

MEMORIES OF THE SOUTH PACIFIC

Hunter M. Hancock, Ph.D.

Inasmuch as my entire tour of overseas duty in World War II was in attachment to a base headquarters (Base F in New Guinea and Base K in the Philippines), this contribution will not deal much with deeds of sacrifice as endured by the majority of my contemporaries in the Pacific Theater. I can only tell how it felt to be involved on the fringes and, if not appearing to be too facetious, to express some of it through the experiences of a beloved canine mascot who, at times, had it rougher but seemed to bear up more like a soldier than many of us did.

He adopted us, the 107th Chemical Company, at Camp Siebert, Alabama, at the very onset of the formation of that huge Chemical Warfare Training Center near Gadsden, Alabama. One morning the First Sergeant blew his whistle for reveille formation and there he was just to the right of the first squad of the first platoon; and there he was the last time I ever saw him on Leyte Island of the Philippines just after the fall of the atomic bombs. He was always present at every company activity that I can recall. He was a nondescript terrier-type mutt who grew to love every man in the company, and they, him. He was given the name M2 and so designated on his dog tags.

The 107th Chemical Company was ordered to Portland, Oregon, from whence it departed for duty in the South Pacific in March of 1944. When we boarded our transport, a homeless Dutch freighter, manned by Dutch officers and a Javanese crew (Hitler had captured Holland), it was already laden with troops galore, including a 155mm self-propelled howitzer. Our ship did not proceed directly southwest toward our destination, but headed due south to the Port of Los Angeles where it spent a full evening and night taking on gasoline to such extent that the loading tanker's deck, well below ours on the previous day, was riding well above it the next morning.

As for M2, the journey from Portland to Los Angeles was far from uneventful. Just before departure, the stern captain of our ship had pronounced in no uncertain terms that no dog would be allowed aboard his vessel. It took some rapid doing by a frantic "dog committee" to find and make arrangement with a medical facility willing to perform an anesthetization in a barracks bag to last until he could be slipped on board. I still wonder how a carefully checking ship's officer passed one soldier with two barracks bags without challenge. M2 did not awaken until we were well on our way up Puget Sound. But, as we travelled toward Los Angeles, our captain, resplendent in his snow-white uniform, pacing the bridge with his highly prized and beautiful Persian cat in arms, spotted our still woozy and supposedly shielded mascot who had been brought up from below deck for air. All hell broke loose! We didn't know Dutch or German but did not need to be told that officer's call was in effect and adverse action was imminent. Gesticulating to starboard, the captain left no doubt he meant for M2 to be thrown overboard immediately. As luck would have it, the cat had somehow gotten loose and in the excitement had descended from the bridge to the deck. I shall never forget the sergeant who scooped up the hapless feline and just as adamantly gesticulated that if M2 was to go over the starboard side, the Persian would just as surely go over the port side. The Dutch captain backed down and remained aloof throughout the remainder of the voyage. Needless to say, a constant guard was maintained over

our blissful mascot all the way to New Guinea.

We departed Los Angeles in a convoy escorted by destroyers and a blimp but on the third morning out, found ourselves sailing alone. It was explained that our ship was one of the fastest in the entire Dutch merchant fleet and that speed and constant variations in course were better protection than a convoy. We were on our own on the pride of the Dutch Merchant Marine—a boat put together entirely by rivets without a single weld.

The constant changes in direction were fine but it so happened that the Javanese crew was of a religious sect that would eat only freshly killed meat and our bow deck was loaded with living goats. We were so fast that the wind seemed always to be coming from that direction. Saint Elmo surely must have been riding with us, for right in the middle of the Coral Sea, and at the most perilous time possible, the driveshaft to our propeller malfunctioned completely and we lay dead in the water for several days. Somehow, we finally got under way again and resumed our zig-zag course. Our fastest of ships, departing the United States in March, arrived at our destination in New Guinea in May after a journey of forty-four days, much of it through submarine infested waters.

After laying at anchor a few days at the Port of Lae, where a Japanese air raid had hit a sister ship with heavy losses, we moved farther up the coast to the Port of Finschhafen, where we finally disembarked. This port, site of a former German settlement, was characterized by a catholic boys school overlooking the harbor. It had been selected for location of the principal base (Base F) of all military operations in that vast area of the South Pacific. The forces of the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and others, were headquartered here, and with the help of the superb Seabees, the base was rapidly expanding. Construction by this remarkable naval organization never slackened, day or night except during air raid warnings, and always started up again before the "all clear" signals ceased. In this respect I shall always remember the day when the subject of who were the best jungle fighters came up during a visit to our headquarters by one of the native "police boys." He readily commented that the Australians, New Zealanders, and Japanese were all great jungle fighters. When asked about the Americans, he paused momentarily before pointing to the huge complex of warehouse and Seabee activity below us and tersely replied, "Americans come—jungle go!"

With one exception, as far as we were concerned, the sparsely clad New Guinea natives proved to be friendly, loyal, and obliging allies. The single exception was that they prized dog meat as an exceptionally delicious food and never ceased trying to procure our pleasingly plump M2 for the "pièce de résistance" at a gala feast of some sort. First they came individually offering strings of silver florins with pierced centers, as issued by the Australian government for the purpose of stringing them around their necks (their loin cloth-like apparel had no pockets). Finally came one of the principal chiefs, himself, at the head of a lengthy single file entourage, all bearing loops of coin. Of course, all offers were politely refused and our mascot was kept under increasingly heavy guard.

No accounting of the war in New Guinea could ever be complete without inclusion of the "police boys." Those that I knew were Finschhafen Mission trained natives who were of inestimable value to our Intelligence contingent, as was true of most of their group. They were unique in that, except for the Australian issued army rifles and typical sidebrim-tilted campaign hats, they could not be differentiated from other natives. Thus, by concealing these items in the lush jungle

foliage, they could and did move freely among the populace and the Japanese soldiers. Inasmuch as the enemy inevitably chose death to surrender, the services rendered by these intrepid loyal allies were invaluable. Such was evidenced by the fact that, in a one year phase of combat, only 38 of 1,300 Japanese losses in action were taken prisoner. As the enemy was driven farther and farther inland from both coasts, Intelligence needs necessitated the issuing of bounties for prisoners brought in alive for interrogation. The "police boys" obliged. They instigated a practice of bringing in their prisoners in groups until they learned that base headquarters paid just as much bounty for one as for several. Only one at a time was brought in thereafter from bamboo "jails," which, it was said, were hidden deep in the jungle. Apparently these hapless prisoners did not fare too well on native food for they became increasingly more emaciated until such practice was discontinued. Further proof of the loyalty and integrity and native New Guineans in general—not only "police boys"—was manifested by wounded allied troops, Australians and Americans alike, who, after engagements of the fiercest sort, thereafter referred to them as "fuzzy wuzzy angels."

Our sojourn in the South Pacific, and the initial phase of General MacArthur's "I shall return" promise, ended in October of 1944 when our flat-bottomed, heavily laden LST crossed the equator as a unit of the longest continuous convoy in the history of warfare. The Japanese were waiting in the Philippines, but during this journey, at last, M2 was at liberty to go anywhere at any time he pleased—and he did.

