

Topic: War Stories of WWII

Abstract: My grandfather enlisted in the navy during WWII after being drafted. He trained in different places across the country until he was ready for war. He was then shipped off to fight for our country in Okinawa, as a turret gunner on an airplane. While there, he encountered malfunctions with his airplane, a typhoon, kamikazes, and the aftermath of an atomic bomb. My grandfather experienced first-hand the struggles of war and the dramatic effects it has on our nation.

Key Words: Grandfather, WWII, Navy, Okinawa, Japan, Turret Gunner, Airplane, Typhoon

In 1942, my grandfather, who born in the Bronx, New York, enlisted in the navy after receiving his draft notice for the army during WWII. He spent almost two years in training. He went from one school to another – first to Great Lakes Naval Training Station; then to Aviation Ordnance School in Norman, Oklahoma; down to Aviation Gunnery School in Purcell, Oklahoma; then to Operational Flight Training in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Then he served in carrier aircraft service units in Norfolk, Virginia and Quonset Point, Rhode Island. Finally, towards the end of this, he was assigned to a squadron, VT301.

They trained for about six months as a land-based squadron, then they were shipped out to the West Coast. When they arrived at NAS in Alameda, California, the squadron was disbanded and reformed as a new carrier group, known as Torpedo Squadron 33. From Alameda, they came down to Hollister, an auxiliary air station to Alameda, where they continued their night operation training, and where he met my grandmother. They bombed unmanned target ships with water-filled bombs at night in the Bay Area. They dropped practice torpedoes at night in the Monterey Bay, which would come up on the beach at Fort Ord and be retrieved. They practiced carrier landings at the airstrip in Hollister. They also practiced gunnery and daytime bombing. They did a little bit of everything, and soon became a finished product as an air group. They were just waiting for an assignment, which came about very quickly.

On November 10th, 1944, after a whirlwind courtship, my grandparents got married. On November 25th, he was on his way to Hawaii. Upon arrival in Hawaii, he and his air group were assigned to the USS Sangamon, an escort carrier, which had been converted from a Standard Oil tanker. These ships were designed to give close support to the troops ashore. Their duties included laying smokescreens for the landing craft; dropping ammunition to the forward positions; spraying the troops with DDT; bombing airfields to neutralize enemy aircraft; flying anti-sub patrol; and flying heckler missions at night to prevent the repair of the airfields they had bombed in the daytime, and to keep the enemy unnerved.

They flew in a Grumman Avenger, a torpedo bomber. They had three people in the crew, a pilot, a radioman, and the turret gunner. My grandfather was the turret gunner. When they landed on the ship, the plane was stopped by catching a cable with its tail hook. He says that it was a pretty good airplane, very solid and heavy. The average speed was about 200-270 mph. They carried one torpedo, or twelve 100-pound bombs, or four 500-pound bombs, plus eight rockets that were installed on the wings. Once when they were attacking an airfield in Okinawa, their pilot was trying to get a really accurate shot with the rockets, so he put the flaps down to slow the aircraft and steady it so that he could get good aim. When he hit the trigger, all eight of the rockets went off at the same time, which they should not have done. There was something wrong with the electrical system. It was as if the plane ran into a brick wall. The shuttered and stopped for a moment. They blew one flap off of the wing and had to go back to the carrier to make an emergency landing.

They were getting ready to invade Okinawa. Their first target was an island off Okinawa called Kerama Retto. They were assigned to lay smokescreen for the ships that were taking our troops ashore. They weren't called upon, as the enemy offered no resistance on this island.

During the Kerama Retto invasion, they were flying above as the soldiers went ashore. They were listening to all of the radio messages back and forth. One of the things they heard was one guy yelling, "My God! They're all jumping off the cliff!" It turned out that the Japanese women were actually throwing their kids off those cliffs and then jumping after them because the propagandists in Japan had told them that the Americans were barbarians who were going to do horrible things to them.

From there they went to the main island of Okinawa and they did all kinds of activities. They sprayed the troops with DDT from the air. They dropped ammunition to forward positions. They bombed the airfields to neutralize their aircraft. They flew anti-sub patrol around the fleet, and they did heckler missions at night.

They went ashore afterwards on Okinawa, landing at Yonton Airfield, and toured the battle area after it was all over with. My grandfather went into one house and there were still bodies all over the place. There was one Japanese officer and a woman and a baby who were all dead. They had killed themselves and the baby. He says that it was kind of a strange war.

One of the worst things he ever saw was on Okinawa after one of the battles. They were ashore on an airfield and took a little stroll around. He came upon five Japanese soldiers standing there with their guns and helmets on. They were all dead. Somebody had hit them with a flame-thrower and they just kind of melted together, they didn't even have time to fall down. "It scared the pants off of me," he claims.

During the Okinawa invasion, they went into Kerama Retto to get supplies and they were attacked by twelve kamikazes. Marine pilots shot down nine of them. One turned and fled, and two of them came at them. One of them hit so close to the ship it splashed water up on him. The

second one hit them directly amidships and they had one hell of a fire for about five hours. They had lost all of their airplanes and their ship's upper decks were completely gutted and burned out. They were of no value to anybody then, so they headed south. They stopped in the Carolina Islands, at an island called, Ulithi, and made enough repairs to the ship to get them to Hawaii. Upon arrival in Hawaii, they were put in the Royal Hawaiian Hotel for a week. My grandfather says that it was like seventh heaven. But they also told them they were going to get them another ship. So they put them on another escort carrier, the USS Attu. That took them to the Philippines, to the Philippine Sea, where they were loaded on an LST landing craft which took them down the whole length of the Philippine Sea to where their new carrier, the USS Chenango, was located. They fooled around for a few weeks in the Philippines, then they received orders to join the third fleet, so they headed north. They were fortunate to get assigned to the mail run to Iwo Jima. They took all the mailbags and flew them into Iwo Jima, so they could be forwarded on to the United States.

From there, they went up and joined the Third Fleet, which was quite a big outfit. They got the job of throwing targets so the battleships and cruisers could take pot shots – gunnery practice – at them. It was kind of scary, but it was a necessary evil, he guesses.

It wasn't too long after that that they were only about forty miles off Tokyo when the Japanese surrendered after the atomic bombs. That was the end of the war as far as they were concerned.

To my grandfather, the battle of Okinawa was evidence that the Japanese were going to put up fanatical resistance to the Americans. Everything the Japanese did was suicidal, the Kamikazes and the whole 'shooting match'. They were fierce fighters, and they didn't give up.

He thinks there were about 110,000 Japanese soldiers killed on Okinawa and 65,000 American soldiers, marines, and sailors. He thinks this was taken into account by Truman and all his groups back in Washington when they were deciding whether or not to use the atom bomb. He thinks they figured out that it would save millions of lives by dropping the bomb. It might seem horrible at that one time, but in the long run it would save millions. My grandfather kind of felt that way too.

The Navy developed a point system in which they accumulated points for length of service, marital status, and so forth. If you wound up with enough points you could go home. My grandfather was one of the fortunate ones and had enough points. They took all of the soldiers who were eligible for discharge to Okinawa, and put them on a base called Bunker Bay. They sent them to a tent city that they had put up there. They were just waiting for the first ship to arrive and take them home.

While they were there, they had a typhoon. It poured and they had winds over 100 mph. They had to practically lie on the ground to stay up. All of their tents blew away and they were all soaking wet. He remembers he tried to dry his wallet out and he had his discharge papers in it. He stuck it by the fire and the leather just shrunk up.

The Japanese had tombs all over the island. They were just like caves that were dug out of the hillsides, faced with rock, with fancy entrances. When the marines went ashore there, they decided that the tombs were great places to store their ammunition. One of the men found a tomb with boxes of dynamite in it. They had burned all of the wood from the boxes, and there wasn't anything else dry around because of the rain. They decided to burn the dynamite. Some wise guy said that dynamite won't explode, it will burn, unless it's set off with a charge. That proved to be

kind of wrong. When my grandfather found out what they were doing, he got out of there as fast as he could. He was going back to where his tent was, or used to be, when the cave he had just came from blew up. He says that was about as close a call as he'd ever had during the war. He looked back and the whole hillside was going up in the air. One great big boulder in particular just kept coming right at him. He says that it got pretty damned close, and that was the last thing he remembers. Evidently his mind blacked it out, because he woke up digging at the ground with his hands, with a huge boulder lying next to him.

They were all given a chit and said they were all survivors of a typhoon and explosion, and put them on a ship the next morning and sent them home. Instead of going south or east to get home, they went north, towards Alaska, and came down the coast to San Francisco. It took them fourteen days. They ran out of food about halfway across, but they didn't care. They drank coffee and ate hot dogs; that was about all they had left. They got home and that was the end of his naval career. He was in from December 1942 to October 1945, two years, ten months, and nineteen days. He was twenty-one when he was discharged from the service.