RAY ANDERSON AND WORLD WAR II

World War II interrupted my college education and I enlisted in an officers V-7 Navy Training program in my senior year. After induction into service in June 1943 I was sent to a V- Navy training program at Minot state College, Minot, North Dakota for one semester after which I was transferred to a Midshipman School at Columbia University in New York City where I received my commission as Ensign USNR October 1944.

I was assigned to the amphibious forces and received orders to go to the Naval Amphibious Base in Solomons, Maryland where after training I was assigned as Executive Officer on a LCI(L) (landing craft infantry). The next assignment was to go to Orange, Texas, where our ship the LCI(M) was built. Our ship had been changed into a gunboat type with three mortars installed on the main deck and ramps on each side of the ship originally designed to land troops were removed and replaced with numerous rocket launchers.

While traveling by train with our crew through the south I was introduced to Jim Crow and racially segregated south where drinking fountains, restrooms, hotels, barbershops, restaurants and public transportation were marked either “White” or “Colored” with “Niggers didn’t vote” signs everywhere. The armed forces were almost as segregated as the south and in the Navy blacks either loaded or unloaded cargo on ships or when on a ship served as steward mates for officers. After Frank Knox became Secretary of Navy he vowed that “the Navy would remain lily-white.” It was an experience for me that I have no words to describe and sometimes I wonder if this actually was a country I was fighting for. Prior to enlisting in the Navy I was taught to respect people by their character rather than their ethnicity or color of their skin.

I recall leaving the Naval Base one afternoon with our steward mate. I was going downtown to meet several friends and he was meeting with his friends. As soon as we left the base he said, “Mr. Anderson, you can’t walk with me.” I said, “Why not?” He replied, “Sir, you don’t understand. Texas is part of a very segregated south. They won’t do anything to you but whites will beat me.” When we reached the corner he dashed to the opposite side of the street.

After assembling our crew on the LCI(M) we went through the Panama Canal, a lock canal across Panama that connects the Atlantic from Colon to the Pacific at Panama City, thus connecting the two oceans and reducing the long voyage around the Cape Horn by 7,000 miles. A French company started to build a sea level canal between the two oceans over the area. The French company failed due to the number of setbacks that included tropical diseases. The U.S. then bought the rights and holdings for $40 million dollars from the French Co. and negotiated a treaty with Columbia to build a canal. The treaty easily passed the U.S. Senate but failed in Columbia because they wanted more money. President Theodore Roosevelt exploded, saying “Those contemptible little creatures in Bogata, Columbia will thwart the progress of our great country.” The results were a revolt in 1903 in the territory that originally was part of Columbia but today is Panama. An impenetrable jungle in the southern part of Panama forced Columbia to bring troops by sea to put down the rebellion. They met units of the U.S.
Navy who threatened to blow them out of the water so they had to return to Columbia. The U.S. then immediately recognized the new country of Panama in 1904 and Panama became in effect a protectorate of the U.S. The U.S. then negotiated a treaty on our terms with their government to build a canal connecting the two oceans. The new canal was not sea level but a lock canal that has three sets of double locks with huge steel gates that swing shut to raise water levels to take ships up from the Atlantic to Gatun Lake and then two chambers with steel gates that lower ships to the Pacific. Construction started in 1904 and after ten years was completed in 1914. The U.S. also tamed a jungle and stamped out yellow fever and malaria. It was the greatest construction project the world has ever seen. Our crew was fascinated watching water levels in the locks go up from the Atlantic and then sailing 51.2 miles through a channel on Gatun Lake to the locks on the other side which lowered water levels to the Pacific Ocean.

We gave our crew liberty on both sides of the canal in Colon and Panama City. I remember trying to act as a translator between officers and beautiful women at our table in night clubs with my limited knowledge of Spanish (two years at Moorhead State College).

The basic treaty with the Republic of Panama, with annual payments, gave the U.S. exclusive control over the strip of land 10 miles wide which we operated as a “non-self-governing territory”, the same as Guam or the Virgin Islands. But over the years problems arose and Panama insisted that “sovereignty” over the Canal Zone had never been transferred to the U.S. After increasing anti-American riots resulting in many deaths we negotiated a treaty with Panama in 1979 that gradually transferred possession of the canal to Panama. They took control on December 31, 1999, and tolls for ships to go through the canal is a major source of revenue for the country.

We left Panama City and went north to San Diego where we received additional training before sailing to Pearl Harbor, a first-class naval base bear Honolulu on the island of Oahu, the third largest of the Hawaii Islands. That was the site of the Japanese surprise aircraft attack on December 7, 1941, that started the war in the Pacific. On liberty we went to the USS Arizona Memorial, the battleship that was sunk with hundreds of sailors still entombed in it. We visited Honolulu, swam in Waikiki, Honolulu’s famous ocean beach resort area, watched graceful hula hula dancers perform on the grounds of adjoining elegant Royal Hawaiian Hotel, and spent several nights in the cheaper adjoin Mauna Hotel. The engineering officer and I also rented a car to tour the island visiting famous Diamond Heads, fields of pineapple and sugarcane, and staying for several days at a resort on the other side of the island. When Zora and I visited the island years later there were scores of high-rise hotels, hordes of tourists and shops in the area that totally ruined the primitive character of Honolulu that I knew. It then resembled a Miami Beach in Florida.

Our ship then joined a huge task forces of 700 ships and for 38 days were underwater almost continuously. I can still remember the day that we left Pearl Harbor on September 11th. There was a nervous tension on our ship as we began the long sea journey to our first invasion. The ship was made ready for sea and all hands tried on their life jackets, helmets and gas masks. With painstaking care we took every precaution to see that the gas masks fit exactly. Our objective was Yap and for a week we
carefully studied all the top secret material and poured over maps, pictures, and intelligence reports until we were familiar with every part of Yap and knew our job thoroughly.

We arrived at Eniwetok in the Marshall Islands on 25th of September, refueled, took on water and other provisions. The next day we pulled out and started on a southerly course. No one could understand why we were on this course. It would never take us to Yap. Had our objective been changed? All over the ship the scuttlebutt was that our objective had been changed and that we would invade the Philippine Islands instead. Upon our arrival in Manus in the Admiralty Islands our suspicions were confirmed. Our new objective was Leyte in the Philippine Islands.

The only war news that we received en route to the P.I.’s was that 1000 planes from Admiral Halsey’s task force had raided Formosa. This would reduce the Jap’s capacity to resist our seizure of Leyte. Days later as we lay at anchor in San Pedro we listened to Tokyo Rose who claimed that the Japs had sunk 8 battleships, 7 carriers and downed 800 planes.

On October 19th we remained at our battle stations all day long and went to condition 2 watches (Port and Starboard), four hours on and four hours off. At dawn on October 20th we could see the Island of Leyte- our objective- and more than 700 ships passes between two islands to get into the gulf. Rangers had landed on Homonhom and Dingagat Islands two days earlier into the gulf. Japs had fled taking only their rifles with them. At midnight we pass through the entrance into the gulf. The convoy kept changing speed and course which made it very difficult to keep in station. We almost rammed the ship ahead of us once. For three days previously larger ships in our convoy had begun the initial bombardment and fleet minesweepers had swept the Gulf. We could see tracer shells from battleships, carriers, cruisers and destroyers blasting away at the beach. When the sun came over the horizon our planes appeared overhead en route to the beach bombing missions. The Naval bombardment and aircraft bombing became heavier and heavier. The noise was terrific. At 0900 we headed toward the beach escorting numerous landing crafts that were loaded with invasion troops and amphibious vehicles. We also were firing mortars and rockets on the beach and further inland for 15 minutes after the first wave hit the beach. As we neared the beach we began firing 20MM shells strafing the beach and soon from this combined firing the beach was covered a cloud of smoke. Despite the terrific concentration of fire power there were few Japs left alive (dug in) and our troops promptly killed them. After we ceased firing we followed the troops as they pushed ahead on the beach. Naval bombardment continued all day and troops kept pouring ashore and LST’s (landing ships, tank) beached and unloaded their supplies. Tacloban Airfield and Catmon Hill, the main objectives, were captured that day. Filipinos were running toward the troops waving their arms so our soldiers wouldn’t shoot them. We were about 1000 yards from the beach and ready to give our troops the fire support if they needed it.

Our crew was very tired and the men were lying all over the decks trying to get some rest. At sunset we anchored off the beach between the enemy line and ours to prevent enemy filtration by small boats, etc. We kept watch armed with Springfield’s, Carbines and Thompson sub-machine guns looking for Jap swimmers, suicide PT boats and midget subs. No Japs were sighted. Just as we anchored I looked up and saw four Jap bombers flying overhead, almost directly over our ship. They dropped their bombs
and I’ll never forget the feeling as I watched the bombs coming down. As I watched the bombs coming down I got so weak assuming that they would hit our ship that I collapsed and fell down on the deck. Luckily, the bombs feel in the water off our fantail- too damn close for comfort.

The bombardment kept on all night. Destroyers behind us were blasting away with their 5”38’s and the noise was terrible. We could hear shells swishing through and air overhead. Hugh balls of fire shot out from our battleships and cruisers as their 16”, 14” and 6” guns kept firing all night but the noise was nothing compared to the sharp banging of the destroyers with their 5”38’s. Red and white tracer shells kept pouring on the beach and star shells and flares lit up whole areas. Occasionally we could see tracers from machine guns and hear rifle fire from our troops ashore. Tacloban Airfield was all lit up as soldiers worked on the airstrip all night.

We went to GQ at daybreak and watched numerous ships firing toward the sky but saw no Jap planes. Two 5”38’ shells burst on the water very close to our ship. We were afraid that we would get hit by firing from our ships. We were sent on a firing mission at 1020 and fired at a target area for several hours expending 600 rounds (3 mortar rounds per minute). The surf was high and our ship kept broaching so it was necessary to go out and then go in for another run firing out mortars. Out target was a Japanese infantry concentration. We had good results and no Japs left in the target area.

Everyone was ready to drop from lack of sleep except the Captain who lay in his sack reading the New Testament while the rest of us stood watch. October 23rd was the first night since the 18th that I took off my clothes and went to bed. We usually got only 3 to 5 hours of sleep each night and that was split into several shifts so it as no use to undress. We just removed our shoes and slept in our bunk beds.

After sunset we moved from beachhead and anchored in front of a heavy cruiser. The cruiser kept firing at the beach all morning with its 6” guns. We were so close to the cruiser that every time they fired a salvo our whole ship would shake and puffs of wind from our gun blast blew back my cabin curtain each time they fired. The entire ship would vibrate. The lamp in my cabin rattled and the typewriter desk and typewriter would shake making it difficult for me to type.

The next day we pulled out of San Pedro Bay and formed a convoy to go to Hollandia, New Guinea which was the headquarters of General MacArthur, the Supreme Commander-in-Chief of the Allied forces in the Southwest Pacific.

We had extra space in one hold of our ship that we filled with cases of beer. Late each afternoon when we were not in battle we would ration two cans of beer each crew member. A few crew members who didn’t drink were able to command a good price for their ration.

I participated in five invasions where our ship firing 4.2” mortar shells and rockets led our troops to the beach. Our first invasion was Leyte in the Philippine Islands were General MacArthur waded ashore and announced that “he had returned to the Philippines.” The pompous general had to wade ashore three times before he approved the photography.

(No detailed diary was kept for subsequent invasions)
Our second invasion was January 9th when an invasion force of more than 850 vessels entered Lingayen Gulf north of Manila. Several days later our sister ship the LCI(M) 974 was sunk by Japanese suicide torpedo boat. There were 29 survivors including Captain Brown with a broken back. One day we were lying to about 2500 yards from the beach near the Cruiser Nashville, the one that took MacArthur to the invasion of Leyte, when two Jap fighters came out of the sun with machine guns blazing away. We opened fire and believed we hit one plane which turned and went into a suicide dive hitting cruiser Nashville exploding in a great billow of flame. It was a horrible sight. The Nashville’s flag went down to half-mast indicating that personnel had been killed.

The third invasion was Okinawa, a large island south of Japan. That was the largest amphibious invasion of war. I especially remember the “turkey shoot” one afternoon when 69 Jap Kamikazes (suicide aircraft named for the “divine wind” that had thwarted the last attempted invasion of Japan in the 13th century) Flew into the harbor where our fleet was anchored. We exhausted our ammunition firing our guns at them. Their targets were larger ships such as battleships, aircraft carriers, cruisers and destroyers and they succeeded in inflicting major damage in our fleet. A shell probably fired by one of our destroyers exploded on our gun deck with shrapnel hitting our ready boxes, ventilator and wounding five crewmembers that were temporarily evacuated to a hospital ship for treatment.

The fourth invasion was the small island of Ie Shima off the coast of Okinawa where Erinie Pyle, the famous war correspondent, was killed by a sniper bullet when he was on the front line looking out of a foxhole.

Later when we patrolling off the north shore of Okinawa a single Jap Kamikaze suicide plane spotted our ship and flew at our ship. Firing our guns we hit the plane so the pilot barely missed the mast of our ship and flew about ten feet over head where I was stationed with my gun crew. In the bow of the ship, exploding in the sea about 50 yards from the ship and lifting the bow of our ship partially out of water leaving me soaking wet from water that came over us. Petrified I thought that I would be killed and that my life was to end. Hundreds of beautiful tropical fish floated to the surface. When we returned to the anchorage at Ie Shima our captain was summoned to the flagship where he was awarded a bronze star for heroism in battle. Our entire crew knew that he was a coward who left his station in the conning tower and fled to the rear of tower for protection. Crew members who stayed at their battle stations firing guns, hitting the Jap plane with 20MM and 50 caliber machine guns which made the pilot miss the mast of our ship were the real heroes. When I wrote to my parents in my home town of Newfolden, Minnesota, I received a letter from my mother in which she wrote that she woke up in the middle of that night and heard me screaming “Mother, Mother!” Convinced that I had been killed she was unable to go back to sleep and was emotionally upset until my parents received a letter from me several weeks later that described the incident.

Several days after that event as I was walking the through the crew mess hall I spotted a glass jar on the bookshelf. They explained that the dead pilot had floated to the surface and they fished him out of the sea, cut off his ears, threw his body back into the sea and then put his ears in a bottle with medical alcohol. That was their victory trophy. Incensed, I threw the contents of the bottle into the sea,
assembled the crew at General Quarters and delivered one of my passionate lectures condemning their barbaric act.

One night we were ordered to anchor close to a cargo ship that was loaded with ammunition. Several Jap Kamikaze planes came into the harbor and we knew if they hit the cargo ship the resulting massive explosion would have blown our ship out of the water. I was so frightened that I collapsed and fell down on the deck. The strain became almost unbearable. Our radioman, a young man with a wife and two small children back in the states couldn’t stand that tension and became hysterical. We had to strap him on a bunk and assign several crew members to hold him down trying to calm him until we were able to transfer him to a hospital ship the next morning.

Our fifth and final invasion was Iwo Jima February 19th. It was supposed to be a 3-or-4 day battle, but the capture of Iwo Jima ended up in a bloody struggle that took 36 days of hell by soldiers, sailors and airmen who endured the worst fighting imaginable in just 8 square miles to overcome the fanatical Japanese defense. For the assault troops who landed it meant an ugly death to many of them. It has been called the toughest battle of World War II. The commander of our LCI group, a chronic alcoholic, was drunk the third day of the invasion and maneuvered his ship so close to the beach that propellers were kicking up mud and sniper bullets were hitting the conning tower and mast where he was sitting in a drunken stupor unaware of the danger. The Executive Officer placed him under arrest, confiscated his liquor supply and confined him to his cabin under guard until he was sufficiently sober to resume command.

After the island was finally secured we started the voyage back to Pearl Harbor to have our ship reconditioned for the final invasion of Japan. During that long sea journey I remember two significant events. The first was receiving news that President Franklin Roosevelt had died. Since he was the only president I knew and also my Commander-in-chief whom I adored I shed a few tears. The second event was the on August 6th we had dropped an atomic bomb that exploded at 2,000 feet and destroyed 4.7 square miles of Hiroshima with more than 71,000 persons dead or missing. The second bomb was dropped on Nagasaki August 9th. It was difficult for me to imagine the damage inflicted on those two cities that also killed thousands of people. It marked the beginning of the nuclear bomb age.

We returned to Pearl Harbor to plan for the invasion of Japan in November. However, Emperor Hirohito forced his government to end hostilities and surrender on August 14th. Fortunately that made it unnecessary to conduct a costly and hazardous undertaking. When we received that news all hell broke lose in that vast harbor resulting in the wild celebration. All the ships fired their entire arsenal of red and white tracer shells, star shells and flares into the sky making the darkness look like a Fourth of July celebration and turning the night into day. Our ship was tied to a pier about 100 yards from the officers club which normally closed at midnight but stayed open all night to celebrate the end of the war. It was a night to remember (the part that I can remember) with a raging headache for several days. Japanese officials signed an “unconditional surrender” document on board the battleship Missouri in Tokyo Bay September 2, 1945. We had won a victory and THE WAR ENDED in the Pacific.
During the time that we were in the Pacific I was promoted to Lt(jg) USNR. Our ship also had the opportunity to visit a number of islands in the Pacific such as Guam, Saipan, and several Mariana and Marshall islands in the Central Pacific Area. It was a journey for a small-town youth from Northwestern Minnesota to dangerous battles in the middle of the Pacific Ocean at which I still marvel today almost 70 years later. What I went through helped to profoundly change the course of history in the world. I also traveled to a part of the world that I hardly knew existed. I remember how awed I was when I crossed the equator and International Data Line.

The greatest military machine that the world had known started to pass out of existence and I was released from active duty May 1946 in the Navy. I found it hard to connect with people and share my experiences in the war. I knew about fear during war and in a way that few people knew. But I immediately recognized that very few people understand what that’s like.

I returned to college but also in the Navy Reserve for several years and went on several training cruises including Cuba. My education after being released from the Navy until I received my PhD was financed by the GT Bill of Rights, one of the greatest pieces of legislation ever enacted which enabled many veterans to go to college. The government paid my tuition and books and I received $90 a month. ($120 after I married)

Raymond V. Anderson

Addendum relating to country of Panama.

Today the country of Panama is a wonderful tourist attraction. In 2005 after I described the Panama Canal to my son Greg, my closest and best friend, he convinced me that we should go to Panama on our 20th annual father-son vacation trip. So in November we flew to Panama City where we stayed in Five Star Diamond Caesar Hotel, billed as the best hotel in Panama. We toured the city and the country with a personal bilingual guide, went through the Panama Canal on the 119-foot Pacific Queen and rode the recently rebuilt Panama Railway which runs for 47.5 miles between the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea. Used to haul cargo and serve affluent business people, for us it was day’s excursion. The original railway was built for the 49ers during California gold rush and ran over 304 bridges and culverts along and sometimes over stretches of the Panama Canal. It was the first transcontinental railroad. Our only primitive excursion was the trip by motorized dugout canoe thru a series of rapids up the Chagres River to the Embura-Dura Indian community where we learned about indigenous culture and traditions, watched native dances, had lunch in a thatched hut, and purchased some of their incredible handicrafts. We spent the last few days at Gamboa Rainforest Resort which included in the 2005 Collection of the Connoisseurs Guide to the 300 World’s Best Resorts and Great Hotels. This luxury resort included an Orchid Farm, Reptile House, Butterfly House, Aquarium, and most exciting, a ride on the Aerial Tram through the jungle canopy to a viewpoint that overlooks the canal. It was an unexpected fantastic world of luxury accommodations and being “pampered,” totally unlike our usual annual father-son trips to various parts of the world.

Today the U.S. Flag flies in only two places in Panama – the U.S. Consulate and an American cemetery in the dormer canal zone.