

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, May 17, 2010

The Pacific Was “Our Ocean”: In the last months of World War II, the United States “owned” the Pacific Ocean, but it had not been that way in the early days of the war with Japan. In the six months after the Pearl Harbor attack, the Japanese moved rapidly, capturing the American possessions of Wake Island, Guam, and the Philippines and pushing up the Aleutians toward Alaska. Occupying half of China, they soon captured the Malay Peninsula and Singapore. Many islands south of the Equator were in Japanese hands in the push to conquer Australia.

A stunned United States mobilized quickly and had to defend and launch attacks on two fronts, the European and Pacific theaters. The Battle of the Coral Sea and the Battle of Midway in the summer of 1942 gave the U.S. hope that the enemy could be repelled. U.S. Marines fought hard on islands like Guadalcanal and Bougainville as the slow advance northward caused Japanese-held islands to fall to the Allies. After numerous naval victories and island campaigns, the U.S. captured Saipan and Tinian and took back Guam in the summer of 1944, and MacArthur landed in the Philippines for a campaign that eventually recaptured Manila. In the fall of 1944, B-29s began bombing Japan's main islands from new airfields in the Marianas (it was 1,600 statute miles from Guam to Tokyo Bay; Iwo Jima, halfway between, was captured at the end of February 1945).

I went to the Pacific theater in June 1945. Except for the final land campaign to take Okinawa, only 325 miles from Japan's home islands, the United States controlled the ocean by that time. Our crew of 10 flew one of three brand new B-24 weather planes from Hunter Field near Savannah, Georgia, to Guam to join the 55th Weather Reconnaissance Squadron, a part of the 20th Air Force. We flew on daily orders, and it took about 10 days of mostly daytime flying. We stopped overnight at Kirtland Field, Albuquerque, and then at Mather Field near Sacramento. After four or five days at Mather, the plane went on to Hickam Field, Honolulu, with a lightened load of five crew members, as this was a 13-hour over-water flight. I was one of five non-essential crew members, and we had a more complicated way of reaching Hawaii and the new B-24. We were bused to Hamilton Field in Marin County near San Francisco, then after three days or so flew out of Fairfield-Suisan Air Field in the middle of the night on a C-87, which was a B-24 converted for carrying uncomfortable passengers. Thirteen hours later, we, too, were at Hickam Field, but no reunion took place. The other five and the new airplane were waiting for us at Barking Sands Army Air Field, an overseas replacement center on the west coast of the island of Kauai. We were flown there in a C-47 and the reunion was complete. The living conditions at Barking Sands were the worst I experienced in the Pacific. We stayed there three or four days, when our orders finally came to proceed westward.

There were two overnight stops between Kauai and Guam. It was four hours to Johnson Island, eight more hours to Kwajalein, and eight more to Harmon Field on Guam. From my observation location in the lower nose of the B-24, I marveled at two things: the huge ocean below, quiet as a mill pond (pacific, indeed!) with its cumulous clouds everywhere, *and* the *thousands* of ships of all kinds plying the water below. These were American ships, many of them “Victory” ships, carrying war materials and supplies for the invasion of Japan. Looking below, it was anything but a lonely sight; there was no question, it was *our* ocean.