

A Soldier's Story Read to the Athenaeum Society, Hopkinsville, Kentucky
December 4, 1997 by J. Daniel Kemp

As a new member of the Athenaeum Society (and not having the courage to attempt a paper on a deep and philosophical subject like most of the well-researched and well-reasoned papers I have heard over the past year!), I have chosen an easier subject, the research and writing of which have been interesting to me and hopefully to you as well. This paper is an exercise in oral history and is based on interviews with a World War II veteran, now eighty-three (83) years old, who participated in the Okinawa Campaign in the spring and summer of 1945. The paper is written in the first person and contains the personal recollections and observations of the interviewee.

A SOLDIER'S STORY

I was born January 29, 1914, in rural Western Kentucky. One of my earliest recollections at age 4 is having watched a dummy with a sign tied to his neck reading "Kaiser Bill" being dragged behind a horse drawn hearse around the Court square in my hometown at the end of World War I. Growing up as a farm boy, I gave little thought to serving as a soldier in another world war since our country had just completed the "war to end all wars".

I had received a considerable amount of military training participating in one month summer camps at Fort Knox, Kentucky, from 1931 through 1936 as a part of the Citizens Military Training Camp Program, which was begun after World War I. While I did not particularly enjoy soldiering for the sake of soldiering, I was grateful for the

opportunity to get away from the farm and its excruciatingly long hours of hard labor for a month each summer and also to make a little cash money, a commodity in very scarce supply in those years. It was during one of these summer camps that I received signal corps training which later may have caused the Army to send me for specialized schooling as a code clerk.

I was drafted in 1943 while working as a welder at a shipyard in Evansville, Indiana. I was a lead man in charge of eighteen (18) welders and could have obtained a permanent deferment because of my job. However, when I returned home for a visit and noticed that people wondered why I was not in uniform (and I was a little embarrassed about it), I decided not to apply for a deferment and shortly thereafter was drafted.

After basic training and three (3) months of signal corps school at Camp Crowder, Missouri where I learned the military occupational specialty of a code clerk, I was sent to Camp Picket, Virginia and then Fort Bragg, North Carolina where I participated in a major training exercise. I got a glimpse of the horror and danger to come when I witnessed an airplane loaded with paratroopers catch the parachute of a large gun, which had been dropped from another plane above, flip over, crash, and burn in front of my eyes. I will never forget the image we saw the next morning, steel helmets on skulls totally burned of all flesh.

In late February, 1945 I said goodbye to my wife and traveled across country by train to Seattle where I and five thousand (5,000) other men boarded a troop ship bound for Okinawa in the Pacific. I, like most of the other men, did not know much about Okinawa but later learned that it was a part of the Okinawa group of some fifty (50) islands with the largest of them being about sixty (60) miles long and from two (2) to eighteen (18) miles wide located not far south of the Japanese main islands. Okinawa was the obvious staging area for an invasion of Japan which our military command planned for the fall of 1945.

The six (6) week trip across the Pacific began uneventfully but then three (3) days out of Seattle, we hit a storm and the ship began to roll and pitch violently. I was proud of myself for not getting sea sick but then I went to the head where I saw hundreds of guys everywhere puking their guts out. I promptly got sick myself and underwent four (4) days of total misery puking violently, unable to keep anything on my stomach. The ship was a depressing place with bunks stacked six (6) high and five thousand (5,000) men crammed together on their way to potential mutilation and death on a Pacific island.

The Okinawa invasion began on Easter Sunday, April 1, 1945. My ship stayed ten (10) miles off shore and we did not go in until the third day. Because of the potential for kamikaze air attacks, our ship was unloaded at midnight far off shore in pitch black. No lights of any kind, not even a cigarette was allowed. We climbed

down ropes over the side of the ship and when we got to the bottom of the rope, marines standing on the bow of the landing craft (which was heaving and pitching with the rather large waves) would catch your ankle and tell you to wait and jump when they said jump. If you jumped at the wrong time and missed the landing craft, it meant certain death by drowning because we carried our rifle and heavy packs which caused those soldiers who did miss the landing craft to sink like lead to the bottom of the ocean. No attempt was made to save any of those who did not jump successfully.

We encountered no Japanese resistance on landing in our landing craft boats because the Japanese had elected to withdraw into the interior of the island where they built very elaborate underground fortifications in caves which were in abundance all over the island. Our battalion was scattered for three (3) or four (4) miles up and down the beach and we had to immediately dig fox holes and sit in those holes until daylight, a long and fearful wait. Our first job, after getting our battalion organized and moving inward, was to pick up dead Japanese for burial. Japanese bodies were littered everywhere. We picked up thousands of corpses and stacked them in trucks like stove wood. Dead and wounded Americans had already been removed by earlier U. S. forces, but the Japanese were left to lay and rot until our reinforcing unit arrived. Bulldozers dug long trenches and the stinking Japanese bodies were dumped in and covered up.

An acquaintance in my company named Bradley had worked as a jeweler before the war and he made good use of a jeweler's kit he had brought with him. We were somewhat aghast but yet amused as Bradley picked gold teeth from the mouths of the dead Japanese adding to a small cache of gold teeth which he had in a small sack. The Nazis were not the only ones to try to enrich themselves from the war's victims.

Our work was occasionally interrupted by the spectacle of Japanese airplanes flinging themselves at American ships, all within visibility of our location. In fact, the primary offensive weapon the Japanese had left by this time was their air corps of suicide bombers and they used not only airplanes but wooden gliders which only had enough room for a bomb and a man. In all, thirty-two (32) American ships were sunk and sixty-one (61) others were so badly damaged as to be out of the war as a result of kamikaze attacks during the Okinawa battle.

Knowing how desperate and suicidal the Japanese were contributed strongly to the general dread among American GIs for the anticipated invasion of Japan. Life meant nothing to them, and it was apparent many of them did not mind dying for the Emperor and they preferred suicide to disgrace.

It did not take us long to also realize that we were up against a tough and inhumane enemy who had no respect for human life or dignity. It was the job of the signal corps to keep telephone lines intact from the front to the rear echelon. These telephone lines would be laid along the ground and camouflage would be attempted

where possible. However, the Japanese would find the wires, cut them, and then wait in ambush for a hapless signal corps repairman to come to repair the broken line. It was better to be a machine gunner than a telephone line repairman. It was not unusual to find a ambushed repairman tied to a tree with his tongue and penis cut off and his penis sticking in his mouth. The Japanese clearly believed in torturing a man to a slow death and wanted these visions of horror to play on the minds of the other American GIs.

After getting a full dose of the Japanese torture tactics, it became very understandable that otherwise civil and friendly Americans could enjoy killing Japanese soldiers as if they were rats. One of my most unforgettable images from the Okinawan experience was one afternoon when I sat on a hillside and watched an American GI with the flamethrower smoking a Japanese soldier out of a hillside cave and then blasting him with a flamethrower after he ran out of the cave. The American ran after the Japanese soldier pouring the napalm to him and laughing his head off. It is hard for the ordinary person to imagine one human being intentionally burning another alive and finding it very funny. But that is what war does to people.

Guard duty was an essential element of our daily existence. We would walk a post back and forth and meet a partner at a particular point. The Japanese who were holed up in caves and even Okinawan subterranean burial tombs would come out at night seeking food and an opportunity to kill American GIs. I had a close call when my

guard duty partner, a big Pollock from Michigan named Joe, started yelling "Jap!"

"Coming your way!". I never saw the Japanese soldier until Joe had already shot him fifteen (15) or twenty (20) times. Joe was rather proud of himself, and we referred to him as "killer" after that! I was proud of him too.

My friend Bradley learned the hard way that guard duty was important. I came into the tent one day and Bradley was sprawled on his bunk. I said, "Get up man, you have guard duty in 10 minutes!" He said, "Aw, I can't see it today!" He dug a hole and filled it up for 2 days with an M.P. with a shot gun standing over him!

On June 19, 1945, near the end of the Okinawan battle, the American commanding general, Simon Bolivar Buckner, was killed and was replaced on June 23, 1945, with General Joe Stillwell. Buckner was regarded as a "show off" by the GIs and they did not mourn his death nearly so much as they mourned the death of war correspondent Ernie Pyle, the victim of a sniper on Okinawa just before the war ended.

Shortly after General Stillwell arrived to set up his headquarters, I was given the job of working as a coder-decoder at 10th Army Headquarters. Top secret messages were actually supposed to be encoded and decoded by an officer. Enlisted men were not cleared for top secret information. However, because the encoding and decoding process was intricate and difficult, we had very few officers who had mastered the skill. We had five (5) code machines which looked like slot machines with wheels

which could be rotated and changed. We changed the settings every twenty-four (24) hours in order to prevent the Japanese from understanding a message.

Since personnel who understood the encoding decoding process were in short supply, I was allowed to encode and decode top secret messages although I was a buck sergeant. This gave me an opportunity to meet and get to know General Stillwell who was common as dirt, didn't care how sloppy you looked, and was very highly regarded by the GIs.

It was well known that General Stillwell hated General McArthur's guts and the feeling was mutual. Therefore, I was not totally surprised on one occasion when I took a message from General McArthur in to General Stillwell which he quickly read, showed his total disgust, and then even more quickly penned a response and handed to me for coding and sending out. I looked down and the message said simply "Go to hell!" "Joe". I looked at a grinning General Stillwell and said, "Is this it?" He said, "Yep, that's it!" I then dutifully coded and sent out the top secret message to General McArthur reading "Go to hell!" "Joe".

From the messages coming in and out, I knew three (3) weeks ahead of time about the planned dropping of what General Stillwell referred to as a "super bomb" which they expected might end the war. I knew the date of the Hiroshima bomb as well as the targets. Interestingly, Nagasaki was not the first choice for the second

bomb. The bombers were diverted to Nagasaki after the first choice target was too heavily clouded.

Of course, I could not divulge anything about the "super bomb" which might bring an end to the war although I mightily wanted to. Later after the first bomb was dropped and I informed some of my friends somewhat smugly, "I knew about it three (3) weeks ago", I got a good cussing. But General Stillwell had impressed on each of us in the strongest of terms that we must keep our mouths shut about the "super bomb".

I get really aggravated when I read and hear so-called experts saying now that it was unnecessary to drop the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and even more unnecessary to drop the second bomb on Nagasaki. I can tell you in no uncertain terms that I believe the dropping of these two (2) bombs most likely saved my life along with the lives of thousands of other American GIs who would have died invading the Japanese main islands. To a man, I believe those GIs who served with me on Okinawa agreed with Harry Truman's decision to drop the bomb, and I am certain they have and will carry those strong beliefs to their graves. I recall battle-hardened American Infantry soldiers telling me they had seen enough and they would kill themselves before participating in an invasion of the Japanese main islands which they knew would be a fight to the death. War is exceedingly hard on the human psyche, and there were some American GIs who committed suicide, unable to cope. I remember one man in my company who

committed suicide, Japanese hari kari style, by disemboweling himself with a bayonet only a few days before the war ended.

The invasion of Okinawa cost the lives of more than twelve thousand five hundred (12,500) American sailors, soldiers, and aviators with more than thirty-six thousand (36,000) wounded. There were more than one hundred thousand (100,000) Japanese killed with only eight thousand (8,000) prisoners taken by the time the Japanese were subdued. I believe these numbers are only a drop in the bucket compared to the amount of dead and wounded which would have been suffered by both sides had an invasion of the Japanese islands been required. I also strongly believe that such an invasion would have definitely been required were it not for the two (2) atomic bombs which finally gave those in Japan who wanted peace (including the Emperor himself) the courage to stand up to the military elite which was bent on the virtual suicide of the entire nation.

August 14, 1945, the day of the Japanese surrender, was a day and night which were unforgettable. Everyone was yelling and screaming and shooting full clips of bullets into the air. There were tracer bullets everywhere, so many it lit up the entire island. As a matter of fact, some people were killed during the celebration. One unexplained casualty was a young American second lieutenant who had been very unpopular with the troops because he wanted them to shine shoes and would chew you out if you failed to salute. The requirements of a "spit and polish" army were long

forgotten by the months of July and August 1945 on Okinawa. This young second lieutenant, who had been on the island only about 10 days, was found with a bullet between his eyes on the morning after the war ended. No one ever knew how it happened.

After the war ended, my unit stayed on Okinawa until well into November 1945 whereupon we were then shipped to Korea in a large landing ship. I was sea sick before the island was out of sight, and I again puked my guts out for several days while we rode the waves up through the China sea to Korea. I thought we never would get there because we were having to stop often to blow up floating mines. I was thankful for a fat sergeant from Buffalo who was kind enough to bring me crackers and kept me alive during that ordeal. American troops were hurriedly shipped to Korea to prevent the Russians from taking the entire country. We met them at the 38th parallel and that remains the boundary to this day.

In March 1946, I finally got the orders that I had been hoping for. I was being shipped back to the states for discharge. Maybe it was because I was in a good mood but, thankfully I did not get sea sick during the three (3) week ship ride from Seoul, Korea, back to Seattle. All of us had \$150.00 cash when we got on the ship which was all the money the Army would exchange for the Korean money we had in our possession. Crap games commenced immediately. In less than two (2) weeks, one guy had almost all of the money on the ship. I can remember him as a big guy who sat

cross-legged covering all bets. He took the money each night to the ship purser and managed to leave the ship a rich man upon reaching Seattle.

Upon returning to Murray, Kentucky, I then saw for the first time my son born October 28, 1945, who happens to be the interviewer and the writer of this paper.

While the returning GIs in 1945 and 1946 were treated with appreciation by a grateful American public, I believe many if not most of those combat veterans have talked little about their war time experiences over the years. That is because the images of what war is all about are simply too painful to bring into focus again.

** The interviewee was J. C. Kemp who has resided in Calloway County, Kentucky, on his family homeplace farm since 1946.