

Ken Culbreath

Ken Culbreath joined the Navy in 1945 through the Selective Volunteering program. This program allowed young men to pre-register for the draft and yet be able to select the branch in which they would serve. At the time Mr. Culbreath was working on a construction crew building rock buildings. They had to use rock since most other materials were in short supply because of the war. When he enlisted he was working on a building in Arden that is still standing in 2003. He chose the Navy because it seemed to offer more chance to travel which was exciting up until he found he got motion sickness!

After enlisting Mr. Culbreath had two weeks to get his affairs in order before reporting to boot camp in Bainbridge, Maryland. During boot camp he came home once for nine days leave and saw his father for the last time. His mother had already passed away. He didn't know it at the time but his father had had a premonition that he wouldn't see Mr. Culbreath again. Sadly this turned out to be true as Mr. Culbreath's father passed away while he was overseas on duty.

While he was at boot camp he took aptitude tests that determined he would be eligible for duty with what he called a "special group" of navy construction units. After being assigned to this construction group, Mr. Culbreath and other men in the unit traveled to California for training. Mr. Culbreath was extremely impressed with the mode of travel as it was a Pullman passenger railcar, something that most soldiers and sailors were not able to travel in! He remembers the training in Camp Shoemaker, California as muddy and that the gangster John Dillinger's brother was a Chief Petty Officer in the camp and all the men wanted to meet him. He also remembered what seemed like a long wait for the troopship to take them to the Pacific war. He and the other young men in the unit were anxious to go overseas. He says "young people always excited, don't always know what they are getting into!"

Once the troopship arrived and they set out across the Pacific for the island of Guam, he quickly found that he was seasick. This put a damper on his enthusiasm to travel to say the least! His first duty was as guard on the sickbay, he found that the smell of ether from the sickbay made his seasickness twice as bad! He also found that he was not the only one who got seasick, many men did, especially in storms. In fact his misery was extended when his ship lost an engine in a storm and was several days late getting to Guam.

Once on Guam his situation didn't improve greatly as everyone from the ship was sent to single building with a tin roof. It was oppressively hot and Mr. Culbreath thought to himself "what have I got myself into". After a day they were moved to better accommodation in a tent city where they waited for their first assignments. All was not necessarily well at the tent city. They were warned not to show lights at night but many men ignored the rule and played cards at night by candle or lamp light. One night they heard shots around the camp perimeter but they didn't think much of it. The next morning they found out that Japanese holdouts from earlier battle had attacked the marine guards at the camp perimeter. The marines had killed five Japanese but lost two of their own. After that night the "foolishness (with the showing lights at night) stopped". Mr. Culbreath had come to learn that the Japanese had captured Guam from the US in 1941 and had lost again in 1944. However in the ensuing 3 years they had fortified it well, building bunkers and tunnels in the caves in the mountains. Many Japanese soldiers had retreated to these

mountain bunkers when the island fell to the US and were periodically coming out to raid the US installations. There were even stories of Japanese soldiers, in their mountain hideaways, using binoculars to watch US servicemen playing baseball games.

After a boring wait in the tent camp the men were moved to a new base, the Naval Operating Base, and housed in much more comfortable Quonset huts. There they received their assignments. Mr. Culbreath was sent to a unit that operated heavy equipment throughout the island. This included cranes on caterpillar tracks, gantry cranes at the naval base and others. His specific job was to keep the equipment lubricated and fueled. For this he was given his own truck with which to travel to different part so the island where the equipment was located. He was considered a BTO or Big Time Operator by the other men in the unit because of the freedom afforded him by having his own truck!

As much as he may impressed his fellow sailors, Mr. Culbreath was just as impressed with them. They displayed a fantastic level of ingenuity to make their life on Guam more comfortable. He noticed that men stationed on the hills built windmill powered electric generators and down in his camp them men used various spare parts to construct a washing machine for their laundry! Without it they had to spend their off duty time washing their laundry. Some of Mr. Culbreath's clothes wore out he washed them so much. There was also a sailor in the camp who had constructed a darkroom in his Quonset hut and could develop film. Mr. Culbreath got him to develop the rolls of negatives he took on his various trips around the island.

One of his more distinct memories of Guam was "Flyboy Casey", the pilot of a small aircraft that flew around the island spraying DDT to combat mosquitos. Mr. Culbreath and the others on Guam took no precautions to avoid the clouds of DDT because at the time it was not known that it was harmful to people. He does however remember that the mosquitoes were kept under control! This was also helped by the expansion of the naval base on Guam. The main channel into the base was constantly being dredged to allow bigger ships access to the base. The spoil from the dredging was used to backfill a swamp bordering the base and subsequently provide more room to expand the base itself.

The food on Guam was another distinct, but in this case, unpleasant memory. Mr. Culbreath recalls the food at boot camp being acceptable and much better than the powdered eggs, dehydrated potatoes and weevil-infested bread he found on Guam. After two or three weeks he learned that if he was going to eat the bread it was best not to look at it. Despite the bad food, there was always a long line at chow time. Apparently anyone who happened to be on the base when the mess hall opened could eat there. This meant that at times the men stationed at the camp could not eat before they had to go back to work: they were waiting in line their entire lunch. Mr. Culbreath and his crew quickly learned that if they wanted to eat they had to break into the front of the line, which they did on any occasion to ensure they didn't go hungry. Mr. Culbreath was not sure why the mess hall, with it's horrible food, was so popular, but he heard that the mess halls at other bases were even worse! Fortunately he had his own truck and he and his friends could visit other installations, such as the navy hospital, to get better food.

Other memories include writing to his father, cousins and friends, making souvenirs to take home and visiting a cave the Japanese used as a communication center during the 1944 battle. He

recalled that it was a “spooky place to visit” and the radio equipment installed by the Japanese was of American manufacture! Still it was one of his favorite places to explore when off duty. He also visited the rest and recreation facility at Talofofo and saw an abandoned Japanese submarine.

On one occasion he and another sailor, a new person on the island, went hiking during off duty hours. They were hiking up a nearby small mountain when they were passed by a long convoy of trucks. Periodically a truck would stop and the driver would ask them if they wanted a lift. They declined saying they wanted to hike to the top. Finally a jeep came by with an officer who said that they had better climb in as he was the last vehicle and they wouldn't have any other way to get up the mountain and out of the way of the tidal wave that was coming! Neither Mr. Culbreath nor his friend had ever even heard of a tidal wave but jumped in and rode to the top of the mountain. There they sat and talked with a local who said that periodically tidal waves would hit Guam and they could be very destructive. The tidal wave “ended up being a dud” but he was sure it scared the men in the low lying areas! When he and his friend returned to base they found it was empty from the evacuation, the only personnel were the marines guarding the gates. It was dinner time so they went to the mess hall to eat and found no one there but the food piled high in preparation for serving. Mr. Culbreath and his friend filled their plates up with hamburger steaks and bread and grabbed a bucket of lemonade that they joking called “battery acid”. They retreated to their quarters and “pigged out”! It had been a wild day; from a day of pleasant hiking to running to avoid a phantom tidal wave to getting the best meal they had had in a while!

While on Guam Mr. Culbreath's aunt sent him a camera. She was not supposed to but the military censors did not take and it ultimately got to him on Guam. Taking photos was actually against the rules and could result in a person being thrown in the brig but he took a few rolls anyway. On one occasion he was photographing a bombed out church when an army captain ran up to him and asked “what the hell are you doing?” Mr. Culbreath was informed that the church was a restricted area and could not be photographed but the captain did not arrest him or take his film. The military personnel were also not supposed to take war booty home as souvenirs. Mr. Culbreath made it a point to follow this rule but on the way home a fellow sailor had taken so many souvenirs that he could not carry it all off of the ship! Mr. Culbreath offered to help him and as thanks the sailor gave him a Japanese bayonet.

During his many trips around the island Mr. Culbreath was prohibited from fraternizing with the locals. As he explains it was more for the protection of the native population than the U.S. personnel. At the time there were 200,000 U.S. military personnel on the small island, they far outnumbered the native population. Locals did work on the base doing odd jobs like construction and collecting garbage.

In 1946 he returned to the United States onboard the troopship U.S.S. *General Mitchell*. Again on the return voyage he experienced seasickness but his was tempered with sights such as pods whales and flying fish. He returned to US soil at Treasure Island naval base in Oakland, California. Unlike some returning servicemen, Mr. Culbreath considered his mustering out pay of \$300 to be adequate. He had saved some money while in Guam and intended to start a new business when he returned home. Since his father had passed away, he went to stay with family friends in Arden. He only intended to stay for a few days but ended staying there for four years.

During that time he wanted to go to college on the G.I. Bill but found that they were all full with servicemen who had returned earlier, instead he decided to buy a truck and start a new trucking business. He drove his own truck and on occasion drove some for other trucking firms. Four years later he attended Blanton's Junior College and then got a job as a billing clerk with a trucking company. He later worked for many years for the US Postal Service.

When asked what were the most important results of World War Two Mr. Culbreath replied that there were two: the Marshall Plan and the G.I. Bill. The Marshall Plan allowed us to rebuild Germany, Japan and Europe and to create very good long term allies. The G.I. Bill created educational opportunities for returning servicemen that would not have otherwise been available.