

W.W.II - Saipan and Japan

A memoir of George M. Pace

I spent the early years of my Marine Corps service, 1943-44, in Norfolk, VA. In the spring of 1945, I received orders to serve in the Pacific. I set sail for Honolulu, Hawaii from San Diego, California. The trip took several days. There were 500 Marine officers on board going out to relieve other Marine officers in various areas of the Pacific. I waited for my final assignment in Hawaii. When I was assigned to the 2nd Engineer Battalion, 2nd Marine Division on Saipan I flew out in a DC-3. When I arrived on Saipan, the major battles for the island had already been fought. Our orders were to continue to maintain security and begin constructing a large air base on what had formerly been a sugar plantation. I was a 1st Lieutenant replacing a Captain as an S-4, Supply Officer. All the men being replaced were war weary and very glad to see us.

In what seemed to me to be a great miracle, my sea bag which had all of my personal items in it, arrived with me. In the pressure of moving many men around for war, one could easily imagine, that such items would get lost. But even on this level there was order. On Saipan, I found however that one personal item that I needed and which I did not have was in very short supply; a mirror. I couldn't find one anywhere. After much searching, I found a fragment of a broken mirror and I used that for quite a while for shaving before I found a whole one to replace it.

We did not know how long we would be on Saipan. We knew it was just one more step toward the final push on Japan itself. Our pattern was to work while listening to the radio news. One day the news was about the Potsdam conference. Truman and Churchill were asking Japan to surrender. There was more than idle interest among us in this. We were already stockpiling supplies and preparing to load ships for the invasion of Japan. We hoped the war would end before we had to move out. The next day the radio news informed us that, "Japan will fight to the last man." To say the least, this was disheartening news.

Every night I would stand out on an open area near our tent camp and watch the B-29's take off from Tinian, flying to Japan to bomb Tokyo and other targets. I would say to myself, "There go the guys that are winning the war." Many nights a number of small boats cruised around the island with loud public address systems telling the remaining Japanese on Saipan to surrender. Several Japanese stragglers did surrender but not to me.

We were taught to set up Bailey Bridges. We built some structures. I directed some small engineering projects. I had some men dig a ditch to drain sewage from a culvert into a cave. It was the only suitable place and besides it would have made any Japanese hiding in the cave uncomfortable.

When I was in Norfolk, training and waiting for my assignment, I began to read the Bible. I read the New Testament all the way through. I did it late at night when I was on guard duty,

about 5 chapters at a time. I read it all. I had never read it before. It was amazing to me that someone two thousand years ago could say such wonderful things.

I was still reading my Bible on Saipan and I decided to take a course in ancient history by correspondence to find out more about the times of Jesus. I had never had an ancient history course. All my education was technical. After that I thought about things and decided that when I got back to the United States, I would join a church and work for the spread of Christianity. It wasn't a bolt out of the blue experience. I thought about it and decided. It seemed to me that for two thousand years the Church was the only organization working for good. Although the Church had suffered many setbacks and was torn by fighting within and without, still its core was good. So when I finally did get back, I joined the Methodist Church.

One morning in September the radio news reported the dropping of the atom bomb on Hiroshima. It was very devastating and the Allies called on Japan to surrender so that this weapon would not have to be used again. The Japanese did not reply within the allotted time so a 2nd bomb was dropped on Nagasaki. The first news out of Japan was that "train travel to Nagasaki had been canceled." Then a few hours later Japan agreed to surrender. We were all interested listeners. We were the ones loading for the invasion of Japan. There were no dissenting votes in regard to the dropping of the bomb from our group.

Soon the word came to get everything to the beach and load the ships for departure. The tents were not to be struck but were to be left standing in place. Lieutenant Pace was to be left behind to assure that everything was removed to the beach. I was to be the last man from our battalion to go aboard our LST in the harbor. (LST stands for Landing, Ship, Tanks. These ships have a great folding ramp with doors at the bow and can be run up on a beach to discharge tanks and other equipment right on the beach.)

I had one jeep and I patrolled our encampment and saw that everything was gone except the standing empty tents. There was a nearby Navy Quonset hut which was also empty by this time. Everything was gone so I determined to sleep in the Quonset hut and go to the harbor the next morning to board our ship. I pulled my jeep into the Quonset hut and went to sleep on a cot. I was very tired and I went to sleep quickly and slept soundly. That night there was a great storm, possibly a typhoon. The rain and wind were terrific, but I barely heard them. The next morning I woke up and went outside. No more tents. The storm blew them all away. Everything was blown away and clean as a whistle. The Quonset hut, being rounded, weathered the storm all right.

I drove my jeep to the harbor and found the radio transmitting unit. I sent a message to the ship that I was ready to board. There was no reply so I went looking for the harbor master who would take me out to the ship. Many of the ships had been sent out to sea to weather the typhoon, but my ship was still near the harbor. I got into a launch with many others who were going out to their various ships. The waves and rollers were very high from the recent storm and when we approached a ship, there would be a rope ladder hanging down over the side. At

the bottom of the trough the lowest part of the ladder would be over our heads. When we came

up on a crest the ladder could be reached and we could catch a rung, jump and climb up. No one ever missed. When it came to my turn on my ship, I also caught the ladder and went aboard.

We had a pleasant interlude on the way to Japan. The food was good: the Navy always eats well. I had to do some washing so I hung all my stuff out to dry on the upper deck. I have a short name so there was no need to use just my initials. Everything was marked PACE. It was hanging all over the place so everyone on board knew about my laundry. To stay in shape we played with a medicine ball, just passing it around to one another.

We finally entered the harbor of Nagasaki. It was late afternoon. In the water, floating out to sea, was one dead Japanese body, swollen and bloated, a son of God, the same as I. War is a sobering experience.

Toward evening, I went ashore for a while. It had been decided that we would spend the night on the ship and start the new day fresh. Some of our equipment had been unloaded and some of our enlisted men were trying to clear an area of ashes and debris to make a parking and working space for our operations. There were many broken water pipes in this area and we eventually had to tear them all out and lay new pipe.

That night a large white ship with a big red cross painted on its side steamed out of the harbor. I was told that it was evacuating American prisoners of war. Later I was told that two of them died that night from over eating.

The next day, our commanding officer, Major Kirkpatrick, told me to go ashore with a jeep and find a place where our battalion could establish itself. I started out. Ashes and debris were everywhere. It was very dusty. One area was roped off as possibly radioactive. The bomb had burst in the air and I suppose that was thought to reduce the radioactivity on the ground. There were a few military police directing traffic. Some buildings sheltered by hills were relatively intact and a military government had been set up in one of them. I stopped to check out the government but I could see that there was nothing but confusion there.

I got back in my jeep and started out along what seemed to be a former street. Everything was dust, ashes, and debris. Not more than a half dozen Japanese were anywhere around. They had all left when they heard the Marines were landing. The Marines were supposed to be supreme torturers. Of course, there were 100% casualties in this area, but where the hills protected things, the buildings were mostly intact except for broken windows and superficial damage. However, practically all the survivors had left to get away from the Marines.

I took this almost obliterated street with my jeep and finally got behind some hills where most of the buildings were still standing. There were street cars there too, all stopped in their tracks because the power house had been destroyed. As I approached this area, I saw a big building

surrounded by an iron fence. It appeared to be a very good brick building. I held up my hand and stopped and the few people around there made way for me. I went up to the brick building

and pounded and rattled the door. A Japanese policeman or caretaker opened it. He was very polite and respectful.

I told him as well as I could that I wanted to see the building. He showed me around. There were big open areas inside which appeared to be for assemblies and perhaps gymnastics events. I found out later that it was the Nagasaki Kai Kaan, somewhat equivalent to our idea of a town hall. It was a big public building. I somehow made it known that I was taking possession of the building for the United States Marine Corps.

I went back to the ship and reported to the Major and told him I had taken possession of this building. He gave me twelve men and we went to occupy the building for the night. After I set up guards in various places around the building, I went back to the military government building and told them where the 2nd Engineer Battalion would be located. They assigned me an interpreter and we went back to the building. Just as I got there, the Sea Bees showed up and wanted the building for their battalion. (Sea Bee stands for CB, Construction Battalion - Navy) They tried to negotiate with me but I said, "Nothing doing, this is our headquarters and you can get lost." So they went off elsewhere to look for another place.

My interpreter was a Japanese, a native of Nagasaki. He was a Christian, a Presbyterian minister. He had had a congregation of about 150 people but about half of them were killed in the bomb blast. But he was a Christian first and he was helping us as best he could to get the peace process started. His English was poor but it was better than being without him.

A great many civilian innocents were killed by the A-bomb. The prime target was the Mitsubishi submarine works which was in a cove by the sea. Tragically there was a big hospital there and many other civilian buildings and schools were in that area also. Everything in the target area was burned up. The only things left were twisted steel bridge beams and reinforced concrete shells. Ashes were everywhere. Ropes were put around likely radioactive areas but were removed in about two weeks.

I saw a Japanese soldier return to his former home site, scratching around in the ashes, looking for anything which might have survived. It was pitifully sad. Everything was leveled flat. However, the first things to be reconstructed by the Japanese were their shrines, two posts with a curved crossbar. There is something about all religion which makes men want to be better and to strive for an ideal.

The morning after we occupied the building, I went outside in the back and hung up my broken mirror and started to shave. For blocks around kids in the neighborhood ran to see me shave. It appeared that Japanese men didn't lather up and shave with a safety razor. It was very interesting to the kids.

Our battalion moved in and used the building and we eventually expanded and used parts of other buildings. The people started to come back from the hills. All day long, steady streams of

people carrying all types of personal belongings, went by our street. They were very polite and respectful, but were not afraid of us anymore. The word had gotten around that we weren't going to hurt anyone.

In the morning and in the evening we would put the colors up and take them down at the front of the building to the accompaniment of bugle calls, Reveille and Retreat. As soon as we would start the ceremony, all the people in the street would stop and wait until it was over before resuming their treks from the hills.

In the evenings at 10 PM our bugler would blow taps. I would go outside and listen to all the other buglers blowing taps all over the city, some near, some far, some faint, some clear, some a little ahead, some a little behind. It was very beautiful.

After a few days we were set up pretty well and I decided to go out into the countryside to see what it was like. One of our Warrant Officers named Abernethy went with me. We drove out into the countryside in our jeep. We drove through several villages and past schools. At one school, the children were outside taking calisthenics. It seemed to be very normal, and was a very peaceful and uneventful trip.

I was responsible for many engineering and construction materials. A ship unloaded a cargo of lumber and I had a lumber yard, including plywood. I also had sheets of window glass. A critical need in the city was for window glass, since all the windows everywhere were broken out by the big blast, even where the buildings were protected behind hills. But, I didn't have any glass cutters, the tools that score the glass so it can be broken out in the right sizes. There could not have been more than a half dozen of those in the whole city. Everyone wanted American cigarettes and Hershey bars so I tried to trade for a glass cutter. I was not a successful trader but after a while I finally did get a glass cutter and we were able to cut window glass.

Everyone wanted to trade for window glass, plywood, and other useful items besides the regular requisitions which I of course honored. The cooks would trade coffee for plywood, the mechanics would trade tools for window glass, etc. We didn't have any tableware to eat with. Nothing but a great big spoon. We had compartmentalized metal mess trays, but no knives, forks, teaspoons or tablespoons. Where would I find tableware in a country where everyone ate with chop sticks?

I went to two Christian schools, thinking that perhaps since they were acquainted with westerners, one of them might have some tableware. The school run by the Catholics was for boys, and the other run by Protestants was for girls. When they grew up, the boys and girls would marry each other and so Protestant and Catholic were all the same to them; they were just Christians. But neither school had any tableware.

I got acquainted with a 1st Lieutenant in the Japanese Army, Lieutenant Yamamoto. He was a nice guy and we went around together a lot. Yamamoto is a very common name in Japan, like

Smith or Jones in the United States. Lieutenant Yamamoto had been a supervisor in the Mitsubishi submarine works for the Japanese Army. His office was somewhat removed from the factory and was not severely damaged by the bomb.

I asked Lieutenant Yamamoto about some tableware; knives and forks. He said he thought he could get some. He knew where the Mitsubishi family had hidden some back in a cave. So we started out to look for it. There were about ten Japanese soldiers with torches with us to help us, not flashlights but real torches. We went back into this cave about a hundred yards, they found the silverware and gave it to me. It would have been an opportune time for them to have murdered an American, so soon after the surrender, but they behaved with honor. From that time on we had tableware and ate like Americans.

There was a Japanese National Park about 35 or 40 miles outside the city. I thought it would be interesting to go there. I asked Lieutenant Yamamoto about it. In his broken English he said it was a good place to go. He saw that I was eager to see it and so respecting Japanese social custom of the time, he did not want to do anything or say anything that would make a friend sad or unhappy. So when I asked him about the road to this park, he said, "It's a good road." Well, the road to the park was perhaps the worst I have ever traveled on, rutted, rough, muddy, crooked, etc. The park was very nice but Lieutenant Yamamoto didn't want to make me unhappy by telling me the road was not.

Another Japanese social custom prevented a man from telling his wife that he loved her, or even calling her beautiful. If you said your wife was beautiful, that would be bragging, and if you told your wife you loved her, that would be crude and impolite. If you loved your wife, she would know it by the way you acted toward her.

We proceeded to work on making the city infrastructure of Nagasaki operational again. We found some surviving water works engineers and they turned the right valves and resumed water purification and in about 10 days they had water running out of the taps. Of course, the water contained a large amount of chlorine, but it was drinkable. In the same way we found some surviving power plant engineers and soon electricity was restored and the street cars started running again. Little by little order returned to the city.

The Marines started basketball teams and so did the Japanese so a competition developed. Most of the Marines who came to watch rooted for the Japanese because they were smaller. The Marine band made up a schedule and started playing for the various battalions and regiments. When our turn came, we enjoyed it very much. Lieutenant Yamamoto said he visited a friend who lived in the neighborhood and they stood outside the fence and listened. His friendship and the politeness of the other Japanese we worked with made me question the sense of war. I gave my Bible to one of our Japanese employees even though it was in English and he couldn't read it.

The Army always came in to a place with everything; laundries, barber shops, tailors, dry cleaning plants, bakeries; everything. The Marines went in light. We'd been eating crackers out of a can for days and suddenly, the Army sent in a bakery. Everyone got enthusiastic about eating baked bread and rolls. We worked the bakery so hard that after about 24 hours, it burned down and we were back to eating crackers again.

We kept building and improving our headquarters and then one day one of the enlisted men said to me, "What are we doing all this for? We're moving to Sasebo." I said, "Where'd you get that idea? I haven't heard anything about it." He said, "It's the scuttlebutt all over the place."

The enlisted men operated the radio, sending out and receiving messages, and as a result they often knew such news long before the officers did. It turned out, he was correct, and we did move to Sasebo on the train in late November, 1945. We were following the normal military pattern. Send in the Marines to establish a perimeter and then replace them with the Army.

Sasebo was the home of the Naval Academy of Japan. After working with our equipment several days, we learned we were going to load a ship and sail for the United States in a few months. Shortly thereafter, I received orders to fly home. I was advised to take a knapsack with toilet items, minimal changes of clothes, and two blankets because it would get cold in the airplane. I had no dress uniform. I had written to my wife, Luvenia, to send my dress uniform, but she got the letter several months after it was written, and decided not to send it because I'd be home soon. I'm glad she didn't send it.

I started out by Navy airplane, flying up the coast toward Tokyo. We were headed for a Japanese Naval Base, Yokasuka. When we got pretty far north in the late afternoon, we could see Mount Fuji in the distance. We landed in the water and the plane cruised around while a crew member tried to throw a rope over a mooring post. We circled around several times and each time he missed. The water was rough and along with the circling, I was beginning to feel queasy. Finally he looped the post and we moored and disembarked.

It was late evening and the only place for me to stay was on a small Navy auxiliary vessel anchored a short way out in the harbor. I went aboard this vessel and got a small room with a bed in it. This ship was the worst vessel I ever encountered. The officers had all gone home leaving only enlisted men on the ship. Discipline had completely broken down. There was no order and it was every man for himself. It was brought home to me how important discipline is in the military. Without discipline there is nothing, just chaos. I went in that room and locked the door, slept, and got off the ship first thing in the morning, as soon as I could.

There were several of us going to the Yokasuka Naval Base. A truck was there to take us to the base but the driver was lost and didn't know the way. Every few blocks he would stop and shout at a Japanese. "Hey Joe! Is this the way to Yokasooka?" But the Japanese wouldn't know what

he was talking about and couldn't help him. This went on for several hours before we finally

made it to Yokasuka. The Japanese pronounce it Yokoska, so Yokasooka didn't mean much to them.

The naval base was occupied by the 4th Marine Regiment, reconstituted. The 4th Marine Regiment had been over run at Shanghai at the beginning of the war but the 4th Marine Regiment was very much alive again at Yokasuka, Japan in December, 1945.

We were informed that there would be a short lay over at Yokasuka before we proceeded on our journey. Some of us were going to Hawaii and the United States mainland and some were going elsewhere. For the group going to Hawaii, of which I was one, there would be a one day stop over. We had a choice for that one day. We could go to Mount Fuji or we could go to Tokyo. I had seen Mount Fuji from a distance so I chose Tokyo.

I took the train. There were many Japanese commuters on the train, most reading the morning papers all printed with Japanese characters. The whole train was about three quarter size for Americans; that is, it was very small. The seats were small and low, the aisles were narrow.

We got to Tokyo and went into the remnant of the railway station which at that time consisted of a number of railroad tracks running between piles of rubble. This was the result of some of the bomb runs I had seen initiating on the island of Tinian.

I walked out heading toward the Ginza, a prime shopping district in Tokyo, but before I got there I found myself in the midst of a large demonstration with people carrying banners and shouting. I finally found someone to ask what was going on. It seems that the Koreans were demonstrating to protest their unfair treatment by the Japanese. They were considered second class citizens in Tokyo. If a Korean family moved next door to a Japanese family, the Japanese family would move out, creating a Korean district and essentially segregating them. Actually, I couldn't see much difference in appearance between the Koreans and the Japanese, except that the Koreans were larger in stature.

I went on to the Ginza. I don't know what I was expecting; perhaps something like Manhattan. But it wasn't like that at all. When I saw it, there were a lot of small shopping booths in the midst of a lot of rubble.

I went on a few blocks and saw a man pulling a rickshaw. I decided I'd ride in one so I gave the man 50 cents to pull me around the block. I didn't enjoy it. A big Marine being pulled by a small Japanese man. It was demeaning for both of us.

I went by the big hotel that had been designed by Frank Lloyd Wright but it wasn't in operating condition. I went on the the Emperor's Palace. I had no dress uniform, just my old field jacket and khaki trousers. I did have bars on my shoulders so the sentry was polite to me but the gate of

the palace grounds was as far as I could go.

I went back into the city. At one shop some Japanese girls were singing, "*Silent Night, Holy Night*" in Japanese. It was early December and there were Christian festivities, even there. I went in to a souvenir shop. It was growing dark. A Japanese woman got a chair and climbed up on it and pulled the chain on the electric ceiling light. Then she got down and took the chair and put it away. On impulse, I reached up and pulled the chain and turned the light off. Then I pulled the chain and turned it on again, just showing off, I guess. The Japanese laughed about it.

I returned to Yokasuka and prepared for departure the next morning. This was another C-47 airplane but just to fly across Tokyo Bay. When we got up over the bay the wheels wouldn't go down for a landing. The mechanism was stuck. The crew cranked them down by hand and we landed safely.

We departed for Hawaii in a C-54 airplane which had four engines. I think we stopped in Truk. I know we stopped in Midway. Finally we arrived in Hawaii. The blankets I had brought came in handy because it was a cold flight.

The most notable thing I remember about my brief stay in Pearl Harbor was the food. That morning, I went to the cafeteria. It was loaded with every conceivable kind of food for breakfast; eggs, ham, bacon, sausage, grapefruit, pancakes, pineapple: the works. After having just left Japan where the people were eating rice and beans everyday and the military was existing on rations, I was shocked to see such abundance.

It was the middle of December, 1945. My wife, Luvenia, and I had been expecting when I left for the Pacific and I had become a father again with our 2nd child sometime in November but I had had no word from my wife. I put in for a telephone call to her in Kensington, Maryland. I was given a time for the call but a very low priority with purely military calls taking precedence. At the appointed time, my call was canceled. My orders were changed. I was going to the United States by ship instead of by air. The next day I boarded a ship and sailed for San Diego, California. At San Diego, my orders were to report to the Brooklyn Navy Yard in New York for discharge after the first of the year, 1946, transportation by any available means. In the meantime, I finally got a call through to my wife and learned of my new baby daughter, Susan. Our first child, Ellen was staying with my parents in St. Louis, Missouri so I was to get a train to St. Louis, pick up Ellen, and then go on to Kensington. I stood in line starting in the early mornings for three straight days at the Grant Hotel in San Diego and I finally got a day coach reservation on the Santa Fe line to Kansas City, Kansas with a transfer to the Missouri Pacific Line for St. Louis. It was a rough trip. There was a lot of rowdyism on the train by those service men who had been discharged. The Military Police had no control over them. I could not sleep the first night but after that I was so tired that even with the confusion I was able to sleep in my seat.

When I finally got to Kansas City, I found that the Missouri Pacific train to St. Louis had been

canceled. However a Rock Island Line train leaving at about midnight would honor my ticket. I

got aboard and went to sleep in the seat. When I awoke the next morning, my seat mate, a black soldier, was sleeping on my shoulder.

My Dad had been notified to meet the Missouri Pacific train but he didn't know about the Rock Island train. When I arrived in St. Louis, I went to the station masters office and paged my Dad. He came to the office and what a joyous reunion we had! I spent Christmas in St. Louis and then started out for Washington DC with Ellen. We arrived in Washington and spent a few days in Kensington and then I went on to the Brooklyn Navy Yard and was discharged. Then I went to the New York office of the Corps of Engineers to try to get my old job back.

I was in the service about 2 1/2 years and overseas about seven months. I did whatever was asked of me to the best of my ability. I was as eager as anyone to see the war end. My work in Nagasaki was the most rewarding. I did what I could to bring order out of chaos there and represent the United States and the Marines with honor.