

# SOUNDS OF

# WAR

By **Bernard Sarisohn**

Now that I am 75 years old and hard of hearing, I realize and appreciate how many of my memories are associated with sound. I don't mean the sounds of the people who are near and dear to me, or the sounds of the music that I love to listen to on the radio. I don't mean the noises that all of us are surrounded by, accept, and take for granted. The sounds that I think about, the sounds that have stayed in the back of my mind for many, many, years, are from a time when I was young and in the Army.

My short term in the service was, of course, a defining period in my life. I took my basic training with the 101st Airborne at Camp Breckinridge, Kentucky. I wasn't smart enough or athletic enough to duck the first time we were told to throw a hand grenade. The sound of the resulting explosion just a few feet in front of me is a noise that I will always remember.

After completing basic training in sixteen weeks, my outfit was sent to California, where we departed for Yokohama, Japan on the troop ship *U.S.N.S. Mann*. I was one of a few that were singled out at Camp Drake in Yokohama for further training I was sent to Etta Jima, which was, at one time, the Japanese Naval Academy. It was there that I was trained to be a supply specialist. After completing the required six weeks of school I left for Sasebo, where I then sailed to Pusan, Korea.

It was my first night in a combat zone. I was sitting in the rear of a truck with several other newly assigned frightened recruits. It was very dark and we were on our way to an area held by the 7th Regiment of the 3rd Infantry Division. This was it.

After a day or two processing, most soldiers from the east coast were put on a troop train that was leased by the Army and staffed by a civilian railroad company. It was probably one of the last of its breed.

Pullman porters made up our berths daily and we were served meals on white table cloths. We really traveled first class. The clickety-click sound that the train made as it traveled along the tracks, along with the whistle as it approached each crossing, were pleasing sounds, made

We were headed toward the front line. It was precisely at that time that the United States Army launched an artillery attack against the enemy. It was unexpected and seemed to come from the side of the road, only a few feet from where we were. The vibrations threw me down and my steel helmet hit the steel floor of the truck. The sounds of the shells going off all around us and the sound of my head hitting the floor are still with me.

It's hard to forget the noises of combat. The memory of the sharp, high-pitched sounds of incoming big guns still makes me cringe. The haunting sound of bugles being blown when the Chinese troops were attacking is forever in my mind. The Fourth of July is never a good day for me. When the sky rockets howl overhead and firecrackers explode, I want to join the dog in the closet until the "celebration" is over.

July 27th, 1953, the day that the fighting stopped, was a day of joy. We had been given orders not to fire any guns after midnight, but about thirty minutes before the truce took effect it was almost as if the war had begun again. Fueled by beer, rice wine, and other drinks, almost every American soldier started to fire his rifle into the air and throw hand grenades into the ponds and lakes. It was a pretty stupid thing to do, but we were living for the moment. Nobody was shooting back at us.

For me, the very worst sounds happened after the shooting war stopped. In April of 1954 I was moved south to Pusan, where I was issued new clothes, and all weapons and military script (money) were taken from me. I was then loaded on to the navy transport ship *U.S.N.S. General Weigel*. This ship was headed across the Sea of Japan to the Pacific Ocean, and then home to San Francisco.

The bunks on the ship were stacked four or five high. It was our first night out. I was half asleep on the top bunk when suddenly I was thrown to the deck with the life jacket that I had been using as a pillow. It felt as if our ship had hit a brick wall.

Alarms sounded and whistles blew. I regained my footing and began to run to the nearest pathway that would take me up towards the deck. When I reached the hatch (door) and opened it, I quickly discovered that there was no deck at that particular spot. I looked out and couldn't see anything.

even sweeter with the knowledge that we were headed home. It took over five days to get from San Francisco to Fort Dix, New Jersey.

While I was unpacking my gear in the barracks, I was amazed to hear my mother. She was running down a camp street yelling out my name, crying, and trying to find me.

Twenty or thirty soldiers were yelling, "Go Mom, Go," as she ran and asked

A very dense fog had settled in and obscured all vision. I slammed the hatch locked the handle and, running down as fast as I could, joined other men as we all ran to the other side of the ship. The fog horn blasted its message at twenty second intervals. It was an eerie sound. It was more than that: it was terrible and frightening. To this day I cringe at the sound of a foghorn.

When the fog cleared we learned that our ship had been rammed by a Chinese Nationalist boat. There was a slice in our hull about twenty feet above the waterline, cutting away a portion of the port deck at the point of impact.

The morning sea was calm. Fortunately, we did not take on any water. Of course, it was impossible to continue out into the Pacific Ocean without rebuilding the smashed deck, so our ship headed for repairs at a shipyard in Japan.

For five days we watched as Japanese workers swarmed all over our little transport ship, using bamboo scaffolds, small hand held welding tools, and riveting guns to replace the steel plates of our damaged hull.

Five days in Japan sounds wonderful. It could have been, except that we were all in a hurry to get home and get on with our lives. There was also another problem. Our Korean money and military script was in Korea. We had no American or Japanese money. We were stranded in Japan for five days without the means to do anything.

We did a lot of walking and a lot of talking. We returned to our ship at night for a meal and to rest.

The trip back to the U.S. was uneventful — except for the 100 or so soldiers who were upchucking over the railing. I suppose that I can add that to my memory of sounds.

The trip took about twelve days as our little transport waddled across the sea. We were all on deck the morning that we approached San Francisco. We saw the lights in the sea lanes before we saw the city lights. Most of us had tears in our eyes when the loudspeakers blared, "Welcome home guys," and played the then popular song "Harbor Lights." That was one of the greatest sounds ever.

where the boys from Korea were. Wow! What a sound! What a sight! What a surprise! It was even more so when I spotted my Dad and the love of my life, Lenore, running behind her.

One week later I was a civilian.

*Sergeant Bernard Sarisohn served with Company F, 7th Regiment, Third Infantry Division, Korea, 1953-1954. Reach him at 36 Colony Drive, Holbrook, New York 11741, (631) 475-8767.*

The Graybeards

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