

II

World War 2



TWO

Serving in the U.S. Army

Leaving Home

I registered to enter the Army¹ in Moncks Corner when I was 18 years old but I didn't get called up until I was 19. Twenty-three of us boys from Berkeley County gathered in Moncks Corner to head to basic training. I was the only one of the twenty-three that went to basic training at Camp Lee,² Virginia (about 50 miles south of Richmond). As we loaded up on buses, I was in charge of keeping up with everyone on the bus. There was so much to see. It was exciting but scary, too, going away from home, not knowing what to expect. It was the first time I left Berkeley County, except for the occasional trip to Charleston with Uncle Ed.

¹ WW2-The Army, Navy, and Marine Corps all segregated African Americans into separate units because of the belief that they were not as capable as white service members. Adding to this indignity, the Army frequently assigned White officers from the American South to command Black infantrymen.

<https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/african-americans-fought-freedom-home-and-abroad-during-world-war-ii#:~:text=The%20Army%2C%20Navy%2C%20and%20Marine,South%20to%20command%20Black%20infantrymen.>

² In October 1941 (two months before Pearl Harbor) the Quartermaster School moved from Philadelphia to Camp Lee, Virginia to begin training officers and noncommissioned officers in the art of military supply and service. Over 300,000 Quartermaster soldiers trained here during the war [WWII]. <http://www.lee.army.mil/about/history.aspx>

Camp Lee, Virginia

Basic training lasted eight weeks. It was what you would expect: living in barracks, getting up early, going to bed early, doing pushups and sit-ups, running and marching. It was during basic training that I received my assignment to the Quartermaster Corps and received training as a Laundry Specialist.³ To make extra money to send home to my mother, I shined shoes, washed clothes, and cut hair.

When basic training was over, everyone got a 3-day pass. A bunch of us headed straight to Richmond by bus. I spent the little money I had on the first day. It was not enough to go to the movies and go out and eat, so the money was spent on soft drinks and going out to eat. That night I headed to the YMCA, where the military could stay, but there were no vacant rooms. I slept outside against a wall. In the morning, I went to the Richmond Army Air Force Base mess hall to get something to eat. The first bus back to Camp Lee arrived at noon and I was on it.

Fort Dix, New Jersey

My next station was Fort Dix, New Jersey. I had a good time in those five weeks. I was the regiment's mail clerk. Assigned a jeep and driver, six days a week we made the trip to New York City to pick up the mail for Fort Dix.

My mother reminded me I had many relatives in New York City and that I should visit them. She sent me the addresses. I would scout out some of the locations while we were on our route. Then I would figure out which bus to take to get there. Mind you, the only family I knew in the city was my mother's brother, my

³ In greatest demand and most consistently used were Negro engineer and quartermaster units. They were also among the first to be called for and sent overseas. <http://www.history.army.mil/books/wwii/11-4/chapter20.htm>

Uncle Dave. On Saturday afternoons or Sundays, I would take the bus to visit my, as yet unknown, relatives. You would not believe how they treated me and how excited that I had come to see them. They fed me up good. It was wonderful to hear stories about them growing up with my mother.

The Transport Ship

Our battalion left Fort Dix in the winter. We were not told our assignment. We assumed we were headed east across the Atlantic.⁴ Actually, we were headed to the Pacific.

As we boarded the ship, we were issued gas masks and life jackets. We practiced drills and knew our assigned stations in case of attack. We did not have tasks to perform at the station, it was our “safe” place while the ship was under attack. When the warning siren sounded, all of us put on our life jackets grabbed our gas masks, and headed to our assigned station.

We were also issued ***‘rules of conduct’ for writing home, talking, and capturing.*** We knew the slogan, ‘Loose Lips Sink Ships.’ This meant no mention of where you were stationed, where you were headed, how many men in your company/battalion, what was carried on the ship, plans, and/or guesses of future operations. Attempting to come up with a code to conceal the true meaning of your letter would result in severe punishment.⁵ But some of the boys from

⁴ As a rule, the troops were not told their destination until they arrived at their final port. Isserman, Maurice. *The World at War: WWII*. (2010) pg. 100. Google Books

⁵ “Loose Lips Sink Ships” <http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/lslips.htm>

Moncks Corner sent letters home mentioning Sam Solomon's⁶ store as a hint to let their families know they were in the Solomon Islands.

The army was using converted passenger ships⁷ to transport troops across the ocean. Even though I had never been on a passenger ship, I could tell this ship had been stripped to its bare bones. The army wanted to pack as many troops as possible in these ships and made the most of the space available.

I had never seen bunks like these. The frame was made of pipe. The mattress was a piece of canvas laced inside the frame. Chains connected each bunk, one over the other, four and five deep. The bunks were narrow and there was not enough room between your bunk and the bunk overhead to sit up straight. Every bit of your gear was stored at the end of your bunk. Even though the aisles were narrow, most of us hung our rifles on the chains in the aisle. The ship was segregated. I didn't really think too much about it; I had grown up in a segregated world.

The only time we left our bunk area was to go to the latrine, to go to the mess hall at our scheduled time, or when the ocean was calm, you may be assigned a time to go on deck. We didn't have any jobs to do, we were just passengers. To pass the time we played checkers, shot dice, and played cards. We were enjoying ourselves. I had plenty of friends but it has been so many years, under all that fear

⁶ Sam Solomon Company was a retail jobber and was located at 484 King Street in Charleston, S.C.

⁷ Prewar passenger ships were requisitioned and refitted for U.S. troop transport to the theaters. Defense Dept., Army, Center of Military History (1956). *United States Army in World War 2, Technical Services, Transportation Corps, Movements, Training, and Supply*. US Government Printing Office. pg. 90. Google Books For an extensive description of the refitted troop quarters, see World War II Story by Robert Gallagher, Chapter 11 - Life Aboard Ship. <http://www.gallagherstory.com/ww2/chapter11.html>

and worry, I can't recall any of their names. That we were headed to war didn't seem real.

When we arrived at the Panama Canal, there were lots of people working. It took more than half a day to go through the locks.⁸ Only one ship could pass through at a time.

The South Pacific Journey

Once the ship passed through the locks, we were in the South Pacific. All of a sudden where we were headed began to sink in. It was time to be afraid. I think I was afraid twenty-four hours a day, every day from that point on.

What a dangerous trip. You could not smoke or have a light on the deck of the ship at night⁹. German submarines were constantly looking for a chance to torpedo the ship.

from the air .

To make it harder for the submarines to hit the ship, the captain zigzagged all the way across the . It took more time to travel this way so the captain would make up time at night.

All ships carrying troops had convoy¹⁰ escorts. We never saw them, but they were there, protecting the ship from air and sea attacks. The Navy used radar, sonar,

⁸ Passage through the locks takes about 15 hours, one-half of that time is spent waiting due to traffic. geography.about.com

⁹ ...a glowing cigarette could be seen as far as half a mile on a clear night. Letters From France edited by William Scott Hendon pg. 45. Google Books

¹⁰ Convoy escort - a defensive operation designed to ward off enemy submarine and aircraft attacks on ships carrying men and equipment for the overseas war effort. Consisted of six or more destroyers and one small aircraft carrier http://www.ussslater.org/history/dehistory/history_development.html

depth charges, and interception of radio traffic to locate the enemy. U.S. aircraft came to our defense when we were under attack from Japanese planes. The only defense we had on the ship...guns mounted on deck. If we had to use those, the enemy was too close. Before we reached our first stop, the Japanese pilots dropped bombs on us, but there was never a direct hit. Some of the bombs were duds.

We passed through storms and even a typhoon¹¹. The seas were rough. I was seasick many times.

The further our transport ship got from land, the worse the food in the mess hall got. Our water supply on the ship was treated seawater. It had a funny little taste to it. We were asked not to waste it.

First Stop - New Caledonia

Our first stop was New Caledonia.¹⁸ It was a little base camp island, sort of like a restocking center for the U.S. military in the Pacific. Everyone on board got three days of shore leave after traveling, nonstop, for thirty days. All of us had to carry our rifles but weren't issued bullets. We were in a war and had to go on land with empty rifles! I was nervous. When I left the ship and was on land, I staggered for about fifteen minutes while I was getting used to walking on land after all those days at sea. I didn't even realize I had gained my sea legs!

Harry, my brother, was a Navy cook. His duty station was New Caledonia. He had enlisted in the Navy in 1942. I had his address so I went to his company and asked

¹¹ Hurricanes in Western Pacific are called typhoons. <http://climatechange.cornell.edu/what-is-the-difference-between-a-typhoon-and-a-hurricane/>

for him. The 1st Sgt. said, “He’s right here in the kitchen.” When Harry came out of the kitchen, he was really surprised to see me! He had no idea I was headed his way. I couldn’t have let him know anyway. When we left Fort Dix, I thought the ship was headed across the Atlantic. We were so glad to see each other! We hugged each other and just looked at each other. The 1st Sgt. told him he could take the night off. stayed up practically We talked about home, the war, and what was happening in the Pacific. Harry’s told him all my comrades. We put that 40-gallon pot in the back of a Jeep to get it to the ship. Everybody was ready to dig in, but ¹²of

Fiji Islands

Our ship’s next stop was the Fiji Islands¹³ where American troops had already established camps. It took a half-day to get there from New Caledonia. We remained on the ship.

Guadalcanal

Our next stop was Guadalcanal Island¹⁴. On the way there, we had to get in the belly of the ship when the Japanese were dropping bombs and firing at our gunners¹⁵. This was happening in the daytime. The air raid siren would go off and we’d grab our life jackets and masks as we headed to our assigned safe area. We

¹² One of Mr. Gethers’ sons became very angry about his father making sure his company commander got the first serving. The son looked on it as demeaning. Mr. Gethers explained that it was just out of politeness and respect for his company commander.

¹³ The Fiji Islands, a British overseas territory is 840.69 miles E-NE of New Caledonia. Both New Caledonia and the Fiji Islands were used as a staging area by U.S. troops. http://www.history.army.mil/html/books/012/12-1/CMH_Pub_12-1.pdf

¹⁴ Guadalcanal is an island in the Solomon chain northeast of Australia. It is 1,326 miles W-NW of the Fiji Islands. After the island was wrested from the Japanese, it was used as a staging area by U.S. troops.

¹⁵ The converted passenger ships had at least 7 guns mounted on the deck.

could hear all of it from inside. Bombs that missed the ship still caused huge sounds and vibrations. We had support y U.S. subs but we never saw them. An enemy submarine was after our ship once, but an Army Air Force plane was tracking it. The submarine had to give up and make its escape. American planes would come and run off the Jap planes... We reached Guadalcanal on the thirty-first day of our journey. We spent three days at Guadalcanal to get our assignments. Mine was Bougainville¹⁶.

Bougainville

It took a few days to get there. When we got to Bougainville, it was several days after the Battle for Hill 700, where the Japanese launched a five-day offensive¹⁷. The Marines had to take it back. The place where we set up camp had been cleaned up: bodies of the Japanese had already been buried in a real deep mass grave, dug with a bulldozer. We could see captured enemy soldiers in a prisoner-of-war containment area. It was a holding area until a larger facility could take them.

All of those Pacific Islands were nothing but jungle. We had to clear an area for our tents, etc. Once that was done, we put up our tents, six men to a tent. We slept on army cots with mosquito nets hung from the ceiling and had a lantern for light. The mosquitos did not bother us too much during the day. The weather was nice, and comfortable. It stayed the same at night.

First thing the next morning,

¹⁶ Bougainville, a province of Papua New Guinea, is the largest of the Solomon Islands. It is 360 miles NW of Guadalcanal.

¹⁷ March 8, 1944 - March 13, 1944

we set up a laundry. The washers and gas dryers were mounted on trailers with wheels so that they could be pulled from place to place. The water supply came from existing wells. Our work shift was from 5:30 am to 6:00 pm. Lights out was at 11:00 pm. The work was easy, but I never felt safe.

We did the soldiers' laundry and sheets. The washer tubs could hold thirty to fifty-five lightweight khaki shirts and twenty to forty pairs of khaki trousers. The gas dryer was real big and it didn't take long to dry everything. We didn't have to pick up the laundry, it was delivered to us. Each company, with about 75 soldiers, had a designated day for laundry. We did not do laundry every day. Laundry duty was not on a rotation schedule. There were twelve of us laundry specialists. It was our main job. However, we were on rotation for other quartermaster¹⁹ duties and guard duty. When ships came in with rations, or other quartermaster supplies, as the stevedores unloaded the ships, we would load the supplies on trucks and deliver them to the warehouse. There were a lot of ships and they arrived any time in the day or night. We loaded trucks with 55-gallon drums of gasoline and unloaded them at the fuel dump. Getting the supplies from the docks had to be done rapidly to make sure there was enough space for the next ship to unload.

The post had a PX²⁰, an alcoholic beverages shop, a barbershop, a canteen²¹, a mess hall²², and an open-air movie theater. I bought a Budweiser from the alcoholic beverages shop now and then. The canteen sold candy, ice cream, coke drinks, and cigarettes. The mess hall served cooked meals. It was nothing

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²⁰ Post Exchange - a government subsidized retail shop operated mainly for military personnel. thefreedictionary.com

²¹ A store in a military camp where food, drinks and small supplies are sold. merriam-webster.com

²² A building, room or tent used for serving and eating meals, as on an army post thefreedictionary.com

spectacular. There was also a sick hall (for the ambulatory) with each division having a field hospital.

The movie theater was usually out in the open or under a tent. We sat on benches. We saw English pictures made in Australia, New Zealand, and Fiji²³ two to three times a week. The movies rotated between the posts/units.

Japanese soldiers would sneak on post to watch the movies. They would sit on one of the benches just like they were one of us. I remember real well the smell of the Japanese, you know they have that fishy smell. A fellow would shout, "A Jap is in here someplace and we gonna catch him!" Somebody would turn the lights on right quick. It was very seldom we caught one, but we did catch a few. If the soldier was caught, he tried to defend himself but did not attack anyone. Those who were caught were taken to the nearest POW camp. Anytime we showed pictures, they would sneak in. They wanted to see that movie, just like us. This was mostly at Bougainville.

Most Japanese soldiers I saw were captured in other places, not at our open-air movies. When they were captured, they tried to defend themselves but did not come in shooting.

I wrote to my mother and sisters a lot. A good memory was the certain time of day for mail call. I didn't get something every day but I waited anyway. It was a happy day when I got mail but it also made me a little homesick.

I had lots of friends. Cannon, a fellow from Columbia [S.C.], I don't remember his first name, was a good friend of mine. I also remember Small. He was from

²³ Fiji was a British colony during WWII.

Tennessee and a fellow from Texas, and another from Arkansas. These were my closest friends.

The Japanese moved around a lot so we had to keep watch. Guard duty rotation was every six or seven days. Everyone was in the rotation. You checked the roster to see if it was your night. You were up all night with your gas mask and rifle with a bayonet guarding the perimeter of the camp. These camps did not have fences at the perimeter. We had to keep the camp safe. The Japanese would come through the sugar cane fields around our camp. We could hear the cane breaking or see it move and would fire in that direction. There was not a time on guard duty that I did not have to fire my rifle. After staying up all night, you would get the next day off.

The Japanese were interested in our area because of the quartermaster quartermastersupply houses built there. These were big warehouses for rations, ammunition, cigarettes, etc. Not only did we have to be worried about sniper fire, but there were also air raids and bombings. If you got a warning that the Japanese were around, there was no smoking and all lights out. You ran to the nearest foxhole²⁵. They were dug deep and surrounded by sandbags. Sometimes the Japanese would drop gas bombs. Your gas mask had to be with you at all times. During the six or seven months spent in Bougainville, two men in the quartermaster corps died, killed by sniper fire.

A bomb landed right beside my tent, but I was not in it at the time. A real close call happened one night when my group had a rotation to go out to the fuel dump

²⁵ a hole dug for a soldier to sit or lie in for protection from the enemy merriam-webster.com

and unload 55-gallon drums of gasoline. We had finished and I was dancing a jig on top of one of the drums, entertaining everybody. A Japanese plane flew over us and dropped a bomb. It landed beside the barrel next to me. It was a dud! We all took off running. The sergeant was asking us if we were okay when the plane came back and dropped another bomb. This one was not a dud. The fuel drums exploded and flew straight up in the air about 100 feet. We could feel the heat from the explosion.

Luzon

We beat the Japanese in Bougainville, then went by big ship to Luzon. Airstrikes and submarine attacks were still going on. In Luzon, there was still some ground fighting, too.

The Japanese had been expelled from Manila by February 23, 1945.

While I was in the Philippines, I went to Manila on a three-day pass. Manila was referred to as 'Little New York.' You could tell a war had been going on, but there was still a big population and plenty of open bars, clubs, and businesses. I thought it was nice. You leave the United States, serve in war zones, and then get to a civilized place.

The Philippines had some unusual taxis... looked like chairs with wagon wheels. The "driver" pulled it using long wood handles that were attached to the chair. The poles rested on the ground for you to get in, then the man lifted the handles and off you went.

The sidewalk shops really stick in my mind. Beef, chicken, and pork, the owners just hung 'em up in the open air. Shops selling fish would have a clothesline of

dried fish hanging in front of their store. The shopkeepers would bite a hard piece of the fish and tell you it was good. I didn't want to get near it...all those flies!

I saw a lot of British, Australian, and New Zealand military men while I was there, as they were our allies.

After Nagasaki was bombed, we were getting ready to invade Japan²⁶. We were aboard our ship when Japan surrendered on August 15, 1945, after the bomb was dropped at Hiroshima. We continued to Japan as part of the peacekeeping force²⁷.

When Japan surrendered in August 1945, fighting in the Philippines still continued because many of the Japanese ground troops refused to believe the war was over²⁸.

Peacekeeping Force in Japan

We got off the ship at the port of Osaka and went to Kyoto. We were housed in a compound of a former hotel/apartment complex surrounded by three walls with a gated chain fence along the front. The buildings were six or seven stories high with spiral staircases on the outside of the building.

There had been little damage in the city of Kyoto²⁹. The buildings were beautifully made. Trees and flowers were all around and it was very clean. Streetcars ran in the city. Saw many red columns connected at the top with two bars. I didn't know

²⁶ On August 15, 1945 Emperor Hirohito announced Japan's surrender. On September 2, 1945, major Allied Forces were present on the USS Missouri for the formal signing of the declaration of surrender.

²⁷ McArthur led the Allies occupation of Japan to keep the peace during fundamental changes to Japanese society, politics and military. <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/japan-reconstruction>

²⁸ Japanese holdouts <http://history.howstuffworks.com/history-vs-myth/japanese-holdout.htm>

²⁹ Kyoto was the ancient capital of Japan, a historical city and of religious importance. <http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Kyoto>

what they were called at the time. The gates were entrances to Shinto shrines called Torii Gates, but I never went in. I saw other buildings that might be churches. I found out later they were Zen Buddhist Temples.

Streetcars ran in the city, but they were for Japanese people. The military did not want the soldiers getting too close or fraternizing with the Japanese. There was specific transportation for soldiers.

It was more crowded than any place I had ever seen. There was a lot of foot traffic. The women and some of the men still wore traditional robes/kimonos, not Western clothing like people I saw wearing in Manila. Children wore Western as well as traditional clothing.

The Japanese were the friendliest people you would ever want to meet. The streets were full of shops, some spilling out onto the sidewalk. These were small and usually had only three or four types of things for sale. Some sellers had their things on tables or carts in the open. When I went shopping, I had to point at what I wanted. They did not speak English.

Unlike the Philippines, you did not barter for goods here. There was a set price. Sometimes you would run across shady sellers who marked up their stuff high and then offered it to you for cheap, like \$25.00 for something that should have cost no more than \$5.00. Their sales pitch...The boss is at lunch. I can sell you this \$25.00 item for \$5.00. You knew that most of the time, the guy who said his boss was at lunch was actually the boss.

There were Japanese bathhouses³⁰ about every two blocks. Women bathed naked in a communal pool. There were quite a few peeping toms among the American soldiers.

There were so many prostitutes in Kyoto. They were there specifically for the U.S. Armed Forces. They were referred to as “comfort women.”³¹

There were a multitude of casinos in Kyoto. The signs outside had “Casino” written in English and Japanese. I went very seldom. I did not like gambling my hard-earned money.

Candy...the Japanese kids would pat soldiers down to see if they had any candy in their pockets. I tried to make sure I always had some. Those kids did not forget who had given them candy. That child would be on the lookout for you. If he was late and you gave the candy to another kid, he would want to take it from him.

We ate in the mess hall. When we finished, we did not have someone come around and bus the tables. We had to scrape our plates into the big can outside the mess hall. Japanese children lined up to get leftovers scraped from our plates. They came with empty food cans or containers. It did not matter how bad the

³⁰ Bathhouses had lost their popularity by the early 20th century. However, during the Second World War, many people did not have baths in their homes. <https://sabukaru.online/articles/archiving-the-sento-japanese-public-bathhouses>

³¹ Immediately after World War II, the Recreation and Amusement Association was formed by Naruhiko Higashikuni's government to organize brothels to serve the Allied armed forces occupying Japan. The official declaration stated that "Through the sacrifice of thousands of 'Okichis' of the Shōwa era, we shall construct a dike to hold back the mad frenzy of the occupation troops and cultivate and preserve the purity of our race long into the future." <https://www.tampabay.com/archive/1995/10/27/defeated-japan-built-gis-brothels/> Tens of thousands of women were employed to provide cheap sex to U.S. troops until the spring of 1946, when Gen. Douglas MacArthur shut the brothels down. <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna18355292>

food looked, they were glad for us to scrape it into their container. They were grateful. This was one of the saddest things I saw in Kyoto.

Those of us discharged from the Army while in Japan did not travel back to the U.S. on Navy ships. We went back on military planes. Noisy! We stopped in the Philippines because of engine trouble, then on to California. Then we caught a plane headed to Fort Gordon, Georgia (near Augusta). The trip from Japan to Fort Gordon took three days.

Before we left, I bought souvenirs for everyone in our community. I bought my mother a cast iron teapot. It was short and squatty but big around with knobby designs on it, handmade geisha dolls that came in their own wooden box (with compartments to hold the five additional wigs), kimonos, and cast iron rickshaws complete with a driver and passenger. I bought so much, I had to buy a suitcase to bring them home!

We did not want to wait on another flight to take us closer to home. A couple of us hired a car to take us to South Carolina. When the hired car pulled up I was so ready to be home that I grabbed my duffel bag and left my suitcase full of souvenirs right there on the ground at the airport!

One thing that amazed me while I was in Japan: not a shot was fired!

My army pay had been \$21.00 per month with a \$15.00 allotment sent to my mother. There was a little left from the allotment when I got home. She had used just about all of it, but I didn't mind her having it. She needed it to keep the family going, especially since I was no longer able to provide her with the weekly money I earned working for Santee Cooper.