

# **My Days at Bishigawa, Okinawa**

## **From Letters by Bill D. Choate**

*(Assembled and Edited by Dave Law)*

I was recently thinking about my first Army assignment after Basic training and about being a young 18-year-old kid overseas. This is some of what I remember, but I am relying on a 58-year-old memory in recounting my year on Okinawa. Its amazing how stupid you can be when you are 18 and think you know it all. I enlisted in the Army Air Corp for an 18-month tour as soon as I turned 18. In and out and go about my life, was my thought at the time. When you first joined the Army, you took all the aptitude tests and they scheduled you for a school when you finished basic training. They had me scheduled to go to cryptology school, but just before we finished basic, they came out with a new rule. If you enlisted for anything less than 3 years - no school! If I hadn't been so stupid, I'd have extended my enlistment for the school, but I didn't know I could do that. So I left Basic for duty unknown. It apparently didn't matter that during High School, before going in, I had taken an 18-month aircraft mechanics course. I had always wanted to be a pilot, but wearing glasses, I couldn't pass the physical. I figured that if I couldn't fly 'em, I'd work on 'em.

I enlisted in early 1946 and, after Basic Training, was shipped directly overseas to the Far East. I arrived at Okinawa the 24<sup>th</sup> of April 1946 on the USS Sedalia, a Merchant Marine bucket of bolts. That was less than a year after the terrible battle to seize the Island from Japan. Naha Port was full of sunken ships, so we sailed into Buckner Bay on the east side of the Island. We off-loaded the ship via rope ladders onto landing craft, which took us ashore. We were then trucked down to an area that had been scraped out of a clearing very near what was called "Suicide Cliff", south of Naha.

Given 4 man tents and folding cots, we remained there for two weeks while awaiting orders to our assigned units. We had to dig trenches around our tents to keep the rainwater from flowing through them. In the process, we dug up several dead Japs. We used a skull on a wood crate inside our tent to hold a candle, the only light we had at night. The only time in 22 years in the Air Force that I was shot at occurred while walking the perimeter of our camp on guard duty one night. I had been issued a carbine, but no ammo! There were still many Japs loose on Okinawa when we arrived, but most were on the northern tip of the Island. After I was shot at, we were issued ammo.

I got my assignment to the 305<sup>th</sup> Flight Control Squadron, which was located about midway up the Island at Camp Bishigawa. The 301<sup>st</sup> Fighter Wing was also located there. (*Ed: As part of the 301<sup>st</sup> Fighter Wing, the 305<sup>th</sup> FCS was an Army Air Corp radar unit*) The Camp was located not too far from a traffic circle on the main north-south roadway. I remember the rain and the red mud. The traffic circle was called Kadena Circle and it was just a circle with one MP shack. After passing it, we headed north and immediately crossed a Bailey Bridge over a river where we turned right and went up the hill for about a mile and Lo! More tents!

*(Ed: Camp Bishigawa (Later Bishagawa) was named for the river that flowed along the south side of it. The river emptied into the East China Sea a mile or so to the west. The*

*camp was located on a plain located between the Bishigawa and another stream which joined the Bishigawa near the Bailey Bridges.)*

Strange to find out the name of that river after all these years. This river is where we got all our water. All the time I was there, we drank brown water, half-and-half with chlorine. The only way we could stand to drink it was to hold our noses. It was easier when it was very cold, but there were no refrigerators. I don't think I ever saw anything cold except the beer and coke in the Camp beer garden, when they finally got it opened.

At Bishigawa, we lived in tents with wood floors until we got Quonset huts built about 2 months later. My hut backed up on a cliff overlooking the river. We were there a month before we got a shower, and then only because we built our own (cold water only!). Our electric supply for our huts was a small generator that you could put in the back of a weapons carrier or jeep. It was always running out of fuel.

I found an old washing machine tub and rotor, so I made a washing machine out of it. I mounted it on one end of a sheet of plywood, put a jeep transmission and an electric motor on the other end and, using parts I made on the motor pool lathe, got it to work.

We were all raw recruits and there were a bunch of 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt.'s there who mostly flew P-47's out of Yontan Airfield. When my group arrived, they lined us up and, going down the line, said; " You are a scope dope, you are a traffic controller, you are a radar mechanic, etc." With no training at all! I immediately became an Air Traffic Controller! I remained one for about a month, working up on Radar Hill (*Ed: Yontan Mountain*). Later, the C.O. called me in and asked if I'd like to take over the maintenance of the Squadron's L-5 at Yontan Airfield. The L-5 was a two place Stinson with a 165hp engine that the unit kept for all the 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt.'s to get their required 4 hours flying time each month. Naturally I jumped on it.

Yontan Airfield was a few miles north west of the Camp. Our L-5, and another unit's L-4 that was maintained by a T/Sgt., were kept on the opposite side of the runway from the hangers. Except for the Control Tower, we were alone over there.

Every morning I'd check a jeep out of the Motor Pool, drive out to Yontan Airfield and do a daily check on the L-5 and any necessary work. If it was nice, or if I was expecting some Lieutenant to be flying, I'd stick around and hope to get an invitation to go flying. Flying around the Island, I'd see all these sunken ships very near the surface. My first thought was that they were Jap ships sunk during the taking of Okinawa. Turned out to be our ships that were sunk by the Kamikaze fighters or during the bad typhoon in Oct 1945. These pilots taught me how to fly, but would not let me takeoff or land. I'd fly the L-5 while they took pictures or just did some sight seeing.

If it was raining they wouldn't be flying the L-5, so after checks and maintenance, I had the rest of the day off. I'd take the jeep and go exploring, usually stopping by the tent to pick up a friend. Well, the Adjutant (1<sup>st</sup> Lt.) found out that I had all this spare time and wanted to assign me to another job, in addition to the L-5. Major Fisher, the CO, vetoed that idea and the Adjutant was forever pissed at me. He did everything he could to make it miserable for me! I had worked on the L-5 for about 6 months when Lt. Stoop made a very hard landing one day and busted a couple of stringers. The plane was condemned and I was out of a

job!

The Adjutant now had his chance! He put me on guard duty (6 on 24 off) on Radar Hill. My guard shack was about 100 yards down a rather sharp incline below the radar buildings, which were also Quonset huts. The roads were all (*crushed*) coral. It was a “no mind job” and I hated it, especially the midnight to 6 AM shift. It was hard to keep awake and there were bats flying all over the place. I’d just sit there in the dark (no electricity) on the stool with my carbine between my legs and stay awake. When I talked to the Adjutant about getting back into radar, I found out what his bitch was with me. He said, “No”, I’d just get you trained again and then you’d get transferred to another job. Sorry, you are stuck here as a guard until you leave!”

Unless I recognized them, I had to stop everyone and check their ID. Now, no one wanted to come to a full stop because going up that steep hill on the coral road made it hard to get started again. If I recognized them, I could just wave them through. I finally got to know everyone who came through, but the mind is a funny thing. For some reason I could never recognize the Adjutant, or even remember his name, until he came to a full stop. The Adjutant complained several times about my not recognizing him. “You know who I am - just wave me through!” “Sorry Sir! I have to check your ID if I don’t recognize you and, for some reason, I can’t be sure it’s you until you come to a full stop.” Within two weeks I was pulled off guard duty and reassigned to the Motor Pool.

It was sometime around the middle of July 1946 when the 305<sup>th</sup> Fighter (*sic*) Control Squadron became the 623<sup>rd</sup> Aircraft Control and Warning Squadron. (*Ed: The 305<sup>th</sup> Flight Control Squadron became the 623<sup>rd</sup> Aircraft Control and Warning Squadron on July 2, 1946.*) Sorry, but I can’t tell you much about the 305<sup>th</sup>. I don’t know why I even remember the designation. I was 18 years old and wondering what in the hell I was doing in this mud hole. The historical aspects of the unit never entered my mind.

When we were assigned from the tents to the Quonset huts, our bunks were the regular GI folding cots with hanging mosquito nets. After we’d been there about 6 months, and I’d learned how to scrounge, I located a couple of hospital beds (almost size) at the Naval Area. I brought them back and hid them near the huts.

A buddy, Lloyd Leabo, was always complaining about the cots. He was on duty at the time, so I pulled everything off his bunk and cut away all the canvas. Then, criss-crossing it with string, I put his bunk back together. He was in the habit of coming in from work and plopping down hard on his bunk. He was 6’3” and weighed about 220 pounds. He came in and hit the sack and went all the way through. He was pissed! Lloyd jumped on my bunk and split it out completely. He was about to start on me until I took him out and showed him our new bunks. So, someone inherited a couple of good bunks after we left.

Some other things about Bishigawa. We had a baseball diamond graded out on a lower plane than our huts. Not too far from the Mess Hall, we had a Red Cross Club, called the Buzz-In Club. Two Red Cross women ran it. They were the only white women I saw while I was there. Behind the club were two trailers where we could develop and print our own film. We got paid in Script Yen - 15 Yen to the Dollar. The only place we had to spend any money was a Quonset hut PX. Everything was on one side and you went through in a line along the other side and pointed out what you wanted. Open only from Noon to 1 PM, you

could get stale chocolate bars, cigarettes (5 Yen a carton) and limited other choices. We had ration cards for cigarettes, limit one carton per week. I didn't smoke at the time, so towards the end of the month I'd buy a couple of cartons of cigarettes for 5 Yen each (33 Cents) and sell them to the Okinawans at a Dollar a carton. Then I'd buy some more, etc. and I'd have enough to get in a penny-ante poker game. I usually won enough to keep me going until payday.

There was a swimming hole at the river where we used to go, but I can't remember just where it was located. There were three guys that got polio and one died. His name was Captain Force. We quit using the swimming hole after that. We had a beach on the Pacific side of the Island that was called Ishikawa, if I am spelling it right. I never saw the name in writing. (*Ed: You are correct*) It was the Enlisted beach. The Officer's beach was further down and I don't remember what it was called.

We had a Buck Sergeant and some other NCO's in the hut next mine. On payday night they would go to the beer garden to buy several cases of beer and would then proceed to hang one on. St Hall had a Thompson submachine gun hidden in the wall between the outside metal and the inside liner of his Quonset. When he got drunk, he'd take the Thompson out to the cliff overlooking the river and cut loose with a full magazine. Then he would run and hide the gun before the 1<sup>st</sup> Sgt. showed up. We put up with that for a couple of months. Then one night he got drunker than usual and lined us all up outside the Quonsets and began calling us a bunch of "slanty eyed Japs", saying he was going to shoot us all. He was crying all the while. He was 4 or 5 years older than the rest of us and had been in combat through several Island campaigns. We finally talked him out of shooting and the next day we found his Thompson, disassembled it, and threw it over the cliff into the river. It is probably still there. Hall was shipped out shortly after that episode. He was a nice guy when he was sober!

An interesting event happened one Monday morning while I was still working on the Stinson airplane. A staff car pulled up to the L-5 with a Captain driving. There was a short stocky officer in the back seat who got out and asked me if I did all the work on the plane. I couldn't see any insignia to tell me his rank. He had me do a "walk around" with him, checking the prop and the leading edges of the wing. He kept asking me if this dent and that dent, etc. was there last week. I told him that everything appeared to be the same as when I started working on the plane 3 or 4 months before. The plane had a logbook and everyone was supposed to check the log to find out if it was ready to fly before using it. After flying, they had to enter their name, date, time and time in the air into the log. I had grounded the plane over the weekend because it was due a complete inspection. He asked me who flew the plane Saturday afternoon. I told him that, as far as I knew, no one had flown it, because I had grounded it and there was no entry. He thanked me and left. I don't think I saluted him. When he was gone, the T/Sgt. that maintained the L-4 near me, came over and asked if I knew who that officer was. When I told him, "No", he said that he was General Whitehead, Commanding General of the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force, head of all Army Air Corps on the Island!

Talking later with some Lieutenants who came out to fly, I found out what had happened. Gen. Whitehead's family had not yet arrived, but his family quarters were nearly completed.

On Saturday afternoons, he would sit on his new back porch flying a box kite. It seems that on Friday night, some of the officers at the Officer's Club got to talking about the box

kite. On a bet, Lt. Stoop (the same Lt. Stoop that would wreck my airplane and put me out of a job) said that he would knock the kite out of the sky. There were four L-5 Sentinels on the Island. There were three at Kadena AB and there was mine was at Yontan. Lt. Stoop did use my L-5 and, needless to say, did not make an entry in the logbook. As far as I know, Gen. Whitehead never found out who knocked his box kite out of the sky - but he was pissed!

Anyway, the Motor Pool assignment wasn't bad. I did not have an Air Corp career in mind, so I didn't mind the Motor Pool for the rest of my tour. I ran the electrical department with an assistant to help me. I was more or less my own boss as long as I kept the vehicles running. The workweek everywhere was 5 days a week until sometime in the fifties. You either stood inspection on Saturday morning or you worked your job. On Saturdays, come noon, I'd make sure there was a usable jeep in my department that would not run because of a missing rotor in the distributor. After lunch I'd stop by the Motor Pool, replace the rotor and drive by our hut to pick up a couple of buddies. We'd spend the rest of the day boon docking, exploring caves or any other place we found interesting. Never did get caught at it.

I would always take the test drives up toward radar hill. There was a narrow road about a mile up that turned off to the left, went through an old Jap emplacement, and came back to the Camp near the Motor Pool. One day I wrecked a jeep up there on a test drive. I just rolled it over. I walked back to the Motor Pool, thinking I would just leave it there, because there was talk about making you pay for a jeep if you wrecked it. The only damage it did to the jeep was to break off the windshield. It was the only jeep in the Motor Pool that had a good windshield. I changed my mind and got the guy that drove the wrecker to go with me and we went back to the site. The jeep was upside down. We turned it onto its wheels, started it up and it smoked like hell. The smoke cleared up, so I drove back to the Motor pool, and cleaned all the oil off the hood and the engine. I never said a word except to a couple of buddies - everything back to normal.

One day, Leabo and I were on the beach and there was a derelict LST about 150 (yd/ft?) off the beach and we decided that we'd swim out to it. I don't know if it was left over from the '45 landings or washed up by the bad typhoon in Oct '45. Anyway, we stripped down completely bare, as there was no one in sight, and started out. The water was so shallow that by the time we got to the ship, we were only knee deep in the water. We climbed aboard and started looking through the ship. Nothing there. When we got ready to leave, we looked back at the beach and there must have been 30 men, women and children where we'd left our clothing. We were bare-ass naked so we waited. After about 30 minutes, they still hadn't left so we did the only thing that we could. We waded back as if they didn't exist, put on our clothes and walked away. Not a word from anyone.

Once we found a stack of P-38 drop tanks, so we took one, split it in half down the center, and widened it. We found a little horizontal 4 cylinder engine (like a VW, except smaller), found a prop somewhere and we made us a boat. When the tide was in the river was pretty wide below the Bailey Bridge. We'd take a box of hand grenades, go to the middle of the river and pull the pin and toss the grenade into the river. Then we would scoop up the fish. All kinds of fish. Some blowfish, one very strange, about 15 inches long and had upper and lower teeth just like a human. (*Ed: Possibly a Parrot or Triggerfish*) When we had enough, we'd take the edible fish back to the Squadron area and have a fish fry for

ourselves and anyone else that wanted to participate.

A couple of other guys built a boat and went to sea. The tide came in (?) while they were out (maybe a mile out) and they got stranded on a reef. Had to be rescued by Air/Sea Rescue.

I only got to Ie Shima one time. Air Sea Rescue ran a bunch of us over one Sunday. The only time I came near getting seasick. We visited Ernie Pyle's monument, looked at Chocolate Drop Hill and went back to Naha. I don't remember even seeing any other people on the island.

We always had a shortage of parts, especially batteries. I had everyone on the look out for wrecked jeeps. When I heard there was one on the side of a road, I'd take off with the toolbox and strip the wreck of all usable parts. I worked in the Motor Pool until the end of my assignment on Okinawa.

Some of my friends and names that I remember were Thomas B. Harn from Tampa Florida. Tom has passed away. Harvey L. Haugrud from Barnesville, Minn. He's still there. Lloyd P. Leabo from Phoenix. Lloyd died of cancer caused by asbestos in 2002. Dean C. Wilson from Independence, KS. He never left the area, is retired and living on a farm about 30 miles from Independence. I remember a guy named Workman from Oregon. Probably the other names are deep in my memory but need some jogging to bring to the surface. Major Fisher, our CO, and Lt. Stoop, come to mind right now.

I mentioned Yontan, where I worked on the L-5. This was a Japanese Zero fighter base and we had P-47's there. There was a row of P-47's lined up near the hangers, all their props curled back. The runway was fairly short. At the end of the runway was the coral road you used going to the hangers. Then there was a deep pit where they had dug out the coral for the roads. At the far side of the pit, there was a big coral rock sticking up. If a pilot touched down too far down the runway to get stopped and went off the end of the runway and cleared the road, he had the pit in front of him and if he could avoid it, the rock on the far side. One of the pilots didn't avoid it. We had two or three of our pilots all killed in day. I'm a little fuzzy on that. One of the pilots killed in a P-47 accident was my Motor Pool Officer. The Captain that replaced him as my Motor Pool Officer was a pretty nice guy.

I was assigned to the Motor Pool about the last 3 months that I was at Bishigawa. I had several Jap prisoners working for me. The most amazing thing was, not one of them were combat soldiers that had fought the Americans! They, like all the other prisoners, were either "cooks" or "truck drivers". Years later, I heard the same story from other ex-military Japanese at Yokota AB. The Jap troops must have been well fed and had plenty of trucks to get around in! After I retired, I got to know a Jap Zero pilot, - but that is another story. I had just one Okinawan working for me in the Motor Pool. I separate the Okinawans from the Japanese. I know that the Japs looked down on the Okinawans as second class citizens, the same as a civil war white from Georgia did a black man. The Japs took anyone they could find into their Army as laborers. I asked an old Okinawan man what he was doing during the invasion, how did he avoid all the shelling? He said he spent his time in one of the tombs, reading "Gone with the Wind". I don't know if he was serious or not, but he spoke very good English.

My tour ended in March 1947. I was shipped back on another Merchant Marine ship that looked worse than the one I had arrived in. I stayed out 20 months and then re-enlisted. (Ed: By then the Army Air Corp was the United States Air Force.)

Early in 1949, I was stationed at McChord AFB, Washington. One day, when I was in the PX, I ran into that Captain that had been my last Motor Pool Officer at Bishigawa. The first thing he said to me was, "Have you wrecked any more jeeps lately?"

*Note: Bill remained in the Air Force until retirement in 1969. He is a semi-retired gunsmith living in Overgaard, Arizona (up on the Mogollon Rim). He returned to Okinawa in 1966 with the "hush hush" YF-21 program. And that too is another story! While there, he lived in an area called "Morgan Manor", which is near Kadena Circle, across the highway from his old Camp Bishigawa. Bill visited the then abandoned and vacant site of the Camp and found only remnants of foundations. By 2002 there were other structures in place at the location of the Camp, which remains part of the joint-services USAF Kadena Ammunition Storage Facility.*