



The Story of a Marine Aircrew Man in WWII

by Judy Foster

For me World War II is just words in a history book. For my husband, it was an inconvenience, as a small child not having 'real' butter or sugar. For Gerry Merz it was all too real. This is Gerry's story as told by him and edited unfortunately for space by me. It will run as a series in the next few newsletters. I hope you will be as entertained, educated, and astounded as I was learning about World War II through Gerry's eyes.

It was 1943 Gerry graduated a happy 18-year old from Monroe High School here in Rochester. Within 24-hours of that graduation Gerry's life would change forever, Gerry had received his notice to report for induction. Only two days later he was at the Federal Building reporting for duty.

The Navy and the Marine recruiters were there. The Marines wanted two 'good men' Gerry stepped forward. After an interview it was off to Buffalo for more interviews and another physical. He was accepted, sworn in, and had only a week before heading for boot camp. Gerry was leaving behind his parents, his sister, and his sweetheart Joyce (who would eventually become Gerry's wife).

From Rochester to DC Gerry traveled for the first time in a Pullman car, ***"it was some trick getting undressed and into bed all cooped up in that upper berth. I tried to fall asleep, but all I could think about was the great adventure that I was embarking on. Finally the clickity clack of the train on the tracks put me to sleep."*** When Gerry arrived in DC he had some time to kill so he took in some sights. He was able to see Harry Truman at the Senate before boarding his next train heading south. ***"I had to stand in the aisle till we got to Richmond. All night and part of the next day we were on that incredibly hot dirty train."***

Waiting for Gerry at the end of the ride were two Marine DI's. ***"My first reaction was one of sheer terror. They screamed and hollered at us and herded us on to another train."*** This train looked like something Lincoln might have ridden on. But it got them to their final stop Port Royal, South Carolina. From there it was a barge ride across the bay to hell...well Paris Island.

Boot camp for Gerry was really probably no different than boot camp for everyone. You go in as a civilian, but by the end of your first full day you're a Marine. ***"The saddest looking excuse for a Marine you can imagine."*** Gerry was probably being a little hard on himself.

Drill Instructors taught him how to march, first aid, map reading, general orders, and military courtesy, ***“just to name a few.”*** Paris Island wasn't the place to be in July and August either. After 5 weeks Gerry was transferred to the rifle range. ***“We had to run all the way out to the new camp that was about 3 miles away. We slept in tents and as I recall, the mosquitoes were having a feast on us. Our DI gave us hell for swatting at them.”*** He said, ***“you had chow didn't you? Well let the mosquitoes eat too.”*** Here Gerry learned about the M1 rifle with its vicious kick.

His last two weeks in boot camp were the worst of his life. KP required him to be on his feet from 4 a.m. to 8 p.m. sitting only to eat. But the day of graduation was something else all together. ***“...With the post band playing the Marine Hymn we passed in review. I must admit, it sent goose bumps up my spine.”***

A week home, and then on to Cherry Point, North Carolina. Cherry Point was a Marine Air Corps base, and to Gerry it was Heaven compared to Paris Island.

Because Gerry had studied radios in high school he was assigned to aviation radio school at Jacksonville Naval Air Station in Jacksonville, Florida. This would be home for the next 8 weeks. Gerry learned Morris Code, becoming proficient at 18 words a minute. He also learned to send Morris Code out on the blinker lights. He enjoyed his leaves in Jacksonville, and saw Bob Hope and Joe Louis while stationed there. One Saturday he talked his way into a ride on a SBD dive-bomber, a ride that he remembers fondly today. The last two weeks of radio school were devoted to learning a new hush hush product, radar.

From Jacksonville it was on to Yellow Water Gunnery School. ***“Gunnery training was a blast (to make a pun.)”*** Here Gerry started with a 12 gage shot gun, killing clay pigeons. Then it was on to the Browning machine gun. Honing his ability to fire several types of weapons was the task at Yellow Water, and Gerry enjoyed it.

From Yellow Water Gerry went to Cecil Field back in Jacksonville. This is where he would put all that he had learned in the air. ***“When I reported to the operations building on my first day, I noticed something very disturbing. Directly across the street was a lot where they had stored all of the crashed planes. It sure gave you an uneasy feeling.”*** This is where Gerry met Don Simmons, his regular pilot at that time. And where he got comfortable with his aircraft, the SBD. ***“They were considered obsolete even at that time, but were very sturdy and reliable. The nick name given them was Slow but Deadly.”***



Gerry's first flight was something worth remembering... ***"We climbed steadily for twenty minutes till the plane got up to 12,000 feet. It was pretty cold up there and I started to shiver, because I knew we were about to take our first dive. The dive flaps opened and the plane started to point its nose toward the ground. We started down and the ground was rushing up at us. The wind was howling and I was watching the altimeter at my left side. When we got down to 2,000 feet I called in the mike 'it's time to pull this thing out!' It felt like a huge weight was put on me as the G forces took over. I could hardly move."*** That first day there were five practice dives. Each one attempting to hit a huge target painted on the ground. This was also the first of many days of practice.

Gerry learned more as the time passed, and was tested many times in many ways... ***"we flew at high attitude to learn how to cope with oxygen gear. It took us forever to climb up to 23,000 feet I thought I would freeze. In an open plane like ours (with no heat) it was almost unbearable."***

As training ended in Jacksonville Gerry was able to come home for two weeks before heading to California and points west. He remembers spending every night out with Joyce, and a short but wonderful trip to the 1,000 Islands. But the War was raging and Gerry needed to be a Marine, so that said he boarded a train for Miramar. Chicago to Los Angeles, where he and a few buddies partied their way up and down the town, then pouring himself on the train for San Diego.

Miramar Naval Air Station was in the desert it had few trees but plenty of sand and rocks. It was here that Gerry would prepare for his actual trip into war. He learned to abandon ship by jumping from a 30' platform into a pool fully clothed. ***"Some guys wouldn't jump so he just gave them a gentle push off the end."***

The day that Gerry left America was cool and bright. The post band played "Over There". ***"As we rounded the corner onto the dock, there she was the USS Cape Bon."***



Now the real adventure began.

Chapter Two

Gerry was heading towards the rest of his life full of anticipation and fear. The USS Cape Bon wasn't like anything Gerry had ever experienced. The hold was the place where the Sailors and Marines would spend their sleeping hours five high in bunks made of pipe frames and stretched canvas. It was hot and stuffy in the hold, and Gerry found refuge on the ship's deck.

Gerry loved the ocean, and was a good sailor; ***"that is to say I didn't get seasick."*** He found himself watching from the bow of the ship, the wake, the flying fish, and the sunsets. There wasn't much to do aboard

for a Marine. Oh sure the Sailors would have drills: ***“you would hear, general quarters...man your battle stations.”*** Sometimes they would launch a large balloon and let the Sailors shoot it down. Occasionally the Marines would gather on the fantail and shoot clay pigeons.

Day turned to night and back to day again. After ten such rotations of the earth they passed the Hawaiian Islands. It would have been a thrill for Gerry except the islands were only a speck on the horizon and it meant no land for a very long time.

Crossing the equator on a Naval ship is an event with great significance even today. This is when any man or woman becomes a Shell Back. Others who have already experienced this help to ‘initiate’ the new ones. Costumes are worn, butts are whacked, and there is the swallowing of the dreaded pill. Which by the way will make you pass blue urine. But once a Shell Back always a Shell Back and the experience is one most don’t forget. ***“The next day we were all issued cards that proclaimed that we were full fledged Shell Backs, I still have mine.”***

Twenty-eight days after leaving the United States the ship sailed into Iron Bottom Bay...Guadalcanal. For a Marine this place was special, there had been such a famous battle there just a year prior. For a guy from Upstate, New York it appeared ominous, ***“with its dark green mountains and groves of coconut palms along the shore.”***

They weren’t there long, and it was on to the Russell Islands only a day’s trip north. They passed a native settlement and the inhabitants as Gerry puts it ***“not the South Sea girls you see in the movies.”*** These were descendents of cannibals that had inhabited the area many years ago.

Their camp on the Russell Islands was a series of Quonset huts located in a coconut grove. This was great until the wind would drop a coconut onto the roof in the middle of the night. For a moment they would wonder if they were under fire. They stayed there for eight days before moving on. It was a great ‘vacation’ you could say; pitching horseshoes, watching movies, and roasting a side of beef the Aussies left behind.



A C47 cargo plane flew Gerry and his group to Munda, New Georgia. He was officially assigned to VMSB 241, MAG 24, 1st Marine Air Wing. Munda had been a battle “hot spot” just months earlier in the Solomon campaign. The airstrip had been started by the Japanese, but it would take the Navy Sea Bees to finish the job. It was built of crushed white coral and had mounds of coral piled up around each plane to protect it from bombing and strafing raids. It was here that Greg ‘Pappy’ Boyington had operated. Boyington was the leading ace at that time, and would later get shot down by the Japanese and sent to Japan. For those of you that may not know, Pappy was the leader of the now famous Black Sheep Squadron.

Gerry was quite comfortable here, he bunked with 3 others, and they called their tent the “Mishafillyyorkfornia. After the locations we lived in at home.” There was one small problem out there in the “boondocks” Coral Rats. ***“They were small, about the size of a mouse but when you turned out the lights they were out and about. You couldn’t leave anything out that was edible... we slept under mosquito nets not only to protect us from mosquitoes but also from the little critters.”***

Gerry also got to experience first hand a natural phenomenon the migration of the land crabs. Now I’ve seen this on the Discovery Channel, but it’s a little different to be up close and personal. ***“...we woke up to an invasion of land crabs. They were everywhere! When jeeps and trucks dove on the road along the airstrip they crushed them by the hundreds. In a day or so in the hot sun, they began to smell pretty bad.”*** The crabs come to shore to mate and lay eggs before returning to the sea.

By now Gerry had met his pilot, 1st LT Jack Hickson, from Honolulu. They were also issued their gear: ***“a parachute, a Mae West, flight suit, leather jacket, 45 cal. Pistol, helmet and goggles. We thought we were pretty hot stuff in our new gear.”***

The planes had arrived and it was now time for combat training. Flying over these islands was a feast for the eyes that Gerry enjoyed very much.

“On one occasion we flew up the middle of a channel known as the Slot. The previous year, this had been the scene of several night naval battles. The Japanese Navy would come down the Slot from Rabaul to raid the US forces that were hanging on desperately, to Guadalcanal. Our Navy lost ships in these waters, including the cruiser Astoria.” This is also the area where JFK’s PT 109 was sunk and he was later rescued.

Soon it was time to move again, and this time to Bugainville Island. Only this move would be different. This was where Gerry, his squadron, and the others would prepare for the invasion of Luzon. He splashed ashore on Thanksgiving Day 1944 K-rations were the menu for the holiday meal.

Bugainville is the furthest island north of the Solomon chain it had an active volcano that spit smoke on a continuous basis. ***“It seemed to me a dark and sinister place, with thick damp jungle and low hanging clouds around the mountain. The jungle was so thick in places you couldn’t see through it.”***

Gerry was able to enjoy a USO show in person Bob Hope, Francis Langford, and Jerry Cellona were the stars. It was a thrill he still remembers fondly.

A skeleton crew stayed back, and for two weeks they loaded the gear on barges and small boats in order to get to the ships in the harbor.



Gerry boarded the USS President Polk. That said... the boarding is one that Gerry will never forget. Trying to climb up cargo nets in high swells was a feat that took a great amount of effort and a little luck.

Once at the Navy base in Manas harbor Gerry was assigned a great work detail. He was to go ashore and bring back beer! He as any good, thoughtful person would, had to make sure it wasn’t ‘poison’.

The next morning in the thickest of fog Gerry watched as the Battleship Missouri passed on it’s way out to sea like a ghost...she made no sound.

The convoy was on the move again getting close to the Philippines. Life was soon to change forever.

Chapter Three

As you remember Gerry was about to go into combat for the very first time. I think that hearing about his experience in his words is important, so for the majority of this article you'll hear from him. I'll leave the editing to a minimum. I think that you'll be as fascinated as I in what he has to say.

"January 28, 1945, I was awakened at 4 a.m. got dressed and went to breakfast. After eating I reported to the briefing tent. Everyone that was assigned to the strike was present. The C.O. Major Benjamin Manchester, and the intelligence officer briefed us. They assigned us the position we would fly in formation...our target was Munoz, near Clark field to bomb barracks and supplies. A truck took the crews out to the flight line where the plans were warmed up and ready to go...when we reached the runway I buckled myself in and we took off in a cloud of blue smoke."



"After joining up in three plane sections we headed for the target. There were four Army Air Corps P38 fighters flying cover over us. Two would fly below and two above for protection from the Jap planes. At this time it was not know what to expect as far as air opposition. The planes slowly climbed for an hour until we reached 10,000 feet. The flight leader called on the radio that the target was in sight and to follow him down. We opened the dive flaps just before peeling off. Down we went, following the second section leader into a long wooded valley. I could see the ground rushing up at me and the bomb released just before our pullout. There was a huge cloud of smoke and dust and I could feel the concussion when that 1,000-pound bomb exploded. My pilot completed his pullout and we were skimming along the valley floor. As we flew along I could see flashes along the hillsides. The Japanese were shooting machine gun and small arms fire at us. I armed my guns and sprayed the hillside with my guns first strike was history."

The Dauntless' that were flown by the Marines may have been out of production, but they performed like champs. They dropped 8,734 separate bombs on Japanese troops, bivouac areas, barracks, armored columns, supply dumps, and gun positions.

"The "Diving Devil dogs of Luzon" fired a total of 861,459 rounds in diving and strafing runs on the Japs; of this number 487,909 were fired by the rear seat gunners from their twin 30 cal. Machine guns. The rest were sent through the propellers by pilots with their fixed 50 cal. Guns."



A Douglas SBD dive-bomber of the First Marine Air Wing giving close air support to Army ground forces in Central Luzon hovers over a target to observe the hit of the preceding plane before dropping its own bomb. The plane is one of the self-styled "Diving Devil Dogs of Luzon" that flew hundreds of missions against pin-point targets in the Philippines.

Gerry's next action was a strike at the town of Cabanatuan on February 1st, after which was a strike at a town north of the landing sight San Fernando. Next was the Angat River. ***"This strike was particularly important. We would be indirectly involved in the rescue of one of our gunner's families and in affect the lives of several hundred others."*** There were non-Filipino civilians that were being held at the Santo Tomas University in Manila. They had been held for the last 3 years, and tanks were ordered through the enemy's lines in order to free them. Gerry's assignment was to knock out a bridge so the enemy couldn't cross. The raid was successful and the prisoners were freed.

Three other missions took place on February 6th, 8th, and 9th taking out bridges. These missions were to keep the Japanese soldiers from retreating. Here is Gerry's account of one of the missions: ***"The bridge was in a deep valley that was between two mountains and we started down in our dive. When we got between the mountains the air became very turbulent. The plane was being buffeted all over the sky. Jack had a hard time holding the plane on course as we descended. He finally got on target and released the 1,000-pound bomb and pulled out very low down the valley. It was a bull's eye. Our bomb hit the left approach right on the button and the road disappeared in a cloud of smoke and dust."***

"We headed for the sea that was at the end of the valley. When we were out over the water the plane was very low and we flew along just over the wave tops. You really got a feeling of speed as you skimmed along at 200 knots."

Manila was captured. Gerry thought it was worth taking a look at so he and a buddy set out on their 100 mile journey to take that look. They were lucky...a fellow marine showed up in a jeep, and offered them a ride. Luck wasn't that they didn't have to walk the 100 miles; luck was that they weren't arrested because the jeep had been stolen from the motor pool! They found Manila fascinating with its diverse population, the kindness of its people, and the poverty that shared space with the devastation the city took during the air raids. One thing that remained intact was a church that had been made entirely of cast iron. The church was built in Belgium, taken apart and shipped over, then re-assembled bolt by bolt. Gerry made it back to base without incident, he doesn't mention whether the jeep thief was as lucky.

The Japanese did manage to have a few planes hidden away and would take night nuisance raids as Gerry would call them. Most of these didn't amount to much and the guys got pretty used to them. Relaxing will get you in trouble however. During one such raid the Japs surprised them with more than the 'usual' a Betty had snuck in under radar. As Gerry hugged the ground the Betty managed to do a great amount of damage to the headquarters' squadron killing four and wounding seventy-eight others.

During Gerry's next strike on March 3rd at Pinaman Bay after which they headed to Corregador. This is where the 11th Airborne took back this island strong hold. This was a great victory since 4-years earlier General McArthur was forced to surrender here, vowing to return.

It was here that for the first time Gerry's plane took a hit from enemy fire. A 20 MM shell exploded on the bulletproof glass in front of the pilot. It smashed the glass and did little else except scaring the crew a little.

"On March 5th there was a raid on Baguio which is the summer capital of the Philippines. It is located in the cool mountains to the north. During the hot summer the whole government would move up there to escape the heat of Manila. General Yamashita, commander of all Japanese forces in the Philippines was holed up there and was putting up a stubborn resistance. The strike was to knock out gun emplacements that were hidden among the houses on a hillside. After we completed our bomb run I was strafing the target with my twin thirties. All of a sudden a swimming pool loomed into view. I remember seeing my slugs ricocheting off the water of the pool and thinking what a strange sight."

"There were 3 more strikes in the Luzon campaign, March 12th, 17th, and 18th, soon we got orders to pack up and get ready for our next operation. Mindanao, in the southern Philippines would be our next destination."

Chapter Four

It is with great sadness that I am writing the final installment of this amazing story. Gerry is a hero, he and the countless thousands of men and women that have fought for our Country. This however, has been very rewarding because I have gotten to know more about a man and more about The War.

I want to thank Gerry for thinking of the rest of us by taking the time to write down his experience. For those of you that have someone in your life that has these tales to tell I encourage you to sit and listen... for this is the part of history that wasn't written down in most books. And for those of you that have a story to tell whether it is of Viet Nam, Korea, or Desert Storm, don't deny the rest of us the opportunity to learn first hand from you what it was like.

To all of you, and especially to Gerry... thank you.

...last we found Gerry it was March and he was in the heat of the battle. He left Luzon and headed to the southern Philippines. His destination was a small town called Malibang. This was in the heart of Moro country. ***"The Moros have a long and famous reputation for there independence and long resistance."*** According to Gerry they had a reputation for being fierce fighters, he felt lucky they were on our side, because the Japs were afraid of them.

It didn't take long to get their camp up and running. There was a stream that provided cold mountain water, and rain forests full of monkeys and tropical birds. Bananas could be picked that were small and very sweet.

Their first strike was April 22nd on the Del Monte airdrome. Raids proceeded through the end of April. It was however the 5th of May that will live with Gerry forever. ***"...we were the third plane to dive and we completed the bomb run and dropped our bomb. As were in the process of the pull out, I saw the first plane in the next group seem to shudder and smoke just before the pull out. It never pulled out of the dive and slammed right into the target."*** The two 'boys' were killed instantly. ***"They never had a chance."***

Only 10-days later Gerry came face to face with a scene right out of a horror movie. Gerry's plane was asked to land to pick up some gear. An Army captain had something for them to see. Seventy-three dead enemy soldiers in an acre sized field. ***"This brought the war up close and personal."***

May 23rd was Gerry's last combat mission. He spent the last few weeks in the Philippines doing guard duty, four-hours on eight off. One night he came face to face with a wild boar in the middle of an ammo dump.



"It scared the hell out me at the time, and I sure was glad when that night was over."

During this time Gerry was assigned to be part of a team that went hunting for a man that had attempted to steal a rifle. Think of an old west posse... except they were tracking through a rain forest fighting off leaches.

About 2-weeks later Gerry was loaded onto a C47 and started his long journey home. He wound up on a plane that the only people aboard were Gerry the pilot and the co-pilot. ***"I rode in the cargo compartment with all the crates and boxes lashed down to the floor."*** Gerry soon found himself up front in the co-pilots

seat actually flying the plane. From the time they landed until Gerry was aboard the USS Charles Stuart life was a blur.

As it turned out Gerry was suffering from Acute Hepatitis and spent the remainder of the trip in sickbay. ***“When they put me in that soft hospital bunk it felt like heaven, after those hard canvas bunks down in the hold.”***

On the way back Gerry heard the news that all had been waiting for...the war was over. We had dropped something called an atomic bomb and the Japanese had surrendered. Gerry was only 3-days out of San Francisco at that time. ***“I can remember seeing the barren hills of California and thinking that I had made it across and back in one piece.”***

Gerry didn't make it back well however, it was discovered while in the hospital outside of San Fran that Gerry was also suffering from Malaria. He spent several weeks in the hospital before he was strong enough to get out and explore that glorious city. A jitney was only .10 cents for a service man and he had easy access to China Town, Fisherman's Wharf, and Knob Hill. He started to put weight back on as he got stronger and healthier. A trip to the PX found a diamond ring for that girl back home.

About 3 months passed and Gerry was really enjoying himself. Gerry was finally well enough to leave the hospital, and was on his way home on a 30-day furlough. This time his trip across country was more comfortable, and the anticipation took on a whole new feel. Home. His girlfriend Joyce was there to greet him, and Christmas that year was extra special.

Gerry spent the last part of his military career back at Cherry Point. It was different this time. He was soon on his way home for good. Getting to Rochester however... ***“I think that was the slowest trip of my life.”***

I'll let Gerry finish this story.

“After writing this I know there are a lot of things that I have left out or forgotten in this brief story of my life in those tumultuous times. I would have not missed the experience for all the world. I treasure my memories in the most exciting and turbulent time of my life. I feel proud and glad for the discipline that I learned in the Marine Corps. I did things and saw places that I never would have dreamed of. I don't regret a moment, and I hope the future generations will get some insight as to what life was in this period of American History. Semper Fidelis.”



Spoken like a true hero.