

Okinawa

BY
Herman Buffington



The following was compiled in 1995-96 after Herman Buffington, a veteran of the World War II Battle of Okinawa, the final battle of that war, went back in 1995 to visit the Japanese island---50 years after the battle.

The information was compiled at the insistence of his family and in connection with a talk he was to make at the Jefferson post of the American Legion. In fact, his wife had questioned him in the 1950s about his war experiences and made notes at that time which also were used in connection with this document. He had been reluctant to assist with the war memoirs until he returned to the island and memories began flooding back.

These are his own words.

This may be a shocking statement: But at one time in my life, I was a hardened killer. I probably killed more human beings on Okinawa in three months than have been murdered in Jackson County, Ga., where I live, in the past 10 or 15 years. I am not proud of this but I do know it was a necessary part of my job.

When I got home in 1946, family and friends thought I was very quiet, and I was. I think that I, as well as many of the other guys, did a good job of covering up what we were really thinking about and saying to ourselves. Besides, it was a little hard to carry on a conversation because we didn't know who had won the football games, who had got married, who had died or what the latest movies were.

We tried to pick up where we had left off and put up a good front. But for me, that two-year experience in World War II is cut deep in my mind and soul and can never be totally covered up.

However, at the insistence of my family, these 50 years later, I have agreed to put down some of those experiences so that my descendants will know something of what it was like for one American soldier in World War II.

UNCLE MELVIN

Before getting into the subject of Okinawa, I'd like to make a few comments about my Uncle Melvin (Fuller).

In the late 1930s, talk of the possible war in Europe was in our local newspapers, on our radios and around our dinner tables. At this time, I was 11 or 12 years old. I had this uncle who had served in Europe in World War I. He had been gassed by the Germans while serving on the front in France.

With all this war talk going on, I became interested in learning what "war" was really like. What did the soldiers do on the front line?: Where did they sleep? What did they eat? How did it feel when they had to shoot another person?

So I decided to talk to Uncle Melvin about his war experiences, even though my parents had cautioned us children about bringing up the war subject with him.

After I made the decision to talk with him, it was some months before I got the opportunity. The chance came on a hot summer day. I found Uncle Melvin leaned back in his chair under a big oak tree at the rear of his house. I sat down near him and we chatted a while. I almost backed out of asking him anything. But I was finally able to get out the words, "Uncle Melvin, can you tell me what it was like being on the front during the war?"

I can't remember his first response but I do remember feeling that he didn't really want to talk

about it. So I decided to be more specific and I asked what they lived in on the front, what they ate etc. He answered these questions all up front and it even made sense to me. But when I asked him how it felt to shoot another man, this put a stop to his sensible answers.

All he said to this question was: “We shot the Germans just to see them jump up and fall!!!”

Now, even as a kid, I knew he wasn't being totally honest with me. Even though I really wanted him to go into great detail, he wasn't going to, so I didn't push the subject any further. This lack of details by my uncle is probably still affecting me to this day. You see, I am probably going into too much detail about Okinawa. But don't blame me, blame my Uncle Melvin!!

UNIQUE TIME

When writing or making remarks about myself, I feel ill at ease. You would probably feel the same way. To offset this feeling, I think about the unique time in history in which I have lived and the opportunity that I have to record my memories of some of this history.

I honestly think we of my generation were purposely put on this earth at this particular time to deal with these historic events that were about to unfold. Think about it!! In past centuries, when great historic events came along, there were also people who could handle the problems.

So without a doubt in my mind, I feel we were a unique and blessed generation---despite the Depression and World War II. We have lived in “the best and the worst” of times of any generation in this century. (The above words were penned by Buffington long before Tom Brokaw wrote the book, “The Greatest Generation”.)

Another first from this generation's leadership: In many past wars, the conquerer of the conflict would strip and loot everything worth having from the defeated country and send it back home. The defeated country would become the property of the conquerer and the conquered people had to get their food and shelter the best way they could. Many thousands would die of starvation. This generation of Americans, and her Allies, did the unbelievable for their enemies, Japan and Germany. First of all, the U. S. and her Allies demanded an unconditional surrender. They didn't make the same mistake they had made in World War I by signing a peace treaty that didn't allow the Allies to occupy the defeated nation. Germany, therefore, rebuilt its industrial and military power and then started World War II.

After World War II ended, we also continued to “kill” the citizens of Japan and Germany---we “killed” them with kindness. We rushed tons of food, clothing, blankets and other items to the defeated. We furnished millions and millions of dollars to restore the bombed-out cities. By “killing” our former enemies with kindness, they are now our friends and have been for more than half a century.

Another first for this generation.

TWO 'INVASIONS'

I have now been on two “invasions” of Okinawa, the first one in 1945 and the second in 1995, 50 years later. Now if you should ask me which one I liked better, it would obviously be the last one.

In fact, I liked the latter “invasion” so much, I think I’ll write our Joint Chiefs of Staff and recommend they use this type of “invasion” if we should have to invade another country in the future!

But more later about these two “invasions”.

I WAS 18

My part in the war started in 1944 when I was 18. It seemed that one day I was a kid working summers in a cotton mill, having a pretty good time for myself, and the next thing I knew, I was a battle-hardened soldier, tired and feeling 50 years old.

Of course, it didn’t happen quite that fast but it did happen within a few months. But I wasn’t the only one and my story probably differs little, excepting locale, from that of thousands of other men who served as front-line combat soldiers in World War II.

I turned 18 on May 7, 1944 and the war was nothing new. It had been going on nearly three years. We were gaining on most fronts and I wondered sometimes if I’d actually see combat duty. But when I turned 18, I knew it wouldn’t be long before my turn would come. The draft started at that age.

I was working at Pepperell Mfg. Co., Lindale, Ga., south of Rome, at the time and living in a hotel in Lindale. My parents lived some 16 miles away, in Texas Valley, Floyd County.

Going home one weekend, I found the draft board notice. In three weeks, it said, I would report to Atlanta’s Fort McPherson for a physical examination. Deciding there was no point in waiting, I went immediately to the draft board office and asked if I could volunteer and go on earlier. So I found myself going for preliminary exams in Atlanta in the middle of June. The physical went pretty well except that they kept checking my heart and found it was on the wrong side... yes, I said on the “wrong side.” It was on the right side. The doctors said it was unusual but the heart itself was normal.

Then came a short stay at home before actually going into service on Aug. 3, 1944. When the day for departure came, a big group of us draftees met at the draft board office on Second

Avenue in Rome and then walked en masse on the sidewalk to the bus station on West Fourth Avenue. (See list of this group in back of book).

We got aboard two special buses and rode to Atlanta. Army buses met us at the Atlanta bus station and it was there that Army routine started. We were really in the hands of Uncle Sam now, we learned.

“Keep your d_____ hands out of the window,” we were told as the bus eased through Atlanta. “Sit up straight. Stop your yelling and act like men.”

Ft. McPherson soon came into view. Barracks. Processing. Physical examinations again. The thing that really stands out in my mind about those next days was waiting in line half a day to eat. I was soon to learn though that that was everyday routine in the Army.

They said we were to be shipped out for training. They couldn't tell us where to but I happened to run into a sergeant who was an old friend of the family. “I can't tell you where you're going,” he told me, “but you won't be more than 100 miles from home.”

BASIC IN ALABAMA

Before finally leaving Fort Mac in Atlanta, however, there were some pleasant moments---ball games, a movie, etc.

When the day came, we took a troop train headed to the new training post. It turned out to be Ft. McClellan, Ala., near Anniston, indeed well under 100 miles from home.

Trucks met us and we soon found ourselves established in wood huts. One of the things we were to learn during the first few days was how to dress properly, Army-style. At that time, we wore leggings, somewhat like those worn by World War I soldiers, and after a number of falls, I discovered that when you put them on in reverse, the hooks rub against each other inside your calves and you sprawl! I did just that, about 10 times, while trying to go to reveille.

This was basic training. We got chewed out. We marched, hiked, sweated, cussed, moaned, groaned. My ankles swelled so big I couldn't get up and down without help during the five and 10-minute breaks. This lasted only about a week, however---the swelling that is. The other seemed to have no end. Interspersed with the hiking, marching, cussing and moaning, we did have a movie or two and then went into nearby Anniston, Ala. a time or two. After six weeks, I finally got home for a weekend.

(Among those I took basic with were Harry Battle, with whom I had gone to Armuchee School, Jack Dempsey, Quinn Simpson, Alfred Hartline and Jesse “Stumpie” McKellar, all of Floyd County, my own home county).

Independent and inexperienced kids that we were, one Saturday afternoon at Fort McClellan we refused to pull targets on the firing range. Another unit was supposed to have done it and we reasoned that they, and not we, should do it. After being threatened with court martial, we pulled the targets. On the hike back to camp, we acted nothing short of ornery. We slung our arms about. "Straighten up," we were told, "and march at attention." We refused. So the non-com reported us at camp. We were marched all night long. Every hour, they'd stop and ask if we thought we could do better. They got no answer. Next day, we were confined to the company area, marched some more, had details all day and had our passes cancelled. The company commander also gave us a much-deserved lecture. Their aim was to make soldiers out of us.

Somewhere along the way, they wanted a certain number of us for paratroopers and several of us volunteered. More examinations. I was underweight for parachuting, however, weighing only 140 pounds.

After 17 weeks, basic was behind us. In early December, a nine-day leave signaled the end---and the beginning.

CHRISTMAS 1944

With Christmas just around the corner and my leave over, I left home, having no idea when I would get back. It seemed likely I was headed overseas somewhere. My brother, Claude, and some others in the family took me to Anniston, Ala. where I took a 10 p. m. civilian train headed toward California. A going-away Christmas gift from the family was a watch. It was still running when I came home from overseas and even lasted a few years after that. (My wife later had the watch, and its story, framed).

Among those getting on the train with me at Anniston was McKellar, the Shannon boy with whom I had taken basic and whom I was to run into from time to time in the Pacific---and whose memorial service I would attend when I returned home. He was one of the unlucky ones. We weren't in the same outfit---I think he was in the 77th Infantry and I understand he was killed by our own artillery, "friendly fire."

I don't remember whether Quinn Simpson was on the train going West but he was in basic with me and he was another of the unlucky ones. I happened to become acquainted with some of his family in the early 1960s when we lived in Summerville....and I learned then that a nephew had been named for him.

GOING TO CALIFORNIA

On the way to California, we stopped briefly in New Orleans, La., changing there to another civilian train. This one was more interesting---it included two carloads of WACs (members of the Women's Army Corps). But it was crowded. People slept in the aisles. Out in Texas

someplace, they stopped the train and put off all the civilians. It was war-time and the soldiers had to get there, the officials said. But the civilians didn't take to that too well.

Christmas came and went...on the train in Texas. Some slightly glamorous movie star was aboard the train and tried to cheer us up but I can't remember her name.

Our destination was Los Angeles and there we had a stopover of several hours and visited the famous Hollywood Canteen. Fort Ord, Calif. was the next stop. Two weeks of training took place there. Because I was an alternate, or replacement, I wasn't among those called early. But the call did come and I headed by train for Washington state. Harry Battle also was on this train.

Fort Lewis, Wash., outside Seattle, was our next stop. Among the first duties I had at Fort Lewis was pulling KP (kitchen patrol) and guard duty. While I was on guard duty we had some interesting events to occur. Some Army guards had gone into the WAC barracks so new guards had to be put on duty and I was chosen. We had quite a time keeping soldiers out of those barracks!!

There were rumors of our being shipped to Alaska or Hawaii. During the week or so at Fort Lewis, I visited in Seattle and found it the roughest town yet. Fighting was everywhere. People were sleeping in the cold streets. The city was full of servicemen and many of the fights were between men of different services. Four of us went into a place to eat one night. A group of Marines came in and before we knew it, a brawl was underway, with belts, buckles and steak knives as the weapons. We moved our table back and continued eating.

But much of the time at Fort Lewis was spent on KP or watching movies.

It was still January and the time had come for the real shipping out. About 2 a. m. one morning, we were ushered down to a troop ship. It was a new Kaiser-built ship, they said. The Red Cross was on hand with food and coffee. On board, we went to bed, buckling ourselves in. The ship moved out before dawn. I woke up sick. The sea was stormy. Going to the latrine, I found it full of guys in the same predicament as I. The odor was terrible. Back at the sack, I soon found myself being, of all things, ordered to KP. I just refused. A threat of court martial ensued.

"There is no one to do it," the guy said. I impertinently told him he looked like he was in good health. He said, "Okay, soldier" and a few more things and pretty soon I found my heaving body down at the galley. Unable to do anything more, I crawled under a sink and lay down in the filthy water on the floor. The guys there didn't report me. I stayed under the sink all day and that night crawled back up in the sack. Next morning, they said more KP. I went back under the sink. Those Navy guys were pretty nice, I'll have to admit. I couldn't do more than lie under the sink and they kept quiet. The more I stayed in the filthy place, the filthier it got. Covered with the wet, vomit-filled water each night, I'd crawl back up to the sack. The third day, a Navy guy said I'd die if I didn't do something. He gave me some orange juice and crackers. The fourth

day I made it back a little better. Pretty soon, I was able to help out in the kitchen and most of the rest of the trip I did KP.

INTERLUDE IN HAWAII

We hit Hawaii early one morning, going through the “sunken city”----Pearl Harbor where the war had started. It was full of half-sunken ships and we called it “the sunken city”.

There was a delightful fragrance about the islands and an Army band met us. I found I had almost completely lost my land legs and so I did a bit of rocking and rolling when I got off the ship. We were housed in barracks and played ball, saw movies, went out on the town, saw a Russian opera and had a little training. We thought that maybe we were going to Alaska. Some said we were going “down under”---maybe to Australia.

TO SAIPAN

The day for departure came too soon and, with a band playing, we shoved off. It was a different ship from the one we had come over on. After days and days at sea (I didn't get seasick this time), we and the others in our convoy reached Saipan in the Mariana Islands, near Guam and Tinian. The island was green and there were dead Jap bodies all about. The island had only recently been wrested from the enemy. We loaded on trucks and went inland on a good road for some five miles or so, the elevation climbing steadily. But there were jungles on either side.

The tent camp was on a mountainside. We were the first troops to set up in this particular camp and mopping up operations were going on not far away. The main thing on the island, from a military standpoint, was the big airstrip. It was eight or 10 miles from our camp.

Pretty soon, we found ourselves pulling patrol. Twelve or 14 in a group would roam through the jungle and check caves, looking for Japs. I saw no live ones. This was daytime duty only. At nights, special care must be taken. A guard accompanied us from the tents to the latrine. No lights were permitted. Battle, Simpson and Dempsey were among my group.

Sometime after we got established on Saipan, movies were started. Pretty soon, we discovered there were some visitors at the outdoor theatre---Japs. Some were caught.

Marines and the 27th Army Division were south of us, ready to hit some other beach. The Japs sometimes dropped mortars on them.

Our camp grew and by the time I left, it was 10 times larger than when I had arrived.

Word came one day that the Marines had shipped out from Saipan and we thought it was to Formosa (Taiwan). They actually hit Iwo Jima.

WE SHIP OUT

Shortly afterwards, we loaded on a ship and this time we were certain it was to Formosa, the Chinese island which was then in the hands of the Japanese. There also was a rumor that we would invade southern Japan on Easter Sunday. During a month on board, we were taught about such things as Japanese living habits and currency.

OUR DESTINATION: OKINAWA

Some 15 days out, we were assembled in the ship's galley for the first of many briefings that would take place in the next few days. At one point, we were told our destination---Okinawa. Most of us had never heard of it. After we got back to our quarters, the first question most of us had was, "Where in thunder is Okinawa?" Later, one of our guys was able to bribe one of the sailors out of a map, a map which showed Okinawa 's location as being 350 miles off the southern tip of Japan proper. It was in the Ryukus Islands.

We had been told that we would be in the eighth to tenth wave of the invasion. The date wasn't mentioned and the meeting was kept brief.

KAMIKAZIS

Finally anchoring off the mid-area of the west side of the island, a couple of weeks before Easter, we saw many Jap suicide planes---kamikazis. Our convoy was huge by this time, having assembled in mid-ocean. The Japanese-held island was undergoing a heavy bombardment when we arrived and this continued for several days while we looked on.

While we were waiting to invade the island, I was among those chosen to pull guard duty on the ship---they had guard duty on the main deck 24 hours a day, keeping men off the deck. This was a troop ship and they didn't want the Japs to know that. All the troop ships were under a continuous cloud of smoke so they could not be seen by the Jap suicide pilots.

One night I was pulling guard duty from 8 to 10 p. m. at the back door of the ship, near one of the big guns. These guns weren't firing at the planes. They didn't need to, with hundreds of ships out there to protect the troop ships. Those other ships were firing anti-aircraft shells at the Japs' kamikazi planes which were zooming in all around us. Flak---red hot pieces of metal---was falling down on my ship's deck and bouncing all over the place. So instead of standing at the ship's back door, which was in the open, but which was my assigned guard post, when the flak started falling I would scoot underneath one of the big gun turrets near my guard post. This was much safer and I could still see and guard the back door.

But a lieutenant, the officer of the guards, came out, obviously looking for me. Finally, I said, "Lieutenant, are you looking for me?" He chewed me out good, saying I had left my post and I could be court-martialed and it would certainly go on my record. He was really all over me but about that time one of the suicide planes came over at a low altitude, maybe 50 to 100 feet high and the hot flak was falling all over the deck. That lieutenant crawled under the turret with me! There was utter silence for a time, until the plane got out of the way, and then I said, "Now, lieutenant, do you understand why I am under this gun turret?" He got up to leave, saying only, "Carry on, soldier, carry on."

EASTER PARADE'

On March 31, 1945, we were ordered to get our equipment ready to disembark by 5 a. m. and to be ready for chow by 4 a. m. We had a big breakfast, including real eggs instead of the usual powdered ones, and, since the day was Easter Sunday, the popular tune, "Easter Parade," was being played on the ship's speaker. It made you plenty homesick. The chaplain told us, "Some of you will never return." I wished then that I had joined the Navy. But I found out later that those guys didn't have it easy either.

Our ship was a long way from the island as we prepared to hit the beaches that Easter Sunday morning. We carried guns, knives and bayonets and it was just dawn when we went over the side of the ship and filled the landing crafts, heading for the long trip to the beaches.

As the landing craft slowly pulled away from the ship, the popular song was still playing. But in a few minutes it began to get farther and farther away. I can remember trying to hang on to every word as long as I could. It was soon out of our hearing...and there was almost total silence on the landing craft, none of the usual joking or laughing by the guys. All you could hear was the humming of the boat's motor.

Our ships put up smokescreens to protect us from the air raids. It took hours to get in.

The actual landing wasn't too rough. We loaded on trucks and rode about a quarter of a mile down the beach and then inland for a few miles to an air strip which had already been taken over by Americans. There we took up positions, digging foxholes and setting up a perimeter around the strip. I was on the south end. Late in the day, some Jap fighter planes landed at the strip, not realizing it was now held by our troops. I saw a pilot get out, realize the situation, reach for his gun and then be shot by our troops. I think that happened several times.

The countryside had pine trees and reminded me of home. I was surprised not to have encountered Japs on or near the beaches. We all were.

I was initially in a replacement company but was soon assigned to the 96th Infantry Division.

It had landed earlier, moved inland and then turned south where it ran into heavy resistance at Kakazu Ridge and had to pull back to take on replacements. We had been following them and now I was assigned to a unit in this division. It was the 3rd Platoon, K Company, 3rd Bn., 383rd regt. of the 96th. Right off, I was appointed first scout for my platoon. My job was to go first, about 50 yards ahead of the others, as we went into an attack. A second scout was also assigned to this platoon. He followed behind me about 25 yards.

OKINAWAN CULTURE

Very quickly, we had a chance to observe some of the Okinawan culture close-up.

This farm family left their thatched roof home, going down a dusty road in front of us, as we were moving in the same direction behind our front line. There was this old gentleman wearing a “Lincoln” high-top hat, walking in front, with the woman walking second in line and the two children in line behind her. The woman had a huge bundle on top of her head.

What makes this story interesting to me is that a couple of our GIs took it upon themselves to change this Asian custom that had probably been established for centuries.

These two GIs ran down the road, catching up with the family. They immediately took the bundle off the lady’s head and gave it to the old gentleman. He became very upset but decided he had better take the bundle. The family continued on down the road for 100 yards or so and the old gent gave the bundle back to the woman. The two GIs weren’t giving up that easily so they again caught up with the family and proceeded to give the bundle back to the old man. He refused to take it. After one of the soldiers slapped him a couple of times, he pulled off his high-top hat and stomped it on the ground. He decided once again that he had better take the bundle. They continued down the road. This time, they got so far away, the old gent felt comfortable in returning the bundle to the lady. The two GIs didn’t pursue the matter any further.

The lesson learned here: You don’t change by force, or in any other way in 15 minutes, a culture that has been in place for generations.

ANOTHER ENCOUNTER

My second encounter with the natives was a few days later when we took a small village from which the Japanese had recently withdrawn.

A few of the thatched roof houses were still somewhat intact. As the first scout, I entered one of the houses. Looking around, I saw several wounded civilians and one wounded Japanese or Okinawan soldier. I remember coming so close to shooting the soldier. But I finally walked

over to him and turned him on his side so I could see if he had any type of weapon under him. He was OK so I let him alone and proceeded to get the ones who were able to walk out of the house. Apparently, the wounded soldier was an Okinawan native as he didn't attempt to hurt anyone. However, a few days later, a GI in another company was killed doing the same thing I had done.

When we got back out in the narrow dirt street, this elderly lady came up to me, bowing as they do, with a small brown paper bag in her hands. She continued to offer me this paper sack. I was trying to refuse it. She insisted so I finally took the sack, looked inside and found it contained maybe 20 to 30 grains of popcorn.

She looked to be very hungry and though I couldn't understand a thing she was saying, I finally came to realize that she was pleading for her life with this last bit of food she had. I took the sack and put it into both her hands, holding them together, so she would get the point that I didn't want her food and that I wasn't going to shoot her. She finally accepted the sack. All front-line troops were issued a chocolate bar for emergency food and I gave the candy bar to her. She was so appreciative and she followed me around as long as we were in the village. As you can guess, I caught it from the other guys who kidded me about my new-found "girl friend." These events took place before we hit the main line of resistance.

ROOSEVELT'S DEATH

The company I was assigned to had taken heavy casualties at Kakazu Ridge just before I joined it and had been pulled back to where we were. A few days later, Kakazu still hadn't been taken and they sent us up. To our pleasant surprise, the Japanese had pulled back, leaving only their suicide squad of snipers to kill as many Americans as possible before they themselves were killed.

This was about April 12 and I remember receiving a message on our platoon radio from the company command post that President Roosevelt had died. The reaction by the GIs to this news was somewhat mixed. Most of us had been on the line then for a few days and understood what death was all about and assumed the government would do the same thing we were doing...that was, when one dropped, he was replaced by another GI. So we knew the vice president would take over as president and things would continue on as usual.

NATIVE WOMAN WITH GUN

I remember that a Japanese machine gun opened up at one village pretty early on. There was popping all around and we were in a field approaching the village. I tried to get up and go forward, but bullets were all about. One of our tanks came forward to help. But the enemy machine gun couldn't be located. Mortars were falling. It turned out that a native woman in a

village house had the gun. We were now at what was called the “Little Siegfried Line” and they said it was better fortified than the one in Germany.

Orders came down for us to take a hill on our right. We were immediately caught in crossfire when I got about half way up this hill. The Jap tactic was to wait until you got on up and then hem you in. We couldn't get back to our line. Some of the men were wounded. It was late day and under the cover of darkness, we finally made it back to our lines. Mortars and artillery shells fell on us all night, but there was no counter-attack.

The next morning we shoved off up the hill again. Yes, I was scared. Some of the guys were cracking up---there was a rumor that some of these fellows thought it would be an easy way to get off the line. I was busy trying to figure out how to stay alive and wasn't worrying about why some went back. I had wanted to see action. But by this time, I'd seen about all I wanted to. There was no backing out now.

We finally took this high ground and were strong enough to withstand several counterattacks.

THE SUGAR CANE FIELD

Shortly after taking this new position, I, as first scout, was ordered to cross a sugar cane field, with most of the sugar cane stalks laying on the ground, and hole up in a ditch on the far side of the field. I was to wait for our unit to get there. As I ran, I saw several dead GIs and by that time I had learned by experience what had happened to them---a sniper was nearby. I thought, “Boy, this is it!” You could always tell when the bullets were getting very close by the sound. When they passed around your head, they cracked like the sound of a .22 rifle being fired near your ear.

The second scout was pretty close behind me. As I skirted across the field, the sniper's shots were getting too close for comfort when I tripped and fell over some of the sugar cane stalks. Seeing my chance, I lay still as though I had been killed by the shots. The second scout hit the ground, waiting to see if I was going to get up. I was carrying a lot of extra equipment, including a bright-colored front line banner 2 ft. wide and 12 ft. long. These banners were used so our airplanes could tell where our front lines were. But I immediately discarded it. I also removed a small camping stove...hoping this would give me more speed when I got up to try making it to the ditch. After a few minutes, I jumped up and ran. The sniper shot at me four or five more times before I reached the ditch and plastered myself up against the bank on the far side. The second scout came right behind me. Shortly, the other members of the platoon came jumping in, along with a lieutenant from another unit. Unfortunately, the lieutenant ignored my warning about standing in the middle of the ditch, where I knew the sniper's bullets had been hitting. The officer was struck near his nose and the bullet exited through his throat. I remember feeling so helpless as the man writhed in agony, his blood mingling with the water in that far-from-home ditch. We pulled him to the side of the ditch, patched him up and sent him back. The last time I saw him, he was trying to make it back across the sugar cane field. I didn't know his name and

never knew whether he lived or died.

We finally spotted the Jap sniper. He was actually tied in a tree on the edge of this ditch and about 200 ft. away. We riddled his body with rifle bullets, he fell a couple of feet and we left him hanging from his perch. I never did know how many of our men we lost crossing the cane field.

Our objective was to move out of this ditch and take a big hill immediately beyond the ditch. At this time, we had been on the front line only a few days. We were young, green and inexperienced. When the order came for us to move out of the ditch, no one moved. As first scout, I was the lead man. The lieutenant came up and asked me what the problem was. I asked the lieutenant, "When I move, will the other guys follow me?" He assured me that when I moved out, they would. One reason I was reluctant is that I had not taken basic with these men and did not know them, not even the lieutenant. As it turned out, they were the best individuals you would ever want to meet and the best soldiers in the world.

So I slowly started, first edging up the side of the ditch to see where we had to go. I moved out and the rest of the unit followed. I ran across an open place for about 500 feet...then went uphill. I went another 300 to 400 ft. up this hill when the Japs opened up with their mortar shells and machine guns. I was able to get behind two big rocks. The Japs cut us up, leaving us with a number of wounded on the battlefield.

The second scout crawled up to where I was and the rocks saved us. Minutes later, the order came to withdraw. The second scout moved out, he made it back but I don't know how they missed him. I ran to the left of where he ran, using those big rocks as long as I could for my shield. Seeing one of our wounded guys on the ground, I grabbed him and started dragging him back with me. As the firing and shelling continued, we fell into a shell hole. I tried to tighten my belt around his bleeding leg wound, then I pulled him out of the hole and we finally got back off the hill and back in the ditch.

We tried again that day to take this hill and several times the next day but were driven back each time.

As usual, at this point we never knew how many were killed or wounded. We were totally exhausted and had only a few men left in our platoon.

A 'HOUSE' LIFTED

Suddenly, after some nine days on the line and still not having taken that hill, we were pulled out. We were pulled off the line because we had lost about three-fourths of our 42-man platoon. Now we were about a mile back of the line and I felt like a house had been lifted off my head. I

pinched myself occasionally to see if I were really alive.

We rested and listened, more intently than ever before perhaps, to the chaplain. We were regrouped, incorporating a number of new men into our unit. I remained as first scout.

After the few days of rest, we went back on the front line. The hill held so stubbornly by the enemy had been taken in the meantime.

We dug in that night outside the village in a place overlooking a meadow. There was a problem of “civilians” coming back through the lines and some of them were enemy soldiers dressed as civilians. So we were ordered to shoot some of these people. (Some Americans, I’m sorry to say, shot children).

‘SURVIVAL INSTINCT’

After being on the front about six weeks, you learned of an instinct you never knew you had. The “survival instinct” takes you over completely. You would do anything to protect yourself and your buddies.

Unlike Uncle Melvin, we didn’t “shoot the Japs to see them jump up and fall.” We tried to shoot them to make sure they were dead. If you missed him, he could be the one who gets you later.

How did it feel to shoot another human being?

The first few days before we got into the heat of the battles, I must admit it was hard to pull the trigger. After that first week, however, they became animals to us---and I guess we became animals ourselves. It became as natural to shoot one of them as it would to shoot a rabbit on a rabbit hunt.

This may be unusual for most front-line GIs, but the shooting of a Jap soldier has never bothered me since the war. I have given very little thought to it. Maybe I should feel differently, but I don’t.

HOME FAR AWAY

You didn’t speak of home or going home while on the front. Before the Okinawa campaign and after the campaign, when speaking of “home,” you actually meant not only your personal residence but also the hometown, the service station where you got your bike fixed and later on, your car repaired...where you went to the movie and the snack bar where you met your friends.

After about two weeks on the line, if you were lucky enough to last that long, the idea of going home was far removed from your mind. By this time, you knew that if you ever went home, it would be one of three ways:

1. In a pine box. (This way would end any problem for the GI).
2. This was the way we all worried about...being shot to pieces and patched together, never being worth anything to anybody.
3. This was the best way out---getting a “million dollar wound” and still being able to live a near-normal and productive life.

You didn't ever think about getting through the battles without getting a scratch and very few did. I know of only two out of the original 40 men and about 100 replacements who didn't get a scratch. As you can see, your odds were not very good!

A STRANGE LOOK

I'll not try to go into a day-by-day description of all the battles even though I do remember many.

As I mentioned earlier, the mental stress of our men dying and being wounded was the hardest part for us to cope with. We later learned that 15% to 20% of the men had to be sent back for what they called “battle fatigue”. If you lived long enough to stay on the front line six or eight weeks, your face and eyes would look strange. Your eyelids were opened wider and the whites of your eyes would become more visible. The pupils of your eyes would become enlarged. It was so gradual that most of us didn't realize we looked like this.

I first became aware of it while in Hawaii, as we were taking physical exams. Some strange-looking GIs came in and I asked the doctor about this odd look. He explained, “Where you are going and, if you live long enough, you, too, will look this way.”

After being on the front lines for several weeks, I honestly think some of our guys lost their lives due to the carelessness this burdensome condition brought on. Some thought it was better to be dead than to try to continue living. The first three or four days on the island, we were lucky enough to have a day or two to adjust mentally to seeing dead Japanese bodies everywhere. But the hardest thing we had to cope with at this particular time wasn't seeing the Japanese dead but it was seeing our American dead. At this early stage, we didn't see American bodies scattered about. Our first sight of dead GIs was when two and one-half ton Army trucks came to the rear with American bodies stacked on them like cords of wood. This was extremely hard for an 18-year-old--and I guess for anyone at any age---to cope with.

You begin to realize this wasn't like the movies---here, the good guys die too. At an age when you thought you were going to live forever, you had to adjust to the fact that you may be killed at any time. This was another tremendous adjustment.

'ON DEATH ROW'

Over the years, I've had a few people to ask me what combat was really like. Unlike my Uncle Melvin, I'll try to compare it to something we all can understand. However, one cannot fully understand it unless he has gone through it.

The closest thing I can compare it to is being on death row in one of our prison systems. You'll have to use your imagination here though: You are an innocent person but have been found guilty of murder and sentenced to death in the electric chair. You have completed the appeals process and the hour finally comes. They strap you in the electric chair, the countdown is finished and the switch is thrown. But nothing happens. The machine has malfunctioned. For two and one-half months, you are taken to that electric chair several times each day, you are strapped in, the switch is thrown---but it doesn't work. However, it continues to work for your "cell-mates".

Just think what a mental wreck one would be at the end of that time. I can't think of any better way to compare it.

Unfortunately for 12,500 Americans on Okinawa, the switch went on and the machine worked! Another 40,000 were wounded.

In combat, it's somewhat the same way: You go into the attack day after day with machine guns, sniper fire, mortar rounds and field artillery shells falling all around you. You look around and many of the guys who started out that morning aren't with you any more.

This is repeated day after day and you begin to wonder how long that protective shield will be around you. I'm sure if you went to the electric chair each day for two and one-half months and it continued to malfunction, the governor would certainly give you a pardon. I received my "pardon" on June 21, 1945 by a Higher Power than our governor....I received one of those "million dollar" wounds. June 21 was the last day of the major campaign.

PRISONERS

At one event, we saw some Japanese soldiers walking across an open field toward us, hands behind their heads, some carrying white flags as though they were surrendering. We set up in a horseshoe stance and let them walk into the mouth of it. One of our soldiers over to the side saw something strapped to their backs. We found that all of them had satchel charges or machine guns on their backs. So we immediately shot all of them before they had the chance to shoot us. It was unpleasant but just something we had to do.

Orders later came down that we could not take prisoners if they were surrendering for no

apparent reason. “Just shoot them” was the word we got. I don’t think it meant take NO prisoners but it was interpreted that way. No prisoners were taken at any time by our unit and none of our guys were taken.

The next day we ran into heavy mortar fire. I was among a group sent across a field to see how many “dead and alive” Japanese we could see. Actually, we were sent out on patrol to see if we’d draw fire from the enemy. We got into a ditch and decided we wouldn’t go any farther. We were aware these officers were watching us with binoculars but we didn’t think they could see us. So when they radioed and asked why we weren’t moving on up, we told them we were pinned down by enemy fire. I well remember their response: “King Three, King Three (for K company, 3rd platoon) if you’re pinned down, why do you move around so freely?” So we moved on out about a half to a mile and then came back.

UNIQUE BIRTHDAY

I had a birthday on May 7, 1945, turning 19. At that particular time, we were behind the front lines, again taking on replacements, but we were still in foxholes.

Our new medic, Ray “Doc” Strenski, had just come up and had replaced me as the youngest man in K Company. He had a “foxhole-to-foxhole radio network” and he would put on a “show” from time to time. It really cheered us up. So on this hookup, he and some guys sang “Happy Birthday” to me. It was certainly my most unusual birthday!

‘BANK ROBBER’

I must tell you about the first and only bank I ever robbed.

The battle for Okinawa’s old capital city of Shuri had been underway for several days. Our unit was moved to the left or east to attack the left side of the town as we fought our way south.

After about two hours, our unit broke through and moved in on the city’s left side. The town had been totally destroyed. Shuri Castle was a pile of rubbles. All I



saw left standing at the castle site were some high rock walls.

We went through the town and I was ready to start digging a foxhole when the sergeant asked me to go back and look for one of our BAR (automatic rifle) men. I found Robert Buskirk sitting on the side of a ditch, exhausted. I took his gun and pack and off we went to rejoin our unit. We decided to take a short cut that went through what had been the main part of downtown. As we crossed the cluttered street, I saw packs of new money scattered all over the street. So I hollered for Buskirk to come over and I showed him the money, suggesting that we fill our fatigue pockets. If we should live through this campaign and get to Tokyo, I said, we'd buy the whole town. So we loaded our pockets with the new Japanese yens and returned to our unit, facing some sniper fire all along.

SOUVENIRS

Very few of the souvenirs I brought back from Okinawa had any historic value. I did get back with a few bills of the Japanese money mentioned above.

And I have a fountain pen which was taken off a dead Japanese soldier. I can't remember whether I had shot him or not. I usually didn't bother with a dead Japanese if I didn't see him fall. The Japs would booby-trap their own dead soldiers.

I have a small Japanese flag and it has a somewhat interesting story. The Japs had been trying to get through our lines all night, usually one or two at a time. In our foxhole, I was the last one to pull watch duty that particular night. The foxhole was close to a two-foot high bank running out to the right of our position. Flares were going off on a continual basis. I looked over to my right and a Jap was sitting there, leaning against the bank. I shot him twice. The guy going off the watch had just stretched out to go to sleep. He raised back up and wanted to know if I needed some help. I told him I didn't think so---I had just shot this Jap over near the bank. My friend got up to look and said, 'I shot him 30 minutes ago. Didn't you hear me shoot?' I said, 'No.'

Anyway, when daylight came, I went over and removed the dead Jap's helmet. That was where they usually put a small flag and I found this flag neatly folded there. I checked his billfold but he had no money, although he did have some pictures. I didn't keep the billfold. He didn't have a watch on. I think he may have had a fountain pen. Earlier, I had put some Japanese rifles in my duffle bag but the bag got misplaced and I didn't get home with them. Souvenirs weren't among my priorities.

After I returned home, I had a chance a time or two to buy one of these Jap rifles but the cost was more than I felt the gun was worth to me. But late in 1978, I came across one at Harper's 5 and 10 in Commerce, where they dealt in guns, and bought one for \$35.

TRENCHES

The next day, our unit moved up. Ahead of us was a steep-sided hill with a plateau on top that we had to take (picture in 96th Infantry Division History book). Trenches were all over the place. There were bunkers in them, we learned. As we got near the crest, a hand grenade battle developed. The enemy would throw grenades down on us and we'd try to throw them back before they'd explode. About 10% of their grenades were duds and wouldn't go off at all. Most of ours were dependable, with a 5 seconds fuse. We'd hold them three seconds, long enough so the Japs wouldn't have time to throw them back down on us before they would explode.

My platoon commander decided that I and two other guys would go over the top and into the trenches to check them out. We were given pistols. I held my helmet up on my pistol and when it drew no fire, I went up over the bank into the trenches. I was looking straight down a neat, well-prepared trench that looked something like a large, long grave. I wondered if one would become my own "grave". I looked for a while and didn't see anything of the enemy. The boys covered us and all three of us got down in the trenches and started crawling through them. We saw nothing in the first and second cross trenches. We got to the third one---and there they were, sitting with guns and pistols in hands---about 20 ft. from us. Some were moving back though, and the ones we saw were waiting to move out. We had no radio and if we had they could have heard us. We didn't know the best way to handle it, so we whispered back and forth about what to do. Finally, we decided to use hand grenades. I was to throw one to the left side and then shoot with my pistol to the right side, with one of us backing up to the crossing at our rear to cover us lest some of the enemy had got behind us.

I threw the grenade and shot away with my gun, scared to death. We had planned to empty our guns and then run back. But one of the boys didn't move---maybe he was too scared. But as the fire was returned, and they still hadn't moved, I ran over both of the guys and got back to our lines first. (Later, I took a lot of kidding about this). The edge of my backpack was hit by the Japs' pistol fire and the shovel in one of the other guy's pack saved his life. All three of us got back okay.

The flame-throwing tanks moved up and sprayed inside the caves with chemicals and set fire to them. When we moved over the hill we found evidence of the enemy's clothing having caught fire from this. Many burned bodies were lying all around.

Another gruesome sight about this time was seeing, through binoculars, when one of our artillery shells hit an enemy soldier and he was splattered just like a swatted fly.

WITH 'INTELLIGENCE'

We had "intelligence units" and about this time they wanted me and two or three other guys to

go with them into a village which hadn't yet been taken.

The Japs let us get all the way into the town without shooting at us. We looked in some of the houses, the lieutenant gathered some info and we eased back out. Then the enemy started shooting at us from all directions. We jumped into a ditch and waited until some tanks came in and with artillery mortar fire helped us get out. We were lucky to have been missed by all that gunfire. The village was destroyed and we went through it later without any problems.

Later, we crossed a field and moved to an open area. No ridges were close. We were walking closely together and got chewed out for that. The Japs threw artillery on us and some guys were hit. Our lieutenant got some shrapnel in his right temple and he went beserk. We threw him on the ground and got the blood off his face. He had a small wound in the temple and I pulled the metal out. He was OK.

BUZZ BOMBS

A short time later, we went into a rather level area. The Japs started throwing buzz bombs at us. They were cutting huge holes in the ground, creating an earthquake-like effect.

We started digging our foxholes and put covers on them---making the covers from timbers of old buildings and putting soil over that. The dirt was loose from buzz bombs which had been hitting the area and this falling dirt on our covers helped protect our group.

We had been pinned down most of the day by these buzz bombs and more particularly, by sniper fire. The sniper was close and kept shooting into our foxhole. By late afternoon, we were getting thirsty. Sgt. Boals ordered us to draw straws to see who would be the "lucky winner." The GI drawing the shortest straw would take all of the canteens of the group and fill them with water. I LOST!

The water was in a 5-gallon GI can about 5 or 6 ft. away from our foxhole. I used the same old trick that I have referred to before: Putting my helmet on my bayonet, which is on the end of my gun and easing it up so the Jap sniper could see it. We had done this several times during the day. Each time, the Jap shot at it. This time, he did not shoot. My thoughts were that maybe some of our guys had shot him or he had wised up to the trick.

I crawled slowly out of our foxhole, dragging four canteens by a chain that was connected to the caps and the side of the canteens. I got to the big can of water OK. I got on my knees and had started filling up the canteens when he shot. The bullet went about an inch under my hand, hitting the water can just under the handle and near the spout. I jumped head first back into the foxhole, leaving the canteens and the 5-gallon can of water for the Jap and us to look at.

After dark, I went back out and got the canteens and the big can of water, bringing it all back into the foxhole.

Right after the Jap was shooting at me, he hit a guy near our foxhole. The GI must have been standing. The bullet struck a grenade hanging on his ammo belt, exploding it, and wounding him in the side and hip. He was in bad condition when they got him off the front line.

RADIO OPERATOR

By this time, I had been named platoon radio operator and runner. It was my job to carry or send messages from foxhole to foxhole and to the company command post. I was no longer a scout.

All this time, I had been in the 3rd Squad, 3rd Platoon, K Company. This squad was led by a farm boy from Rose Bud, Ark., Willie B. Holeman. He was among the best leaders in the 96th Division. Byron "Bill" Boals of Lincoln, Neb. was our platoon sergeant. He is the one who assigned me to the platoon runner's position. He was a tough, hard guy but fair. He had the intelligence and the demeanor to have become an Army officer. I still get to see him from time to time at the 96th Division reunions and he and his family are our family's close friends. A few years ago, I asked him whatever made him decide to appoint an 18-year-old boy as first scout and he laughed and said, "I wanted to see what you were made of!"

UNEXPECTED VISITOR

I was involved in one event that was most unusual for a frontline rifleman. It was south of Shuri and we were dug in north of an area where a major battle was taking place on the other side of a deep valley. The battle site was known as Conical Hill.

To our immediate left were two tall knobs running about 30 ft. high and 30 ft. long. Our men had been pulling sniper duty on those knobs all day.

The rumor had been going around that we would be receiving night scopes for our rifles. This scope was to allow us to see in the dark. We didn't know we would only get one per platoon, however.

Late in the day, one of our sergeants came to me and said, "Buff, they have issued our platoon one of these night scopes to fit on our rifle. Would you take it, mount it on your rifle, go up on one of those knobs, try it out and let me know how it works."

I went up on the first knob and found a place not being used. I lay down and started to fire

across this deep valley into the mountain on the far side. It was at least a mile or farther across this valley and the night scope was unbelievably good. The Japanese soldiers started to come out of the mouths of caves and cook their rice, or whatever. They thought they were so far away and it was getting dusky dark that they didn't have to worry about the American snipers. They never thought we could see them. When we would hit one, they would pull him off and then come right back and start fixing their food again.

But that night scope brought about a visitor that day which most frontline riflemen never have the opportunity to meet. As I was firing away, I could see out of the corner of my eye several men standing close by and discussing the night scope. In a minute or two, one of the men walked over close to me, kneeled down and said, "How's it doing, soldier?"

I said, "It's unbelievable."

He then said, "Do you mind if I shoot a few rounds?"

I passed the gun to him and he asked me to take his binoculars and let him know how he was doing. To use a phrase we used back then, this guy was no "slow leak". He was good. We must have had 15 to 20 targets and he would move from one to another and occasionally I could see the Japs pulling one off. And I would use another phrase we used on Okinawa: "You just made another good Jap happy, sir." I knew he was some high brass and I would have guessed these men were from the 96th Division headquarters. They would usually come up with five or six aides along and would be in several Jeeps. No officer wore his bars, eagles or stars so you wouldn't really know what rank they were unless you knew them personally.

After this man had fired for eight or 10 minutes, he made some comments about the night scope and thanked me for letting him use my rifle. He and his aides then went off the knob.

It wasn't three minutes later that a sergeant and some of the others came up to where I was and said, "Buff, do you know who that was?"

I said, "It wasn't Gen. Easley but was some other high brass from the division." I'd seen Gen. Claude Easley and he was a smallish man while this man was large.

The sergeant said to me, "You nut, that was Gen. Buckner. He is over the entire 10th Army." In other words, he was over all the Army divisions and all the Marine divisions in the battle for Okinawa.

It just goes to show that it's always best to have good manners in whatever situation you find yourself!

In June 1995, on my return trip to Okinawa, I had the opportunity to show Gen. Buckner's son and daughter the knob where their dad had shot with my rifle.

WASHINGTON'S PICTURE

After the encounter with Gen. Buckner, we moved to our left and took the town of Yonabaru, a seacoast town which had been totally destroyed. There in an old school I saw on the floor, much to my amazement, a big, framed picture of George Washington! Strange sight in a faraway land, a land that had been dominated by the enemy for years. I stopped and hesitated for a moment, trying to figure out how I could carry it with me but a sniper made up my mind in a heartbeat!

On one occasion, I was taking a message to another battalion commander, got lost and almost never found my unit. I ran up a 10'x4' ditch full of dead Japs for about half a mile. There were so many dead Japs that I had to walk or run across on them to get where I was going. Snipers were all about and I didn't want to get out of the ditch. But I was afraid one of those "dead" Japs might not be dead! It was nearly dark when I found my company.

We were dug in in a perimeter. Capt. "Hoss" Mitchell, from Louisiana, (there's much about him in the division history) and his company were trying to take Conical Hill in front of us and they finally made it after several days of bloody fighting. (Actually, other units had been trying for two weeks to take it.)

Once again, I was chosen to go with the intelligence unit and check out some caves in the wall beneath us. We'd usually throw satchel charges in all caves. But intelligence officers wouldn't let us throw charges in the caves they wanted to check out. They didn't want items in the caves disturbed. Once we finished, we'd move on to another cave. All of the caves they wanted to inspect would be in front of our lines.

A BABY BORN

There were only a few of us. We went into one cave full of natives where we had an interesting experience. This group included a lot of women and children. A few wounded Japanese soldiers were about. The women started bringing up and giving us guns and we set the guns and ammunition outside, at the same time trying to get across to them that they should gather up their wounded and move out of the cave. This little dried up fellow kept vehemently jabbering something to us as we motioned to them to get out. We had a big fellow named Tom Turner with us and he slapped the little man who thereupon grabbed Turner's hand and almost bit a plug out of it. This little guy was hanging on like a bulldog. Turner finally hit the guy, knocking him about five feet. Turner then went around shaking and holding his hand! It turned out that the little guy was a doctor and he wanted to tell us that there was a woman in the back of the cave having a baby. We then let them alone and let some of the women, as well as our

corpsman, assist. Later that day, the young woman came out, climbing up the steep mountain, which was about 200 feet from the cave, carrying the baby...a new life in the midst of so much death.

Another interesting incident connected with the cave: There was one little 4 or 5-year-old boy to whom some of our soldiers gave candy. But he'd spit it out every time. These civilians were obviously hungry but this little fellow wanted us to know that he resented us. But we did get most civilians to eat and all were moved back to a civilian camp where they received food, clothing, medical care and a place to sleep.

The enemy moved back. I think that may have been the "Naha line." We gave up a lot of young men's lives to break through this defensive line.

They threw artillery on us but, like their hand grenades, there were a lot of duds in their artillery and some wouldn't explode. Maybe one out of 10 would not explode, but just thump on the ground, bounce up in the air, turn end over end over our heads, making a whoosing noise as they went through the air.

SGT. HOLEMAN

Serving as an 18-year-old on the front lines in the battle for Okinawa, I received some unusual assignments, some more hazardous than others. But any assignment could get you killed in a heart beat. There was no such thing as a safety zone anywhere on the front.

When I was first assigned to the 96th Infantry Division, after getting to Okinawa, I was placed in the 383rd Regiment, the Third Battalion, the Third Platoon and the Third Squad of that platoon which was in K Company.

I mentioned earlier that our squad leader was Willie B. Holeman, a truly outstanding leader. When his squad was assigned to patrol duty, he always went. He did not choose to do like most squad leaders---go part of the time and send the assistant on the other assignments. In fact, if only one of his men was assigned to go on a patrol with another group he would also go.

With that type of leadership, it goes without saying that he had the best squad in the company. His men would support him until their death and a large number of them did give their all.

I can say all this because I was removed from this squad after about the third week on the line and was assigned as the platoon runner and radio operator. In that role, I shared the platoon command post (CP) foxhole with Lt. Post and platoon Sgt. Bill Boals.

One of the most hazardous assignments I received while serving on Okinawa was because of this squad sergeant, Willie B. It happened about the middle of May and I can remember the

details as though they happened yesterday.

I have a drawing by fellow rifleman Ken Staley that was done as these men moved out on patrol that day---they were going out to take the knob, or small hill, in the drawing. This was Willie B.'s squad. They moved out about 3 p. m. and didn't run into any major problems in taking the assigned high point.

But in the late afternoon, the squad was still out there. It was time to set up our defensive position for the night and tie our right and left flanks into other platoons. I remember Sgt. Boals asking Lt. Post if he planned to leave Willie B. and his squad on the knob. He said, "Yes, they didn't have any problems taking it and I don't think they'll run into any tonight."

He asked me to get on the radio and see if Willie B. would need any additional ammo or grenades. The first thing Willie B. asked was, "Is he planning on leaving us out here tonight?" I answered, "Yes."

Willie B. then wanted to talk to the lieutenant. He gave the lieutenant a rough time, stating that he didn't believe he could hold the knob with only eight men if he had a major counterattack. He insisted that another squad of men be sent out to help support his position. The lieutenant didn't want to spread the present main defensive lines any thinner. The platoon sergeant, Sgt. Bill Boals, then began to take the lieutenant to task, stressing the need to tie the flanks together. But the lieutenant didn't give in. I agreed with the sergeant but this private knew better than to get involved in this debate although it didn't take a military genius to know this could be a major mistake.

That night, a moonlit night, the lieutenant pulled the first guard duty---from 9 to 10. I pulled it from 10 to 11 and the situation was still quiet on the knob and I thought maybe the Japs wouldn't try coming through our lines and hopefully Willie B. and his squad would make it without a major fight.

Sgt. Boals went on guard duty from 11 to 12. He heard some sniping shot on his hour of guard. Nothing major. The lieutenant went back on guard from 12 to 1.

'HELL BROKE LOOSE'

About 1 o'clock, all hell broke loose on the knob. The lieutenant got me up since the next hour was my turn to pull watch. The firing on the knob continued to be heavy. The lieutenant stayed up. In a few minutes, he asked me to try to get Willie B. on the radio. I turned the "On" and "Off" switch a couple of times to get Willie B.'s attention. He came on and, in a very low voice, told me he wanted to talk to the lieutenant. His squad was dug in on the very top of the knob, which was 50 to 60 feet high, and maybe 50 feet across, and the Japs were trying to come up from all sides. Willie's men were rolling hand grenades down on the Japs and he was

concerned at this point that they might run out of grenades. The lieutenant didn't take his turn to sleep and I could tell he was very concerned that maybe he had made a big mistake.

By 2 a. m., the fighting was still heavy. Flares were being shot over the knob on a continuous basis. About every 15 minutes, the lieutenant was contacting Willie B. By 3 a. m., the situation on the knob was getting desperate. They were very low by now on grenades and ammo. The lieutenant looked at me and said, "Buff, I hate to do this to you, but would you take several men and get some ammo and grenades and take them out to Willie?" I told him I would. Keep in mind that in getting out of a foxhole at night and crawling around, you were more in danger of getting shot by your own men than by the Japs. We rarely ever got out of a foxhole at night.

The flares continued to go off and where we were, it was as light as day. The word was passed down from foxhole to foxhole that every man was to be awakened and informed of what was about to take place. Another order was for them to collect one-third of their ammo and grenades and pass them up to the CP. The third order was for the two squad leaders to pick two men from each squad and for them to crawl to the platoon CP.

WE MOVED OUT

By this time, Sgt. Boals was awake. He leaned over to me and asked what was going on. I filled him in. All he said was, "You guys are going to get killed." We organized and moved out. I took our backup radio. The field we crawled through toward the knob had something growing in it similar to broomsage.

We moved about half-way out toward the knob and got the greatest shock of our lives. The Japs were crawling all over the place. Occasionally, they would jabber something to one another. We kept crawling very slowly. At one point, they were on both sides of us crawling. We finally got to within 200-300 feet of the base of the knob.

It must have been about 4 a. m. by this time. The grenades and rifle fire had died down somewhat. We stopped and listened for any sound of the Japs. Not hearing anything at the moment, I decided to turn the radio as low as it would go and contact Willie to see what approach we should take in coming up the knob and also to let him and his men know we were coming up.

Willie B. was on the radio with the lieutenant and I have never heard an officer get chewed out by a sergeant such as I heard that night. Willie knew the patrol was coming but he thought the lieutenant was sending one of the other squad sergeants to bring the group out. When he found out it was just some young privates, he was outraged. They went off the air, not knowing I had been listening. I gave Willie a minute or two to cool down and then I contacted him.

He said, "Buff, the Japs are all the way around the base of this knob. Get your butts back to

the main line before all of you get killed.”

I told Willie the Japs had been crawling all around us and it would be worse for us to head back than it would be for us to stay put. I again told him we had hand grenades and some ammo for them and asked which would be the best way for us to come up.

He said, “There are only five of you. There’s no way you can get through that line without all of you guys being killed.”

‘STAY WHERE YOU ARE’

We didn’t want to hear that at that time but later we could see he was right. He again insisted that we leave. He said things had died down some and that they might get by without the additional ammo. I explained that we would stay where we were but if the Japs tried again to attack the knob we would come up. He said, “Stay where you are, if you must stay, but please don’t try coming up here.”

By this time, the firing had become a now-and-then situation. So we decided to stick it out where we were.

The sky began to light up a little and daybreak was on the way. Once again, we got the scare of our lives. The Japs started to leave by crawling out, crossing right in front of us. There must have been about 30 of them. We could certainly be seen, with all those flares going off, but apparently the brush broke up the light on our white faces and they didn’t pay any attention to us. I remind you once again of the “Protective Shield.” It was protecting me 24 hours a day.

When the Japs moved out, I continued to stay in radio touch with Willie. It finally became daylight and Willie and his squad came down to our position. We walked out of the place, along with Willie and his men. He had three men slightly wounded. What a bright morning and what a relief!!

The next night when I went off guard duty and went to sleep in our foxhole, I got to dreaming and talked in my sleep. I was, in my dream, refusing to go out on the patrol to Willie B. The lieutenant was awake nearby, pulling guard duty, so he talked back to me in my sleep. I finally got very upset (still dreaming) and hit him. Sgt. Boals finally got me awake.

Willie B., who died of cancer in 2000, told me many times after this how grateful he was that we were willing to try and save him and his squad.

I saw that knob in dreams for some years after the war.

ANOTHER TRENCH INCIDENT

During a lull between the Japanese defensive lines, the lieutenant asked me to get four or five guys and go out to hill number so-and-so. He said, "This is one of those patrols where you are to count the live and dead Japs."

What that meant was we were to go out and, hopefully, get the enemy to shoot at us--so the battalion or regimental commanders could determine where the enemy was and estimate how many were out there. The high command would explain that this was "probing tactics". All patrols were out in the front of your front line.

This particular event turned out to be everything except a normal patrol.

We got to the hill by going up a valley on its left side. When we got near the top, we started crawling and crawled right up to the crest. I eased up to see if anything was out there. What I discovered was a network of trenches, the type you would have seen in Europe during World War I.

I motioned for the other guys to come on up. We knew there must be Japanese soldiers there some place because they would always leave a squad behind to kill as many Americans as possible before they themselves were killed.

The trench ran along the crest of the hill with other trenches about every 20 ft. running directly in front of us to tie in with another set of trenches crossing the one we were looking down.

We decided to go over. Two of the guys were to go to the point where the trenches crossed, one on the right and the other on the left. This would give us some protection if the enemy started to crawl in our direction or on either side. We got over in the trench and took up positions between the two flank men. The next trench was about 25 ft. over, in front of us, running parallel with ours. I once again raised up very slowly and I thought I saw the top of a Japanese helmet going down. The word was passed on to the other guys. You have to realize that in a situation like this, the person who has his head and shoulders and his gun up above the ground is the one in the best position.

I started to raise back up and then thought better about it. I put my helmet on the end of my gun barrel and slowly raised it up. The Jap immediately shot. I pulled my gun back down. He had shot under the helmet, knocking dirt all over me. Now, we knew that they knew we were there and there wasn't much of a way we could get out. We also knew he was in the shooting position, and if you raised up, that was it.

'HERE I AM, JOE'

In a minute or so, we heard something that we had never heard before. The Jap soldier was calling us. He was saying in broken English, "Here I am, Joe, here I am." He continued this several times.

We briefly got our heads together and decided to throw hand grenades. Hand grenades have a five-second timing device on them. Three of us decided we would try to throw ours at the same time. We would pull the pin on the grenade and let the handle pop, count to 3 and then throw it, hoping it was going into the trench with the Japanese. The purpose of counting to 3 was to run 3 seconds off the hand grenade's timer so the Japs wouldn't have time to throw them back on us. You prayed that the timing device on that grenade wasn't set on a shorter time!

We did this three times. We waited for the Jap to call us again. He didn't and we didn't know if he had stopped playing cat and mouse and started "playing possum." This thing really wasn't funny---we were scared to death. A wrong move on our part and we would be dead.

We decided to throw the fourth time. The two flank men would immediately stand up, in firing position, after the grenades went off. If the Japs raised back up, they would be history. This worked well and we were all in the shooting position in a matter of seconds. But there was no sound out of the Japanese. We didn't see any. Our first thought was that they had pulled back into the network of trenches. We waited briefly and I asked the flank men to crawl through the side trench and see if they could see anything while we stood guard. They crawled over to the next crossing where they could see down the parallel trench where we had been throwing the grenades. Our men came back and reported they had seen three or four Japs who looked dead.

We sent one guy back up the trench again and when he got to the crossing he stood up and shot each Jap. He shot all four and came walking back down the trench.

We then jumped over the crest of the hill, out of the trench and eased our way back down the hill, working our way back to our unit. We had managed to get ourselves out of a tight situation. Once again, we felt that protective "Force" had come into play.

The first few years after I got home, on occasion I would awaken at night hearing that Jap soldier calling, "Here I am, Joe, here I am." An extremely frightening dream.

48 YEARS LATER

Another major event from Okinawa has stayed on my mind all these years.

About June 1, 1945, our company went on the attack. Our assignment was to take the high ground to the left of a village, then take the village. At this point, we were about five miles from

the south end of the island.

The Japs let our scouts and the advancing platoon, which was ours, come right into an ambush from our right and left flanks.

The Japanese were firing rifle and machine gun fire directly into our platoon. The guy on my left had a hand grenade hanging on his fatigue pocket. One of the enemy rifle bullets hit the hand grenade and exploded it. The incident blew the GI's leg off. There was only skin tissue holding it on.

We pulled him into a shell hole where the medic finished taking his leg off. About the time this GI got his leg blown off, there was a guy hit behind us. He was in great pain. I heard him hollering for help. I went to him and pulled him into a shallow ditch. He was hit in the hip and the pain was obviously unbearable. We called for a tank to be sent up. This was something we often did when we had wounded we couldn't get back to the rear. We could strap the stretcher on the side of a tank and the tank could move the wounded out of harm's way.

We took the guy who had lost his leg and put him on the far side of the tank. The guy who was hit in the hip was Robert Stevenson. I can't remember the name of the guy who lost his leg.

We took Robert and strapped him on the exposed side of the tank. I can remember the bullets continuing to ricochet off the tank as we strapped these guys on.

When we finished strapping Robert on the tank and we had started back for cover, it dawned on me that the Japs would continue to shoot at Robert while the tank pulled back down the hill as he was on the exposed side. I hollered to the other guys that we had to go back and move Robert to the other side of the tank where he would be safer. No one wanted to go back and move him. But finally, three of us got to the tank, with bullets still hitting all around us and bouncing off the tank. We got Robert and moved him to the less dangerous side. No one knows how we got by without being killed or wounded.

In 1993, at a reunion of the 96th Division in Reno, Nev., I got the opportunity to see and hear from Robert for the first time in 48 years. This was the first reunion he had ever attended.

He came up to me and said, "You are Herman Buffington?"

"Yes," I replied.

"I'm Robert Stevenson," he said with tears in his eyes. "And I've been waiting all these years to get the opportunity to thank you and the other guys for saving my life."

I told him his name was familiar but I couldn't place him. He said he would tell me an incident which might help.

He continued:

“Do you remember what happened when you fellows strapped me on that tank and the bullets were hitting all up and down the tank?”

I told him I did.

“If you hadn’t got those guys to help you move me to the other side of the tank, I wouldn’t be here today.”

Robert said he couldn’t believe to this day that we weren’t killed getting the two of them on that tank.

Robert brought me up to date about himself. He and the other man were immediately flown to a stateside hospital where he went through several operations and his hip was completely rebuilt. After staying in the hospital some two and one-half years, he was finally able to return home. He finished his education, got married, raised his family and is now retired. The amazing thing about Robert is that he walks straight as he ever did and said he’s in fairly good health for his age. We hear from Robert at Christmas every year now.

'STRANGE EVENTS'

I won't try to tell all of the "strange events," but I do feel compelled to tell some of the most outstanding ones that have cut deep into my mind. I wouldn't have mentioned the following a few years ago out of fear that no one would believe me. I'm not so sure they will now.

It was the latter part of May 1945 and we were behind the front lines taking on new replacements. I was finishing digging our foxhole while the lieutenant sat nearby censoring the men's outgoing mail. I sat down on the edge of the foxhole, taking a rest, when this GI with red hair, and older than most of us---probably 27 to 29---approached. He asked the lieutenant if it was possible to speak with him alone. I started to get up and leave when the lieutenant motioned for me to sit back down. He explained to the GI that he could speak frankly in front of me and the information would go no further.

I could visualize his having all kinds of personal problems back home. But I sat there, somewhat ill at ease, listening. He asked the lieutenant if it would be possible for him to find something behind the front lines for him to do. My first thought was, "Here's a con artist, trying to get out of duty on the front." The unit had received word that morning that we would be moving back up on the line early that afternoon.

The GI continued to push the lieutenant for behind-the-lines duty. The officer went into detail as to why this couldn't be done and if he did, we'd have no one on the front lines to do the fighting. I kept trying to figure out if the GI was sincere or if he was trying to con the lieutenant. But something about his voice would lead you to believe he was sincere. The lieutenant finally told him it was totally impossible.

But the soldier came back again and said, "Lieutenant, you don't understand. If I go on the line this afternoon, I won't live through it."

This comment really caught my attention. As I looked at his face, I could see he was totally sincere. The lieutenant asked him if he would like to speak with the chaplain. But he said, "No." The officer tried to reassure him that under such extreme stress his mind was playing tricks on him etc. The GI said, "No, sir. This is it for me."

He then asked the lieutenant to mail a letter that he had already written to his family. The lieutenant asked if he would like to say The Lord's Prayer with him. They both went on their knees beside this foxhole and said the prayer. The soldier got up, put his helmet on and went back to his squad.

Part of my job at the end of each day was to help gather information from each squad sergeant about the men he had sick, killed in action, missing in action, etc. I made a mental note to watch this recent event to its conclusion.

The lieutenant opened the GI's letter to censor it. The only thing the officer said to me about the letter was, "He's telling his family the same thing he told us."

To make this story somewhat shorter, we did go into action that afternoon and managed to take the hill assigned to us. It wasn't quite as easy as this may sound.

In the late afternoon, I went on my usual round, picking up the names of KIA, MIA and names sent back because of illness. I must admit I was anxious to know what had happened to the guy who had talked to the lieutenant that morning, so I hurried back to the platoon CP. I gave the list that I'd received from each squad sergeant to the lieutenant. He glanced over the list. Since I didn't know the guy's name who had talked to the lieutenant earlier that day, I asked him if "that redheaded guy's name" was on the list. He said, "Yes, KIA." He didn't elaborate and I didn't push the subject any further.

AND MORE

To carry this matter a few steps more: A couple of weeks later, we were moved immediately behind the lines to take on more replacements. This young, stocky GI came to the command post and wanted to talk to the lieutenant alone. The lieutenant went through his comments as he had with the first guy and I stayed put. This guy must have been 21-22 years old. He went through almost the same words as the first guy---about wanting to do behind-the-lines duty etc. It all came down, once again, to the lieutenant asking if he wanted to talk with the chaplain. He didn't. The lieutenant then asked if he would like to say The Lord's Prayer with him.

The GI immediately said, "Yes, sir." Both men removed their helmets and, down on their knees, said The Lord's Prayer. When the prayer was over, the GI reached into his helmet and pulled out a letter, asking the officer to mail it. The lieutenant said he'd be glad to do so but if he wanted to wait, his sergeant would pick it up from him later and see that it got mailed. The GI said, "Lieutenant, I won't be here tomorrow to give it to the sergeant and they may not find it in my helmet."

With that, the young man turned and went back to his foxhole. The lieutenant immediately read the letter. Then he looked over at me and said, "He's telling his family the same story he has just finished telling me."

Needless to say, this type of event raises the hair on your arms. By this time, I was thinking maybe we'd all gone nuts. I couldn't believe what I was hearing and at the same time, with the tone of this young man's voice and the look on his face, you knew without any doubt, that the next day would be his last.

The next day, as expected, this GI's name was on the KIA (killed in action) list.

I've often wondered why I didn't sit down and talk with the lieutenant about those weird events. I guess now that it wasn't that important at the time because of the many wounded and killed, it was accepted as an everyday event. And yet, these particular events did cut a deep area in my mind.

But those two events don't finish this unusual aspect of war that I was involved in.

As we got closer to the south end of the island, four or five miles to the beaches, we had been trying to take this hill for almost all day. We finally succeeded late in the afternoon. Once again, I was digging that protective foxhole. As you can see, we were always digging foxholes, even if we thought we'd be there only a few minutes. This GI, about my age, whom I knew, came up. He was one of the replacements and had been on the line for four or five weeks. If they lived this long, you would get to know their names and I knew this was John Forbes. He wanted to know where the lieutenant was. I explained that the officer and the platoon sergeant had gone to the company CP for a meeting. He looked at me and said, "Buff, will you trade foxholes with me tonight??"

I knew immediately why he wanted to talk to the lieutenant. I told him I would be glad to if the lieutenant gave the OK and asked him to check back later. He was back in about 10 minutes and he showed me where they were digging their foxholes so I could find him when I came down. He left again and I went back to finish digging our foxhole. Another 10-15 minutes passed and he returned.

I said, "Forbes, he hasn't returned yet but I'll be sure to ask him when he does." He said, "That's OK, Buff. I don't want you to ask him. It's not going to matter whether I'm in this foxhole or if I'm in mine, I'm not going to live through the night. I don't know why I thought changing foxholes would help."

We sat down and talked a few more minutes. I tried to use some of the lieutenant's tactics on him, such things as his mind was playing tricks on him, etc. It didn't work. As I think about it, it never worked for the lieutenant either. He said to me, "I appreciate what you are saying...but there's nothing that can be done. It's my time to go and the only reason I came back this time is to get you to see that this letter gets mailed to my family"

He removed his helmet and pulled out the letter and handed it to me. I told him I would see that it got mailed. We shook hands and he put his left hand over both our hands and said, "Good luck to you and I pray that this never happens to you."

I stood and watched as he walked back to his squad. I knew this would be the last time I'd see Forbes alive. This was the third time I had witnessed such a strange side effect of this war. This "force" of knowledge was so powerful that you knew this young man was totally controlled by

it.

The lieutenant returned about dusky dark and I explained the situation to him and told him the guy's name. I also gave the letter to him, saying, "He wants us to be sure it gets mailed."

The officer immediately opened the letter...they were never sealed as everyone knew they had to be censored. He read it over briefly and said, "It's the same story the other guys wrote home about. He's telling his dad what to do with his old car and other personal details."

Much activity took place that night. The Japanese were trying to come through our lines, a few at a time. No one got his three to four hours of sleep. The next morning, I made my rounds to the squad sergeants. Several guys were wounded. When I got to Forbes' squad, there he lay dead. It turned out he had got up to run, helmetless, and one of our own guys had shot him, thinking he was a Jap. Japs had crawled up and tossed hand grenades in his foxhole.

CHILDRESS, BUNDT INCIDENT

There was another incident along this line that I was deeply involved in, but I didn't know about the guy's statement to our platoon sergeant until our 96th Division reunion at Lubbock, Texas in 1995.

At that time, I asked Sgt. Bill Boals if he remembered the attack in which two of our guys by the names of (Carl W.) Childress and (Robert W.) Bundt were killed, along with several wounded. He said he did. These guys were replacements who had been up for several weeks and we'd had a chance to get acquainted with them.

While we were trying to take a big hill, Childress and Bundt were on my immediate right, Childress being about six feet away and Bundt about six feet to the other side of Childress. We were receiving heavy .50 caliber machine gun fire from our left rear. I saw Childress fall and thought he was badly hurt. Bundt was hit a few seconds later and the sound of his helmet hitting the ground caused me to assume (correctly) that he had been killed instantly. The way the helmet hits the ground, with a heavy thud, you could usually tell whether the wearer had been killed or severely wounded.

We advanced another 75 to 100 feet up the hill when the order came for us to pull back. The lieutenant and I went back down the hill, farther to the left of the path we'd taken going up. The Japanese machine gunner was having a field day, wounding several of our men on their way down. The bullets were so close at times that it knocked dirt all over us. In this attack, along with a number of other such attacks we were in...I cannot figure to this day how any of us survived.

When we got back down, I relayed the fact that we had left Childress up on the hill and told

the lieutenant that I was going back up to get him. He wanted me to wait until he could get our units on our left flank to take those machine guns out. But I told the lieutenant that Childress may already be dead and he certainly would be before we could remove those machine guns. He waved his hand, giving me the OK sign.

CRAWLED UP

So I went crawling back up and when you reached a certain height on the hill, the Japanese gunner could see you and he started firing again. It was the same as the first time up, with the exception that the Japanese had only one target now to fire at. The bullets were knocking dirt all over me as I continued to crawl. The best news was he kept missing me. With all the time he had, I'll never know how he could miss me so many times.

As I continued to crawl, I kept hearing something behind me. I finally looked and saw this GI crawling along, just below my feet. I don't remember who he was---I probably never knew his name---but the lieutenant apparently had sent him with me.

We got to the height where Childress was. I reached up and jerked Childress' foot to try to determine if he was still alive. I heard his low moan. I crawled up beside him and removed his helmet. He was telling me in this very low, weak voice to leave him...that we all were going to be killed. I told him we were going to pull him down by his feet. He strongly insisted that we leave him. But I got hold of one foot and the other GI got the other and we slowly started pulling him down the hill. I could hear him from time to time urging us to leave him.

The Jap machine gunner had to be the world's worst shot to continue shooting at us for about 8 to 15 minutes (that seemed more like 12 hours) and still continue missing us. You remember I mentioned this "weird protective force" that no one could see or hear but, believe me, it was there.

We made it back down to the area where the machine gun couldn't hit us. The medic came up to help. He cut Childress' clothes off around the wounded area, the lower part of his body, and soon the Jeep he had called up arrived. Childress was put on a stretcher and the medics started toward the Jeep with him. Childress looked up at me and put his hand out for me to take. I took his hand and began walking alongside his stretcher. He kept saying, "Buff, don't turn my hand loose." He continued saying this over and over and by leaning down close to his mouth I could hear him. I kept reassuring him we would get him to a field hospital soon. We got about 15 ft. from the Jeep when the driver of the Jeep met us. I motioned for him to come over to my side of the stretcher and then whispered to him that I had to get back to the unit but I wanted him to take Childress' hand.

The very instant I put Childress' hand in the Jeep driver's hand, Childress died. I've always wondered whether he would have made it if I had continued to hold his hand.

But getting back to what Sgt. Boals told me in Lubbock about Childress: He said he and a few of the other guys ate breakfast with Childress the morning before he was killed that afternoon. Childress was trying to trade a can of beans, which he didn't like, out of his breakfast "C" ration kit for something he did like. No one wanted to trade with him, Boals said, so he told Boals, "I'll eat it myself and not leave it here for the Japs to get." Boals said he tried to get him to keep his beans and trade later with someone else. Childress, however, looked at Boals and said, "Sergeant, I won't be here to trade it with anyone later."

Boals said Childress then looked up at the hill and said, "This will be the last hill I'll ever have to climb." It was.

Childress was the fourth person that I know of who let it be known his time was up. I will never know how many others felt that they would be killed at a specific time but said nothing about it to anyone. Even those who said something must have felt uncomfortable in telling someone else. I guess you'd call it a premonition. I'm sure it's called different things by different people. Some would call it God's hand. All I know is that I'm personally convinced that this "force" prevails in times of great tragedy and takes control of man and definitely guides him. I think at times this "force" is there to protect him and sometimes it's there to let him know his time is up in this world.

'THE ESCARPMENT' AND NAPALM AIR BURSTS

It seems we were always trying to take a hill...and it's true that that was an every-day task.

But on June 18, 1945, we reached a major point that was called "the escarpment," "Big Apple" or Yaeju Dake. It reached for miles across the south end of the island, running east and west, and was a few miles from the very end of the island. It had a plateau on top around which the Japs had dug a defensive trench. This trench ran around the perimeter of the mountaintop.

This was the site of the last major battle on Okinawa. In places, the escarpment's sides went straight up.

Other units had been trying, without success, to take this mountainside for five or six days. Before our attack, our company had lost so many men that they had to take what was left of three platoons to form just one platoon. At this point, and before this attack, only six of the 135 men in our unit who had been sent in during the April 1-10 period were left, although we, of course, had had replacements on three occasions and we still had some of these guys left. Those six of the originals were: Lt. Post, Platoon Sgt. Boals, Squad Sgt. Holeman, Rifleman Ken Staley, Robert (Red) Buskirk and me. Before our attack, the artillery units started firing smoke shells and these did help but didn't stop the Japs from firing.

Our lieutenant, Post, was severely wounded when we started up the steep escarpment.

We had been bombing and using ships at sea and artillery to soften up the Japs' hold on the escarpment position. Napalm bombs were being used by us, as they had been before on the Japs' strong positions. But what made the difference on this occasion was that the artillery was using napalm "air bursts". When the shell exploded, it would be 25 to 50 feet above the ground.

We knew napalm was a horrible weapon but we didn't really know how hot the explosion was until they used these air bursts.

We were in a position about a mile away when the artillery started to fire these air bursts. The heat was so hot we had to turn our backs to it to keep it from blistering our faces.

After the artillery stopped, we crawled and, using tree trunks, pulled our way up the mountainside. When we got about halfway up, a Japanese machine gunner opened up on us from our right rear flank. I can remember, and can still see, these guys all around me being hit and trying to grab hold of those tree trunks to stop them from tumbling back down the mountain. Mortar shells were falling all around us.

When we got near the top, a mortar shell hit and several of the guys on my left were blown back down the mountainside. I didn't know it then, but 49 years later I learned one of these boys was Sgt. Holeman, the only squad sergeant we had left. He was wounded and stayed in the hospital for several months but I didn't know about it all those years until he happened to mention it decades later.

You would think after using this terrible weapon that no one could possibly be alive up there. And they wouldn't have been if the Japs had stayed there in their unprotected positions. But they would often pull back and go into caves, then come back into their firing position once the shelling had stopped. However, when we first began using the air bursts with napalm, it must have caught them off guard. When we finally reached the top of the mountain, after taking tremendous losses ourselves, we found some Jap soldiers were still in their defensive positions. Some were sitting on the sides of their trenches while some were down in the trenches in the shooting position.

We immediately started to fire at them. We were 25 to 50 feet away. But as we shot, we noticed that they didn't react to the bullets hitting them. In other words, they didn't fall over. They didn't spin around and fall. They just sat there. We immediately noticed the flesh would splatter more so than usual. With no reaction by the Japs to fire back, we stopped firing and assumed correctly that all were dead. We moved quickly on beyond the crest of the mountain to set up a defensive perimeter and got ready for the usual counter or banshi attack. The counterattack didn't come immediately. After things settled down, two or three of us went back to check on these Japs who wouldn't fall when we shot them.

We found a shocking thing: They were “cooked”. The skin would peel off their arms or faces with the touch of your finger. These napalm air bursts had apparently taken the oxygen out of the air and the tremendous heat had cooked the Jap soldiers in their positions. They were still holding their guns in the ready position but they were stone dead.

We now know that the atom bombs, dropped on Japan a few months later, were tremendously hot. However, the napalm bombs did the same thing on a much smaller scale, as we saw with our own eyes.

HELD OFF COUNTERATTACKS

When we reached the top, only 13 of us were left. Within 15 minutes, the only sergeant remaining was killed. He was Jack Cannell. With the help of our mortar section and the field artillery, we managed to hold off two counterattacks.

The only officer we had left was a second lieutenant, Langstaff, who had been assigned a few days earlier to one of the other platoons in our company. By now, we had lost most of our original sergeants, corporals and officers. The only 3rd Platoon sergeant left of our original group was Sgt. Boals. He was leading another group at this time.

In the past, at night we had always withdrawn from any position in which we could not tie our right and left flanks in with other units for protection.

DESPERATE SITUATION

After setting up our defensive position on the plateau, Lt. Langstaff had me radio the company command post. He explained to the acting commander how few we were in number at that site. The order came back down in about 10 minutes: The 12 men would stay on and try to hold this high ground at all costs. We felt like this was a death sentence. We knew, with a major counterattack at night, we would be totally wiped out.

This was another of those nights that we didn't get our normal three to four hours of sleep. Many nights, we did not close our eyes and this was one of those nights. No one slept at all.

We held off several more counterattacks with the help of our support groups which were our field artillery and our mortar squads. No one can imagine the joy of being able to see daylight the next morning.

After Jack Cannell was killed, Lt. Langstaff told Ray “Doc” Stenski, our medic, and me that if he should be wounded and still alive for us not to try giving him blood because we would not be

able to find the vein in his arm. This new lieutenant showed his lack of combat experience the next morning when a colonel from battalion showed up. The lieutenant took him to the very spot where Sgt. Cannell had been killed. We knew the sniper was still out there. Earlier that morning we had put a helmet on the end of a bayonet and eased it up above the rocks and the Jap shot at it. We thought the lieutenant knew this. So our first thought as the lieutenant took the colonel up on these rocks was that he was going to get the colonel killed. However, it was the lieutenant who got shot...he was hit in the shoulder. We pulled him off the big rock and gave him blood through the vein in his arm...probably saving his life! We then let him down the steep mountainside with ropes to safety below.

Now, only 11 of us were left. We immediately named one of our older guys as our acting sergeant. By 2 p. m. that day, they got additional troops up on our right and left. What a relief!!

(A postscript on Lt. Langstaff: We got a newspaper clipping some time after the war, while I was still overseas, telling that Langstaff had met a nurse in a California hospital, proposed to her on a certain park bench at the hospital and had then bought the bench from the hospital!)

WOUNDED

From the top of this mountain, we could see the end of the island, probably two and one-half miles away. The next morning, we jumped off to take a knoll about a mile south of the escarpment. We received some sniper fire and a light mortar attack but were able to take the knoll without any casualties.

There, we dug in for the night. This was June 20, 1945. Late that evening, the Japanese started dropping heavy mortar fire on us, wounding three that night. The next morning, the enemy continued with his mortar attack and we were picking up equipment left by the three GIs wounded during the night. A shell hit and exploded near three of us, no more than five feet away. I got hit in the leg, Ken Staley got a small piece of shrapnel in his back and the third guy, whose name I don't recall, received the worst hit and was moved out immediately. I never have known what happened to him. "Doc" Strenski, our medic, removed the shrapnel from Ken's back with his knife and Ken never left the front lines!

This left five men out of the original three platoons that had taken the mountainside. I can think of only two of us left who had gone on the line in early April. We had now been on the line (in battle) for 66 days.

BATTLE ENDS

The morning of June 21, the Japanese had started surrendering to units on our left. They were not attempting to surrender to our unit. They were well aware that our company was not taking any prisoners and probably had a pretty good idea that we would not surrender ourselves.

From this point, we could see the enemy hemmed up in a pocket on the end of the island. They were going in circles and some were surrendering in droves. They weren't being killed but they were being stripped down to their shorts.

There was a 500-foot cliff on the end of the island and Jap soldiers were jumping off this cliff in droves. Some civilians were doing the same. Women were pushing their children over the cliff...and then, with babies in their arms, they were jumping over. At that time, this did not bother us in any way. We were glad to see the Jap soldiers jumping over. This only meant fewer Japs we would have to kill and fewer Japs available to kill us. However, looking back now, it is sad that the women wasted their lives and their children's lives.

A great deal of confusion was going on. In our area, the Japs were still fighting and 500 yards to our left they were surrendering.

Plans had been made for us to join another unit and take a small village to our right the morning of June 21. The first thing I thought of when I received that "million dollar wound" was, "I'll not have to go into that village."

I found out 50 years later that our group didn't go on the attack in the village that morning, after all. Only a few of the men who had been in our group going up the escarpment were left and they were pulled off the line so the campaign was also over for them.

The Japanese formally surrendered the island the next day, June 22, 1945.

'MILLION DOLLAR WOUND'

I need to explain what a "million dollar wound" is: If you received a wound in the leg, arm or shoulder, or a flesh wound, these were called "million dollar wounds" as most were not life-threatening but would remove you from the front line.

Nevertheless, in my situation, the wound and the burning of the flesh were quite painful for five to 10 minutes, particularly the burning of the flesh. You could hear it like bacon frying! I was losing a large amount of blood so I borrowed the belt of our medic, Ray "Doc" Strenski, to use it as a tourniquet. (I don't know why I didn't use my own belt. Strenski said he didn't think much about it either until after I'd gone. He said he went around for days with his pants wired up! We've laughed about that when we've seen each other since then. In fact, I "replaced" his belt when I took him an Army belt during our visit to him and his family in Green Bay, Wis. in the 1970s.)

TRIP TO THE FIELD HOSPITAL

My experience in going through our medical aid stations on the way to the field hospital was an education. I was put on a Jeep that was equipped to handle up to four wounded GIs. At all three aid stations I went through, still on the Jeep, these young medics were gung-ho on giving me a morphine shot and hell-bent on taking my rifle. I wasn't about to take morphine---nor give up my rifle.

I knew a tourniquet must be tightened and released every few minutes. I would almost come to blows with these medics in my refusal to take the morphine shot. In the last aid station, the medic couldn't take no for an answer so he brought in a doctor to order me to take the shot. The doctor wanted to know what the problem was. I didn't say anything at the time. I just pulled up my pants leg, took off my boot and poured out a bootful of blood...then I told the officer, "I've got a tourniquet on my leg. These nuts of yours want to give me a shot of morphine and you know I'll be asleep in about 15 minutes after taking this shot. If I take the shot, are you planning to send one of these medics with me to loosen and tighten this tourniquet?"

The doctor looked at the medic and told him to get the blood plasma and give me blood on the way to the field hospital. The Jeep driver wasn't aware of this conversation so he pulled out, leaving for the field hospital. The medic came running behind the Jeep, bringing the blood plasma, but was never able to get the driver's attention.

Still in the Jeep, we went to Buckner Bay on the east side of the island, where we boarded a beach-landing type craft, with the front of the ship dropping down so the Jeep could roll right in and unload its patients. I still had my rifle.

After an hour or so, we docked at another location on the island. Once again, I was put on a Jeep. The seriously wounded GIs were put in an Army ambulance, better known to us as "the meat wagon"! We arrived at a field hospital about 4:30 p. m. on the same day, June 21. There was a line of tents, several 100 yards long, joined end to end and three tents across. The grounds along the approaching side of these tents was covered with wounded GIs, along with the native wounded. It reminded me of the "Gone With the Wind" scene in the Battle of Atlanta where the wounded and dying were lying out in the street.

As I was lifted into the tent, once again the medics, in a nice way, tried to take my gun. They could see I wasn't about to give it up, so they didn't push the subject.

As I think back now, they probably had had this problem before and with the look in my eyes and on my face, they decided not to push the point.

In the first tent, I immediately received several shots around the wound. With me holding on to my trusty gun, they took me across to the second tent. Two young surgeons came in and said, "You think you'll need your gun?" I said, "Yes." That was the end of the gun conversation.

They asked a number of questions...what time was I wounded, did I use the tourniquet all day, had I had any blood plasma and so forth.

They debated on whether to give me blood plasma, finally deciding against it. They explained that they must operate immediately and one could easily understand why. They said they couldn't wait for the shots to totally take effect.

With a tongue paddle in my mouth to chew down on, and gripping my gun in one hand and holding on the side of the chair with the other, I had the piece of shrapnel that had lodged in my right leg just below the knee removed. They had some discussion on whether to remove some chipped bone, finally deciding to do so.

I remember the tears running down my cheeks and the doctors saying, "It's just about over." The operation was worse than being wounded, with the exception of that white hot piece of metal frying the meat on my leg.

After they removed the shrapnel and the cooked meat, they gave the piece of shrapnel to me. I looked at it and then threw it away. I don't know why. I'd like to have it now.

THE GUN

I was moved across to the third tent where the medics put on bandages. I was then taken, along with my trusty gun, to a hospital ward in a tent. My hospital "bed" was an old fold-up Army cot with a cloth bottom and an Army blanket for the mattress. It looked great!! As I was placing my gun under the edge of the blanket, the head nurse came back. She wanted to know if they could bring me something to eat. I said, "No, thank you." She asked if I wanted to be bathed or if they could take me to the shower, but I thanked her and said all I wanted at this time was to sleep. She said she understood. Then she added that they would be glad to look after my gun for me if I wished. I thanked her again and explained that I had slept in dirty foxholes with it for three months and one more night wouldn't be a problem. She left, I put the gun under the edge of the blanket and immediately fell asleep.

I slept all that night, all the next day and all the following night. I was awakened on the second day at about 9 or 10 a. m., the same head nurse shaking me awake. She explained they had become concerned about my sleeping so long and didn't know whether I was asleep or had passed out because I had lost so much blood. After giving me a few minutes to get awake and oriented, she asked if they could bring me something to eat. I asked if I could be taken to the bathroom and then get a good shower and some clean clothes.

When I got back to the cot, I made it a point to transfer my Shuri bank money to my clean fatigues.

The nurse again wanted to know if they could bring me something to eat. I asked if they could take me to the mess hall (dining room) and she said it would be no problem. I know that was one of the largest meals I've ever eaten.

The medics took me back to my ward and as I sat down, I felt like the world had been taken off my head. What a great feeling. But that instant, I missed my gun. I remember being so mad I could have beaten the hell out of whoever had taken it. I lay back on my cot to cool off before I did something drastic. But I finally realized that I didn't need my trusty gun any more. I went back to sleep.

That afternoon, the doctors made their rounds through the ward, waking me and doing what became a routine everyday event. I never mentioned my gun being taken by the nurse or someone on the ward's staff and they never mentioned it either.

Looking back, I know the head nurse and her staff were doing their very best to care for all the wounded. But the real reason she gave me so much attention was probably because she was trying to figure out how in the world she was going to get that gun away from me without pushing me to the breaking point. She could not have handled it better. With that rest, I bounced back into the real world and realized I didn't need to depend on the gun for my life's protection any more.

I point this event out to explain how paranoid one becomes when you are under such a life-and-death situation for so long.

ICE CREAM

A few days later, I was transferred to a holding field hospital and stayed there about three weeks.

Here is where I found out how important my "bank robbery" money was, particularly when they found out it had come from a Shuri bank. These GIs and the nurses wanted to take home an Okinawan souvenir. I was probably the "richest" GI on the island with these worthless Japanese yen.

I found out that the Special Services Section made 19 gallons of ice cream each day and I figured out a way for our ward to get its share, and more. There was this pretty young nurse with beautiful red hair who would take a few of my yens, go out and talk to the sergeant in charge and cut a deal with him for a little extra ice cream for our ward of about 65 GIs. We got all 19 gallons of the ice cream every day I was there. I really hated to leave this group. I don't know which I missed the most, the pretty redhead or the ice cream. She took me to the movies several nights but she was an officer and I was an enlisted man. I mentioned the rules about officers and

enlisted men not being allowed to fraternize but she thought she could get away with it as a “nurse and patient.” Anyway, she explained, she had nothing to lose as she didn’t plan to make the military her career. She planned to go back to California and finish school so she said she could “care less” about the rules. I thought I certainly didn’t have anything to lose! Anyway, not long after that, I found myself being shipped out and I thought maybe it was to get me away from her in a diplomatic manner and not have to discipline her at all. They badly needed nurses but privates were a dime a dozen. They found an easy way to solve this little problem: Ship the private out to a Saipan hospital.

TO SAIPAN

I finally boarded a hospital ship for Saipan, some 1,200 miles to the east---that much closer home. My first thought when I went aboard the hospital ship was of the time when we were waiting off the coast of Okinawa to invade the island and I saw a hospital ship hit by a suicide plane.

My stay on the hospital ship was great, however, with the exception of the second morning aboard. As in any hospital, the first thing in the morning, they stick a thermometer in your mouth. When the nurse came back to retrieve the thermometer, she looked and looked again and then looked at me and left in a hurry. I began to wonder what was wrong. In a minute or so, she came back with this young doctor. He stuck the thermometer back in my mouth and immediately started checking my pulse, heart beat, etc. Retrieving the thermometer, he looked at the nurse, looked at me, put his hand on my forehead and I began to wonder if I’d be around long enough to spend my remaining Japanese yen.

He finally said, “How do you feel, soldier?” I said, “Fine.” He looked at the thermometer again and said, “You are supposed to be dead, with a temperature of 106!”

They immediately had the medics come and put me in what I called the “ice box.” They put ice all around me and in four or five minutes, I told the nurse I was freezing to death. She assured me it wouldn’t take long---and I agreed and told her that in another five minutes I would be a solid piece of ice. I looked at her, with my teeth chattering, and asked if she’d taken my temperature each time with the same thermometer. You should have seen her face. She hurried out and in a minute was back with a new thermometer. You guessed it---that was the problem. There wasn’t a thing wrong with this old “war horse.” But those hot blankets they put around me sure did feel good.

Once again, I want to point out that at least 85 percent of the doctors, nurses, Army officers and all the way down to us privates were very young and inexperienced at our war jobs. Still, I think everyone did a pretty good job.

Our hospital ship eased in and docked at the Saipan harbor. We received a red carpet

welcome, along with a very pleasant surprise: An Army band was there to greet us and the Red Cross ladies were there with cookies etc. The medics were walking the less seriously wounded patients down the gangplank to the dock. When my turn came to be unloaded, I tried to get the medics to let me walk down. But one glanced at my patient chart and said, "You're a bed patient, therefore you'll go down in style!" So I was carried down on a stretcher. Another medic said, "Don't sweat it. This will probably be the only opportunity you'll ever have to be carried off a hospital ship with an Army band greeting you." Man, was he ever right!. I sat up on the stretcher, like a "big wheel," and off we went!.

EARTHQUAKE AND 'RED SPOTS'

An earthquake came while we were at the hospital on Saipan and it shook the beds around and shook some of the boys out of their beds.

The biggest laughs we got while here were about the older nurses being jealous of the new, younger nurses who were coming in.

While there, we also saw some of the soldiers who had been wounded by our own unit when we had mistaken them for the enemy..."friendly fire." I also saw Harry Battle of Rome with whom I had taken basic training and had seen from time to time. (We not only had taken basic together, but we also had gone overseas on the same ship, had both landed on Okinawa, were in the same division and same battalion, were both wounded, came home on the same ship and came all the way back to our home town, Rome, Ga., together.)

The stress of being a front-line combat soldier really came out in an unusual event while I was in the hospital on Saipan. I had been there about three weeks when they decided to issue us short-legged PJs. In the past, we'd had only long-legged pajamas. But it was hot, hot on Saipan.

The doctors and their staff came through every day and you must keep in mind that we now had short-legged PJs. When the doctor got to a certain GI on the second bunk over from me one day, he noticed red spots on this patient's leg. The doctor was trying to find out if the patient had some kind of disease and so he questioned him at length.

Most of us who could hear the conversation knew exactly what the problem was but none of us wanted to discuss it. The doctor continued to push this young man for some type of answer, but the patient was obviously embarrassed. In fact, we were all somewhat embarrassed. Finally, in a very shy voice, the young man said, "Doctor, I've been pinching myself to reassure myself that I'm really alive."

The doctor's tone of voice immediately changed as he continued talking with the GI. "How long have you been doing this?" is one of the things he asked. Finally, he had every front line combat patient in the tent to raise his hand if he had done the same thing. Out of about 60

patients, at least 55 raised their hands. Yes, I had been doing the same thing. The point was, if you saw some blood it was reassuring that you were truly still alive and not dreaming.

The next day, they had a team of psychiatrists in checking all of us. The joke was that we'd be getting a "Section 8" (mental) discharge. But that didn't happen. The doctors continued to check on all of us. We had no problem now in admitting it after this man had done so. I know this is hard for us today to understand but it did happen.

'HORRIBLE THOUGHT'

Around the first of August 1945, the order came down for the hospital to move out anyone who could walk. We knew the invasion of Japan was coming up. What a horrible thought...invading Japan proper with thousands to be killed.

We were immediately moved out to a holding camp and re-issued all arms, including a new M-1 rifle. We were waiting for ships to come in and take us back to our old outfit.

In the holding camp, Air Force guys from the nearby island of Tinian came over and were betting \$100 to \$10 that the war would be over in a month. Tinian was the island the B-29 bomber, the Enola Gay, took off from on August 6, 1945 with the atomic bomb. But, of course, we didn't know anything about that at the time.

We soon heard, however, that "a new weapon" had been used on Japan. We did strongly suspect that it might end the war but didn't want to get our expectations up and then be disappointed.

The Air Force guys were right on target, however. The war was over within that 30-day period, on Aug. 14, 1945, shortly after atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

'THE WAR WAS OVER!!'

When the order came over the company PA system for us to turn in our guns, ammunition and knives, we knew something was about to be announced, and they didn't want the place shot up by a bunch of out-of-control combat soldiers. They didn't know it, but they didn't have anything to be worried about with these men.

In a few days, the announcement came: The war was over!!! It must have been about 11 a. m.

There was no shouting, there was no dancing in the company streets, no one was going around shaking hands.

We all just lay down on our bunks, no one saying a word. We just lay there in total silence. It seemed that we lay there until chow time in the late afternoon.

I remember thinking, "You know, I just might make it home alive, after all." What a great, great feeling this was!!!

(To me, the stained glass chapel window commissioned for our present Okinawan American Army base, commemorating the end of the battle, shows exactly how we felt in August 1945 as we lay on our bunks on this far-from-home island of Saipan. I have a small rendition of this scene.)

Of course, when the war ended, it felt like the weight of the world had been lifted off our shoulders. But a month or so after this great feeling, some of us got a somewhat useless and letdown feeling that turned into anger at the world. Why all these different feelings? I don't really know. This anger probably showed up in some of the letters sent home during this time, but it slowly went away.

TO THE PHILIPPINES

Leaving Saipan, we were shipped to the island of Leyte in the Philippines where there was a separation center. There, I again helped guard a camp of WACS, but these were pregnant WACs. Still, it was a job keeping the officers out and keeping the WACs in. (It seems I was sometimes assigned to some of the most interesting duty!!)

Next, I was shipped to the island of Mindoro in the Philippines and got back to my outfit in the 96th Division. Many of the fellows were back from the hospitals and decisions were being made about occupation duty.

At this point, I was among those loaded on a ship scheduled to leave for Japan in a few days. Then they unloaded us and in a week or two, they loaded us up again. This time, we were to go to Korea for occupation duty, Korea having been a Japanese possession. After about three days on this ship in the harbor, we were again unloaded and we then set up camp there on Mindoro in the Philippines.

We were offered a chance to go home immediately if we'd re-enlist for a year. No way. But some of those who re-enlisted went home, came back and then went home again before I got away. We had a point system on going home, depending on such things as length of service, overseas tenure, whether married, children, etc. As a single man, I didn't have many points.

SAD DAY/96TH DEACTIVATED

While on Mindoro, orders came down in December 1945 that the 96th Infantry Division would

be deactivated. This was a sad day, in a way, for the “Deadeyes” who had made this division one of those most feared by the Japanese High Command.

After the break-up, my old combat pals, Sgt. Boals, Sgt. Holeman, Sgt. Henry Grit and others left for home. These guys were like my older brothers. I really missed them!

When they broke up the 96th Division, I was re-assigned to the “Black Hawk” Division, the 86th, in Manila, Philippines. It had been sent to Europe right at the end of the European war and then had been sent on to the Pacific where it had seen limited action in the Philippines. It had been scheduled to help invade Japan, had that been necessary.

We were in Manila two or three weeks. Some intra-Army (31st “White Dixie” Division and a mostly black division) trouble erupted on a beach on Mindanao island in the Philippines. So those of us from the old 96th who had seen combat were sent there. It took a few months to quell that racial disturbance. Later, I helped guard some U. S. government sawmills up in the mountains as some Japanese were still in the area.

Back at the base camp, my next duty was at beachside rest camps on Mindanao where I pulled lifeguard duty--- and sometimes pulled drunks out of the ocean at night

After a few weeks at the rest camp, each of us started getting a couple of cases of beer every two weeks, compliments of Uncle Sam. I couldn’t drink hot, steaming beer, so started giving it away to GIs who would drink it. This proved to be a bad decision. After the first shipment, the guys started to gamble to see who would get my beer. Some of them tried to give me money to hold it for them. This situation was getting out of hand!

So a great idea hit me: I would auction the beer off myself in the company street to the highest bidder! I would take both cases for the auction, auctioning off one case at a time..for cash money. The first winning bidder could not bid on the second case. This got to be quite a show...me standing on a case of hot beer, acting like an auctioneer. These guys would give their entire month’s pay for a case of beer!!! I made several hundred dollars this way before we shipped out.

BACK TO MANILA AND A REUNION

Then it was a return to Manila and the 86th Division camp. This time, I looked up my old Crystal Springs buddy, Earl Storey, with whom I had grown up and who had recently arrived in Manila. We got to see each other quite often then and were there at the time of the Philippine Independence, July 4, 1946. In fact, I marched in some kind of parade related to the independence. But I think we Americans were mostly confined to camp on the actual Independence Day.

While Earl and I were in Manila, we dated a couple of pretty Filipino sisters, Eve and “Baby Jane,” whom Earl had got to know. Although “Baby Jane,” who was my date, was some kind of famous movie star there, their parents were very strict with these girls and would accompany us to the movies! (After Helen and I married, she wrote the girls, as Earl had retained in memory their address, and got a nice reply. When Helen and I went to the Philippines in 1999, we tried to get in touch with them or their family but had no luck.)

When Earl and I finally got home, we resumed our long friendship. He was my best man when I married, and Helen and I accompanied Earl and Geneva when they married, both in 1949. Until his death in July 2008, Earl and I remained the best of friends, as close as brothers.

Earl had tough duty in Manila. He served in the military police (MP) unit which had the job of trying to keep law and order in a city that was literally torn to pieces, with no order of any type except what the military police provided. He had a very dangerous job. After some months, things began to get “somewhat” better, but still a long way from being normal. Some of the buildings were patched up and some businesses began to open their doors to the public. The restaurants were among the first to open. I guess they were anxious to get their share of the GIs’ dollars. Most of these restaurants had Filipino bands with young ladies singing. These restaurants gave Earl an opportunity to share his very good bass voice with their customers.

Being a military policeman and being known by most of the business owners, Earl was welcomed with open arms. He could walk into a restaurant, go up to the bandstand, where the Filipinos would be murdering American songs, raise his arms and the band would stop playing. He would then give the band the signal to start back and he would begin singing himself. The crowded restaurant would be full of GIs and they would go wild when Earl started singing. He had a good voice and would stay and sing for an hour or two. I think he became the “Bing Crosby of the Philippines” at that time. (For the young folks, Bing was a popular vocalist of World War II, singing the popular songs of the day.) Earl really did enjoy this part of the war! And he continued singing the rest of his life, with him and his wife, Geneva, singing in their church choir, Old Armuchee Baptist Church, Crystal Springs, Floyd County, Ga.

GOING HOME

In September 1946, my time finally came to go home. Earl, who hadn’t been there as long, didn’t get to leave until some months later.

We were loaded on ships at Manila. It was a balmy trip home across the Pacific, quite a contrast in more ways than one to the trip I had taken going over in early 1945. I had no seasickness, for one thing. But there were other contrasts as well.

I saw Harry Battle of Rome again, while lined up in the Philippines to come home, and we

came all the way back to Rome together. After docking at Oakland, Calif., and doing some sight-seeing around San Francisco, we took a train to Fort Sam Houston, Texas, near San Antonio. After a few days there, we were released and a bunch of us chartered a plane to come to Atlanta.

As I mentioned earlier, the mental stress was the worst part of the war. I cannot put in words strong enough to explain this. When we got ready to leave on that plane from Texas, we made the two pilots walk up and down the aisle of the plane to prove to us that they weren't drunk or drinking. The extreme fear of walking out in front of an automobile or being killed in a car or plane crash lingered on for some years. We thought it would be a helluva note to be killed like that after all we had been through!

BACK HOME AT LAST

When I arrived home, I remember looking around the community I lived in (Texas Valley, Floyd County, Ga.) and our old hang-out place, nearby Crystal Springs, both just "wide places in the road." My first thought was that these places had "stood still" in the two years I had been away....almost nothing had changed. My childhood pal, Earl Storey, wouldn't return home for another two months and I did miss seeing him at his home. But the people were going about their daily lives as though we had never been in a war!

Old friends would say something like, "Where have you been?" or "I haven't seen you for a while." I would usually jokingly respond that I had been on a "long, free extended vacation to the Pacific."

After several weeks, I began to realize that there had been some changes. I could tell that some big oak trees around the community had grown, for example. As I look back, I must have been really hell-bent on finding changes of any kind!

I had two first cousins with whom I had grown up, Rufus McCary and Charles Flippins. They had served their time in the Navy and were already discharged and back home. We had partied, double dated, gone on skating parties and attended many movies when we were 16 and 17 years old. I remember one time that we were attending a movie at the DeSoto Theatre in Rome and were seated in the balcony, our usual place. It so happened that we had sat down behind three pretty young ladies (better ..known then as "chicks") and an event happened that I remember very well: Charles was picking at this cute little girl sitting in front of him. He was telling her how pretty she was etc. The young lady finally turned around , looked old Charlie straight in the eyes and said, "I wish I could say the same for you!" Charlie, being the wit that he is, answered, "You can, by telling just as big a lie as I did!" This, of course, eliminated any chance he had to impress the girl.

Getting back together with these two cousins helped make my adjustment in returning home

somewhat easier. The combat on Okinawa was still haunting me...and to a certain extent, it still is.



Several months after I returned home, my old pal Earl made it home. This was a big boost in my adjusting to civilian life. Earl and I pretty much had to start from scratch in the field of making new friendships, more particularly finding new girl friends! We were kinda like fighter planes that got shot down during the war.

Finally, things began to slowly come into focus. One thing I

noticed was that my adorable nieces and nephews had grown a few inches. Today, most of these nieces and nephews are wonderful parents and grandparents. My brothers and sisters-in-law had not changed that much. They were still doing the same old, same old thing...busting their bottoms to pay for the light bill and to keep food on the tables....some things never change. But they were then, and had always been, there for me if I needed them.

‘DEAR JOHN’

So many of the guys received those famous war-time letters, the “Dear John Letters.” These would be received from what the GI had thought was his most cherished girl. What was the girl friend telling the soldier or sailor? In so many nice words, she would be saying, “You are being dumped, pal!” These letters were so prevalent they changed the name of the enlisted men’s club to the “Dear John Club.” If the GIs found out a guy had received a “Dear John,” they would toast him that evening by singing the popular “Dear John Song.” They would furnish the “tears” free of charge, pouring a can of beer on the guy’s head...and give him a lot of useful advice. They poured just one can of beer over his head, not wanting to waste any more than that....it was rationed. The “Dear John” ritual also included, on occasion, reading the letter to the group, then putting it on a dart board with all taking the opportunity to throw a dart at it.

During the time I was overseas, I had received some friendly so-called “Dear John” letters from “sweet young things” I had known prior to service. They would usually be telling me of their approaching marriage to So-and-So. They might say, “Do you know him? I know you would like him.” Or they might say, in so many words, “I’m here and you are thousands of miles away” or “I have this guy who doesn’t want me to write you any more.” But I think the best “Dear John” letter I received was from this sweetie telling me about this young man she planned to marry and then she added, “If you don’t approve, please let me know.” I wrote back that he sounded like a wonderful guy and she should get him while she could!

When I got back, I saw one of these girls at a store with her new-found boy friend, probably the one she had dumped me for. She asked how I was and how I liked being home. I told her the first two weeks hadn’t been so good but that now things were beginning to look up.

One of the biggest and most surprising changes was when I pulled out my old battered and torn address book where I had kept the addresses and phone numbers of some of these “sweet things” back home.

When I started calling these old girl friends of two years earlier, the mother or another family member would usually answer the phone. The responses were quite sobering, to say the least. The family member might say, “She didn’t write you? She has been married for nearly two years and now has the cutest baby.” You know what happened next...I would have to listen to this grandmother tell me in detail about the world’s greatest grandchild! I must say that this opened my eyes to the changes that had taken place in two short years.

This old soldier didn’t give up. I continued to use this worn-out address book to call other outdated numbers. The information I received was about the same....some were in college, most had married and some had moved away.

WORLD HAD KEPT TURNING

So I finally began to realize that the address book, and I, were somewhat outdated and that the world had indeed moved on during those two years. I suppose I had thought at first that maybe the world back home had stopped turning.

So, as one can see, it did take some adjusting, meeting and making new friends. But before long, I was back in the old groove, pretty much picking up where I had left off before entering service.

Soon after getting home, I met this brown-haired, brown-eyed “Indian” girl and this ended up in being a chasing match....she had me chasing her until she caught me. I have now been

“caught “for over 60 good years....sometimes it pays to run slowly!!

Out of this “Indian chase” came two good-looking young men which we both are proud of. Mike, the older one, chased Denise Blair until she caught him and out of that chase came two handsome young men, Blair and Clark. The other son, Scott, married Tammy Doster and they had a beautiful young lady, Brittany, (who is now married to a handsome young man, Taylor Truelove) and a handsome young man, Martin Lee. All these children are a great joy to “Paw Paw” and Grandmother. We have grown from two to start and now there are a dozen of us! You can see what happens to you when you run too slowly!

THE LIFESTYLE

Sometimes people ask me what we ate, or how we bathed, or slept, when on the front lines. So here are a few remarks along that line:

--Most GIs didn't have a chance to take a bath during those 82 days of the battle, although we did stay wet for three to four weeks during the rainy season.

--There was no washing of clothes but they did bring us a change of clothes on one or two occasions.

--We slept only in foxholes during those 82 days. No tents, no buildings. We slept in our clothes, including our helmets and boots. Our gun was by our side in the foxhole, with the barrel coming up just past our head and at least one hand staying on the rifle. Most nights we didn't get more than two to three hours of sleep anyway.

--We ate twice a day most of the time and I don't remember being hungry. I guess we got enough food although I lost 15 to 20 pounds during the battle. We had no hot food other than what we heated ourselves, using at first pieces of dynamite and later “composition C,” something like putty, which we pinched off in small amounts and put in a tin can. Using this, we could have instant hot water. As you can see, personal life became secondary. We ate mostly “C rations” or “K rations,” the “C rations” being mostly in cans and therefore better, sometimes including meat. We had a little can opener on our dog tag chain. The “K” items were often powdered items which you mixed with water and this included milk, soups and “instant coffee.” We also got little packages of cereal with powdered milk already mixed in.

--And where did we “go to the bathroom”? Out in the open for God and everyone else to see! (Now that the young ladies are going to war, where are they going??) If we could, we'd dig an individual trench. However, this was not always possible.

NO GIRLS ALLOWED!

I don't know what the problem was when Dad and Mom were raising their family. But it seems they forgot to place an order for girls!!! They ended up with a total of seven boys, four of whom served in World War II.

Essie Virginia Green Buffington and Abner Cyrenius Buffington had the following seven sons, listed in order from oldest to youngest: Clarence Darius "Tim" Buffington, Ruben Abner Buffington, Claude Rena Buffington, Herman Abner Buffington, Edward Henry Buffington, Billy Eugene Buffington and James Albert Buffington. James died at the age of 18 months.

World War II started Dec. 7, 1941 and ended Aug. 14, 1945. During this time, Dad and Mom watched as their four oldest sons marched off to war, all being drafted into the U. S. Army. Fortunately, all of us returned home safely. Only the two youngest, Edward and Billy, missed serving as they were still too young. But Uncle Sam was snapping at Edward's heels when the war ended.

The first to go was Claude, who was called in 1942 at the age of 20. He was married to the former Mary Lou "Myrt" Tanner and they had one child, Kenneth, age six months, when Claude was called. He was inducted at Fort McPherson, Atlanta, Ga., and went to Camp Barkley, Texas for basic training, expecting to serve as a mechanic. His training was interrupted because of damage to an old teenage leg injury and he received a medical discharge the same year he was inducted. Claude returned home to work and farm part-time and he and "Myrt" had five more children, Gail, Troy, Jimmy, Fran and Kim. Both Claude and Myrt died in ????? (email JimmY)

The next brother to go into the military was Ruben, who was drafted in January 1944 at the age of 25. He was married to the former Annie Mae Mathis and they had one child, Betty, age 2, when he went into service. Claude also was inducted at Fort McPherson, Atlanta, Ga., and from there he went to Camp Ellis, Ill., near Peoria, for basic training to go into the Army Engineers. However, his ulcer began to give problems and he was hospitalized for some months because of internal bleeding. The problem could not be solved and he too received a medical discharge the same year he was inducted. The discharge was dated Aug. 9, 1944. (This was the same month I was inducted.) Ruben also returned home to work and farm part-time and he and Annie Mae had three more children: Louise, Peggy and Melody. Ruben was a life-long quail hunter and he, Claude and I had gone quail hunting one week before he unexpectedly passed away from a heart attack on Feb. 1, 1986.

Tim, the oldest son, was the last to go. He was drafted in June 1945 just as he turned 29. Tim was married to the former Matilda McIntyre and they had three children at the time: Marie, Leonard and James. After being inducted at Fort McPherson, like all of the Buffington brothers, he was undergoing basic training, and out on bivouac, at Camp Crowder, Mo. when the war ended. But that didn't immediately end his military service. Tim was sent to Fort Bragg, N. C. for medical training and from there he was assigned to a hospital in Virginia. He was discharged Dec. 7, 1945 after having served almost exactly six months. He also returned home to work and farm part-time. Tim and Matilda had one more child, Jerry. As I write this in 2009, he is 93 years old and gets around better than I do.!

I never heard any of the three complain about being called to serve, even though, unlike myself, they were married and had children. As I said earlier, we were fortunate in that all of us returned

safely. My brothers pretty well picked up where they had left off and went ahead with their lives. These three provided me with 14 nieces and nephews plus the six my younger brothers provided. Edward married Mary Lou Hulsey and they had four children, Roy, Kathy, Ricky and Amber. Billy, who died of cancer in 2002, married Patsy Murdock and they had two children, Janice and David. All of my brothers, like myself, had marriages of 50 years or more.

1995 TRIP

Now all this makes my 1995 trip to Okinawa seem much less important.

However, it was a great trip.

I have seen the time that no amount of money would have got me to go back to this island. I was dead serious about that. I thought it would be just my luck to step off the road and step on a mine if I were back over there! Being in constant combat for almost three months takes a terrible drain on you mentally and physically. But time not only heals our physical wounds, it also heals our minds, somewhat.

I thought I had totally cleared my mind about the Battle of Okinawa until I started jotting down detailed events about the campaign and this brings it all back into focus again. I found out after thinking and writing these events down, usually doing the writing at night, that I didn't sleep well at all. These memories are clearly still there and are etched in my mind forever.

In the 1980s, when we had begun to do some traveling, the wife and I gave some thought to going to Okinawa. But each time I thought about it, the pieces just didn't seem to fit together.

Luckily, someone organized a 50th anniversary trip to Okinawa in 1995 and I heard about it. So the pieces finally came together and we signed up immediately for the trip.

When we first arrived on the island and started our bus tours, my first thought was, "How did this island get so green and beautiful?" It was hard to realize that raging battles went on there for three months half a century ago. When I had left there in June 1945, the land was a burned brown color and the trees were nothing but stumps. The flat areas looked like a desert. You couldn't walk more than 15 feet without having to walk around a shellhole. Most villages and towns were totally destroyed.

Despite the changes, when I returned I could still pick out most of the areas of the major battlefields with those steep hills. I could visualize seeing through that fresh green growth and relive the slaughter that took place on both sides those 50 years ago.

I could see us crawling over our own dead, as we did on occasion, in trying to take those high peaks. I could hear the moaning from our wounded. And the occasional young wounded man

crying out for his Mom.

I could remember our taking some of those knolls and being unable to hold them because we wouldn't have enough men left to withstand an enemy counterattack.

I could see us having to withdraw down those hillsides, trying to make it back to our own lines, carrying back as many of our dead and wounded as possible.

At that time 50 years ago, these events seemed to go on forever, even though for me it was only 81 days. The campaign lasted a total of 82 days. Here, the world seemed to have stopped and it felt as though it would never turn again.

When I look back now and think about it, I can't remember but one other GI, Sgt. Boals, from our 40-member platoon at the end who had gone on the line between April 1 and 8 in 1945. In fact, there weren't but six or seven men left in our company, including the approximately 90 replacements we had taken on after I went on the front. Not all of these were killed, of course. About 90 to 95% of these were wounded with about half of those suffering mental breakdowns.

SHAKING HANDS WITH THE ENEMY

You would think that shaking hands with the enemy of 50 years ago would have been the main highlight of this trip. It wasn't, although it was one highlight. The Japanese veterans, their wives and other family members were just too nice to dislike. We exchanged gifts and generally enjoyed our brief time together. It was all so different from 50 years ago when we were trying to get each other in our rifle sights.

You might also think being able to see the island once again and seeing all the changes that have taken place would be the highlight. It was a highlight but not the most important one, though that alone would have made the trip worthwhile. When we were there in 1945, the place was 50 to 75 years behind the states in most ways, so far as we could tell from their roads, houses and farms. However, now they are as modern as we are and make as much or more money than we do. Their culture seems to have changed very little though, despite all the damage to the country, except that they now mostly wear western dress.

Another highlight was the Peace Park. The Okinawans, probably with the help of the Japanese, have put in place on the southern end of the island (the area where we had such tough fighting) a large Peace Park with 7 or 8 ft. high black granite walls carrying the names of the 234,500 people killed there, including approximately 14,500 Americans, 80,000 Japanese soldiers, 15,000 Korean soldiers and 125,000 civilian Okinawans. A very impressive park. We found the names of McKellar and Simpson there, both from Floyd County, and made pictures for their families.

OLD BATTLEFIELDS

But the highlight of the trip for me, and I believe for most veterans, was seeing the old battlefields. They had changed a lot and almost nothing at those sites commemorates the American involvement. All the signs are in Japanese and we understand they tell only about the Japanese involvement with almost no mention of the fact that they lost the battle, and the war. Still, I could recognize some sites, such as Conical Hill and the escarpment, although both are now a lush green instead of the shell-pocked brown as we remember them.

ROYAL TREATMENT

Another highlight of the trip was the royal treatment given us by our military still based on Okinawa, which, by the way, had reverted to Japan in 1972. Our military wined and dined us and just couldn't do enough, it seemed. This was unexpected but it was appreciated. The 50-gun salute to the veterans of the Okinawan campaign was very touching. At one point, a drill sergeant marched us down a company street on our base there, with people standing on the sidelines giving us hearty applause. This was also unexpected but it took us back 50 years. (If I do say so, we old soldiers looked pretty darn good marching down that street!) They really tried to make heroes out of us but we all knew the real heroes were those who fought but didn't get home like we did.

INTERVIEWED BY JAPANESE REPORTER

Several of us were interviewed by various Japanese TV stations and newspapers while there. A young Japanese TV reporter surprised me by asking what I thought about the atomic bombs being dropped on Japan. I told her that it was indeed a terrible weapon but she should keep in mind that the bombing raids over Tokyo in the spring of 1945 by American B-29s killed more people than the atomic bombs did. And in the battle of Okinawa, some 234,500 persons lost their lives, many more than the atomic bombs killed. Over one-third of the civilian population of Okinawa was killed and 90 percent of the Japanese soldiers lost their lives in that battle.

(Think about this: The number killed on Okinawa alone is about the total number of people living in Barrow, Clarke, Hall and Jackson counties at this time (2001).

If the atomic bomb had not been dropped, I told the Japanese reporter, we would have had to invade the Japanese mainland, killing far more people than both the atomic bombs did. The Japanese had over 3 million armed persons stationed on the mainland. Had we had to kill 90 percent of this number of soldiers and 30% of the civilians to take the homeland, you can see that the Japanese would have not had much of their population left to carry on and retain their culture. It's estimated that U.S. losses would have been up to a million lives lost.

LARGER THAN D-DAY

I have learned that the invasion of Okinawa was larger than the D-Day invasion of Europe in June 1944. General Eisenhower had 150,000 American and other Allied troops on that invasion day. But the 10th Army commander, General Buckner, had 184,000 troops in the invasion to take Okinawa.

We lost a lot of our high-ranking officers on Okinawa. General Buckner, who was in charge of the entire 10th Army (all the Army and Marine Corps troops on Okinawa) was killed. In fact, he was the highest-ranking American officer killed in World War II. General Claude Easley, the lieutenant general of my division, the 96th, was killed. And Lt. Col. Curtis May, the commander of the 383rd Regiment, my regiment, was killed.

DO IT AGAIN?

Would I do it again, if I had my choice?

I have been asked this question a number of times over the years.

Under the same circumstances and at the same age, yes, I would.

However, this doesn't mean I think the United States should have been involved in all the wars we've been a part of since World War II. I totally disagree with the manner in which our government had our men fighting in the Korean and Vietnam wars. We must have a defined reason such as our country being in danger of being taken over and we must fight to win. In peace and war, we must keep our military strong and teach our young people that freedom is not free. For our civilization to survive, we now know that all nations must find a way to settle disagreements peacefully rather than going to war! If we don't, we'll blow ourselves back into the dark ages!

EPILOGUE

BY HELEN BUFFINGTON

While on Okinawa, Herman A. Buffington was in the 96th Infantry Division, 383rd Infantry Regiment, 3rd Battalion, K Company, 3rd Platoon and 3rd Squad.

He received the purple heart and the bronze star, as well as several other medals. He had been told near the end of the war that he'd been recommended for the bronze star but it had not come through by the time he was discharged in 1946. In the 1950s, I saw in a veterans' magazine that many men had been awarded medals which had not been delivered and, by writing a certain address, one could find out whether a veteran had any such medals. I wrote and some time later the bronze star and an accompanying certificate arrived. Although the certificate doesn't spell out exactly what the commendation was for, Buffington believes it was for his work in going into the enemy trenches as related in the first trench story recounted above. One of his sergeants, Byron Bill Boals, had made the recommendation. Boals told him some years later that he also had made the recommendation for Buffington to be promoted but the division was de-activated and the promotion was apparently cancelled.

PRESIDENTIAL UNIT CITATION

In 2001, the 96th Division learned it had been recommended for the prestigious Presidential Unit Citation. The 96th was one of only four Army divisions out of the 198 formed during World War II to receive such an honor. The citation had been approved in 1946, but somehow the documents were lost for over half a century. The honor was bestowed on the proud veterans at the annual reunion of the 96th Division Assn. in 2001 at Omaha, Neb. (A copy of this citation appears at the end of this book.)

REUNITED

Buffington was first reunited with Boals and some other fellow Army men in 1960 at the 96th Infantry Division Association reunion in Kansas City, Mo. They met again for the 1961 reunion in Detroit, Mich. and then family and business obligations kept the Buffingtons from going to reunions again until 1992.

However, we stopped by to see the Boalses in Lincoln, Neb. in the 1970s while on a western vacation. The two families continued to exchange Christmas cards and notes each year and resumed seeing each other at the division reunion in 1993 at Reno, Nev .
(Herman Buffington: Boals was our platoon sergeant. He had enormous leadership qualities and would have made an outstanding commissioned officer had he wished to move up the ladder. Sgt. Boals was a "big brother" to me and I have greatly appreciated his kindness.)

Buffington also has kept in touch with several other fellow soldiers. The Henry (Hank) Grits, then of Holland, Mich., stopped to visit the Buffingtons at their home in Summerville, Ga. in the early 1960s and the Buffingtons first visited the Grits in Holland, Mich. in the 1970s while on a midwest vacation. The Grits and Buffingtons also have visited each other at the Grits' "new" location, Roaring River, N. C., and the Buffingtons' "new" location, Jefferson, Ga. Grit has

never attended a reunion. He was a sergeant and the platoon guide, “a very fine individual, very religious and on the quiet side,” says Buffington.

The Buffingtons visited the Ray “Doc” Strenskis in Green Bay, Wis. in the 1970s, the Strenskis have visited the Georgians at Jefferson and the couples have met at various reunions in the 1990s. (The Buffingtons have been blessed by several gifts of Doc’s handsome Christmas wood crafts and the display of these crafts is a highlight of the Buffingtons’ Christmas each year.)

In addition, the Buffingtons visited the Willie B. Holemans at Rosebud, Ark., the Holemans’ home town, in the 1970s, and the two men met again in 1994 at the 96th reunion at Hot Springs, Ark.

For the first time in 47 years, Buffington and another Army friend, Lester Brown, met in 1992 at the 96th Division reunion in Louisville, Ky. and for the first time in 48 years, Buffington and his friend, Glenn Stewart, met in 1993 at the reunion in Reno, Nev. These friends had exchanged Christmas cards for years but had not had the opportunity to meet before.

Brown, an Indiana man, was a platoon runner/radio operator who was replaced by Buffington when Brown moved up to being company runner/radio operator. “Les was a fine soldier and is an outstanding person,” says Buffington. Les has gone somewhat into politics, serving on his city council.

Glenn Stewart, a California man, came on the line early in May and was second scout when Buffington was first scout. He was a very outgoing fellow and still is, says Buffington. We met him and his wife and the Strenskis at Lake Tahoe, Nev. for a few days before the Reno, Nev. meeting. The Stewarts also came to the Hot Springs, Ark. reunion the next year and rode back to Georgia with us where they visited some relatives. They also have attended other reunions. “Stewart was a helluva good Scout and a top-notch soldier,” said Buffington.

One Rome, Ga. fellow who served in the same platoon that Buffington did was “Big George” Cody.

“He ambled up one day and jumped in the foxhole with me, saying, ‘I hear you’re from Rome, Ga.’” says Buffington. “I told him I was and he said, ‘I’m George Cody also of Rome.’ I saw ‘Big George,’ (sometimes called to his back, ‘Big Mean and Green George,’) several times over there. He was one of the bravest men I ever saw---he wasn’t afraid of anything and I was surprised that he survived.

“A few years after I got home and was working at Vic’s Goodyear Tire Store in Rome, George dropped in to see me. We chatted a while and he wanted to borrow \$10 which I let him have, knowing it was a gift. He said he needed the money ‘to get out of town.’ He’d been home on a visit and the police had given him two weeks to stay and the two weeks were about up, he said.

Anyway, I didn't see or hear anything from George for a couple of years. Then he showed up at the store at mid-winter with a suntan that was unbelievable. He'd been in a Florida prison. And he wanted to borrow another \$10 which I let him have. A couple of days later, I got a phone call from a sheriff in Centre, Ala. He said George was drunk and had knocked two deputies down a flight of stairs in the jail and almost killed them. Anyway, George wanted the sheriff to call and get me to come and get him out of jail. Since he was still drunk, I wouldn't do it. The next day I called the sheriff and he said George had been let go the night before. I've never heard from him again."

FINDING ONE OLD FRIEND

But there was one old Army friend Buffington could not seem to locate. Ken Staley had been with the Georgian during much of the heavy fighting on Okinawa and had made sketches of various battle and landscape scenes when he had a chance during lulls in the battle. Buffington kept trying to find Staley over the years and learned that he had been from the state of Washington. However, Staley had apparently left that state and efforts to locate him failed for years. However, Buffington finally managed to get a list of many Staleys in the country and he sent out inquiries to all on the list. Ken was not listed but a distant family member was and through her, in the early 1990s, Buffington finally found his old friend who was now living in Schenectady, N. Y.

Staley had known nothing of the 96th Division reunions nor had he kept in touch with more than one or two of his fellow soldiers. He had got home with his sketches but he had never had them published. Buffington encouraged him to do so and he eventually did.

Staley attended the next 96th Division reunion, the one in Reno. And he brought along his sketch books...pages and pages of the sketches Buffington remembered seeing him work on. Since that time, Staley and his wife have attended several of the reunions. He has expressed gratitude to Buffington for searching until he "found" him so that he could be reunited with these friends of long ago.

NO BANDS

There were no bands or parades to welcome these troops home when Buffington returned in 1946, a year after the war had ended. He returned on a large troop ship and, like a lot of the men returning at this time, had slipped back home quietly.

Buffington first went to work at Rome's Celanese Corp. which was soon crippled by a strike. He then attended the Carroll Lynn School of Business in Rome under the GI Bill and worked for the school on a part-time basis, often mimeographing paperwork for the school administration. He later took a job as credit manager for Vic's Goodyear Tire Store in Rome, continuing his studies at the business school and later at the Rome Center of the University of Georgia, with

night classes.

A few days after he arrived home, Buffington went to call on Earl Storey's girl friend, Margaret Daughtry, and she introduced him to her next door neighbor, where I was living with my aunt, and I became his wife less than three years later!

We lived in Rome until 1960 when we moved to Summerville, Ga. and both worked at The Summerville News for five years. In 1965, we purchased a struggling weekly newspaper, The Jackson Herald, at Jefferson, Ga. and moved there. We were accompanied by our two sons, Michael 6 and Scott 3, and my mother, Mrs. Minnie Lee Toles. All five of us worked hard at the newspaper and after the boys graduated from the nearby University of Georgia, they joined the business and continued living in Jefferson.

Herman's special talents in business and sales helped boost the firm and by 2009, the business included a total of six award-winning weekly newspapers and a modern commercial printing plant. It was about this time that his vision began to fail and he gradually cut back on duties at the firm, although he kept a keen interest in what was going on.

In 1997, he purchased a 1943 World War II Jeep, achieving one of his long-held dreams. Our son, Scott, saw the Jeep advertised in a car magazine and Herman ended up as the owner. "I have appreciative memories of the WWII Jeep since one very much like this carried me off the battlefield when I was wounded June 21, 1945," Buffington says.

We have now been married more than 60 wonderful years and I don't have to tell you that I am proud to be this veteran's wife! Like most of the other men of this generation, he did his duty as he saw it, came home to become a good citizen, a good husband and a good father, pretty much putting behind him those months of anguish on a foreign battlefield.

I am pleased that he has agreed to his family's desire that he share with us something of those horrible months. It is a record not only for our children and grandchildren but also for their children and grandchildren, as well as other family members and friends.

