

Memories of the Aleutians Campaign, WWII

MSgt Frank F. Carnes
14th Signal Operations, Radio Platoon

Troopship Ulysses S. Grant

Departing San Francisco in early August 1943 and sailing under the Golden Gate Bridge, we were aboard the troopship Ulysses S. Grant. She was originally a German ship acquired after WWI. The ship was accompanied by a destroyer escort that zig-zagged ahead of the Grant. We were bunked in cots several layers deep with personal possessions and large blue barracks bags. It was so crowded that I spent days in the radio room copying news from the USA in Morse code. And, also listening to Domei radio in Tokyo and the news there by Iva D. Aquino, known as Tokyo Rose. One day she had a message addressed to the U.S. Grant in the North Pacific waters. The news was that their Navy would sink the Grant and being thrown into the cold water, a soldier would live for only a few minutes.

Adak-Kiska Islands, Aleutians, Alaska

Arriving in Adak and using two-man tents for several days, again, it was very crowded. We watched our aircraft take off and land from their bombing and strafing trips to Kiska Island – especially the P-38's. Then load again, back on the Grant and to the landing on Kiska, August 15, 1943. Three others and I went down a rope ladder to the landing craft loaded with a snow jeep which had a mounted radio. A Major accompanied this motley crew. He was an aide to General Corlett who had us contact all island outposts before the Commanding General would land on the island. The Japanese had vacated during a prolonged weather storm and a great deal of fog. They boarded a ship in the harbor, throwing their rifles overboard. Later, one of our men used grappling hooks to raise one of the rifles. Then it was build quonset huts, move in, and experience a year and a half of dull living.

Quonset Hut Living, Adak, Aleutians

Eventually, I was transferred back to Adak to maintain the base radio stations with the outposts and copy in code the 10-11:00 PM news from Washington DC. This was presented to Cpl. Dashiell Hammett and Robert Kolodny to use in the Post's daily newssheet called the Adakian,

When Hollywood movie people visited the Aleutians, they first visited Cpl. Hammett. One was Errol Flynn and another was Olivia de Havilland who was just as gracious in person as she was in "Gone with the Wind".

We lived in quonset huts that were located in a huge gully, situated so that the tops were even or lower than ground level. One night with an Adak snowstorm in full fury and while we were all asleep, a soldier loudly announced that we were to grab personal items and leave immediately to a hut near the headquarters building. Farther down the gully, some huts were flattened by the weight of the snow and we heard of a death by suffocation. Rumor had it that a Colonel received a commendation for the hut's location.

Being the ranking NCO in the hut that housed many soldiers including D. Hammett, there were no officer inspections of these huts as we had in the lower 48. We slept in cots with sleeping bags that after some time, when stepping from the outside air into a dank smelly hut, was quite a shock. On a rare nice day, I ordered a house cleaning with sleeping bags aired outside and at this time, Cpl. Hammett was 55 years old. I was 25 and I heard the word "whippersnapper" and "wonder boy". But how nice to enter a clean environment.

Memories of the Aleutians Campaign, WWII, cont'd

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Fort Richardson, Anchorage

My next transfer was to Fort Richardson, Alaska, to the Department of Transportation, Harbor Craft Detachment. Colonel Nickell, Commanding, was to join Captain Eaton in establishing a school for Signalmen to man shore stations and small boats in the Aleutian Islands. This school taught voice radio procedure and blinking light communication (Morse Code). The cadre consisted of myself, a staff sergeant, two instructors, a two-man team of radio repairmen, and a gofer. As I recall, there were 250 students finishing the course, licensed and assigned to boats and shore stations.

Potato Diggin' – Here and There

I was born in 1918 and reared on a poor farm in Eastern Ohio. As a teenager, I made myself available to work at neighboring farms, felling trees for firewood, threshing, hoeing corn, and harvesting crops. A day's work usually resulted in a dollar and a noon meal. A neighbor, Simon Legree, asked me to pick up potatoes for a half day. On arrival, he laid down the rules: no throwing potatoes; drink water only at the end of a row; if your back hurts, get on your knees; and no talking! I was paid a fifty-cent piece. So, at the Fort, we hear of a farmer at Palmer, Alaska, requesting help harvesting potatoes. Borrowing our assigned jeep, my friend and I visited a Mr. Svenson on a Friday evening to offer two days work for a dollar an hour. As Mr. Svenson approached the jeep, we noticed that he brushed his bald head several times and flipped his hand. MOSQUITOS. My friend was using his cap to keep them away and they were thick in my ears and nose. Good luck, Mr. Svenson and goodbye!

The Colonel

Colonel Nickell had his own aircraft at Elmendorf Field. On weekends, he used a direction finder, a small cased instrument that he used for his routes. On Monday mornings, I would get a call to his office to have our repairmen recalibrate the DF. The Colonel was always fair, polite, and very appreciative.

Totem Poles

During the classes, the students and instructors resided in the same barracks. My room was on the second floor. The rules were lights out and absolute quiet at 10 PM until 6 AM. One night I was awakened by a loud ruckus on the floor below. There was T/5 Amos Wallace, a native of the Tlingit tribe of Southeast Alaska, who was very drunk going the length of the building using profane language, perhaps some in his native tongue, and directed at me. I asked another student to call the MP's who took Amos to the guardhouse to dry out. Later Captain Eaton removed his rating and still later he was assigned to a boat as a Signalman.

In the 1980's, still remaining in touch with ex-student Harry Bailey near Boston, who met Amos in a shopping mall where he was carving a totem pole from a large tree, similar to those in Southeast Alaska. Still later, my wife and I stayed a few days at a Disney lodge that had a huge totem pole inside. Was this also a Wallace creation?

And, after that, my brother and wife were on a cruise through the Inside Passage and I asked him to visit Amos when they stopped in Juneau. Amos's only comment about Army Service was "That was a long time ago."

Nenana, Alaska

Returning from a trip out the Aleutian chain, the Staff Sergeant and radio repair crew had been sent to Nenana on the Tanana River where they were to install radio equipment on three paddleboats that were in dry dock. The Captain said they were gone too long and my orders were to hurry it and return to Anchorage. So, on by train, with an overnight stop at a hotel, midway to Nenana. I have since heard that the hotel burned.

Of course, the crew knew I was enroute (no secrets in the Signal Corps) and on arrival, we all met at the local pub. While there, a local Indian miss, very pregnant, angrily faced me and by pointing and using signs, indicated that I was the father. She had been so instructed by that motley crew. It was ha-ha-ha and ho-ho-ho. My sense of humor was tested there.

While at Nenana, it was interesting to see the Ice Pool and the mechanism that is placed in the water. Also walking the bridge and hear the stories of the Russian pilots flying under that bridge while ferrying aircraft from the USA to Russia. The Staff Sergeant met the daughter of the minister of the local mission, was invited to dinner, where he heard the story of the minister's annual trip through the Lower 48. He would purchase a large car, travel through states visiting churches and telling congregations of the mission. Collections were taken and he showed the Sergeant his full money belt. This so impressed the Sergeant that he volunteered to give the sermon that very evening and gave me an invitation to hear it. This was declined.

VJ Day

Now we were on the train enroute to Anchorage. Several miles south of Nenana, the train picked up passengers of a mother and son for our car plus two bundles of animal pelts after a winter of trapping. The car was heated and so were the pelts and the two passengers, so the odor permeated every inch of that car. And our crew. By now the war with Japan was winding down and so we made a quick trip to Seward and the shore station. The switchback ride there was somewhat scary and then a flight to Kodiak for two days.

After VJ Day, I finally had a warm ride in an aircraft – a DC4 to Seattle. So plush and a hostess. In retrospect, my nearly five years service did very little for the war effort. Six months schooling, learning Morse Code with a key, then to speed up with a bug and typewriter.

Colonel Nickell received a commendation and Captain Eaton to a Major for their efforts at the Signal School. I enjoyed mail and e-mail communication for many years with Mr. Eaton. Thank you.