

My Four Years Before The Mast

by Bert Compton, LST 884

Part 1

I was sworn into the Coast Guard regulars in Chicago. There were ten of us, and then we were told that the training camps were filled to capacity and there was no room for us there. So we were sent to a cutter, the Hollyhock, stationed on Lake Michigan. Its duties were aids to navigation, such as buoys, light houses and such. Plus, emergency calls. We all reported aboard in our civilian clothes, a bare mattress, and a bare pillow. They lined us up and asked five of us to volunteer for the black gang.

I had just recently gotten out of the CCC camps and they were run by the army and forestry department. There, we had learned the hard way to not volunteer for anything, so I stood fast, and the rest of us were assigned to the deck crew, a move I shall never regret. It wasn't long and I found myself working on the bridge, striking for a quartermaster's rate. The rate had been frozen since 1938, and no new rates had been created since then. Peace time strength for the Coast Guard was, I believe, 10,000 men. Small compared to the navy.

I requested a sea duty transfer from time to time, and this didn't happen right away. I found the work on the bridge very interesting. We used dead reckoning for navigation. The surprise of my life was to find so many islands on the lake. Many had lights and fog horns on them, which we were required to service. And we tied up in all the cities around the lake and met many people, especially girls. When I had sixteen months in, I was made a QM 3/c. I loved to steer the ship in and out of the harbors, which sometimes meant through many bridges. One time fourteen bridges in, and out again. It was fun now.

When I received my transfer, I was somewhat disappointed to find I was going to another ship on the lake. The Tamarack. It was, of all things, a submarine tender. By this time I was second class. New submarines were being built at Manitowoc, WI. It was only 40 miles from my home town, Green Bay. Further away from sea duty than ever. The captain of the Hollyhock told me when I left that he was sending me there because he recognized some mechanical aptitude in me, and that I might be able to pick up a good trade there. This ship had six deep sea divers, with their lead feet, screw on helmets and a decompression chamber. At any rate, as I crossed the gang plank on the Tamarack, I asked who I would have to see to put in for a transfer, and was told I would have to wait for a month and, then, stand a captain's mast.

During the month, I found this very interesting work, too. Helium was mixed with the diver's oxygen and that shrinks their lungs up and makes them all sound like Donald Duck while they were down. If their ears and teeth didn't hurt them, they would sing for us and we all had a good laugh. The ship went out with the subs on the lake when they made their dives. When my month was up, I stood a captain's mast and made my request. The

captain turned to the yeoman and told him to send a letter to headquarters stating that this man had a personal score to settle with the enemy and it worked.

I soon found myself on a train headed for Camp Bradford. The camp proved to be quite a shock at first with all of its regulations and marching. I had never attended a boot camp and wasn't hep to all that jive. But I picked it up as I went along and got along good enough. After the training was completed, we were sent to Pittsburg, where the 884 was built. It wasn't long and we were on the way to New Orleans via the Ohio and Mississippi rivers. The crew was filled out and we were given some liberty.

The captain had me make up a couple of deep sea lead lines. The line was soaked for a couple of days and then they were completed. We found New Orleans to be a fun liberty town, and I was peeved to find I wasn't on the liberty list the last night we were to be there. This posed a problem for me and I solved that by finding a raft that shipyard workers had left tied to the bow ramp.

When it turned dark, I jumped on the raft and pulled myself along the pier to a point I couldn't be seen from the ship, and I was away. First I had to pass through a shipyard gate office, and no one challenged me, so I was off. I soon found myself alone on a dark, lonely road, hoofing it shanksmare, when a jeep came by with two dogfaces who gave me a lift to the French Quarter.

It wasn't long before I had a ringside seat at a night club featuring 15 minute acts. The mistress of ceremonies was a pretty young thing in a long gown and she took to sitting at my table between acts. She introduced the various acts. The drinks were coming on a regular schedule for both of us. Just before she announced the last act, she leaned over and told me she had accommodations topside where we could be alone after the show. It didn't take a rocket scientist to know she had no designs on my carcass, so I got my freight out of there, only to soon find that something had been put in my last drink. It cost me a very long ride in an ambulance to an army hospital where they wouldn't even look at me.

There was a pharmacist's mate in the ambulance with me and he had the drivers take us to Gulfport where the 884 was going to. We took the lines when she pulled up to the pier. No one ever asked me about anything and I didn't volunteer, as I recall. So I was home free.

After the usual shake down, we were underway for the Panama Canal. The water took on a milky color and that worried the captain. He had me use a contraption on the fan tail that consisted of a drum of cable attached to a small torpedo that could be opened to insert a glass tube, which was open on one end. The tube changed colors with the various depths and the depth could be ascertained by comparing the tube with a chart. We were told there was 300 feet, or fathoms of wire on that drum. I don't remember which anymore. And we soon found out there wasn't and we lost the whole thing.

Then, I was told to break out one of those lead lines. I stationed a man near the bow with the lead and a coil of line, and every little ways aft, another man and coil. When the lead was dropped, I ran aft till the lead bottomed out and got a 28 fathom reading. As I tried to retrieve the lead, I found it was tangled in the coral below, and even though I took a couple round turns, the line parted. But we did have a reading. When we reached the canal, we anchored out. Orders were sent out to us to provide one man for SP duty in a cat house and I was given the assignment. A small boat came alongside for me and I was issued leggings, club and armband.

Some one stationed me on the second floor of some dive and said I would be relieved at midnight. It was very busy up there and I was worried all night about any fights, or stabbings. There had been some. But midnight came along and I was relieved in more ways than one to get out of there. No trouble on my shift. Lots of the people down there are dark and they speak Spanish. This was the first time for me that far away from home and I found it very interesting.

Finally, we got underway and it was a real experience going through the locks. There was a shipyard near Balboa and no one was given liberty here. I had told the navigator that we needed some plotting sheets and he told me there was a geographic office by the shipyard where I could pick some up. It didn't take long to locate the charts, so I took a look around and found a ship yard bus that carried the workers back and forth from Balboa. Then I got an idea. A navy officer agreed to take care of my charts for me for awhile, so I took off and boarded the bus. They were all colored and spoke Spanish here, too. I can't speak Spanish, but I was able to get enough of it to get the drift of what those men were saying to the women, and they should have been thrown in the brig.

At Balboa, I found a nice bar and I was the only customer for a short while till two young navy gobs came in and sat a little ways away. It wasn't long before three women came in and each of them grabbed one of us. We had a great time till I had to get back to that bus. When I got back to the shipyard, I retrieved my charts from that officer and very profusely thanked him and returned to the ship. No one else had been ashore and no one asked any questions, and again, I didn't volunteer anything. All in all, it was a great day.

Then we were off for San Diego. The Gulf of Tewaunepec proved to be a rough passage and it was there that we learned the ship could take it. The bow was flexing up and down and the screws were coming out of the water. One of the seamen was always sick as soon as the lines were cast off, and he was in a bad way here. He lay on his stomach on the top deck and heaved till there was no more, and tried some more. The captain had him carried below and I witnessed the saltiest thing I was ever to see. The pharmacist's tied a tarp by its four corners and threw the man in it, face down. One tied an IV bag up above him and the other opened a large pail of some kind of grease. While one of them held his cheeks apart, the other took a large handful of grease and literally threw it right into the smile. Then the IV was inserted and he stayed that way till we hit Diego. A notation was entered in his log that he was never to go to sea again. He was taken off and we never saw him again.

One of the seamen found a new born pup in Mexico and he was promptly named Poncho. He made a great ship's mascot. One of our signalmen, Harold Hartley and I hitch hiked to Los Angeles and spent some time visiting someone he knew there. We caught a ride back with two Marine captains, riding a rumble seat.

Then we shoved off for Pearl Harbor and sometime before we got there, I made first class. When we were entering Pearl Harbor, we had a seaman on the wheel. I told him I was going to change over the method of steering from the wheel to a small lever, which you could do by activating a nearby switch. I was doing that when we got an order from the con for a 10 degree right turn to starboard. I hadn't had time to tell him that the rudder turns opposite to the way you turn the lever. He turned the lever to starboard and we took off to port right at an outgoing tanker we were meeting on a bend. I grabbed the lever and reversed it, but we came close enough to the tanker to get a dressing down from one of their officers using a megaphone. They were loaded with gasoline and were ferrying some planes on their top deck.

We pulled a couple of liberties in Honolulu and got ashore for a bit. Then some LST had a misfortune of some kind and it was decided we were going to take their load. They were loaded with a Sea Bee unit with all of their earth moving and construction equipment. The navigator and I went ashore and picked up our sealed orders and took them to the ward room. There, we got out the charts for some place called Iwo Jima.

It wasn't long and we were under way running solo. When we were at sea about three days, the captain played a record, which was a part of our orders and then, everyone knew where we were going. Tokyo Rose knew, too. She was on every day telling us she knew where we were going. She would tease us by asking us if we knew who was sleeping with our women at home. There was a brief stop at Eniwetoc, and we were off for Quam.

In Tanapag harbor, we had our first red alert, but nothing showed. Ships were gathering by the numbers and it wasn't long when we joined a convoy headed for Iwo Jima. We stopped at Saipan, and even though we were anchored out, we were able to go ashore. We saw plenty of Jap prisoners. They were riding on the backs of trucks. I think they were on work details. There were native families cooped up in small parcels that had shacks on them with no sides. And they had small gardens, too. It seemed to be a busy place. As I remember, they sent us to the beach, a boat load at a time with a couple of cases of beer. No drinking on the ships. Some priest gave me a small medal to hang around my neck, about that time, and said that they never heard of anyone being killed that wore it. I managed to lose it in the sand on the beach and would like to have worn my hands out sifting for it. But I never found it again.

We got underway in a convoy headed again for Iwo Jima. Somewhere between Saipan and Iwo, some planes managed to sneak up on the convoy by keeping an island in between us and flying low. A suicide plane crashed the ship off our port beam and they lost about 25 men, and from what I remember, the ship's doctor. A large fire broke out,

but their crew kept it under control so that they could keep up with us. The ship looked like a car ferry that plied the great lakes.

Then when we neared Iwo, the convoy was attacked again and a plane dove down to crash us, but it came in too steep and it veered at the last minute to take the one astern, but it missed and hit the water on the side of the ship. All of the guns on that side of the ship boiled the water where the plane hit and that Jap had a hot send off. Soon, there was an accident aboard the LST to our stern. One of their officers was messing around with their radar set and an explosive charge built into them exploded, severely injuring the man. That captain asked the convoy commander permission to have the convoy change course so we would be headed into the seas. They wanted to do an operation. Permission was granted, but the man soon died. A burial at sea ceremony was held and when the man was slid over the side, all ships dipped their colors.

When we reached Iwo, the big ships and planes started the bombardment and the concussions were so great our pant legs whipped around on our legs like as though we were in a great wind storm. And the pressures on the chest made breathing difficult. It seemed you couldn't get a decent breath before another pressure was on your chest. A flight of planes swooped down on the foot of Mt Suribachi and laid all their bombs on one spot, one at a time. They didn't explode. A second flight came in from a different direction and they laid their ordinance on the same spot. I found myself yelling at those planes to get out of there, as though they could hear me. I was certain they were going to be hit when the first flight's bombs went off. When they were away, all bombs went off at the same time. Then I realized they were using delayed fuses. Live and learn.

When the marines landed, we monitored their positions on a chart that had squares with numbers and letters of the alphabet on it. I shaded the chart with a red pencil where the marines were. During the night, they had a set back and I found my chart was no good the next day. I didn't use the pencil anymore. We were slated to make our first landing near the foot of Mt Suribachi and they lined us up next to a smaller landing craft. The smaller one got the word to go in first, and as they started to move, they were fired on from the mountain and you could see the big splash next to the ship, but it wasn't hit. Next, it was our turn. The captain had told me to swing a lead line on the way in, so I stationed myself near the bow with a "talker" to relay the reading to the con. As we neared the beach, we were ordered to retract and make smoke. Planes were coming. When the ships had their smoke generators going, there was nothing for me to do for awhile, so I sat with my back to a gun tub and fell sound asleep. I didn't intend it that way. Too many hours on my feet. The next thing I knew, the tub was slamming me on the back and I realized we were on the beach.

Now I'll guarantee you that I was the only one to hit the beach at that time sound asleep. I'm not proud of that, but that is the way it was. On that first landing, we were struck by a mortar round and I remember the bosons' mates lining up the deck hands with their brooms, after we retracted, to sweep the shrapnel from the deck. We ran out where the cargo ships were and got another load. We tied up to one by giving them our line and they winched us in and started to crush one of our LCVP's. When we put up a squawk, an

officer from that ship told us that they were expendable. I didn't think there was any need to cost the tax payers for something that could have been avoided.

There was an area on the opposite end of the beach from Suribachi that was very difficult to clean out. It seemed that no matter what was thrown at them, they were still there. Planes would fly over the area and drop bombs and strafe and you could tell the ones who had the most courage. Some flew so low and some just dropped their bombs and dipped their noses from on high and, then, got out of there. An LST was sent there and it was fitted out with rows of rockets. All the rockets were set off at one time and you could see them by the numbers in the air, tumbling end for end. They really raised a ruckus when they exploded about 25 feet above the area. Then the big ships would send salvos of phosphorus shells that exploded over the target, too. They were using proximity fuses. But still the Japs were there. Rocket trucks were backed up and they put their rockets in there, too. Still, the Japs were there. Then three Marine tanks came in single file, and when they took fire, the crews abandoned them. It was a jumble of rocks there, and on our ship, we called it the Grand Canyon. It really took a lot to clear that area out.

There was an unfinished air field that could be seen from the beach and some of us went there and crawled around the junked, Jap planes. One of our black gang took a piece of metal from one of them and fashioned a knife that was for sale before we left the island. That's ingenuity. I picked up a pair of Jap shoes that were used for climbing the mountain. They had caulks on them like our golf shoes. The leather was turned inside out to our standards and they looked rough. The leather wasn't tanned too well, because they stunk when I would pull them out a locker once in awhile to look at them. One of our officers took a tennis shoe off a dead Jap and it was a weird looking thing. It had a separate compartment for the big toe. When we were making our first landings, a plane flew over Suribachi and was hit in one of its wings. The pilot reported this and he was asked if he knew where the fire came from. He answered that he was going around again to see if he could draw the fire again and he found out it was coming from an area called "Hot Rocks" on our charts. It was just a pile of rocks out in the water near the mountain. A big ship soon took care of that. Another plane reported some kind of building on the island and he gave co-ordinates to the big ships. He would tell them if they were to the right, or left, and so on till there was no more building.

There were two small Jap ships that had been run up on the beach to prevent sinking. They had been holed by our flyboys before we got there. Some of us had walked by them already when they found a Jap sniper on one of them. Then one day I took a walk on the beach with one of our signalmen, Al Geary. We were on the way back to the ship when we came upon a Marine with an AmTrack. He was standing next to it, and had dug himself a small fox hole. As we got to him, a mortar round landed right on top of his vehicle and, instantly, there were three trying to fit in a hole dug for one. The shell peeled a piece of metal on the top of the AmTrack like a banana. Al and I soon decided to get out of there and we did just that. I often wonder if that Jap tried to get all three of us with one shot, or if he really tried to hit that AmTrack. We will never know. Due to the slope of the beach, the shrapnel had to pass over our heads, because the AmTrack was a little higher than us.

One night we were on the beach and a full, bright moon was shining. I was stationed on the bridge and I was watching through slits in the port hole covers. There weren't any clouds. After awhile, I decided to go up on the con and watch from there. When I got to the ladder going to the con, I looked up and saw a man on the con, who was sitting on a stool. He was wearing an oversized helmet over earphones. He looked like a cameo picture against the moon. Then I started to climb, and just as my belt reached the con deck, I heard an incoming shell. Instantly, I doubled over and laid my chest and face on the con deck. I was still standing on the ladder. That man never heard it coming in, due to his earphones. But as soon as we took the hit, he jumped off his stool and yelled that we were hit. Soon, calls were coming in saying which frame we had taken the hit on. That cameo picture of him outlined against the bright moon when we took the hit will always be with me.

There were turkeys in the refrigerator that had bloated up by the time they were cleaned out and men had to wear masks with oxygen to handle them. They blew up and stunk when touched.

Early in the game, there were many LCVP's sunk, bow down near the beach. Someone put markers on them so they could be retrieved. And when we were about to make another landing, a landing craft loaded with wounded marines pulled alongside and the coxswain asked the captain if he would take them and the answer was, no. We had no doctor and we still had more work to do, so he was told to lie out to an area where the APA's were to get help. There would be doctors out there. It was sad to think we couldn't help them. About this time, the captain took me and another quartermaster, John Fieghtner, to the rail and told us that in the case the officers were incapacitated, we were to take the ship to Saipan. We watched the cruisers at night shining lights into caves on the mountain and they fired point blank into them. We called this a coon hunt. And we saw marines climbing the mountain. One would climb a ways, and then throw a rope down. Another man below would tie a ladder to it and it would be hauled up. When the flag was raised on the mountain, it was a sight to see. We were all very happy about that. It is a shame the people who raised the first flag never got the credit they should have.

On one landing, we fouled our stern anchor cable on one of the screws and we were operating with one engine. The last time we were on the beach, a Marine drove into the tank deck with an AmTrack for a load and was aboard when we got orders to retract and make smoke. More planes. When all was clear, we received orders to lay out to an area where ships were gathering that needed repairs. The Marine was still with us. A convoy was formed and they all set their speed to us as we were the slowest. And we were off for Saipan.

While were under way, the marine's 45 cal pistol was taken from his AmTrack. The captain lined us all up and said that he would shoot whoever had that gun. And that everyone would be searched before you could leave the ship. It was no surprise to learn the Marine soon found his weapon on his AmTrack. And then we reached Saipan.

To be continued

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Part 2

At Saipan, we took a blinker light message from the island that requested medical supplies for a hospital there. It was direct to all ships in the harbor and it involved medical terms we weren't familiar with. Wounded were streaming in from Iwo. We had to take that one, one character at a time. But, we got it. We loaded with marines to take to Okinawa. I had taken a compartment for myself and they loaded the sergeants in with me.

Each day they held their own muster topside. One day one of them asked the rest of them if a certain Marine belonged to any of them, and they all said "no". So they went topside and gathered him up and found he had deserted at Iwo by stowing away on the 884 while it was on the beach. There were about six LST's lashed together, riding one anchor, and he said he was going to go to another ship that day. At any rate, the word went around that he was wanted for murder in the states and he thought that this was a good way for him to disappear. He was taken ashore and we don't know whatever became of him. Those sergeants were a tough lot and they had many purple hearts, some of them, more than one.

While were at Saipan, our stern anchor cable was taken care of, and Our carpenter's mate, Jessie Taylor, welded a plate over the hole made by that artillery shell that struck us at Iwo Jima. Finally, we joined a convoy headed for Okinawa. There were three Coast Guard manned LST's in the convoy, and each was the lead ship of their column. We, being in the lead of the center column. One evening I happened to remember a gallon can of pre-cooked chicken that I had picked up somewhere and it was always too much for me alone. I broke it out and we all sat flat assed in a circle on the deck in the compartment. One sergeant broke out his kaybar and ripped the top of that can off and we had a feast by passing the can round and round, each using his fingers, till it was all gone. It was something to remember.

The island we were to take was flat on the south end and mountains on the north end. The plan of the day was to make a fake landing at the south end to draw the Japs down there so they could be isolated and mopped up before they could escape to the mountains. Marines were to land further north and race across the island to seal them in. We were to take part in the fake landing on the south end. To make the fake landing, we were to lower boats and load them up and make a run to near the beach, and then return. We would actually land our troops further north.

It was Easter Sunday, and we were coming near the island in the dark and I laid up to the bridge and worked out the time we were to go to our standard morning GQ. The word was passed to the con and I went down to my sack again. I wasn't in the sack very long when the alarms went off for GQ. At first, I thought this would be the standard GQ till I realized it was too early for the time I had set. So I ran, too. As I was reaching the bridge, the port side gunners opened up on a plane coming in from the island. I picked it up in the dark by our tracers. I wasn't assigned to a gun, but there were two 30 cal machines guns bolted to the railings by the bridge. One on either side. The marines had put them there the day before and had held gunnery practice while were underway. As the plane was diving, I ran to the port gun and tried to get a bead on it. The plane flattened out to come at us just over the water. This made the plane lower than me so that I had to depress the gun to aim down at it. It came in so fast that I never was able to swing the gun barrel fast enough to catch up with it. When it went through our side, my gun was aiming a foot behind the tail and I watched every inch of it going into the ship. I can still see the tail, the last thing going in.

Nowadays when I think of it, I wonder if that gun was even loaded. The plane was lower than me and slightly to my right. Even so, I couldn't have been the closest because there was a sky 20 down there and the plane must have gone in right under their feet. At any rate, it was only a few feet from me. Some say they saw flames on the plane. I don't recall any flames. Even the captain's report said there were flames and he thought that the pilot was dead before he hit us. I don't personally agree with all of that. The plane had to flatten out just over the water and someone had to steer that thing to prevent it nosing down and crashing before it got to us. To me, it couldn't have been coincidence. We were to learn later that there were two 250 lb bombs on it that never detonated. More on them later. There were 24 marines killed on the tank deck, some of them showing no wounds. Huge fires broke out and detonated ammo stored on the tank deck and some of that came up through the main deck. Our fire control parties tried to fight them, but it was a losing battle.

While the fire control parties were busy, another ship nearby was hit with an engine from a plane. It knocked two marines off the ship. They started to swim to us and our marines were lined up along the starboard rail and took to shooting at these men with their rifles. They must have mistaken them for Jap swimmers. You could see the splashes around their heads till our captain got on the PA and ordered everyone to stop shooting. They swam to our nets and when people reached down to help them, they grabbed those hands and kissed them. It was a very close call for them, but they were not through yet.

They would have to go over the side and do it all over again. And I still remember another very young Marine who was running around in circles with his hands clasped in prayer. He wasn't the only one terrified. About this time it was realized that fighting the fires was a losing battle and the captain gave the order to abandon ship. On our ship we had four divisions. Divisions 1,2 and 4 were to go over the side while division 3 held fast. That was my division and it was called ship' control division. We were to wait for a second command to go over the side. With the first order, the exec and myself started chopping

rafts free. The first one landed on top of people and there were many cries from the water. The exec called to the captain and apprized him of the situation and we were given an order to drop them all, regardless. And we did just that. Next, the exec went to the star-board LCVP and began lowering it. By this time the smoke was very thick.

I went to the port boat and had it half way down when I heard a cry from behind me. Someone was asking me to help save his buddy. It was a Marine who was carrying his buddy over his back with the arms crossed around his own throat. The one being carried was only wearing shorts and the skin over his entire was rolled up in rolls. He was all gouged to hell and he couldn't walk. I stopped lowering the boat and I climbed up on the davit and pulled the Marine to me and I worked him out till he was over the boat, and then fairly threw him to the bottom of the boat. When I jumped down, the other Marine had disappeared. There was room in that boat and he could have saved himself had he jumped in.

By this time it was breaking daylight and the 3rd division had received orders to go over the side. Now I had some special duties to take care of. One was to see that all quartermasters signal men, radar men and radio men were gone. When I stepped into the bridge. it was almost impossible to see. And there were no quartermasters here, so I went into the chart room and the visibility was worse. The radar set was blown up, so I knew the radar man had done his job well and he was gone. Next, it was the radio shack. The further I went into the ship, the harder it was to see and I found that when I got close to the radio shack I couldn't see at all. All I could do was grope for the door jamb and yell as loud as I could and got no reply. So it was back to the chart room where visibility was almost non-existent now. Here I was charged with taking the ship's log and the sextant. Then I knew I was going to have to make a decision.

With the rafts and boats all away, I was going to have to swim for it and I knew I wasn't going to be able to swim with something in both hands, so which to leave. The sextant or the log. I opted to leave the sextant because I figured the log was most important and I did just that. I took the log and made my way out of the bridge to the outside. I found I couldn't even see the bow for the smoke, so I started for the fan tail meeting no one along the way. They were all gone. At the fan tail, it was going to be a considerable jump, which I wasn't going to be too crazy about. Then I thought of the stern anchor and climbed down to it. Here I remembered to unbuckle my helmet and I did jump from there. As I went under, my helmet came off and I found it was upside down in front of me riding the waves toward the beach. I tried a few one handed strokes to catch it and saw that I wasn't going to be able to catch up to it and then remembered that there were none of our troops on that beach yet.

And I wasn't about to be the first, so I turned around and started one handed swimming away from the beach when I heard some one calling to me. It was one of two of our gunner's mates hanging onto a 55 gallon drum of gas we had been carrying for a cub plane we were, also, carrying. He said he was coming to help me and he did swim to me, but I needed no help, even though I was still swimming one handed due to that log book. When we reached the barrel, we held a little conference and decided the barrel was not a

good thing to be by in the event we were strafed. One of the gunners decided to strike out for a sea going tug we could see in the distance. And he took off. The other gunner and I spotted a small balsa raft with only two men on it. We struck out for that.

When we got there, we could see the raft was very small and the two men were straddling the rim of the raft and they were using small canoe paddles. But all they were doing was spinning around in circles. One of the men was a seaman from our deck force by the last name of Walker. The other was a Marine and he was a very sad case. He was bare to the waist and had his entire back burned way up, and including his neck. When we climbed aboard, I took the Marine and placed him down in the bottom of the raft, which was only a rope net. I often wondered how he could stand that salt water on those fresh burns. It must have been awful. Then I took his place with the paddle and told the seaman to stroke when I called out. By paddling slow and deliberate, we were able to stop spinning and while we weren't making much headway, we weren't drifting ashore.

We finally saw an LST making its way toward us. The gunner's mate came up with a plan. He was going to jump in and grab a net that was trailing the side of the ship while he would be holding onto the raft with the other arm. We were to jump, one by one, onto his shoulder and then leap for the net. And all worked as planned. The only thing we hadn't planned on was that the part of the raft he was holding on to was going to go down about a foot into the water and that made the other end of the raft tip up high out of water.

The LST never stopped and I was thankful the gunner was strong. First, the sea man leaped on the shoulder and with another leap, made the net. Next, I helped the Marine up and gave him a shove so that he could get on the shoulder and another shove so he made the net. Next, it was me and I got on the net under the marine. The gunner then left the raft go and he crawled the net. I was holding the net with the same hand I was holding the log book and I had the other hand on the marine's butt. Each time we advanced a step, I had to let go with the hand I was holding the net by and grab a new hold higher up. When I did this, I had to leave the net go entirely because my other hand was always on the marine's butt. And this is the way we reached the top. When my hips just were over the deck, a hunting knife I had on my belt came out of its scabbard and almost fell into the sea. But I saved it. That knife was made for me at home because we weren't issued knives. So was glad to have saved it.

That ship had pulled several Coast Guard and marines out already. We stripped all our clothes off and draped them over anything topside to dry. One of that ship's crew gave me a camouflage gun cover to put over myself. Sometime after our clothes were dried, we were fed. Then an announcement was made for the highest rated Marine and Coast Guard to report to the bridge. That was me and some sergeant. The captain of that ship told us to go get the names and serial numbers of our people and report back to the bridge. And we did that. While I was counting noses, I found one of our men with a 45 Tommy machine gun. We were not issued those guns. But he had no ammo for it. Then I found another man who had two magazines of ammo for that type gun, but no gun. I weaseled the whole works from them, one at a time, without letting the other one know about the other and I ended up with a Tommy gun with two magazines of ammo.

Everything was full of salt water, so I got some oil and disassembled everything and oiled everything up.

That burned Marine was placed in a sack right under a 40mm gun. He was face down and they had put several towels under him to soak up the body fluids he was losing. The ship had a doctor and they had a doctor as a passenger. The two of them stood beside the Marine and I heard one of them say the Marine wouldn't make it because of the fluid loss. The other doctor said he had something called sulfa, which was rather new then, and he poured it like flower all over man's back and in time, the whole back turned black. He was getting new, pink skin when I last saw him and I'm happy to report, I think he made it.

This ship was to make it's landing north of Naha and it struck a reef before it reached the beach. But the marines they were carrying were able to wade ashore. There was an airfield directly ahead of the ship near the beach. The marines captured the airfield while the Jap planes were in the air and some pilots were captured when they landed. We had a ring side seat when three more planes came in for a landing and when their wheels got close to the ground, they started strafing the field. They turned as they started to climb and came over us. One plane was knocked down by a small landing ship that had water cooled 50's and the plane crashed at the water's edge near us. Another strafed us and started a small fire and wounded some.

The first to be wounded was one of our Coast Guard men from our black gang. He was hit in the side of the head and it was said he would have to be sent back to the states to have the shrapnel removed. Other ships were firing at this plane as it circled around us and their tracers went right over our deck. I made a dive under an army cot and lost my mouth organ and waterman's pen. Never got them back. I don't know as how an army cot was going to shelter me, but that is all there was. Then the planes were on us by the numbers, not just us, everyone. Lots of us that didn't have any stations gathered in the mess deck and the rumble of those 40's overhead was like being inside a big drum.

The captain put a call for anyone able to reload 20mm magazines to go up in the bow where there was a small room for reloading. Some of us started to go there, and when the guns started up, we would return to the mess deck. That happened a few times till we decided we were going to keep going regardless, and that is what we did. I did not know how those magazines were loaded, so I took the phone and reported to the con that we were loading magazines and asked what they wanted done with them and the answer was to distribute them among the forward guns. There were three of us in this small compartment and the other two knew what to do, so as the magazines were loaded, I took them to the guns. Finally we had more than the gunners wanted and they didn't want any more around them than they had. They refused to take more, so the con told me to stack them up outside of gun tubs.

While I waited for more magazines to be loaded, I dogged the hatch so that we were locked in there. Once I opened the hatch to carry another load top side and I found a man squatting down, smoking near the hatch and I told him to get rid of that cigarette, but when

I came back, he was still smoking. I didn't like him smoking so near all the ammo. So I squawked again. One of the men in the compartment with me told me it was one of the chiefs from that crew, so I shut my mouth. We were on that reef for quite some time.

There was an LST flying the baker flag anchored out a short ways away from everybody, and one day a single Jap plane dove at it several times dropping one bomb at a time. It never did hit the ship. But we had a ring side show for this, too. Suddenly four Corsairs dove down on the Jap and chased it out to sea. They had beautiful team work, each taking a firing run at it. All the while the Jap flew low over the water. They finally knocked it down.

The Okinawans had strange way of dealing with their dead. They built concrete vaults, and scattered them around the fields. They were built somewhat like a horseshoe with the far end higher than the rest. They took their dead down there and left them for seven years and then, returned to put the bones in a large jar of alcohol. Our big ships laid some big shells on some of them and bones were lying around in the fields. One of my shipmates went ashore and came back carrying a skull with his fingers in the eye holes. He would sit on his bunk, which was only a couple of feet from mine, and stroke the thing. That turned me off and I asked him if he would get a pail of soggy water and a brush and clean it up, and he did. He was cleaning it when we got a call to go to chow. He put the skull in the bucket and slid the whole thing under his bunk and took off. I stood fast till he was gone, then took the whole works and threw it over the side. I was always thankful he didn't go for another one.

One day a string of bombs hit the water just off our fan tail. Some plane was so high that we never knew it was there. I don't remember how we got off that reef. Probably towed off. At any rate, we left Okinawa after we were there for at least three weeks. We were in a convoy headed for Ulithi. I was standing just outside bridge one day when a blinker light message was sent to the ship. I read the message and it said that all the Coast Guard crew was accounted for, one way or the other, except a man by the name of Snipes. When I read that, I realized that man was aboard this ship and I had missed him when I went around counting noses. He was a litter case and they had him in a sack up near the bow. So I stepped inside the bridge and reported to that captain that Snipes was with us. That must be how some people can be reported as missing in action. It took almost a month to account for him.

When we reached Ulithi, we were put on the General George Randall. A receiving ship. Others from my crew kept showing up with other ships and planes till we were all together again, except for one. One day we saw the LST 884 being towed in with no one aboard. We got a blinker light message saying that one of our shipmates had been killed aboard the 884 after it was towed to the island where Ernie Pyle was buried. Ie Shima. This is the first that most of us knew he had been killed. A ship that had picked up some of our crew, and I believe the officers, was carrying some pumps on its deck and they ran alongside the 884 and dropped their suctions in to the sea and started their pumps.

Some men, including some of the 884 crew, as well as some navy officers boarded the 884 and placed hoses on it to fill the ship with water. When the ship was riding low in the water, they stopped the pumps, and later the ship was considered a hazard where it was, so it was towed to Ie Shima. Some of the men who boarded the 884 with those hoses were given medals. Two navy officers got silver medals out of it, but our crew didn't get much. Maybe a bronze star or two. They put 15 of our crew back on the 884 that first night, and some time during the night a fire fight broke out and our man, Flockencier was hit. When he fell to the deck, a quartermaster striker ran to him and lifted him in his arms and he took a round through both arms. Flockencier was killed, but the striker was sent over to the Indianapolis, and from there, to the Good Hope, a hospital ship. They were involved with Jap swimmers. Most of us didn't hear anything about this till the 884 was towed to Ulithi.

While we were on the General George Randall, we were given a pair of dungarees and a dungaree shirt. Nothing else. I had made a leather pouch that I wore on my belt in which I carried some articles just in case we went over the side. One article was a razor. Why I ever put a razor in there is a mystery, but I did have \$27.00 in the pouch and I doled that out to some of my shipmates 50 cents at a time for those who smoked. I didn't smoke. So the \$27.00 never did me any good. Finally, our crew was placed on a navy LST which was going to be towed back to Pearl Harbor. The 884 was tailed off behind this navy ship and was towed, too. With no one aboard.

The progress was slow and when we were off Truk, the tow line broke and the 884 drifted for a day till we could get the tow line repaired. An LCVP was lowered and a crew went to the 884 and I was part of that crew. We had something like an 11 inch tow line and the broken end was hanging straight down. We pulled with everything we had to get a couple feet up and we lashed that to the rail and flaked it back and forth till we got our end up. After it was spliced, we continued on to Eniwetoc where we got a towing bridle from some big ship.

While we were under way, some navy swab came around asking the Coast Guard for volunteers for a boxing match they wanted to put on for a little entertainment. I was sitting with one of our signalmen, Al Geary, when we were asked if we would like to box and the signalman was kind enough to volunteer me. We put on five matches a few days later. It was hot weather and one of our seamen was billed as the masked marvel. He had long underwear under shorts. And he had a red cross bag over his head with just two holes so he could see. At the end of the first round, he was trying to loosen that bag with 16 Oz gloves so he could breathe. They decided to take the bag off and we all found out who he was.

We made Pearl Harbor and they put us in tents at Waipio Point. We had all the liberty we wanted. One day someone told us where there was a hole in a fence around a navy base and, also, told us where we could buy some sandwiches on that base. Three of us found the hole and we even found where they sold sandwiches, but it was closed, so we turned back. I was the first through the hole and made too much noise so that a young guard with a rifle started blowing his whistle. The second man was half way through the fence

when this happened. The guard was far enough away so that he couldn't see the third man still on the wrong side of the fence. The man half way through talked low to the third man and said that the guard didn't see him and told him to stand behind a something big and hide. Several guards showed up and marched me and the second man in and they charged us with trying to break into the base. And they got me for two ID cards. One of them was burned in half from our thing on the 884 and a new one had been issued to me at Pearl. I was saving the burned one as a souvenir. To make a long story short, our navigator cut a deal with the navy where our own captain would set our punishment and report the results in writing to the base.

Our captain said he was going to report that our liberty cards were taken away. But he never did take them away and we had all the liberty we wanted. And they never did find out that we had been in the base. We were issued a paper for a complete sea bag. The worth of the bag was \$138.00. I got some thing and had almost \$100.00 left on that chit. I was soon to lose that, too. We were transferred to a base taken over by the Coast Guard where the Matsonian Liners were based. The war ended while we were here. Twelve of the 884 crew, including me, were sent to the USS Poole 151 as replacements. We were going to Japan for the first day of occupation.

To be continued

Bert Compton
USCG
LST 884
QM 1/c

Part 3

The morning we were shoving off for Japan, a clothing barge came alongside. I had been issued a chit for a complete seabag, valued at \$138.00. I still had about \$96.00 on it, so I got down on the barge and bought six pairs of sox. I gave my chit to the gob at the till and he told me he was too busy to do the paper work right away and said he would send me the paper through the mail and I bought that. Needless to say, that is the last I ever saw of it. We weighed anchor and made for Saipan. When we got there, the navigator had me take our sextant ashore where there was an optical shop. We were getting two images and it had to be calibrated. They took me ashore in a small boat and said I would be picked up late that afternoon. It didn't take long to find the shop and they told me to come back about 1500 hours and pick it up.

I came ashore before breakfast and at noon, looked up a navy base to try to bum a meal. The officer of the day at the camp wasn't very sympathetic to my cause and wouldn't feed me. So I went to the beach area again and whiled my time till it was time to pick up the sextant. Then I returned to the beach area and waited for the boat. When I got back to the ship, chow was all over for the day and the cook wasn't very sympathetic, either. The best he would do for me was to give me a couple of beef bouillon cubes to dissolve in

water. I hit the sack hungry that night. It was a big surprise to see the changes at Saipan since I was last there. Even had traffic lights. Almost civilized.

We shoved off for Japan and landed at a fishing village called Wakinoura. We all anchored out and went ashore by a landing barge that came around the various ships. When we reached a pier, there was an officer there who picked the highest rated man in the boat to serve as an SP. And every time, but once, it was me. We traded for souvenirs and I saw fights between sailors and, especially, their older men when our boys came up with one of their flags. The Japs stood around in small groups, giving us the evil eye. Some of our gobs went into stores and bargained with the Japs for things, and when a bargain was struck, our gobs walked away without paying and the Japs would throw a fit. I did nothing to stop it. I figured it was just a short time ago and they would have gladly cut our throats.

I picked up a flag from a woman, who sneaked me to her back yard and tore a wood pile apart to find the flag she had hidden. It cost me about 40 cents in small supplies. In no time, it was forbidden to take ham or sugar ashore. The sailors from the big cargo type ships had access to lots of that and the Japs were more willing to deal with them. All we could bring was two packs cigarettes, two packs of gum and so on.

We watched the ladies of the village get their daily supply of rice. Each day, about ten women would pull an old iron cart with small canvas sacks on it to an old unpainted wooden shack. Inside, a Jap was barefooted on a pile of unpolished rice. He took a scoop shovel and filled each bag with a certain amount and tied the top of the bag by twisting it into a knot. Then he threw the bags on the cart and they all pulled and pushed till they reached one of their houses. That one took her bag and the rest went on. And the women were used in another way. To go down a mountain with a two wheel trailer, a man would hold the pole and the women would each have a short rope which was tied somewhere on the frame. The women held back on their ropes while the man took it easy steering the trailer. You could see as many as five women straining to hold the rig from running over the man. This was a fishing village and it was something to watch a Jap squat and reach in his pocket for a fish, which he would eat like we would a banana. And with the other hand, pull a ball of rice out of another pocket and eat it like a popcorn ball. Some would squat, they were great squatters, and light a small fire of straw and pull out some kind of pipe and smoke. I believe it was opium.

I got a long necked banjo type of instrument the men used when they went courting. The women would gather around me and make motions for me to play. They had babies tied in shawls on their backs. They had a word for sex and it was Pong-Pong. So I would strum and I would accompany myself by singing Pong-Pong, they would bow their heads and walk away. I had to have my fun. The shrines were soon off limits. Our lads were taking their little statues they had in them as souvenirs and that was a no-no to them. There was a grade school and that was something to see. There was a wooden walkway running in front of the class rooms and everyone had to take their sandals off. The sandals were lined up in very neat rows. You went in barefoot. They had one teacher for two rooms. One room studied while the other recited. And there was a window without

glass open to the side walk. I walked along the sidewalk and stuck my head in the window. The kids would come by the window in the rooms where there was no teacher and I had fun having them write their names down for me. One teacher was very polite and tried to tell me that these were her pupils, but she couldn't say pupil good. It took several tries before I got it. I went up in a loft and found a great pile of text books thrown in a big heap. I took one home for a keepsake. It was the only thing I took from them that I didn't give them something for. Of course it was written in Japanese.

There was a cruiser in the harbor. The Cleveland. Each Sunday it held church services for the different denominations. A large landing craft came around to all the ships and took you there and brought you back. One Sunday it rained so hard they wouldn't let us go back to our own ships and they told us to get into the chow line. Man, oh man, what chow. Different kinds of baked things, choices of meats and deserts. What a chow. Each Sunday after that, we prayed it would rain again. But it never did. I was to find out that one of my future brother-in-laws was on the Cleveland then. We never saw each other then, but after I was home we found out. There were many from the different services that had the points to get out, including me then. We were loaded with many wanting to return to the states for discharge. Among them were two quartermasters and I asked the navigator if we could use them and he OK'd it. So a couple of our own men didn't have to stand watches coming back to the states.

After 30 days, we were given the word to head for Pearl Harbor in the company of two navy destroyers. We ran single file with us in the stern. They were much faster than us and they had us at flank speed for about three days when we got the word to slow down to 15 knots to conserve fuel. We were slower, but had a lot more range than they, so they dropped out at Wake Island to take on fuel and we proceeded on our own to Pearl. When we got there, there was some trouble on the streets. Some of our colored troops were making time with the Kanaki women and this ticked the Kanaki men off. There had been some fights and stabbings. When I went up the street on liberty, I saw a mob of Kanakis that had a young soldier backed up against a building and they were in an angry mood. I forced my way to the soldier and said I would stand by him because I had a brother who was a soldier. I was facing the soldier when I told him that with the Kanakis behind me, when someone back of me, I don't know who, hit me so hard in the side of the head that my white hat went sailing way out into the street. The only thing that saved our tails was a paddy wagon came up with Shore Patrol and an officer bulled his way through the crowd and grabbed me by the arm and ordered me to get out of there fast. I told him I wanted to get my white hat, but he said to either get out, or get into the paddy wagon, so I went about a city block away and waited till the crowd left, and then went for my hat. The next day my cheek was cut up inside my mouth and I had a sore face for sometime.

On the last liberty before shoving off for the states, I went ashore with some of my 884 mates and we were having our fun till one of the mates got severe stomach cramps and fell to the sidewalk. We got a cab and took him to a navy hospital and signed him in. This was late in the evening and they kept him there. Now, the rest of us were over liberty, so I arranged to have a message sent to the ship saying we were on the way back and explained what we had done. The next morning we sailed for the states and we left our

mate there. His name was Armand Dugas. He caught another ship to the states and he was supposed to catch us in California, but he missed us there, too, and had to catch another ship again and caught up to us in the Panama Canal. We landed at Long Beach and had some duty demonstrating the rules of the road for a training film. While we were there, I hitch hiked with one of our signalmen, Harold Hartley, to San Bernardino and visited some relatives. They gave us a ride back and at the pier, we saw a navy sailor coming in with a small boat who jumped out and missed the pier and went down in the dirty water. One of my young cousins was with me and her eyes were as big as saucers when she saw that.

From Long Beach, it was through the Panama Canal and on to Charleston. While the ship was under way yet, an 83 footer ran alongside and we, who were to leave the ship, jumped down on it. I had no coat, because I became separated from my clothing chest at Pearl Harbor, and very little of any other clothing for that matter. The quartermaster checking me out said there was a rain coat of sorts in a locker somewhere and I scurried off and found it. It had something stenciled across the back, so I folded it over my arm and left the ship like that. At some office, they scheduled me to be in charge of a trainload headed for St Louis in two days. The very next day one man scheduled to be on a train going to Detroit was thrown in the brig and I was asked if I would like to take his spot, and I did. They gave me Pullman tickets, but again, fate was against me and there was no bed for me, so I rode setting up all the way to Detroit.

At the discharge center, I was scheduled to be on some radio show at noon. It was held above a big gymnasium. They fitted me out with the tickets to ride the rails home to Green Bay. I stopped over in Chicago to visit relatives and nearly froze to death because of a lack of a proper coat. They put me in a bath tub and an uncle went somewhere and bought a half pint of whiskey and they had me drink that while I was in a tub of hot water. I never was so cold in all my life. From Chicago, it was only a few hours to home. And I was more than happy to get back all in one piece. So ended four years and if I, knowing what I do now, had a chance to do it all again, I would. It was quite a ride.

The End

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