

John Berdie

John Berdie is currently 83 years old (born Jan. 12, 1920 in Chicago.) He and his wife Shirley have been married 57 years, and are both from Duluth, Minn. They retired to Asheville, N.C. in 1986.

John graduated from the University of Minnesota (School of Journalism, major in Advertising) in June, 1942; with the end of his student deferment, he entered the Army in July 1942 and served until November 1945. He attained a rank of Staff Sergeant; most of his service was in the Pacific Theatre.

I asked John whether he had any feelings or thoughts upon entering the military; he said that serving was simply expected of all young men and he took it for granted that he would also serve. He said that because of his extensive experience in test-taking (!), that he scored very well on one of the vocational exams and (also because of wearing glasses), he ended up as a chief clerk. This meant that he performed a wide variety of tasks. John did everything during his service time from working with a veterinary detachment (mule pack!) in Camp Carson, Colorado to booking USO shows in the Philippines for 90,000 men.

Although he was not a combat soldier, John was in life-threatening situations, memorably a very rough landing on a New Guinea airfield while being strafed by the Japanese. He also suffered serious bouts of dengue fever and hepatitis.

John's worst posting was at Tacloban, Leyte, the Philippines, (AKA "The Hellhole of the World," he added, not entirely jokingly.) It was at Tacloban (1943-44) that John contracted dengue fever; he also played a role in the Soldier Voting project promoted by Gen. MacArthur at the behest of congressmen concerned about our servicemen's exclusion from political participation during the war.

Later, in 1944, while at Mendoro in the Philippines, John's bout of hepatitis left him at a weight of 120 on his six-foot frame.

One of the ironies John noted during his war-time service occurred early on: in 1942, his unit had several months of desert training at Camp Irwin, California. That same unit was posted to the tropical rainforest of New Guinea. (I couldn't help but think of Yossarian and Catch-22, but John and I agreed that this was probably one of many snafus that occurred because of the enormity and complexity of the war effort.)

I asked John whether his war experiences effected his later civilian life or his political leanings. His long career in advertising and management provided many opportunities for honing the organizational skills he developed during the service, for one. Like many American Jews, John's pre-war political leanings were liberal, and his experience confirmed that tendency. He disliked the jingoistic sentiments he encountered among certain parts of the officer corps in particular, and he still resents those who argue that those opposing the Bush administration foreign policy are unpatriotic.

Returning back to the States and Duluth in late 1945 was difficult because it was hard to find a job. Like many veterans, John was unpleasantly surprised by what seemed like a wall of women preventing him from getting a job himself. (Before the war, women would not have been in those positions in personnel, etc.)

John never once encountered anti-Semitism during his 39 months of service. In his units, religion was a fairly submerged topic anyway. He did know of one Jewish boy from Duluth who became a prisoner of war in Germany, where his fellow GIs devoted themselves to preventing the Nazis from learning his true identity.