



HONOLULU 1946

LITTLE KNOWN STORY OF THE COAST GUARD IN WWII

By

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THE BEGINNING

Here is the story that is waiting to be told. As I believe I mentioned, when writing up my experiences for my children and grandchildren, “What Did You Do In The War Daddy?”, I subtitled it “The Man Nobody Wanted”. It certainly seemed that way, read on. But as you read, try to remember that I taught community college classes for some ten years and much of my writing and lecturing contained a “tongue in cheek” approach. So there may be some who approach this at an intense level. Don’t. What I write is true, to the best of my memory, but just be ready for the occasional sly, wry way things are presented

When I went to the CG historical site I had thought the basic events were all that I should set down. But after reading their guide, it seemed to me that personal experiences were wanted. How did the writer fit it with the events? Who else was there? Impressions? I hope that is true, because now we delve further into my experiences during WWII. From out of the past comes the thunderous cry of SEMPER PARATUS, the old days live again!

In 1943 I was an art major at Washington University in St. Louis, Mo. To cover expenses and compensate my parents for my living with them, I also worked as a clerk in the freight claim department of the Wabash Railroad. The war was going on and it seemed

like it would be a long time before we triumphed and most of us in my age group expected to serve in some branch of the Armed Services. Somehow I heard or read of a Navy program entitled "V12", where they would send you to college (their choice, my choice, I do not recall). After graduation you would be commissioned in the Navy and serve the same amount of time with them. By which time (most of us thought) the war would be over or winding down. So, off I went to the Navy recruitment office and signed my name. They gave me a written examination and I blush to say, I did very well. Then they gave me a physical examination. Now I had grown up in the Great Depression, money was scarce in our family and my father did not really believe in dentists, so the Navy doctor took one look in my mouth and reported the results. The powers that decide such things decided that the amount of money to bring my mouth up to Navy standards could be better spent on one or maybe two destroyers and declined my application. Remember, I was working and had a little extra money, so I went to our neighborhood dentist and had him repair the inside of my mouth. Not fun. Meanwhile one of the women in my anatomy class at Washington U. told me of her attempts to enlist in the same program. She had passed everything but they informed her that at the time there were no V12 openings, but to keep trying as they would hold the results until the end of time. She had a plan to get around this, the Coast Guard was part of the Navy, and she had been told that since it was Navy, but being smaller there would be a better chance of making the college list. Shortly thereafter, she was accepted, and for officer training. But not V12. So at the end of the semester I trotted down to the CG recruiter and pled my case. They did look up the record and found my test results. They had no vacancies either, but I was told (oh, they had good recruiters in those days) that if I joined the record would follow me and when there were openings, my name would be on the eligible list. I signed on the line, passed the physical this time and began my rather strange career.

I, along with several other St. Louis recruits went to boot camp at Government Island, now known as CG Island, in Alameda, CA. Now, originally I would stop here, but I think they wanted to have me put down all the details, or what I can still remember I will try to hold it to non-routine events or how the routine events affected me. We had the usual boot camp: the famous Blue Jackets Manual, learn to tie knots, handle a small boat, march in what was called "close order drill" with a replica of a rifle. When we did this with fixed bayonets and the command rang out "Marching Manual", it was amazing how close order drill became not so close as the bayonets moved through the required positions. These drills always culminated in a complete march around the parade grounds, called "the grinder". There we would stand inspection and listen to inspiring words from various officers until we were dismissed. This exercise was exacerbated by being the morning after inoculations were given, Depending on the shot being given, the heat of the grinder and the physical state of the seaman who received the shot, it was almost a given that one or more would slowly slip down on to the rather hot asphalt and assume a very restful, unconscious position. Woe, woe unto anyone who tried to assist. There were Pharmacist Mates for that. We were to merely close ranks so the derelict boot could not be observed from the viewing/speech making platform, and maintain our position at attention, or possibly parade rest.

Other memories of the way we were include pushing dirty dishes through the wash rack when on KP, “policing” grounds, barracks, and other less accessible areas. Night patrol on the perimeter of the “grinder”, knowing that some of your company would sooner or later show up to make noises and slip back and forth in the shadows hoping you would pursue them, And of course “Piss Call”. It would seem that bladder control was not an eliminating factor when passing the entrance physical; we had a few bed wetters. We all took turns at this duty post after the lights went out. With a clipboard that gave us the name and bunk location of the urinators we assumed our duty. By each name was a time to wake him up and see to it that he staggered off to the head. If it happened to be too late, tough, try again and get him back into the damp, smelly sack.

We also had excellent workouts on the obstacle course, not in our opinion so great, but in the minds of sadistic Bos’n Mates it was joy to watch. I especially remember the “vine” swinging part where we all raced towards a water filled trench that had vertical posts topped by a horizontal post from which several ropes (lines) were hanging. The object, as I am sure you know, was to leap from the side of the trench at full speed, launch your body toward one of the “vines” and just like Tarzan, swing to the other side, dropping your “vine” and racing on toward the next obstacle. (Today the Marines, who have a main recruit depot here, call it the “confidence course”). On one occasion, two boots slightly ahead of me went racing toward this obstacle, determined to be the first to cross, Although there were several lines on the horizontal post, they decided, independently I am sure, to try for the same one! This brought them on a collision course just short of the line and both took an unexpected bath. Many years later I was an air traffic controller and I always remembered this as my first mid-air collision.

The locale of the base made it subject to a lot of fog. I can still recall heading for the mess hall early in the morning with fog so thick it met every cliché ever made about fog. When we stepped out of the barracks, there would be someone with a flashlight to get you started, then you put your hand on the wall and felt your way forward. At the end of each building there would be another flashlight guide to steer you toward the next building and so it went until you reached the chow line. Very innovative, another sign of SEMPER PARATUS.

I had only been outside of St. Louis once, a trip to Maryland and New York to visit relatives. I knew little about other parts of our great country, especially Texas. I thought to myself there must be a lot of people in Texas, because they were able to ship so many off to Coast Guard Boot Camp. They were all allowed to bring their guitars and several of them would meet in one barracks and then another, singing the saddest, most mournful songs ever written. I believe that musical tradition survives today.

Although my Missouri President (Truman) did not integrate the services until 1947 or so, our boot camp was not segregated. One morning a few of us were straddling our table bench seat, and one was a Texan. Along came a black boot who sat down beside the Texan, it was the most logical place at the time. “Tex” got right up, picked up his tray and said he was not going to eat with a “deleted”. When the aforementioned boot

did not get up and it was apparent that the rest of us had no problem and were not going to join in any expulsion tactics, “Tex” stormed off a short distance and sat at another table. The black man smiled and said to us: “I didn’t ask to be here, they sent me here for training, and it just works out like this, so I guess I will just have a little fun with him”. He picked up his tray walked over to the other table and sat down next to “Tex”. This was too much for the Texan, he picked up his tray, tossed the contents into the trash, tossed the tray toward the dirty dish pickup stop and stormed out expressing some unkind opinions of all black people and any one who would associate with them. We’ve come a long way now!

Now and then we were given liberty and could go into Oakland or San Francisco. I chose the latter every time. One trip remains in my memory until today. I managed to find the “Stage Door Canteen” and saw several movie stars (if they were in movies they were “stars” to me) serving donuts, coffee, punch, etc to the service personnel visiting there. The biggest star there that night was Pat O’Brien. He finished his turn on the serving line and took the stage where he sang some Irish songs and then sat down on the edge of the stage while we all crowded around and he rattled off Irish joke after Irish joke. Great fun and a definite highlight of boot camp, which offered very few highlights.

Boot camp lasted just about eight weeks as far as I can tell from the few references I have in my documents. During that time we were given a battery of tests to determine our next assignment. When I had taken these tests I mentioned my V12 data, sure enough they did have access to that, and this was before computers! Again, no slot, but hang on and I would be considered. So I paid little heed to the future and kept on trying to get a high score for boot camp. One day, we were summoned one by one to meet with the personnel placer. I cannot recall if this was an officer or a yeoman, or what. But this person reviewed my test results, seemed quite pleased with what he found and told me I had qualified for just about any training school available. (Please – I am not bragging, that is just the way it was). I mentioned my V12 eligibility and was told no vacancies at the present, so I was required to list my three choices, for the enlisted schools, what were they? Well, my mother had been a nurse, we had rented a room to one of her associates, there had been a lot of medical talk around the table; so I listed Pharmacist Mate. “What next?” said the eager interviewer. Just from what I knew it sounded like, Quartermaster would be interesting, “put that one down”, I said. “One more” he said “I don’t know about others” I said. He said we must have three, and rattled off many more that I could train for, and since it would be choice #3, no doubt I would already be in V12, or selected for one of the others before the class opened, I threw in the towel and said “OK Radio Man it is”. I think you can see where this is trending. They selected a group for Pharmacist Mate school. I do not know about QM school, but I was told that I would be going to my third choice, Radioman school in New Jersey. Of course! There were a few others so favored, and we were all briefed about the school and the training we would get and what we could expect after graduating. Somewhere there was a railroad Almighty (today he would be a railroad Czar), and he fiddled with numbers, baggage, destination, supplies needed, how to hook up with other trains, etc. and finally found a train for us, Some of our group had gone here and there, but the Pharmacist group was still there

waiting. Later the word went around (unverified) that there was a big invasion planned in the Pacific and they needed personnel to handle the landing craft. Not too hard a procedure to learn and the Coast Guard was well known for doing this. This meant the Pharmacist school waiters would be given a crash course (bad choice of words) and shipped to the staging area for this invasion. Considering the survival rate of boat operators, I felt fortunate to be in radio school.

RADIO SCHOOL

Actually this was a pretty plush billet. It was in Atlantic City, New Jersey. The Coast Guard had taken over the Morton Hotel, not too plush but just a block east of the famous Boardwalk, The rooms were furnished with regulation top and bottom beds, the ones more like twin cots, but at least they were not like the cots we had on Government Island. You could hang clothes (well most of them) in closets, You had washroom cabinets for your toiletries, drawer cabinets, and carpets on the floor (deck) We were six to a room in top and bottom bunks; as trainees progressed through the program some would wash out (fail) They wanted to keep the classes together, so they would not bring in a new class member for your room. If no one from your class wanted that bed, it went empty. We were not nearly so cramped as time went by, it was a tough school. The Coast Guard had kept many of the hotel staff on duty. So there were housekeepers to make beds and tidy up the room, including the head. Many of the cook staff was there and that did make for a much improved menu, not to mention better food and no KP! On the lower level; extending below the sidewalk was the barber shop with the full crew of extended barbers. Outside the dining room was a large room that may have been a sitting room or library. In it was a man named Fritz Imhof, from Germany or Austria, another hold over from the hotel days. Every night he would play for listeners and sing mostly light music from musical theater, or other Broadway shows. That was fine with me, I grew up with this music as played in the open air opera in St.Louis' Forest Park. There was a rooftop lounge named the Crow's Nest, We used that for book study, we had many procedural and technical manuals to read and we were tested on their contents, so we did need study time. The instructional manuals were up there, so we could study. There was a large, well equipped sick bay .One story I remember about this facility, the medical officer in charge was a firm believer in the benefits of circumcision. I do not believe he could order this procedure for those who had not been given the operation in their younger days, but if not, he could strongly suggest it be done. This resulted in, as far as I know, all of them going under the knife, and having a pretty painful recuperation. This was always done on Friday so they were able to return to class in more or less good condition on Monday. I am glad my parents had the wisdom to arrange for my circumcision as a newborn so I did not have to join this ritual.

The main radio classrooms were in the Elk's Hall just down the street. It had been taken over also and was staffed by Coast Guard Instructors. Here long, very long, tables were furnished with input jacks for your headset and a typewriter. It did not matter whether you could type or not, you would learn. The method was simple and effective. The

typewriter keys were covered, and as we learned later, were all capital letters. When on duty radiomen would copy messages on such typewriters, all letters would be capital letters. So it made sense to leave out the function keys. We would copy incoming messages on a typewriter so we learned to type Morse code, often referred to as “CW” for the method of transmission. For instance we did not learn the code signal for “A”, we learned that “dot dash” meant hitting the first key in the third row on the typewriter with your left little finger. This did teach us both elements at one time, it worked very well.

As you became familiar with the code, the speed of transmission increased and hopefully our reception and typing went along with the speed. This meant a lot of practice, so we had classes mornings, afternoons, and evenings. The code classes were broken up by study on procedures, equipment (which did include actual hands on experience) and other minor facts about operating radio life that we might need. As we progressed the training time did decrease, I think (although this is pretty vague) that we actually were given evenings off. There were several classes in school at one time and the training syllabus had to be fashioned to give everyone the necessary time at the radio and in the classroom. When we had achieved a certain speed in copying the Morse code, we were given instruction for what to do if there was no typewriter. Naturally this meant copying using a pencil (called a “stick”) at a somewhat lower speed. And, the typewriter keys were uncovered! A side note, after I assumed civilian status I had a very hard time learning to shift keys on a typewriter.

At one point in the training we were given instructions on how to send out that code which we had been copying. This was using a “hand” or as it is often called a “telegraph” key. When we are on our own most of us started using a “speed” key, a lot faster and easier to use. We were tested periodically as we built up speed in both receiving and transmitting. A speed of 20 words per minute was required in both aspects to graduate, I finally made it!

This school was 24 weeks, a long time but it was necessary to get in all the aspects of radio training. I note from my diploma that 248 hours of that time was devoted to sending and receiving Morse code. I am amused to review this record and learn that 140 hours had been spent in “physical education”. I believe all of that was marching up and down the famous boardwalk in Atlantic City in formation but without weapons. I recall that during the winter months the wind came right off the ocean and was icy cold. The pea coats were good at blocking it, but from the edge of the coat down to the shoes, it was freezing.

It was during an evening in that period of the year that a large fire swept through the Boardwalk area of Atlantic City. We were close by and every available hand turned to volunteer (well, more or less) for fire fighting. Since we had no training in this, we were instructed to grab a hose a few feet behind the actual firemen on that hose and help pull. As I mentioned, it was cold and the water likewise. Once you were a ways from the fire the water was subject to freezing, at least it felt that way. We continued from structure to structure until the fire was controlled and we were released. During the time on the hoses we were given short breaks and all went to a support area staffed by the Salvation Army.

Hot coffee, hot chocolate, donuts and pastries were available and quickly consumed. I have always had affection for the Salvation Army for that and have often taken my turn ringing a bell by a kettle in shopping areas.

So there came a day when we were finally through! And as it always seems to do, it was just as things were getting good (spring was in the air, hotels and entertainment were starting up again, we had a lot of time off, etc.) it was over. There was a graduation ceremony and a banquet meeting in one of the other hotel dining rooms with speeches and entertainment, just like a non-service school. There was even an illustrated program with a great cover drawing and design. Well, I was an art major, remember? Someone in the office saw some of my work and I was assigned to this task. It was a fine way to get out of the more mundane tasks being assigned to keep us busy as we wound down the training. See the illustration appended to this article to judge how I did.

I do not know how many of us were in the class when we started, but 64 made it through. I note that I was 49th, not in the top of the class, even though my final combined grade of practical and theoretical training was 87.5%. Almost all of the class were promoted to RM3/c, with a few given Seaman1/c and listed as “strikers” who would, hopefully, gain the rating while on their first assignment. We were also given new duty stations, but with one week of leave before reporting.

One last strange event. Remember the woman from my art class that really started me on this path? One day I was in the administrative offices, also located in the Elk’s Hall. As I walked down a hallway, I saw an open door at the Chaplain’s office area, I looked in, and there she was! Newly commissioned Ensign and assigned as administrative aide to the Chaplain. We compared notes for a while, of course there the difference in rank so we did not continue to meet, she was still there when I departed. It would seem that in the Coast Guard it was indeed a small world.

PHILADELPHIA

My new assignment was the 4th CG District Office, located at the Naval base in Philadelphia. One other member of my class was also assigned there and for some reason, we were given “quarters and rations” status. We were paid to take care of our own living arrangements. I am not sure but I do think they placed us in the living quarters, as I do not think we could have found it by ourselves. It was an old Philadelphia house converted for military use by several, if not all, branches of the service represented. Not a tough assignment at all! Actual semi-private rooms, dining hall for evening meals, a library and we only had daytime duty in the District Office. In this District Office there was a small communications area and we were there to handle incoming and outgoing messages. In theory this would be done by radio, but there was an operating teletype system and I believe everything came in by that means. It was all in code, just like the radio messages would have been. Our highly technical job was to rip these off the machine, time stamp them and pass them to the decoding officer. We were on our own when the rest of the

office closed down in a big city with a lot of entertainment, excellent rates everywhere in town for military personnel, actual money to spend, so it was a given that we would not be there long. One day I passed a message to the OOD in the crypto (coded) message center and a few minutes later she came out with a smile and told me that message was a transfer order for my classmate and me! Farewell, Philly, away we must go!

DIRECTION FINDING DAYS

Little did I know just how far this assignment would eventually take me, and what strange events would ensue. We were to report to the Navy base at Casco Bay, ME for training by the Navy. Casco Bay is located on an island off shore from Portland and the largest operation there was the various types of anti-submarine warfare. We would become part of that operation, training in the use of High Frequency Direction Finding Equipment, usually referred to as HF/DF and spoken as "Huff Duff". It seems that while under water, the subs can receive radio signals but they must surface to send reports to the land bases. Radio operators trained in the use of this HF/DF could then take a directional bearing on the sub's signal and the nearest ships would head for that position and attack the sub. The German shore stations transmitted a steady stream of messages (as did ours) and somewhere in this stream would be some actual pertinent information. This gave us an excellent source of training for the German Morse code. The Germans, due to the umlaut letters in that language, have a few extra letters in Morse. We spent hours copying these stations, although in practical application there would be no need, it was just for learning the code. Our Naval Intelligence had information on when they would shift frequency and what the new frequency would be, so we could shift right along with them. Our most important aspect of the training was in the operation of the DF equipment, a cathode ray presentation somewhat like radar, which, if properly operated would indicate the approximate position of the sub, or in this case "U-boat". If there was more than one ship in the area, cross bearings could be obtained pinning down the location even better.

Another use of the island was as a brig for "hard core" prisoners. If they were to escape they would have to be very good (and lucky) swimmers. One of our lesser duties were tours on KP, the exemption of petty officers was not in effect here. The times my name came up I was given a serving job on the chow line, not bad, better than doing dishes. The prisoners were always served first and they were an intimidating crew. When one of them asked for an extra helping, scowling at me as he asked, I was quick to dish it up!

There were, to my best recollection, thirty one of us in the class, from varied CG backgrounds. There were newcomers, and I was one, all the way to those with several years of duty. Some of us (like me) were 3rd class and the ratings went all the way up to Chief. The entire class was CG and the stated intention was to station us on CG vessels, but if there was no ship in need of us at the time, we would be assigned to Navy ships. This group actually remained together, in effect, far longer than anyone thought. As you readers will see.

When we had liberty we could catch a launch into Portland and if we had weekend liberty we could “fan out” from there. My favorite plan was to go into Boston by train and spend the weekend there. A fine liberty town, everywhere you went there was free admission, free food, free lodging (arranged by the USO). Many historical sites to see, lots of entertainment, but the high light of my trips was always Fenway Park and a chance to see the Red Sox. Coming from St. Louis I was born a baseball fan, but a Cardinal fan and not having inter-league play in those days, there had not been much opportunity to see some of those old time Boston greats. Only when they came to town to play the lowly St. Louis Browns, an AL team, but a bad one. They later became the Baltimore Orioles.

This school lasted several weeks, I wish I had better time references (other than my memory). We were finished, time to move along. All of us were sent to the big, big Navy base at Norfolk, VA for assignment. I have to believe that there were no ships in need of our expertise as we laid around Norfolk for some time. I can not say it was a pleasant experience. Some of you readers may have been there in the WWII days and know what I mean. Sailors, since there were so many, were not welcomed in the town. In fact, they were discouraged from entering town. Of course we had to find out for ourselves and made a few trips, I can only recall two and after that I pretty much kept to the base. On the first trip, there were three or four of us, and we boarded the trolley into town. When we walked in there were no seats in the front, but several in the rear, so we headed there and sat down. The motorman came to an abrupt halt and told us we could not sit there and to move up front. I said (why do I always open my mouth first?) “There are no seats there”. We were then told we had to move up and stand, the seats in the rear were for “coloreds”. Something none of us had experienced in our home towns, or anywhere else to be exact. So we moved up, assumed a standing position, hung on to the passenger straps while the trolley bumped along into town. This did not give me a good first impression of Norfolk. If we did not go into town, we could take advantage of the tennis courts, the ping pong and pool tables and other recreational areas of the base. Our barracks worked on the port and starboard system, half hung around the barracks just in case; in case they needed you for pleasant duty such as going into town on large trucks to collect the stacked newspapers that the citizens of Norfolk had put on the street as part of their support of the war efforts. Dirty, hot, not fun, it stands out as the worst of our exploits in Norfolk. But, I suppose we were doing our part even then.

But, things were changing. As I understand the situation, an engineer at the FCC in Washington had come up with an idea for using HF/DF equipment to take bearings on aircraft that had strayed from their flight paths. He had developed the equipment and someone decided that the Coast Guard would be the appropriate branch of the service to take on the operational part. He was quickly commissioned and the wheels were set in motion. Where to locate the necessary training facility? Well, why not in an area already used for radio training? Atlantic City! It was natural. Where to find the first students? Well, there were 31 HF/DF operators hanging around Norfolk. They should breeze through the training and be ready for operations in a short period of time! And so, we found ourselves plucked from the Navy and on our way back to the Coast Guard training facility in Atlantic City! SEMPER PARATUS!

All of us found this to be a welcome change of station. Atlantic City in summer. The hotels, restaurants, entertainment sites, tourists visiting (from areas close by, the only ones who could get there in those days). The sun was warm, the ocean was warm, the beach sand was warm! And the greetings were warm, we were welcome everywhere. We were the experimental class, the curriculum was made up as we went along and the training time was easy. It was new equipment, but the principle was the same, take bearings on CW signals. No evening classes, liberty whenever we were not in class. I will always remember those days fondly. In Atlantic City the live entertainment was pretty much located on the various piers that project into the ocean and on one of these there was a live review called "Tars and SPARS". I think some who read this may recall that name. All Coast Guard cast, singing, dancing, comic routines, all Coast Guard. The MC was Chief Bos'n Mate Victor Mature, yes, the actor soon to be famous as Samson in the epic movie "Samson and Delilah". He was just back from sea duty on the New York – Murmansk convoy and I am sure he found this duty a welcome change! The cast were assigned to our hotel and we were able to meet many of them. This was great, especially the dancing SPARS from the chorus. One of the top acts in the show featured a seaman named Sid Caesar, the one who went on to achieve great fame in TV. He was already doing the WWI dog fight routine and it was hilarious, as it was when I saw it on TV after the war. We were on the fringes of show biz fame!

As always the good assignments end too soon; we were deemed qualified and were to be sent to the Pacific to establish a network of HF/DF stations on the little chunks of coral that pilots had trouble locating. We boarded another example of pressed into service railroad rolling stock and headed west. Along the way, somewhere east of Illinois the engine with a few cars decided to take unauthorized absence and jumped the track. No one was injured and after a few hours of waiting, a new engine pulled up and was connected to the remaining undamaged cars. Well sort of undamaged, the wheels were a little out of round resulting from the efforts to stop the train and we bumped and clattered into Chicago. There we had a few hours while new transportation was found for us and we actually left the station and I briefly looked at Chicago. Not far was a theater and "Stage Coach" with John Wayne was being shown. Most of us waited for our new transport while watching John in one of his early starring roles. Then we were on our way and ended up at Naval Base, Treasure Island, San Francisco, CA.

INTO THE PACIFIC

While at Treasure Island we were restricted to one part of the base. Quarantined you might say. Just so none of us yielded to temptation and tried to swim to San Francisco. While we were there, Bob Hope came through on one of his tours, just before he headed out across the Pacific. We were not allowed to attend, even under escort. So we made do with standing outside the barracks and listening. Not quite the same! But it was something to do while waiting and it was Bob Hope.

As it always does, one day followed another until we finally were rounded up and marched to the dock, there to board the good ship "Robin Wently", a merchant marine

transport already old in days at sea. We actually had a concert on deck prior to sailing with Lionel Hampton! But that too passed and we pulled away, not so much into the sunset, our first stop would be a Naval base down the coast, Port Hueneme. There we picked up a company of Sea Bees and now headed off into the west.

As it seems is standard procedure, our first meal at sea was mostly greasy pork chops with gravy covering all else. I understand this was to test everyone for motion sickness, and sure enough in our area one man was hit right away. I was in a lower bunk close by and above me was one Joe Grazulis, a veteran of small boats on convoy duty in the Caribbean. Joe leaned over and said to me “Do you get seasick Brown?” I told him I had no idea, it was my first time on a ship. He said “OK, get a swab, clean that up and you never will get sick” As he outranked me, I did as instructed and it worked! I have never suffered from any motion sickness.

The Robin Wently was a somewhat battered Liberty ship, manned by a Merchant Seamen crew with a Navy signal man, a few other Navy personnel and a Marine Guard. About half way across, the Robin Wently went ominously quiet. There was a failure in the engine room. I am not sure what quit, but while the crew was investigating and repairing, we floated in an unscheduled pattern upon (thankfully) calm seas. Then – out of the blue, on the horizon, appeared two Navy Destroyers (our Navy) and they headed toward this suspicious looking vessel, They ran up various flags, and while the Navy signal man aboard our ship was hurriedly searching his manual to make reply, they closed in, keeping in formation so we were always between them, while training their guns on us. Whatever flags our signal man ran up, it did not impress the Navy and they broke out the signal light and started sending messages. This really overwhelmed the signal man on our bridge and the captain, in desperation, searched for and found us (standing on the starboard side). I do not recall the exact words. But he asked weren't we radio men and if so did we have training in reading light signals. Of course we had, but alas, in the intervening months, we had also forgotten most of them. We could all read the code, but not fast enough to get the message. However, in the spirit of SEMPER PARATUS one, old timer, volunteered. He went topside and worked out the message and managed to send a reply, giving our condition. Now, I am not sure how well this convinced the Navy, after all, here was a merchant ship out of the path where it should have been and without very much knowledge of identification. Was this a trap?

So, they continued to circle until the Sea Bees appeared on the railings. Not wanting to sound racist, but I must say that this was final proof that we were not a Japanese plot to entice Navy ships into a trap, the entire Sea Bee unit was black. The Navy asked if we needed help, our captain said to thank them but they were working on the problem and did not want to keep them from their duties. They sailed away, and thanks to the Coast Guard and a Sea Bee battalion, an embarrassing incident was avoided. The crew finally restored enough power for us to proceed at reduced speed to Pearl Harbor. It did not provide enough power for the galley and for the fans in the “passenger” compartments. We ate cold food and slept on deck until we rounded Diamond Head and docked;

Now the tale really begins. My memory is a bit dim as to our group. I am fairly certain that we were 31 radiomen of various ratings, some were old hands (see above paragraph) and others were in my category, very new. I know we had one Chief, Langle by name and one or two Warrant Officers. These leaders contacted the CGDO in Honolulu, reported our arrival and requested transport. Well, nobody in the DO had any information that we were coming, much less what we were to do, and no equipment for us to use in establishing the DF network in the islands! I can only presume that the communication paths were heavily loaded between Honolulu and various offices on the mainland. As I was told, CGDO gave up and passed the buck to CINCPAC. Either Admiral Nimitz or someone high up on his staff, found out that the Army Air Corps through their AACS (Army Airways Communication Stations) was already operating HF/DF facilities as part of the Air/Sea rescue service. Then came the final, fatal words “Detach those men to the AAACS”! And so it was.

This gets even stranger. When we arrived at the Air Base, Mokulea, on the north shore of Oahu, we found that the AACS was operating the same DF equipment we had used at Casco Bay! Well, they did have a different antenna system, not being confined to the deck of a ship. Therefore it did not take long to have all of us certified. We then went into the AACS personnel pool and given assignments to various stations in Hawaii or close by friendly atolls. I, with two others went to Kauai, a D/F station in the middle of a cane field. It was staffed by several AACS radiomen and we replaced three of them. This gave us practice and it was an easy workload. By this time almost all pilots could find Hawaii and there were radio facilities to guide them. After a few months, RM2/c David Allan Morris and I were sent to Kwajalein for assignment. Things were rather primitive on Kwaj. There were few trees left, there were few roads, lots of shell craters and not much in the way of housing. While we waited around for our assignment, the Japanese actually sent some aircraft toward the island, at least that was what we were told when the sirens sounded and we were told to put on our helmets and dive into the trenches that served as bomb shelters! Some aircraft were dispatched and we presumed they took care of the situation (nobody tells a group of unassigned, transient personnel anything) They came back, the Japanese did not reach us and we climbed out of the trenches and resumed what ever we had been doing, which must not have been much as I have forgotten all about what we did most of the time that we were on Kwaj. Funny though although we did nothing we were there at a time that qualified us for a combat star on the Asia-Pacific campaign ribbon! I have several illustrations to show something of the life there.

After some time we were reunited with others from our group and eventually five were sent to establish a new facility on Tarawa. (Actually, Betio Island of the Tarawa atoll group). One of our crew, RM2/c Arthur Victor Hackett was placed in charge. He was an old hand, he had served in the army before the war, where he was on a boxing team, had been promoted and busted a few times (all hearsay you understand). He was the ideal leader for the enterprise. Others that I recall were Dave Morris, a man named Cuneo, one other whose name is lost and another known as “Swede” (aren’t they all?) The AACS also had a radio station on the atoll and we were assigned an officer from their personnel. He was a newly minted 2nd Lt. and no match for Arthur Victor Hackett! Hackett took over right away and established the “rules”. “You do the paper work and handle the

administrative side, I will take care of the operation, and all will work well". That was the way it was, and it worked! Hackett was well versed in scrounging, scavenging, appropriating, what ever it took to make the facility work. We had the best equipped, best furnished, best everything operational tent (with a thatched roof), on the island! We soon had the station on the air, operating in an AACS network with the net control at Guadalcanal, later I believe it shifted to Kwajalein. With a number of stations in the net the bearings were crossed then plotted and we were almost always able to get several bearings on the "lost" aircraft and had an excellent record of saves. From our original group some were at Funafuti and some at Majuro. I am not sure where the rest of them went. But I do know that one of those assigned to Kauai stayed there for the duration, a RM1/c by the name of Louis Van Dyke. It is strange how some names last in your memory and others are lost in just a short time.

The renovation of Tarawa (I shall use this instead of referring to Betio) had begun and there were several mess halls, an open air theater, an Army PX (open to all) and many tent areas. We were quartered with other AACS personnel in one tent area. I believe there were three or four in a tent, I do know that Dave Morris was in that tent, Cuneo, and "Swede". There are some illustrations that show our quarters. It is entirely possible that some AACS members were there also. The AACS did not consider us anything more than Army members and we went along with that designation, not that we had any choice. We did have a choice of uniforms. We still had our CG dungarees, Army Khaki uniforms given us in Hawaii, and some Sea Bee green fatigues given us on Kwaj. One day Hackett was summoned to the Island Commander's office, "Hackett" he was told. "I know yours is a strange unit and you have several uniforms. Now, I don't care which one you wear, but make it the same from top to bottom". Most of the times we wore an undershirt, cut off shorts, and the sun helmets given us on Kwaj. So we tried to keep to a sort of dress code. You can see some of the results in the illustrations provided.

There are other illustrations from Tarawa in the attachment to this long, long document. Since I was on Tarawa longer than any other assignment (excluding radio school) there will be a good deal of space devoted to the way of life on a coral reef. And everywhere I went, I had a sketch book and a supply of charcoal pencils. And there was usually someone around who had a smuggled in camera and someone who could manage to have them printed in the recon photo lab.

You can see that the living conditions were rather primitive, but we worked on solutions and it finally was not bad, compared to what many people were enduring at that time. There were salt/fresh showers, located in each quarters area. A platform with piping that allowed several people to shower at one time. However most areas used improvised showers taking advantage of the almost nightly rain showers. A gutter along the roof area, leading to a large empty and cleaned oil drum was a fine way to collect fresh water. In some tents this was also hooked into an overhead can with a spigot for shower water. In one of the illustrations you can see our "wash room", a combat helmet stuck into a wooden stand with a mirror close by for shaving. There were also toilet facilities, a rather large pipe to which a funnel was attached, stuck in the sand. After things got rather ripe it was moved to another area close by. These were exposed, but when the Navy brought in

some nurses for the sick bay, canvas covers were erected along three sides. For other toilet activity we had large tents located here and there as deemed necessary. Inside were board seats with several holes carved in them. Have a seat, meet new people, discuss important matters. As with the urinals they were moved from time to time and the sand below covered over. Near our D/F station was a urinal, but no sit down and relax accommodations. If the need arose we were given a trenching tool (spade) and hopefully the net control station would give you the OK to go off net for the necessary time. We worked a very effective schedule, six hours in the station followed by twenty four hours off. We were open all day, all night, all week.

Tarawa was originally a part of the British Crown Colony of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands and the Japanese replaced them. While I was still there, the U.S. decided it would be good to bring back British control and turned the atoll over to a small group of Australian troops. I never did find out what they did on the island, but it was under the Union Jack (next to our Stars and Stripes).

When the British had the islands they had several Boxer dogs and the Japanese inherited them, and we, in turn, liberated them from the Japanese. They and their descendants were marvelous animals, intelligent and well trained, so our officers had first choice. We saw them around and I began to wish I had such a dog. This was not probable, but word got around and one of the Army personnel came up and told me that he had heard about a dog that was available. Now, when the British were in residence they had a number of the Micronesian islanders from the colony on their payroll. They did not want to become part of the free Asia movement sponsored by the Imperial Empire and left for other islands. When we arrived they returned and were given a compound area and employed by our government. There are a few in my illustrations. It turned out that the dog was not a Boxer pup, but one of no recognizable ancestry about four weeks old. One of the natives was willing to part with the pup, who was being kept (nasty part here) for the main dish at a forthcoming party. I could not allow that so I offered to buy him. It seems the owner did not want money. He wanted to trade, one dog for one G.I. trench knife. I am sure that would give him prestige and perhaps power in the compound, but the knife, issued to me by the Army, was accountable. Or so they claimed when handing them out with other gear. He would not relent, so I gave in. I came back with one quivering, stuffed with rice for obvious reasons, lonely but happy puppy. I named him "Mickey", fed him with powdered milk until he came down to normal size and health. He was a wonderful dog, he was as smart as any Boxer and devoted to me. He followed me everywhere and if it was a place such as the mess hall where he was not permitted, he would wait by the door until I came out. Besides being a part of my life at that time, he figures in the last story of this chapter. Read on...it takes some time to set the stage.

Stage is the operative word here. We were not deluged by live entertainment on Tarawa. For some reason the big stars and the USO shows by passed us. But one day we were informed that a real big Hollywood show was coming our way. It was the typical show, a well known MC, maybe one or two lesser "stars" as a singer/dancer and a chorus, most of them feminine. Our MC was Jack Carson who appeared in many movies as the funny man, side kick of the star. But, for most audiences the main attraction was Chili Williams

a starlet more famous for her pin up pictures than movies. She always wore polka dot outfits, swimming suits, dresses, sportswear, and became known as the “Polka Dot” girl. Finally they arrived, a stage with a large number of seats for the audience was quickly in place, excitement was in the air! I have mentioned Dave Morris before, he was a big movie fan and he was really excited! He intended to be at his best for the show and wanted a close shave. I have mentioned our wash bowls and there is one in a picture of our tent area. If you really wanted true warm water the custom was to put the helmet wash basin out in the sun for a few hours. Dave did that well in advance, he wanted really hot water! Well, while he was away, Mickey saw the “bowl” and decided it was time for a long, deep drink. When Morris came looking for his wash basin, I seem to recall that he was not happy, recall – I will never forget that moment! Lucky for Mickey (and also me) there was time enough to set out another helmet and it did warm up in time for his final preparation! I am still thankful for that hot, hot tropical sun! Dave was planning to get his seat early, like maybe two hours early and he was kind and forgiving enough to save seats for all of his tent mates. I do not think I took Mickey.

The next day, when the show was scheduled to depart, some activity broke out near their route and so they remained with us until things were safer. They were kind enough to spend most of their time with the troops. They broke up into small groups and went to a “day room” or other suitable spot in each outfit’s tent area for informal chats. We were lucky to get Jack Carson for ours, although I do believe many would have opted for Chili. The rumor was she went to that rather restricted area known as “officer’s country”. But he had a lot of stories and answered questions, nice guy. But, I think any of those entertainers who came out in any theater of operations had to be “nice”!

As the US forces pushed westward in the Pacific the main idea was to be able to take the war to the Japanese homeland. Unlike the Japanese in their invasion campaign, they bypassed those islands that did not have, or could have a runway for aircraft operations. Many of the small islands around Tarawa were still home to Japanese troops who by now had lost all touch with their forces. Every now and then a Navy patrol craft would go by and Japanese speaking announcers, using a bull horn, would offer food, shelter, toilet paper and other temptations, all they had to do was step, unarmed up to the shore. Of course any who did forsake their oath to the Emperor and the code of “Bushido” would never survive long enough to board the boat, the others would see to that. However the will to find a better home did exist and some decided to finally take a chance. I was on the 1800-2400 shift one evening and Hackett came screeching up in the Jeep we used. He had with him our carbines and combat helmets, plus the explosives provided to destroy the equipment as needed. An alert had been declared; it seems some of those Japanese who yearned for better times had managed to assemble a seaworthy raft and pushed off for Tarawa. They had been spotted by a patrol pilot and were being tracked, we should be prepared to repulse invaders. However the intrepid rafters had no navigation equipment, night had fallen, their propulsion and steering was very limited and they missed Tarawa by many miles, drifting off into the unknown. The stand down was ordered, Hackett went back to the tent and calm settled over the island. The next day some aircraft were dispatched to fly over all the nearby Japanese held islands and drop a few explosive

warnings about anyone attempting another sea voyage. I do not think this is recorded anywhere, but now you know about the second Japanese invasion in the Gilberts.

One last memory. Driving to or from the DF station at sundown, the first notes of Taps were always heard. Climbing out and standing at attention while the colors were lowered far off at the headquarters compound. Gazing out at the still ravaged island where so many had fought and died as the light faded and the final notes sounded. To this day I cannot find the words to describe my feelings.

After six months of duty on Tarawa, I was transferred to Majuro in the Marshall Islands. The station was a joint operation and I found two other members of our "lost" band of Coast Guard DFers there, including Joe Grazulis who had initiated me to swabbing vomit on the "Robin Wently". Majuro had been used as an R&R island for the Japanese troops in the Pacific and so it was not really fortified, I gathered that the invasion forces just came up in landing craft and walked on shore. In any event, the palm trees and other foliage were untouched and it was a typical Pacific island as seen in movies and travel books. Great sunsets, good swimming, sun bathing, and a pretty easy life for all U.S. personnel. After the invasion, the island was converted into a prison camp for captured prisoners and there were quite a few. Not all Japanese troops had carried on the fight until death as prescribed by the Emperor. They were held in separate camps, the officers sleeping (as we all did) in Quonset huts. Those officers, however, were guarded at each door by armed Marines. No such guards were needed in the enlisted area, they were actually pretty happy to be out of the fighting. Every morning someone from each of our housing areas would take a personnel carrier down to the enlisted camp and take a few of the prisoners back to the area where they would make beds, sweep floors, clean latrines, all the chores that we did not want to perform! They worked very hard, because if they finished before it was time to return them to the prison compound, they could go in our rec room and play ping pong! Also bum cigarettes and practice English. "My uncle, he taxi driver in San Francisco, after war I go live with him" Actual quote from one who had learned that much English. Nobody tried to disillusion him.

Because this was a prisoner holding area, we were frequently visited by the Red Cross and other organizations concerned with the welfare of the detainees (sound familiar?). That meant that our meals were as fine as possible, fried chicken, ham, fruit and vegetables that almost tasted fresh. It was a stop for all USO and other troupes. Life was reasonably good on Majuro.

I had not been there long before we were joined by the aforementioned Arthur Victor Hackett. It seems that the AACS put in a new officer in charge for the HF/DF station on Tarawa and it seemed there were a few differences in the makeup and experience of this officer and a few differences between said officer and Hackett. He was just one of the operators here, but did not seem to bother him, he had been up and down and in and out before. Hackett had never learned to drive. I think the Jeep on Tarawa was his training school. On Majuro we had a personnel carrier (often called a weapons carrier) to go from the quarters all the way down the causeway connecting the coral outcroppings to the final one where our station was the only structure. One day coming back from a midnight shift,

Hackett went off the road and into the shallow water. It was easy to steer it back onto the side of the causeway, but it did not want to make the final push unto the road. So Hackett kept going, trying to exit at each outcropping. On and on, finally just before reaching “civilization” as we knew it and being very embarrassed he broke out onto the road! No one saw this, but he was not embarrassed to recount the incident.

Since I had last seen Joe at Hickam he had grown a most impressive handlebar mustache. He liked to curl the ends and to hold them there it needed wax. Not on sale at the PX. However useful to the operation of the HF/DF equipment were various size resistors. These were coated with wax. Joe would patiently melt the wax with a cigarette lighter, collecting the wax and applying it to his mustache. Well, we all needed our hobbies. I had sketch books, Joe had wax.

I spoke of our toilet facilities on Tarawa. Majuro was more up to date, at least in the barracks areas. Quonset huts with all the necessities including plumbing. However, out at the tip of the island where our station arose from the coral things were different. The usual tube in the sand – but when we needed “other” facilities we went back to basics. A palm tree had fallen and the trunk being horizontal and a bit off the ground it became a natural toilet seat. A roll of papers stuck on a branch nearby completed the arrangement. Plumbing? None needed. This may sound odd, but true – hermit crabs were there as soon as the “shit hit the sand” to clean up.

The atomic bombs were dropped during our stay on Majuro and they were followed, as we know by VJ day. We were still useful as there were still aircraft flying but it was time to down size. The AACS would take over and we were all to be returned to Hawaii and released from detached service This took place quickly and off we went to Kwajalein, by way of Eniwetok. Kwaj was a sight to behold! The Sea Bees had been busy since we left! There were paved roads all over, big buildings, utilities, theaters it was almost like a normal military base with all the amenities! We turned in our equipment, without any inventory, (so much for my worries about the trench knife!) I had been able to take Mickey to Majuro, but they would not allow me to take him to Hawaii, due to the long quarantine period there for all pets. I found a good home for him with one of the people remaining on Majuro and we sadly parted.

Upon arrival in Hawaii we were all assembled and taken from Hickam field to the Coast Guard station for the 14ND. We were all immediately promoted one grade (there had been no promotions while on detached duty) We had various release dates, so we were to serve until the date was reached .I was sent to a DF equipped radio station at the Pauwela Point light house on the island of Maui. It was DF for ships, not aircraft and I do not think I took an actual bearing in the four months I was there! It was there to get radio messages for the light house personnel. Here is that small world again. One of the radiomen there was from my class in Atlantic City! We lived, with the light house staff (all two of them) again in an actual house! Cooked our own meals, kept the house clean, went into town, such as it was on a Coast Guard truck. There was a Bosun’s mate in charge of the operation, he was responsible for turning the light on and off, no automation in those days. In April my time was up and I was sent to Honolulu for release

preparation and discharge. (although they promised me immediate promotion to RM1/C, if I would continue my Coast Guard career, I respectfully declined.)

That is it, the story of a small group of Coast Guard personnel who served in a very different operation during WWII. In spite of all the mix-ups, I think we served the country well. It also proves that being SEMPER PARATUS means being PARATUS for anything!

To bring this long story to a short ending, I did not go back to art school, but studied it privately for some time, and still dabble in art today, but with less interesting subjects than in my CG days. Having been given the wonderful gift of Morse Code radio by the Coast Guard I worked it into a career. When I was discharged, the CAA (now FAA) was conducting station to station communications by CW and they actively recruited anyone with this training. Had to do 30 words per minute, 10 more than Atlantic City had given us, but speed improves with use and I had no trouble. I started in on the island of Maui where I had been before. Later I transferred from the stations (who moved on to teletype) to control towers and finished a 36 year career with ten years in San Diego as Assistant Chief in that tower. I followed this with a ten year career as an instructor in the aviation departments at two community colleges.

And I did manage to become an officer! Not the Coast Guard, but National Guard. When working on Maui for the CAA, I had a neighbor who had joined the Army Guard unit there, and he persuaded me to go with him one drill night. They were trying to establish an inter-island network of radio stations, using CW communications. I was the first qualified person they found. I was given the equivalent of my CG rating and started to carry out their job. After it was doing well, they decided this really should be an officer in charge. All I had to do was pass a written exam, which I did easily (note past references to exam capability) I was then a 2nd Lt in the Army Guard! Easy road to “high country” After things were running well, I resigned. It was difficult to meet the training requirements with my CAA duties and they would not allow me to attend the two week encampment each summer.

I do think this ties up all the details. A lot of story but a “tale to be told”.



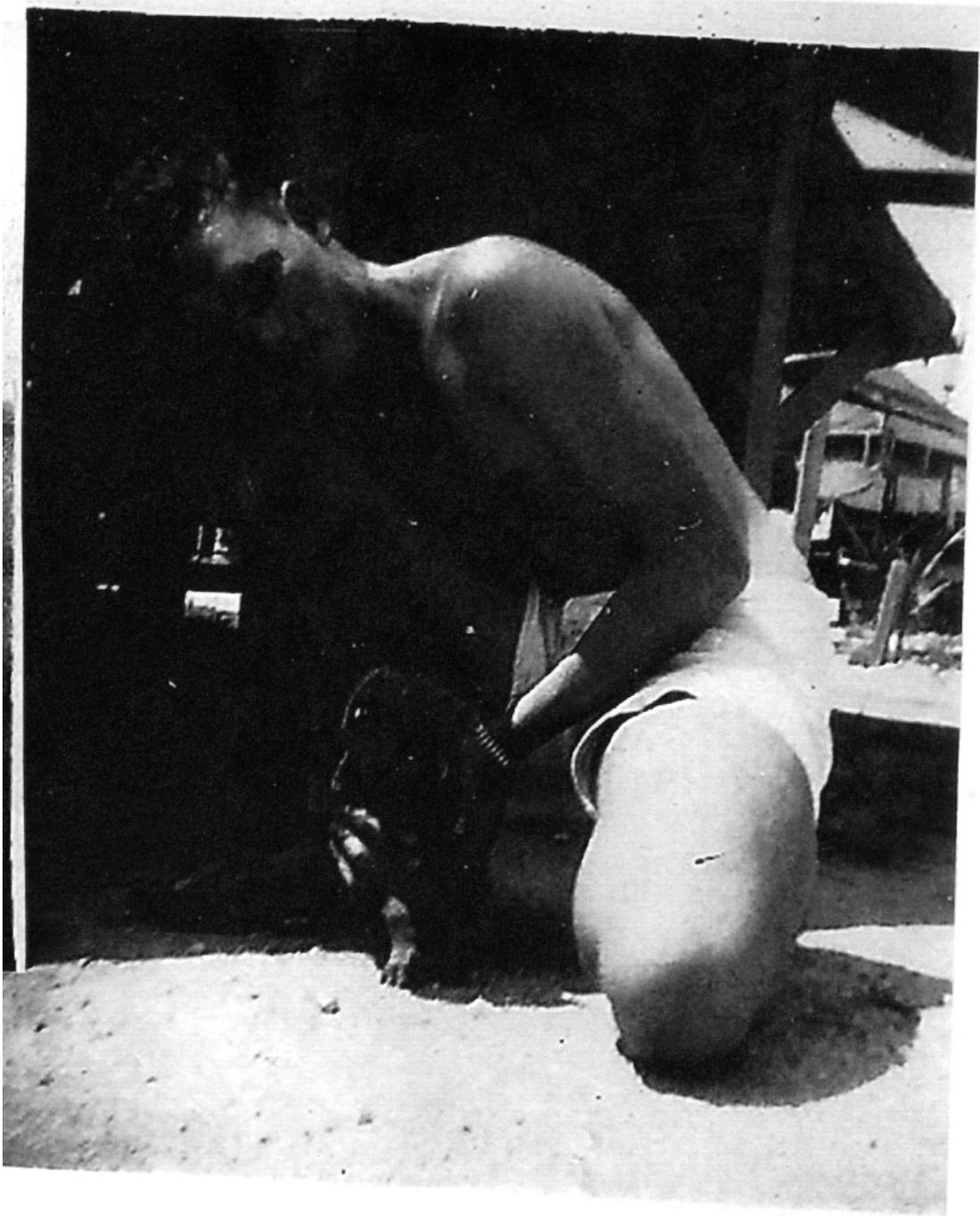
HONOLULU 1946

The author



TARAWA

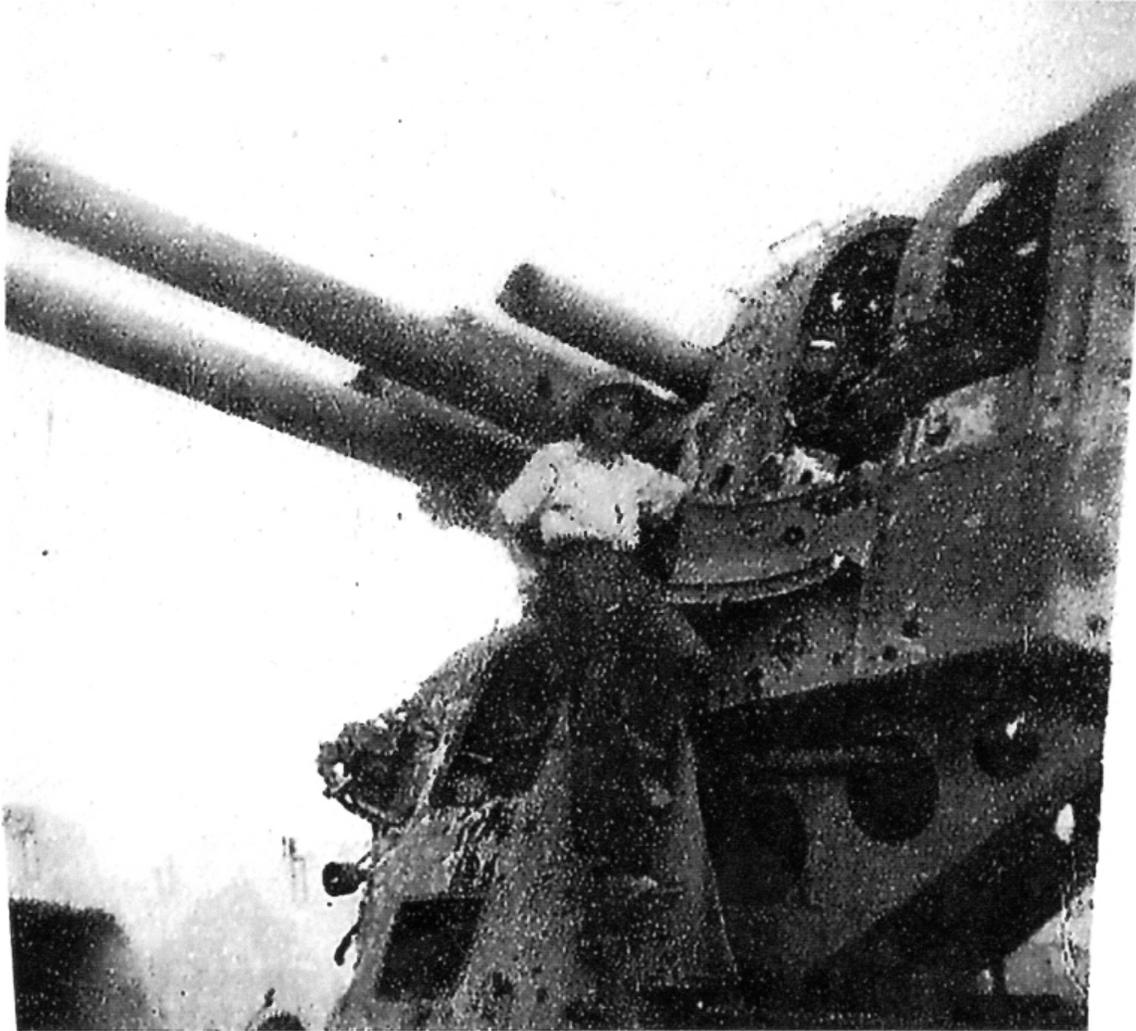
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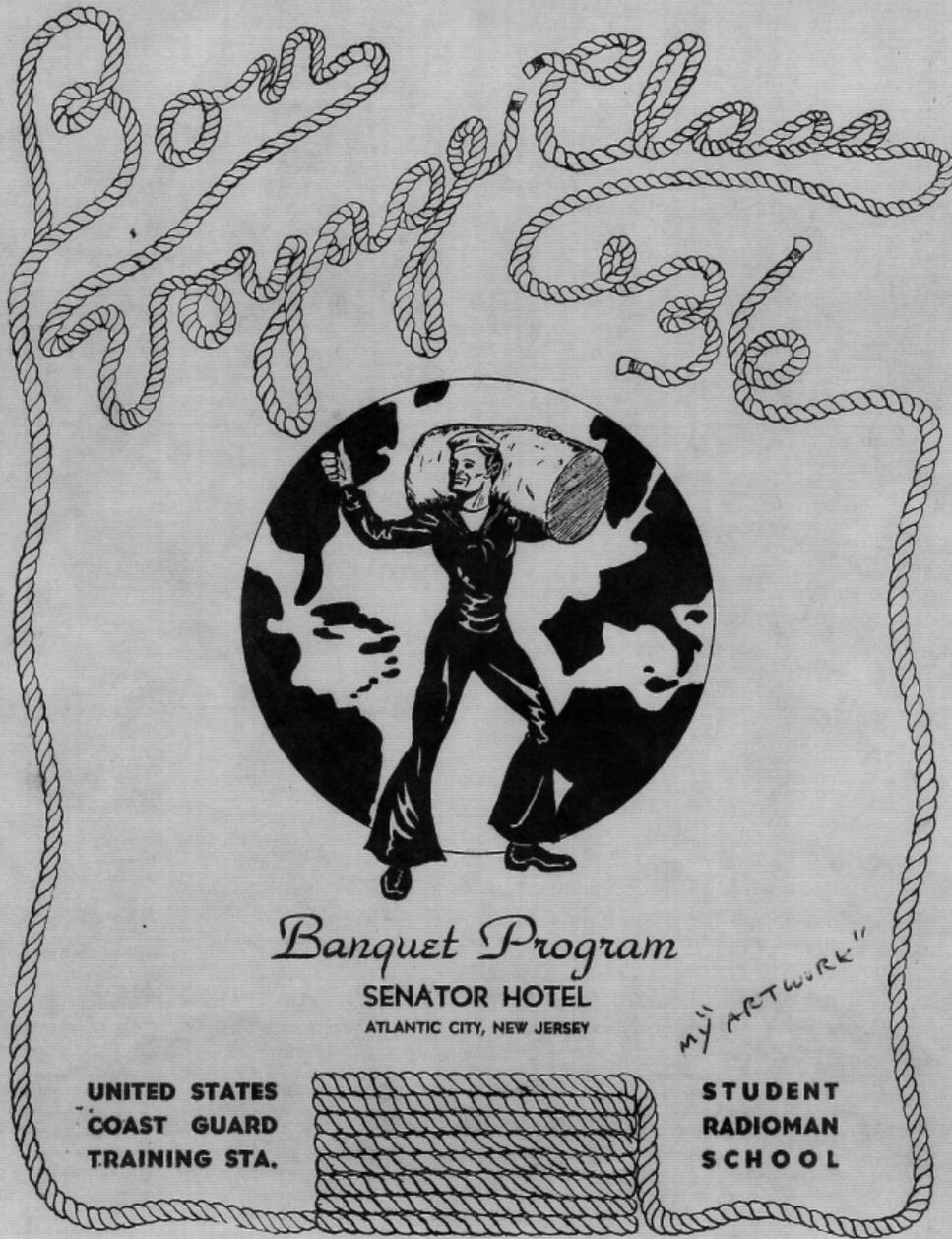


MICKEY AND ME

TARAWI

BRITISH GUNS





Mrs
Nine

4
Boys





CHECKER GAME
JAMES LAYMAN DRAWN
"Robin Wently"



SANITATION DECK
7 SEPT 44

JAMES L. YOUNG

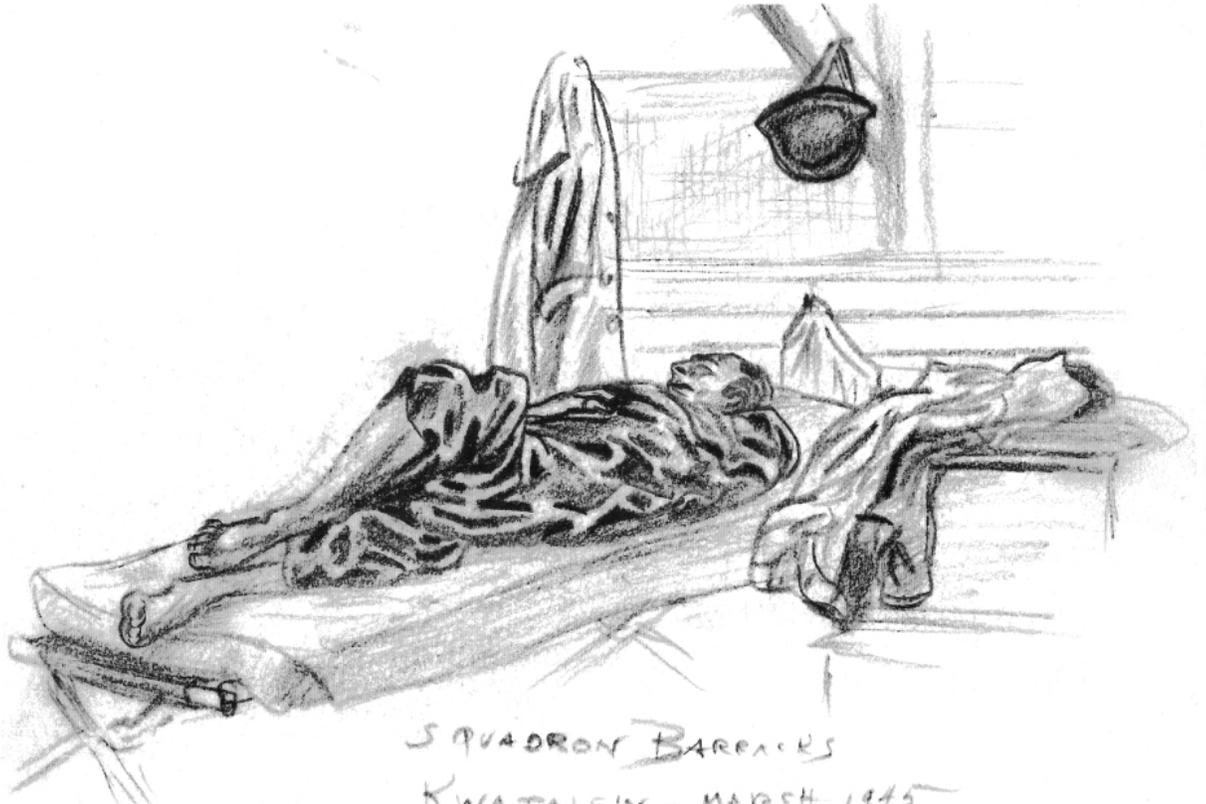


JAMES LAYMAN BROWN

DONALD VIST RMAIC and MIKE KALLO RMYA

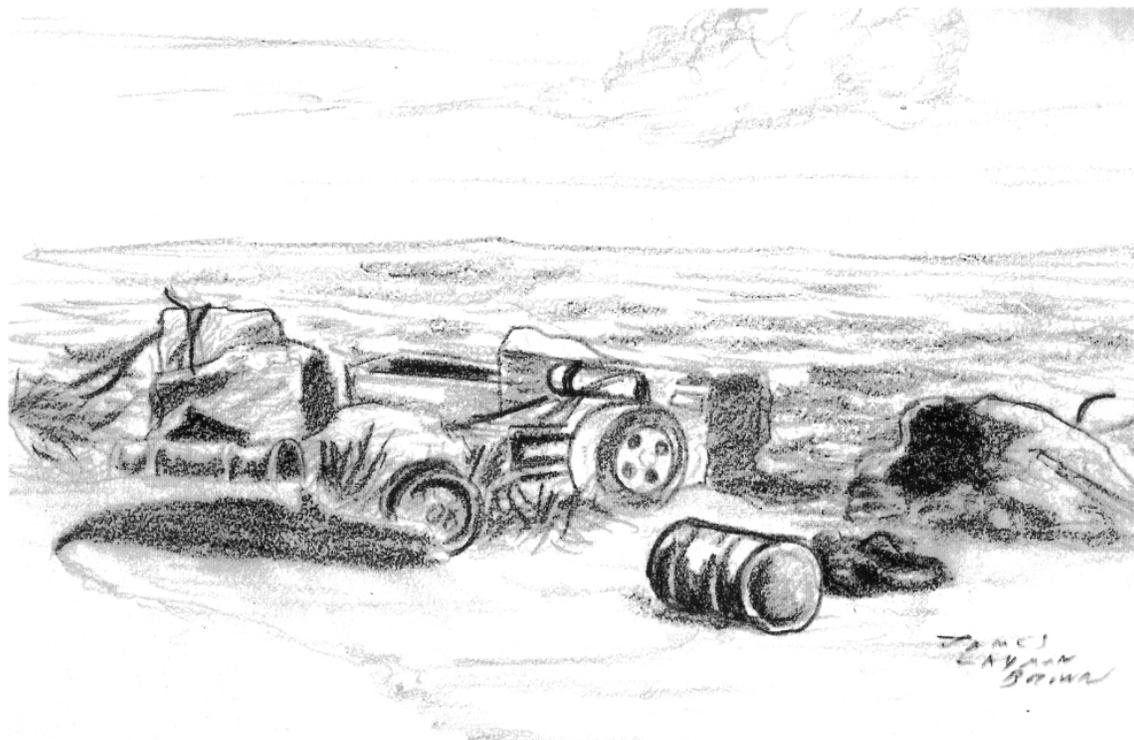
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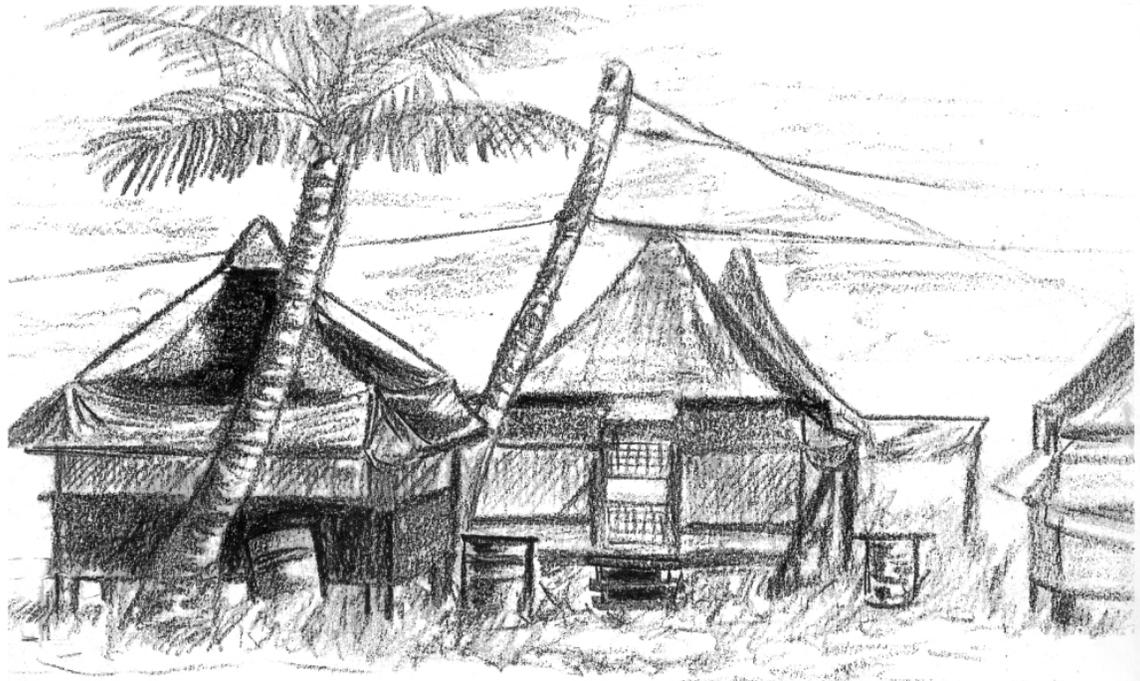
SQUADRON BARRACKS
KWATALEIN - MARCH 1945

JAMES
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JAMES
E. VAN
BOWEN

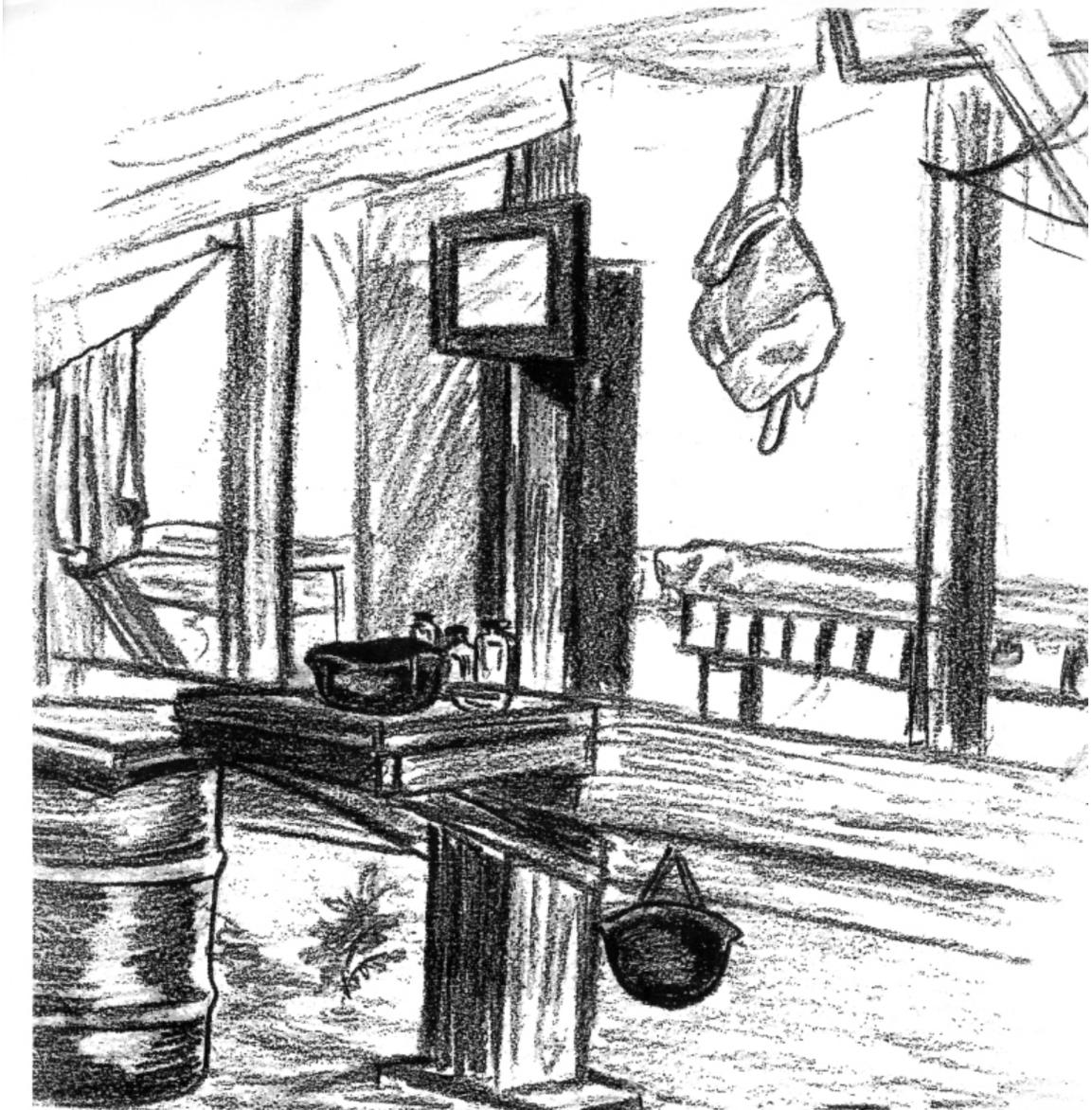
BEACH KWATALEN MORAY



AACS AREA - TARAWA JINEYS

BROWN

3



TENT +
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JAMES LAYM
DRAWN
TARANA 1983



WANTING THE RELIEF -

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MOVIE - TARANA JULY 1948

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TARAWA
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12
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