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Lt. J.G., U.S. Navy
Seabees
World War II

When World War II was declared, I was a civil engineering student at Kilgore Junior College. During the latter part of my freshman year, twelve of us decided to join the V12 Program. We went to school in the daytime, took flying lessons at the local airstrip in the evenings, and studied navigation and meteorology at night. Many an afternoon, we stared into the sky and tried to name the clouds. At the end of the course, we all passed the flight test. Then we were to advance to a V6 Program and become pilots, but first we were given a test that consisted of lining up sticks. All 12 of us flunked that test.

Luckily, I was sent to Southern Methodist University in Dallas to study civil engineering. When I earned the equivalent of a college degree, they sent me to Midshipman School in Endicott, Rhode Island. That was pure hell. I think they tried to kill us. We had to march at attention to chow or wherever we were going. Saturdays meant a full day of standing at attention or marching. Men often passed out. We learned to moor a boat alongside a dock. When the bosunsmate attempted to show us how, he missed the dock. One of my friends laughed. The next day, my friend was flunked and shipped out.

We went through maneuvers where they were shooting live ammunition over us as we fell and rolled under barbed wire. I'll never forget going out at dusk one day with a compass and a penny box of matches. The bearings for getting back to camp were listed on a post, and we were expected to follow those bearings using only that compass and box of matches. Snow covered the ground. Though we could hear water running underground, we couldn't tell where it was. If there had been no trees, I could have found my way back using my compass bearings. But the briars and bushes were so thick that we couldn't tell where we were. I never hear so much cussing in all my life. We should have been back by ten or eleven o'clock, but men were staggering in all the following day.

We had to get up one morning at 4:30 a.m. to grease live 20mm ammunition with no gloves. Then we went to breakfast. Afterward, we were strapped in antiaircraft gun wearing a mitten and a mask. We had to shoot at a drone. Every second or third shot was a tracer bullet, so we could see it. The temperature was below zero. When water hit the bank, it would splash straight up into our faces, freezing our eyebrows and mustaches.

For four months, we were subjected to everything. Upon graduation, we became ensigns and went on to four months at Officers' Training School. Out of the original 12 men who had left Kilgore Junior College, only two of us had earned commissions as officers. At Officers' Training School, I studied naval courts and boards, etc. After that, I received a letter saying I was being sent to Camp Perry in California for further training. I had been training for 30 months counting my time at SMU.

Thinking I would be training for some time in California, I got married and brought my wife with me to San Francisco. When I checked in at the Naval Station, my orders read, "You are on 48-hour notice for overseas duty." My wife and I just looked at each other and cried. Neither of us thought I would come back. Two weeks after my wedding, I boarded a train to San Diego to get on an aircraft carrier headed for Iwo Jima. I was in the officers' quarters enjoying the best food service of my life. My duty involved watching over the 1,000 Marines on the hangar deck. Three days out to sea, we ran into a terrible storm. Waves washed over the flight deck forty feet above the ocean. Everybody on board was seasick. Every hall, every stairway, every room was covered with men throwing up. Remembering advice I had been given not to get hungry, I stayed in my bed and ate apples. I did not get sick.

When we arrived in Hawaii, I was transferred to a troop ship and joined the Seabees destined for Iwo Jima. In six days at sea we were told a sub was in the area and we could have no lights, no noise, nothing. I stood on that deck at night not saying a word, just looking and wondering if we would get blown to bits. We arrived in Iwo Jima at four o'clock one afternoon. I'll never forget what I saw that day. The city was totally destroyed. Our planes had bombed the island, and the Marines had stormed the beach. They lost 5851 men in 37 days. A huge, ruined gun turret still had its cannon pointed out to sea.

I slept in a tent by myself that first night at the back of our battalion headquarters. A piano wire had been strung around the area. If anything touched it, flares would shoot up into the air alerting the men in the machinegun nests surrounding our battalion of 400 men. At ten o'clock that night, something hit that wire. Machineguns began firing like crazy right behind my tent. I didn't know what to do other than be scared. Finally, the gunfire stopped. At two o'clock that morning, the air raid siren went off. Everybody was hollering and running for foxholes. Not having been assigned a foxhole, I just started running until I came to one. When I jumped in, someone said, "You don't belong here." I said, "I just got assigned to this thing today, and I'm here to stay."

The Japanese did not succeed in bombing us that night. Instead, we shot down two of their planes. When I woke up that morning, all I could smell was burning flesh. That's a smell I'll never forget as long as I live.

Iwo Jima was a smoking volcanic-ash island about two by four miles in size. In some places, the ashes were so hot we couldn't walk on them. But the Seabees managed to move in and set up camps. Each tent had four-by-four corners and were approximately 8 by 8 feet included. The Seabees were made up of chief warrant officers. Though they were not commissioned officers, they had the same privileges. They received allowances for their families and for living quarters. They were old construction men who knew how to build anything. I had been assigned to one of them because I didn't know anything about construction.

Our job was to build Quonset huts as living quarters for the pilots and also to build three concrete airstrips. We worked around the clock. My first job was to keep the men working. They liked to go off behind a hill for a nap. I learned more about engineering during my time there than I would have learned in four years of college. To protect Iwo from being blown to bits, we

dug a flat at sea level on one end of the island to store our fuel tanks. Then we built pipelines to the airstrips. After the airstrips were completed, everybody was there for the celebration. A B17 landed, and we stuck the fuel hose in its tank and turned it on. Nothing but gas came out, no fuel. Running through the hot volcanic ash, the pipelines had become so hot that they converted the fuel to gas vapors. We had to dig them up and encase them in larger pipes with water circulating around them.

Though the Marines had secured the island, the Japanese were still hiding out in thousands of caves. They had built underground headquarters with huge rooms, some housing 100 men. While we were running that pipeline and building the airstrips, the enemy would come out of those caves and take potshots at us. On one occasion, two Japanese soldiers were so hungry that they killed two of our men, put on their uniforms and tried to slip into our chow line. Of course, our men recognized them, shot them and hauled them away.

A redheaded lieutenant who had been in the service about three years became my roommate. He had been there about three weeks when the Japanese bombed our battalion again. A bomb hit one of the four-by-four corners of a tent, slid down and spread out, killing 17 of our men and my roommate. They reported that I had been killed instead of him, and it was two days before they realized their error. I actually was in a foxhole at the time. Two Filipino boys who worked with us and had roosters, hens, pigs and dogs had stayed in their beds in their tent. They were blown to bits. Losing them really hurt everyone. They were the cutest kids.

I think God took over and kept me from being afraid. I should have been scared to death all the time, but I wasn't. Death was all around me but I had faith that God would protect me.

Our warrant officers could do anything. They built ice cream freezers so we could have ice cream. They even were able to turn salt water into fresh water. So the Seabees were the only ones to have fresh-water showers. All the flyboys would come to our area and show us pictures of them strafing trains, buses and everything else in exchange for ice cream and a chance to take a fresh-water shower. Those pilots kept telling us the war would end in August. Sure enough, the atomic bombs were dropped in August, and the war was over.

I had been in charge of a lot of heavy construction equipment. After the war ended, I never went back to that equipment. I guess it's still sitting there. A whole flock of Seabees who had been in the service for four years got to go home. Then the Navy decided to build a shipyard in Youkasuka, Japan so they could move into Japan to control the area. Having only been with the Seabees a year, I ended up in Youkasuka to help convert an old gun factory and Japanese officers' training school into a shipyard. When I arrived, I saw thousands of guns that had been welded together by the heat from a bomb. Literally hundreds of one and two-man submarines had been left behind, too. I was in charge of security for the area and also supervised the building of fire escapes.

Every morning, I had to contact the Marine Shore Patrol to pick up our men who had slipped out, bring them back and write up the charges. Then I had to take them before the skipper and present the charges. Our battalion headquarters were fenced, but the men had built an underground tunnel so they could go into town. There were a lot of women there, and most of those men hadn't seen a woman in four years. One of the hardest things I ever had to do involved a sweet young boy who had gone through the tunnel, gotten drunk on saki, stolen a fire truck and run down the wrong side of the road. He even kidnapped a little Japanese kid and brought him back to the base to present to the captain. I had to present the charges against that boy. He was sentenced to a general court martial, placed on a ship and returned to the States to be dishonorably discharged.

I never was a drinker. As a student at Kilgore Junior College, I had lived in a warehouse with four or five other guys and some huge rats. Though they drank and I didn't, we would go out together. I became a sort of nursemaid for them. It was my job to haul them back home. I had been strongly influenced by a great Sunday school teacher when I was a kid. He was truly a good, Christian influence on my life.

After I left the service, I returned to SMU and got my degree. Then I went to work for a City of Dallas civil engineering firm and designed bridges. I also helped design Central Expressway in Dallas. I began to notice that the contractors were driving Cadillacs while the city employees were driving Fords. So I went to work for Austin Road Company. Later I ended up working for Reynolds and Huff Construction in Tyler.

In my opinion, the capture of Iwo Jima played a great part in our winning the war. The P51's (fighter protection for the bombers flying in from Guam, Tinian and Saipan) flew from the airstrips we built there. We could put six P51's in the air every eight seconds. If the B17 or B29 bombers were running low on fuel when they returned from their missions, they would land on our airstrips to refuel. If his plane had been hit and seriously damaged, the pilot would turn on the automatic pilot over the ocean and parachute out. Boats constantly were picking up pilots out of the water. P56 night fighters would take off and shoot the unmanned bombers down over the ocean so they couldn't circle back and fall on Iwo Jima or to prevent the Japanese from capturing them. That always was a show.

If a damaged bomber landed or crashed on land still carrying bombs, a special unit would deactivate the bombs, unload them and place them on a truck. One day I was sitting in my jeep watching a B17 land with its bomb bay doors open. Suddenly a bomb came rolling out of those doors and headed straight toward me. I jumped under a bulldozer parked next to me. But the bomb stopped right by me and didn't explode. Men came out then, deactivated the bomb and threw it on a truck.

There were 2400 emergency landings and Seabees were credited with saving 26,000 airmen's lives.

I am 100,000% positive that every man should serve at least two years in the military. We wouldn't have the discipline problems we have now because they would learn respect for authority. They would learn to love their country. I believe with all my heart we're making a horrible mistake by not having compulsory military training in America. Every military man loves this country and will do whatever they have to do to protect it. It is the finest country in the world.