

Selection from the Memoir of Don Arters, USN – WW2

When Pearl Harbor was bombed, like everybody else, we were angry, that something like that could really happen - the way it happened. The way they snuck up on us and everything. When something like that happens you have anger but there was nothing that we could do. What could *I* do?

I listened to other people talk.

People said, “Ah, the war ain’t going to last long, it’ll be over in a couple months. This won’t last long.”

Yeah. Turns out they were wrong.

All of us kids ended up in it. Maybe because my father always went to sea but that’s all I ever wanted to do; go in the Navy. I don’t know why, maybe from hearing stories about my father; places he’d been and all that. It just seemed more fun than going in the damn Army. Sleeping in the mud and the other stuff you used to see in the movies.

My mother didn’t really say anything about it when I told her. I guess maybe she figured it was the best thing for me. I don’t really know. She never said anything against it. When I asked her to sign, she signed. She might have thought a lot but she never said much. Well, I guess she figured maybe she wanted me to get out of the environment I was in being stuck the way I was. I don’t know. I really don’t know what her rationale was. She just signed. I didn’t get any arguments. In those days it was really the only way out of the neighborhood.

I did my training in Bainbridge, Maryland. A center was built there when the war started, and then they started getting an influx of inductees and enlistees. In boot camp we got a lot of training - a little bit of this and a little bit of that. Like how to handle the shells for the big guns, how to shoot the small guns. But it was mostly seamanship. When I got out of boot camp, they sent me to signalman’s school. That was the first big mistake I ever made - going to signalman’s school. You had to learn Morse Code. You’re always up on the bridge if you’re a signalman. You practically run the ship. But I couldn’t take it. Probably because of the hatred I still had for school.

When we got shipped out we had to go down to Norfolk, Virginia. I was only there three or four days when I was on a ship on my way to Pearl Harbor. We had to go through the Panama Canal. I will always remember that. How impressive that was.

On the transport we used to have boxing matches to pass the time. Down below we were on one side and the Seabees were on the other. After I signed up to fight this Seabee came over to me and said,

“Hey, Arters. You know it looks like it’s you and me.”

Then he told me, “I was almost lightweight champ up in New England.”

Almost the champ. His face looked like everybody had beat on him. He was older than me. **A lot** older than me. Well, maybe two, three years, but he seemed a lot older then. Well, I beat him, and the next day the winner was supposed to get two cartons of cigarettes and the loser one. An officer came up to me and gave me one carton.

“No, I get two!” I said.

“Why, you’re the winner?”

He started laughing. He couldn’t believe I won.

But that was my biggest purse; a dollar. Fifty cents a carton and I got two cartons. That was the end of my boxing career.

When we got to Pearl Harbor we had to go to orientation. Again. Screening. Again. I was told when I got there that I could go to Radar Operator’s School. It would only be a couple of weeks. So they sent me to Camp Kaneohe up in the hills there. It was a marine base but they had radar school there. After I got done, I came back down and was waiting for assignment. It wasn’t long before I got a call that I was going to be taken out to my ship.

It was an LCI(G) (Landing Craft Infantry - Gunboat), converted from a landing craft into a gunboat with about ten Mk7 rocket launchers on the sides where ramps used to be. It was back there in the harbor where the Arizona was and, in fact, it might have been tied up to the fantail of the Arizona because all the spaces were taken up around there. When I saw this ship, aw man, I couldn’t believe it.

It had just gotten back from Iwo Jima, where it was part of the assault, and it was hit pretty bad. It wasn’t painted either, and was smaller than I expected. I thought, ‘Holy crap. Where the hell am I going to go on that thing?’

But we got it cleaned up and we left from Pearl. We went all over the Pacific; Guam, Saipan, Marianas...., well we didn’t go straight out to Japan. It took us awhile.

The regular LCI’s, they would transport just from the fleet into the shore. That’s why it was so tough on ours. The ship’s company was supposed to be about 23 men on an LCI, but ours, had 70, 75 men in ship’s company because we had those rockets. It was like being on a sub. We were really crowded.

Our job would be to go in at the beginning of an invasion while the planes were going in with air cover. We’d have been in first. We’d have been in there before the troops probably because we had to soften them up and establish a beachhead – while ships from the fleet lobbed in “bathtubs” or whatever they were shooting. Cripes, some of the shells were as big as Volkswagens. We would have been the front line.

That's how the ship got hit at Iwo Jima. They got hit right up on the bow. And that's where my battle station was, where we had two 40 mm guns. I was with the Gunners Mate, an Indian named "Afraid of Bear."

He had a clipping from a newspaper that he had cut out and carried around with him. It was a story about how he had more horses than any Indian in Montana. He was proud of that. He owned more horses than any Indian in Montana. Nice guy. I don't know what ship he was on before that LCI but he got hit - he got hit in the rear end. He got a Purple Heart for it. For getting hit in the ass.

I think we were around Saipan in early August of '45. Not that we knew for sure. We didn't get that much information, us guys. There were some guys, the quartermaster and the signalmen, they knew more than we did, but nobody bothered telling us anything. They were building that armada to get ready to invade Japan. That's why there was all kinds of ships up there in Guam, Saipan and the Marianas. We were getting ready for the big push, the invasion.

I remember just so many different types of equipment and ships. That would have been horrendous, the size of that armada, because they had bases in Saipan, Guam, the Gilbert Islands. Everywhere over there they had these things being built up - troops that were going to go in there. They had them coming from everywhere. Plenty of people - plenty of ships - plenty of firepower.

And then, when Harry dropped that bomb, everybody just sort of relaxed for a day or two.

Then one day this First Class Boatswain who ran all the deckhands came up to me.

"Hey Arters, come here, you and this other guy. Look, we gotta get that number on there (on the side of the ship), we're leaving tomorrow."

That's when I found out that's where we were going to Japan.

We had to rendezvous with the other eight ships in our group when we were going into Tokyo Bay. Everything was still under war time conditions and they were supposed to get a package with our orders dropped onto our ship at nighttime. We had to have a guy ready to go into the ocean to get it if they missed the ship. Nothing was sent over the air or anything; just drop them on your ship. You were only supposed to be on the radar scope for a half hour but we didn't have enough people for that so we stood a two hour watch. The other 22 hours belonged to us. We had 135 feet from one end to the other end if you wanted to take a walk.

When we were out at night time, you weren't allowed running lights or anything. That was the only way we kept track of where we were. We decided to keep track of the ship ahead of us. That was our job as the radar man and so while we were out to sea we didn't have anything to do all day except those two hours at night. But when we were going into Japan, I remember this one night. I guess that's when we were going into Tokyo Bay a typhoon came up. I was standing radar watch. The deck was metal and I was sitting in a ward room chair, a regular chair they had in the ward room. Sliding back and forth on that metal deck. Man, the swells that came in - you go up

and then come crashing down and slide all over the deck. The guy up on the bridge is giving me hell the whole time.

“I want a fix every minute!”

“I’m trying! I’m doing the best that I can!”

When my two hours were up that night, it was pure heaven. I thought a couple of times there the ship was just going to fall apart.

By the morning it had cleared up and we were in Tokyo Bay. The day of the surrender everybody had to get lined up. Well, we couldn’t all be where they were signing, but in that area. Everybody had to line up, everybody had to be on the rail in the uniform of the day - dungarees and skivvies. The whole bay, everybody standing there in their clean white skivvies shirt and clean, white hat. It’s hard to believe how much equipment and how many people were there.

We hung around for a day or two then they started opening up liberty. All of us amphibious ships, we had to take the liberty party. The fleet didn’t come up into the harbor. They stayed out in the bay and we had to bring the liberty parties up to the harbor or wherever they were going. We were taxis. Then when they opened up liberty in Tokyo they were going to send the SP’s up there where everybody was going to disembark so they sent us up there to feed the shore patrol. We were right outside of a finger pier. Right outside. We could walk right into Tokyo any time we wanted.

That’s where we stayed. One day we were hanging out at one of the USO functions. The Japanese girls would bring us quarts of beer and chasers. There was a photographer there taking pictures for a paper. A Japanese paper I guess. And they wanted a soldier, a sailor, and a marine. Well, I was the sailor they picked. The one Japanese girl who took her picture with me started telling everyone that she called me “Baby.” I guess it was because my hair was cut real short and I was still only 18 at the time. But after a while everyone was calling me “Baby.” One day I was walking down the Ginza with a buddy of mine and I heard someone hollering,

“Baby! Baby!”

It was the Japanese girl with her friends. The next thing you know all of these GI’s and everybody else were looking at us. One of them asked,

“Where’d you get them at?”

You didn’t see anybody fraternizing outside, in the open like that.

But that was one of the things I was surprised about. How they wanted to extend their friendship to you. If they had anything, they would give it to you. They used to say,

“Presento.” and offer you what they had.

They used to come down at night and watch our movies when we were tied up to the finger pier. If they wanted to buy something, they had some really good watches and cameras and stuff that they'd barter with.. They wanted cigarettes and soap and candy mainly. Face soap. Man they went crazy over soap. I guess they stopped making it during the war, I don't know. But they were really, really nice people. We didn't have any trouble at all that I ever encountered. None of my friends ever did either. They were very nice.

Maybe about the third or fourth time I went into Japan after we were tied up, everything was bombed. We really got a sense of the destruction and devastation walking down the Ginza. You could see it was a big shopping center and all but there was one building. There were these two Japanese with a bamboo ladder, a makeshift scaffold, and they're climbing up and down the ladder with cement and tools. I don't know what they were patching up and I told one of my buddies,

“Man, it's going to take them years if they're going to do stuff like that. They'll never rebuild this place.”

But five years or so later I was watching TV one night and they were showing how they had brought the Ginza back. It was unbelievable! When I saw that, I couldn't believe it, especially after I had seen these Japanese guys with their bamboo ladders and all, trying to patch up. But they really did a quick job. They did a lot of work.

We didn't really talk to them about the war and what happened to Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Some languages you can communicate with the people but with the Japanese, it was hard. Some people would talk to you. Some people knew a little English and they'd tell you certain things but I never asked anyone what their thoughts were on the war, or the dropping of the bombs. After they saw what happened to the people in Hiroshima and they figured maybe the same thing could have happened to them, get hit with that bomb - the atomic bomb. That was another thing that might have scared them, kept them a little sober. I don't know. For us we never had too much to think about. It saved us a lot of fighting. We knew it wasn't the **right** thing to do. I guess even Truman knew that but it had to be done. There was no other way. They weren't going to back down.

The average Japanese, just like anyone else, didn't want to get involved in the war to begin with. That's one thing. I don't think it was a very popular decision although I don't know really. I mean the thing that I thought was the most prominent thing was the way that they came out of it with all the help, and worked with General MacArthur on a plan to rebuild. It didn't take them too long before they were grinding out cars, and doing other things that I could never believe.

Like one day we got a train going from Tokyo, just to take a ride. You could go for miles and, nothing. The only thing maybe you'd see a chimney standing here – just everything was bombed out. They just really bombed everything. Those planes used to take off **every night** from Saipan and Guam, those bombers. **Every night** and just keep going - bomb the hell out of that area. I mean, it was a **big** area. So I guess they had a head start on rebuilding because they didn't have any cleaning up to do.

We were there about a month, month and a half after the treaty was signed when we got sent back over to Saipan, and from Saipan we went about our duties. Then, I don't know how long we were in Saipan when we got transferred. I forget how many of us got transferred to an LSM because we had to start taking supplies to the little islands that we had taken. There was one island, Marcus Island, I think it was, it was just big enough for one bomber to take off from. There were Air Force guys there and we had to take them supplies. There was nothing there, no trees, nothing. We were tying up to the Island – radar couldn't pick the island up. That's how small it was. All they had were these underground tunnels with a bunch of empty sake bottles lying around. They must have had a small garrison there.

Eventually we made our way back to Terminal Island, San Pedro. From there we could go to a lot of different places on liberty; Los Angeles, Hollywood, Long Beach. It was great. There was a train you could get on to go from L.A. down the coast to the resorts. There was always something to do. We had a cook who knew a guy who ran a taproom in L.A. and he would sell him supplies from the ship. We were getting supplies for a regular ship's company and by that time we had a lot of extra food.

One night, he said, "Hey, Don, do you want to go on liberty? Want to go in with me?"

"No, I ain't got money for the ferry (to the mainland)."

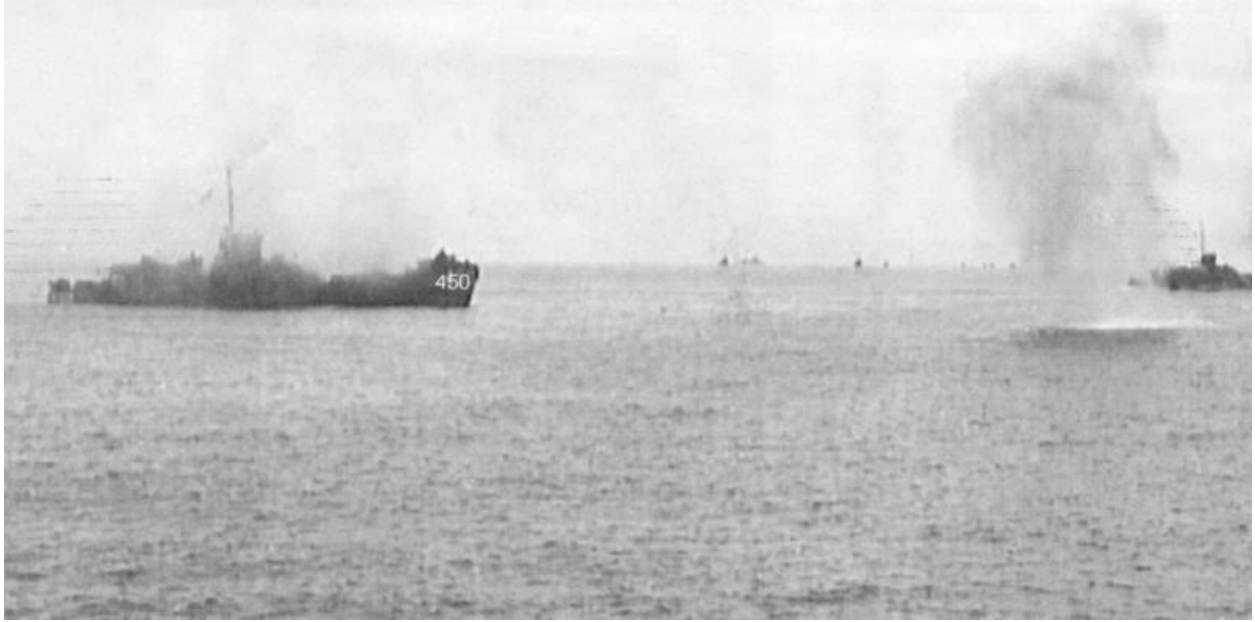
"What the hell you worried about?" You ain't got two pounds of butter?"

He handed me a couple pounds of butter.

"Here you are, we'll take these in, sell them to some old lady and get enough to go into L.A."

We had a pretty good life for a while. And then they sent us back to the east coast. They gave us a 30 day leave. I wish they hadn't. I wish they had just sent us back and discharged us and gave us the money for that 30 days. But they gave us 30 days leave and then we went back after the 30 days were up. I went down to the Navy Yard in Philly, then they sent us down to Bainbridge and discharged us. I think they gave us \$200.00 when we got discharged – a bonus. Then I came home. That was it. I started looking for a job.

I tried to stay in touch with some of the guys after the war. You get home, you write, but eventually you stop. The last time I saw anybody was about twenty years ago. There was a reunion up in New Jersey and that's the last time I saw any of the people that I was in with during the war. No one on my ship was from Philadelphia. The closest one was a guy who lived in Brooklyn. I don't know, most of them were up in New England; a couple outside of Boston. One guy I was pretty close with lived down in New Orleans. There just didn't seem to be anybody or anyone that was close enough for me to really keep in touch with. So that's it. Those things just die out.



LCI(G) 450 at Iwo Jima



LCI(G) 450 Showing damage received at Iwo Jima



The Ginza – Summer, 1945