

Grandfather Tells About End of WW II in Letters, Diary

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Like millions of Americans, I was told as I grew up that I owed my existence to the atomic bomb. My grandfather, a U.S. Army anti-aircraft battalion commander in the Philippines, was busy planning the November 1945 invasion of Japan when word came over the radio about the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima. He had his ear tuned to the radio again when the Japanese surrendered a few days later.

As he was in battles at New Guinea and throughout the Philippines, Granddad

would have been among the first on the beach in a Japanese invasion. Based on the heavy fighting at Iwo Jima and Okinawa, he figured his odds of survival were slim. Since the atomic bombings ended the war, and my father came along during the post-war baby boom—the story went—I could thank all those scientists and engineers from Los Alamos that I had been born.

It's one thing to hear these stories as a child. It's quite another, as a historian, to read first-hand accounts of them.

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When Granddad, Col. (Ret.) Albert L. Reed, moved into an assisted living facility in 2003, I, as the family historian, received a trunk full of wonderful family documents and artifacts. It included a diary he kept during the war and the letters he had written home to my grandmother and uncle. (Unfortunately, in the heat of battle, not to mention the heat and humidity of the Philippines and lack of a way to transport them home, Granddad was unable to save any of her letters.) Nonetheless, the items are a treasure trove.

Never a very talkative man, Granddad's diary is cryptic, often recording troop maneuvers, the boredom of war in between battles, and his organizational duties, from inspections to setting up mess halls as the Americans advanced through the archipelago.



Avis and Al Reed in 1942.

The letters to my grandmother, Avis, on the other hand, are nothing short of amazing. They flesh out the details of his daily existence between battles, inquire and reminisce about family and friends back home, and discuss mundane matters such as their finances. Each letter – and there are hundreds of them – ends with

a passionate paragraph about how much he misses her and longs to hold her in his arms again.

The letters are also filled with his self-effacing, wry humor, such as the time he fretted that he would rather discipline 700 soldiers than his young son, my uncle. Or this note he wrote on March 22, 1945: “Honey, I was awarded the Bronze Star Medal for my work in this campaign. We

are having a formal ceremony tomorrow and the General will pin it on my manly chest. That will be my third ribbon – Bronze Star, Philippine Liberation with two stars and Asiatic-Pacific with two stars so far. Quite the little soldier, eh?” The much more enigmatic diary notes on March 20: “Stayed in Hqs. during the day. Received notice that I had been awarded the Bronze Star for Leyte Campaign.”

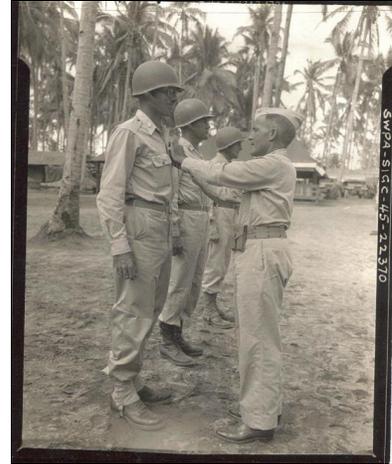
Granddad left Camp Cooke, California, on Sept. 20, 1943, and arrived in Sydney, Australia on Oct. 19, 1943. He started the diary on Jan. 1, 1944, as the battles for the Admiralty Islands were about to begin. It saw him through the battle for Los Negros that February, the decisive campaign at Leyte in the Philippines in October 1944, and on to Manila in 1945.

V-E Day brought some hope to men who had been stationed overseas for 18 months or more that troops from Europe might replace them. For most of July, Granddad wrote notes in his diary about hoping to hear when he might be able to return home. However, he found out on July 25 that a new point system was developed that did not apply to officers. Planning and training for the invasion of Japan continued in earnest.

From here, the diary and letters will take you, the reader, to the end of the war:

August 6, 1945: “Spent the day in the office. Readjustments look bad for the officers. God only knows when we will get home.”

August 7, 1945: “Lt. Col. K. C. Smith



Lt. Col. Albert L. Reed receives the Bronze Star from Gen. Homer Case, March 23, 1945

came to make further investigations of flak falling on 126th General Hospital.” [One of Granddad’s anti-aircraft batteries had sent flak falling onto the hospital during a training exercise on Aug. 3, and he had expected repercussions.]



This photo was taken when Albert Reed was on leave in Australia in 1944. It is inscribed, “To my beloved wife—Al.” The author keeps the picture on her mantle.

That same day he wrote to Grandmother: “We heard today about this atomic bomb. If it is half as good as the radio dispatches indicate, it ought to help us get

home quicker.”

August 8, 1945: “News of the atomic bomb is now the big topic of conversation. We all hope that it will make an early surrender. Spent the day in my office.”

August 9, 1945: “... At group battery company meeting in the afternoon. Big news is declaration of war on Japan by Russia this morning.”

August 10, 1945: “What a week! Japan’s peace offer came over the radio about 0900 while Gentry and I were playing dirty eights [a game, known to me as crazy eights, that we spent hours on end playing years later]. Everybody celebrated—& how! It was drunk out!”

August 11, 1945: “Several headaches this morn. We stay pretty close to the radio. Got news of our counter offer to Japan. We should know Monday.”

He wrote to Grandmother that day: “The big news today of course is the offer of Japan to capitulate. At about 9 o’clock last night Major Gentry and I were playing

dirty eights when the news came over the radio. We could hear horns blowing, people shouting and guns being fired a few seconds after the announcement. All the officers came over to our quarters. We broke out a stray bottle of liquor here and there and really celebrated. There were a lot of headaches around this morning ...”

August 12, 1945: “No news yet as to whether Japan accepts counter offer. Everyone waiting impatiently—meanwhile the status quo continues.”

August 13, 1945: “Stuck pretty close to radio but no news from Japan. Had jeep stolen in the evening.”

On that same day, he wrote to Grandmother, “We are still waiting tensely the news as to whether Japan will accept our surrender terms or not.” No word about the jeep, though, and we never do learn what happened to it.

August 14, 1945: “25th grp. had party this night. Gentry, Horton, Ferguson and I went. Still no news of Jap reply to our surrender ultimatum. Wish it would come.”

August 15, 1945: “This is it! Japan accepted our peace terms. I first heard the news at 0815 (615 pm 14 Aug in Kansas). Saw “Valley of Decision” in the evening.”

To Grandmother: “At last it has come—peace in our time. You will celebrate it on August 14 but I guess we who are over on this side of the little old globe will always think of it as ending Aug. 15 because it was that date over here when it



Vehicles abandoned on Leyte by the Japanese in October 1944. (Photo by A. L. Reed)

ended. I first heard the news about 0815 when I happened to switch the radio on.” He noted that Tokyo’s first announcement of a willingness to surrender had been “a bolt out of the blue ... I lost ten pesos on a bet I made a few weeks ago as to the end of the war. I bet it wouldn’t end before 1946. I never was so happy to lose a bet in all my life.” In later years, he would say the atomic bombs caused him to lose the bet, but he still didn’t mind.

On Nov. 22, 1945 Granddad was finally able to ship out of the Philippines. His ride home, aboard the USS *Dorothy Dix*, was beset by numerous storms, and the high temperature when he arrived in Los Angeles on Dec. 12 was a mere 59 degrees, greatly chilling all the soldiers who had spent years in the tropics.

Grandmother and Granddad had their long-awaited reunion in Denver on Dec. 17. Afterwards, the diary records busy times in his home state of Kansas, visiting family, processing out of the army, and applying for jobs, including one with the regular army. Granddad kept the diary through June 29, 1946, when it abruptly ends. He received a telegram that day offering him the rank of captain, but he wrote that he remained undecided.

Indeed, he did accept the offer and continued his military career, spending time in Korea and later becoming a district en-

gineer for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Based in Albuquerque, Granddad oversaw the construction of the Abiquiu and Jemez dams. After finally retiring from the army in the early 1960s, he went to work for an architectural firm in Albuquerque before retiring to Colorado Springs and later Sun City, AZ. Grandmother, the love of his life, passed away in 1997.

Albert Reed’s life may have been interrupted, but it was not cut short by war. Although his first-hand accounts of how the atomic bombs ended World War II and allowed him to return home to his family are a small part of his wonderful legacy, my family and I do say thank you to all those Los Alamos scientists and engineers.



Destruction in Manila, capital of the Philippines, in 1945. (Photo by A. L. Reed)



“Dutch” Van Kirk Makes Los Alamos Visit

Theodore “Dutch” Van Kirk, navigator on the *Enola Gay*, signs books during an appearance in Fuller Lodge on October 25, 2009, sponsored by the Los Alamos Historical Society. “Dutch” spent about an hour telling the crowd about his experiences on the *Enola Gay*. Signed copies of the book, *The 509th Remembered*, are available in the Los Alamos Historical Museum Book Shop.