

THE FLAG STORY

For over 50 years now I have owned this flag and now an attempt will be made to return it to its rightful place. During World War II I served in the United States Marine Corps First Division. I was a telephone lineman, as part of an artillery forward observer team. The division landed on Okinawa on April 1, 1945 and advanced clear across the island with minimum resistance. Meanwhile others and I were stuck on an LSM out in Buckner Bay. Hundreds of Japanese suicide planes came day and night.

Once finally ashore we worked 72 hours straight organizing all our 105s and necessary supplies. Then after one day off we were moved to the frontline in the south to support Army Infantry Divisions who had come up against the main Jap resistance.

At my fourth observation position, now with the Army 96th Division we were situated on a long east to west steep wooded ridge. Behind us was a large flat field perhaps less than a mile wide, then a gentle rising slope to the north. A single dozed jeep road came directly to our ridge. This particular observation post became day and night full-blown scenarios of war action I will never forget. On the first morning around 11 a.m. an Army major came up to the post. I warned him that a Jap sniper had been shooting at us all morning and was very good. Sometimes coming as close as one foot. The major ignored my warning and borrowed my field glasses and stood up in plain view facing the enemy positions. Almost instantly he was hit in the upper left arm. The bullet passed through his arm without hitting any bones. He then told me that this would be his fifth oak leaf cluster on his Purple Heart ribbon. So much for combat intelligence.

Later that afternoon Perry our radioman heard that Lt. Green, our first Forward Observer, had been shot in the groin at a position west of us. With permission Perry and another man hiked over to that area several miles to the west. When they returned they said that on their arrival Lt. Green was still lying in the mud. They carried him out to a first aid station. One testicle had been shot off. However the Army medic told them that when he recovered he probably would still be able to have kids.

The following day while glassing the reverse slope to the rear I spotted a Jap dugout with what appeared to be boxes and other gear. Since the phones were all operational and the front quiet two of us asked for permission to investigate. Permission was granted so we walked halfway across the jeep road then angled through the farm field. The field had been planted to some kind of low 1 to 2 feet vine crop. We crossed about 500 to 600 feet of this field and found Jap telephones and food supplies. As we started back out to the road to my horror I almost stepped on a Japanese land mine with trigger device sticking about 4 to 5 inches out of the ground. It took us about 30 minutes to negotiate our way out of this minefield and back to the road. On reaching the Observation Post we called in the location of the minefield which extended on either side of the jeep road and covered several acres.

That night at about 2:a.m. with the usual front line daylight provided by Naval floating flares we received several rounds in our position from a battleship's 16 inch shell from Buckner Bay. One man was blown to bits and another's leg was blown off at his hip. I cannot fully describe the absolute screaming and cursing that took place all along the frontline that night. In panic we immediately by radio and phone called for a cease-fire. The shell hole near our position was about 30 feet across and 12 feet deep. No one slept the rest of the night.

The next day things were quiet again for a short time and the weather clear. Two events occurred during the morning; a single medium tank came towards on the jeep road. With interest we watched it progress not worrying about the forewarned mine field positions. All of a sudden about halfway across the flat field the tank left the jeep road and turned left into the minefield. We all shouted and cursed but we had no way of communicating with the tank crew. About 300 feet into the field they hit a mine. The entire tank lifted off the ground in a terrific explosion, with one track blown off. We assumed that all the crew had been killed, however, after about five minutes when the dust and smoke began to clear the top hatch opened and three men crawled out and fell to the ground. They staggered to their feet but appeared to be blinded. Before we could react a jeep came over the hill and all were loaded up and taken to the rear.

As if that was not enough excitement for the day, later in the afternoon as we were in an artillery, fire for effect phase, a Navy plane came into view flying over the same field. As we watched it there was a large fiery explosion. One of our 105 artillery shells had hit it.

The next morning we witnessed the 96th Infantry attack on the enemy positions, south of us on a semi-flat area in front of our position. A small Okinawan village of about 20 dwellings was to our left at the base of a very long gentle sloping hill rising to the south. The infantry first advanced through the small village with no enemy fire. Then the whole line about 2000 feet was assaulted by dozens of infantry squads. We stood transfixed by the panorama of the battle scene in front of us. Like all other advances this one had been preceded by vary heavy artillery fire into the hilltop enemy positions. As the first squads neared the top of the hill all hell broke loose. The sounds of machinegun fire and mortars were deafening. Men were cut down all across the line. They were being mowed down both from Jap positions on the ridge and the small village that had been earlier by passed. Then we witnessed an unbelievable happening. Starting in the middle units and quickly spreading all along advancing line the infantrymen began an unorganized panic retreat. As we watched they threw away their weapons and ran screaming back down the hill. Most of them did not make it; a truly sad and tragic day.

That afternoon once things had settled down again two of us asked the Forward Observer for permission to investigate the blown up tank. We were given permission for 30 minutes and warning to look out for unexploded mines.

We had no sooner reached the tank when a prolonged Jap artillery barrage descended on us. As the incoming rounds began to whistle their destination. I took cover behind the

dead body of a Jap soldier. In all there were four dead soldiers lying there. When the shelling stop I shook off the dirt and turned the Jap's body over. My first reaction was, "My God he is only a boy." He had like the others died instantly by shell or mine fragments. The left side of his head had been blown off. As I turned him over his helmet tumbled off. Inside the liner was this folded up flag with all the Japanese writing and the red sun. Inside that was a picture, I took to be him in some kind of armor. Until recently I assumed this to be for some kind of sporting game. However, Mr. Ariki, owner of Sandpines Golf Links, and his partner Mr. Ishakawa informed me that it is part of a high level military training from ancient times. There were also photos of what I took to be his family back home.

Though like many I came out of the war with a deep-seated hatred of the Japanese enemy, but time heals all things. So now it is my earnest desire to return this precious flag to his family. Also to reassure them that their son died instantly and did not suffer a painful lingering death. I cannot fully ever write in words my pride of those I served with both the survivors and those who died around me. By the same token one must certainly feel compassion for the fathers, mothers, sisters, and brothers of Japanese families, where sons also died in this terrible war.

My final day in this Forward Observer position was far less eventful but interesting never the less. Daybreak started with the usual punctual Jap alarm clock artillery barrage, later several rounds of 80mm mortar fire, which landed in the flat behind our ridge. This blew our telephone lines up going back to the battery position. Walt and I went down to the field to repair the lines. After about eight to 10 splice repairs I was finishing the last wire break; when all of a sudden another mortar barrage. Again 80mm explosions working their way to our position. We stood transfixed knowing the next one would land close to us. Then the good Lord intervened. We were standing only three feet apart when we heard a sound like Whisssp! as the mortar shell landed between us. We escaped instant death by a defective shell that did not explode. It took minutes before either one of us could speak. I remember the old salts description of being able to hear an incoming mortar, "It will if it happens, it will be the last sound you will ever hear!"

After completing the last repair splice I attempted to call the battery. Instead I found myself talking to a man with a different voice. He wanted to talk about US cities and major league baseball teams. It dawned on me that I was actually carrying on a conversation with a Jap. So I asked him to repeat that days password which was Hollywood. Try as he could he could not pronounce the word. Even at 19 years of age I had already had a extremely trying day, so my angry reaction was not too polite was, "Get the hell off my phone you son of a bitch." The phone then went silent and I reached the battery. During our stay at this position other then the ill-fated assault day the infantry lost 1 to 3 men a day by enemy sniper fire.

The next day our officer had me go with him several miles to the east next to the ocean just north of Yonorbaru. Scouting for another new Forward Observer position. This sad eventful trip is described in another writing.

This short account of the flag story episode is impossible to describe in full detail. Conditions at the front consisted of cold C-rations, sleeping in mud, no water to wash with. Being alive each day was more important than all those. In truth, I had one bath from an Okinawan well in the 40 days on the front lines until I was shot my machine gunfire on May 10, 1945 at a place later named **Death Valley**.