

An Interview with Pete LeRose
WWII Army Veteran
By Michele Starkey

Pete LeRose was born and raised in Newburgh – back in the days when ice was still delivered by horse and buggy. LeRose shared with us that he always had a fascination with horses when he was younger. Mack, the ice delivery man, showed up in front of their home one day and LeRose began pestering him to ride along. One day Mack relented and LeRose climbed on board to make the ice run through the Heights in Newburgh. He told us,

“I was about nine years old and I got into the wagon and Mack let me take the reins. We rode through Newburgh’s streets – down Washington Street to So. William Street, over to Hasbrouck Street and up to Mill Street – stopping at Nicoletti’s Bar on Mill Street to deliver some crushed ice. While Mack went into the bar, I was left to watch the horses. Suddenly, a truck went passed us and it back-fired and frightened the horses. They took off running across Mill Street towards Broadway. I’m yelling, ‘Whoa’ and Mack comes running up behind me and he’s yelling, ‘Whoa’ and those horses didn’t stop running until we reached Broadway. I was so scared that my hair was standing on end and I was as white as a ghost. But the next day, I was back up on those horses and riding along with Mack to make those ice deliveries.”

Did you enlist or were you drafted into the War?

“I worked for about a year at the pocketbook factory in Newburgh as a framer. Then, I went to work at Turl Iron & Car Company in New Windsor where we manufactured water purifiers and water boilers for Liberty Ships. I had met my future wife, Ann, at a dance and we were married before I was drafted in the Army in January of 1945. Ann was about four months pregnant when I was sent to Camp Croft in South Carolina. I was there for about six weeks during my basic training to become an Infantry Soldier. While I was in basic training, my wife took a fall and miscarried our first child. She was in the hospital in Cornwall for several days and became very ill but I wasn’t allowed to leave basic training to come home to be with her. It is amazing what the women during WWII had to endure while the men were serving their country.”

Where did you go after Camp Croft?

“I was scheduled to be sent to Europe as a replacement for troops serving there. My orders were changed while we were still at Camp Croft and my unit was sent via train to San Francisco. We ended up receiving orders to go to the South Pacific. After the ten-day train trip to California we arrived and the first thing we did was to trade in all of our winter clothing for summer clothing. Then, we headed to Guam.”

What was the journey to Guam like and what did you do there?

“Well, the ship was so crowded with soldiers and it took us about 2-3 weeks to reach Guam. The Liberty Ship was zigzagging the whole way. We finally arrived in Guam, sometime in March of 1945. When the US dropped the atomic bomb that ended the War, I was assigned to the 777th Army Air Corps in the 199 Gas Supply Company. My unit supplied the gasoline and fuel oil for the Air Force planes. I became the crane operator and one day while operating the crane I had four Japanese prisoners of war detailed to hook up four drums of gas at a time to the crane hooks. While raising the drums of gas and not realizing the boon was too high above the crane cab, I continued to raise the

drums. The crane boom began to fall toward the cab of the crane and I noticed it and jumped off. The boom of the crane fell directly on top of the cab and turned the crane over on its side. The gas drums went flying in all directions and almost hit the Japanese POWs. It was at that point that I was re-assigned to the motor pool but I did get a promotion to the rank of Corporal for making that mistake!”

What did you do in the motor pool?

“I was assigning jeeps and weapon carriers to soldiers to be used for detail work on the island. Shortly after that assignment, I was reassigned to a cleanup detail going to different islands. We went to Saipan in the Northern Mariana Islands first. We began collecting all of the debris and the vehicles left behind – even the good ones – and we loaded them on Ducks and headed out about 10 miles to sea and dumped them in the ocean. From there, we headed to Marcus Island and did the same thing and then we returned to Guam. The flight back to Guam was my very first airplane ride aboard a C-47 and the landing gear failed to deploy from the plane. The Captain must have radioed ahead to the airport because when I looked out the window as we were descending, the runway was lined with fire trucks. I was really frightened and thought we might crash but instead we landed safely on the belly of the plane and no one was injured. It scared the daylight out of me and I knew I didn’t want to be flying in a plane anymore.”

What did you do back in Guam?

“The first thing that I did was to go and speak to the Captain and asked him to please re-assign me so I didn’t have to fly and he said, ‘No.’ Shortly thereafter, I was assigned back to Marcus Island. After a few days there, I was assigned to run the Officer’s Mess Hall and I was promoted to Sergeant. I remember thinking, ‘Why me?’ but it turned out to be the best assignment because I was my own boss and supervised about 4-5 guys. We prepared meals for the returning officers. Whenever the pilots arrived on Marcus, we had to be ready to feed them day or night, and meanwhile, we got to eat some of the best food, too. Most of the pilots that we fed were some of the finest fighting pilots in the War.”

What next?

“The pilots were rotated back to the States and I left Marcus Island and went back home to the States, too. It was December of 1946 and I was discharged from the Army in New Jersey and headed back to Newburgh to be with Ann. I went to work for IBM in Poughkeepsie and we had a son, Peter, who was born in 1951. I stayed there for twenty-five years before retiring in 1978.”

Pete LeRose continues to reside in the Hudson Valley and is an active member with VFW Post 1161.

The VFW Post 1161 meets every third Friday of every month in the City of Newburgh Post 973 Bldg. The meetings begin at 1:00 pm and you can call Quartermaster Steve Fanizzi at (845)236-7295 or Commander Donald Ruckdeschel Sr. at (845)562-7828 for more details.