



Personal Experiences of World War II

Joseph Garofalo

Enlisted: October, 1942

Active Service: November, 1942

October 1942, I enlisted in the U.S. Navy Seabees and arrived at Boot Camp – Camp Bradford, Virginia in November. For a city boy, 22 years old, it was culture shock. The conditions were primitive, cold and muddy. We piled snow against our tents for insulation, and although coal was scarce, we tried to keep warm around one small pot belly stove in the middle of the tent.

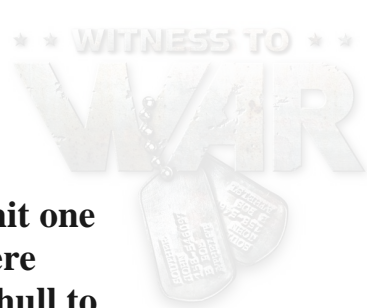
After five weeks, we left Camp Bradford and went on to Camp Endicott in Davisville R.I. There, we trained in the rifle range, close order drill, hikes, callisthenics, etc. During this time, I had one “liberty” and quickly found a good Italian restaurant in Providence. After enjoying the Italian food, my spirits were lifted, feeling more fit and seasoned than we started, our battalion was then divided in half. One half went to Port Hueneme, California and my half was shipped to Camp Lejune, North Carolina for advanced training. We then became the 121st Seabees as part of the 4th Marine Division. We were redesignated as 3rd Battalion, 20th Marine Engineers, 4th Marine Division on May 10, 1943. After a few months at Lejune, we departed to Camp Pendleton, California. Once there we were given more advanced training, such as amphibious maneuvers, bridge building, rifle range, obstacle course, demolition, etc.

Roi-Namur, Kwajelin

Marshall Islands

February 1, 1944

In January 1944, we left San Diego, our battalion landed on February 1, 1944 on the Japanese held Kwajelin Island Roi-Namur, Marshall Island Group. Prior to disembarking, we were waiting to climb down on nets to the LCVP's, it started to get light and foggy. I was looking at the ocean staring and thinking the worst. Suddenly I saw something floating towards our ship—I couldn't make it out. A few minutes later, I saw a raft with three figures. My buddies and I saw this and we immediately started firing. They were Japs . At the same time a Navy man (crew



member of the transport) started firing a 20mm automatic. He hit one on the raft and his body flipped into the air. Finally, all three were killed. The three men had charges with them that adhere to the hull to plant on our transport to blow it up. That was our baptism of fire. It was quite an experience. All this happened before our landing on Roi-Namur, (Kwajelin). After the island was secured, we went to Maui, Hawaiian Islands (so called a rest camp). In May 1944, we departed for our next objective, an island called Saipan, part of the Marianas Islands.

**Saipan, Marianas Islands
June 15, 1944**

On June 15, 1944, we landed on Saipan, where we debarked in LCVP landing crafts. Our objective was to land on Blue-Beach- 2, which was to the right of the Japanese sugar mill smoke stack (chimney), as stated on the mimeograph sketch that was given to us.

Hundreds of landing craft were rendezvousing, waiting for the signal to head for their designated landing beach. Moments later our craft was alone. There were only ten men in our LCVP because we were carrying ammunition. We were headed towards Tinian, the wrong island, which was three miles to the south of Saipan. I looked at my sketch, and then looked up and saw Saipan disappearing. I told Chief Sullivan (who was in charge of our platoon on board) “Chief, we are headed for the wrong island”. Suddenly I saw the coxswain staring into space, frozen at the wheel. We realized that he was in shock and we were headed for Tinian the wrong island. One of our men heard me shout at the Chief and quickly slapped the coxswain in his face. Just as he recovered, the Japanese artillery on Tinian opened fire on us. Two shells came very close to us. The craft almost capsized – we were taking on water. As we turned away heading for Saipan, one shell exploded in our wake. This was very close, even if you were a good swimmer, you would have never made it. The gear and treacherous currents would have drowned all of us. We made it to Saipan and there we encountered deadly artillery fire on the beach.

“D” Day on Saipan



D-Day on Saipan was hell. Artillery fire was intense for two days. We sustained approximately 2,000 casualties the first day. We were strafed, sniper fired, booby trapped etc.

On the first night, June 15, 1944, Lt. Robert Fiske picked up nine of us to go on patrol. Counter-attacks by Japanese were coming through gaps in our lines. Fiske told me to remove my two canteens, so as not to make noise while crawling. I removed one – the other, I had trouble getting off. A few moments passed, I still couldn't get it off, so I went on the trail of the patrol with Lenny Delunas. I did not see the rest of the men who were going on that night patrol. I crawled approximately two hundred yards, not knowing where I was going. I started to smell pungent body odor and I heard Japanese voices. My buddy Lenny started to shake and mumble. I grabbed his lips and punched his thighs, and softly said, don't make a sound—don't breathe hard. We backed up slowly breathed very quietly, turned supposedly 180 degrees crawled back, and were challenged by Marines.

Who goes there?

I responded Joe Garofalo, 3rd BN, 20th Marines

Where do you come from?

I reply, The Bronx !

What's the Bronx?

I reply Yankee Stadium, Bronx Park.

The Marines let us go by. Lenny and I reported this incident to Lt. Fiske and told him of Japanese activities about 200 yards away. He stated that they had cancelled the patrol because the terrain was too difficult and the star shells would give our position away, etc. Within the hour, about 200 Japs were mowed down in the counter-attack. Incidentally, the men who were assigned to the patrol that was cancelled were awarded the Bronze Star. Lenny and I were recommended for the



award. The recommendation is on our discharge papers, but as of yet we have not received it.

“D” Plus - 1--- Bringing Ammunition to the Front Lines

Tony Mellino was in charge of the detail. I was told to put the carbine sling around my neck so that I could push the wagon loaded with belted ammunition with two hands. One man pulled, while I was in the back pushing. Two men with Thompson’s and two men with carbines, each escorted us. They also assisted in pushing the wagon.

Suddenly, all hell broke loose. The wagon stopped and our escorts scattered. I went around the wagon and saw a Jap coming at me, wearing only a jock strap and a helmet. He had already hit the hand grenade plunger on his helmet to activate it. As I tried to take my carbine off from around my neck, I saw bullet holes enter his chest and smoke rings coming out. The men that scattered, took cover opened fire on him. He fell on his own grenade and his body lifted about two feet above the ground. Shrapnel hit the ammo and the wagon. His body landed approximately six feet from me. This was another close encounter. At that time a Navy Corpsman took me aside and insisted that I drink some whiskey. Reality hit me later when I realized what had happened. Later that same afternoon, I was bringing the wounded back when a Japanese machine gunner opened up on us. I landed on top of a Marine. The Machine gunner sprayed continuously. The bullets just missed my back by inches. I could see the bullets hitting a wall. I told the Marine below me to exhale. I thought that was the end. Moments later, the Jap machine gunner was killed. After this incident, I saw a Marine staggering in the area. He was hit in the face. I ran to him. He put his arms around me. He couldn’t see. He was about six feet tall – I’m 5’5. I took him to some Corpsman. Then I remember giving him some lime hard candy to suck on. I never knew his name, nor what happened to him. It all happened so fast. Occasionally I still think of him.

The next day I entered a cave, and found a couple of cases of canned crab meat, which I shared with all. It was difficult eating this crab meat without getting flies in your mouth. We finally devised a way to eat



canned crab meat. Open the can, put it between your knees, fanning continuously, as the meat goes into your mouth. The flies were awful. Sanitary conditions did not exist. The dead were everywhere. A catholic priest was asking to have dead Marines removed. I volunteered. Two men would pick up the dead, I was in a Duck (treaded vehicle) with built in shelves. When the Duk was full, the bodies went out to a ship for burial at sea. I handled many dead. It had to be done. Still, sometimes, I get nightmares of these occurrences.

Another cave I entered had a few wooden crates which held about twelve bottles of sake. I took them out, and my buddies surrounded me. The bottles were sealed on top with wax, so the men helped themselves to this find. The Japanese had poisoned the wine. One man died immediately, one went blind. The sake was destroyed. Booby traps were all over. The Japanese sugar mill in Charan Kanoa,, had a so called spotter in the smokestack who would direct artillery fire to our beach line. He caused many casualties. He was finally spotted and eliminated. He was in the stack for two days. The day after this incident, I entered the sugar mill and saw the large leather belting that turned the mechanism that, in turn, crushed the sugar cane.

I had helped my uncle in his cobbler shop and had some experience with leather. This belting was about twenty inches wide and was about four stories high. Doubling the length (in total) it was about eighty feet long. Before I cut it down. I cleared some debris to make a path to run, to avoid getting hurt or possibly killed.

I yelled at a couple of Marines to get out of the way. One, by the way, was Bill Gallo a well known cartoonist and sports columnist for the New York Daily News, also in the twentieth regiment. I cut the belt, made slabs, and put them aside. When we invaded Tinian, I took them with me. Later on I became a cobbler for the 121st and used some of this leather for ladies lifts for nurses and aids. I made knife sheaths for men in my regiment. Incidentally, I donated my knife and sugar mill sheath to the museum on Saipan in June 1994.



Other Incidents on Saipan Japanese Families in Stockade

Japanese and civilian families were behind barbed wire stockades on Saipan. I had a few cans of condensed milk with me to give to mothers with infants. With my knife, I punctured two holes on top of each can and gave one can to a woman holding and infant, through the barbed wire. Instantly, the husband snatched it from her and immediately started to drink it. I threatened to shoot this barbaric Jap. I held him with my carbine through the barbed wire. My buddy, Pat Gargano, handed her another can of milk from which she fed the infant. She controlled the flow of milk from the can by placing a finger on one hole. The milk dropped into the infants mouth. She bowed many times. Thanking us.

Garapan, Saipan

I was guarding a prisoner with my buddy Pat Gargano. This Japanese prisoner had cut marks on his stomach. It looked like he had intended to commit Hari Kari. He spotted Pat's large knife and made motions that he wanted to use it on himself. I said to Pat, give it to him. He replied are you crazy? I pulled the knife from Pat's sheath, cocked my rifle, stood back and threw the knife to the Jap. He picked it up, put it to his stomach and started to tremble. Pat turned pale white, but the Jap dropped it. Pat cursed me for a long time! We all did crazy things at one time.

The Banzai Charge On Saipan

Lenny and I went to that area after the charge. We must have seen two thousand bodies, mostly Japanese, but also quite a few Americans. The Japanese found time to booby-trap some of the dead officers. One officer was wired to a grenade. When I went to turn him over, the sun was shining on the black thread. That is when I noticed the thread on



the grenade. The sun saved my life. Some of the Japanese soldiers were still alive, but they died shortly. It was a terrible sight.

Finding the Maps

Amongst my findings on Saipan, I consider this one of great importance. A few days after our initial assault I entered a cave and found a stack of maps when open measured approximately 4x4, folded in a wooden box. They were in color (code) of every city of Japan. I can't recall. But there were about 25 maps. Each map listed the types of buildings, with name of the manufacturer printed on the roof of the essential structures. I was advised by my friends to turn the maps over to intelligence, which I did. What has always bothered me, is why would the Japanese have these maps on Saiapn?

It has been many years since that incident took place. The January 1993 issue of V.F.W. magazine there appeared a story "Nisei Achieved Intelligence Coup" by Bill Wagner.

The eighth paragraph of the article stated that the coup was the discovery of the Imperial Japanese Army's ordinance inventory. It listed amounts, types and manufacturers names and locations of the home islands, providing new targets for our B-29's. I found this inventory, and I have many witnesses to support my credibility. I feel the 121st NCB, the 4th Marine Division deserve the recognition with this matter. I entered the cave alone and risked my life to find these maps and the Nisei got the credit! The Nisei's, however, contributed a great service to the termination of the war in the Pacific.

North Field, Tinian

This incident happened on or about January 1945. Working on North Field air strips with rollers, wheel barrows, shovels and rakes in the hot sun can get very boring. One day a Ventura PV-1 Bomber, Navy patrol plane landed on North Field. I got friendly with the pilot and after a few



days, I mentioned to him that I would like to go up with him on patrol some day. He would oblige me only if a member of his crew was absent, then I would take his place. My day came about a week later. He spotted me on the strip and said “Joe, we need a tail gunner” and I replied “yes sir”. I explained to the men with whom I had been working to cover for me, for I was actually going to be “awol”. I had to crawl to the tail end of the plane to man the twin 50 caliber machine gun. Prior to getting into position, I was given instructions on how to use it. Up we went, lying on my stomach with a 6” hole beneath me, I could see the universe. After three hours in that position, I was told to come forward. I was getting sleepy in that position anyway. We were flying north of the Marianas, close to 500 miles, of the patrol. We received ack-ack from one island, I could see the black puffs of smoke below us. I was briefed on this matter and assured that the Japanese anti-aircraft weapons could not reach us. We bombed one island on the western side, probably a docking area. We flew over six islands on this patrol. On the way back, we encountered bad weather. At this point, I really missed being with my wheelbarrow. I looked back at this adventure as a volunteer who risked being court martialed. It was an experience I will never forget!

The three operations – Ri-Namur, Saipan, and Tinian with the 3rd Battalion 20th Marine Engineers, 4th Marine Division are described in the 121st Naval Construction Battalion History book.. It explains in detail the functions of the 121st from its inception to its decommissioning. This book was put together by our staff and I purchased an edition in 1946. There are many other incidents that occurred on Tinian Island of which I can explain in furth detail on a one –to-one basis.

