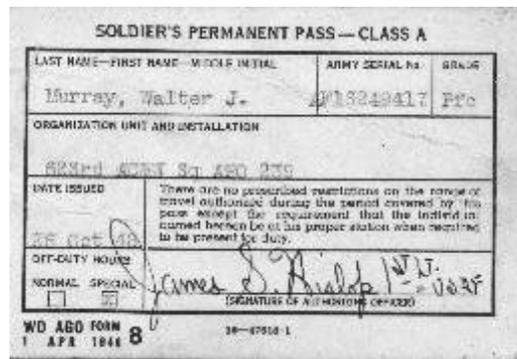


OKINAWA

Recollections



1948-1949

These are the recollections of former private Walter James Murray, AF16249417, a member of the Occupation forces of the United States on Okinawa Island from January 1948 to May 1949 assigned to the 623rd A.C.&W. (Aircraft Control & Warning) Squadron as an information center/radar operator. It was written in the summer of 1994, forty-five years after the event, and is in no particular order.

The word in everyday use to refer to the native Okinawan was “gook,” perhaps derived from “Hangook,” a word in the Korean language meaning Korean. It was employed as a matter of course, serving to identify the island inhabitants while in turn raising the status of the occupier. The term could refer to a man or woman, even children, and was used as well in the plural form (“gooks”). We were who we were and they were gooks.

A common interjection used by the Okinawans was “Aah-semi-oh.” It could mean any number of things, like a response to seeing something beautiful or extraordinary or as a mild expletive (Damn!). The accent is on the first syllable. I utter it on occasion to this very day.

The airport at Naha, just south of the ruined capital city, had one runway and served as the principle airport for the island. The other airport, Kadena, was exclusively for B-29s. Between the runway at Naha and the sea was a hill behind which, toward the sea, a mound composed of man-made debris had been bulldozed into a giant pile, most of which seemed to be Japanese military equipment (e.g. planes, vehicles) destroyed in the battle. It was quite a sight and gave us newcomers a chance to examine real war stuff.

It was a bit monotonous waiting for an assignment at the Naha airport in early 1948. It was cold, it rained a lot and there was sticky red mud everywhere. In addition to the debris adjacent to the airport, another airman and I were attracted to the unique Okinawa tombs, some of which were in fields nearby. They were domed affairs with a small entrance and inside was a shelf upon which were placed urns containing cremated human remains. Thinking there could be gold we upended them, scattering the ashes on the shelf. We found no gold. It was an altogether shameful episode.

Brothels were not available in those years, their erstwhile inmates dispersed or dead. Furthermore, the occupation authorities frowned on such activity. For anyone needing service of that kind there was a not too pretty Okinawan female of a certain age available by going to a particular area in darkness and offering an Okinawan pimp a carton of cigarettes (eighty cents at the P.X.). You would then be taken to the woman who would be lying in the tall grass in the gloom grinning a toothy welcome. For those luckless enough to contract a venereal disease (e.g.,

gonorrhea), there was what was euphemistically called the “clap shack,” a facility (Quonset hut) located within the camp where victims were exiled leper-like until cured.

Prior to my assignment to Okinawa, there was a thirteen-week basic training course (for me Flight 2282) at Lackland AFB, San Antonio, Texas. For the first three weeks of my enlistment,



that is from August 26, 1947, I was in the Army Air Corps, the forerunner of the Air Force. I went to Okinawa as a basic soldier, sailing on December 30, 1947 from Fort Ord, San Francisco, on the transport Walton Walker after a brief stopover at Hamilton Field. **Left: On board ship.**

My orders read Yokohama but once docked at Buckner Bay at Okinawa I was ordered off the ship along with all Air Force members. It had taken 28 days, with stops at Hawaii, Guam and Manila, to get to Okinawa. The

forces on the island, I came to learn, consisted of air force (the vast majority) and naval personnel. The army, such as it was, was made up of Filipino Scouts officered by Americans. Almost all military people I came into contact with were white (i.e., no Blacks).

Transactions involving money were made with script (specimen, page 12 & 13) issued by the military as there was no American money (dollars) as such. We were paid in script and spent it as if it were real money. Native Okinawans were barred from holding script but it came into their possession through the black market anyway. One day in 1948 the script was suddenly and without warning recalled and new bills issued. This took only a matter of hours and anyone left holding the old script was stuck with worthless paper.

After disembarking from the troopship at Buckner Bay on January 26, 1948, we were driven in 6X6s through Naha to the airfield where we would wait for about two weeks before being assigned. The city presented a scene of total destruction, of rubble, ruin and death. An earthquake of enormous intensity couldn't have done worse. I was transfixed by the reality of war; it wasn't a movie or a newspaper picture I was looking at. A mere two years and seven months had passed since the end of the battle for Okinawa. North of Naha I would later see burned-out tanks and various trucks abandoned in fields and wreckage-littered beaches that welcomed the invasion on that Easter Sunday in 1945.

On top of a ridge line north of Kadena, on what was called “Radar Hill,” was where the airforce sited its early warning radars, a 250-mile range CPS-1 and a height finder, a



RADAR HILL

CPS-4. There were radio transmitters galore, a diesel power generator, maintenance shacks, a telephone exchange (“Seaview”), the works, all in Quonset huts. The only facility lacking was a mess hall. The radio call sign for the facility was “Walter Control.” Once in a while, in certain atmospheric conditions, the whole of the Ryukyu Island chain could be seen on the radar. At the northern tip of the island (Point Tare) a second, smaller radar was set up to cover a narrow blind spot caused by mountains to our north. The Pacific Ocean lay to the east, the East China Sea to the west. The invasion beaches, such as Yontan, were in view westward from the hill. The



narrow waist of the island was immediately to our north, just before where the mountains rose. The Motobu Peninsula, jutting out on the west of the island and a scene of fighting in 1945, could be seen to the north on a clear day. Sunrises and sunsets could be stunning and unforgettable. Caves dug into the hillside below us by Japanese soldiers, we were led to believe, still contained the bodies of those trapped inside and killed.

Our living area (**photo above**) was in a military camp located not far north of Kadena off Route 1 just after crossing a set of Bailey bridges spanning the Bishagawa River. Both the 623rd and 624th A.C.&W. Squadrons were based there. An M.P shack was on the approach road. We lived in Quonset huts, long, low, one-story structures shaped like rain gutters turned upside down and secured with steel cables into the ground to keep them from blowing away. Floors were of plywood and there were screened windows capable of being shut tight. The huts were divided into two twelve-man rooms and two four-man rooms and every man had a bed with a mosquito net, a desk and a footlocker. Toilet facilities (latrines), erected over pits, were nearby. There was a communal shower. I was paid \$80.00 a month (my portion in script), \$25.00 of which I sent home. Everyday wear was a pair of fatigues, oversized bib-like overalls. There was only one size: too large.

Two musical refrains from that period still linger in my mind to this day, “Tokyo Boogie Woogie” and “Shina no yoru” (China Nights). Both were broadcast on Armed Forces Radio and performed by Japanese musicians. Shina no yoru was supposedly composed to commemorate the deaths of Japanese soldiers in China during the 1930s. It has a haunting melody.

(**Right:** Orville J. Vincent & Author.)

Under a clear blue sky one day the routine on Radar Hill was disrupted by the appearance of an old stooped Okinawan man strolling determinedly and incongruously through the facility. He had come up one side of the hill and was going to go down the other, the hill lacking a fence or even signs to deter intruders. Hauling a bundle of firewood slung over a shoulder and wearing an inscrutable expression on his well-weathered face, he completely ignored us as we stared transfixed at this unbelievable violation of our top-secret and inviolable installation. Eyebrows everywhere shot up and jaws dropped correspondingly. Someone stopped him and someone else was sent for the military police, which soon arrived to lead him away. It may have been a deliberate intrusion but it was more than likely a simple act of



a man who had for years traversed the hill in the same manner and didn't think he was doing anything wrong. I have often wondered what happened to him.

In October 1948 typhoon Libby struck Okinawa with horrendous force, its approach from the southeast filling the radar screen with its massive size. A B-29 dispatched into the storm to measure its force couldn't be tracked, as it was lost in the intensity of radar echoes. While the typhoon was still hours away we were ordered to a beach to fill sand-bags to lay on the roofs of our living quarters to assure, if worse came to worse, we would have a roof over our heads. Up on the hill, after everything that could be done was done to secure the buildings and electronic apparatus, it was abandoned to the whims of the weather gods.

We were clobbered by the storm for three days, then there was a respite of a half a day under a blue sky (the eye of the storm) and then another three-day battering. Electricity was lost in the first hours but we had kerosene lanterns in our quarters for a backup. In the first days of the storm the door of our hut was blown off, admitting a flood of water and a howling wind into our sanctuary. Three or four of us, naked in the teeth of that merciless torrent, labored frantically to reattach it by nailing it to the frame, all the while almost submerged under a Niagara-like rain. Later we were told the winds were clocked up to 160 miles per hour.

The food we ate during the typhoon consisted of dried food in little boxes called K-rations, which were issued before the storm hit. Cigarettes were included. During the days of inactivity we played endless games of pinochle, a game I learned to play on the ship going over (I played it hundreds of times on the island and then again on the ship going home but not since). One brave fellow from Georgia went out one evening at the height of the storm to get a case of beer and returned to our cheers but we sobered when he told us he'd been knocked down by a piece of corrugated siding that would have certainly cut him in half and killed him had it hit him edgewise.

After the typhoon moved on we went out to discover our mess hall had been demolished and there was significant damage everywhere. It was a mess. Our work site, Radar Hill, was devastated, too. The CPS-4 height finder had been blown down the hillside but the main radar, the CPS-1, at the highest point on the hill, suffered little damage, even with its broad, snowplow shaped antenna exposed to the elements. It was brought back to working order quickly. Other equipment and some buildings took weeks to restore to a workable condition. One result of the storm was that I began to drink coffee for the first time; I had no choice, as there was nothing else.

The native population in their flimsy thatched huts was no doubt devastated as well by the fury of Libby, but we were too overcome with our own problems to be concerned. There must have

been some aid given them by the Occupation authorities but I knew nothing of it.



There was a swimming hole a fifteen-minute or so walk from the camp on the Bishagawa River where the water flowed through a little canyon and then cascaded into a widening between two sheer cliff walls creating a deep pool where we could swim. We could even dive, as it was deep enough. Two wrecked vehicles, both jeeps,

were sticking out of the water in the pool and there was a burned-out weapons carrier atop one of the cliffs. They dated to the fighting three years before. As was everything outside of the camp, the river was off-limits, but we paid no heed to the warning-- we wanted to have some fun. There was, too, the danger of stepping on a leftover mine so an order to stay on the roads was in force. Old booby traps were another danger and, furthermore, we were told to be on the lookout for renegade Japanese soldiers thought to be still holding out on the island.

Okinawans were never allowed on Radar Hill and any and all labor was performed by American service personnel. In the camp, however, there were work gangs of Okinawans, including woman, who were employed in all sorts of enterprises. Women (we called them girls) worked as food servers in the mess hall and did kitchen police (K.P.) as well. And women were assigned to the quarters of staff sergeants and higher ranks as housemaids to do laundry and cleaning. Men were put to work on all kinds of projects from ditch digging to repairing electrical fixtures. One or two English speaking Okinawans were employed in the service club and library, affording some of us an opportunity to talk to a real native. At the end of the day they were all transported back to their village by truck.

An outdoor theater that could seat perhaps two hundred people was in the camp on a slope looking down on a movie screen set in a roofed stage area with an Eighth Air Force emblem was attached. Dressing rooms were available for live performances. Movies were a regular feature and Okinawan boys and girls would sneak in to sit on the hillside behind us further up the slope. No one ever challenged them and they disappeared as soon as the movie was over. During the time I was there only one live show was put on-- a troupe of Australian show business people who performed song and dance routines and comedy skits on the stage. There was never a more appreciative audience.

Near the theater was a library where I spent a good deal of my time. One book I recall reading was entitled "The Cry of Delores," a story of the Mexican revolution. A service club had magazines and games and there was a beer garden (hard liquor was forbidden) that served even 17-year-olds like me. And a PX (Post Exchange) that sold things like toiletries, stationary, cigarettes and the like.

I was in the service club one day browsing through an issue of Time when a strange, groaning noise made me pause and sit up straighter. It was coming from below me, from the bowels of the earth, altogether eerie and disquieting. When the floor began to tremble and the room to creak loudly and start to sway, I was out the door like a shot. It was my first experience in an earthquake but it was over in seconds.



The daily work schedule on Radar Hill consisted of four rotating shifts: midnight to seven a.m., seven to noon, noon to five p.m. and five to midnight. The routine called for an hour on the radar, IFF equipment, directing finding or plotting board and an hour off. There was always one officer on duty.

One early morning nearing sunrise I had an hour off and went out for some fresh air. It was still dark but the beginnings of daylight were visible on the eastern horizon. I choose a spot facing

west, put my foot up on a low wall, lighted a cigarette and peered out over the East China Sea. It was quiet, the sky was clear and the temperature cool and I could see a long, long way out to sea. As the earth turned into the direction of the sun it became brighter and brighter. Bolo Point, just north of the Yontan invasion beaches, was visible. The beaches themselves appeared from out of the darkness, too. Day was breaking.

Then I saw something strange, quite out of the ordinary. It was a stationary object in the water a bit north of Bolo Point and not too far off shore. It was a long slender object and as the light grew in intensity I could discern a tower-like structure in the middle of it. Ah-semi-oh! It was a submarine! It had to be a submarine. It was too far away to see any people on it but as I watched I thought it probable I was being observed as I stood there rooted by the scene. Then I turned and went to fetch the officer in charge.

Together we looked long and hard at the submarine. It was quite light now. There was no doubt as to what it was and I wished we had had a pair of binoculars. The submarine crew may well have been watching us, too, for in a few minutes it began to sink gradually into the water and then it was gone.

The officer and I returned to the radar room and he called headquarters at Naha to report the incident. A warship was eventually dispatched to the scene but by the time it had arrived the submarine had long since departed. I have always thought the mystery sub was Soviet and was there to spy on our installation.

Working a day shift one afternoon, I picked up a target approaching from the direction of Japan, that is from the north-northeast. It was not transmitting an IFF (Identification Friend or Foe) code. The normal procedure was to contact Okinawa Control on the phone (we had a direct line) to check on what they had coming from that direction at that time. Air traffic in and out of Okinawa was strictly controlled and no one flew anywhere without filing a flight plan indicating route, destination, call sign, altitude, etc. This went for civilian and military aircraft alike. Okinawa Control reported it had nothing on any planes coming from Japan and wasn't expecting any. An order soon went out to scramble an F-80 "Shooting Star" jet fighter from the airbase at Naha to intercept and identify the intruder.

Intercepts in daylight were made head-on, that is the F-80 was steered so as to approach the bogie (unidentified aircraft) from ahead on a collision course. We had no notion of the altitude of the bogie (the CPS-4 height finder was useless) so it was up to the pilot to determine an intercept altitude. Contact was made about eighty miles out and the fighter reported the aircraft to be a flying boat cruising at a low altitude. He was then ordered to make a close pass to determine its registry and shortly, after a fly-by, we were informed it was of Australian registry and we got the identification number (actually letters) read from the plane's tail. Another check with Okinawa Control with the identification numbers proved fruitless. Calls on HF and VHF radio frequencies were initiated but there was no response. The Australians piloting the flying boat with obvious indifference kept on a steady course that would bring them directly over the island.

Such a challenge could very well lead to serious repercussions as the very existence of the American military power on Okinawa was being flaunted. The Americans controlled the air space around Okinawa and you'd better have permission to use it or else. The F-80 was directed to make the intruder turn away by the use of gestures between the respective cockpits but this was ignored. The next order was to shoot across the bow to force it to turn away or at least to get its attention. That did the trick. All hell broke loose as the airwaves were instantly vibrating with a furious Australian accent shouting, "This is an international incident!" And, "There are women

and children aboard!" He ranted on with no letup but he continued to stubbornly maintain a course that would put him directly over the island. Nor did he respond to radio transmissions from us on Radar Hill advising him he was crossing a restricted area and was in violation of our air space. An order to shoot the airplane down was, of course, the next logical step but that was utterly out of the question and the flying boat was allowed grudgingly to proceed unmolested.

Contact was eventually established with Okinawa Control and clearance issued to proceed on course to his destination, Hong Kong. The flight, we learned, had originated from a British air base in the Inland Sea of Japan (Beppu?) and had initially filed a flight plan that took it over Shanghai and thence to Hong Kong but the pilot elected to change his mind en route and go via Okinawa. On radar I watched him fade into the southwest, the echo petering out in the vicinity of Miyako Oshima, 180 miles away. So long, mate. You fared better than did that old man who trespassed our hill. Had he an airplane and an equally combative attitude, he might have pulled it off, too. (The incident recalls the shooting down of Korean Air flight 007 by the Soviets in 1983, thirty-five years later.)

Fighter protection for Okinawa was entrusted to relatively speedy Lockheed F-80 "Shooting Star" jet fighters for daylight operations and to Northrop P-61 "Black Widows" for nighttime. The F-80 (a.k.a. the "lead sled") was easier to deal with, as it merely had to be steered directly to the target to intercept. The twin-engine propeller-driven two-man P-61, however, needed to be steered around to the rear of the target and then brought up behind in order to make contact using the airborne radar. The P-61 was exasperatingly slow, so slow even a Northwest Airlines DC-4 was more often than not able to outdistance them. There were numerous times I transmitted the words "Buster! Buster!" to a P-61 pilot, the instruction to speed up; it was oftentimes said in vain.

In a letter from home I was to learn a brother-in-law, T.J. "Tucker" Giblin, had recently gone to work with Northwest Airlines as a purser and would be working flights passing through Okinawa from Tokyo to Manila and back. I told the family to tell him he could reach me on the radio through Okinawa Control when approaching the island on one of his trips and that I would try to arrange a meeting at Naha airport. He came in the middle of the night and I was roused from bed by prearrangement and speedily driven to the airport in a weapons carrier, arriving just as his DC-4 was touching down. He could only spare a few moments but it was still good to see him. Years later he was a 747 captain flying the identical route for the same airline.

The camp and Radar Hill were frequently sprayed for insects, mainly mosquitoes, and we were issued anti-malaria pills to ward off the malady as well. (We took salt pills, too.) But I came down with malaria anyway and to my knowledge I was the only one in my group to be so afflicted. Realizing I was becoming sick one day, I went over to the camp dispensary for help but my temperature was still normal and I was rudely sent away without so much as a APC (all purpose pill). Once back in the barracks I took to bed and within a short time was running a fever and shaking but, in a pique, refused help and asked to be left alone.

But my mates, watching me shivering and seeing the discomfort worsening, couldn't just sit by so one finally went off to get a medic. When the medic came to my bedside I ignored him, telling him I was all right and to leave me alone. He left but was soon back with wheels, leaving me no choice but to get up and go with him for a ride to the hospital. It was the ubiquitous weapons carrier and I sat in the rear and could hear the driver and medic talking in the front seat. They were telling stories of how many times they'd been taken in by those feigning illness. I didn't know if they were telling this for me to hear to compensate for their initial behavior in ignoring my complaint or trying to scare me. In any event, it didn't make the ride pleasant. At the hospital

I was treated well, particularly by the nurses, who were almost to me like creatures from outer space.

I subsequently went through four additional seizures (two on Okinawa) but I was never again challenged when I asked for assistance from the medical staffers. The medication proscribed to alleviate malaria in those days was chloroquine.

INTERMISSION

When we were scheduled to go to work up on the hill, we would assemble at the post office at the camp to catch a 6X6 or weapons carrier, depending on availability, for the twenty-minute or so ride. I made the trip so often that I could close my eyes and predict every twist and turn of the dirt road. A good deal of the trip was made in second gear as the vehicle labored up the hill, particularly the last one, our destination. During the rainy season (wintertime) it was especially tough to drive on the often-muddy road. The last bit of road up to the top of Radar Hill was along a steep, twisting gravel roadway requiring first gear for most of it. There was a guard shack manned by military police (MPs) twenty-four hours a day near the top and that's where the DF (Direction Finder) operator got off. His post had to be the loneliest on the island. There were times when we had to do duty at the guard shack too, in the absence of the MPs, and I was no exception. It was another lonely place to be assigned to.

Once at the post office waiting for the transportation to fetch us, I was on the other side of a low stone wall in conversation with someone. When the truck came I turned and jumped over the wall and lit on a stone on the other side, falling and badly spraining my left ankle. It took weeks to heal and has left me with a reminder of Okinawa ever since.

I walked down to the DF facility one day in a free hour to spend an interlude with the operator, who was a friend and barracks mate. On the way back along the brush-lined road I heard a snort behind me and turned to see a wild boar poised to attack. It scared me half to death and I took off running like never before. I was always fearful afterwards on that road. The mongoose was another animal we saw occasionally and was best left alone. It was said they were brought from India years before to counter an invasion of rats. Snakes were also on their menu. It was rare to see a bird on the island.

On some days an F-80 would be up with the pilot getting in his required number of flying hours for the month. Occasionally one would call us asking for a "wheel check," which meant they wanted to buzz (fly low over) the hill, a maneuver decidedly frowned upon by the brass. If the "wheels" (officialdom) were "up," permission was refused but if there were no big shots around (wheels down) we would give them clearance for the low pass. Then those of us who could would hurry outside to watch the jet scream overhead only yards above us with a tremendous roar.

I recall a scandal involving the local camp fire department. The chief, a civilian, was arrested along with at least one enlisted man that was assigned there. Through whispered rumors we heard it had to do with homosexuality, a hush-hush topic those days. Another affair of the same sort at another time involved the local medics. A totally male atmosphere prevailed in the camp and work site with sex only something you talked about. Most of it was boasting by individuals about the dubious conquests that they had made somewhere. With the exception of the native

girls on the serving line in the mess hall (with whom we sometimes bantered), USO women and nurses (if you were sent to hospital), we had no contact whatsoever with a female.



HAPPY HOUR

I was ordered to Tachikawa air base at Tokyo in June 1948 to attend a two-week Information Center Operator course (MOS 510) which was held at another nearby air base called Johnson. It was a specialty I had been doing since joining the squadron the proceeding February and indeed turned out to be the only formal training I ever got during my four-year enlistment. The five-hour flight from Naha to Tachikawa was in a windowless twin-engine C-46 Curtiss Commando with facing bucket seats along the interior of the fuselage. I managed to stretch the two weeks into three and see some of the sights, such as they were, around Tokyo, and the city itself.

The war had ended two years and ten months before and Tokyo still had the scars from the countless bombs that had been dropped from the B-29s. A lot of the city had already been rebuilt but most of the construction was rather flimsy and temporary. Tokyo Station was missing a roof. The men in the streets still wore army uniforms or parts of uniforms and there was little of the bustle seen today. General Douglas MacArthur's headquarters was in the Daichi Building and always drew a crowd when he either arrived or departed. I joined the crowd once to watch the Old Soldier enter the building.

From Johnson Air Base we could take a Tobu Tojyo line train into Ikebukuro and then transfer to the circle line that went around the city. Every train had a white-banded car at the rear for occupation personnel and was free. Once I went AWOL with another airman in mid-week to see some girls in town. When we returned on the train early in the morning in time for class we went a station beyond Johnson, got off, and went over a fence to get back onto the base. Japanese security police employed by the base patrolling the perimeter greeted us but let us through after we gave them cigarettes.

The other airman and I picked up girls at the roofless Tokyo station, the place for such opportunities, and would stay with them somewhere in the city. The first one I picked up was named Michiko, a not very pretty woman, and one who had been badly burned on her lower extremities during one of the fire bomb raids. The second was Homiko, perhaps 15 (I was all of 17), with whom I spent a weekend at her one-room dwelling in a village outside Tokyo. The night there found us on a tatami (straw) mat bed alongside her family, that is her father, mother, and four siblings. The other airman and his girl were with us there as well. We were not supposed to be there at all and moreover it was strictly forbidden to eat food prepared by

Japanese because of the severe food shortage at that time in the civilian population. But we were young, adventurous and unconcerned.

I bought a ticket to a girlie show from a sergeant on the base one time and was taken by bus to some sort of club where two girls from behind a netting performed a strip-tease while Japanese mood music played. There were a couple of drinks, too, as part of a package-like deal. The sergeant had led us to believe it was against the law to do any-thing like this and the whole thing, I noticed, was done in a very furtive manner. He undoubtedly made money from his shady little enterprise.

On the circle line train one day we met an Australian woman who had lived in Japan during the war and had been married to a Japanese. She invited us to her home in Sugamo in Tokyo, which was just outside Sugamo prison where Ex-Premier Hideki Tojo had been incarcerated and subsequently hanged for war crimes. There we sat and had tea while she related her story to us. Things went well until she told us she had murdered her husband by stabbing him to death with a knife and that sort of cooled us toward anything further to do with her. We made excuses as soon as possible and went on our way.

The other airman (also from Okinawa) and I were inseparable during our time in Tokyo and attended the same school. After our return to Okinawa he came down with the clap (Gonorrhea) and was banished to the clap shack until he was cured. Our friendship waned after that, though, for he wasn't able to forgive me for not sharing the same fate.

The flight back to Naha was in another C-46 from Tachikawa. We took off in good weather but were soon in an appalling storm, the plane bouncing all over the sky in heavy rain. Most of us, if not everyone, soon became violently sick. In almost exactly five hours we landed and I was never so happy in my life but when I stepped off the plane I knew we were not at Naha. Nothing was even vaguely familiar so I waited at the door for the crew to appear. We had seen nothing of them since taking off earlier, they undoubtedly very busy keeping the plane in the air. When the captain finally came out I asked him where we were and he replied we were at Itazuki air base outside Fukuoka on Kyushu Island in southern Japan. Due to the weather he had had to go to Seoul, Korea to try to land but the weather there turned bad and forced him back to Itazuki, which had been closed earlier due to weather. There wasn't much fuel left, he added, for any options.

We were given a bed and meal tickets and spent the night at Itazuki. The next morning on the way to breakfast I ran into a fellow airman who had been in the same flight as me in training at Lackland seven months previous. He was as surprised to see me as I was to see him. The flight that day to Okinawa took three hours through a cloudless sky, the storm having moved off. Thirty-four years later I was to return to Fukuoka to teach English.

Later, back on Okinawa, I went with a swimming party organized by the USO to the beach at Yontan. We were to use an amphibious vehicle called a "duck" as a platform from which to swim because the beach there was still pretty much littered with the debris from the invasion. A coral reef also pre-cluded any notion of going into the water at the beach. The duck took us out into the East China Sea beyond the reef into the swells and deep water where a swim was possible. Just beyond the reef two or three fellows leaped into the sea while the duck was still moving, leaving them splashing in the wake. A half-minute later it stopped, the engine shut down, and I went to the edge of the deck and dove into the water. It was my first time to swim in an ocean.



(Left: At home) But as my body was committed to the water I heard screams for help from those who had earlier jumped off. The sudden silence from being submerged cut the sound off but I quickly fought my way back to the surface to climb back on the duck but it was starting its engine and moving with increasing speed away from me. I tried to grab on the now moving duck but I couldn't catch hold of anything. Since all attention was directed to the guys in trouble I was left on my own treading water in the deep sea. Fear and panic rose up within me but I pushed it back and began dog paddling my way to the duck. Images of sharks and octopus rising through the water below entered my mind and the realization of where I was made me acutely aware of my situation.

Bobbing like a cork in the swells I tediously dog paddled my way toward the now far away duck. My eyes stung from the salt and my arms grew heavier but I couldn't, I wouldn't, call out. Nobody would have heard me anyway and by calling out I realized I would have let loose the panic growing within me. The distance lessened and then, when I knew I was going to make it, I felt renewed strength and surged through those last few yards. With a desperate lunge I grabbed hold a ring of some sort on the duck and felt my body go immediately slack from relief. I was safe. I climbed up onto the deck and lay quietly, breathing hard and thanking my lucky stars for being alive. I told nobody of my ordeal and after all was again back to normal I dove off the duck for another swim.

Walter James Murray

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Correspondence

From: Lyle "Mike" McMichael, November 27, 2000 (via e-mail)

To : WJM

Hi—nice to hear from you. Yes, you no doubt vectored me around out there in the ink as I did not leave the Island until mid-48. Never flew the [P-] 61 again as I think they all hit the junk pile, but did get to fly on most of the follow-on birds as I stayed on active duty for another 24 years. Have never made one of the reunions due to medical, but have hopes for the future. Like you I also think [Ray] Walker has done a great job of getting the Okinawa gang together. Thanks for the note—Lyle 'Mike' McMichael.

From: WJM, November 27, 2000

To : Lyle 'Mike' McMichael (see above)

Hi

I was assigned to the 623 AC&W Sq. shortly after my arrival on Okinawa in January 1948, as a basic airman. I very soon became a radar operator on Radar Hill, just north of Kadena. Our call sign was "Walter Control." I ran many an intercept during the 15 months I worked up there, directing F-80s in daylight and P-61 "Black Widows" at night. What a pleasure to be writing to a man after all these years who was in one of those night fighters! As a 17-year-old boy I had a lot of fun on Okinawa and adventure, too. I attended the reunion at Dayton and had a fine time there. Ray Walker's a great guy. There was even a P-61 on view in the air museum! Jim Murray, Saint Paul

Response from Mike:

Dated Friday, December 01, 2000 (via e-mail)

Jim---no big tales about my 61 days. As engineering officer for the Sq. I also had to take my turn on alert, but also had to test fly the birds when it was called for. I was a pilot--in fact you got me trying to remember who my RO was. I used to feel sorry for him, sitting in the rear of that bird with me falling asleep up front and the bird would drop off on one wing and I would wake up with a jump and sweat---thank god the 61 was a very stable aircraft. Keeping the birds in the air was tough as everything was going to Europe under the Marshall Plan and many times I gave natives cigarettes to go up in the hills and get me parts off crashed aircraft. After months operating this way I grounded all of the 61s and that brought the #1 commander out of his office in Haw. Chewed and cussed me out, but saw our problem and a few weeks later after that I started to get some people and parts. The day I left they gave me a fly over with 12 birds out of our 14 that we had in the Sq. so we came up in the world as when I took over the job we were lucky to have one birds in flight status. I had an assistant Eng. Officer that we took turns testing the birds (we also had a couple Douglas A26s) by the name Rickey that spun in on one test flight. He and the RO were both killed. That was the only loss of crew during my tour. My investigation of the crash, it looked like he lost flight control when one of the wing spoilers jammed up---the 61 had wing spoiler rather than ailerons. ---I shot my wad---mike

From Stephen Rabson, dated December 01, 2000:

Dear Mr. Murray:

Thank you very much for sending these essays. The first one confirms that after W.W.II Okinawa became a kind of low-priority dumping ground for the military where they could send defective equipment and "problem" personnel from other commands, and divert needed there to mainland Japan and, as this account indicates, to Europe. Some of this is explained in a book called Okinawa: A Tiger by the Tail by M.D. Morris (Hawthorn Press, New York, 1968), Best wishes, and please keep me posted with anything else you get. I wonder if anyone remembers that in 1946 the military set up a kind of "comfort station" of regulated prostitution with drinks sold and health check-ups provided until the chaplains put the nix on it. (This from Morris' s book.) (Signed) Steve

Addendum

Like everyone else, I had bought gifts to take home after my tour of duty. Among the gifts was a pair of silk pajamas for my younger sister who had been taken to a sanatorium in northern Minnesota because she had tuberculosis. I put the items in a B-4 bag, a canvas bag that I still have, one that had been decorated by an Okinawan artist. When I boarded ship for my return to the states, I stored the bag where I was told, adding it to a pile of similar baggage in the same

area in which we slept. On my arrival at San Francisco, when I picked it up, I immediately realized it was considerably lighter in weight. When I was later able to open it, it was with a heavy heart that I discovered it' d been ransacked and I had lost all the presents I had bought in Asia to take home. WJM

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In 1948 a new commander, a general, was assigned to Okinawa and all military personal were ordered out for a dress parade to welcome him. It was to be the first time since basic training that I would be required to march in formation. The parade was held somewhere south of Kadena on a field where we were formed into flight formations, that is three flights together, twelve abreast. A flight would normally have between 50 and 60 men. There were a number of such formations, at least a dozen, but I don' t recall how many.

I found myself in the front row of mine and, as the tallest, wound up on the extreme right, behind the right guard. I would be for me the first time ever at the pivot position, even though I had been the tallest in my flight in basic training. I was never more conscious of where I was and fought down anxiety. A military band struck up a Sousa march and we paraded splendidly, I thought, for the general. It was exhilarating to be marching again and I pulled off my role without a hitch. Alas, it was to be the last time I marched as a soldier, even though I spent two more years in the military after Okinawa. WJM

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In the mid 1950s, working in the flight dispatch office for Northwest Airlines at the Twin City (MSP) airport, I was temporarily assigned to the Seattle office as sickness and vacations had left them shorthanded. One of the dispatchers there had flown co-pilot on B-29 bombers during the war a few years before. He told me he was in the last wave of planes dropping incineraries on Tokyo during a nighttime firebomb raid in March of 1945. The first wave had flown high with the succeeding waves progressively lower until his wave approached the city at a mere five thousand feet. They looked for dark areas into which to drop their bombs as the airplane was tossing violently in the updrafts caused by the fires below. Over the city the stench of burning bodies filled the plane and the crew, overcome and hanging on for dear life, vomited uncontrollably throughout the run. I tell this only in respect to the girl Michiko (p. 11) who had suffered serious burns on her body from such a raid. It may well be I had met one of the airmen who flew above her in a bomber that fiery night. WJM

Two e-mails from Basil Stephanoff:

I' ve read a lot of books in my day and I would have to rate your story right up there with the best of them! I' m glad I asked you to send it. Your memory is excellent. There have been a lot of changes from the time you were there to when I came along in ' 55. The Quonsets were more open bay in my day with one NCO room at the far end of the BAQ. Another Quonset behind the main BAQs became to latrine where one could shower or use the toilet. The roads were improved and during the rainy season the transport up the hill would occasionally slip and slide but we always made it up or down the hill. I don' t recall any other buildings atop the hill other than the radar building but I could be wrong.

My memory of my time in the AF has done a pretty good job of eluding me. While at Bisha Cawa There was an army outfit across from us, 808th Engineer Battalion. Years later I ran across an ex-soldier who was stationed there. He had pictures of the area and the 623rd was no more. It had been leveled and the earth moved around. I don' t know if anyone who ever returned to Oki ever mentioned looking for the old place. As for the "radar hill" I don' t have any idea what became of it. When Bisha Cawa closed down I went with the new site to Yoza Dake and was

there only about a month and rotated back to the U.S. You mentioned working seven-hour shifts – we worked eight-hour shifts – 8 to 4, 4 to midnight and midnight to 8. The only control of aircraft and intercepts were done by officers who were trained back in the states, the lowest rank being 2nd Lt. The highest ranking officer that I can recall on the hill was a 1st Lt. or Capt. I was an A 2/c when I went over and came back an A 1/c and that's what I got out as. The barracks floors were still wooden and we were allowed to have house maids as we called them to help keep the BAQ clean. There were one or two girls to a BAQ and we also had a houseboy who shined our shoes. The bunks still had mosquito netting and we sprayed around the bed before putting the netting down for the night. Sometimes you would hear the mosquitoes buzzing around and would wonder if they were inside the netting or not. One of the enterprising GIs (Chris) had an Okinawan girl friend and he opened a laundry business and his girl friend (called a "honey") did our laundry. The food was still served in the mess hall by the Okinawans. Watching the radar scope was still for one hour on and one or two hours off. The positions manned in '55 were a scope operator, recorder (wrote down the moves of the targets on a log) and the plotting board. There were two positions on what was called a "dais" – an M.I. (Movements Identification or something like that) and another I think called "Control Tech", the latter assisting the controller and scrambling any aircraft as directed by the OIC on the dais. I believe they may have been two scopes on the dais to run intercepts but couldn't say for certain as there was always two officers there on duty. Going back to the Quonsets I forgot to ask you if you had a box next to your bunk with a 40 W bulb burning constantly to keep your clothing from getting mildew. I can see where you got your experience from controlling aircraft on Oki and then having the good fortune to get into Approach Control when you returned stateside. By the way, I flew over and came back on ship and it took us eighteen days. We came a northern route with only one stop and that was at Yokohama and into Seattle. I sent a photo of the ship to the 623rd web page and it was filed under the Yozadake photos as a "cruise ship" I think. I enjoyed crossing the Pacific by ship and had a lot of fun running around on it. The ship was the U.S.S. General Mann. It served during WW II. The island was pretty well cleaned up when I got there as I never saw any wreckage of equipment as you did. If Ray [Walker] has a copy of your story it wouldn't be a bad idea to put it on line for others to read. From the time you were there through the time I was there and beyond there is a lot of interesting history for us younger guys to know what it was like in the beginning. Thanks for sending your story. [signed] Basil.

P.S. The outdoor movie theater was still there – never saw a USO show while on the "rock".

[From an E-mail dated November 17, 2001 & retyped in its entirety by WJM]

Second e-mail from Basil Stephanoff:

I enjoyed walking through your past years in the AF. It was interesting to note that when you enlisted you were in the Army Air Force and in a short period of time you were now in the USAF. A few years after WW II was over you still were able to see the damage the war had done. I think there may have been one ship that was still laying off shore on the eastern side of the island. I don't recall if it was supposed to be Japanese or American. The burial sites are something else. I never went into any but had taken a few photos of them. One of the vets wrote about being at Motobu on the "Forum" and sleeping in tents. I don't recall if that would have been around your time or not. I found that interesting. I wonder how many guys know what an MOS was. I was lucky to have had an older brother in the AF around the time you were in and had a chance to learn something about the old and new. I can still picture the uniform with the polished brass, Army stripes and insignia and the shoulder patches. The one-piece fatigues was another item. A lot of businesses popped up from the time you were there. The military became more lenient and in your off-duty time you could go practically where you pleased. A lot of taxis and motor scooters on the roads. One of our crew even had a car and drove it up to the hill several times. The typhoon problem was about the same – batten down everything and get a

couple of decks of cards to play pinochle (double deck pinochle), lots of booze, snacks and batteries for radios and flashlights. I lucked out with the typhoons as there were never any that tore up Bisha Gawa very bad. Most of the guys looked forward to having them come. Party time I guess :0) The box I mentioned with the 40 W bulb contained our dress blues and khakis and shoes. If these items were left out overnight or two they would get a green looking fungus (mildew) growing on them. I don't recall Yozadake having the boxes but I never bothered to unpack my duffel bag when I got there since I was rotating back in a short time. I had forgotten the saying you mentioned (aah samio oh) something like that and got a chuckle out of it. It will be interesting to know what Ray thinks of the idea of placing your story on the web page. One of the guys I met on another web page wrote an email to me and then posted it on the web. His telling of returning to the site we had once been at made for some excellent reading. Things like this make the web page of the organization interesting and it helps jog ones memory.
[signed] Basil [From an email dated November 17, 2001 & retyped in its entirety by WJM.]

E-mail correspondence entered on the 623rd web site:

When I [Jim Murray] enlisted in the military in August 1947, it was segregated. White were here and blacks (Negroes or colored then) were over there. The following year, 1948, President Truman desegregated the military but until I was discharged in August 1951 I never worked with a black man, never even saw one as a matter of fact. Today, Martin Luther King Day [February 20, 2003], it's a different military and I applaud the change. What has been your experience? Jim Murray

From Richard van Meter, Sr., vanrch@netscape.net January 25, 2003, Bravenet Web Services
Hi Jim Murray, you just missed it, I forgot when you came home but in June of 49 three black men were moved into our Quonset, one was named Charles Osborn from Kansas City Kansas he became a good friend the other two I did not know well but that was the time it all came about, we had some men who talked about blacks in a bad way but after they moved in I never heard another word, we all got along well and did our job, Jim you might remember I came home in September of 49 at least was processing to come home and was called to the orderly room and given a bar with three ribbons on it to wear on our uniform, I know one was the Army of Occupation ribbon but for the life of me can not remember what the other two were and they don't show up on my papers [Typed as in original, WJM]

Reply from Jim Murray:

Hi Richard Van Meter, Sr! For those interested in the history of the 623rd, your contribution regarding the first black airmen to join is appreciated. I left on the General Pope in the second week of May 1949; the replacements may well have been incoming on the Pope and sent to the 623rd, like me, after processing in Naha. I, too, was awarded the Occupation medal, the only medal I ever got, and I don't recall it ever being pinned on me. But my old grey matter, she ain't what she used to be! Jim

This from 623rd web site dated March 7, 2003 from one who didn't identify himself:
"About the end of 1949 and the beginning of 1950 some members of the squadron were involved in moving to the small islands around the chain and trying to establish a submarine spotter station. I remember going to one little island and we were run off by coral snakes." See near bottom page 6 from "One early morning..." Did I do that?

Message put on 623rd web site by WJM May 2003 followed by reply:

During the time I was on Okinawa there was a complete lack of public transportation, like busses or taxis. The war had been over three years, leaving the island in ruins. Having a private vehicle, even a motor scooter, was unheard of and any wheeled travel was at the mercy of the motor pool. There were no gas stations, not to mention car dealers. No doubt the victory of the Chinese communists on the mainland in the fall of 1949 and later, in June 1950, the beginning of the Korean War, brought on an improvement in the economy and lifestyle on the island, particularly for the Okinawans themselves. Who has memories of the changes back then?

Reply from Ted N. Branson dated 05-5-03 who served on Okinawa 1949-51:

I had spent the night in the village (can't remember the name) the day before June 1950 and walking up the main gate couldn't figure way [sic] the AP had a steel Helmet. The Korean war had started. Well the gist of my tale is when Uncle Sam found out how Okinawa was important to this (police action) they started pouring money into the island. In the Air Police section, (which I was in) they tore out the guts of our Quanset huts and put in two person rooms. At the Kadena Air Field, they started putting up brick barracks. Put in a indoor theater (poor old Comet hillside). They just made all kinds of improvements. Okinawa is the only island I was ever on that you could be up to your a-- in mud and still freeze in the winter months. [Typed as written. WJM.] 9,754