

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, August 27, 2012

Living on the Islands, 1945–46: The Japanese had a plan for complete dominance of eastern Asia and the Pacific far beyond the attack on the U.S. Navy at Pearl Harbor at the end of 1941. Their war machine was in high gear, and within six months they had captured the Philippines, the Malay Peninsula and Singapore, most of northern and eastern China, and many of the strategic Pacific islands, including Wake Island, Guam, the western Aleutians, and islands south of the Equator close to Australia. To stop this dangerous advance, thousands of U.S. Marines and Navy men were sent to the South Pacific in an attempt to engage the entrenched enemy on the sea, in the air, and in the island jungles. These were the real heroes of the Pacific war.

The years 1942 and 1943 were dangerous ones. Island campaigns with heavy naval support in unknown places like Guadalcanal and Bougainville and air support over the “hump” of the Himalayas from Burma to Chungking to sustain the Chiang Kai-shek government in China were costly in lives and material. By 1944, things were starting to turn around, with General MacArthur returning to Leyte in the Philippines, the Marshall Islands falling to U.S. forces, and the strategic Mariana Islands of Saipan and Guam captured in June and July respectively, after heavy naval and air bombardment. By the end of the year, hastily built air fields with long runways to accommodate the long-range B-29 bombers were in full use on Saipan, Tinian (a small island next to Saipan) and Guam, all about 1,600 statute miles south of the Japanese mainland. The older, smaller, and slower four-engine B-24s were used for aerial weather observation, and the 655th (later the 55th) Weather Reconnaissance Squadron was established at Harmon Field on Guam by the end of 1944.

When I joined the training part of this squadron at Will Rogers Field in Oklahoma City in March of 1945, the four 10-man crews in this group would represent the newest and last additions to the squadron at Guam that numbered about 400 men just before war's end later that summer. Of these, roughly 120 flying personnel (twelve 10-man crews) were supplemented by twice that many mechanics, cooks, tactical officers and non-coms, store room and commissary people, and a squadron doctor. We had 12 or more airplanes, including the three new B-24s equipped as weather planes, one of which was flown by “my” crew from Hunter Field, Georgia, to Guam in June 1945.

Upon our arrival, we built our own barracks from pre-fab lumber and screening sent in great quantity from the Pacific Northwest. At the same time, the squadron was establishing “flights” of up to four crews each to fly out of Iwo Jima (captured in February and halfway between the Marianas and Japan) and Okinawa (captured in June and only 325 miles from Kyushu on the Japanese mainland). The western Pacific was finally our ocean, and the important islands in this area were bustling places indeed. Our crew spent five days at Iwo Jima just before MacArthur accepted the Japanese surrender in Tokyo Bay and went to Okinawa in late September after the war had ended. Although Colonel Chevasse, commander of our weather squadron, had visions of grandeur, the squadron broke up by the beginning of 1946, and the long period of idle waiting set in before the last of us returned home in late summer of 1946. In the summer of '45, there had been 400,000 service men living on Guam; by the time I left in June 1946, I doubt that there were 50,000. We were not heroes; we just happened to be there at the end.