

Oceanside – Pendleton

Nearly 50 Years Later!

November 8, 2007

There was no *déjà vu* to arriving in Oceanside -- it is no longer the place I knew. The first thing that struck me was there were no Marines to be seen anywhere. Yes, it was 1000 on a "work day", but there were always a few Marines, even if just in front of the USO waiting for a Pendleton bus.

I also noticed there was virtually nowhere to eat and the bars were all gone too. Then I learned the four old movies were all shut down as well. The Star Theater is still there but does not show films anymore. The cut-rate theater on the eastside of Main is totally gone, as is Walter's Credit Clothiers. That whole block was leveled, including Walter's, the deli, and the movie, to make way for a new library and an Oceanside City Park. The main movies used to change their double features over a weekend and the two smaller theaters did the same with their triple features. Before I started at Walter's my buddy Steve Niebur and I used to see as many as 20 movies on a weekend liberty!

Anyone who shopped or did their laundry and dry cleaning at Walter's in the early 1960's would know me, as I had a part time job there running the laundry desk, the fluff dry operation and even learned to be a pressman! When not in the field I fit in 30 hours a week on top of a full FMF schedule. I stayed with that job until I started night school at the then Oceanside Carlsbad Junior College.

Caddy corner across the street from the old Walter's location the discount movie is still there but it no longer shows films either. The marquee offered some special events and some kind of small local concert. Next door, under the Arena sign, the old Normandy lounge is gone too. Long gone, because looking through the window of the closed up establishment, I could see it had been a pin ball, pool hall dive and was not the once elegant lounge where I learned to drink Michelob draft!

I was always impressed with the gentleman that owned the Normandy and admired his beautiful wife. I thought it was "cool" they lived in a second floor apartment over the establishment. Now I can't imagine anything worse than living over a bar on a busy city street. Any Marine who ever went to the Normandy will also remember the piranha fish tank behind the bar where they fed them raw hamburger on request; and the bald, gay organ player who was always trying to find a Marine he could "ask, who would not tell".

Back over on the eastside of Main, and the next street up, the old elegant Crest Theatre is now a church! No places to eat, drink or see a movie -- so, no Marines in Oceanside!

Back on the westside and down Pier View Way the entire block on the southside is a parking lot. This is where the old USO had been and where we all caught either a main or back gate bus to return to base.

Across the street is the location of the 1stMarDiv Association. My buddy Don Wiant and I went in and met the Executive Director, Colonel Len Hayes USMC (Ret). The Colonels ribbons displayed behind his desk include a Silver Star and Bronze Star w/"V" device, and tell the tale

of a rifle company commander who served two tours in Vietnam. Another friend who knows the Colonel told me I had met one Hell of a Marine whom he characterized as a "pit bull with a Masters degree!"

After a great visit with Colonel Hayes we departed for lunch in Carlsbad. The first thing I noticed in Carlsbad was the stark contrast to Oceanside. Carlsbad is a thriving little town with all the charm you expect in a small SoCal community. Sadly Oceanside seems to be a place that has lost its place! Anyway, in the photo we are waiting for our table, and some good Mexican food. From L to R, me; Captain Jim "Gunner" Mulloy, USMC (Ret), 1950 -1984, 3 tours in Viet Nam and a Navy Cross; Sergeant John Wintersteen, USMC 1959 -1963; Corporal Don Wiant, USMC 1957-1960, and Lt. Colonel Ken Pipes, USMC (Ret) with 24 years of service and a Silver Star from the 77 day siege at Khe Sanh. The conversation was perfect!

After lunch we departed for Pendleton by way of the main gate. Of course with Jim Mulloy we were saluted right in and made our way to the Camp Margarita plateau where I had initially been stationed. Just as we were coming up the hill and entering the camp a convoy of armored vehicles passed us with .50 cal guns manned. Other than a couple of Marines later seen horsing around these were the only guys we saw at a Camp that had once been the home of the entire 5th Marines.

We parked the car and stood on the parade deck looking across to where I had once lived; and looking up at the "hills" just behind camp. I had spent lots of time up in those Pendleton hills! Now the location is home to the 1stReconBn and HqBn1stMarDiv. So they had moved HqBn to my first home at Pendleton! This is interesting to me because I had spent some of my last months in the Corps with 1stMarDivHqBn. I had also once had orders to 1stRecon. The story is told in the photo captions on my main Pendleton page.

As we walked across the grinder toward my old barracks I got an eerie sense of voices from the past. Not sure many things affect me as much as going back to places like this! But there it was just as it had been nearly 50 years ago when the building housed Weapons and 3rd Platoons of Golf 2/5. It is now a 1stMarDiv personnel office. I stood at an exit that had once been the weapons entrance and then walked down the sidewalk and around the corner to the messhall, which is still there just as it had been!

The company office Quonset huts along Company Street behind the messhall are all gone! But the other brick and mortar was 95% the same as it had been when I was there. The one thing missing was Marines. It was the weekend before Memorial Day and the USMC Birthday and someone suggested they were all on a 96 or something. And, of course, we are in the middle of a war! However, at the very least I thought we would see a sentry. No more guard duty? I had also noticed this several years ago at Parris Island. It seems Marines no longer walk a post, and 'til now I had thought it was just a sleep related boot camp thing.

From Camp we then went down the hill in back to the rifle range. I had fired Expert there and standing on the 500 yard line made me wonder how I ever did. But I can still see that target coming up with a white spotter and a white disc telling me another 5 in the black! Be fun to lay down prone with my present M-1, get some dope, and then see what these old eyes could do.

We then took our chances at being thrown out and *drove* down to the butts. In the old days it would have been double time. It was fun to stand there in the target pit. The butts are the same. In my day the now wooden score signs were round metal disks -- white for a bull's eye 5, red for a 4 ring, black and white for a trey, and black for a deuce! Of course, there was also the Maggies drawer's flag for a miss! No sound barrier crack? They would call down, mark 33. We would pull it down, search for a hole, and ultimately WAVE the flag.

After we looked at everything we could see in the butts (Marine sightseeing, no one else would understand) we left for main side. The 1stMarDivHq building is still there just as it was all those years ago. I had never served in that building as I had been in HqCo and SvcCo, up on the hill behind where there is now dependent housing. Seems the old HQ building and the parade field are all that's left from my time. I walked up, held the lanyard on the ship's bell, and wondered if I rang it ***really hard*** if we would get to see a Marine!

I looked out at the parade field and recalled all the times I had passed in review there. The music was always so inspiring. Check the other link here for a little history in regard to Waltzing Matilda!

We left Camp Pendleton out the back gate and proceeded on to a visit with Captain John E. "Jack" Bennett USN (Ret). The Captain had graduated from the USNA in 1941, and was personally awarded the Navy Cross by none other than Adm. "Bull" Halsey for bravery in the epic sea battle the USS San Francisco endured off Guadalcanal in 1942. The story of that battle is on my *Sea Stories* page! Soon after, Captain Jack was transferred to Submarines and served on the Queenfish and Caiman during WW11.

My first encounter with the USS San Francisco was on a California business trip. My District Manager had taken me to the park where the bridge of the ship has been placed as a monument. I did not know the story then but stood on that bridge looking at the jagged tears through the armor plate and knew something momentous had happened to this ship. I read the plaque describing the event but still did not know the whole story.

Later I had also seen an hour special on the Oliver North *War Stories* program telling of the terrible encounter this ship had endured with an entire Japanese fleet. I was later able to get permission to post the whole story, which I am proud to have on my site.

Anyway, Captain Jack had contacted me several years ago after noting my name on an email sent to him by Major Frank Stolz USMC (Ret). The Captain wanted to know if I was possibly related to a John Rohrer who had been his father's best friend in the Marine Corps, and who had been killed at Belleau Wood in WW1. Captain Jack had always suspected he had been named after WW1 Marine John Rohrer. I would like to believe he was a long lost relative but have no knowledge of him. My brother's name is John he was only born in 1942.

Captain Jack then related this story to me by email.

"Major Frank Stolz knew me through our mutual Marine pal Col Jack Kelley, who will handle my local memorial service upon my death. When the heavily damaged cruiser USS San Francisco returned from Guadalcanal Dec 10 '42 for major repairs at Mare Island Naval Shipyard, it was obvious our bridge needed replacing. The City of San Francisco requested

that our old bridge be donated to the city as the foundation for a memorial monument to the ship. The Navy agreed and transferred the bridge to them.

Years later when stopping at Alameda to board a huge Mars flying boat to Japan to take command of the submarine Caiman I drove over to Golden Gate Park to show my dad where I assumed the San Francisco monument would have been built. Not finding it I went to the Ranger shack to inquire further.

The Smokey Bear said 'Oh you must mean that pile of junk behind the West End stables.' Something I must have said caused him quickly to take his feet off his desk and give me clear directions to the stables where I found the bridge covered in bird excrement and graffiti with evidence of attempts to pry off large segments for souvenirs.

I returned to my hotel and tried to reach the Admiral serving as District commandant to tell him I felt strongly that if the City was not going to use the bridge for the purpose requested the Navy should reclaim it and give it an honorable disposal. Perhaps to my good fortune the Admiral was unavailable, and I was shunted to the public affairs officer who was a ball of fire and promised me he would diligently pursue my project. Well, he certainly DID.

He enlisted the support of a paper no longer publishing (NOT the Chronicle), posed a peacock on the bridge which was featured on the front page, and gained immediate public attention. He then organized a committee of civic leaders, initiated a grass roots funding campaign similar to the NY Herald Tribune's "Yes, Virginia there is a Santa Claus". The monument was then funded and built in time for its dedication on the 9th anniversary of what ADM Ernest J King had called "the most furious sea battle fought in history".

This was the work of an unsung PR officer whose name I unfortunately don't remember. All I did was start the ball rolling with him and boarded the Mars next morning for Japan. God was in charge."

After learning this whole story, I promised Captain Jack USN and Major Stolz USMC, if I ever got back to San Francisco, I would make it a special point to return to the monument out of respect for the Captain and the entire crew of his ship. In the spring of 2007 I was back in San Francisco, and did make the side trip I had promised, and my wife, Jonnie, took photos of me at the monument. More recently my good friend Jim Mulloy surprised me by framing the photos and presenting them to Captain Jack with a brass Navy medallion on the frame. This generous act completed the whole experience for me. Thank you Jim, and all the best to the Captain!

Anyway, If you are ever in San Francisco you must go to Lands End Park and stand on the bridge of the ship. It will leave you with an impression you will not soon forget!

Now having returned to Parris Island, Camp Geiger at Camp Lejeune, and the locations where I served at Pendleton, my memories are complete. That is except for my most memorable tour – Okinawa! I did get back to Japan, China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan on business trips, but I never had the opportunity to make a side trip to the island of Okinawa. Time and distance will now most likely preclude my ever seeing that beautiful little island again. But like Oceanside, the Okinawa I knew as a young Marine is gone. But I am having those memories rekindled by reading a wonderful book titled *B. C. Street* by E. A. Cooper!