

The combat stories of **JOSEPH G. MORRISON**

Dates of Service: April 1941 – February 1946
Branch of Service: Army
Hometown: Stanley, NC
Location: Pacific Theater
Battle/Campaigns: Leyte, Philippines, and Okinawa
Highest Rank: Major

Joe Morrison describes his time as an Army chaplain and the horrors of war in the Pacific, including performing funerals for the many soldiers who died there.

These stories were compiled by an interviewer, who prefers to remain anonymous, and goes by the nickname 'Kilroy Was Here.' These stories are posted through a partnership between 'Kilroy Was Here' and the Witness to War Foundation. Permission to use any of these materials must be granted by 'Kilroy Was Here,' which can be obtained through the Witness to War Foundation.



In 1939 while in the North Carolina National Guard, my uncle, Hall Morrison, who was a Lieutenant Colonel in the National Guard, and a captain during World War One, had told me he felt we would be at war soon. He advised me to join the chaplain reserves, which I did. For the following three months and after much correspondence, I was transferred from the infantry to the chaplain reserves.

I was called to active duty one year later with the rank of first Lieutenant and was told to report to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, which I did in 1941. I was there for one month before being sent to Camp Davis, which was just south of Jacksonville, North Carolina in the Holly Ridge area. There I was attached to the 96th Anti- Aircraft Coastal Artillery. For the following six months I was the only Chaplain in the regiment until a Catholic chaplain came. The regiment had some 2,400 men and of those there were about 250 boys who were Jewish. For these men I had to call in rabbis from around the area to hold services.

When I learned of the bombing of Pearl Harbor, I was in Richmond, Virginia on a 30 day leave. As soon as we heard, all leaves were canceled and we had to report back to our bases. When I left Camp Davis, my oldest son Joseph was only twelve months old and it wouldn't be until he was five years old that I saw him next.

As I arrived back at Camp Davis, I found everything being packed up getting ready to move out. Orders showed we were being sent to San Francisco. In January of 1942,



we made the 11 day trip across the country on a troop train. The reason it took so long was that the government used only land grant railroads which would not cost anything. Back then the train engines were steam engines, and as we made our way over the Rocky Mountains, its steam line had frozen. I remember waking up at 1:00 in the morning freezing to death. There we sat until another engine was brought up and hooked to the back of our train and got it thawed out. As we arrived in San Francisco we learned there weren't quarters to handle a large group of soldiers, so we were placed in the "Cow Palace" for twelve days (a cattle exposition building). Even though the Cow Palace had no heat, we were better off than the next group, who were placed under the grandstand of the dog race track.

News came that we were being sent to a warmer climate, and before long, we boarded a large Matson liner that was part of a 22 ship convoy sailing for Hawaii. We were some of the first troops to be sent overseas right after the bombing of Pearl. I remember on May 17, 1943, standing and watching as they raised the sunken battleship West Virginia. Later on during one of the convoys I was pleased to see the West Virginia back in action.

While stationed at Hickam Field, I heard a story about this Japanese plane that had been hit and went down on one of the small islands off of Kauai. It was told that after the pilot had landed his plane, a Hawaiian man and woman, who lived on the island, saw the plane come down and



came to see if they could help. As they got to the plane, the pilot was climbing out and got to the ground, and said he was taking over the island. The following morning, the islander decided he was going over to Kauai and find out what was going on. He went down to the beach where he had a boat. As he tried to get his boat into the surf, the Japanese pilot saw him and ran down to the beach with his pistol. Seeing the two of them on the ground fighting, the woman ran to the aid of her husband and hit the Japanese in the back of his head with a large rock, killing him. They went on to say that the man went over to Kauai and told what had happened. The military sent a group over to the island to report on what was found. They removed the body and plane from the island.

After spending over a year in Hawaii, I was assigned to a task force being sent to sea which had some 25,000 men in it. It wasn't until the following day at sea that we learned in a briefing that our destination was the island of Yap. I had never heard of the island and was told it was near the island of Truk. Within two days of arriving at Yap, we received a radio message giving us a change of orders to return to Eniwetok. There we sat for 11 days waiting until further orders were sent.

At the end of the 11 days, orders came for us to proceed to the Admiralty Islands which are near New Guinea. There we learned that they were forming a task force that would be heading into the Philippines. From here



we moved out for the island of Leyte in the Philippine islands. On the morning of October the 20th, 1944, I climbed down a rope ladder into a landing craft and went ashore in the second wave. There I spent my first night in the rubble of a Catholic church in the southern part of the landing area. It was during the second day there that I returned to the beach where I dug myself a foxhole and planned to spend the night. That night the Japanese counterattacked and as I laid there watching the tracers pass inches over my head, I learned that I had not dug my hole deep enough.

The following morning I dug a larger hole, but as the day went on our troops were able to move further inland. The 24th was my 33rd birthday and that night I decided not to dig a hole but to sleep in a ditch which lay alongside of a road. I had taken off my shoes which I laid at the top of the ditch, and put my billfold in a towel that I rolled up and used as a pillow. That night, around two in the morning, a Japanese plane came over and dropped a 500 pound bomb that hit about a hundred feet from me. I remember lying there watching a wall of flames pass over the ditch, followed by all this dirt which covered me, knocking me unconscious. When I came to, I remember putting my hand to my face and being able to see it. As I climbed out of the ditch I could hear faint cries of the wounded and dying all around me. Sixteen soldiers next to me died, some of whom couldn't be identified. I never saw my billfold or



shoes again. About a week later I received a letter from my wife asking me how I spent my birthday.

While on Leyte, I held funeral services twice a day for 50 to 60 soldiers who had been killed and were laid in a row. My biggest regret was that I wasn't able to write a brief note to their families. I just didn't have the time or the information to do so.

On December the seventh we were at San Pablo airfield and as I stood there brushing my teeth, a number of Japanese planes came over. The next thing I knew the sky was covered with some 300 parachutes from Japanese paratroopers. For the following two days we fought them, only losing 11 men, one of which was a Lieutenant who was a very close friend of mine. The only thing I can recall that they destroyed was eleven planes sitting on the flight line. They dropped grenades in as they ran past the planes.

It wasn't long afterwards that we moved on up to Manila, and I was there the day it was taken. The city had been reduced to rubble, and I heard about some missionaries who had been held as prisoners at Santo Tomas, an old university. I got a jeep and went over to find these four missionaries. They were nothing but walking skeletons and almost starved to death. There I found the Junkins who had a six month old boy. Mrs. Junkins told how she was allowed to trade her diamond ring for a goat and allowed to bring it to the compound. Being too sick to nurse the baby, they milked the goat. After the goat went



dry, they killed the goat and ate it. It was the only thing that kept the baby alive. Bill Junkins' glasses had been broken, so I gave him 200 pesos. We heard the Red Cross had some glasses, and hoped to replace them. Before the Junkins were sent back to the states, they had to wait until they had gained some weight. They looked too bad for the public. It was through Mrs. Junkins that I was able to get word to my wife that I was heading for Okinawa.

The LST on which I made the trip to Okinawa had just returned from landing marines on Iwo Jima. The cabin I was given had two five inch holes in the walls where the shells came in on one side and out the other. We landed on Okinawa April 1st 1945, which was Easter Sunday, and I held services that morning on board before the landing started.

When we had gotten within 200 yards of the beach, our ship ran aground on a coral reef leaving us stuck and unable to move. There we had to sit for the following six hours waiting for the tides to come in. As we waited, I watched as wave after wave of Japanese kamikazes came in and attacked a number of our ships. They never attacked our sitting duck. After getting freed off the reef, the captain moved the LST down the beach and as we made our second run for the beach he had the ship at flank speed. The LST plowed into the beach burying the front door in the sand. Once again, we sat there with kamikaze planes attacking ships all around us until a bulldozer was brought up and



removed the sand from in front of the doors. After getting ashore I made my way to Yon Tan Airfield which wasn't too far from the beach. By the time I had gotten there, the Japanese had fallen back to the mountains and it took us four days to catch up with them. It was very costly for our troops trying to remove the Japanese from their caves and fortified emplacements. We had Japanese interpreters who tried to get them to come out and surrender, but very few of them would. I know that I performed over a thousand funeral services while on Okinawa. It was very stressful on me thinking to myself that I too could be lying there in those graves. I found out in combat that all religious differences and denominations went right out the window, and the men were very grateful that I had waded through all the mud and water to reach their groups. It was very rewarding for me to see it too.

For 11 months we lived on rations and dehydrated food, with our water being rationed out. All of our water was shipped in from Pearl in five gallon cans. Each morning we would line up to have our canteens filled and after that, you dropped a halizone tablet in it to kill the germs. Maybe once a month our mail would catch up with us. You would have a batch of letters at a time and sometimes there would be a package too. I even got a fruitcake that the ladies of my church had made. The cake had first gone to the Philippines in October and I finally got it in May while on Okinawa. The tin can it was in looked as



if it had been beaten with a hammer and the cake was pretty well dried out, but be as it may, we ate every crumb of it.

By the time we had taken Okinawa, I had received orders saying I could go back to the states for a 45 day leave, but only if I would sign an agreement saying that I would return to my command and would make no attempt to get a transfer to another unit. By this point in time I was willing to sign anything. We had been advised of what we could take with us and what we couldn't, one of which was any animals. This one man who had a monkey decided he was going to take it home anyhow. Before boarding, he stopped by the medics and got a can of ether. He poured some over a towel which he placed over the monkey's face until it went to sleep, and then he put the monkey into his duffel bag. Things went well for him until we were within a day of Honolulu and had a ship's inspection. As the Captain and Commander made their way through the ship areas, they came across two small eyes shining under a bunk. Of course, it was the monkey. After arriving in port, it was turned over to the health authority, and the last time the monkey was seen, he was sitting on a Health Authority man's shoulder.

The ship I was assigned to leave on also had some 400 Japanese prisoners on board, with many of them wounded. The doctors on board did their best to save eleven. The bodies were weighted with a 5 inch shell, placed on a dolly, and arranged on the fantail. At the end of the service, the



dolly was tipped up allowing each body to fall to the water and slip out of sight into the deep. I have often wondered how deep the bodies would go before they were overcome by the pressure.

After three days in Hawaii, I boarded another ship heading for the states. We docked in San Francisco on August 6, 1945, which was the same day we dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima. I remember as I walked down the gangway hearing sailors talking to each other with one saying, “We dropped a Buck Rogers bomb on them today.” Three days later we heard word that we had dropped the second bomb on Nagasaki, and I have always appreciated Truman’s decision in doing so and ending the war. If he hadn’t, I would have been part of the invasion of Japan and it would have been another costly landing for our boys.

Arriving home, not only did I have a loving wife waiting for me, but a son who was just months old when I left, and was now five years old and had never seen his dad. At the end of my rest leave, I still had 120 days of leave time remaining, and before I could be discharged, I had to use it up. I was discharged at Fort Bragg, North Carolina in January 1946.