WORLD WAR II

MEMOIRS OF JOHN T. GEERTSEN

My apologies for having waited 55 years to relate my experiences. Time has undoubtedly dimmed my memory for some events. Probably even forgotten some. Many have left me with the indelible, vivid and often terrifying details of the happenings as if they had just occurred.

In 1939 and 1940, Hitler had conquered a large portion of Europe and appeared to be on the verge of adding England and Russia to his victims.

In response, President Franklin Roosevelt had sponsored a National Draft Act which was passed by the narrow margin of one vote by Congress. A "fish-bowl" drawing was set up to determine the order the men were to be selected. Not long after, I received a letter from the local draft board instructing me to take a physical examination at a fire station then located on lower Erie Boulevard in Schenectady, New York.

After a brief exam, I was adjudged 1A. Actually I was still recovering from a very serious mastoid operation on my left ear.

The well-known "Greetings" letter from FDR followed informing me of the "privilege" given me to serve my country.

Soon, without fanfare, in a group of about eight other men, we boarded a train for New York City. We were told that we would be gone for a maximum of one year of training, then sent home to continue our civilian life. The attack on Pearl Harbor intervened and the start of World War II. I did not see home again until May 28, 1945 -- four years later.

Each man received a meal at a restaurant in Manhattan and then taken by ferry boat to "Fort Jay" on Governor's Island close by Ellis Island. Here we were inducted into the US Army on the 23rd of July 1941. The next day we left by train for Fort Dix, New Jersey. Here we shed our civilian clothes for poorly fitting army garb. Trousers and shirt sleeves too long were slung at me.

Here we were introduced to reveille, taps -- how to make up our cots, march, etc. and of course -- KP duty. We took a couple of written tests -- one being an IQ Test. Also an oral test by a physiologist asking a number of questions. I recall one question, "Do you like girls? I answered yes. He said, "OK, you're the intellectual type -- pass on."

At Fort Dix, they asked each of us if we had any preferences as to which branch of the army we would join. Before stating a choice, they had us pass by a number of officers observing each of us. One called me over and said it was their opinion that I should choose the paratroopers. Immediately I said no but wondered if my opinion would make any difference. Later another officer asked what my preference was. I answered the "Engineer Corp."

In retrospect, was this a good decision? I'll never know. Most of the paratroopers spent their time during the war in the USA, later England living the good life. They were dropped extensively in 1944 over Normandy mainly from glidders. It was not a particularly successful operation -- most spending the remainder of the war, for about 9 months, in German Prisoner of War Camps -- casualties were relatively low.

Headed south by train again - destination Fort Belvoir, Virginia. This was the Basic Training Center for the Army Engineer Corp. I spent three months learning drilling, rifle range,

marching 20 mile hikes with full packs, construction of bridges and corduroy roads using logs and plenty of plain old pick and shovel work, etc. I soon began to wonder if I had picked the wrong branch, but the die was cast. While at Belvoir, I took a course preparing me to be a surveyor.

Fort Belvoir was situated just across the Potomic River, from Washington, DC near Alexandria, Virginia. A very nice area to be stationed in, only we had little time off to enjoy the interesting places and things to do.

One evening I want into Washington and saw a big block dance going on. There was a popular "Big Band" playing and everyone seemed to be having a wonderful time. The US Government employed many women in the offices throughout the city. Many of them were standing around the periphery of the dancers, surely hoping a soldier, sailor or marine would ask them to dance. I was trying to muster up enough courage to ask a pretty girl to dance. Deterring me, was the fact I really didn't know how to dance very well and was rather shy -- foolish boy that I was.

On November 11th Armistice Day (now called Veteran's Day) two other soldiers and I decided to go to Arlington Military Cemetery to hear FDR give a memorial speech honoring the countries veterans. We arrived late. The ceremonies were apparently over by the time we started walking up the long tree-lined drive to the spot where the activities were taking place. Suddenly, with the wail of sirens and a police escort of motorcycles, a large black limousine moved slowly down the drive toward us.

Immediately, we recognized one of the occupants of the car as President Roosevelt. Dutifully, the three of us, snapped to attention, at the edge of the curb and saluted smartly. The procession slowed somewhat and FDR, with a big grin and waving constantly passed by. He appeared to be yelling something to us, but being drowned out by the noise of the motorcycles, none of us understood what he had said. We turned about and headed toward camp.

About the middle of November, I boarded a troop train headed for I knew not where. We traveled by coach having to set up the entire trip through the southern states to San Bernardino, California. Occasionally, during the journey we'd stop at railroad stations to make use of the toilet facilities. I distinctly remember on one occasion, the train coming to a halt while traveling through Alabama. There was not a house or civilian in sight. We were ordered off the train and told to take care of our basic needs. It would have been a rather humorous sight for any civilian to see since there were only flat cotton fields in every direction.

Upon arrival in San Bernardino on December 2, 1941, we were loaded on trucks and sent to "March Field" a large Army Air Force base. Here, I joined the 808th Aviation Battalion whose main mission was to construct air bases. The outfit had recently returned from duty in Alaska and the rumor around was that, in case of war, we would never be sent overseas. How wrong they were -- must be they were listening to Roosevelt's Fireside Chats.

Now for the day that FDR said would live in infamy -- the day the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor -- December 7, 1941.

Being Sunday, we were given the day off. Another soldier and I decided to hike to the top of a small mountain having a rotating search light at the summit. In those days, there was very little smog in southern California. Due to the clear atmosphere, the mountain seemed to be a lot closer than either of us realized. Nevertheless, we did make it to the top and arrived back at the base well into the afternoon. Missed lunch.

Almost immediately, we were ordered to fall into formation and an officer told us about the Japanese attack. Information was very scant and no one knew at that time how devastating it was -- practically our whole Pacific Fleet had been sunk.

Within a couple of hours, we were loaded onto trucks and on our way to somewhere. They had us hidden from view, the whole back of the truck was covered by a tarp. We couldn't see out either. Finally, a soldier sitting at the back end of the truck, opened the flap a little and said we were traveling through downtown Los Angeles. So although having traveled through LA, I can honestly say, I never saw any part of the city.

We traveled for many hours and finally ended up in the Mojave Desert at Edwards Air Force Base. A cold December wind blew sand and tumble weeds constantly across the flat terrain. Tents were already set up with cots. A large mess tent with benches, where they served us hot army-type food-soup, beans, etc. I was there only about a week or so, when again another train trip took us up the coast of California to San Francisco -- interesting scenery along the way. From the city, we took a ferry boat ride out to Angeles Island. It being a very hilly, pretty island, luxuriously covered with beautiful trees and flowers. There were permanent army barracks, a well-stocked canteen, and a barber ship dispensing, of course, the well-known service style crew-cuts. In the canteen I bought a pretty little pillow with pink roses embroidered on it and sent it back to my girl friend Dottie in Albany.

One day a couple of buddies and I were given a pass to take the ferry boat back into San Francisco. Had a good time enjoying the sights of the city. Saw Fisherman's Wharf and rode a famous cog trolley car. Had a meal in Chinatown. Returned to camp that evening thoroughly tired from much walking up and down the steep hills of the city.

One night, I especially remember while on Angeles Island -- New Years Eve. I was assigned guard duty from 10 PM to 1:00 AM and stationed at the very summit of the small mountain island. From this vantage point, there was a marvelous panoramic view of San Francisco, and the Bay area with the city itself further in the distance. Alcatraz, with its maximum security federal penitentiary was situated on a small island perhaps a mile or so from ours. The ferry boat stopped there on its way to and from the city. It was alleged that Al Capone was then imprisoned there.

It was a beautiful night, with full moonlight illuminating all. Surprised that the city was not blacked out though. Distance made everything appear to be in miniature. Tiny boats, with lights aglow, were plying the great bay. Faintly, music could be heard. People were undoubtedly dancing and attempting to enjoy themselves, in spite of the somber war news of the day. Among them many soldiers and sailors, knowing they would not see their loved ones and friends for a long time or perhaps never.

These thoughts with myself having left home six months earlier, were also on my mind, with no one to share them with. The December night felt very chilly with a cold, damp breeze blowing off the bay into the mountain. So when 1:00 AM came around, I was more than happy to see the army jeep grind up the steep winding road with my relief guard to take over.

At Sea - January 2, 1942

On this day, each soldier of the 808th Engineers called out his name and serial number to an officer; and with a blue duffel bag slung over his shoulder climbed dutifully up the gang plank unto the "President Coolidge" -- TO WAR.

The "President Coolidge" was a large oceanliner used in peacetime to take tourists on cruises to the Far East. I was assigned a bunk, third up from the deck, with three more bunks above mine on "B" promenade deck. (Normally it would have been in an open area -- but had been modified to allow for more troops to be carried; by building wooden barriers at the rail sides.) Practically the entire time of the voyage, I was confined to this bunk. Not by any army orders. As a matter of fact, I recall them calling out my name, assigning me to KP duty and mop detail to clean the dining room floors. I did not respond and was not challenged on these occasions. Actually, I never made it down into the dining room at all.

Yes -- intense sea sickness. Totally unable to eat anything until once more on Terra Firma many days later. Ironically, the men whom were not affected by the motion of the waves came back from the dining room raving about the wonderful food they had just eaten.

Due to the sudden onset of the war, the ship was extremely well stocked with all the delicacies normally enjoyed by the tourists. Best of bake pheasants, chicken, steaks, fruits, vegetables, fancy desserts, etc. This of course turned me green. No, not from envy, that came later when our only option was a choice of the infamous "C Ration." These were small cans of hash, stew or beans with a so-called dog biscuit. That was what we ate for all our meals.

In our flotilla, was another large troop ship named the "Mariposa." Escorting us was a navy light cruiser. The ships traveled on a zigzag path changing directions at different intervals, intended to make it more difficult for enemy submarines to sink us if they were encountered.

What our intended destination was, to this day, I don't know. Throughout the war, the soldiers were never told where they were going except, of course, movements on land within a battle area. Security was the reason. Rumor had it that we were headed for the Philippine Islands. If this was indeed the case, the plans were soon changed by the massive and victorious sweep of the Japanese Navy and Army into the Philippines, Malaya, Singapore and heading for the Dutch East Indies.

Scuttlebutt next indicated we were on our way to Java to build an air base. One day, the ships captain announced that we had just crossed the International Date Line. In so doing, we had lost a whole day of time, jumping ahead 24 whole hours from Wednesday to Thursday. As a consequence, we were each awarded a certificate saying, "We were now a pollywog" in the mythical King Neptune's Court. A few days later, it was announced that we had just crossed the Equator and were now in the Southern Hemisphere.

On and on we sailed southward until we noticed the warm weather giving way to cool chilly breezes out on the open deck.

Then after 21 days at sea, on February 2, 1942, we entered Melbourne Harbor, on the southeastern coast of Australia. A very attractive city with beautiful parks, patterned on English cities. We were quartered in army barracks outside a small suburb of Melbourne for a few days. We had one day of furlough to go in and see the sights. Went down on the beach and talked to some Aussie's who were enjoying themselves -- it being summer time in the southern hemisphere. All were very friendly and said they were happy to see US Troops come to help them defend their country. We were the first US Troops to arrive in Australia.

That would have been a great place to stay awhile, but that was not to be. We headed west on a train taking us through an area having huge wheat fields -- much like our own mid-western states of Kansas and Nebraska. Traveling perhaps a day and a half more we arrived at the city of Adelaide.

No opportunity to do any sightseeing here. In the freight yard area, they transferred us to another train. This train was built in England, with many entrance doors along the sides of the coaches. The direction now taken was directly north toward the very center of Australia. Australia is a continent about the same size as the USA, but different in that the entire center of the country is one vast inhospitable desert.

We were packed tightly into the coaches and soon on our way. Initially, there was interesting scenery with green vegetation, but this soon gave way and the trip became progressively more dusty and hotter. The end of the rail-line brought us to "Alice Springs" (a misnomer for sure), close to dead center of the continent. The town looked just like the Hollywood version of Tombstone, Arizona in the 1870's. The Aussie Army had pole sheds with corrugated iron roofs set up. They served us with their "bully beef", beans and tea.

Alice Springs had only one outstanding tourist attraction, an immense monolithic red rock formation projecting hundreds of feet above the otherwise perfectly flat desert floor around it. It is considered sacred by the native aborigines. (On TV recently views of Alice Springs were shown as it now is, with air conditioned hotels -- a modern city. But in 1942, it would not have been a place many tourists would pick.)

Piling into Aussie Army trucks (Aussie's call them lorries), we once again headed north across the extremely hot desert for hundreds of miles, in the general direction of Darwin. The truck journey ended for us as we came to the dead-end of a railroad that extended from Darwin south into the desert. This railroad was used to carry our troops and heavy construction equipment up to Darwin on the north coast.

This railroad had been built 50 years previously to transport gold and silver ore, discovered in the area, up to the coast at Darwin. Chinese laborers were used to build it.

The train we took was a real antique having been built in England in the mid-eighteen hundreds and used there for many years. There was a sign on the steam locomotive stating it had been rebuilt in 1896 and then sent to Australia for use in the "Out-Back". The rails, were of the narrow gauge type. For our use, the train was mainly made up of flat cars (called trucks by the Aussies) with a couple of coaches for troops and one on the tailend of the train for the officers. The flat cars were loaded with our construction equipment.

Men were loaded into the coaches and the rest traveled on the flat cars, either on or sandwiched between the heavy equipment. I considered myself and a man from Kentucky lucky in getting a well cushioned double seat up on a D-8 bulldozer. Although it was extremely hot 115° to 120° (with no protection from the sun); we had an unobstructive view of the territory from the slowly moving train. As contrasted to the seemingly lifeless flat desert terrain of the preceding 2500 miles, the scenery rather abruptly changed. This area is subjected to the monsoons, that is, for 11 months of the year not a drop of rain falls; then in January the heavy tropical rains move in from the sea. Plants with flowers spring to life and grow at an amazing rate. Kunai grass, thick with sharp edges, grow 6 to 7 feet tall. Interesting wild life, with an abundance of birds could be seen. At that time anyway, there were herds of wild cattle and horses roaming the countryside. Even some wild camels, no doubt escapees from early miners. Also many wallabies and kangaroos indigenous to Australia. Throughout this "Northern Territory" as it was called, were huge termite hills, as high as 15 feet. So strong, a truck would have difficulty knocking one over. The northern end of the railroad terminated at Darwin.

As the train proceeded northward, the landscape became increasingly hilly with many curves to negotiate. The ancient locomotive slowed considerably -- finally almost to a walk. The

fuel used was wood. Sparks and even some fire could be seen spewing from its' smoke stack. Tinder dry Kunai grass along the right-of-way caught fire. Finally with sparks flying out from the spinning wheels; the train was not moving at all. Get a horse -- get a horse could be heard. The Kentuckian (can't remember his name) sitting on the bulldozer seat next to me yelled only half jokingly, "The officers will be coming up and ordering the men off to push the train up the hill." With a greatly lightened load and hundreds of men pushing, it probably could have been done.

It was not tried. Instead an Aussie crewman uncoupled a number of cars from the back of the train -- including the coach on the tailend in which the officers were riding. Like the childhood story of "The Engine that Could", with cheers from the soldiers, the little old locomotive slowly pulled the train up the hill and kept going. Many miles ahead, the train came to a stop at a switching point. The little engine went back and picked up the officers coach and other cars.

Darwin, at that time, was a small sleepy, attractive tropical town situated on the Arafura Sea with an excellent harbor and with many palm trees fringing the sandy white beaches along the shoreline.

Consensus of rumors at this time indicated that our outfit would go by ship from Darwin, Australia up to Timor or Java, in the Dutch East Indies to build air strips.

Once again it was the Japanese who were calling the shots. After their devastating attack on Pearl Harbor; their combined fleet was ordered south to support their armies in conquering the East Indies.

In a courageous attempt to stop them; a hastily assembled allied fleet consisting of American, British and Dutch cruisers and destroyers moved into the Java Sea; hoping to prevent the Japanese Army from landing and conquering Java.

The Allied warships faced the powerful aircraft carriers loaded with the navy planes that had caused the Pearl Harbor disaster. In spite of these tremendous odds, the Allied sailors fought valiantly on for many hours before being killed or having their ships sunk from beneath them.

Early on the morning of February 19, 1942, they struck Darwin. Two hundred fifty-eight bombers and fighters, flying in perfect formation systematically sunk all the warships in the harbor. They hit and flipped over a transport, loading Aussie infantry, anchored at a wharf. Another transport that would have taken the 808th to Timor or Java, hit a reef and had its' stern section sunk. It had been the captains intention to attempt to get the ship out to sea, however, in the confusion, one of the anchors had not been raised, causing the ship to twist around and hit the coral reef. The ship had not been bombed. (Many years later, I read a Japanese account of this Darwin raid. They deliberately did not bomb this ship early on, as it was their intention to let the "Portsmore" get underway and only then to sink it in the channel to block the entrance to the harbor.)

All civilians were hurriedly evacuated from Darwin and sent, to what was considered, at least temporarily, safer cities such as Sydney, Brisbane, Melbourne, Perth, many hundreds of miles away. Darwin was the only city in the entire vast northern territory and totally isolated from the remaining three-fourths of Australia.

Had the Japanese so chosen; they could have easily captured Darwin. Allied troops consisted of two companies of Aussie infantry and the inexperienced draftee 800 soldiers of the 808th Engineers, pathetically inadequate to defend the city against the veteran enemy forces.

Invasion seemed inevitable. Except for a guard patrol maintained at the waterfront, most of our outfit moved back down the railroad line to Katherine, and setup headquarters there.

Before dropping back to Katherine, we had the opportunity to see the impact the bombings had on Darwin.

An errie feeling prevailed. Not a civilian could be seen on the streets, in the stores or houses. It was as if everyone in the city had disappeared within a moments notice. Interrupted meals were left on the tables in some houses. Many of their personal belongings and even money had been forgotten in their haste to leave. There was a large ethnically Chinese population, as indicated by family photos left behind.

During this period, a soldier from Brooklyn and I were assigned guard duty down by a smashed wharf. Our relief guards left us with a GMC army truck. As we were heading back through the outskirts, the other guy yelled, "There is a woman standing in front of a house on a side street." This surprised us knowing that all civilians were supposed to be gone. We decided to go around the block and find out why she had not left with the others. It was easier to go around the block, as we were pulling a 20 mm cannon behind the truck. (Funny thing about that cannon -- we had no ammunition, nor experience in firing it either.)

Upon stopping in front of the house we saw an elderly lady and a small aboriginal boy in the side yard. Assuring the lady that we were American's and meant her no harm and would like to help her if possible. She invited us to have tea and papaya at a little table in her garden area. The papaya was picked ripe from her own tree and was certainly the most delicious fruit I have ever eaten.

She had hidden when all the other inhabitants had been ordered to leave. She said, "I had left dear old England 40 years previously. My husband died and I did not want to leave my lovely little home in Darwin. I have a nice little aboriginal boy to help me with the garden and be company."

A very courageous lady. For surely she must have realized, as did we, that the Japanese would almost certainly land at any time. Apparently, it was not in their plans to do so at that time. Surely readers are wondering what happened to the brave little lady. I just don't know. We all hoped she survived the war years and some happy additional ones. Darwin was never invaded. Why? (Many good books have been written about the war in the Pacific. It is not my intent or within my ability, to write about the American and Japanese War strategies, that I was totally in the dark about at the time they were happening.)

From time to time throughout these memoirs, I'm going to quote from Japanese and American historical documents made public after the war. This should give a perspective as to why we wound up in certain islands, battles, and at times what we did.

The Japanese Imperial Command in Tokyo wanted to proceed southward after recouping their forces, and capture New Guinea and Australia. But Admiral Yamamoto (the architect of the Pearl Harbor attack), asked to first use the combined fleet to capture Midway Island.

Because of Yamamoto's prestige and confidence that he could capture Midway and destroy the American Fleet, he was granted his wish. He did not accomplish this task.

The battle of "Midway" was a great victory for the Americans. We had previously broken the Japanese naval code and knew before hand how, when, and where they would attack. Even so, the enemy had much greater resources in large aircraft carriers and experienced pilots and many more battleships and other warships. They had every reason to expect to win the crucial battle.

Fate definitely was smiling on the Americans. The enemy lost all four of their big aircraft carriers along with all of their most experienced naval pilots. Luck was definitely a major factor.

After that, the Americans fought the Japanese navy on a more even basis, thus saving Australia (including the relatively unimportant Darwin and Port Moresby from invasion).

Let us now go back to Katherine, Australia where the 808th Engineers built a fighter and a bomber strip in the desert. Each strip was 5,000 feet long with dispersal areas and revetments to protect parked planes from anything but direct bomb hits.

My first job was to go out with two or three other surveyors with a captain in charge, to locate a suitable location to build the air base. This was called an advanced party. We took a GMC 4-wheel drive truck. The officer and driver rode up front, while we enlisted men rode in the back.

Without roads, it was very rough, slow traveling across the desert terrain. Many rocky outcroppings of hills and ravines. Our truck would often get stuck in the sand or on rocks and we would have to back up and go around obstacles, or use the power winch on the front to free the truck.

Once the location for the base was determined, we would spend full time out there using our transits, levels, alidades, etc. to lay out the air base. On these occasions a supply truck would come out from Katherine every few days with water, food, gasoline, etc. Each man would sleep on the ground with one blanket under and one over himself. Although it was extremely hot in the day time, the nights were very cold in the desert. There was nothing to prevent the heat from radiating off into outer space.

Once in the middle of the night, a large herd of wild cattle went thundering past us. Whether they saw the trucks and deliberately avoided trampling us -- or maybe we were just lucky, I don't know. They came very close -- spraying us with thick clouds of choking dust. I don't recall anyone mentioning it after they passed. Guess everyone was so tired -- we just went back to sleep.

I remember one day while working in the extremely hot sun that I felt very sick and dizzy. I had trouble seeing the numbers in the transit. My buddies said that I suddenly passed out and fell to the ground. They loaded me on the truck, flat on my back with my gas mask bag cushioned under my head and headed back to the army field hospital at Katherine. The doctor diagnosed me as having Dengue Fever (called back break fever by the Aussie's). It is caused by the bite of an infected mosquito -- much like malaria. The only treatment was large doses of aspirin and remaining on a cot under the shade of a tent for a few days. But unlike malaria, once having gone through the high fever, pain and suffering of Dengue Fever, one is then immune to catching it again. Thank goodness.

In relating my memoirs, it is my intent to honestly and accurately record the events; and sometimes my thoughts at that time. To do so, I feel obliged to include mistakes I made; and the sometimes negative and long-standing consequences.

My biggest "goof" took place when working on this air base. It was a larger advanced party than usual. In charge of the group, was Captain Ellison (had worked on the Mississippi River levees in the pre WW II years), a regular army career master sergeant named Flores, a sergeant and three of us Pfc.'s.

After an especially difficult and tiring day, Sergeant Flores ordered the three Pfc.'s to put up a tent. After completing the task, I heard Captain Ellison call my name from outside.

My unthinking stupid, disrespectful, and rude response was, "Yeah what do you want?" Immediately I saw the alarmed and amazed look on sergeant Flores face. In the wartime army of

54 years ago such a lapse of discipline was not normally tolerated. The correct response would have been to hurry from the tent, stand at attention, salute the captain and say, "Yes, Sir."

Immediately he ordered all of us to "fall in" in front of the tent. He then proceeded to give us a heated lecture on discipline. He did not mention my name; but there was no question in my mind, and I'm sure in everyone's present, that it was me he was speaking to. In retrospect, I realized I should have apologized to him. It may not have changed his mind, but it would have been the right thing to do anyway.

A few month's later, I was transferred from his command and assigned to the machine repair section of Headquarters Company. I would have preferred staying at surveying. (After graduating from high school, I had worked as a machinist apprentice at the General Electric Co.) I wasn't too wild about this kind of work, but I earned enough money to pay the tuition to Clarkson University for one year, to study Mechanical Engineering getting on the Dean's List. Then went back to work at General Electric Co. to earn money for another year at college, as a laboratory assistant. Was drafted into the army in July 1941 and never did get back to college.

Looking back over the many years of my life, I realize I've had an authority resenting attitude toward my officers and later toward my managers when working at the Research and Development Center at GE for 40 years.

It was not wise. I should have recognized this self-defeating attitude and corrected it early on. Nevertheless, I was always praised for working very hard and doing excellent creative work at GE. Well, I was never aggressive to those over me again. This being a fault of mine which prevented me from being assertive.

While on the subject, there is a sequel to the unfortunate occurrence with Captain Ellison. A sergeant in the clerical section of Headquarters Company confided to me that my records showed my having an IQ of 142 (higher than any man, including officers in the entire battalion). He told me that it had been the intent of the captain to promote me to sergeant the day when he called me from outside the tent. Maybe IQ tests don't mean that much. I certainly have done many dumb things. Probably more than anything else, I should have developed a friendlier rapport with those above me.

While still stationed at Katherine, I must tell readers about an experience that was terrifying and certainly at the time seemed the most hopeless of my ever returning alive.

This goes back to the time when we were still scouting for a location for the air base. We had a small advanced party -- a sergeant, two surveyors and the truck driver. The front axle of our GMC truck hit a rock out-cropping and sheared off a "U" shaped bracket that held the front axle to the frame of the truck. The truck was not driveable. We had no radio to contact headquarters for help, so the sergeant told me to take off on foot to Katherine and obtain assistance. My orders were to have them send out a wrecker to lift the front end of the truck and bring it back to the motor pool for repair. Also they were to send another truck to get the other men back. Things didn't work out as planned. I had a rough azimuth (the horizontal angular distance from our supposed position to headquarters) and I had a compass, so we figured my hike would not be too difficult. My attempt to go for help went awry almost immediately. I found I could not easily walk a straight line to Katherine. It soon became apparent it was not practical to do so. I had to walk around many out-croppings, ravines, etc. I had no way of knowing whether I was back "on line" or not. Errors added up.

Early on, I realized I was in serious trouble. The desert sun and air were unbearably hot -- 120° F in the cloudless sky. I started out with my canteen full of water and a can of "C Rations"

beans. Walking under these circumstances, a person dehydrates at a rapid rate. Compounding the problems encountered -- we didn't know exactly where we were when the truck broke down. Consensus was that we were probably about ten miles from headquarters -- in a straight line and that I would probably make it in 4 or 5 hours at most. Well I didn't. I had started out just before noontime and by 6 PM I had not arrived. The sun would soon be down. I was glad to no longer be subject to it's fierce merciless rays, but beginning to get very scared.

Right ahead, was a higher out-cropping of the type I would normally have veered around. This time, I went to the top for observation. From this elevated vantage point, I could see 360°, perhaps 20 miles in every direction. That figures out to be 1268 square miles in view. Obviously, my buddies at the broken down truck, Katherine, and the railroad were somewhere within this area, but because of the roughness of the terrain, I saw none of them. I decided, like it or not, I'd have to spend a cold night on the desert, without a blanket. I had my trusty gas mask with case for a pillow. I never had need for its intended purpose -- luckily. The only other equipment was my 1903 bolt action Springfield rifle, bayonet, and belt of cartridges. And, oh yes, my now empty canteen!

I couldn't sleep. The moon came out brightly and I decided to walk on. Then decided not to. Probably figured there would be a greater chance of going the wrong way; or not seeing something I should. Although completely worn out, I again tried to sleep, but to no avail -- it was too terrifying. It was somewhat like the opposite of having an awful dream and waking up to find it was only that -- a dream. This time it was reality -- not a dream. I thought, how could it be possible to scan such a relatively large surface of the earth, and not see a person, animal, plant, or any indication of any living thing, other than myself having been there? Uncanny to say the least.

One positive decision I made during the night's ordeal, was to change my direction of walking. Up until then, I was on a east-northeast course. The Darwin railroad runs almost directly south for about 300 miles into the Australian desert. Katherine was situated on that railroad line. So I switched my course to directly east hoping to reach the railroad at its' closest point. After staggering along for about an hour, I felt I could not go on much longer. My canteen was empty, my tongue swollen and my mouth felt like it had a dry rag in it. I was extremely dizzy and light headed.

Suddenly, I walked across a car or truck tracks, in the sand. They seemed to be taking a somewhat winding course and appeared to have been driven on, a number of times. This undoubtedly encouraged me to carry on once more and I started following the tracks. I couldn't have gone very far, when I decided I must be going in the wrong direction. I haven't any idea why I came to that conclusion. The trail didn't seem to be headed toward the railroad either way. I turned around and started retracing my steps. I just couldn't have been thinking too rationally at that time. As it turned out it wouldn't have made any difference. I don't know how far or for how long I walked, but I do know I was dragging my rifle with the butt end on the ground at that time.

It came to the point where I had to force myself to take each step and I knew I could not continue much longer. I have never really believed in miracles, but what happened next should have convinced me there are. Suddenly I saw the front of a truck (heard nothing), stopped directly in front of me. Over each headlight was slung a waterbag. (It's a homemade bag made of two layers of slightly porous canvas, which tends to sweat, cooling the water inside. It has a ceramic spout sewed on it and a cork stopper. It was used extensively throughout the Australian desert regions.) Without looking to see who was in the truck, I grabbed one of the water bags,

fell to the ground and started gulping the precious water, choking and dropping the bag on the ground. The next thing I can remember, I was riding in the truck sitting between the man driving and another man. They were civilians, otherwise I had no idea whom they were. When they talked, I could not hear them, nor the sound of the engine. I was deaf. (I learned later, that when an individual becomes dehydrated as I most certainly was, the body loses the water from the inner ears and one becomes deaf when near death.) It was a close call.

After a ride of maybe 20 minutes, we arrived at what looked like a pole barn with a galvanized roof (open sides). There were three picnic benches and perhaps a dozen army cots set up. They placed me on one of them and I fell into an immediate deep sleep. I slept the rest of that day and well into the night. I was very thirsty and hungry. They served me "bully beef" sandwiches washed down with lots of tea. Also had jam and bread. (I remember the jam came in cans like beans.) My strength and hearing had returned surprisingly fast.

There were six men in the group that had picked me up. They told me they were all civilian Australian surveyors working for a mining company. They had planned on leaving that next day to return to Sydney where they all lived. They asked me to look them up if ever I came to Sydney. I will always be grateful to my rescuers. Later they drove me up and dropped me off at Katherine. It was about 5 miles from their mine and only a couple of miles from the railroad.

For the next couple of months or so, we built the air base and an access road to it from Katherine. Also constructed a road parallel to the railroad tracks up to Darwin and embarked on a troop transport taking us up to Port Moresby on the southeastern coast of New Guinea. By this time much of New Guinea had been captured by the Japanese. They landed many troops and built a series of bases along the northern coast. Two of these bases at Lae and Salamaua were especially menacing to us, as they were less than 200 air miles from where we were building an air base at Port Moresby. Each day and on moonlight nights they would bomb and strafe us in an attempt to disrupt our work. The air strip received many hits. After each raid, though, the men went out with dump trucks and filled in the bomb craters. So our work continued on in spite of the Japanese attempts to disrupt it.

Now the enemy planned to capture Port Moresby with a land invasion. Led by one of their most capable generals, General Tomitari Horii, thousands of their veteran jungle fighters started moving overland from Buna. (Taken by 13,000 Japanese troops on July 22, 1942.) Their objective was Port Moresby (only 100 air miles away). It was only 91 miles from our air base. The enemy was extremely confident of reaching their objective. No one at MacArthur's headquarters realized at first that the Japanese troops would possibly attempt to fight their way across such a formidable natural barrier as the Owen Stanley Mountains.

Each of their soldiers was trained to hack his way through the thick jungle with a machete, until he dropped with exhaustion, when a man fell, his place would be taken by another. It is considered to be probably the most grueling military advance in history. Up over the 10,000 foot pass on the Kokoda Trail and down into Port Moresby. They came very close to succeeding.

The major defense of Port Moresby was dependent upon a regiment of the Australian 7th Division. The men were all volunteers, rugged, and experienced combat troops. Having obtained much combat experience and fame fighting General Rommel's "Africa Korp". They were well known as the "Rats of Trobruck" having dug-in and prevented the Germans from capturing Trobruck for a number of crucial months. After "Pearl Harbor" they were sent back home to defend their homeland from the threatened Japanese invasion.

While the 808th Engineers were busy building the "Nine Mile" airdrome (situated on the Kokoda Trail, 9 miles from the Port Moresby dock area), the Aussie 7th Division unit moved up the trail, from the south, to confront the enemy heading toward them up the trail from Buna.

Many of the Aussie soldiers were mounted on horses and had mules to carry their supplies. They were very cocky and bragged to us how they would soon take care of the bloody SOB's. At that time, they had no idea how tough the enemy and the terrain would be. Very soon it became necessary for them to abandon their horses and proceed on foot up the increasingly steep, slippery Kokoda Trail. In spite of the terrible terrain and difficulties supplying their troops with food and ammunition, they reached the "Gap," the high altitude (10,000 ft) pass through the Owen Stanley Mountains. They then continued northward down the trail toward Buna, soon running head on into the advancing Japanese army. Fierce fighting immediately commenced between the opposing forces. Each side appeared to be stopped in their tracks, but not for long. The enemy slipped through the trailess jungle to out flank the Aussie's and set up a trail block in back of them, cutting off their supplies and troop reinforcements. The Aussies were forced to fight their way back up the trail to remove the trail block. Although the Aussies fought with great courage, they lost the high pass and were relentlessly driven down the trail toward Port Moresby. A few P-40 fighters and bombers got off our unfinished air strip, at times, and bombed and strafed the advancing Japanese. The enemy got within view of our air strip lights (we worked 24 hours a day) before they were finally stopped. Stopped by starvation. They were not able to maintain their supply lines over the tortuous trail from Buna. Their bodies looked like skeletons, and they were ordered to retreat back toward Buna. Not many of them made it, including General Horii who died crossing the rain swollen Kumusi River on an improvised raft.

An attempt to capture Port Moresby by sea was also made. The Americans had deciphered the Japanese Naval Codes and knew beforehand of their intentions and plans to land and capture Port Moresby on May 10, 1942. As a consequence, the US Navy dispatched a two carrier task force with escorting cruisers and destroyers to intercept and try to prevent the Japanese Navy with their troop ships from capturing Port Moresby. In the ensuing battle known as the "Battle of the Coral Sea," the invaders were turned back. Once again Port Moresby was saved, but in so doing, one of our biggest and newest carriers, the "Enterprise" was sunk with a great loss of men.

While at Port Moresby, we built three separate air bases; the "9 mile Airdrome", the "3 mile Airdrome," and the one named the Laloki Airdrome (built on the site of a banana plantation). The air attacks from Buna, Lae & Rabaul (their major naval base in the Southwest Pacific area) continued unabated. We observed unfortunately for our brave and outnumbered American pilots, flying what were essentially outdated P-40 fighter planes. They did not stand much of a chance against the far superior "Zero fighters" and more experienced pilots. Many of our brave young pilots were lost.

Now it is traditional that when a fighter pilot shoots down an enemy plane, upon returning to his own home base, he flies low over the entire length of the field rolling completely over once to acclaim his victory. If he has downed two, or in the unlikely event more, he will roll the appropriate number of times. This practice harks back to WW I and is done by the pilots of all air forces throughout the world.

Now on one particularly unfortunate day, it appeared that all of our planes had been shot from the sky. Suddenly, and without warning, three Zero fighters approached the end of our runway, flying in perfect "V" formation at high speed and at a very low level. Traversing our

field, without altering their origination to each other, as a unit, made a complete roll over. It was an amazing and skillfully executed maneuver. An event that will never be forgotten by those that witnessed it. And of course, that was the intent of the enemy fliers.

Saburo Sakai, the flight leader, wrote a book after the war about this event and other experiences of the air war over Port Moresby. He is credited as being the top Ace of the Pacific War, having downed 130 enemy planes. He relates that after returning to Rabaul he was severely reprimanded by his base commander and threatened with Court Martial for unnecessarily endangering the planes and men. In his battles later, he was up against much better American planes such as the "Lightning P-38's", the "Thunderbolts," and the "Mustangs." In his last battle, he and his plane were so badly shot up that it was amazing that he made it back and survived the war.

Sometime in October, 1942, we boarded a ship and headed out of the combat area, down the eastern coast of Australia to see the sights of the city. I met some friendly Aussie girls who showed my buddies and I (we all had similar interests), the interesting places in town. We went to the movies, dances, opera, the zoo, botanical gardens, etc. Unlike the dating behavior of many of the present day young people, we did not involve ourselves in serious sexual situations. Sure many did, but my buddies and I went to town with limited amorous activity like kissing and necking. Actually, the girls of Sydney were especially pretty -- beautiful judging from their names, a majority seemed to be of Irish decent.

Botany Bay, on which Sydney is situated, was originally a penal colony settled by Irish prisoners of the English. Many of them had done nothing more than steal a loaf of bread for instance. Some were sent there for strictly political reasons.

In writing home to my mother, she informed me that she had relatives living in Australia -- an Aunt in Adelaide, and an Uncle in Sydney. Mother was born in England in 1891 and had an older brother Tom also born there in 1889. Another brother and a sister were born after the family came to America and settled in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Other members of the family went the opposite way around the world emigrating to Australia. She sent their addresses and thought it would be nice to look them up if I ever got to their respective cities. The opportunity presented itself to go see the uncle and his wife. One of my buddies, Max Dorle and I visited them. They lived across the bay in an apartment, in a very nice resort type community. The uncle was a retired major in the Australian Army. We had a cordial and interesting visit. He said their daughter lived and worked across the bay in the City of Sydney. They thought it would be nice if we could go meet her. Well, because of army commitments, we were not able to visit her.

While at Sydney, General MacArthur planned to have the American and Australian Armies go on the offensive and attempt to capture Buna which was heavily defended by the Japanese. (In fact, much more so than he realized.) The 32nd American Infantry Division was sent up to do the job. From the beginning, they ran into tremendous obstacles attacking fortified camouflaged positions held by the enemies veteran troops. The 32nd Infantry was a National Guard outfit from the states of Wisconsin and Michigan. They of course had no previous experience with combat, and compounding their difficulties, were the jungles, it's heat, almost continuous rain, and tropical diseases like Malaria.

General MacArthur, remained in Brisbane in a hotel living with his wife and small son. He spent a great deal of his time giving speeches to women's organizations, etc., building up his own image and ego. He never went near Buna. He began making statements that his troops in New Guinea were not fighting hard enough, so he sent another general up to Buna to take over

command of the attack -- General Robert Eichelberger. He ordered him, "Bob, go up to New Guinea and tell your troops to take Buna soon or don't come back and that goes for you too." This was grossly unfair to the troops who were fighting against insurmountable odds. General MacArthur was totally unaware of the true conditions. They were fighting in malarial swamps on one-half rations, were poorly supplied with ammunition, had no artillery, and no naval support.

It was the 808th Engineers part of the overall offensive to build a large air base about ten miles south of Buna at a place called Dobodura. He transported us there, on an old wooden ship named the "BOK." It was a small old and decrepit ship having served many years in the inter-island trade in the Dutch East Indies. It was captained by a Dutchman who had many years of experience sailing through the uncharted reefs along the northern coast of New Guinea. The US Navy refused to send any ships into these waters, considering it too dangerous. The crew were all Javanese (from Java in the East Indies) and could not speak English.

Now, this ship was never meant to carry men below decks in the hold. It was to be used only for carrying cargo. In spite of this, carpenters at Brisbane built a platform halfway down in the hold, making in effect an upper and lower area to hold about 800 soldiers. To enter from the deck, the men would descend down a vertical ladder through a cargo hatch to the upper floor of the hold, and down through another hatch to get to the lower level. The officers were accommodated somehow topside. This ship resembled the slave ships. One of the officers said, "You wouldn't even treat sardines that way." The troops had to endure these horrible privations -- we had no choice.

The men packed in the hold, which in the fierce tropical heat reeked of feces, urine, sweat and vomit. We were subjected to unbelievably terrible conditions. The soldiers were required to stay below deck during the day so that a possible Japanese observation plane would not recognize it as being a troop ship. The only exception, was that if you needed to use and thought you could make it to the toilet facilities which were topside. There were no toilets down in the hold, of course. What accommodations, in this respect, did the men have up on deck? Primitive, unique, ridiculous, hygienic are all adjectives describing them. The carpenters in Australia had constructed of wood what was basically a large platform extending perhaps 10 ft from the top of the railing out over and parallel to the water, about midship on the starboard side of the ship. Steps were built, from the deck up to the platform. Using essentially the same concepts as the old outhouses of yesteryear, a whole series of approximately 12" holes to accommodate maybe 16 soldiers at one time. Must say though, the system had one positive feature -- immediate and continuous flushing by the ocean, a feature the old outhouses could certainly have used.

Drinking water was drastically rationed. There was no way one could clean the stinking filth off ones hands, body and clothes. It was on everything, such as the rungs of the ladders which would have to be grabbed to get in and out of the hold. Awful, awful, awful.

The Javanese crew must have been equally short on drinking water. On one occasion, I saw a small group of maybe three or four of them sitting cross-legged lined up on the deck. Each of them had a small bowl of water setting in front of him. They seemed to be saying their prayers, the water apparently being a part of the ritual. They were of the Muslim Religion. Each man then swished his fingers in his bowl, raised it to his lips and drank the water. Even dirty fresh water was considered too precious to be thrown away. Needless to say, I ate nothing while on this voyage. The negative combined effects of sea sickness, vicious heat, bad air, etc., made even the thought of food preposterous. I don't remember how any of my buddies fared in this respect or maybe I was too sick to notice or care.

Probably everyone in the hold was grateful for the efforts of a couple of soldiers. They both had brought their guitars to war with them. They spoke with a very definite Mexican accent. Many times they would sing Mexican songs while strumming on their guitars. Sometimes American songs. One of their favorite renditions was, "The Yellow Rose of Texas."

The "BOK" had taken us north along the "Great Barrier Reef' of Australia to the eastern most tip of New Guinea, then sailed northwest following along the northern coast. These were uncharted dangerous reef strune waters, where many ships had floundered on the rocks for many years. Our Dutch sea captain certainly knew his way through the passages for he delivered us safely to Oro Bay just ten miles south of Buna. Buna was the powerfully fortified base which cost the 32nd National Guard Division so much time and difficulty to capture. Their losses in dead, wounded, and diseases from the jungle were staggering.

When the "BOK" arrived at Oro Bay, to a man we were more than ready to get off that terrible ship. A saying among the troops "you spend six days in these conditions and you'll fight anyone to come ashore." Our task at Dobodura, that is the 808th Engineers, was to build a large air base with a number of airstrips, for both fighters and bombers. It was to have many dispersal areas with revetments, to protect the parked planes against anything but direct or close bomb hits. The air base was also very much needed to accommodate large numbers of DC-3 transport planes required to supply huge amounts of supplies, such as ammunitions, food, etc. to support the planned offensive. It would allow thousands of troops to be flown from Australia and Port Moresby directly over the Owen Stanley's to the Buna area.

As the construction continued, we saw increasingly many newer types of fighter and bomber planes -- such as the P-38 Twin Engine Fighters and the B-17 Four Engine Flying Fortresses as they were called. These gradually allowed the US 5th Air Force to gain air superiority for perhaps a couple of hundred miles further up the New Guinea north coast. Fewer unopposed bombing and strafing attacks on the air base occurred.

The Japanese Imperial Command in Tokyo considered this to be too great a threat to their New Guinea, and New Britain defenses. They assembled a large force of troop carrying transports, escorted by cruisers and destroyers, at Rabaul their main naval base in the southwest pacific. They then sailed for New Guinea with the intent of recapturing Gona, Buna, and our base at Dobodura.

Their plans may very well have succeeded except for one overriding fact. Early in 1942, the United States had been successful in deciphering the Japanese Naval Intelligence Code, and we knew they were coming -- when and where. Information obtained by this means, greatly helped our forces at the Battle of the Coral Sea, Battle of Midway -- in fact for the remainder of the war. Admiral Yamamoto, the architect of the Pearl Harbor attack, was ambushed and shot down using this source of information.

As the large enemy force approached the New Guinea coast, they were attacked by every plane that could be thrown at them. Flying in at very low levels and using a newly devised skip bomb technique, they completely devastated the Japanese force. Many of the men whose ships had been sunk were left floating in the water and were killed by planes strafing them and by sharks that infested these waters. Very few made it to shore.

One day, near the end of our stay at Dobodura, the whole 808th Engineers Battalion was ordered to fall into formation on one of our newly completed airstrips. The men had no idea what was up. Major Chaffee, our Battalion Commander, and his staff officers, standing in front of the assembled troops seemed to be waiting for something to happen. After waiting perhaps a half

hour, with the men standing "at ease," a plane landed on an adjacent strip and a few officers got into a staff car and drove over to our formation. The troops were ordered to "rifle salute" as General MacArthur and his Chief of Staff, General Sutherland walked up and traded salutes with our officers. To the best of my memory, I believe I saw Major Chaffee hold out his hand to shake hands with General MacArthur and that the Commander-in-Chief in the Southwest Pacific ignored the extended hand and saluted only.

General MacArthur praised the 808th Engineers Battalion for doing an outstanding job in its efforts building the Dobodura airbase in record time under very adverse conditions. Thus allowing the US and Aussie Forces to commence the offensive to reconquer New Guinea. In recognition, he then awarded the 808th Engineers "The Presidential Unit Citation" from President Roosevelt. It is considered a very prestigious award given to very few military organizations throughout the world.

While still at Dobodura, I recall a number of occurrences or experiences that I especially remember. During a heavy downpour and strong windstorm, while sleeping, a huge tree fell on top of a buddy killing him instantly. Most jungle trees have very shallow roots and are easily toppled. Sadly, men died from accidents and diseases in addition to the war. Another accident happened when a couple of soldiers died while fishing, using nitro-starch (similar to dynamite). They would fasten a short fuse on a stick of it and rapidly toss it into the ocean. Most of the stunned fish would float to the top, where they would be harvested and cooked. In this particular instance the thrower apparently thought the fuse had gone out and needed relighting, or maybe didn't get rid of it fast enough. The thrower had his chest blown out, the other man survived, but had to be sent back to the States very severely injured.

I had an accident myself one day. Certainly not comparable to what happened to those poor guys though. We had a diesel operated air compressor used to power our air tools. On this occasion, I was inserting a 1-1/2 diameter drill bit into a large air drill. I was holding the sharp bit in one hand while tightening the chuck using the other. I carelessly let the on-off lever hit the ground triggering the drill bit to turn in my hand. It nearly cut my large finger off on my right hand. They sent me back to the army field hospital where the doctor stitched things up. By the next day, the finger had swelled way up with infection, breaking some of the stitches. He said he would probably have to amputate, but wanted first to try a new medicine on it. The new medicine was Penicillin just being made available and the military services were given top priority on its use.

Another unusual happening that comes to mind while stationed at Dobodura, is I was walking through the jungle alone -- out of sight of any of my buddies. Suddenly, looming about 20 ft in front and blocking my path stood about ten fierce looking New Guinea natives. They stood in a straight line, each holding a long spear by his side, as if in a military formation. Their faces and bodies were painted in weird designs and had bones sticking through their noses. What scant attire they had was mainly made of Kunai gross and feathers. I was startled, and I immediately assumed the "at attention" position with my "MI Garand rifle"; pretty much copying the manner in which they were standing with their spears. I'm sure I didn't think out what response I should be taking. In retrospect it certainly would have been a mistake for me to have taken an aggressive stance. They are traditionally extremely good hunters. Capable of shooting with their spears even small birds perched atop large trees, for instance. On the other hand, there had been a Catholic Mission Station at Buna before the war. A priest, who survived the war,

relates having witnessed at the time of the initial Japanese landings at Buna, the beheading of two Catholic nuns by a Japanese officer.

Many of the New Guinea natives were head hunters and cannibals -- some having never seen a white person before. The men I encountered in the jungle, those many years ago, were certainly not from the mission group. Perhaps they were a hunting party from a village back up in the mountains. Some of the natives had been converted to Christianity and proved to be very dependable and helpful to our troops as porters and spies.

I must say, though, that by their actions those natives I faced in the jungle, exhibited no hostility toward me. Their demeanor seemed more like curiosity. For all of five minutes they froze and just stared at me, and I responded in the same observable way. My reaction was based predominately on surprise, great fear, amazement, among other emotions; all of which I was perhaps not totally aware of or able to explain today. Their constant, intense eyeball to eyeball contact with me indicated neither, belligerency, friendliness -- nothing. Nothing except their obviously profound curiosity. Suddenly, without my observing any signal from their leader, each man assumed a "right-face" stance and quickly and quietly moved to the left in single file, disappearing into the dense jungle.

On a day in the latter part of September, 1943, having completed our work on the air base, we were ordered to pack up our equipment and prepare for our next task in the up-coming offensive. The next day we moved down to the shore line at Oro Bay, and each man was assigned a cot with a mosquito net in tents that had been set up for us.

During the night, our encampment was subjected to heavy air attacks. I had carefully tucked the bottom of my mosquito net under the edges of my blanket, before going to sleep. I was suddenly awakened by close loud bomb blasts. Without trying to open the mosquito net, I automatically flipped my cot over and rolled into a ditch, all tangled up in my net. The attack ended as quickly as it had begun. Under these kind of circumstances, we were never allowed to turn on a flashlight or even light a match that could be seen from the air. So I fumbled around in the dark to set up my cot and find my blanket which was quite wet from the water in the ditch. I made no effort to do anything about the net. I was soon was fast asleep for the rest of the night.

Early the next morning, were ferried out to an LST (landing ship-tanks) on ducks (small amphibious craft). There were a number of other ships in the harbor, including some warships. I was assigned guard duty on deck, with orders to keep any soldiers from what was a small structure called a paint locker. I'm sure this was just a make work duty for why would a soldier want to go in there?

It was a bright cloudless day and a Sunday. A Catholic Priest was conducting mass to a group of men. Suddenly there were three shots fired from an anti-aircraft gun on shore. This was the standard warning procedure to indicate that radar had picked up unidentified planes approaching quite a number of miles out. Soon many fighter planes were roaring off the Dobodura field, gaining altitude and heading out to sea. Among them was a crack squadron led by Major Bong (nicknamed Bing-Bang-Bong). He turned out to be the top US fighter pilot of WW II, having credit for something like 42 enemy planes shot down. He is alleged to have died in an automobile accident in Wisconsin, shortly after the end of the war. Just a few minutes after the P-38's disappeared to the north to head off the Japanese, the "Red Alert" signal was given. Almost immediately, the anti-aircraft guns right next to where I was stationed started firing. I crouched low to the deck, in the shelter of the shield protecting the gun crew. From this position, I could hear the plane spotter directing the gun crew. Seems the enemy planes had eluded the US

fighters and had circled around and were coming in out of the sun from the east; a favorite tactic of theirs. Making it much tougher for our gunners to see them.

A "Zero" fighter strafed our ship from stern to bow at an extremely low level. It appeared not to be hit by our ships' guns and certainly not shot down -- at that time anyway. Flying in the same direction, just above the ocean. I noticed a "Kate" torpedo bomber flying parallel to our LST and the shore. I clearly saw the pilot with his flying helmet and goggles on, look directly over at our ship. His deadly "Long Lance Torpedo" was fastened outside and under his plane. There was no way he could have hit us with the weapon, it was not even pointed toward us. Almost immediately an American fighter plane appeared on his tail with its' guns blazing. The whole plane broke into large pieces before plunging into the ocean.

The Japanese bombers concentrated on attacking the ships in the harbor ignoring the heavy anti-aircraft fire from the guns on the ships and on shore. American fighter planes were vigorously attacking the bombers seemingly oblivious to the anti-aircraft fire. The fact that friend and foe were so intermingled had much to do with this situation. The "Zero" fighters flying top cover for their bombers had dropped down on the Americans and furious dogfights were taking place. Many planes were bring shot down, most glowing like meteors as they hit the ocean. Usually black smoke erupted from the ocean for a few moments.

Miraculously, a Japanese pilot survived his being shot down and was seen swimming toward our ship. It was rumored, but unconfirmed that a soldier had shot him in the head. If true, this is considered against the rules of warfare in two ways. First, soldiers are not supposed to shoot from a ship, and second our naval gunners should not have shot him. He could have been interrogated had he been taken aboard. But typically, the Japanese refused to be taken prisoner by their enemies. Instead considering it an honor to die in defense of their Emperor and Japan. American losses were relatively light considering the size of the attacking forces. A few men were killed or wounded accidentally, while standing on shore watching the battle. It was speculated that the guns shooting at the "Kate" Torpedo bomber flying low between our ship and shore, might possibly have hit the men. The soldiers should have taken cover, after all, it was not a movie.

Soon after, we joined a small convoy and sailed out of Oro Bay to sea. As always, the soldiers were not told where they were going. On October 3, 1943, we entered Langemak Bay and landed at Finschhafen on the straits between New Guinea and New Britain. In so doing, we had bypassed a number of Japanese bases, such as Madang and Lae, with the idea of cutting them off from supplies and reinforcements. This was a new strategy by the US high command. No longer did they want a repeat of another Buna where we had attacked strongly fortified positions at a terrible loss of men and time.

There was a problem in beaching our LST correctly at Langemak Bay. The LST was designed to carry tanks, trucks, etc. A large door at the bow of the ship was lowered allowing the vehicles to be driven right out onto the beach! In our case, we had D-8 Caterpillar bulldozers, graders, trucks, rock crushers and other equipment for our construction work -- which was an ideal use of the ship.

At this landing, the slope of the ocean bottom was not steep enough. As a consequence, our ship grounded out perhaps a hundred feet from the shore. The first vehicle out, sunk half out of sight under the water. Luckily there were no Japanese to oppose us. The soldiers set to work filling hundreds of sand bags to make a ramp from ship to shore. We were greeted on shore by soldiers from the Australian 9th Division. They had landed several days prior and had driven the

enemy back up into the hills. This was an Aussie operation and we had been assigned temporarily to their army as they had great need for our services and modern equipment. Many had an element of jealousy, for I heard one Aussie soldier say, "You bloody yanks have everything, we have sweet fuck all."

The Japanese fell back to Sattelberg, a place up in the mountains, about seven miles from our air field construction site. It was strongly fortified and defended. The almost constant boom of Aussie artillery fire could be heard for about two months before the town was finally captured.

Progress moved along rather routinely during our four months stay at this location. A couple of events, I do remember though. One day we had a gas attack scare. I didn't think so, but other men in the squad thought the enemy was dropping gas on us. It turned out to be just methane and hydrogen sulfite gas given off by the jungle. Due to the exceptionally high rainfall, the vegetation falling to the ground rots at an extremely fast rate giving off a high level of stinking gas.

One night something bit me on the right cheek. The whole side of my face swelled up and turned numb and remained so for the rest of the night. I don't know what bit me, maybe a snake, scorpion or any one of the many creatures crawling around in the jungle. In any event, by next morning without medical treatment, it cleared up on its own.

There was another troublesome situation that took place routinely at this location. Most nights, a lone Japanese plane would fly low over our positions. Unlike other enemy planes, that would come in fast, make their bomb runs and get away fast, this pilot would fly over us for maybe an hour before dropping his bombs. He probably carried only a couple of small bombs. His mission, no doubt, was to make the men nervous so they would loose sleep. The plane was small, slow, and had a junky sounding engine. As a consequence, he was given the name, "Washing Machine Charlie." Far as I know, Charlie was never shot down, nor any serious effort made to do so.

Our next sea voyage, again by LST, was another leap-frog movement further up the New Guinea coast to Saidor where we landed unopposed on January 2, 1944. Paratroopers had secured the area before our arrival. In contrast to our previous locations, this area was flat and covered with Kunai grass instead of dense, dark jungle. A cool, clean water, river flowed through it. It was great to bathe in, wash out our clothes and it helped dry out the jungle rot covering our skin. Jungle rot, tropical ulcers, dengue fever, malaria were rough painful problems we all suffered in the jungle areas. Mildew disintegrated our leather belts, shoes, watch bands, etc. turning them green. Malaria is caused by the bite of an anopheles mosquito. There was no cure for it, only pills to somewhat subdue its symptoms. At first, they gave us "quinine" which had many adverse side effects. Later they switched us to "Atabrine" which turned our skin a yellow-brown color. Each day, the battalion doctor or another officer would hand each man an Atabrine tablet, watch him pop it into his mouth and swallow it. Previous to this procedure, it was rumored that some men had deliberately not taken their daily pill and were getting extremely sick then shipped out of the combat areas to Australian or even US hospitals. Fortunately, for our country, most of the men did their duty and did not resort to these cowardly tactics. In a similar vane, one man while on the "BOK" "accidentally" shot himself in the foot. In another case a man from "B" Company came around quoting the bible in an irrational manner. We told him to see the battalion chaplain. Was he faking? We were not really sure. We stayed at Saidor for approximately four months then were on our way once more by LST. We ended up with a long jump to "Biak Island." It is a relatively small, but very strategic island off the northern coast of

New Guinea, in the Dutch East Indies. We were always paid in the currency of the pre-war country, in possession of the territory we occupied. For instance, while in Australia, Port Moresby, New Guinea, Buna, and Papua, we were paid in Australian pounds, shillings, and pence. While in the Dutch East Indies, we were paid in Guilders, and in the Philippines it was Pesos. Speaking of pay, any of the younger generations reading this, would be amazed to learn how little the soldiers were paid in those days.

When inducted into the army in 1941, as a private, we were paid $21/month. When sent overseas upon the outbreak of war, I vaguely remember a small increase in pay as a consequence of going over. Now let us consider a private going up into the jungles of New Guinea in 1942. First of all it was a full time duty -- 24 hours per day, 7 days per week, no holidays.

$21.20/month ÷24 hrs x 30 days = 0.28/hour = 2.9 cents/hour

I've already related much on the hardships of war such as the possibility of death, wounding from enemy action, diseases, and lack of physical comforts of some of the most primitive type. Long separation from wives, girl friends, friends in the US and separation from the US itself in contrast with the wonderful pre-war life. Loneliness -- no opportunity to date girls with chances to dance and get to know them, interact with them, which would be the normal condition back home. As a matter of fact, I never saw a white woman for years at a time. Native women were off bounds from the army's standpoint, and native men were very protective of their women. Any soldier violating this code, would risk being killed. I was not aware of any that tried.

Although the people were scantily clad, the women were usually bare breasted, they were very modest folks. I never saw any show of affection between the sexes, such as kissing, holding hands, etc. The women could usually be seen walking a few paces behind their men. One thing that greatly surprised me, was I saw on a couple of occasions, women nursing little pigs. Now I am sure in their culture this had nothing to do with their lack of modesty. It's just that they have a very high regard for pigs as food. If conditions were favorable, a movie camera was sometimes set up showing Hollywood movies. The soldiers would sit on stumps, logs, cans, etc. to watch the shows. In back of them, were usually groups of natives watching in amazement the things and behavior that existed outside their known world. Often the women would turn their backs in bashful embarrassment, at some of the Hollywood love scenes. Probably the thing that made their eyes pop out most in disbelief, was to see for the first time someone remove their dentures. This to them was sheer magic.

With the soldiers isolated from contact with women for sometimes years at a time, I'm sure many readers are wondering how much homosexual activity took place. I overheard some remarks and observed flirting actions between certain men, so it most certainly took place. I don't know how prevalent it was, though. There was no indication that anyone in my squad was attracted to that kind of behavior. I believe for most of the servicemen fighting in the isolated islands of the Pacific, abstinence was undoubtedly the predominate way of life. Sadly, though, it was just another of the many deprivations suffered.

Last, but not least, was the all pervading thoughts of food. I must mention right now that the men of the 808th Engineers never ran out of food, as sometimes happened in some outfits that had their supply lines cut off. No, we always had plenty. It's just that it was monotonous, canned, and very limited as to choice. "C Rations" and later in the war, "K Rations" a somewhat

improved version of the "C Rations." "C Rations" consisted of a can of beans, stew, or hash, irrespective of the meal or time of day and a piece of biscuit (that was the name it went by). For a long time, we didn't realize we were supposed to be receiving a can of peaches occasionally. The story going around was that troops unloading the supplies were taking the peaches and making homemade liquor using a still they had made. On the short wave radio beamed to the SW Pacific, they reported that all the servicemen throughout the world would be served turkey with fixings for Thanksgiving. For the 808th Engineers, all holidays were just like all other days. If conditions warranted, a mess tent was set up and hot beans, stew, hash, powered eggs or powdered potatoes were served along with hot coffee. If bread was available, we sometimes had toast with canned stew meat in gravy on it -- universally referred to as "Shit on the Shingle."

While serving with the Australian Army at Finchhafen, we were fed "bully beef and mutton." Jokingly referred to as mutton with the fur still attached.

On a few occasions we were each given a bottle of excellent Aussie beer. The American army also issued us a can of beer on rare occasions and a carton of cigarettes once a month. The beer of necessity was drunk warm. Actually it was the custom in Australia at that time (maybe still is), to drink beer at room temperature. They contended that the flavor was better served uncooled. Could be, but I'm no expert on the subject and was glad to drink the beer they gave me. One story going around, was that some guys in one of the line companies, had used fire-extinguishers carried on half trucks (armored personnel carriers) to cool their beer. The carton of cigarettes were usually "Piedmonts" and considered by the smokers as a poor grade, as contrasted with the "Camels" and "Luckies." Can't prove it by me though -- I was never a smoker (an important reason I'm still alive at 76 years? -- maybe). The Aussie's thought the "Piedmonts" were superior to theirs and were glad to pay a pound ($3.20 at that time) for a carton; worth about 7 days pays at that time for me. Actually, money had little immediate value while we were in the jungle. Some of the men did a lot of gambling, mostly cards, with high stakes involved. I never joined the games for I had no experience, ability, skill or whatever it takes. Actually, no interest and I am sure I would have lost what little I had in short order. The army had a system whereby a man could save money and send it home, it was called soldier's deposit. To return to the cigarette story, I traded my carton of "Piedmonts" to a native for a delicious ripe papaya and seven green bananas. I was happy with the deal.

While on the subject of food, I'll mention a situation which engendered strong feelings among the soldiers while traveling on the LST's and other ships in our moves during the war. No one was at fault really -- logistics demanded the system. The ships spent a great deal of time at sea from the time they left the States until their return. They could carry only enough fresh food to supply the ship's crews and naval gun crews for their long voyages. I still remember a guy from the gun crew coming topside from his mess area eating a delicious looking egg and ham sandwich. Boy was I jealous. My thinking -- as we're all Americans -- it's not fair. We hadn't eaten fresh eggs, butter, meat, vegetables, ice cream, etc. for years. War -- whoever said it was fair?

Tokyo Rose, some of the younger readers may not know. She was an American born propagandist broadcasting from Tokyo aimed at the allied troops in the Southwest Pacific. Obviously, it was her mission and intent to discourage and make us unhappy. She very often had the opposite effect.

We, of course, knew what she was up to. In a positive way she did entertain us. She would very often act like an ordinary DJ, saying in a pleasant happy voice, "Here is a song I think

you will enjoy." Then going on playing enjoyable music. Very often the latest American popular songs. All coming in much clearer than the music from San Francisco. Then she would come through with the propaganda saying, "Brave American soldiers of the 808th Engineers located at Saidor Airdrome, the invincible Japanese Army will soon destroy you, don't be fools." She would then put on the "Tennessee Waltz," play it awhile, then say, "Don't be suckers men. Your wife or girlfriend is probably out dancing in the arms of another man to this dreamy romantic music." She would speak in what sounded like a very sympathetic voice. It probably did have it's intended effect, to make some of the men unhappy and wonder.

It reminds me of one tragic case, which Tokyo Rose had no part of. One of our buddies, was always happy to receive a letter from his wife, to show us photos of her and their two sons. Then one day, he received a "Dear John" letter from his wife. He was completely devastated. I'm sure he didn't have the slightest warning. Yes, very tragic.

Readers, by now, undoubtedly have a pretty good idea of many of the hardships we endured. So I'll not continue philosophizing on that subject and return to the discussion of the war offensive itself.

We landed on Biak Island on the 1st of June, 1944 with no opposition as far as the 808th Engineers was concerned. We immediately occupied a couple of Japanese air strips, and commenced lengthening and greatly improving their plane capacity. When completed, it would allow the US 5th Air Force to range it's control of the air much closer to the Philippine Islands.

The topography of Biak consisted entirely of coral. The land was relatively flat without the dense jungles of previous base locations. It made construction easier. Optimism proved to be premature. Upon the initial American landings, the Japanese had not confronted us in great force. Instead, they had dropped back and hidden in the many deep limestone caves that dotted the entire island. They would pick their targets and opportune time, come out unexpectedly, set up temporary road blocks, kill men, destroy vehicles, grab supplies and then dart back into their caves. The island was anything but secured.

Eventually, they were subdued, by Americans rolling or dropping 55 gallon drums of gasoline, followed by hand grenades and flame throwers down on them. Some of the entrances were bulldozed shut. Some of the caves had long subterranean interconnections. In some places large rooms had naturally formed. Here their officers had set up command posts and supply caches, but there were no natural water supplies down there. Many resorted to suicide rather than surrender or die of thirst. Our outfit had a number of two wheeled water trailers, with a large tank with three faucets on each side. It came in mighty handy for our men to fill their canteens. Biak sets almost right on the equator -- a very hot, dry place, so we were always needing lots of drinking water.

One night with a full moon reflecting it's light off the pure white coral ground, visibility was almost as good as full daylight. A group of perhaps 20 Japanese rushed out of a cave and were attempting to pull a water trailer away by hand. (US army pulls them with a truck of course). Although the enemy soldiers had their weapons, their main occupation and concern was to get away with the water, in spite of the almost inevitable probability of being killed in the attempt. One man, with his mouth under a faucet, was drinking as the trailer was moving along. As you can guess, they didn't get away with it. It does point out how desperate a person can be when they are thirsty enough. From my experience on the Australian desert, early on in the war, I know just how they felt.

In retrospect, after the passage of more than a half century of time, I now realize that my buddies and I often took some very risky, foolish, and unnecessary chances. Maybe, the fact that we had faced so many obvious dangers in the preceding two years, we just didn't want to believe that everything posed a crisis. That we couldn't relax a bit. As an example, one particular day comes to mind. A group of maybe five or six of us went hiking along, looking at spots where the Japanese had used as small eating and sleeping areas, and obviously had been forced to leave in a big hurry. There were straw mats stretched on the ground for sleeping, little burners to cook food and heat tea. We found bottles of saki (wine made from rice) and a small wooden barrel containing pickled plums. Well no one in our group drank or ate any of this. We had been warned not too. Sometimes the Japanese would booby trap their "left behinds" especially officers swords or pistols, that our soldiers might want to take.

Walking quite a distance from our air field that day, we came out on a nice beach. Somebody yelled, "Let's go swimming." Each man threw his clothes off, put his rifle on top of his own pile and raced into the surf, foolishly leaving not one man on shore as a guard. And this at a time when there were still plenty of enemy down in the caves. Well, as it happened, we were lucky, nothing bad occurred. We all had a wonderful time. The war was forgotten and we were, "boys again." Yes, certainly a very dangerous, stupid thing to do.

While on Biak, we were threatened with an extremely serious situation, of which we were totally unaware of at the time. I learned about it, many years later, reading a book written by a Japanese admiral. He had been a major participant in the WW II actions there.

Early in 1944, the Japanese Imperial Naval Command in Tokyo had devised a plan of actions to be taken in the event that their most vital interests were threatened by the American capture of certain peripheral islands. The plan was given the name SHO-GO. Biak was one of these islands. Our invasion was considered to be too great a threat to their occupation of the Philippines. The SHO-GO plan was invoked, meaning they would use their main combined battle fleet to attempt to recapture Biak from the Americans. This extremely powerful naval force, with transports loaded with thousands of soldiers, approached Biak. They almost certainly would have overwhelmed and destroyed our outnumbered forces on the island. Once again fate was on our side. First though, I must mention a little about the American strategy intended to win the war. There were two almost independently operating forces, each led by a commander believing his own plan of operations was the best way to win the war. One force was commanded by General MacArthur and would advance on a northwest axis up through New Guinea for the eventual capture of the Philippines as it's goal. It was carried out through most of 1942 and 1943 almost exclusively by the army and 5th Air Force with very little naval help.

The second force was commanded by Admiral Nimitz and carried out by the navy and marines with some army help. Throughout the war, MacArthur and Nimitz were always competing with each other to receive the most men, equipment, etc. Both men heartily disliked each other.

Now to get back to the threat of the combined Japanese fleet on our forces on Biak. Just as they were about to attack us, they received the news that Admiral Nimitz with his, by now, huge US fleet had invaded Saipan with a large force of US Marines. To loose Saipan was considered to be an even greater loss to Japan than the loss of Biak. They immediately canceled their planned attack on Biak and turned their ships around and headed back to Singapore. It was feared that if they became heavily involved at Biak, that Nimitz's main US fleet around Saipan

would come down from Saipan and attack their left flank. They thought it was a trap contrived by the Americans.

Luckily for our air base and soldiers, no such US plan existed, and our occupation of Biak was never challenged again. The timing was strictly coincidental. MacArthur and Nimitz were not cooperating. Each was independently pursuing his own plans for winning the war.

MacArthur was now eager to return to the Philippines since his hasty departure in early 1942. He had been promising ever since, "I shall return." Incidentally it points out the extreme egotism of the man. It should have been, "We shall return." General MacArthur achieved this victory, etc. Practically all his soldiers greatly resented him. Most of the time during our tough campaigns in New Guinea, "Dug-out Dug" as he was called by his troops, was living the good life in a luxurious hotel in Brisbane, Australia. His wife and young son living with him. He was alleged to have spent a great deal of his time giving speeches to women's organizations, trying to build himself up as some kind of exalted hero. He seems to have been quite successful in convincing the civilians in both Australia and the US, but certainly not the troops and other military personnel he interacted with. (Years later he was fired by President Truman for advocating, in the Korean War, an atomic attack on China.)

Around the middle of 1944, President Roosevelt called a meeting in Hawaii, to determine whether the next move would be a US attack on the Philippines or Formosa. Both MacArthur and Nimitz each gave a speech outlining their individual reasons why they thought their own plan was the better. MacArthur prodded FDR and the American Joint Chiefs of Staff to approve a Philippine campaign under his control. He received opposition from the US Navy, particularly Admiral Nimitz, who refused to let MacArthur control his large aircraft carriers. Roosevelt favored the Philippine drive and handed control of all land units, all ships transporting those men and all small escort carriers providing air support to the army general. While the large, fast carriers and new fast battleships were left under the control of Nimitz. The two commanders were ordered to act in unison, but this division of the command later nearly resulted in disaster.

In early October, 1944, we boarded a troop transport and sailed away from "Biak" and ended up in Hollandia Harbor. Hollandia is situated on a large bay on the northern coast of Dutch New Guinea. It had been captured a short time earlier by American troops. The 808th Engineers did not disembark, instead our ship stayed anchored out in the bay for a number of days. Day and night there was a steady stream of transports and warships joining us. When it appeared as if the large bay could not contain another ship, they all began pulling up their anchors and started heading out to sea -- among them ours.

As in the past, we were not told where we were going. But what we did know was that something very big was going to happen and that we would be very much a part of it. Rumors were running rampant. Some said we were going to attack the Japanese in the Philippines, other thought it would be Formosa, or China. Maybe even Japan itself. My guess was that it would be Mindanao, the large southern most island of the Philippines. While at Finchhafen, I had salvaged a compass from a shot down Japanese "Betty" bomber. With the help of a detailed "National Geographic" map of the western pacific and the use of the compass as the voyage continued, I concluded it would be Mindanao. Well, my guess was wrong, as were all the other guesses of the soldiers I had talked to. My guess of the Philippines was correct, just not the right island.

The ships encountered a typhoon with tremendous waves battering them, as we moved slowly (about 9 knots) toward our objective. I was seasick, of course.

On October 20, 1944, at about 4 AM, we were suddenly awakened by an officer speaking on the ships PA System. He ordered all the soldiers to fasten on their "May West's" (nickname of life preservers), saying that we were moving through heavily mined waters. To prepare ourselves and equipment for a landing on hostile shores. An hour or so later, our ship was cloaked in artificial fog, making it difficult to see from bow to stern.

During the voyage, I had slept on a cot set up on deck between a couple of GMC trucks. Upon getting up, I noticed our little black dog lying underneath my cot. She was dead. A soldier in one of the line companies had gotten her three years earlier in Australia. All the men were very fond of her. She had shared so much with us. I've never considered myself a superstitious person, nevertheless, I couldn't help but wonder if is was some kind of bad omen. Surely, it was just a coincidence that she took her final sleep under my cot.

Titanic amounts of men and material were accumulated for the Philippine invasion. Admiral Kinkaid's 7th Fleet of 738 ships were used to transport the 174,000 men of MacArthur's 6th Army and two million tons of supplies and equipment to the Leyte Beachhead. That averages almost 23 tons per man. (Leyte Island in the central Philippines was the place picked that we were about to invade.)

Admiral Halsey's 3rd Fleet, consisting of 16 of our newest and biggest fast aircraft carriers and 10 largest battleships (total of over 100 warships) was ordered to use it's tremendous fire power to support and protect our landing forces. His large number of experienced naval pilots would dominate the air with their fighters and bombers.

There was, however, one potential flaw in these plans -- divided command. While Kinkaids 7th Fleet was under MacArthur's overall command, Nimitz controlled Admiral Halsey's 3rd Fleet. If a sudden unexpected occurrence demanding immediate action should come up, there would be no supreme commander ordering and synchronizing the actions of both huge naval forces. The unexpected did happen and it nearly resulted in total disaster for the men on shore and the hundreds of ships in Leyte Harbor.

The sun was rising on a cloudless day as our ship entered Leyte Harbor and it's anchors were dropped perhaps a couple of thousand feet off shore. The noise was unbelievable. The very atmosphere itself was pulsing against our ear drums. Every warship in the gulf was firing into the intended landing areas. The battleship USS Pennsylvania, which had been raised from Pearl Harbor and repaired, was firing broadsides from it's 16" guns at some target well inland. It was about 500 feet from us and it's big guns were especially loud. Swarms of bombers from Halsey's large carriers further out in the gulf, were continuously blasting targets on land. Hard to believe how any enemy soldiers could survive this tremendous bombardment. Early in the first couple of years of the war, the Japanese had bombed our air fields with little or no opposition. If the troops at Buna had had a small fraction of this kind of support, the war would have been over years earlier.

Actually, the enemy sustained relatively few casualties during the landing. Upon seeing the overwhelming forces about to attack them, they had withdrawn from their prepared beach fortifications and moved their troops to Ormoc, on the other side of Leyte. As a consequence, our landings were relatively unopposed, and the 808th Engineers moved a few miles inland, that first day, and took over the vital air field at Tacloban. Immediately, we went to work repairing and lengthening the runway on a 24 hour/day rush basis, so that it could be used by American planes just as soon as possible.

The Japanese could not afford to lose control of the Dutch East Indies. Most of their precious oil flowed from there to Japan itself. By seizing Leyte, the Americans would sever the supply line and drastically reduce Japan's ability to wage war, especially through her powerful Imperial Fleet. Admiral Toyoda, Commander-in-Chief of the combined fleet, designed a plan called SHO-1 to block the Americans. The plan utilized an intricate combination of deception and daring. Three strong naval forces would smash through the American defenses, and destroy the Leyte Gulf beachhead. To accomplish that, Toyoda had to lure away Halsey's mighty 3rd Fleet so his own ships could get at Leyte Gulf. He dangled an irresistible plum at the aggressive American admiral -- four aircraft carriers and escorting ships of Vice Admiral Ozawa's northern force. The carriers contained few airplanes because American carrier air power had decimated Japanese air strength, but Toyoda hoped the mere appearance of carriers would lure Halsey away from guarding the Leyte beachhead. While Ozawa lured away Halsey, two other Japanese battle groups would join and attack Leyte Gulf from the south. Simultaneously, the strongest unit of SHO-1, Admiral Kurita's 1st Striking Force, made up of 23 battleships, cruisers and destroyers, would depart from Singapore, head northeast across the Sibuyan Sea, pass through San Bernardino Strait and descend on Leyte Gulf from the north.

Although dubious of the plan's success, Kurita encouraged his officers in a pep talk before leaving. "Would it not be a shame to have the fleet remain intact while our nation perishes? I believe that Imperial Headquarters is giving us a glorious opportunity. You must remember that there are such things as miracles."

The three enemy units did not arrive to attack Leyte Gulf simultaneously as planned. There was a communications breakdown among the units. The southern unit of Vice Admiral Nishimura attempted to fight his way north to reach Leyte Gulf. He was opposed by and eventually defeated by Rear Admiral Oldendorf a unit of Kinkaids Fleet after a fierce night battle starting around 2:00 AM on October 25th. Forty miles behind Nishimura, the second Japanese attack unit, arriving late, was also defeated. The Americans had better radar and communications than the enemy.

Kurita's 1st Striking Force was initially spotted steaming up toward the Sibuyan Sea from which he intended to enter San Bernardino Pass from the west. He was seen by two American submarines -- the "Darter" and "Dace." "Darter's" torpedoes sank Kurita's flagship heavy cruiser, "Atago" and also damaged heavy cruiser, "Takao." "Dace" sent a spread of torpedoes into a third heavy cruiser, "Maya," with such force the ship disintegrated in a tremendous explosion. In less than a half hour, Kurita lost three heavy cruisers and two destroyers, and he still had more than half his voyage to complete before reaching Leyte Gulf. On October 24th, as Kurita advanced across the Sibuyan Sea, Halsey's carrier planes bombed and fired torpedoes at his ships almost continuously. In this battle, were the two largest and most powerful battleships ever built. Their huge guns were the largest with 18.1" bores. (The largest guns American, British or German battleships had were only 16" bores.) One ship was named, "Yamato" and her sister ship "Musashi." These super battleships were considered by their designers to be unsinkable.

"Musashi" sank only after receiving 19 torpedo and 17 bomb hits, taking with her 1,000 officers and men. Kurita reversed course after losing seven warships and started heading back to Singapore -- or so it seemed.

The popular, profane Halsey had built his reputation on bold words that garnered public adulation and an admiring press back in the USA. In this respect, he was much similar to MacArthur. Although he was better liked among his men in the Pacific, than was the General.

As news poured into Halsey's flagship, the New Jersey, he searched for signs of enemy aircraft carriers. He knew they would show themselves for such an immense battle. Late in the afternoon of October 24th, Halsey's search planes finally sighted the four aircraft carriers of Ozawa's decoy force about 200 miles to the north. Halsey correctly believed that Oldendorf could handle the southern force and knew that Kurita's center force had turned back with heavy losses after being assailed by "3rd Fleet" carrier air power and submarines. Figuring no other force could threaten Leyte Gulf, Halsey concluded he could safely leave his post off the San Bernardino Straits and chase north after the carriers.

Earlier he had radioed his commanders his intention to form Task Force 34 to block Kurita should the Japanese admiral decide to reverse direction again and go for the Leyte Gulf. However, Halsey never formed Task Force 34 to guard the straits. Instead he took all his ships north with him to hunt the Japanese carriers, leaving the straits totally unguarded. Kinkaid at Leyte and Nimitz at Pearl Harbor had intercepted the message saying that Halsey was actually positioning Task Force 34 off the straits.

A little before 7:00 AM a message from Kinkaid shocked Halsey. The message asked if Task Force 34 was watching San Bernardino Straits. He shot back in quick reply, " Negative. Task Force 34 is with carrier groups now engaging enemy carrier force." Halsey focused all his attention on getting Ozawa's carriers. A couple of hours later, his planes sank all four Japanese carriers and a destroyer. While his carrier air strikes were sinking Ozawa's sacrificial ships, Halsey received additional messages from Kinkaid that he desperately needed Halsey's help off Leyte Gulf.

At 9:45 AM Nimitz sent Halsey a message that infuriated the old war-horse. By mistake, the message was delivered to Halsey with the padding left in, and in plain English. It read: "Where is Task Force 34, The World Wonders." When Halsey finally turned south for Leyte Gulf, his help was no longer needed. The vastly outgunned and outnumbered Admiral Sprague was participating in one of the most amazing miracles of the Pacific War.

When surprised by Kurita just 15 miles from Leyte Gulf, Sprague realized that he and his 13 little ships were the only force between the Japanese and the Leyte beachhead. Since destruction appeared inevitable, Sprague decided, "We might as well give them all we've got before we go down." He also ordered his destroyers and destroyer escorts to charge head long at Kurita in a David - versus - Goliath assault, while aircraft from his unit pestered the enemy. One aviator reported to Sprague that he and other pilots were forced to take off without proper ammunition and had run out of bullets and bombs. Sprague replied that they should make dry runs on the enemy ships who would be forced to divert attention from escort carriers to swat away the offending planes. Sprague boldly launched torpedo attacks on Kurita. Darting from port to starboard like little warriors fending off a group of giants, the ships aimed torpedoes, made smoke, and fired their 5" guns at whatever target appeared before them. One spread of torpedoes forced Kurita's flagship the mighty super battleship, "Yamato" to reverse course, which put her and the attending battleship, "Nagato" out of the battle for 10 crucial minutes. Sprague's 5" shells proved no match for the 14" and 8" shells that lumbered back in return, some containing various hues of dye to mark ranges for different ships. Sprague remembered that, "the splashes had a kind of horrid beauty." One of the sailors yelled, "They're shooting at us in Technicolor."

The enemy shot more than pretty colors at Sprague. Large shells soon zeroed in on the small ships and whacked them with impunity. "It was like a puppy, being smacked by a fire truck," remembered one man aboard Johnson.

In spite of the valiant efforts of the destroyers and destroyer escorts, Kurita's cruisers and destroyers closed in. Sprague again ordered his screen to attack, and was informed that they had no more torpedoes. In went the screen for another joust anyway. Their 5" shells bounced futility off Kunita's stronger hulls, but still they went in. A shell smacked, "Heerman," and "Hoel" took as many as 14 hits and started to sink. "Johnston" single-handedly charged a column of destroyers, led by light cruiser, "Yahagi" and forced them to release their torpedoes from too great a distance, then fell prey to their combined shell fire. As "Johnston" disappeared under the surface, a Japanese officer stood at attention on board his passing destroyer, gallantly saluting the bold vessel. "Samuel B Roberts" floated awhile in twisted agony before dropping to the depth. Enemy heavy cruisers overtook escort carrier "Gambier Bay" and sank her.

Just as it seemed Kurita would move in for the coup de grace, the nearest Japanese cruisers and destroyers started turning back. The stunned American Admiral Sprague could not believe his eyes, but it looked as if the whole Japanese fleet was indeed retiring. Confused by the smoke and aggressive tactics of his American counterpart and afraid that Halsey's fast carriers were actually his adversary, a timid Kurita turned away at the moment of victory.

About 11:00 AM Japanese aircraft led by Lt. Commander Seki approached Sprague's exhausted unit. Two of the planes immediately dove for Sprague's flagship, "Fanshaw Bay" and were shot down, while another peeled off toward the escort carrier, "St. Lo" and a fourth selected, "Kitkun Bay." Sailors on all ships watched in horror as the planes, instead of pulling out of a bombing run, plunged straight toward their targets. The fourth plan crashed into "Kitkun Bays" port catwalk, exploded, then bounced in the sea, while the third smashed into "St. Lo's" flight deck, creating fires that ignited numerous explosions through the hangar deck. "St. Lo" sank taking 114 men with her. This was the beginning of the Kamikaze suicide attacks, which caused tremendous lose of men and ships in later campaigns.

Halsey's 3rd Fleet pursued Kurita as he retreated through the San Bernardino Straits and Sibuyan Sea, sinking a light cruiser and damaging one heavy one. Kurita departed with approximately half the force he had brought to the battle -- an in glorious defeat for a man who had held victory in the palm of his hand.

I have included the above historical naval accounts in my memoirs, so that the reader can see how the experiences of the 808th Engineers in the Leyte beachhead fitted into the overall picture in those dangerous and crucial days.

On October 24, 1944, (four days after our initial landing on the beachhead), we were alerted to be prepared for a probable land attack on our airfield. The Japanese did drop paratroopers from low flying transport planes, but they were soon killed or rounded up, so they were not very effective. All along the beach for miles were stacked huge amounts of ammunition, gasoline, food, supplies of all kinds closely packed together. Japanese bombers hit and created huge explosions and fires that lit up the sky all night long.

About mid-morning of October 25th, a blue Navy F4F Wildcat fighter plane signaled that he was about to land on our Tacloban airstrip. The men on the ground tried to wave him off, but quickly removed the construction equipment off to the side when it became obvious that the pilot was determined to land. There were large piles of gravel in places along the runway so a crash landing seemed inevitable. With much skill and a good measure of luck, he made it down to

everyone's surprise. He jumped out of his plane yelling, "Large Japanese battleships, cruisers, destroyers -- a huge fleet about 10 miles away headed here. Terrible, terrible -- nothing to stop them. He was asked where Halsey's American Fleet was and he didn't know. He wanted to know if we had any bombs, ammunition, aviation fuel, so he could fly out again and do something. He was so excited and upset when he learned he could not possibly get off our airfield. He said he landed at Tacloban because his escort carrier had been sunk while he was in the air.

Well, as you now know, the miracle happened. Should Kurita have succeeded in getting into the harbor, hundreds of troop transports and supply ships would have been destroyed. As for targets on the beachhead, our airfield at Tacloban undoubtedly had top priority with the Japanese warships. Except for a rare air raid on our airfield we had no further interaction with the enemy at Tacloban. We occupied ourselves building a powerful airbase with a number of runways to be used for the next six months of the war. Living conditions improved. A regular mess was set up to serve hot meals. Tents and cots were supplied for everyone.

Tents and cots bring to mind a happening that took place while we were here. A terrific typhoon hit the island one night. It blew our tents down on us. The rain was coming down at an unbelievable rate. The men in our tent figured there was not much we could do about it then, we were tired too, just went back to sleep. We would deal with it in the morning. Now we use to sling our rifles between the center crossbars and end crossbars of our cots and place our shoes beside our cots. While still dark, one of the guys yelled out something about water. I reached out to grab my shoes and hit water almost up to the top of my cot. By daylight, the storm had pretty much abated, but it looked like we were a hundred feet out in a lake. We had encamped on a flood plain in a coconut grove. The water level receded rapidly and we were soon busy putting our tent back up and drying things out. With a few exceptions, all the other tents had been blown down also. Many shoes were floating all over the area. I couldn't find a pair to fit me, so I got a new pair from the quartermaster sergeant. We laughed about the whole incident. Funny, I saw one guy filing the sole of a shoe, apparently he didn't like the fit or condition of the pair he found. With a hole through the sole, he could be issued a new pair.

Something else happened while we were at Leyte. It turned out OK in the end, but it could have ended otherwise. One evening after eating my food, I followed the prescribed procedure of stringing my spoon, fork, knife and mess kit lid onto the mess kit handle. Then swishing it around in an ash can of boiling hot soap water for cleaning and dipping them into a clean hot can of rinse water. As there had been no Japanese in this area for months, I headed away in anything but an alert frame of mind. I was not at all alarmed when I saw what appeared to be three friendly Philippine men approaching and about to pass me on the trail. Suddenly, one of them lunged at me with a machete, grazing my fiber helmet liner (didn't have my steel helmet on). I fell to the ground in an attempt to dodge it, my liner rolling away on the ground. The attacker was really a "friendly" man, who had unintentionally mistaken me for a Japanese soldier. I could see they were all very much upset and sorry. The man who had swung the machete kept apologizing over and over again. He explained in broken English why he thought it happened. He gave me a number of reasons, all of which were creditable to me. He said, he realized immediately, upon seeing my reddish brown hair, that he had made a terrible mistake, that I was certainly not Japanese . The reason's he gave as to why he originally thought I was a Japanese soldier were; I have high cheek bones, my skin was a yellowish brown color (caused by the Atabrine pills we had to take to control the symptoms of Malaria -- they were not a cure -- plus

the intense tropical sun), and he contended that I walked like a Japanese , who characteristically swing their arms higher than Americans. Just by chance, I was temporarily exaggerating the swing of my arms with the idea of drying out my mess kit and utensils faster.

Another of my nine lives expended. Especially ironic in that I would soon be scheduled to go home after three and one-half years overseas.

In April, 1945, when it became certain that Germany was completely defeated, Congress enacted a system for demobilizing the soldiers that had served longest in the war. It was called the point system. Extra points were earned for each month spent overseas and time spent in combat zones. Extra points were awarded for battle stars earned, etc. With this type of scoring, I had points to burn and was soon loaded on a ship headed for the good old USA.

While a few days out of the Philippines, they announced on the PA System, the death of President Roosevelt. After all these years, I can't seem to remember anything else about the voyage home -- sure my thoughts were about the future. Well, yes, there was something. We still had on our tropical light clothing as we approached San Francisco Bay. I remember sitting on the deck shivering my teeth out. Actually it was considered a warm California May day. For me, it would take quite some time to become acclimated to a temperate climate again.

At the unloading dock, they directed me to a train for soldiers whose destination was Fort Dix, New Jersey -- traveling by coach. Here we were given physical exams and I was awarded my honorable discharge papers and put on a train for Schenectady, NY. Home at last -- two months shy of 4 years after leaving. I was met at the station by my mother and brother Edwin. I probably would not have recognized my brother had he not been with my mother. On leaving he had been 9 years old and on returning 13 years old. He had grown a couple of feet to over six feet tall.

Yes, I was very happy to be coming home. It seemed that I had been sent away to the war and a life entirely alien to anything I had experienced prior. When I returned to the US, most people, life styles, well everything, had changed drastically, or so it seemed to me. It was a different world, very confusing, especially at first. The war affected me profoundly and I'm thankful that I returned unwounded physically and mentally. Regretfully, many did not.

Best Wishes to All,

John T. Geertsen
written 1996

John T. Geertsen