A Memorial Day Tribute

Introduction

Editor’s Note: Last May seven of our veterans who are residents of SDRC published some of their true war experiences and dedicated those stories to the memory of their comrades who went overseas and fought with us and did not come home. For this Memorial Day our writers’ group (TWIGS) proudly honors the memory of our SDRC residents’ family members who sacrificed their lives for our country. In a real sense their sacrifice, along with that of hundreds of thousands more, made it possible for us to live in such a wonderful place as the Stuarts Draft Retirement Community.

1st Lt. Roger Phillips

Submitted by Bill Phillips
19 Mountain Vista Drive, 103
Brother of Lt. Phillips

It is a challenge to write a memorial about a brother that I hardly remember but who had a big impact on my life. I grew up on a farm in Kansas and my oldest brother was fifteen years older. He went to college when I was three, entered the army when I was six and was killed in World War II when I was eight. The last time I remember seeing him was at his wedding when I was almost seven. He definitely influenced my life, however.

Lieutenant Roger Phillips was the Executive Officer of an infantry company that was with the Third Infantry Division. He saw action in North Africa, Sicily, Italy, Anzio, and Southern France. He was in the first wave landing in Southern France in August, 1944 and had advanced north almost to the German border by the end of October. He was wounded for the third time on October 28, 1944 and was being evacuated to a hospital on November 1 when the plane crashed, killing twenty servicemen including the four-man crew, the flight nurse, nine U.S. soldiers and six German POWs. We received information about his death on Thanksgiving Day, 1944.

Roger had received the Infantry Combat Badge, the Silver Star, Purple Heart with four clusters, a Bronze Arrowhead, a Divisional Presidential Citation and the French Four-gère. He was reinterred in 1948 and is buried in Manhattan, Kansas.

Subsequently, my parents sold the farm and we eventually ended up in Virginia where I have lived since I went to college using part of his government life insurance money. His death definitely affected my life, for otherwise I would probably still be in Kansas.

As a follow-up to this story, I got details of the plane crash in 1999. In 2011 I used the internet to try to track down surviving relatives of the crash victims. I also made contact with a Frenchman who sent me a picture of the actual crashed airplane and news that a monument (stele) existed at the crash site. An annual ceremony was held there. This was all news to me.

Through the internet, I located a daughter of one soldier and two nephews and two nieces of the flight nurse. The nurse, 1st Lt. Aleda Lutz was one of the most senior and decorated females in WWII. She has a VA hospital named after her in Saginaw, Michigan and at one time had a hospital ship named after her. In 2012 I visited with both the daughter and one of the nephews. Also, in 2012, the daughter visited the site of her father’s death on Memorial Day and my wife and I, plus the four nephews and nieces attended the ceremony in Dozieus, France. Official representatives from the USA, Germany, and France were present, plus many local people. We were impressed with the appreciation the French still have for our servicemen. Prior to my contacting them, none of the relatives knew of the stele or the ceremony.

Although I have learned much data on the fourteen U.S. soldiers killed in the crash, I have been unable to locate any other relatives. Three of the U.S. soldiers and three of the German soldiers are still buried in France.

The following touching tribute to AMM3c Jacob E. Ricketson, brother of Pearl Alexander (Skyline, Apt. 312) was written by Elaine Ricketson Danks, daughter of Jacob Ricketson.
AMM3c
Jacob Elijah Ricketson
Torpedo Squadron, Air Group 17,
USS HORNET
Killed in Action 7 April, 1945
in the East China Sea
off the Coast of Kyushu, Japan

Epitaph for a Father Lost
Renowned is his hallowed grave,
majestic and awesome, this Pacific;
Whose solemn waters taste of tears,
And depths and breadth pale in shame
beside the vastness of his spirit,
Once contained by slender limbs
and boyish charm.
A life bright as a just-struck match,
Flared brilliantly for too little time,
before dying.
Transfigured to a radiance that lights eternity,
He soars among the gauzy clouds
and dances with the wind.

He was only 22 years old that early April day when
he died, half a world away from the small town in the
rolling hills of Georgia that was his home. Yet even in
that briefest of lifetimes he was blessed with what he
cherished most in life: a wife and child, and his close-
knit, loving family.

He was the second child and firstborn son in the
family of eight children of George and Effie Ricketson,
and was named for both his grandfathers; but those
somber, biblical names were too weighty for his fun-
loving and affectionate nature and so he was known
always and to everyone simply as “J.E.” He was the
protector, defender and adored older brother of his sis-
ters and brothers, his father’s pride and joy, and his
mother’s “heart.” His father worked for the railroad and
on Sundays served as a minister in some of the small-
town Baptist churches that were nearly as plentiful as
the tall Georgia pines. His mother played the piano in
to church and at home, and their house was filled with
music and happy family times.

The lean days of the Depression were still being
felt when he graduated from high school and, though
he was valedictorian of his class, the thought of going
to college could have only been a dream. Instead he
joined the CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) where
he was taught baking and meat cutting. At Christmas
time he met and fell in love with Lola Mae Smith from a
nearby town and the following July, 1941 they were
married and moved to Florida where he had been work-
ing at the site of the newly built Eglin Field near
Pensacola. Though war was spreading over the world,
for a short while the young couple lived a simple but
happy and relatively carefree life. In April, 1943 my birth
made him a very proud father and I was named Elaine
after the song “Maria Elena” which he particularly loved.
He had joined the reserves in 1942 and in September,
1943 he was called to report for induction into the Navy.
He took my mother and me back to his family in Geor-
gia while he went to Maryland for training. Perhaps he
might have been able to use his meat cutting or baking
skills in a safer place within the Navy, but he had al-
ways yearned to learn to fly and so he requested avia-
tion training.

He was first sent to aviation mechanic school, and
was then found suited for aviation gunnery so he was
transferred to Hollywood, Florida for further training. At
last my mother was able to be with him again and he
delighted in taking us to watch the planes at the Naval
Air Station as they squeezed every moment from the
dwindling days they would be together. All too soon the
time came for him to take his place fighting the war in
the Pacific and he left by train for California. Once there
he volunteered for testing of some sort of gas, for by
so doing he would be granted a leave with his family
before departing the United States. He was able to
spend a last Thanksgiving in Georgia and arrived there
with terrible, blistered skin on his back from the gas.
Photographs taken during those precious days show
only smiles, but hearts were surely breaking as he had
to say good-bye once more. He would not let my mother
go to the train station for he told his father he did not
believe that he would be coming back from the war
and he did not think he could bear to say good-bye to
her there.

From California my father, his pilot Lee O’Brien and
radio man James Opheim, who had trained together in
Florida as a crew for the Avenger torpedo bomber/
fighter, slowly made their way toward the battles rag-
ing in the Pacific. In March, 1945 they left Guam on the
supply carrier USS WINDHAM BAY to be transferred
to the USS HORNET to support the invasion of Okinawa
that would begin on April 1. This last great battle of the
Pacific war was fought on land, in the air and on the
sea as kamikaze attacks on the carriers increased daily.
There was no rest for the crews of the bombers and
fighters and the unrelenting stress on them was so great
that after seven missions they were temporarily re-
placed.

In early April the Allied Forces learned that the Japa-
nese were planning to send the YAMATO, the largest
battleship ever built and mounted with enormous guns,
to Okinawa to help their embattled troops. On the morn-
ing of April 7 planes from twelve U.S. carriers converged
off Kyushu, Japan to intercept and sink it and its ac-

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companying convoy before they could reach Okinawa. They attacked in waves and the tope do bombers from the HORNET took their turn just after noon. Ensign O’Brien began his run toward the YAMATO just a few hundred feet above the ocean through intense antiaircraft fire, holding to a course toward the left side of the bow to make certain their torpedo would run straight and true. The plane was hit, the engine burst into flames, and they crashed into the East China Sea just beyond the bow of the Yamato. There was no sign of wreckage or any survivors. It was their seventh mission.

A couple of hours later the YAMATO and other ships in the convoy had been sunk and the Japanese Navy no longer existed.

In early May, 1945 my mother and my father’s parents received the dreaded telegram stating he was “missing in action.” The long, terrible war with Japan came to an end just four months later, but it was not until an interminable years and a day after that terrible April morning that their beloved husband and son was declared to be dead, and their agonizing waiting and praying for his return finally came to an end with the awful knowledge that he was gone from them forever, and their shattered lives would never again be the same.

I have just now learned my father’s story, 53 years after his death, and it was the miracle of finding AWON that made it all possible. I am especially indebted to Jack Forgy, an AWON member, for locating most of the information about the last weeks of my father’s life, and for helping me to truly “find” my father.

Elaine Ricketson Danks

Clarence married Guinevere Arey in 1942 shortly before being sent overseas. Among the citations that he received was the Purple Heart, awarded posthumously.

Clarence was shot in the head and killed by an enemy sniper who was up in a tree on August 11, 1944. Along with thousands of his comrades, Clarence is buried in France.

Pearl states that her husband, Howard, and Clarence had a very special bond.

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**Nylon Floyd Jordan**

*Brother of Verlyn Salter*

*Skyline Terrace, Apt. #107*

After graduating from Florien High School, Florien, Louisiana, Nylon F. Jordan enrolled in Southwestern State University, Lafayette, Louisiana. From there he volunteered in the United States Army Air Corps. After basic training and promotion to Private First Class, he was assigned to service in the Philippine Islands. When the war broke and their expected planes did not arrive, Nylon and his comrades were forced to serve as infantry soldiers in defending the Philippines.

Nylon and his comrades who had not been killed were captured when Bataan was surrendered to the Japanese. The infamous Death March out of the Bataan Peninsula to the Japanese prison camp at Camp O’Donnell is chronicled in James Bollich’s book *Bataan Death March, a Soldier’s Story* (Pelican Publishing Company, Gretna, Louisiana 2003). A survivor of the Death March himself, Mr. Bollich describes unbelievable atrocities inflicted by the Japanese soldiers on the American prisoners.

Nylon survived for three and one-half years in O’Donnell Prison. Mr. Bollich also survived those three and one-half years in that prison. He tells that as many as 400 American soldiers were dying each day from dysentery, diphtheria, beri beri, cerebral malaria, and hepatitis.

Verlyn’s mother received the following letter from the War Department, The Adjutant General’s Office, Washington 25, D.C. This official letter tells how he died.

Dearest Mrs. Jordan:

The International Red Cross has transmitted to this Government an official list obtained from the Japanese Government, after long delay, of American prisoners of war who were lost while being transported northward from the Philippine Islands on a Japanese ship which was sunk on 24 October 1944. It is with deep regret that I inform you that your son, Private First Class Nylon F. Jordan, 14,014,562, Air Corps, was among those
lost when that sinking occurred and, in the absence of any probability of survival, must be considered to have lost his life.

The information available to the War Department is that the vessel sailed from Manila, Philippine Islands, on 11 October 1944 with 1775 prisoners of war aboard. On 24 October 1944 the vessel was sunk by submarine action in the South China Sea over 200 miles from the Chinese coast which was the nearest land. Five of the prisoners escaped in a small boat and reached the coast. Four others have been reported as picked up by the Japanese, by whom all others aboard are reported lost. Absence of detailed information as to what happened to other individual prisoners and the known circumstances of the incident led to a conclusion that all other prisoners listed by the Japanese as aboard the vessel perished.

It is with deep regret that I must notify you of this unhappy culmination of the long period of anxiety and suffering you have experienced. You have my heartfelt sympathy.

Sincerely yours,
J.A. Ulio, Major General
The Adjutant General of the Army

M/Sgt. Calvin Robert Graef, one of the five surviving American prisoners, with the help of Harry T. Brundidge, wrote a gripping account of the sinking of the Japanese “hellship” as he called it in the April, 1945 issue of Cosmopolitan Magazine. Hundreds of American prisoners were stuffed into the hold of the ship in such horrible conditions that they were praying for the ship to be sunk while it was being attacked by an American submarine.

While looking through the keepsakes that Verlyn has about Nylon, we came across the following unsigned handwritten poem. It was written on USO stationery by someone who evidently knew Nylon very well. He was affectionately known by the nickname of “Jiggs.”

In Florien High School’s Hall of Fame,
High on the list you’ll find this name.
“Jiggs,” he was affectionately known to all,
He was one who answered his country’s call,
To a prison camp he was forced to go,
How his life was spent we never will know,
Through his veins American blood ran red,
And we know that he never bowed his head,
But far away from home and friend,
On a prison ship he met the end,
Somewhere he rests beneath the tide,
With many comrades by his side,
And though to us he can’t return,
The name of Nylon Jordan will ever burn,
In the hearts of friends who are here tonight.

Lt. Cameron N. Hall
Grandson of Rosemary Hall
Resident of Stuarts Draft Retirement Community

Pictured is Lt. Cameron N. Hall, grandson of Rosemary Hall. He was killed in a training accident off the coast of North Carolina. He was one of the three crew members of a plane which was launched off the flight deck of USS Harry S. Truman. The plane exploded immediately after it left the flight deck. Only fragments of the bodies of the three flyers were recovered.

Below is a picture of the impressive monument which memorializes the event.

Pictured below is a cemetery in France where thousands of American soldiers are buried. The grave in the foreground is that of Clarence Alexander, Pearl Alexander’s brother-in-law. When we look at these graves of American soldiers, we are reminded that the freedoms that we enjoy came at a tremendous price. On this Memorial Day it is fitting that we pay tribute to all those who lost their lives in the service of our country. Our SDRC writers’ group thought that it would be worthwhile to remember especially the loved ones of the families of our residents who paid the supreme sacrifice for the freedoms that we enjoy in the United States of America. It is due to their sacrifice, along with that of hundreds of thousands of others (400,000 in WWII alone), that we do not speak German or Japanese and that we can live in such a wonderful place as the Stuarts Draft Retirement Community. Perhaps the best way that we can show our appreciation for their sacrifice is to be the best citizens that we can be.