

## Tom Marshall's Weekly News, February 8, 2016

*(Also Covered in Weekly News of July 20, 2009)*

**Three Weeks on Okinawa, 1945:** The battle for the Island of Okinawa, 325 miles from the Japanese mainland (Kyushu), was the last major American campaign of World War II. In costly encounters, the former Japanese possession was secured at the end of June 1945. The central portion of the island was destroyed, including the cities of Naha and Shuri. The famed World War II columnist Ernie Pyle was killed in the last days of the war on Ie Jima, a tiny atoll just off the west coast of Okinawa.

The main reason for the campaign, with its high cost in lives and materiel, was to secure a staging area for the anticipated invasion of Japan. The native population was moved to the northern-most portion of the island; airfields and ports for naval vessels were being built in the central section; and in the southern one-third, there were abandoned towns and open countryside. By August, Yon Tan Airfield was in full service, Jimmy Doolittle's 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force was a major presence, and dozens of living areas had been established for the rapidly increasing military population. Had it not been for the ravages of war, Okinawa would have been a beautiful island at a latitude of 26 degrees north, the same as that of Miami, although the climate was considerably cooler off the Asian continent.

In early August, Lieutenant Colonel Chevasse, commander of the 55<sup>th</sup> Weather Reconnaissance Squadron on Guam, sent a flight of four B-24 crews and probably two or three airplanes to establish a living area near Yon Tan Airfield and schedule flights to gather weather information in all directions from Okinawa. As the summer progressed, these crews were platooned, some returning to Guam while others went to Okinawa for a few weeks. Lt. Newton's crew, of which I was the weather officer, went to Okinawa on September 28, three weeks after the war officially ended. As we approached the island in our B-24, I recall seeing the many coral reefs below the surface of the clear Pacific water. There were no clouds in the sky, a very unusual phenomenon in the western Pacific, and it turned out a moderate typhoon soon followed that corridor of clear weather and doused Okinawa about two days later. Our squadron was part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Air Force on Guam, but on Okinawa we were attached to the 8<sup>th</sup>. We were paid in Japanese yen instead of U.S. dollars.

One Sunday, our crew chartered an Army 6 x 6 truck, and we went exploring in the vacated southern portion of the island. For several hours, we saw no evidence of life. We walked through an abandoned native village and went through some of the houses. The cooking materials and table dishes were still in place, indicating that the people had to vacate without notice but that no looting had occurred. The former inhabitants were then living in temporary quarters at the north end of Okinawa, off limits to U.S. service personnel.

Despite the war's end, military construction continued full blast. A second airfield called Kadena, to be larger than Yon Tan, was being rushed to completion near our living area. Our food was not as good on Okinawa, but most of us liked the independence of being away from the "top brass" on Guam. The few crews and support personnel made the rules, which were few. Dick Estabrook, a good friend of mine, was a jack-of-all-trades and kept our living area functional. When the power went off, everyone yelled "Where's Estabrook?" He and three others built a hotel for four, complete with a shower and running water (they collected rain water). Most of us slept in tents with wooden floors. The sides could be rolled down to protect from rain and cool weather. In October, outdoor showers were tolerable only at the warmest time in the afternoon. Sometimes a jeep was available to attend an open-air movie within a few miles of our headquarters.

During the day, heavy dust would envelope our living area, caused by the many construction trucks passing on the unpaved road below. I developed asthma and could not lie down at night. I went on sick call, where the hospital was in a series of Quonset huts on the new Kadena Air Base. The first or second night there, another typhoon drenched the island, and the wind ripped up some of the facilities and heavily damaged the port area. By holding our feet against one end of our Quonset hut, we kept it from blowing out, but the hut next to us was not so lucky. However, the rain took care of the dust in the air, and I was fine again. Unfortunately, a few days

later the asthma returned, and I was grounded and ordered to return to Guam. On October 15, I returned with Lt. Deano's crew, who kindly flew no higher than 4,000 feet for the seven-hour trip to protect my damaged lungs. At my last breakfast on Okinawa, I took a good chunk of flesh from a forefinger while opening a can of C-rations, and went to the "medic" in our group for temporary repair. His name was Philatore, and he had some unknown new powder for such wounds called Penicillin. He dumped some of the powder in the hole, put the flesh back, and taped it up. It was an excellent repair.

I spent 19 days in the hospital on Guam, but I was fine — no trace of asthma. I thought I might get orders to come home, but it was not to be. Having numerous useless jobs for many months, including assistant mess officer, I finally sailed under the Golden Gate Bridge on the Army Transport "President Buchanan" on August 6, 1946. Today, I think Okinawa is a Japanese resort with many vacation hotels and condominiums.