

The Trip Back To Okinawa

The trip I took back to Okinawa in 2000 is one of the very best memories of my life. When I was eighteen, I was in combat there, and since that time I had often wondered if I would recognize anything if I went back, and what would I feel if I went to the exact places.

When the opportunity came, my wife encouraged my son and I to go, and my oldest son Paul agreed and generously paid the way.



We secured our passports and visited the Customs office in Indianapolis to get permits to carry cameras, and learned all the rules to follow. I happily began making lists. I made contact with “Valor Tours,” the tour group, as I was concerned whether my gluten free diet could be accommodated, and I was given assurances. I even called the airline and made appropriate requests.

We had two flights from Indianapolis to San Francisco. I was in a real good mood, loved the flying and enjoyed my seat at the windows I enjoyed watching patchwork scenery five miles below and the marshmallow clouds drift majestically by.

I took the responsibility of direct control of my pieces of carry-on gear and baggage. We briskly whisked through strange airports, followed strange signage, and hurriedly handled tickets and boarding passes. I followed Paul who was an old pro at this, as close as possible, and thankfully arrived at every spot on time.

It was a joy to join the twelve members of our tour group in the San Francisco. We were soon on a Boeing 747 Jetliner that accommodated over 300 passengers and seated ten people abreast.

We flew a heading into the jet-stream in a northwesterly 13 hour flight over gazillion miles of ocean. The airline accommodated passengers with a large movie screen that provided strange movies and unique graphics that kept us aware of the

progress across the Pacific. We traversed a large arc that took us above Japan to Seoul, Korea. We knew our speed and the speed of the jet stream and that was fun to watch.

The Asian hostesses were attractive, very professional in manner, and tastefully dressed. After a mix-up in my diet instructions, they accommodated me with good food. It was a long, long tiring and cramped flight but we did enjoy a break in the boredom with occasional conversations and a smattering of sleep.

We had a short stop in Korea in the early morning. This was just before all the shops opened and so we watched the clerks do their morning routine out in the main corridor. I looked around to try to find a phone to contact my wife Jeane but was without luck. I did manage to enjoy a breakfast of rice and tea at the cafeteria. They had a display of sample dishes to choose from so language issues were not a problem. The whole area was spotless, unique, and charming.

We soon boarded another much smaller plane along with several Filipinos who were carrying a lot of strange looking baggage, and after a short flight through the sunny sky we arrived at the little peaceful Naha airport on Okinawa. As we taxied in I could see several American fighter planes with Japanese insignia sitting on the tarmac.

With paper work and baggage in hand we slowly checked through customs. Surprisingly the local press met us and took pictures, and we soon boarded a small tour bus waiting outside.

We were immediately treated to running commentary. A peaceful city indexed in front of us street by street. Here was a world of small colorful houses and shops, cars, people, buildings and narrow busy thoroughfares, all seemingly three-quarters the size of those at home. Naha truly had returned from the devastation of war. Our tour bus passed under and around an imposing overhead monorail being built downtown. Paul and I were truly impressed by the culture, beauty, and tidiness spread before our eyes.

Naha was quite a contrast for me to see as I had seen pictures of it in the history books showing its destruction when it was nothing but an extended mass of broken slabs of dusty concrete. It was a ghost of a city at that time, whose streets had been scraped into place by a large rumbling road grader.



I remembered Okinawans as a bunch of little slant-eyed people squatting and huddled around, waiting to be taken back to a refugee camp. The houses I had seen then were but a few grass shacks back in the country among rice patties. They were often infested with fleas, a resident goat or a cow, and a few scurrying chickens.

Our accommodations were at the New Okinawa Hotel, (On the immediate right), in the heart of Naha. Notice the narrow streets, cleanliness, and power lines.



It was strange and pleasant experience checking in at the front office. The Japanese hosts were quite cordial and accommodating and graciously stored my stash of rice bread in the hotel refrigerator. The foyer had a vinyl tiled floor and large potted plants on each side. Opposite the desk was a bright glass paned wall of an adjacent grocery /gift shop, while an open stairway on the right led to a restaurant in the basement.

We were soon directed down the hall to the elevators on the left. Our room was on the second floor. It had two casement windows that gave us a unique view above a busy street. The bathroom was small and had strange fixtures. Paul and I dropped all our bags and quickly returned to the main floor. I was delighted to discover two hot and cold vending machines, in the hall along the way so I knew I would have a supply of cokes.

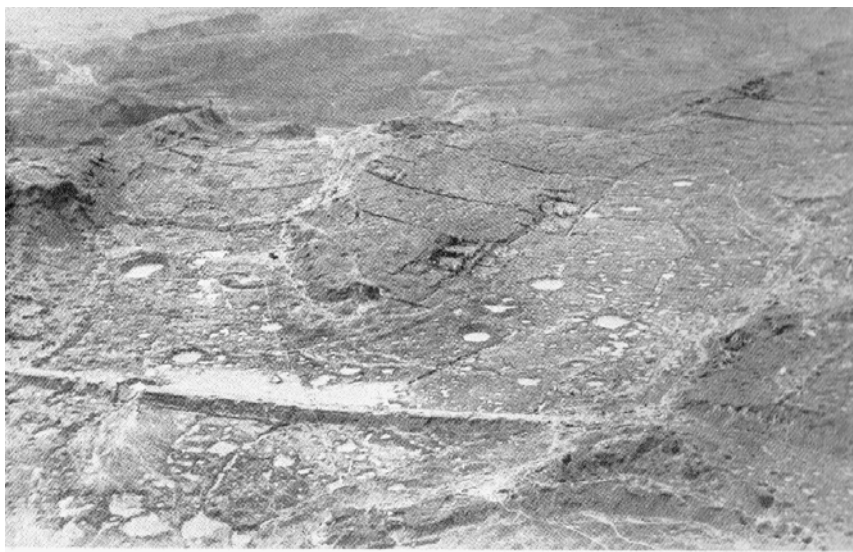
A few of the tour members had already arrived, and when the rest appeared we all filed on our little tour bus. The small driver was in a spiffy uniform and wore white gloves. After a few welcoming comments by our leaders we began our trip for the day; winding among the narrow streets. We were soon heading south on an open highway in a group of strangers.

Our American tour guide was Donald Dencker; the historian of our 96th Infantry Division. In combat there, Don was in a rifle company as a 60 mm mortar gunner in I Company right out in front of my M Co. mortar company.

He was ably and cordially assisted by Alex Kashiba, the Chairman of The Rykuyu Japanese Historical Research Society of the Okinawa Prefecture. He was well versed in the history of the battle of Okinawa and all the memorials.

Looking out my bus window heading south, I saw silhouettes of familiar hills that were peaceful and happy, and covered with lush green vegetation. The countryside was sprinkled with small quaint walled-in homes. Each one it seemed to have had gargoyles out in front, with water towers and air conditioners on each roof. I enjoyed their little flower gardens and their large fields and out buildings, and saw an occasional truck traversing in the distance.

When I was there in 1945 it looked like a cratered moonscape, and at that time I



trudged along with my squad in the hot sun in a single line, and loaded down with a heavy pack on my back. I also had a heavy pouch of mortar shells hanging over my shoulders. We were moving south from Koghi Ridge as the front pushed forward. In this panorama of rice paddies and cane fields, we had to pick our way around bomb craters filled with water. The rim of adjoining hills around the circumference was a silhouette of large rocks, scraggly bushes, and spikes of splintered trees.

It was spring and warm that morning on the tour and a misty rain began to fall as we made our first stop. We filed out and began walking up a long rocky stairway. This is where I stepped off the path and planted both feet into the grass just to feel the reality of being back on Okinawa soil. I was really back! At the top our group gathered around the *Tomori Stone Lion Dog*.



Don and Alex told the interesting legend of evil spirits and unexplained fires. The mere presence of the Lion Dog scared them away. From this vantage spot we could see little of the hills in the distance because of the haze.



The names and details of all these tour members will be found at the end.

Jim Causey, the man on my left, was the playful one of the group and began entertaining us with sounds of a lonesome whistle of one of the old steam engine fired trains. Somewhere along the way some began talking and joking about the possible presence of the Habu snake native to Okinawa. We were all about the same age so humor was common.

We visited the Yazo Dake,(Big Apple) and the Yaeju Dake escarpment areas. Site by site and hill by hill we were immersed in the details of each battle. The stories and blood of thousands of maimed and dead Americans and Japanese committed to control this area made this sacred ground we were walking on. Some of the bloodiest action on Okinawa in 1945 was the battle of Kakasu Ridge. Notice the scene then.



The picture below is “Big Apple” with Don Dencker in the foreground. Notice how lush and undeveloped it is after all the years.



The historical information the guides provided, intermingled with our own memories of men and action many years ago. Each hill and crest had a story, a strategy by our forces and an analysis. We took pictures at each site and shared personal recollections.

We traveled to the southern tip of the island to the large beautiful Memorial Peace Park, to the Cornerstone of Peace. It is a Japanese memorial to all those who died during the battle; with over one hundred thousand names inscribed on its granite walls. This memorial was the result of Japanese and American's working together.



The top right photograph is an extension of the Peace Park. We walked through it's many corridors and we saw many mementoes of the war.

We had the press with us because Mary Brubaker was there. She is the daughter of Simon Bolivar Buckner who was the Commanding General of all the Armed Services in the battle for Okinawa and was killed there. She is a charming lady. She placed a wreath in front of his name on the wall and discretely answered questions about his heritage, life and service. His dad was a Civil War General.



All of us saw names of men and buddies we had known and some other veterans revealed detailed stories about their dying. Jim Causey told the sad story of his squad leader who had advised him the night before to take cautions, but was killed the next

morning. Another member of his squad was despondent and feared that he would die in combat and he too died.

Jim Koslow, a tour member, lost his brother on Kakazu Ridge. He placed a wreath in front of his brother's name and stepped back and saluted. The story of his brother Pete is in my memoirs. I saw names of men I knew who had been killed.

Don Dencker the gracious host from the 96th Division brought wreathes for Mary and Jim to have. Jim Koslow, though not a member of the Deadeye division said he really felt good about that gesture because it bonded him to Pete's outfit.



. We were joined by a team of journalists from England who video taped the veterans returning to the scene of combat and along with a couple of Americans who were teachers in the local schools.

I began to appreciate each man's contribution to the war, and especially since I learned that five of these veterans were still carrying shrapnel. From that time on, I made an effort to visit with each man, because I wanted to hear and share their experiences. It was so rewarding for me and I soon began enjoying a new kinship.

Alex was always there to fill us in with interesting items.



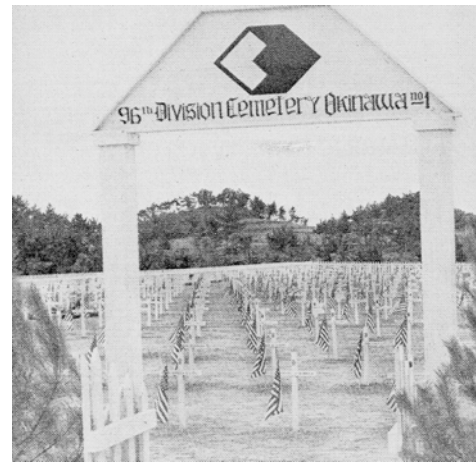
We visited the spot up on crest of the hill where Gen. Buckner was killed. An artillery shell exploded the coral and it struck the General. There is a memorial for him and Gen. Easley there. Easley's had been moved from the original site where he had died. We all gathered around Mary and heard the story of her dad. Also there is a memorial to Buckner by the Japanese Commander whose unit had saved a few artillery shells to try to kill a high ranking officer. He expressed his sincere regret. Gen. Easley was the man responsible for giving the name "Deadeye" to the 96th division.



Day by day we saw many touching, pictures, displays, and memorials, and I learned much history. The picture below is the memorial for hundreds of Nurses.



In back of our minds at all times were the memories of the real heroes of this battle, who gave everything they had. We all felt privileged to be able to be here.



Below is a scene in a cave, which depicted the primitive conditions the native Okinawans were forced to endure during the combat.



We visited the Shogaku Junior and Senior High School and attended a polite program in our honor. We visited some of the rooms, and the school was immaculate. After all classes students are required to clean all the school floors and rooms.



I had a chance to show off and actually came up with some poor calligraphy on the chalk board. We did meet with the administration and shared our somewhat ill informed opinions. I did contact two of these students by email later on.

One of the highlights of our tour was our visit to Torii Station Army base where we shared a formal retreat ceremony. Mary Brubaker was the center of attention as they honored the memory of her Dad by naming a street in his honor. There were formal speeches by several. Torri Station is a support unit providing fuel to the Pacific fleet.



It was really different seeing someone else doing the same formation I had performed many times back in basic training, and ours had been a much larger group. These troops had different uniforms, were a wee pudgy and their movements were not as crisp as I remembered ours were. But this was a peacetime army from a support unit and could not be expected to perform like a spiffy honor guard.

It was very strange seeing the Japanese flag being lowered along with their national anthem while everyone stood at attention. I am not as easily moved as others are, but I had a great feeling of patriotism when I saw our flag flapping in the breeze.

We were treated like royalty, and I made it a point to talk to several of the troops. Our group was shown modern weapons in a room adjacent to the plaza and answered many questions. They gave us two unit ornamental challenge coins that I treasure yet today. I met a soldier who was the Command Sergeant Major. He had been a recruiter in Indianapolis. I was also proud to see the Indiana flag along with other state flags. Here is a picture of a Deadeye Flag being displayed by myself, Don Dencker and Jim Causey at the flag pole plaza in Torri Station, and the next is one of Paul and me.



In the meantime I finally did get a call through to Jeane, and I knew she was relieved. All the ways that ATAT said would be easy proved useless. The most successful effort was in a pay phone just down the street from the hotel. It was nice talking to her and then saying with feeling the usual; "I wish you were here" and I did.

We visited to an old and attractive village, with its colorful winding flower gardens and large strange trees. There were some old ladies bent over keeping everything neat

and growing. Many Okinawa women are permanently bent over as they have had spent so much time harvesting rice crops.



A place relevant to our combat experiences was the walk we took on the 96th Division landing beach, where we picked up pieces of coral to take home.



Near the end of the tour our group headed north and east of Naha. It was here that I remembered many of the hills, and one very vital one; Conical Hill, which is now blanketed by a golf course. We viewed many of the hills where waves of American men had bled and died, which included Hacksaw Ridge, Needle Rock, Dick Hill and Tombstone Ridge. Many of these hills were where our Deadeyes were in combat. Also we visited the Kakasu Ridge Battle Park, toured the Shuri Line Inner Defenses and saw Dick, Zebra, Flat Top, and Oboe Hills



This is a shot of Conical hill. It is the highest one around and it can be seen for miles in each direction. The golf course has been well maintained.

My son Paul and I made an extended search trying to find exactly where I had been at Koghi Ridge by using other hills as reference, but we were not sure we had found the spot. I picked up a sample of soil there to take home for a souvenir. I also left some from my backyard. In my memoirs I tell of many of my experiences there at Koghi.



Eating was a strange experience. This spot was especially nice. I always consulted Alex for assistance and I had no gluten violations. Paul is on my left.



I did rely on the two loaves of bread Jeane baked for me to get me by. Eating breakfast in the basement restaurant was no problem as they always had rice, fruit, orange juice, bacon, eggs and potatoes. It became a pleasant and familiar routine. The grocery adjacent to the hotel had a few items I could eat, and tons of interesting and strange things to ponder.

I was fascinated all the activity at night, all the strange signs, scents and sights, narrow streets and small shops, all so very peaceful. I do not remember seeing any police on patrol or a patrol car on tour. There were some men who wore uniforms that directed traffic and one security guard at Shuri Castle. The automobile traffic was cordial, and some motor-scooters with toy-like horns that played melodies and these were obviously quite handy on the small streets. I did not see one American vehicle.

Paul and I had different jet-lag experiences. He had to sleep and I didn't. So I went out alone and that was a unique adventure. There was a large outdoor market under roof about six blocks away, that was lit up at night. It had at least a hundred shops where they sold all kinds of food, fish, pork, vegetables, roots, herbs and fruit.



I even found bags of Hershey kisses. I went there several times and did manage to communicate; but little. It was so charming! I had previously taken the time to get a little familiar with the Japanese language but people from Okinawa varied from the native tongue and it was a problem. I was slightly confused one evening and I didn't know how to get back to the Hotel. I just kept saying the hotel name, pointing and using body language to show that I needed help and someone stepped up for me.

One evening I came upon a group of American Marines walking around and I enjoyed a cordial and English conversation. I told them that I helped take the place.

We visited the famous Shuri Castle that had been restored to perfection. During the battle there, thousands of Japanese troops had lived in the tunnels underneath it. Americans pulverized it with tons of 16 inch shells fired from battleships in the harbor.



We also walked down some of the extensive tunnels in the former Japanese Naval underground headquarters, and also visited the site where Japanese Lt. Generals Ushijima and Cho had committed suicide.



Below is a photograph of the suicide cliffs near Mabuni. On the left in the near background was where that hundreds of civilians jumped off and committed suicide with their children. They died on the jagged coral below. This happened at other cliffs too.



Before we left Okinawa I rushed around at the last minute and bought souvenirs at an Army-Navy Club that I brought home and shared. I was especially proud of tea set, a plaque and a bell all beautiful and great to own. (All made in Japan)

In conclusion my son and I enjoyed this fabulous trip; seeing the beauty of the island, its many memorials, discovering its culture, and being with its people was all quite gratifying. We especially enjoyed sharing time with some American soldiers serving on the Island.

One item of disappointment; Bud Clark's daughter Sharon, my wife's cousin, had a daughter and son in law, (Bill and Amanda Doolittle), stationed on Okinawa and we tried to meet them but failed to connect, and we were so anxious to meet them.

Most of the tour members flew back to the states together and said our goodbyes in San Francisco. I was there in the airport waiting around for my flights to Indianapolis when I saw a young man carrying a big trophy. I was really curious and decided to find out who he was and why.

I searched around and found him talking on the pay phone. There was a man with him, so I asked him who it was on the phone carrying the large trophy. He said he was Jose Louis Rivera and was just back from China where he had been in a big professional fight. I got the fighters name and told his associate that I was making a gift for him and to not let the boxer get away.

I hastily went back to my seat, got out my handy pens paper and ruler out and quickly made him a certificate in black, red, and blue calligraphic letters that said: "World Light Heavy Weight Champion of the World, "and then " Louis Rivera" and "Boxer" down at the bottom. (I do not remember what boxing group it was),



I rushed back to the phone and got there in time to be introduced before he left. The man with him interrupted a call he was making and told him I had this certificate. Jose was astounded. He told the man he was talking to on the phone what had happened. Jose turned to me and said that he had his agent on the phone, and wanted to know if I would say a word to his agent. I was quite surprised and delighted so I said yes. I told his agent that he had a very promising young man to take care of, and he had Jose's future in his hand and for him to do the very best he could for him.

Louis was astounded that I had produced that so quickly and told me that he got beat there in China, but he had been seen by at least 5,000,000 people and got a lot of publicity from the fight. He also informed me that he had held the World Championship in the Light Heavyweight division at one time.

He also made a testimony about "Jesus is the only way", that he was a member of the National Fellowship of Christian Athletes, and lived in Cleveland Ohio. He and I posed for this picture that Paul took. I did learn that he was wearing dark glasses because he had a mouse under one eye. I asked him how that happened and he said he moved wrong and the guy tagged him good. In parting I told him to not let anyone mess with him. We shook hands and parted. I did verify on the internet that he did own the title one time. We did contact each other by email a few times.

In retrospect I especially cherish the memory of the camaraderie of the tour members. We were a fun loving, sharing and jovial group. As I reminisce about those men, I think about the years these veterans spent away from home, their terrifying experiences, their wounds and tragic losses of their buddies. I see their value as men, who over the years have contributed much to their society, their jobs, and families. I am flattered to have been with them. It was also a very special pleasure to share with my

son and to show him places I had been, and share the feelings we had about going there. I will always be grateful to him for this great experience that we often talk about.

Paul and I have two albums of pictures, a video made by one of the tour members, several souvenirs, and many interesting stories to cherish and remember.

Since that time I have been in contact with tour members, Glenn Perry, Jim Koslow, Frank Bolton, Jim Causey and Mary Brubaker, and one of the most congenial Deadeyes in the whole division, my good friend Donald Dencker.

I do regret that Jeane my wife, Janet and Joyce; my daughters, and Bill my youngest son and others did not go with us too.

Page 6 Names of the members in the group picture are: Left to right Frank and Lillian Bolton, Ed Maurer, Don Dencker, Paul Hill, myself, Jim Causey and his wife Pat, Jay Brinkmeyer, Jim Koslow and Ed Brubaker In front: Glenn Perry and Mary Brubaker. Jim Richardson; Don's son-in-law was not in the picture.