

Spotlight on a Veteran

An Interview with George Bucci, WWII Marine Raider

By Michele Starkey

The Sentinel sat down with George Bucci who is now serving as the Master of Arms with VFW Post 1161. His story began in 1941...

"I was just 16 years old when I tried to enlist in 1941 in the Marine Corps. They found out that I was just 16 and they told me I was too young. I hitchhiked to Albany and met another fellow about my age who was also trying to enlist. We headed up to Rochester, Buffalo and on to Niagara Falls trying to enlist and we finally stayed and worked in Niagara as construction workers for about 50 cents an hour which was good money in those days."

Were you ever able to enlist in New York?

"No, after a few weeks of working in Niagara, we hitch-hiked all the way across country to Los Angeles and by then, I had turned 17 years old and was able to enlist in the marines in LA. There was a waiting time before we were assigned to boot camp and I landed a job as a bus boy in a local restaurant for about six weeks until I was called up. I made about four dollars a day between wages and tips. I was still considered a minor living in California and had to report weekly until the Marine Corps took me to boot camp in San Diego. I heard about the Marine Raiders and I volunteered for that - it was a Special Forces division of the marines who have since been disbanded. I believe that there was only one other marine from the entire Mid-Hudson Valley in New York who became a Raider." Marine Raiders wore the red-and-blue patches with white skulls and the stars of the Southern Cross lighting their way. Their exploits were burned into America's memory in 1942 and 1943. They fought in places like Guadalcanal, Segi Point, Makin Island, Tulagi, and Bougainville in the 1st, 2d, 3d and 4th battalions of the Marine Raiders. The Marine Raiders made the initial ground offensives against the Japanese in WWII; they participated in turning around the Japanese advance; the only ground unit that participated in every island assault in the Solomon Islands; following which, Raiders as individuals or units were in virtually every Island hopping event in the Pacific War and the first landing in Japan after the announced surrender. Bucci would participate in five marine raider invasions in Emeru, Guam, Bougainville, Okinawa (twice) and assisting the Navy with the Waha invasion.

What was one of your worst WWII memories?

"The Bougainville invasion was a tough one. We had just disembarked from an amphibious assault and the shore line surrounding Bougainville was full of coral holes and I was sinking trying to get to shore. I had to remove all of my clothing or drown as I could only hold my breath for a minute or so. By the time I got to shore I resembled a drown rat and I picked up a weapon and kept moving forward."

Were you ever stationed in Japan?

"We spent about 3 months in Tokyo Bay at a Japanese naval camp. I remember lying in the barracks at night and hearing the rats running down the hallway, sliding sideways around the corners and you could hear their toes tapping on the tiles. We would lift up our blankets off of the floor to keep them from jumping up on the bunks." ***How long did you serve and when did you return to the States?*** "I served for three years and came home in December of 1945. T met Dolores at a Christmas dance. T was going to head to Florida because it was warmer climate but we ended up getting engaged in February of 1947 and married on April 22 which happened to be my 22nd birthday. I haven't received a birthday present ever since! We had five children together, four girls and a boy."

What did you do for work after the War?

"I went to work for DuPont -Stauffer in Newburgh and later at Nepera in Harriman. I finished up working as a mechanic for the Town of Newburgh Water Department for ten years and finally retired. I have been a member of the VFW Post 1161 for over 20 years. For over 25 years, I played Santa Claus for the kids and handed out lollipops. T loved doing that but I've got a bad knee now and it prevents me from putting on the red suit anymore. The kids just loved it and I did, too."

George and Delores continue to reside in the Hudson Valley and are looking forward to their anniversary in April.

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. They are recruiting for new members and offer many benefits, call for details.