

Trip to Tinian

November 22, 2011

Robert and Janet Shirts accompanied by Rod and Nan Osborne

During World War II my father, Morris Alpine Shirts was sent to the Pacific Island of Tinian as a part of the 58th Bombardment group. The 58th was previously based in India where among other things missions over “The Hump” (the Himalayas) were flown. Some of the crews flew the B 29 Super fortress bombers to Tinian while the rest of the crews went by Navy ship to their new home in the Pacific. My father had the great privilege of spending 40 days in the belly of a Navy ship that arrived at their new home on April 6th 1945. Perhaps a little history of the island to begin with.

History of Tinian

The Chamorra people are the indigenous population of Tinian and the other islands of the Marianas. The island is about 39 square miles and is about 5 miles from the island of Saipan to the northwest and 80 miles north of Guam. After WWI the island became a protectorate of Japan and was largely a sugar plantation. (In his journal Dad records that the first days on the island were spent clearing and burning sugar cane (April 8)). As the war in the Pacific heated up it was apparent the USAF needed air bases closer to Japan to carry out their bombing missions. The islands of Guam and Saipan were taken and then on July 24th the Marines staged an attack on the island of Tinian. There were 9162 Japanese on the island and by Aug 1st the island was declared safe though there were still some Japanese hiding out. In his journal Dad records that they were warned not to go too far from their camp as some C.B. s (Navy Seabees) were found dead 300 yards from their camp. It is not hard to see how soldiers could hide on the island. The jungle is thick on the island and someone could hide in it or a limestone cave for months and not be found. The Marines faked an invasion near Tinian city but the main force came ashore on the north west part of the island on what some call White beach but on the island they call it Unai Chulu. “As part of the 13-day naval bombardment of Tinian leading up to the invasion at Unai Chulu, U.S. forces utilized napalm bombs against the Japanese. It was the first time napalm bombs were ever used during warfare.” (<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/facility/tinian.htm>)



Unai Chulu beach

Before the battle was even completed the Seabees began the construction of airfields on the island. In what became the largest engineering project of WWII, the Seabees constructed 6 8500+ foot runways, all the taxiways, pads for the planes and the roads. There are 13 miles of runways and taxiways on the north field and a little less on the west field. One report says they moved and dug 112 million cubic yards of earth and coral. The 15,000 Seabees worked 20 hours a day. The island became the biggest airfield in the world and was capable of launching 450 B-29s in 70-80 minutes. Dad recorded on his first mission over Japan that there were over 500 planes dropping their bombs. It must have been quite a sight to see that many planes taking off at one time. And loud. I have never heard a B-29, but I have heard some of the old planes and you can hear them miles away. To have that many planes all rumbling down runways at the same time must have been deafening. It is reported that there were over 19,000 flights take off from this island. Dad records that a roundtrip mission to Japan was about 2700 miles.

After the war all the military buildings were torn down or left for the locals. Now there is little evidence of the scope of the occupation of the island. The biggest evidence is the large runways and even those are being overcome by mother nature and her patient onslaught of vegetation. Notice the amount of growth since WWII from these pictures taken then and those taken now.



North field- from the West in 1945 and present day from the South—Runway Able



West Field –WWII from the west, present day from the east

Presently there are about 2700 people on Tinian. It is a part of the US Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands with Saipan and Rota and many smaller islands. Recently a Las

Vegas style casino has been built on the island. I don't know how it stays in business because there are only small commuter planes that come to the island. It is a beautiful hotel and casino. We went into the front lobby and there is lots of marble and brass, but very few people. Once we got out of the city we only saw 4 people the rest of the day, so it is a quiet island.

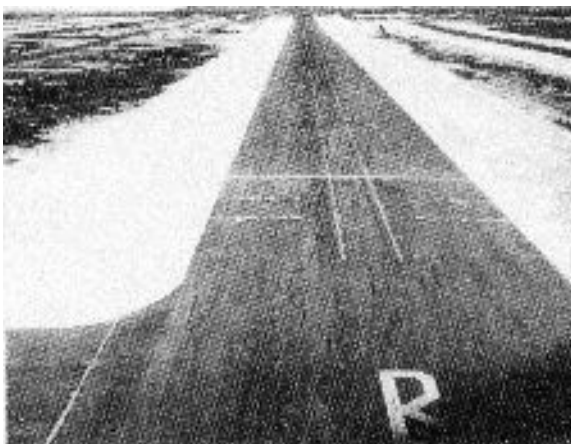
Our Trip

The only commercial way to get to Tinian is by airplane from Saipan. We went to Saipan the night before and stayed the night. From our motel room on the west side of the island we could see Tinian. There used to be a ferry back and forth between the islands but it is no longer running. Rod and Nan Osborne, some friends from Coeur d'Alene came with us. They presently live in Guam where Rod works for the FBI. We got up on Tuesday morning and went to the airport and signed up for the short 8-10 minute flight. Freedom Air is the only commercial airline. (There is one other charter airline that has a little bigger planes, but it is more expensive unless you have a big group.) Freedom Air is pretty laid back. I tried to get reservations but they just told me to show up and we would be able to get a flight. There is a schedule published but when we got there they just ordered up a plane. They said they were running a special for \$69 round trip per person. We flew on a 6 seat Cessna Cherokee. There was one other person who came with us on the flight. It was interesting when we came out to the plane they told us which seats we would sit in. Instead of weighing luggage they weigh each person going on the flight along with your carry on stuff. The pilot was a big man and because I was the next biggest they had me sit on the opposite side in the middle. The smallest lady was in the front co-pilot seat. The airplane shuddered and shook as we took off and the pilot was working hard keeping it pointed straight. But we made it safely.



As we flew west, the island of Tinian came into focus. The eastern coastline is rugged with very little beach that I could see. We flew directly over the North Field. I was amazed to see three of the four main runways of the North Field barely visible through the undergrowth. Runway Able, which is the farthest one north, is still visible and we rode on it later. I wonder if they go through and clear the growth off of this runway but they let the others slowly succumb to

the growth. We continued west over the ocean into the airport from the west. The present day airport sits on the site of West Field from WWII. The 58th bomb wing flew from this field and the 462 Bomb group of which dad was a part flew out from this base. I took a 3 ring binder with dad's journal and the part of his book on Tinian that has copies of pictures he took. I also took some maps and other things I had found on the internet about Tinian. Dad has a series of pictures showing a landing in his book. I tried to recreate this sequence the best I could. Our pilot didn't take the exact flight pattern the B-29's did for some reason.





We seemed to taxi on the runway for quite a while, but finally got to the small airport. Outside of the front entrance of the airport there is a plaque dedicated to the 58th Bomb Wing.



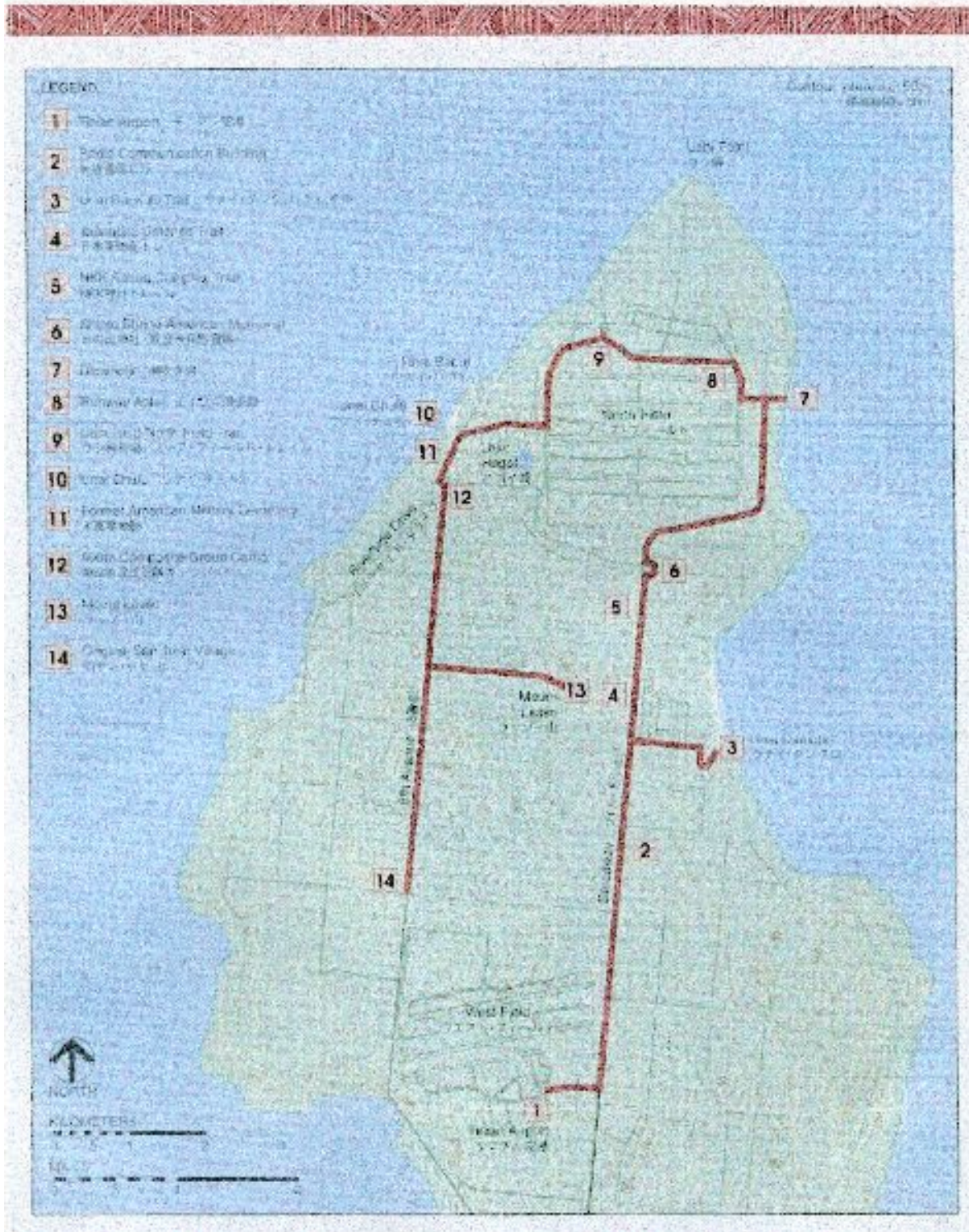


There are some other artifacts next to the plaque including some tires from a B29. We hitched a ride from the airport going to the casino and got off across the street at a little shack that rented scooters. The scooters were \$35 a day though they wanted \$50 deposit for each scooter, all in cash. We pooled all our cash and didn't have the \$340 cash so we walked across to the casino. No we didn't play poker to get the money, we just went to the ATM. I showed one of the workers at the casino some of dad's pictures and he told me where some of the things might be. That was a big help. Getting the scooters was a great decision. We could have rented a car, but we went places a car couldn't go and went through so much brush and grass I am sure we would have scratched a car all up.. It was fun to go around the island on the scooters and I would suggest it to anyone else who would like a fun day.



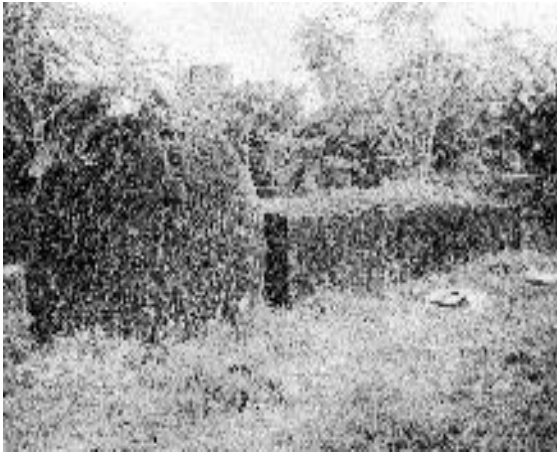
Here is a map with our approximate route from a brochure I found on line. We took a few side trips off the map route.

Self-Guided Tour of Historic Nantuxi Island, part 2.



Our first stop was in the main City of San Jose, which is a half a mile from the casino. We found the ruins of the House of Toga, which has some prehistoric Latte Stones. These stones are the symbol of royalty in the islands. There are Latte stones on every island in the area and are

used in a lot the architecture in the area. These stones were used to hold up the homes of the royalty and then a roof was built over the top. The stones on Tinian are some of the biggest ever discovered. On one of dad's excursions he took pictures of these stones and we used his pictures to recreate where he stood to take the pictures.



“Tinian is about the same size and shape as Manhattan, and when U.S. forces occupied it during the war, they laid out a system of roads with the same general plan and orientation as on Manhattan. To carry the huge quantities of bombs up from the port at San Jose, two divided highways were built across Tinian. The GIs gave the roads names like Broadway, 8th Ave., and 86th street. The main north-south road, is Broadway, and it runs parallel to the other main north-south road, 8th Avenue.” (<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/facility/tinian.htm>)

We got on our scooters and headed North on Broadway which is/was the main road on the island. It is well maintained up to the airport, but after the airport the vegetation has crept in and cut the width of the road quite a bit. It started to rain on us as we went up the road but it was a light, warm rain and it only lasted a few minutes. The picture below is a few miles north of the airport and it is apparent how far the vegetation has moved onto the road.



Broadway close to the roundabout looking back toward town

About 5 miles from the city there is a round about before the entrance to the North airfield. When we got there Rod asked if we had seen the entrance to a Japanese Shrine. The rest of us had missed it in the rain so we went back and it was good we did. There is a gateway to the shrine that has a crosspiece on top of two pillars. It looked like a picture dad had taken so we looked it over and decided it was not the place. Rod looked back into the brush and noticed another gateway arch and wondered if that was the place. Lucky he is an FBI agent and is good at looking for things. We went back and it was indeed the same location dad had taken the picture 66.5 years ago. This arch had the same notch taken out of the top and the same markings and pillars around it. In dad's picture there is a little pillar in the background. It has fallen to the ground, but it is there. There are not many pictures with dad in them so it was fun to find a spot where we could recreate the picture with me taking the place of my dad. See for yourself.



As I look at the foliage in Dads picture, it is dead. I wonder if it is the work of the Seabees or probably the effect of the Napalm

We tried to find another shrine where dad was in the picture. We think we found it, but we are not 100% sure, but it is pretty close. The top has been knocked off the one we found so it is hard to know for sure. There are a lot of these little monuments but most have a flat top and not the slanted one like Dad is standing in front of. It is in the same area as the gateway above.



Our next stop was on the East coast at the blowhole. It is a natural cave in the coastline that has punched a hole straight up and when the surf comes in it shoots water way up in the air. I can find nothing in Dads writings where he records he ever came here. But it is a fantastic piece of natures handiwork.



We then worked our way to Runway Able. It is the best preserved of the runways on the North Field. We got our scooters going flat out on the runway, but it was not enough for lift off. I was amazed it is in as good of shape as it is. Better than some of the freeways I drive on today. It is a little rough in places but there were parts of it that were pretty smooth. I found one reference in his book that his crew landed here on the North field on their way back from the training in

California. They were supposed to land on Saipan, but there was a black out there so they landed on the North Field. They took off to go to Saipan but blew a tire and had to wait, but finally got to Saipan to report in and then flew back to Tinian to their base.



Near the west end of the runway there is a turnout to the north and just a little way off the runway are the remains of the Japanese airfield and command headquarters. Dad talks about visiting the Japanese communications building and other buildings but I couldn't find any pictures so I didn't put them in. We did get pictures if you want to see them. There are a couple of Japanese bomb shelters there also. After the war, plaques were erected here for all the US bomb groups who were stationed in the north field (like the 58th plaque at the airport.)

Leaving that area and going north and then east are the pits where the two atomic bombs were loaded into the planes. The bombs were too big to be loaded conventionally so pits were dug, the bombs put into the pits and then the planes were rolled over the top of the pit and the bombs winched up into the planes. The pits are located about 50 yards from each other. I was quite surprised how close together they were. They are covered over with a Plexiglas cover now, with explanations and pictures inside the glass that tell about the bombs. Dad used to tell the story of going by the fenced off area this bomb group was located in and laughing at them because they were not allowed to go out. I can find nothing in writing of this story. The planes were located in the most northeastern part of the staging area, though I don't know where their barracks were located.





The picture on the left shows both bomb pits and the monument in the middle. The plaque is on the monument (the little white thing under the tree)

After visiting the bomb pits we went back east and found the dirt road to Ushi Point, which is the northern most part of the island. There is a memorial there to some people who died in a shipwreck. We were able to look out and see our motel on Saipan just a few miles away.



The road to the north tip and the road from the air

We then drove back around to the west side of the island and came to Unai Chula beach where the invasion force came ashore. It is a small beach but at least it is a beach. (The only real beaches we saw were on the southwest side near the city.) It is fairly flat and I could just picture 1400 soldiers coming ashore here and moving out to take the island. I guess it came as a surprise to the Japanese on the island that expected them to come ashore to the south. There were over 9000 Japanese on the island and most were killed or committed suicide in the southern part of the island in a place called suicide cliffs (we didn't get there). In the battle for the island 328 marines died and 1571 were wounded.



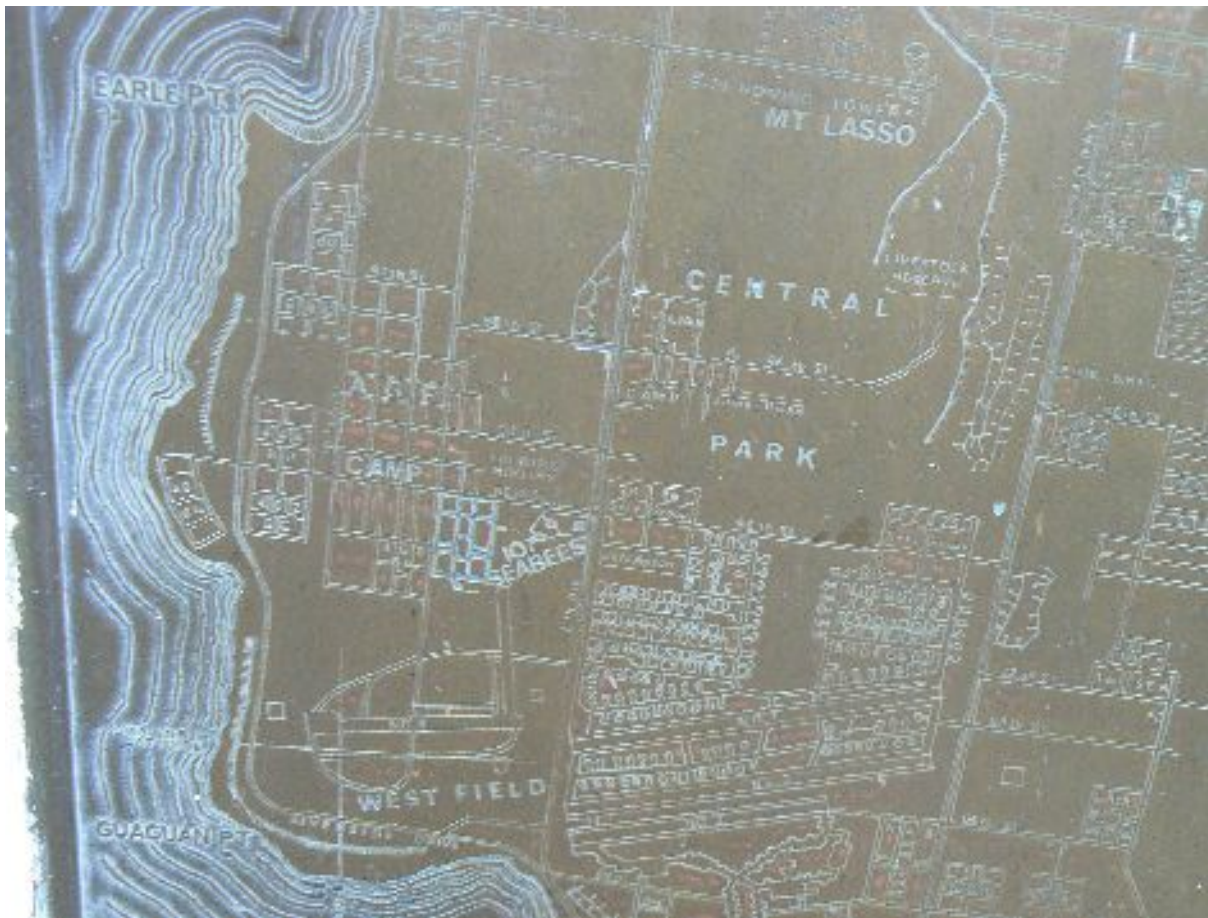
Invasion beach---and of course we had to skip rocks!

We then got on 8th avenue and rode down until we found the road to Mt Laso. It is the highest point of the northern part of the island. There are the remains of a Japanese shrine and radar station on the top and parts of the foundation is still there. We took some pictures and after we got back I was looking at the pictures dad took and I found a fence that looked like one up on top by the shrine so I wonder if he took some pictures there. What do you think?



Back on 8th avenue, Janet was leading the pack of “hogs” and stopped at a monument to the Seabees. When I pulled up she said she thought I would want to stop there, but I said I didn't really have a reason to stop here, but I am glad we did. It ended up being the find of the day. The plaque in honor of the monumental construction project had a detailed map of all the facilities the Seabees had built with labels on everything. Looking close we found the 462nd bomb group barracks! If you look on the picture below you can see the 107th Seabees just to the left of Central

Park, then go straight west down the road almost to the ocean and you will see the 462 BG. It was a great find. You can see it was not to far from the west airfield.



Dad recorded that his group was camped in the “West Central area-just a couple hundred yards form the shore. This was the original beach head area” (April 18) He says they found some Japanese Pill boxes near the camp area and found a few Japanese items. He said it rained every night and there was dust every afternoon. ((April 14) They made coral walks to fight the mud. (April 22) He planted a little garden of flowers and vegetables to make it seem more like home. Drinking water was also hard to come by. He talks of swimming on the beach. He took a picture of a bunch of the soldiers swimming but we could not find the spot. At first they put up tents to live in. He talked about taking a truck to the dock area where they loaded up some lumber used to pack bombs in the ships. They spent the rest of the night using the lumber to put a floor in the tent. It was the only tent in the area with a floor. (May 8). When he returned from the training in California he said the tents were gone and they had Quonset huts. He said the hut was almost in exact spot where the tent was (Aug 13) He said his “hut is the last one on the row. At the bottom of the hill and all drainage runs to us. I’ve had to dig a trench around us to keep us from getting flooded out.” (Aug 29)

Knowing all this information we set off to see if we could find the spot to the west of the Seabees monument. We tried to get all the way to the shore but when we went down a slight hill with grass up to our waist and the brush so thick we finally gave up. Rod said he saw an overgrown road at the top of the hill so we went back up. Janet and I drove right past the road, but Rod’s FBI eyes saw it. We went back and Rod and I hiked down the “path” which we think was the western boundary of the 462 campsite. The ground slopes slightly to the south and a

little west so I wonder if he was at the south end of the barracks. We would have hiked into the brush to see if we could find evidence of the camp, but the brush was so thick we didn't want to chance it. I had long pants on, but Rod had on shorts and his lower legs were torn up walking through the sharp grass. But I am pretty confident we found the western edge of where he was camped.



Picture of what we think was the southwest end of Dads units barracks site.

We then rode around the west side of the airport and back down into the city. We tried to find a road up to a Shrine on the lower east side of the island but we missed the road and ran out of time because we had to take the scooters back and catch the plane back to Saipan. We filled up the four scooters with gas with a grand total of 3.18 gallons. Not bad for 6 hours of fun. Good thing, because gas was \$5.60 a gallon. There were a few more pictures I was hoping to recreate, but with the jungle growth of the last 66 years, and with Mother Nature working on the landscape, it was hard to get to a lot of the places. There has also been some vandalism so some of the sites may not be recognizable. For instance, on Mount Laso, there was a stone marker at a Shrine that had the top knocked off and an unexploded artillery shell put in its place.

Summary

It was a great experience to visit the island where Dad spent time during WWII. Though he was only on this island for 54 days, it was this area that I heard him talk about the most. It was here that he saw the most action flying missions from this base. I don't know if Dad enjoyed the time he spent on the island but he felt like he was doing his part in helping the cause that we were in the war for. He talked proudly of his time in the service. I know the war left a lasting impression on him. I know he got discouraged and wanted to quit a few times, but he endured. In reading through his journal and some of the letters he sent to his fiancé, there seemed to be two things that helped him through. One was the letters from Maxine and his parents. Mom was a little embarrassed when I read some of his letters. Dad had a romantic streak that I rarely saw. He cherished the letters from home and he loved Maxine and could hardly wait to get home and

marry her. In his journal he talked about a girl in Australia who wanted to dance with him and he said, “she wasn’t bad looking but Maxine is still the best.” The second thing that pulled him through was his testimony of the gospel and especially his patriarchal blessing. He refers to his blessing a few times. He seemed to find hope and strength from it.

His patriarchal blessing has these lines:

“Be humble. Be prayerful. Honor the priesthood that you have received...” (mentioned twice) and this promise:

“ I bless you with health and strength sufficient to carry on the labors and the duties that you are now called upon to perform in the armed forces. May the Lord bless you that you shall have strength to perform the same wherever you may be sent; that your life may be protected; that you shall be able to endure the hardships and trials that may come there-through and eventually be returned home in safety.”

And the final line: “I seal these blessing upon your head and they shall become yours through your faithfulness, your ability to avoid things that are evil.”

Dad knew these promises and relied on the hope and peace the promises gave him. Many times he said he gave up his ration of whisky and beer and avoided the situations that many of the soldiers got themselves into. He was disgusted with many of the soldiers and what they did with some of the girls they met. Before his first mission from Tinian he recorded that he went into the shadows of the empty bomb crates and knelt in prayer. (May 18th)

In a letter to Maxine dated May 30, 1945 he writes:

“I carry your small picture always and with it the blessing. On the last mission I was scared-as usual-everyone is. I don’t think we can overcome that feeling. But I felt safe. I’ve lived the requirements called for in the blessing the best I can and I know prayers are answered. I knew I’d get back. That is the way it always is. When I’m up there I always have that feeling.”

As I read these things it is apparent Dad was aware of the promises in his blessing and didn’t want to do anything to forfeit those blessings. He was sure that Maxine was a part of that blessing. These two things seemed to buoy him up and give him the courage and strength he needed in hard times.

The B-29 was not the most reliable of planes. Add that to the fact that while they were dropping bombs, the Japanese were not really appreciative of the presents they were receiving from the air and sent up fighter plane to welcome them, and also fired anti-aircraft shells at them with the hopes of bringing the Americans down to meet them. There were lots of missions where they could have been shot down or simply crashed but his crew was saved.

I think most of you are aware of the “Untouchable” experience in India where his crew was supposed to take a B-29 up to break in the engines and they got bumped at the last second. The plane caught fire and crashed before it took off.

Here are a few quotes from his journal:

May 18th-“One plane crashed on take off.” From his book he records: “Take off was accomplished and we looked back to see several large fires, evidence that some of the heavily laden ships had failed to become airborne... We knew that most of the men probably hadn’t been able to get clear of the inferno... With five hundred planes over the same target, we were afraid of being rammed or doing the ramming ourselves. This fact kept us on edge about as much as the fear of the enemy.”

May 23-“Part way there the bomb-bay doors opened mysteriously by themselves... One B-29 went down in flames. One almost rammed us from the rear... The flack was also heavy.”

May 26-“Engine no 3 smoked a lot...Flack was rocking the ship. Sounded like it was inside us.”

May 29- “One B-29 lost by accidental ramming... We had a huge hole in our left wingtip.”

June 5-“We went in at extremely low altitude, and took a severe beating. A number of ships were lost. One in front of us in formation was shot down...Flack and fighters were extremely heavy...”

June 7- Everything went wrong. Bad weather scattered us. A gun jammed. A fighter came out of the clouds and was too startled and too close to fire. A mysterious smoke filled the cabin. The nose wheel door came open. We ran low on gas. Gun jammed against nose wheel wall door. We were one of three ships to make it back. Some were lost, others had to land at Iwo Jima,”

His crew was transferred to California for some training on a new radar-bombing device and they had to go to Iwo Jima to get a “war weary” plane to take back to the states. He said the radio equipment conked out and one engine quit and another engine began to lose oil. He said when they landed they left the plane at the end of the runway and were told it would not be flown again.

My purpose in mentioning these events, and I am sure the list is not inclusive, is to show that dad’s patriarchal blessing of protection was answered. There were so many places and numerous times his life could have been taken. Even the assignment to California in the middle of some of the heaviest bombing of the war may have been part of that blessing, freeing him from some of the deadly missions he could have flown.

Final word.

It was an honor to go to one of the places Dad served in WWII. I don’t know if it holds any significance in the big picture, but it helped me appreciate a little better what he went through and where it all happened. I don’t know why I had a desire to go to Tinian. I don’t have a great desire to visit other places he served, for instance Piradoba India, though he was there just about as long as he was on Tinian. Lubbock Texas, Scotts Field in Illinois and Ryan Field in Arizona don’t have the same draw as the South Pacific for some reason.

We flew from Tokyo to Guam and I wanted to take a picture of Tokyo bay where the surrender document was signed, but Norita airport is not very close to the bay. It took us about 3.5 hours in air-conditioned comfort (comfort in economy?) to fly between Guam and Tokyo. I watched a movie and had dinner and snacks served and had a restroom if I needed it. And a big plus was that there was no one shooting at us. I thought of the B-29s as I made the flight. I am sure comfort was not as big a part of the plans as they designed the planes. When I think of the 2700 mile round trips, it must have been at least 10 hours in the air but Dad doesn’t record how long the trips were. (He does record that it was 32-37 hours from briefing to briefing.) It was fun to be able to go with Janet and the Osbornes. They were troopers to follow me around in my whims. They were very patient as I read in my book and looked up pictures and tried to find places and recreate pictures. The weather was almost perfect and the scooters were a great way to get around. All in all it was a wonderful day, one that I will cherish for a long time.