

Recollections of a Unit 6 Beach Jumper

Training and Action Experiences in World War II

After finishing Midshipman's School at Notre Dame, a call came for volunteers for extra-hazardous duty in a new unit about which they would tell us nothing, called the Beach Jumpers.

I think you will find it interesting to read the series of papers in the Naval Service section of my records ordering me from one station to another for training. Thinking back to my lack of experience I find it interesting to realize that I got from one station to the other on time. You will get the gist of the training from the orders. After this specialized training all of us new Beach Jumpers came together on Ocracoke Island, N.C., just below Cape Hatteras. It had been a Coast Guard station before the Navy got it for Beach Jumper training. It could be reached only by ferry boat from Beauford or Washington, N.C. The isolation was for secrecy and the secrecy was extended even to us. We didn't really know what we were up to until we got overseas. During our training there, volunteers were solicited for Scout & Raider training. I signed on, along with Moose Musser, Max Munn and George Duro. We trained at Ft. Pierce, FL, with the enlisted men who made up our squads. We had to pass swimming and stalking tests and we were taught martial arts and Chinese, among other activities. Our PT after breakfast was tossing a palm log in the air, by squad; each of us had a log. The drill required moving the log sharply from alongside-to-hip-to shoulder-to overhead-to shoulder-to-hip-to ground. When we went overhead with the log, it had to be done in unison or one end of it put a lot of pressure on the guys moving too slowly. All of us had the latter experience in the time we were there.

The highlight of S & R training was a final scouting assignment. My squad drew the Underwater Demotion Camp next door to us. We were to determine how many tents, how arranged, headquarters, mess hall, sleeping, latrine and showers, etc. In the course of it, I found myself alongside a box about 4 ft. x 4 ft. with a tarpaulin over it. I raised it and heard a hiss. I knew it was an alligator immediately. We were among sleeping UD guys and it was hard as hell to mute the excitement. We pressed the tarp down on the gator to still him and wrapped him up in it without rousing anyone. I thought that trophy would suffice as evidence of our effort, so we got out of there. I forgot to mention that to get to UD we had to launch a rubber boat, paddle about half a mile down the inlet from the Atlantic Ocean toward downtown Ft. Pierce, and get it up the jetty wall of monster rocks to the camp above. Reverse the process to get home.

The alligator swiped from the UD camp was the trophy of the night. When we left to return to Ocracoke I told the squad not to expose the alligator for fear it would be confiscated by the authorities. The squad had made a harness and leash for it, and it was no time before they were parading it up and down the aisles of the train to the delight of the young ladies. The gator was not large, about 3 or 4 ft.

After Ocracoke we took a troop train across country to San Francisco. Waiting for our ship we had a few days to scout Union Square, the trolleys, and the waterfront. This was not my first large city. I had visited Chicago from Ft. Bend, IN. (Notre Dame) and Washington, D.C. in my training up and down the East Coast. But San Francisco was special for some reason, but not for the swells you feel as your ship sails under the Golden Gate Bridge and into the Pacific Ocean. It was seasick time, big time. Bunks were stacked two or three high, but as I recall, not the bare canvas style. We had mattresses and pillows but not sheets although we were officers. It seems we were about a month at sea before docking at Milne Bay, New Guinea. We moved quickly to another port and stayed there a while. Moose, Max, George and I hit it lucky when a Sea Bee unit that was shipping out asked our commander for four people to man their office for them. They had fresh food and beer and all my buddies went ape over the beer. We went from New Guinea to Leyte in the Philippines where we watched our first anti-aircraft fireworks; spectacular until you awakened to the fact that it was Japanese aircraft over American ships and airfields. It was at Leyte that we were assigned to smaller

ships, mostly LCI,s (Landing Craft Infantry) and LSM,s (Landing Craft Mechanized: Jeeps, Troop Carriers, Tanks). Moose, Max, George and I were assigned to the same LCI, along with our squads. We left Leyte soon for a 3-day trip to Mindoro Island (Philippines) the island just below Luzon, the largest and most civilized of the Philippines. Manila, the capitol, was where McArthur left just ahead of Japanese invaders early in the war. He left General Skinny Wainwright in charge, later captured and imprisoned with thousands of GI's on Corregidor Island in Manila Bay, Luzon. General Wainwright and the GI's looked like the Jews of the Holocaust when they were liberated after the war.

The convoy leaving Leyte was composed of about 85 ships and a dozen PT boats. Among the 85 ships were destroyers that occupied the four points of this huge rectangular convoy of ships with one or two destroyers down the sides of the rectangles, one ahead and one behind. Several supply ships were included, among them ammunition ships.

We left Leyte during the night and all hell broke loose at daylight. I hit the deck in my skivvies and when I passed through the hatch to the outside the first thing I saw was a Jap Zero so close I could have hit it with a baseball (or so i thought). He was barreling down the space between two lines of ships, from back to front. His trick was to have us firing at each other, and as he emerged from the convoy he stayed low until out of range, leaving only the ships in the first row free to fire on him unless others wanted to chance hitting a friendly ship. During the 3 days, 25 or 26 kamikazes circled our convoy, and about eight of them took the dive. Four of these were particularly memorable.

Kamikazes were suicide bombers who dove their planes into their targets. They typically came in twos or threes, one a senior pilot to be sure that the junior killed himself like he was supposed to. They circled out of range, not for long, until a target was chosen, then the dive, almost vertical. Throughout the circling and the dive, all ships were firing at the Japs. The first memorable happening was a dive on the left-point destroyer. The skipper of the destroyer put it on full speed ahead away from the convoy. At the last possible moment he ordered the wheel full to port (left). He heeled to 45 degrees or more, it seemed, to avert the collision and almost made it. The tip of the Jap's wing caught the edge of the destroyer. The bomb went off but damage was slight. You could hear the shouts from our ship clearly, and I thought I heard shouts from the entire convoy.

The second memorable event was the dive on a supply ship carrying ammunition. Must have hit the load square because there was nothing left to sink; flotsam, including a few life preservers. The third event was the dive on a second supply ship. It must have been an ammunition ship also because it was immediately abandoned. We spent half the night picking up survivors. Moose, Max, and one of the squad later received Bronze Stars for tying lines to themselves, diving in and swimming to the life rafts to expedite retrieval. An LCI is not easily maneuverable. Where was I? In practice with 20 mm cannon somewhere along the line I had impressed my buddies with a quick hit into a target balloon and they and I volunteered me into a 20 mm crew of 2, one to load and one to fire. A ship's company gunner and I shared the gun, alternating loading and firing. I had occasion during the three days to fire on a Zero in range but got behind him and could never catch up to him. He was moving left to right and my tracers told me I was gaining when the canister gave out and we had to reload. My Navy papers may contain mention of the LCI and crew in picking up survivors.

The fourth memory was the toughest. We had just anchored at Mindoro when 3 Kamikazes appeared almost out of sight. The PT's fired up smoke tanks and began to circle our command ship. There was no wind and the obvious happened - the PT smoke effort produced, instead of a screen of smoke, a bull's-eye of smoke. One of the Japs went into his dive and all ships were on him instantly with their fire but to no avail. From somewhere one of our P38 fighters had arrived and dived after the Jap. When the Jap went in the P38 pulled up but went no more than a couple of miles before exploding in flames. The greatest act of heroism I saw, the pilot had to know he had no chance with almost 100 ships firing on a Jap diving on the same line of flight as his.

The devastation of the Jap's hit could hardly have been worse. Our commanding officer was killed, our second-in-command had a leg blown off; our communications officer (a vital assignment in our operation) was killed and his number one assistant went into shock and may have never come out of it. I saw him sitting alongside a sailor with terrible burns, also in shock. Neither moved nor let out a sound, just staring into space. Others were killed and wounded but none as important to our operation. We got replacements quickly, but the two killed and one losing a leg were very close to us, hard to lose.

Time to let you know what a Beach Jumper Unit was trained to do. I put this together not from being told or reading a manual (there was no manual). Our existence was secret. That's why the isolation of Ocracoke and pledge to silence regarding the word, Beach Jumper. It was a large-scale diversionary unit. We were to carry out a mock invasion on southern Luzon while the real invasion took place at Manila Bay. All of the ships described so far were involved in our mock invasion. The smaller ships were equipped with "chickens", two chicken wire rectangles, 3 feet high and 6 feet wide (and larger, depending on the size of the ship) configured perpendicular to each other. These "chickens" mounted high on the mast of the ship, produced a radar response (blip on the screen) much larger than the blip produced by the ship alone; e.g., a PT boat carrying the "chicken" looked like a destroyer on radar. LCI's and LCM's with "chickens" looked like much larger LST's which carried men and tanks. We looked on radar like quite an armada.

Communications was a huge element of our ruse. Scripted messages were sent out directing various landing craft to land men and equipment on different beaches. Other bogus messages were to be sent for the direction of the mock invasion.

Finally, the destroyer fire, the biggest guns we had, was to be supplemented with aircraft rockets. The open hulls of the LSM's and LST's were packed with rocket launchers.

I should probably add that Beach Jumpers did not man all of the ships in the convoy; there were not that many of us. The destroyers, supply ships, and PT's had none aboard, and some of the LSM's and LST's had none aboard. Ship's company were trained by our people to load and fire the rockets.

Before the armada took off for Luzon we played hide and seek with the Jap reconnaissance for days, maybe longer. Since they were more vulnerable in daytime, they made their trips just before dawn. We would run up a lagoon after dark and return to the anchorage before daylight. We heard and saw a plane fly over very low one morning and apparently he had us well positioned. The next morning he straddled us with two bombs, one on each side, both barely missing. We continued the routine but got no return visits.

During that period, the 4 of us Scouts were ordered to make a run to our "invasion" site on southern Luzon, two each aboard two PT boats, the purpose being to try to raise fire from the Japs presumed to be there. McArthur was "island-hopping" his way to Japan, ignoring concentrations of Japs on some islands, and carefully choosing islands that were strategically located to create a supply line from Hawaii to Japan. Luzon was almost certain to be on that supply line since McArthur had a personal obligation to recapture the island he had been run off of and to liberate General Skinny Wainwright and the GI's imprisoned with him. The Japs were aware of this; and Luzon presented two very likely landing spots, Manila Bay and southern Luzon. Our plans for a mock invasion on southern Luzon were intended to shift Jap troops from Manila Bay and hold tight on southern Luzon any troops that had been positioned there.

Back to the PT boat trip. We left just after dark and ran full speed until just before dawn. We were in a fairly narrow channel with heavily wooded hills on either side. We tied up and cut what branches we could cut with knives and partially covered the two PT's. When night fell we took off again at full speed, arriving off the coast of southern Luzon around 10 or 11 p.m. We fired Verry pistols into the air (flares), machine guns, 20 mm canons, and the big one, a 40 mm canon. The two PT's paralleled the coast but too far out --- we drew no response. Hauled fanny back to Mindoro, stopping over during the day in the same channel as before. The PT skipper attached brooms to their masts as we entered

the Mindoro anchorage, symbolizing a "clean sweep" or successful mission. To us it was a disappointment.

The mock invasion went smoothly and the aircraft rockets provided the most spectacular fireworks I ever expect to see. It was over too quickly and we were surprised to draw no fire. As you may have read, the Japs had developed the practice of allowing our troops to land before opening fire. If they were there they missed a great opportunity to sink several sitting ducks (or "chickens").

We returned to the States soon afterward. I remember American prisoners coming aboard the troop ship we came home on. Among them was a civilian couple, the wife a very attractive blonde who had clearly suffered no hardship during the confinement. A real sight for sore eyes, prancing the decks for a horny all-male audience for about a month.

I went back to Ft. Pierce for Scout/Raider Training and was having dinner with a buddy, Blackie, when the war ended. The bar closed immediately, and everyone inside poured into the streets leaving the place empty. Blackie and I leaned over the bar, got two of the fullest bottles we could reach and joined the party outside.

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