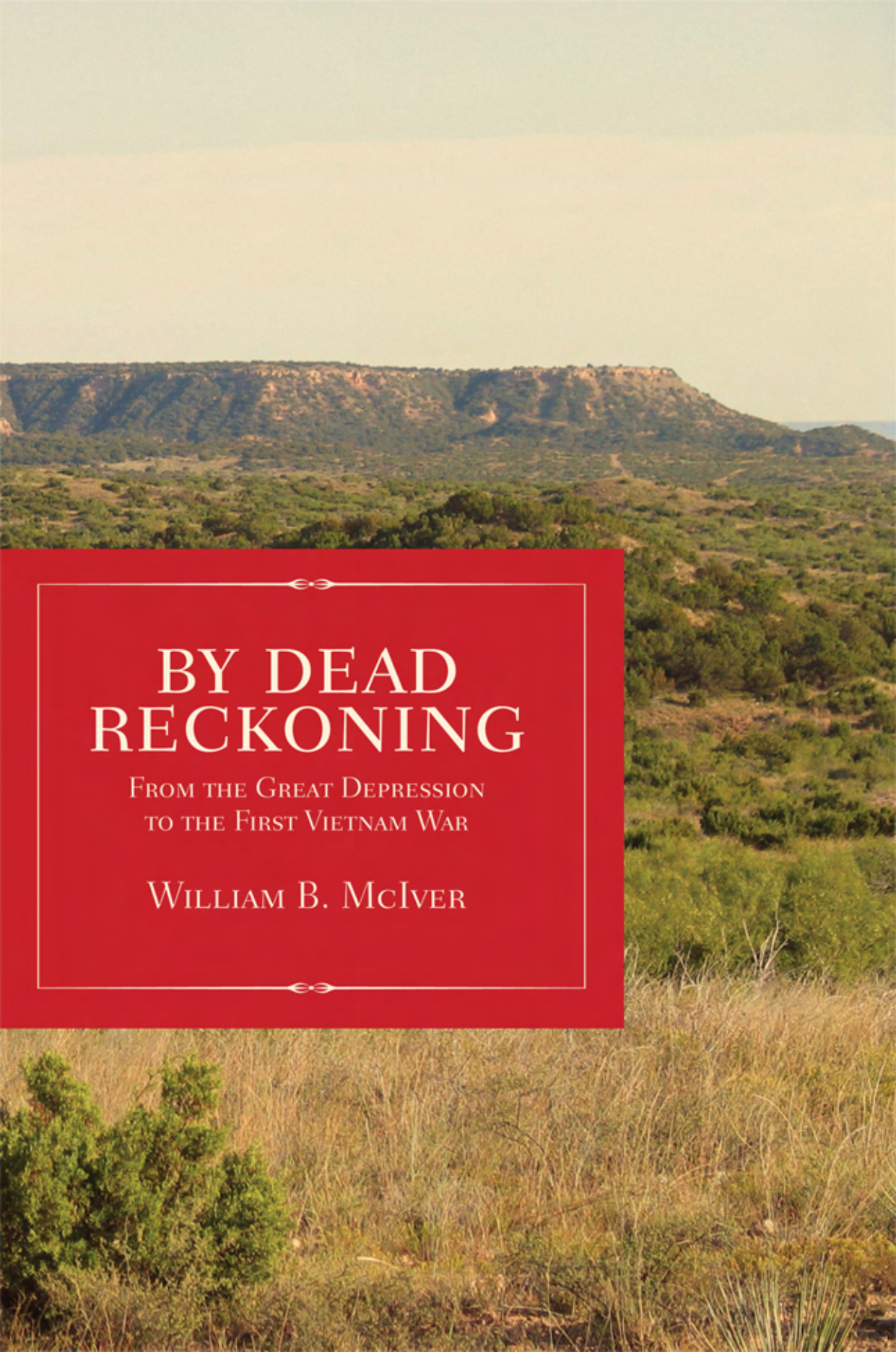

BY DEAD RECKONING

From the Great Depression to the First Vietnam War

William B. McIver

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Chapter Four

Hard Traveling

Now as I look around, it's mighty plain to see
This world is such a great and a funny place to be;
Oh, the gamblin' man is rich an' the workin' man is poor,
And I ain't got no home in this world anymore.
Woody Guthrie, 1938

While my family and the Lewises struggled to rise from the Depression's depth in the 1930s, the United States focused inward and turned a blind eye to swirling international turmoil and geopolitics. Congress, following the electorate's will, was determined to avoid involvement in "old world" political affairs even as Germany and Japan abrogated treaties, rearmed, threatened neutral states, and invaded neighbors.

In 1939, after the fall of Poland to the German blitzkrieg and the Japanese invasion of Manchuria, President Roosevelt knew that America would eventually be drawn into this new conflict, but his warnings did not move a slumbering Congress or the American people. His only recourse was discreet aid to England, a quiet increase in production of war materiel, and a cautious strengthening of his undermanned, poorly trained, ill-equipped military forces.

I don't recall my eighth birthday November 10, 1941, but a month later – December 7th – I remember well. My parents' sat in stunned anguish as they listened to radio news about the Japanese "sneak attack" on Pearl Harbor. We heard President Roosevelt proclaim December 7 as "a date which will live in infamy" in his Declaration of War speech on December 8. Suddenly people I barely knew existed became "Japs" and "Krauts." My playmates, black and white, were soon in the street with makeshift toy guns playing war games.

At the end of 1941 the American economy was still in Depression doldrums. My dad's produce peddling business and Mom's WPA job had kept us out of charity bread lines, but the relatively good times on West Annie did not last. By the time I finished the second grade in June 1942, we were homeless again. I don't know why. Perhaps Dad's business faltered. Perhaps cutbacks in public works cost my mother her WPA job. Most likely it had something to do with his drinking.

My parents bought a large tent at a surplus Army goods store. They erected the tent in a pasture on Mr. and Mrs. Pastor's dairy farm at the corner of Evergreen Street and Fredericksburg Road. We shared a pasture with their milk cows and goats. The campsite was in a hollow between Fredericksburg Road and the railroad tracks running from Austin to West Texas. Fredericksburg Road carried traffic from Austin to the Texas Hill Country towns of Fredericksburg and Llano, thence to West Texas. Traffic on the highway above us roared and passing trains rattled. Our campsite was on marshy ground infested with mosquitoes, flies, ticks and chiggers. Mother inspected my brother and me before bedtime and removed the day's accumulation of ticks and chiggers. Mosquito bites were dabbed with Merthiolate. Every evening my parents sprayed DDT inside the tent in an attempt to get a night's sleep without blood-sucking mosquitoes hovering overhead. We had no mosquito netting.

In January 1942, the War Department announced the selection of Killeen, Texas, as the site for a major Army tank-training center. The government acquired 108,000 acres and appropriated $22,800,000 for the land, real estate and development of the base. Construction was to be completed by August 1942.[162] Killeen was near enough for news of the employment opportunity to quickly reach Austin. Dad got a job at Camp Hood as a construction laborer.

In the spring of 1942 the tent at the dairy farm was taken down. Mom's treadle Singer sewing machine, her Maytag washing machine, a portable two-burner butane gas cookstove, a bedstead, the rest of our skimpy belongings and the tent were loaded on a pickup truck that Dad had traded his produce truck for. We drove about eighty miles north to Killeen.

The Handbook of Texas Online describes the scene on our arrival:

> *Construction workers, soldiers, and their families moved into the area by the thousands, and Killeen became a military boomtown with an acute housing shortage; some newcomers found themselves paying rent to sleep in henhouses, and at one point about 1,000 workers lived in a tent city raised to deal with the unexpected influx.*[163]

I recall arriving at the sprawling tent city in the dead heat of Central Texas summer. Swirling dust coated the sweaty bodies of adults erecting tents. Children were everywhere. Tommy and I made friends and were soon at play along the banks of the river that bordered the encampment. Dad joined other campers helping newcomers set up their tents.

Erecting tents was a community project at the camp. Everyone pitched in to help newcomers get settled. Our tent had a long pole that hoisted the center of the tent to its full height, and four shorter poles supported the tent corners. A Coleman lantern hung from the center pole. The lantern and a few kerosene lamps provided lighting. The kitchen area with the butane cookstove was situated at the entry. A table and several folding chairs were the only furniture. My parents set up their bed on one side of the tent. My brother and I slept on pallets of heavy homemade quilts on the other.

Before we left Austin, my shinbone was scratched by a tin lid that a kid had sailed at me. The scratch turned into a bad infection because nothing was done about it until it began to fester. By the time we got to Killeen, the sore was an ugly infected wound. There was no money for doctors and drugs. Mom treated it by wiping away oozing pus, disinfecting the wound with alcohol and dabbing it with Merthiolate, which sent me into paroxysms of pain. The wound finally got well. As a reminder of those hard times, I carry today a scar, an inch-and-a-half long and a half-inch wide. I keenly recall sleeping on the ground with my brother and sensing my parents' despair. I recall no parental fighting at Killeen. I think it was the first time I realized the extent of our privations and my parents' will to hold their little world together. There was no big family to provide comfort, let alone material aid.

My mother, equipped with her gasoline-powered Maytag washing machine, started a laundry service. With a pot of beans cooking on campfire coals, she washed and ironed clothes for the camp's single men. I was her helper. We carried water from the communal well, filled the washing machine and two rinse tubs. The wringer swung around from washer to the rinse tubs. My main job was pulling heavy work clothes through the wringer as my mother fed them into it from the soapy washer. The job required a deft, steady pull to prevent articles of clothing from bunching up and stalling the motor as clothing progressed from the washer to the first rinse tub and then to the second. While Mom hung the clothes to dry, I drained the soapy washer from the first rinse tub and refilled it with fresh water. The second rinse tub, less soapy, was the first to receive the next washed load. The process continued until the last load was hung to dry. Mother then began ironing the previous day's wash. She folded them into bundles, and prepared a bill for each customer. When the day's washing was finished in the afternoon, I was free to roam the camp, explore along the riverbanks and play with neighboring kids.

In late summer my dad along with most of the Fort Hood construction laborers were laid off. We took our tent down, packed the truck and joined the exodus. Our destination was an Army Air Corps base construction job near

Dalhart, Dallam County, Texas. Dallam is in the far northwestern corner of the Texas Panhandle. The wind-swept, dusty town of Dalhart is thirty miles from the New Mexico and Oklahoma borders, deep into the Texas Dust Bowl region, and almost six hundred miles from Fort Hood. Memories of that long, tiring trip remain strong in my mind.

When the truck bed was packed with a mattress on top of the load, the tent was stretched tarpaulin-like over the truck bed to protect our possessions from the elements. The tent poles, tied down with ropes to the front and rear bumpers, held the load down. The scene was not unlike one memorialized by John Steinbeck in *The Grapes of Wrath*:

> *Out in the dark yard, working in the lantern light, Pa and Al loaded the truck. Tools on the bottom, but handy to reach in case of breakdown. Boxes of clothes next, and kitchen utensils in a gunny sack; cutlery and dishes in their box. Then the gallon bucket tied on behind. They made the bottom of the load as even as possible, and filled the spaces between with rolled blankets. Then over the top they laid the mattresses, filling the truck in level. And last they spread the big tarpaulin over the load and Al made holes in the edge, two feet apart, and inserted little ropes, and tied it down to the side-bars of the truck.*
>
> *'Now if it rains,' he said, 'we'll tie it to the bar above, an' the folks can get underneath, out of the wet. Up front we'll be dry enough.'*[164]

Our family of four squeezed into the cab of our little truck. The load was heavy. It taxed the truck's power and capacity. It was a long, slow, boring and tiring trip. We played license plate poker by making hands from the license plate numbers on the vehicles that passed us. We played "what-we-would-do-if-we-had-a-million-dollars." We camped along the road. My bed was on the cab seat. My parents and brother slept on the truck bed beneath the tent tarpaulin.

The moment on that trip that stands out most clearly in my memory occurred during a lunch stop by a lake. The weather was stifling hot and the water was a beacon of coolness. While Mother fixed lunch, Tommy and I played and waded around the edge of the water. We had strict orders not to get our clothes wet. I slipped, fell down and got soaked. I got a whipping for that and Mom made me sit between the tent poles on the cab top when we drove away. I sat there terrified as we chugged down the road. I screamed

and pounded on the cab top until my father stopped the truck. My mother spanked me again for that. I was not allowed back inside until I was dry.

After several days on the road, we finally pulled into Dalhart, picked up some provisions, and got directions to the tent city. It wasn't hard to find on Dalhart's flat, treeless perimeter. The encampment offered a dismal sight of human desperation. Tents and house trailers were erected and parked hither and yon, with no sense of order. The camp was not as friendly or as nice as the riverfront camp at Camp Hood with its big oak shade trees and cottonwoods along the river. No one came over to help us put up the tent. Gloom settled over my parents and me as we set up our tent as close as we could to the camp's single well.

As tents went, we had one of the best. We were proud of the finished job and we reassured ourselves with the refrain: "It'll take a tornado to blow it down." After the tent was up, Mother and Dad unloaded the truck, arranged our belongings inside, and found a place to set up my mother's washing machine. They put me to work digging a drainage ditch around the tent perimeter to prevent rainwater from getting inside. While we worked, my extroverted brother Tommy circulated through the camp making friends and entertaining campers with his antics.

My father was soon off to work at the construction site and Mother's laundry service was quickly established. A backlog of dirty clothes soon accumulated in piles next to her machine. As before in Camp Hood, I was my mother's laundry helper. Tommy turned five in June of 1942. He was curly-blond-haired cute, devilishly playful and seldom punished for bad behavior. Everyone doted on him and called him "Tommy Tinker." Sometimes we added "the little stinker" to emphasize his penchant for monkey business. He made friends easily, roamed the campgrounds at leisure and spent a lot of time playing with the daughter of a nearby farmer. I was quite jealous of his free time and popularity. I was as shy as Tommy was gregarious, and I was envious because I liked the pretty little farmer's daughter. I resented my little brother spending time with her while I washed clothes under my mother's critical eye.

But it was another and older farmer's daughter who first stirred my interest in girls. Reminiscent of the days in Austin when I accompanied my father on his produce route, my parents often drove to a farm nearby where they bought eggs, butter and milk for our table. I can still visualize the farmer's daughter coming out of the milk barn with a bucket of milk, wearing a flour sack dress that showed the curves of her developing breasts, tiny waist and rounded hips. I was too shy to speak to her, but I always tried to get as close as possible without making my attraction conspicuous.

Our careful work in setting up the tent paid off. Tornado warnings were sounded one day. The men raced home from work as the storm began to roll in. Dad tightened the guy wires and I checked the trenching. Tommy wailed, I prayed. My parents looked very worried, but they stayed calm. When the storm hit, the tent started swaying. Mom, Dad and I stood around the center pole and held it against the wind with all our strength. Tommy sat at our feet and cried in terror. I don't know how long the rain lashed and the wind howled. It seemed we stood there for hours, struggling to hold the tent up, fearing all the time that it would come down on us.

When the storm subsided, we wearily let go of the pole and rested while the rain continued to beat down. Water had run into the tent, but there was no damage. We were proud of our tent and congratulated ourselves for the care we had taken in setting it up. We felt even better about our achievement when we were able to look outside. The sight was surreal. Few tents in the camp survived. Some house trailers lay on their sides. Tents and tent poles were lying in the mud. Some tents were wrapped around trees that caught them as they blew away from their moorings. Piles of tables, stoves, iceboxes, beds, clothing and personal possessions lay soaked on the ground.

Dazed residents stumbled around crying over the destruction. Some, separated from their families, were panic-stricken and fearful. Some called it quits and left the camp with salvageable property. Those who stayed got busy resetting their tents, setting their trailers upright and reestablishing their abodes. It soon became just another hard times story to be told in better times.

September 1942 came while we were at the Dalhart camp. I recall going to school with my mother to enroll and that there was some confusion about my class standing, but I was accepted as a third grader in Dalhart's elementary school.

The new Dalhart Army Air Field was activated the same month. It became a training base for gliders, B-17 and B-29 bombers, and fighter planes. It also had the distinction of being one of the air bases to train the first American women in history to fly the military's fastest fighters and heavy bombers. The women were known as Wasps – Women Airforce Service Pilots.[165]

Completion of the airfield ended my dad's job, shut down the tent city and put people on the road looking for work again. I had barely started school when it was time to load up and move on. As I recount these times, I am amazed that everything happened within one spring and summer. My memory tells me we were in Camp Hood and Dalhart for many long months. Actually, the events took place in a scant four-month period from late spring to September 1942.

I don't know why my parents couldn't find better jobs and decent housing. The Japanese attack on the U.S. fleet at Pearl Harbor put America on a wartime footing. The buildup for world war was creating thousands of jobs. Wartime mobilization ended the Depression in 1942. Millions of men and women joined the Armed Forces and even larger numbers went to work in well-paying defense jobs. America's economy was beginning to boom, yet for us the Depression did not end. We were still homeless and my parents were out of work again.

When we left the Dallam County high plains and dropped down into eastern Texas, we began to see vast cotton fields filled with cotton pickers. My brother and I were excited when my parents said we were going to get jobs picking cotton. We stopped at a farm supply store in Vernon, Texas, and outfitted ourselves with sacks, kneepads and gloves.

After procuring equipment, we drove to a farm and joined Uncle Gerald and his children – O.S., Van, Gaynelle, Jack and Pat. Pat was the cousin with whom I shared his mother's milk when we were babes in Ropesville in 1933. This time Aunt Margaret had stayed home in Tishomingo with the youngest of Gerald's children – Loutrelle, Mike and Billy.

That cotton picking trip was the last time I saw eighteen-year-old O.S. He soon joined the Army Air Corps and became a B-17 gunner. After training, he was assigned to the 8th Air Force's 338th Heavy Bombardment Squadron at Snetterton Heath Air Base in England. From January to May 1944 his bomb group suffered the highest aircraft loss rate in the 8th Air Force. O.S.'s B-17 was shot down over France on February 6, 1944. He is buried in the American Cemetery at Epimal, France.

The farm was exciting to me. Cotton fields surrounded the farmyard. We were quartered in a small farm worker house. It must have been Sunday because I remember running down cotton rows and playing with my cousins on a bright sunny day. My cousins, well experienced in farm work, assured me that picking cotton was not fun. But I was eager to use our new equipment and happy when we headed to the cotton field the next morning. Our sacks were sized to one's pulling strength. Mine was about six feet long. My mother's sack was about midway between mine and my father's twelve-foot-long sack.

By mid-morning the sun was blazing hot. Dust swirled from whirlwinds that danced across the fields. My enthusiasm waned as sweat turned to dirty ringlets down my face. My fingers were nicked by the sharp tines of the dried-open cotton bolls. I soon lagged behind crying and complaining about the heat and hard work. My complaints were unheeded. I was of working age, unlike my little brother who frolicked about and entertained

himself and others with his antics. I resented it and whined that I had to work all day in the hot sun while my brother was free to play.

I should explain that we were "pulling" bolls, not "picking" cotton. When cotton is "picked," it is plucked from the seed boll with the picker's fingers and the boll remains on the cotton stalk. By the 1940s, picking cotton was not necessary because cotton gins had the capability of separating cotton from the bolls, as well as separating seeds from the cotton. That allowed the picker to "pull" bolls from the cotton stalk with the cotton in the boll. The mechanical innovation made the job of hand-harvesting cotton much easier and quicker.

We wore lightweight cotton gloves to remove the dry bolls from the cotton stalks. Instead of using fingers to pick cotton out of the boll, one boll at a time, several bolls could be pulled simultaneously from the stalk using both hands. The gloves helped but they did not prevent pricks from the sharp points of the dry, brittle bolls. From my experience pulling bolls, I shudder to think about Southern plantation slaves who "picked" cotton from the spiny bolls with bare fingers.

A day in the life of migrants began with breakfast before daylight. Sherley Anne Williams' beautiful prose in *Working Cotton*[166] illustrates a fall morning in a cotton field:

> *We gets to the fields early, before it is even light. Sometimes I still be asleep. It be cold, cold, cold. The field fire send up a gray trail to the hazy sky. Everyone speak in smoky whispers. "'Don't get too close that fire, Shelan." This side warm, other side cold; both sides can't get warm at once. "Sun be out soon," Daddy say. "Burn off this fog and the dew."*

After a hearty breakfast of bacon, eggs and homemade biscuits covered with flour gravy, we went to the fields just at daybreak, to be ready as soon as the sun dried the dew from the cotton. A small campfire was started, and a pot of pinto beans that had soaked in water overnight was nestled into the coals. Biscuits from the morning meal and leftovers from the previous evening's supper were wrapped and secured from ants, flies and yellow jackets. With the first rays of sun streaming across the fields, we strapped on our knee pads, pulled on our gloves, shouldered the sack strap, shuffled forward on our knees between two long rows of cotton, and began pulling bolls from the cotton stalks on both sides. In tall cotton I could walk and pull bolls without getting on my knees. Adults crawled to protect their backs from bending over all day.

Sherley Anne Williams:

Cotton smell like morning, sometime, kind of damp. It smell dusty now it's warm, like if you get too close, you sneeze. The rows of cotton stretch as far as I can see. Daddy pick so smooth and fast. You see him reach for a bunch of cotton, then you see him pull his hand out of the sack. The cotton's gone, may be in his sack, but you never seen my daddy put it there. Daddy's cotton sack so long, they have to fold it double to weigh it. Take a long time to empty his sack into the trailer.

When our sacks were full we hoisted them on our backs, walked to the cotton wagon and hooked our sacks to the weight scales. My father carefully observed the owner or field boss record the weights to make sure we weren't cheated. He recorded the poundage of each weighing in our weight book. My parents often complained that the "weight man" rounded off weights to next lowest pound even if the weight was closer to the next highest pound. Observation of the weighing operation angered me and instilled a lifelong resentment of the power that the owners, living in nice houses, had over workers.

Weighing and emptying was the only time we paused to talk to fellow pickers and drink from our canvas water bags that stayed in the shade under the wagon. The talk centered invariably on comparisons of the just-weighed cotton and the total for the day. Restroom needs were accomplished during weighing breaks. Portable toilet facilities were unknown luxuries. Men and boys voided anyplace out of sight of womenfolk. Unless the cotton stalks were high and still leafy, women were faced with losing picking time by hiking back to the farmyard.

Cotton pickers loved "tall" cotton and coined a crude double-entendre – "Shittin' in tall cotton." First, it implied that we migrants made more money when the crop was plentiful and easy to pick. Second, it referred quite literally to another benefit of tall cotton – we could drop our pants and squat without being seen.

Sherley Anne Williams on lunch time:

Mamma bring cornbread for lunch, and greens. Sometime it's a little piece of meat in your bowl.

At noon my mother and the other women stopped pulling bolls to fix "dinner," as we called lunch. Putting the meal together included final seasoning of the beans that had cooked on the campfire and warming up food prepared the night before. The men picked another round of cotton while the meal was readied. We ate off of tin plates, sitting on our cotton sacks in the

shade of a tree or the cotton wagon. As my mother put away the leftovers and rinsed our utensils, my father totaled the pounds we had accumulated and calculated our morning earnings.

We were paid a dollar for each hundred pounds of cotton we harvested. One day, after I had become an efficient worker, we set a goal of harvesting a ton of cotton. To reach that two-thousand-pound target, we each had to pull more bolls than we had ever done in one day. My father's goal was one thousand pounds, my mother's six hundred, mine three hundred, and my brother agreed to work hard to get the last hundred pounds. We never worked harder or with more purpose. We met our goal and earned twenty dollars. That was our highest for a day's earnings.

Sherley Anne Williams:

> *It's always kids in the field; sometime they be your friend. But you hardly ever see the same kids twice, 'specially after we moves to a new field.*

When the cotton crop was "in" at one farm, we moved to another, and another, until the season ended. On some job sites, we made camp in a shady spot. At other places, owners would provide makeshift housing. I well remember one of the farm dwellings. It had thin walls, a dirt floor and no furnishings. We drew water from a nearby cistern until a dead rat came up in the bucket one evening. After that, we walked a long way to a well near the owner's house.

In September 1942, Uncle Gerald returned to Tishomingo to put his kids in school. My family followed the crop northwest until we reached the flat plains of the Llano Estacado. The Llano Estacado comprises 37,000 square miles of the High Plains. It straddles the Texas-New Mexico border and roughly covers the landmass between Amarillo and Midland-Odessa Texas. The region is a very flat, treeless, semiarid plateau with an imperceptible slope in elevation from the northeast at 5000 feet to 3000 feet at its southeast terminus.[167] The view to the horizon was one contiguous cotton field. Only scattered barns, houses and windmills rose above the ground.

Our last cotton-picking jobs were near Ralls in Crosby County, Texas. There, as September drew to a close, the cotton harvest petered out. The cotton crops on the plains did not grow verdantly high or produce the high yields per acre that we found around Vernon. We were harvesting the last stands of Llano Estacado cotton and making less money than ever.

A late fall chill and cold rain had arrived. We worked whenever the cotton was dry enough to be pulled. Instead of the summer heat we had started

with, we now worked in blustery cold weather, with occasional snow flurries. We were among the straggling few cotton pickers left on the plains. We continued to work a few days here and there until no more bolls were left to pull.

As winter approached in 1942, the cotton crop was very thin on the last farm we worked. The owner, whose name I believe was Mr. Ragland,[168] was determined to get the crop in and gladly hired us. He put us up in a small, uninsulated house with a cookstove for heat. There were only a few hours of sun during the day. Cold winds blew dark clouds of dust. At night we went to sleep shivering, bundled under thick homemade quilts.

With winter cold setting in and nowhere to go but south to warmer weather, we ran into some good luck. Besides his large farming operation on the plains, Mr. Ragland had ranchland and a small twenty-acre farm in Crosby County's cattle country. The farm was fourteen miles south of Crosbyton, Crosby County's seat.

Ragland was surely more interested in helping us than operating the distant farm. In the early 1900s the little farm was probably an adjunct to the ranch's cattle operations, serving as a place to grow feed grain for winter cattle foraging. It is extremely doubtful that the farm ever grew enough cotton to sustain a family. By 1942, mechanized farming and irrigation on the flat plains obviated the practicality of operating the small farm far from the center of Ragland's principal farming operations. Proof of that was the fact that the Crosby farm was allocated a team of horses and early-1900s farming equipment, not a tractor.

My dad told Ragland that he had spent most of his life farming with horses and felt he could make a go of the farm if given the opportunity. They shook hands on an agreement for us to make a crop "on the halves" – meaning we did all the work and split the crop with Mr. Ragland. The share-cropping deal included a house on the property.

On a cold November 1942 morning, we loaded our truck for the trip to our new home. At Crosbyton, we left the highway and headed south down a dirt and gravel road that was designated Ranch Road 651 in the 1950s when Texas' system of farm and ranch-to-market roads began to be paved. Four miles from Crosbyton, we reached the north edge of the Caprock Escarpment. The escarpment divides the flat, treeless Llano Estacado from the canyon lands and rolling plains below the Caprock.

The Caprock escarpment begins on the north and west sides of the Llano Estacado. At varying hundreds of feet in height, it appears as a fortification against entry to the High Plains when approaching from the south and east. Conquistador Francisco Vásquez de Coronado, in search of the Golden Cities of Cibola, reported sighting the escarpment in 1541. Coronado's name

for the High Plains, Llano Estacado, meant "Palisaded Plain," (not "Staked Plains" as it has been fancifully interpreted) because it was bordered by the steep Caprock ridge that Coronado visualized as a palisade.[169]

The Handbook of Texas Online completes the Caprock description:

> *The Caprock escarpment was formed by erosion about one million to two million years ago. Prehistoric nomadic hunters, Plains Apaches, and Comanche lived in the region. The Spanish explorer Vásquez de Coronado traveled the area in 1541. The Caprock escarpment forms a natural boundary line between the High Plains and the lower rolling plains of West Texas. It stretches from the Panhandle into Central Texas and can be seen most prominently in ... Dickens [and] Crosby ... counties, where it reaches its highest elevations, rising abruptly above the plains at 200, 500, or as much as 1,000 feet. The east-facing wall is often cut by rivers, forming canyons such as Palo Duro Canyon.*[170]

Crosby County, Texas L7 Ranch land and Caprock, 2004

My dad stopped the truck at the edge of the Caprock precipice. From there we gazed at the wide open expanse before us. I didn't have any idea of what lay ahead, but topographically it looked beautiful and welcoming compared to the dusty high plains and transient life behind us. From the edge of the escarpment, as far as the eye could see, lay the 34,000-acre L7 Ranch.[171] The L7 lands embraced the first cattle ranches under the Caprock – ranches dating back to the late 1870s. In 1883 the L7 was in the West Pasture of the

half-million acre Espuela Land and Cattle Company headquartered in Dickens County, the next county to the east.[172]

The region below us was a storied part of the clash between settlers and the indigenous Plains Indians – Comanche, Kiowa and Apache – who claimed the area as hunting and wintering grounds for hundreds of years. The Indians fought valiantly, won some battles but lost the war against Euro-American settlers who began to arrive after the Civil War. At the end of the 1870s, determined U.S. Army Cavalry forces led by Colonel Ranald Mackenzie pursued and fought the Plains Indians until the Indians were forced to submit to Oklahoma reservation life. Within a few miles of our perch was the site of the Army Supply Camp on the Freshwater Fork of the White River from which Colonel Mackenzie launched campaigns against the Indians in 1872 and 1874.[173] When the buffalo (properly "bison") that sustained the Indians were exterminated in the 1880s, the Caprock canyon lands frontier was opened to cattle ranching. Farming on the L7 lands below the Caprock was never intensive and what little there was became unprofitable after large-scale agriculture, spurred by deep-well irrigation, began on the level plains above the Caprock.

From our vantage point, there was not a house or farm in sight. Unlike the high plains, the rugged country below us was festooned with hillocks, canyons and mesas. The landscape was lush green, carpeted with prairie grass and studded with stands of short cedar and prickly shrubs. Mesquite and wild plum thickets grew randomly.

In 2004 I revisited the area and took photographs from the Caprock rim where my parents, my brother and I stopped that day in November 1942. The only change was that the road was paved and railings were installed on the steep grade from the crest of the Caprock to the Canyonlands below.

The region would become my family's home for the next six years. After we took in the view, my dad started the engine, clutched the transmission into second gear, and let the old truck coast down the grade into the great vastness. I was jumping out of my skin with excitement. It looked like an adventure into the country where Indians still lurked. Practically, however, I was happy because we were going to have our own house again and I would be going back to school. The road was straight for long stretches, but it rolled over hilly ridges so we didn't see the house until we were almost upon it. Dad stopped at a barbed wire gate. Mother got out and opened it. As we proceeded through the gate and waited for her to close it, I sat thunderstruck at the sight of the big two-story house before us.

The house and grounds had the look of abandonment, but the presence of farm animals and equipment indicated the place was somewhat tended. Beyond the house were a barn, a corral and a couple of grain storage buildings. There were whiteface cattle grazing on a hillside and two milk cows and some horses in a fenced pasture next to the barn.

The old house was surrounded by thousands of acres of ranchland. In my memory it looked like the big house I saw years later in the James Dean, Elizabeth Taylor and Rock Hudson film, *Giant*. The hitching rail in front was a throwback to a time before gas-driven vehicles. The house was surrounded by a picket fence – we called it a "wood paling" fence. I was wide-eyed and excited. There wasn't a cultivated field in sight. We were living on a ranch! It turned out that Mr. Ragland's cotton field was a mile farther down the road on the flood plain of the White River – the only relatively flat terrain in the area.

While my parents brought our belongings into the house, Tommy and I explored. The front door opened into a cavernous living room with a huge fireplace and a few pieces of furniture. Dad and Mom took a side room on the south side of the living room. The landing at the foot of the staircase on the north side of the living room became a sleeping nook for Tommy and me. The living room fireplace was open through the wall into the dining room that had a long, rough hewn table. The kitchen, with a wood-burning cookstove, a firewood box and a small cupboard, opened to the backyard. Up the dark staircase, on the second floor, were two rooms with dusty boxes of miscellany, dated ranching magazines and debris in closets. The house was built for a large family.

There was no sign that anyone had recently lived in the house. Whoever had been taking care of the livestock lived elsewhere. Sandstorms had blown across these lands since the house had last been occupied. Wind had sifted sand and dust through unsealed door and window encasements. Layers of dust covered everything. We fell to sweeping, dusting and cleaning to make the place livable.

The old house was spooky. My brother and I would never go in it by ourselves at night. We were sure it was haunted and that ghosts resided on the dusty, musty second floor. We only went up there during the day and then with great trepidation. The slightest creak would send us flying downstairs and outside. At night Tommy and I fell asleep scared at the foot of the menacing, dark stairs. Our parents had no tolerance of our fears and left us to our imaginations about ghosts coming down the stairs to get us in the middle of the night.

Naturally, there was no electricity, water or plumbing in the house. Lack of those conveniences was not even noticed. We were used to lighting by ker-

osene lanterns, outhouse pit toilets and carrying water. This time our domestic water came from a small, crystal clear spring that was perhaps a hundred yards from the house. The everyday chore of toting two buckets of cool, fresh spring water to the house fell to me. Tommy was too small to carry a bucket full of water, but he usually went ahead of me on the trail, making noise to scare away rattlesnakes that I was deathly afraid of. There was a large pile of firewood behind the house. I was responsible for splitting kindling and keeping the wood boxes in the kitchen and by the fireplace filled. The woodpile was "snaky" so I always removed firewood very carefully.

Billy McIver, 9 years old, Crosbyton School, 1942-43

On November 10, 1942, soon after we moved into the big house, I had my ninth birthday. I enrolled in the third grade at Crosbyton Elementary School after missing the first two months of the 1942-43 school year. My parents couldn't afford to replace the third-grade workbooks they purchased at the Dalhart School, so my teacher made-do with my Dalhart workbooks. That was humiliating, but being back in school compensated for my embarrassment. I was in a class with several Billys – Billy Bob, Billy Joe and Billy Dale. To distinguish between us, our teacher called us by our first name and a second name. I became Billy Mac.

I was among the first kids on the school bus on dark winter mornings and the last to get home in the afternoon. A couple of ruffians made the fifteen-mile bus ride miserable, but I finally got up enough courage to complain

to my teacher. She arranged for me to report the problem to the principal. The principal put a stop to the physical harassment, which saved me some thrashings by the bullies, but did nothing stop their verbal harassment. They made fun of me because my dad was a farmer, not a ranch hand like their fathers. All the kids had store-bought lunch sacks and boxes. A few had boxes stenciled with comic book characters that were coming into vogue. I was ashamed of my one-gallon syrup tin lunch box. I was also ashamed of my lunch, because my sandwiches were made with homemade biscuits instead of sliced white bread like those of the other kids.

As usual there was no money for presents on that cold, snowy 1942 Christmas, but we did have a Christmas tree. Dad cut down a small cedar, dragged it through the snow to the house, and fashioned a stand for it. We decorated the tree with threaded strands of popcorn and cranberries. On Christmas day Mother turned out a feast in the oven of the big wood-fired cookstove. I remember that meal well. We had roast pork, gravy, cranberry sauce, sweet potatoes, yeast rolls and a cake with sweet canned pineapple on top and between layers. The radiated heat from the hot iron cookstove and a roaring fire in the fireplace warmed the dining room. My father offered prayerful thanks for our deliverance from homelessness. The following Sunday we drove to Crosbyton to attend church services for the first time since we left Austin. We closed out the year happy, safe and grounded.

We spent a bitter cold winter in the Crosby County ranch house. The county's average minimum temperature in January is 26 degrees fahrenheit. Lows on many days hit zero degrees. The spring froze solid and my father had to break it up with an axe. Ice and snow stayed on the ground for weeks at a time, but we managed to survive the winter of 1942-43 without freezing. The fireplace was largely ineffective. Most of the heat went up the chimney. With high ceilings and thin, uninsulated walls, the house could not hold heat even with a fire roaring in the fireplace. Through that long winter, we spent the coldest days huddled around the fireplace that only heated the space around its hearth. Even then, we had to rotate ourselves to warm both sides of our bodies. At night we slept under heavy quilts.

Snow piled up in drifts on the house, outbuildings and fence rows. Cottontail rabbits became easy prey. When flushed, the rabbits tired quickly, trying to run away in deep snow. When exhausted, they sat shivering, and we picked them up, cut their throats and brought them home for our next meal.

Besides fetching water from the spring daily for drinking and cooking, we carried additional water to the house on Saturdays for bathing. Bath water was heated on the kitchen wood stove and dumped in a big galvanized washtub in the dining room. We took turns bathing in the same water. My parents

went first because they could stand the hot water better than Tommy and me. Tommy and I fought over which of us would be last. My mother made us take turns. I hated being last because I suspected that Tommy peed in the water. If he had, he would swear he didn't, and then admit it after I had my bath. Little Stinker, Tommy Tinker!

Dad's monthly haircuts were worse than weekly baths. He sheared us with a pair of old clippers that snagged, pulled our hair and left us itching from tiny clippings down our backs. We squirmed, complained and insisted he had cut enough, but he persisted until he was satisfied.

The farm came with two Percheron workhorses, a wagon, and riding implements: buster, planter and cultivator plows. The equipment fell between the age of walking plows and tractor-drawn plows. The distinction between walking and riding plows has historical significance. In an *Alkali Trails* chapter on the advent of West Texas farming, Texas Tech University historian Professor William Curry Holden explains:

> *The West Texas farmer had one trait which he usually acquired after his arrival in the country, and a trait which his eastern brother did not have – an aversion for all kinds of walking farm implements. When he migrated to the west he carried with, as a rule, the farm tools he had previously used, which consisted of a walking turning plow, a walking planter, and a walking cultivator. He had scarcely arrived when he began to develop a strong dislike for walking. The reasons were two fold. In the first place, an aversion for walking is an indigenous trait of the country. The plains Indians, especially the Comanche, had a profound contempt for walking. A Comanche off his horse was indeed an awkward sight. The cowboy had an uncanny endurance as long as he was on horseback. ... But, to ask him to walk for an hour ... was the surest way to break down his morale. When the farmer arrived he found the same natural influences silently working on him. In the second place, the amount of ground one man could cultivate in West Texas was so much greater than that one man could till in a country where stumps, rocks, and grass prevailed, that much more walking was necessary for the requisite amount of plowing and cultivation. The result was that the newcomer, as soon as possible, exchanged his turning plow for a sulky plow, his walking planter for a riding planter, and his walking cultivator for a riding cultivator.*[174]

The conversion from riding implements to tractors occurred in the 1930s. We were among the very few in West Texas farming with horses in 1942-43. Only people who were down and out, as we were, would have even attempted it. Thanks to God, grit and gracious Mr. Ragland, we had a place to live and we somehow managed to scratch out a living for a year on that tiny farm.

In addition to the plow horses, there was a sorrel cow pony we named Sarlo. A couple of milk cows with calves, a flock of chickens, and a sow with piglets of butchering size provided a plentitude of milk, eggs and bacon. We also had a lot of rattlesnakes. Rattlesnakes were everywhere – around the house, under the house, in the woodpile, in the barn, in the fields and in the pastures. We killed dozens of them and had a fine collection of rattles that we kept in a large Quaker Oats box.

It took a lot of work to survive so far away from commerce. We had cows to milk and animals to feed and tend. Except for the sow, all the animals foraged off the land – "free range," as in today's high-brow term for animals raised "organically." The milk cows were fed a little grain mixed with nutritious feed-store cottonseed meal while they were being milked. We fed egg laying chickens some store-bought feed that was necessary to encourage production and hard shells. The sow and pigs foraged and were "slopped" with our table scraps and leftover milk. The piglets had to be watched carefully when the cows were penned for milking because they would suckle the cows dry. The livestock watered at a large spring-fed waterhole.

Like all country kids, I became adept at handling firearms and hunting game. We had three guns: my dad's single-load 16-gauge shotgun, called "Long Tom," a .22-caliber bolt-action rifle and a single-shot, pistol-grip .410-gauge shotgun. Dad taught me gun safety and marksmanship. His gun rules were simple: "Never aim a gun at anything you don't intend to shoot," "Always keep the safety on until ready to fire," "Always point the gun to the sky until you are prepared to fire," and "Never bring a loaded gun in the house." He said "unloaded" guns were the ones that usually killed people.

The Ragland pasture and adjoining L7 ranchland provided us with game that supplemented meals of pinto beans, cornbread, fried chicken, and home-butchered pork. I became proficient at shooting cottontail rabbits with our .22-caliber rifle. I shot quail and dove with my father's long-barreled "Long Tom." Wild fowl and rabbits were a big part of our diet.

We trapped quail by setting floorless screened boxes on ground sprinkled with a handful of corn kernels. We pulled away dirt to make a small entrance under the box and scattered corn around the opening to entice the birds into the trap. Once inside, the quail seldom figured out how to get out. We checked the traps daily, extracted captured quail through a door in the top of

the box and pinched their heads off. Occasionally a rattlesnake or bull snake would find and consume the trapped birds before we returned. In those instances, if the snakes were still there, we would flip the box over and blast them with the .410 shotgun.

Packs of coyotes thrived in these ranchlands and were a constant threat to chickens that ran loose during the day. The chickens were cooped up at night and let out at milking time in the morning. The job fell to me to hide out in the barn loft with the .22 rifle and keep an eye on the flock in the morning before going to the cotton field or to school. I scared off a lot of coyotes, but I didn't bring any of the cunning creatures down.

Dad got back into livestock trading and attending auctions. Starting from scratch he built up an inventory of trading animals. He would leave with a cow or a yearling in a trailer hitched to the pickup truck and usually returned with some profit in cash or more livestock than he left with. Occasionally he returned with his tail between his legs with little to show for his absence – except for a bottle of whiskey that he tried to keep hidden from Mom. Those trips would be followed by loud arguments with my mother. She accused him of carousing and drinking up the profits. Dad passed setbacks off as bad luck.

One time he came back from a trading trip with a mare that was a "throw in" on a deal. We named the mare "Dilly," which came about because Dad introduced her to us saying, "Ain't she a dilly?" She was a handsome animal but turned out to be lazy and stubborn.

On another trading trip, Dad returned with two baby goats for my brother and me. Mom gave him hell for it, but Tommy and I loved the goats. Dad also brought us a bag of lemon drops. We named one of the goats Lemon Drops and called him Lemmy.

It was a romantic time for Tommy and me. We had horses to ride and large stretches of rugged ranchland to explore and play on. We quickly became accomplished and fearless horsemen. We conducted mock battles over terrain where Indians once hunted buffalo and the U.S. Cavalry and Comanche fought for sovereignty seventy years before. Sometimes we fettered the horses in a shady spot near the livestock watering spring and played cowboys fighting off Indians trying to steal our livestock.

We rode with abandon everywhere. At first there was only the one saddle that came with Sarlo so we usually rode bareback, pell-mell, up and down gullies and through mesquite thickets. When it was time to go home, we raced sweaty Dilly and Sarlo to the barn. That was the only time Dilly would even try to outrun Sarlo.

Early in 1943 Dad and the Percherons broke the hard ground in the cotton field with the buster. In the spring he hitched the horses to the planter

and put cottonseeds in the ground. Cotton would be our money crop. Corn, planted later, provided animal feed but no direct revenue. Our hopes were high for a good crop and indeed it was good. Winter rain and snow provided plenty of moisture for early planting and sufficient, timely rain fell that summer.

I loved harnessing the team and hitching them to the wagon for the ride down the road to the cotton field. That was fun, but the work that followed wasn't. During the summer my father hitched the team to the cultivator that turned the soil between the cotton and corn rows. The operation prepared the soil to better absorb moisture during summer rains. Busting the soil in the spring and cultivating it during the summer in arid West Texas constituted the basis of successful "dry land farming." Professor Holden describes the development of dry land farming techniques:

> *The average settler had profound contempt for scientific farming, "book farming" as he called it; after experiencing a few dry spells, he developed a system of his own. He seldom deliberately carried on experimentation; but he learned much from his neighbors, and made the most of his own successes and failures. The fundamental principles of dry land farming were simple. It stood to reason that if in an average year there would be a limited amount of rainfall, two things had to be done. First, the soil must be cultivated in such a way as to catch and retain the greatest amount of moisture; second, crops must be planted which had the most powerful drought-resisting qualities. Both reason and experience taught that the land should be broken deep early in the season in order to catch the winter rains. If the crops were planted as early as possible in the spring, it would tend to enable the plants to mature before the extremely hot weather of mid-summer. The fields had to be cultivated frequently in order to keep a loose mulch on the surface of the ground. The mulch broke up the capillary action in the ground, and made it possible to retain the greatest amount of moisture for the plants.*[175]

Six days a week that summer I hitched the draft horses to the wagon while Dad, Mom and Tommy finished the morning chores. With us, lunch and work implements aboard the wagon, the Percherons were headed down the road to the cotton field. Upon arrival, I unhitched the horses from the wagon and hitched them to the plow while Dad sharpened our hoes. Tommy scurried around for some firewood. Mom built a fire to cook a pot of beans that had soaked overnight to go with whatever meat and bread she

had brought for lunch. While my father plowed with the team, my mother, Tommy and I hoed weeds that the cultivator left standing in the cotton rows. Weed removal was essential to preserve precious moisture only for the cotton crop. Mom checked the beans and kept the fire going at the end of each round. When the beans were done, the sun would be burning hot on our backs. With few clouds in the sky to offer shade, we filled our plates from the pot of beans, forked on other victuals and sat cross-legged on the ground in the shade of the wagon for lunch.

One evening after work Dad killed an opossum that my parents decided we would have for lunch the next day. They both swore that "possum was as good eatin' as rabbit." The animal was skinned, cleaned, cut up and left on a block of ice overnight. The next day Mom fried it over the campfire for lunch. Tommy and I were skeptical all along and we were right. It was tough and inedible – nothing like rabbit fried tender.

I was aware of the food chain, but not as an intellectual concept. We preyed on cottontail rabbits, quail and dove, and raised animals for food. But I was not fully prepared for how rattlesnakes sustained themselves until one day in the cotton field we heard a rabbit squealing in distress. Tommy and I ran to investigate. We found a big, ugly diamondback rattlesnake with a baby rabbit halfway down its throat. We whacked the snake mercilessly to pieces with our hoes, but we could not save the little bunny. We hated rattlesnakes already, and that only increased our determination to never let one get away alive.

After one pass through the cotton field with the cultivator and hoes, we turned our attention to getting the corn crop going. As William Holden pointed out, "It was possible to plant feed crops later in the summer. They could get their growth in the cooler weather and early fall."[176] The cornfield was fenced on a ridge above the house – not in the cotton field down the road. The corn stalks were left standing after the corn was removed the previous year. The cows and horses were allowed to forage on the corn stalks. The field had to be cleaned up with a harrow before planting.

I could handle the team from the wagon seat and the walk-behind harrow. I wasn't big enough to operate the plows. It took more strength than I had to keep the horses pulling straight and actuate the lever that lifted and lowered the plows when turning at the end of each row. I was thrilled when Dad gave me the job of harrowing the cornfield. I felt very big walking behind the harrow, guiding the horses with long reins, breaking up the previous year's corn stalks and smoothing the ground for planting.

In the fall of 1943, the four of us harvested the cotton and transported the crop in the wagon to the Kalgary gin about eight miles away. When the

corn ears were mature, we "headed" them with razor sharp knives and tossed the ears into the horse-drawn wagon. The horses were trained to obey voice commands – "gee" to go forward and "haw" to stop – as we progressed down the rows. Reins were only needed to turn the team when we reached the end of the rows we were harvesting. The cash proceeds from the cotton sale were divided equally between Mr. Ragland and my dad. The harvested corn was placed into separate cribs, one for Mr. Ragland and one for us. We shelled our corn with a hand-operated corn sheller into "toe sacks" – burlap bags that held fifty pounds of livestock feed, pinto beans and other commodities.

We worked hard that year but it wasn't all work. Although neighbors weren't near, we made a few friends. The father of one of my schoolmates was the L7 Ranch foreman. My friend, Darlene, lived at the ranch headquarters just under the Caprock near Crosbyton. My gregarious father made friends with everyone. He knew the ranch boss and did some livestock reconnoitering for him at the Lubbock stockyard and auction house. I first visited the ranch compound with my dad. While he was probably enjoying a swig or two of bootleged Four Roses whiskey and talking business, the foreman's daughter took me on a tour of the house and grounds. In addition to the big main house, with cool verandas under ageless oak trees, there were bunkhouses, corrals, barns, various livestock holding pens and vegetable gardens that covered several acres.

Darlene invited me to her birthday party – the first I ever attended. She was a tomboy and knew her way around livestock and horses. I was smitten with her but she was more interested in ranching activities than me. I visited the ranch with my dad every chance I got. While he and her father talked business, she and I had the run of the place. The ranch was all Wild West to me. We climbed to the top of a corral fence and watched cowhands unsaddle and feed a remuda of mounts at the end of their day. We toured the tack room with its pungent horse, sweat, liniment and leather odors. The tack room, alongside the horse stable, had a long rack of damp saddle blankets draped over saddles to dry. It also had bridles hanging on pegs, and a worktable with coils of leather and tools for repairing riding gear.

The L7 Ranch had a colorful past and our old house was in the middle of the grassland where Crosby County Canyonlands pioneer ranchers established their headquarters. The first ranchers were William B. Slaughter and the John and Charles Hensley brothers. The Hensley ranch was known as the 22 Outfit. By 1879, both were established on McDonald Creek. Slaughter Ranch was on the west side of the creek and the 22 Outfit on the east side. They took water from the same spring.[177]

William Slaughter hauled lumber from Fort Worth and built a four-room "boxed house" as his ranch headquarters on his side of McDonald Creek. Cowhand Rollie Burns, who began punching cattle for the Hensleys in 1881, described the less sophisticated 22 Outfit's headquarters in the book *Rollie Burns: An Account of the Ranching Industry on the South Plains*, written by Professor Holden as though Burns had written it:

> *The Hensleys, as did most of the West Texas cattle pioneers, built "a half dug-out" about ten by twenty feet dug in the side of the creek bank. The walls were built up about three feet high with poles. The roof was made by placing poles close together and covering them with buffalo hides. There were no windows at all. In the back side was a fireplace on which the cooking was done. In the winter time the boys slept on the floor, and in the summer they slept out of doors.*[178]

The historic boundaries of the Slaughter and 22 Outfit ranches were mapped in 2001 by the Center for Archaeological Studies of Southwest Texas State University. The university's archaeology study, *A Cultural Resources Inventory of the L7 Ranch*, assessed the potential environmental and cultural impact of turning 4,000 acres of the L7 Ranch into a Texas Army National Guard tank and infantry training site.[179] The map shows that we lived on the old 22 Outfit's ranchland.

My father's work for the L7 Ranch foreman at the Lubbock auction house gave him opportunities to make a few deals for himself. He occasionally picked up a cow and a calf as pay for "rep-ing" for the L7. Occasionally, Dad took me to the Lubbock auction. It was a fascinating experience to watch him work at something that was so complex to me. I couldn't understand a word the auctioneer said. Every once in a while, Dad would enter the bidding. Until I caught on to his technique, I wouldn't know he had bid until he got up to go claim his purchase. Dad and the auctioneer would make discreet eye contact and Dad would gesture "yes" or "no" in a manner that only the auctioneer could read. The process was a business game, played by experienced traders like my dad. Most of the bidders were drinking buddies who gathered at the end of the day to have a few shots of illegal booze, laugh and kibitz about deals made and lost. They knew each other's tendencies and probably had a good idea of what each was out to buy that day.

One day we were sitting on the front row of the auction ring seats. The ringmaster was running milk cows with calves around the ring in lots of two or three cows at a time. The calves were spooked at suddenly being thrust into the limelight of noise and people. They ran wild-eyed around the ring

kicking up their heels. Dad warned me several times to stop resting my leg on the railing in front of us. At one point he did some bidding and left to claim his purchase. I resumed slouching in my seat with my leg hanging into the ring. Without warning one of startled calves ran by and kicked my shin. I yelped in pain and jerked my bloody, rapidly swelling leg off the rail. When my dad came back, I was sitting there sniffling over another lesson learned the hard way.

Unlike the dry plains above the Caprock, the area below had plenty of water. The Southwest Texas University survey reported, "The eastern portion of the L7 Ranch is rich in seasonal, spring-fed streams. ... Plunge pools are common ... along those streams and these pools of water provide a reliable source of water most of the year. Prehistorically ... springs and water-filled plunge pools were probably more common and perhaps supplied water to aboriginal people year-around."[180]

When we arrived in Caprock country, the L7 was sprinkled with windmills that pumped water from shallow wells into steel stock-watering tanks. In some places dry gullies were dammed at low points to capture rainwater. Some of the large reservoirs not only collected rainwater but were spring water fed as well and held year-round water. Some were stocked with sun perch and catfish.

Crosby County Ranch swimming hole, 2005

There was a large spring-fed pool on the Ragland property. In the summer of 1943, Tommy and I would take off our clothes in the barn, put a bridle on Sarlo and ride naked over a ridge to a waterhole that was always full of cool spring water. The pool was shaded in the afternoon by scrubby cedar trees. Our swimming hole was only waist deep for me, but it was big enough for Tommy and me to frolic in and wide enough to dog-paddle a few strokes across. I learned to swim in that waterhole.

One day, returning from our naked romp at the waterhole, we topped the rise looking down on the house. Visitors had arrived and we were in plain view. We veered quickly to screen ourselves, but it was too late. We were seen. We got to the barn, dressed ourselves and sheepishly walked to the house to be greeted with a chorus of jibes and laughs.

The best day of the week for my family was Saturday when we went to Crosbyton. Safety concerns not being what they are today, Tommy and I rode to town sitting on the lowered tailgate of our old pickup truck. When we got to the Caprock grade and the truck slowed down, we would drop to the road, hold onto the tailgate and run behind the truck. When the truck reached the top of the grade, we jumped back to our tailgate seats as the truck picked up speed. It was a very dangerous thing to do. One day Tommy, who always tested limits, didn't jump back on in time and went sprawling on the road face first. I pounded my fist on the cab top to get Dad to stop. Tommy was badly scratched up, especially his nose, elbows and knees. I got a whipping for participating and was blamed for his injuries. He got patched up in town. But we continued to perform this trick when we thought we could get away with it.

Aside from "town Saturdays," our main recreation was fishing. There was a large creek on the L7 Ranch. It was a half-day wagon trip northwest of our house. We went there several times to fish. By dead reckoning and close inspection of the Southwest Texas University map, I can conclude that our excursions took us across the L7 to Turkey Creek, which runs parallel to McDonald Creek a couple of miles to the east.[181] The stream was a catfish habitat, and sun perch were abundant as well. There were shade trees along the banks which provided shade for our camp and cover for some of the deep holes where big catfish stayed cool in the afternoon heat.

The trip was a rough cross-country horseback and wagon ride. We loaded the wagon with fishing tackle and enough supplies to last a few days. We hitched the Percheron to the wagon, saddled Sarlo and Dilly and set off on a journey to where the creek was widest and shaded. Upon arrival, we set up camp around the wagon and put out trot lines with baited hooks to snare the big catfish that scavenged the creek bottoms at night. The catfish didn't

move around much during the heat of the day. Instead, they stayed in the deepest of the cool, shaded pools. During the day, we fished for sun perch with cane poles and tried to entice the big catfish that could be seen clearly in the deepest pools. The lazy catfish seldom bit our baited hooks, but by late afternoon we always had a "mess" of fat perch and a few catfish for dinner. My mother sliced the fish from gills to tail, cleaned them out, scaled the perch, rolled all in salt, pepper and cornmeal, and dropped them into a deep skillet of sizzling bacon fat. We feasted on crispy fish and cornbread griddle cakes cooked in another skillet. The next morning my dad would "run" the trot lines that always yielded several big "cats" for eating that day.

Another recreation on L7 land was wild plum gathering. Trips to the plum thickets were full day affairs. We always encountered rattlesnakes along the way. We threw rocks at them and used long sticks to toy with them, making them angry and threatening before we beat them to death and extracted their rattles. Before we started picking plums, we had to find and dispose of rattlesnakes shading themselves under the spiky thickets. As we filled our pails, we ate the tart fruit until we were satiated. My mother made delicious plum jam with the fruit we brought home. According to Professor William Holden, we were carrying forth a custom established by the Indians and early settlers of the region:

> *Wild plums ... occurred in thickets at intervals along creeks, especially those of constant flow. The fruit, when ripe, was from a half-inch to one inch in diameter, red in color, and slightly sweet with considerable acid. It made excellent preserves with a wild, tart taste when cooked with sufficient sugar. The fruit was highly prized by frontier women before orchards were introduced. It was quite common for families to travel considerable distances in covered wagons and camp out for two or three days to gather wild plums.*[182]

My father's daughters – Jessie, Woodine, Pat and Babe – lived with their husbands in Lubbock, about fifty miles away on the high plains. They became a part of my life. My half-sister Jessie's son, Gene, loved to visit. We became best friends. Gene was a couple of years older. We still enjoy the irony that I am his Uncle Bill. I never missed an opportunity to introduce Gene as my nephew to doubting friends. Having close family nearby was wonderful. The best part was that my half-sister Woodine and her husband, Maenard Febra Dagley, came into our lives. They would become our safety net.

Although I usually referred to Maenard by his given name, he was best known as "Dag." Maenard loved hunting the plentiful game in the wide-open spaces around us. It wasn't clear to me until years later, but he also took a shine to my pretty mother, who apparently returned the compliment. Whether it was the hunting or my mother that drew him often to our place, he and several of his buddies spent a lot of time with us, hunting and enjoying my mother's cooking. Maenard cleaned up the upstairs rooms and brought in folding cots for himself and his friends. He and his entourage had the best and latest semi-automatic shotguns that could fire six shots without reloading. When free from work, my father hunted with them, carrying his old single-shot Long Tom. He always outshot the Lubbock city slickers with their fancy firepower.

Old Long Tom had a kick. If you didn't hold it tightly to your shoulder when firing it, the kick left a bruise. My mother was as handy with firearms as anyone. One day she was out hunting with Long Tom. While walking on a sandstone-cut bank, she flushed a covey of quail. She wheeled and fired. Long Tom's recoil knocked her from the cut bank into the gully below.

Maenard was the richest person I had ever known. He was a self-made man who came from a very large, very poor family in Floydada, Texas. He was a licensed pilot in the 1920s and a daredevil in early air shows. When he started visiting us, he operated a flight training school at his Dagley Field, near Lubbock. Between 1937 and 1943, he trained about a thousand West Texas pilots.[183] He and Woodine lived in a nice house and owned rental property in Lubbock. While my parents and everyone else in the family struggled through the Depression, Maenard and Woodine came out of it better off than before. They provided Woodine's mother Alta – my dad's ex-wife – with an apartment and financial support after she retired. They always drove a Cadillac or flew one of Maenard's Piper Cubs when they traveled.

Through the good graces of Mr. Ragland, Crosbyton was a wonderful respite from what we had been through the previous year. Despite the hard work and cold winter, the year on the Crosbyton County ranchlands provided great childhood memories. I loved the freedom of remote living, hunting, horseback riding and handling workhorses. I didn't like farming or fieldwork but they were a natural aspect of my life. That's what we did. The times were still hard but we had a roof over our heads, and best of all, my parents were getting along pretty well.

I loved school and was a good reader. I was a better speller than most and as good at sports as anyone. I was poor in mathematics. I think that missing the beginning of the third grade, as well as the confusion of changing schools, put me behind in mathematics. For lack of effort or whatever reason, I never

did well in math classes. At Crosbyton I was stumped by multiplication, and division was completely incomprehensible. My mother's sister Velma came for a visit and made it her business to teach me the multiplication tables. The last thing I wanted to deal with was math when I came home from school. Moreover, I wasn't receptive to Aunt Velma's teaching method because she made me feel stupid. The more she tried to teach, the more I stubbornly resisted.

As a sign of the times, Velma gave me lessons in social etiquette. Once she showed me the "correct way" to offer a cigarette to a lady and how to light it. She also impressed upon me that "nigger" women were referred to as "women." "Lady" was reserved for white women.

We became a part of the Crosbyton small-town farming and ranching community. Like everyone else in the region, we went to town on Saturday. It was a sad Saturday if rain made the road too muddy and slick to get to town. We sold butter and eggs at the Crosbyton grocery store. My mother did the weekly grocery shopping and got caught up in community gossip with other farm women. My father hung out in the domino hall where there was always some bootleg whiskey "out back."

Tommy and I were given money for milkshakes at the drugstore and tickets and popcorn at the picture show. Saturday matinees at the picture show were cowboy "shoot-'em-up" feature films and weekly serialized thrillers that always left the hero or heroine facing certain death. In the serials, Tarzan swung through the jungle on vines and fought lions, gorillas and evil men single-handedly, while saving Jane from countless perils. Buck Rogers and Flash Gordon dueled outer-space monsters with ray guns while zooming around on contraptions that stirred our imaginations about space travel. Cowboy flicks featured stars like Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, Hopalong Cassidy and the Lone Ranger. We also cheered a host of lesser-known, quick-draw sagebrush cowboys such as Tex Ritter, Johnny Mack Brown, Tom Mix and Lash LaRue.

Gone with the Wind came to Crosbyton while we were there. It was shown on a weeknight, so we had to make a special trip to town to see it. The film was risqué by Crosbyton's standards. Local adults had heard about Clark Gable's famous line to his co-star Vivien Leigh, "My dear, I don't give a damn." That "damn" alone made it a big draw. The movie nourished my Southern roots and added to my growing interest in American history.

In the fall of 1943 my father came home excited about a farm he had found for sale in Dickens County – the next county east of Crosby. The farm was about fourteen miles west of Spur, the largest town in Dickens County. In short order Dad and Maenard collaborated on a deal to buy the farm. Woodine told me years later that Dag bought the farm for twenty-five dollars per acre and opened an account in the Spur bank with my father. Maenard

sold his flying school in 1943. I imagine some of that money went into the Spur operation.

Among the start-up expenses was a new Allis Chalmers tractor that Dad bought in Crosbyton. The tractor was the first motorized vehicle I learned to drive. I hounded my dad until he finally relented. I got it started, put it in gear and started forward, headed toward the paling fence around the house. I confused the clutch and brake pedals, panicked and drove the tractor through the fence. The fence posts were so rotten that the force flattened the fence like rows of dominoes. The tractor and I were headed straight at the house. Dad ran alongside and slapped the accelerator lever to stop. The tractor rolled to a halt at the house door.

Pieces of the decaying fence were still lying on the ground when I returned to the site of the Ragland ranch house in 2004. The site was grown over with mesquites but it was easy to find. The house and buildings were not standing. The fireplace hearth and the dugout we used as a storm cellar were evident. Some of the collapsed barn wall boards rested askew on the floor joists.

Tommy started school at Crosbyton in the fall of 1943. I began the fourth grade there. My father and Maenard began construction of a house at the Spur farm that winter. Sometimes Dad camped out there during the week to put in as much time as possible building the house. On weekends we all went to the farm and worked. My mother hoisted boards and drove as many nails as anyone on the days she was there. Tommy and I were put to work clearing construction debris and hoeing out the cockleburs and Johnson grass that had taken hold in cotton fields that had lain fallow for a couple of years.

Construction at the Spur farmhouse was finished in the spring of 1944. We moved in during the spring school break. With the house completed and occupied, my father planted cotton, milo-maize and corn. Maenard was ordered to World War II wartime duty as a U.S. Navy fighter pilot in July.

It is surprising to me today to realize that the distance between the Ragland ranch in Crosby County and the farm in Dickens County was only ten miles – but that was as the crow flies. The White River, dry in the summer, ran north to south between Crosby and Dickens counties. The rutty dirt road across it was impassable during winter and spring rains. (Years later the river was dammed and the road was designated Ranch Road 2794 and paved to Spur.) In 1944, when we moved, we had to take a circuitous route down the road to Kalgary and take Ranch Road 261, where the White River was passable, through the Red Mud Creek community in the southwestern corner of Dickens County and then across the ranchlands to reach our new home – a distance of about twenty-two miles.

The reason I point out these seemingly irrelevant facts is that it was not a simple move. In the year we lived on the Crosby County ranch, we acquired chickens, pigs, a cow, a calf, Dilly the lazy mare, and the Allis Chalmers tractor. In the past, everything we owned fit in the bed of our pickup truck. Now we needed the tractor, the farm wagon, Dad's livestock trailer and the truck to move our possessions. For the move to the Spur farm, my mother drove the pickup truck with our household goods and Tommy. She towed the livestock trailer with a cow and a calf. My dad and I stayed behind to load the chickens, pigs, our portion of the corn crop and our farm equipment into the wagon.

My job was to ride Dilly and follow Dad on the tractor towing the wagon. But Dilly wasn't going anywhere, certainly not without Sarlo. It didn't help that Sarlo clearly understood that he was being abandoned. He began neighing and running up and down the pasture fence. Dilly dug in and wouldn't leave. Whipping her with a quirt didn't help. She would go a few steps, then whirl and turn back toward Sarlo. My dad got so angry at me for not taking firm control of Dilly that he threatened to leave me. I took the threat seriously because he drove off down the road until he was almost out of sight. I cursed and beat Dilly and got off and tried to lead her but she just went into reverse and walked backward. Finally, my dad climbed off the tractor, cut a sturdy limb from a mesquite tree, and walked back to where I was struggling with Dilly. He made me get back on the stubborn mare. When I got her headed in the right direction again, he began hitting her rump with the thorny tree limb. All of a sudden, Dilly started bucking and took off running. I was barely hanging on. She ran to the spot where dad had left the tractor and stopped so abruptly that I almost went sailing over her head. I wanted no more of Dilly that day and jumped off because my father was in hot pursuit, cursing and intent on keeping Dilly on the run. He berated me for being a sissy, but he gave up. He removed the bridle and saddle from the cantankerous mare and got in one more rump whack as she took off in a dead run back to the closed ranch gate and her good friend Sarlo.

Off the back of Dilly, I sat humiliated in the wagon bed among the chickens and pigs for the long trip to our new home. I always hated that mare and made Tommy ride her when we went riding. Tommy was better with her than I was. On that day he probably could have succeeded in prodding Dilly down the road far enough to get returning home out of her dumb head.

My father didn't forget Dilly. After we settled in on the Spur farm, he returned to the Crosbyton ranch with the truck and the livestock trailer. He found her grazing along the roadside, communing with Sarlo over the fence. He whipped her into the trailer and brought her to her new home, leaving a

forlorn Sarlo neighing goodbye. We kept Dilly all the years we lived on the Spur farm, but she was never worth anything – except maybe what she would have brought if she had been turned into tallow or dog meat.

All that I have described after we left West Annie Street in Austin happened between spring 1942 and the spring of 1944. We relocated many times in 1942 before moving to the Crosbyton farm late in the year. We were now looking forward to settling down in a place we could call our own. With Maenard and Woodine's help, the hard-time Depression years were finally behind us.

As 1944 began, World War II was in its third year and I was halfway through the fourth grade at Crosbyton Elementary School. We had moved up in the world. The year before we sharecropped with a team of horses. Now we had a tractor and a farm of our own. We were "shittin' in tall cotton!"

Chapter Ten

Korea

> There was now no doubt! The Republic of Korea needed help at once if it was not to be overrun. More seriously, a Communist success in Korea would put Red troops and planes within easy striking distance of Japan, and Okinawa and Formosa would be open to attack from two sides. I also approved recommendations for the strengthening of our forces in the Philippines and for increased aid to the French in Indo-China.
>
> President Harry S. Truman, *Memoirs*

On Sunday morning, June 25, 1950, I bicycled to my Western Union messenger job, arriving a few minutes before eight. I parked my bike in the alley between the Western Union office and the Driskill Hotel, punched in and was surprised to hear a flurry of telegrams rattling from the Teletype machines. Manager Deane Hamilton was very busy taking them from the Teletype operator, folding them, stuffing them into envelopes and sorting them for delivery. I asked what all the hubbub was about on this Sunday morning. The usually pleasant Mr. Hamilton didn't even look up. He just muttered, "It looks like we're going to war in Korea. The Communists have invaded South Korea." He handed me some telegrams to deliver to the Texas governor's mansion six blocks north up Congress Avenue at West 11th Street and Colorado Avenue.

It was unusual that my first deliveries on a Sunday morning would be to the nearby Governor's mansion. Normally my first route on the Sabbath would be a long ride to the Enfield district in West Austin with a stack of birthday greetings and such, sent by rich people who could afford the luxury of hand-delivered overnight messages that could just as well have been mailed with three-cent stamps or written on penny postcards. I headed north down the alley to East 7th Street and wheeled left for the half block to Congress Avenue. As I rounded the corner of East 7th onto Congress, I checked the newsstand in front of the Stephen F. Austin Hotel. The headlines in Sunday's *Austin Statesman* newspaper told nothing about the Communist invasion. I delivered the messages to the Governor's service entrance in the back, where

it was unusually busy for a Sunday, and hurried back to the Western Union office, hoping to get more information about the situation in Korea.

The reason the news wasn't in the Sunday newspaper provides a sidelight to the Korean War's beginning. A United Press reporter in Seoul, South Korea, wired the first report of the invasion to his New York headquarters early Sunday morning, June 25, 1950. This was Korean time. It was Saturday afternoon in New York.[248]

The Associated Press, however, was not willing to recognize its competitor's scoop until it verified the story independently. *The New York Times* also refrained from publishing the story until AP authenticated it. Most of the nation's newspaper editors followed *The New York Times* lead. Since the *Times* didn't carry the story, neither did they.

The United Press was also ahead of the State Department in Washington. Two hours and forty minutes after the UP reporter wired his story, the State Department in Washington received official word from United States Ambassador John Muccio in Seoul.[249] The time was 5:00 p.m. Saturday, June 24, in Washington. President Truman was at his home in Independence, Missouri for the weekend, visiting his family and taking care of personal business. The State Department forwarded the ambassador's message to Truman at 10:30 Saturday evening.[250] The Sunday editions of the nation's newspapers were published before the story was confirmed to the satisfaction of top news editors.

When I returned to pick up telegrams for my next route, Mr. Hamilton told me the radio news. The Communist force was conducting an all-out offensive against the Republic of Korea, and that ROK military forces were being badly mauled in retreat. With that, he handed me a larger-than-usual stack of telegrams for the Enfield route. It took most of the morning to deliver them. Already the temperature was heating up, and it would reach a sweltering 95° before I returned.

I worked a couple of hours overtime that day, running messages to the Driskill and Stephen F. Austin hotels where the capital city's politicians, lobbyists and big wheels congregated. At the Western Union office and in hotel lobbies, everybody was talking about what President Truman would do. Everyone assumed that Russia was pulling the strings if not openly involved.

The country would have to wait until the following Tuesday before learning how Truman would react. But his daughter, Margaret, knew what was on her father's mind on Saturday night when Truman hung up the phone after discussing the situation with Secretary of State Dean Acheson. That evening, Margaret wrote in her journal, "Everything is extremely tense. Northern or Communist Korea is marching in on Southern Korea and we are going to fight."[251]

Sunday morning, while I was delivering telegrams, Truman was in solemn, solitary contemplation, flying back to Washington on the presidential plane Independence. (It was a Douglas VC-118 plane that recently replaced the first presidential aircraft, Roosevelt's Douglas VC-54, the Sacred Cow). A criminal state had thumbed its nose at United Nations resolutions. North Korea had crossed the 38th parallel in force. The debate was as pertinent then as it was in 2002 when Iraq refused to obey more than a dozen UN resolutions and allow UN weapons inspections. During the flight back to Washington, Truman pondered the failures of democracies to act in the face of totalitarian threats, and later he put his thoughts in his memoirs:

> *I had time to think aboard the plane. In my generation, this was not the first occasion when the strong had attacked the weak. I recalled some earlier instances: Manchuria, Ethiopia, Austria. I remembered how each time that the democracies failed to act it had encouraged the aggressors to keep going ahead. Communism was acting in Korea just as Hitler, Mussolini, and the Japanese had acted ten, fifteen, and twenty years earlier. I felt certain that if South Korea was allowed to fall, Communist leaders would be emboldened to override nations closer to our own shores. If the Communists were permitted to force their way into the Republic of Korea without opposition from the free world, no small nation would have the courage to resist threats and aggression by stronger Communist neighbors. If this was allowed to go unchallenged it would mean a third world war, just as similar incidents had brought on the second world war. It was also clear to me that the foundations and the principles of the United Nations were at stake unless this unprovoked attack on Korea could be stopped.*[252]

While in flight, Truman radioed Acheson to meet him at the White House with a hastily drawn "war cabinet," composed of Acheson, the Secretary of War, the military secretaries and the Defense Department's Chiefs of Staff. After dinner that evening, with full agreement from his advisors, Truman ordered Far East military commander, General Douglas MacArthur, to immediately airlift arms, ammunition and supplies to South Korea and use the Air Force to protect and evacuate American civilians from Korea. Orders were given for the Seventh Fleet to move immediately from the Philippines to protect Formosa (now known as Taiwan) in case the Communists planned to attack there as well. The Seventh Fleet was placed under MacArthur's command and based at Sasebo, Japan. Finally, Truman "instructed the service chiefs to prepare the necessary orders for the eventual use of American

units if the United Nations should call for action against North Korea."[253] The war cabinet meeting broke up to carry out Truman's decisions. The officials had orders not to make any statements until Truman himself did.[254]

Earlier in the day the U.N. Security Council voted unanimously to approve a United States-suggested resolution that called for the invasion to end and for the Communists to withdraw to their side of the 38th parallel. Had the Russians not walked out of the Security Council earlier in the year and not returned, they would have undoubtedly vetoed the resolution and the war that followed would not have been conducted under U.N. auspices.

The next day, when I reported for my early Western Union shift, the deteriorating situation in Korea was all the talk. As the day went on, gossip turned to criticism because no word had come from the White House. David McCullough wrote in his biography, *Truman*, "On Monday, as the news from Korea grew worse, [Truman] issued a statement notable only for its generalities. The widespread impression was that the United States was going to take little or no action."[255] However, he resolutely prepared his administration for war. Behind the scenes in Washington, war plans were being made not only to go to war in Korea but to lend aid to France, which was fighting a Communist insurrection in French Indochina. Military units were put on alert for immediate duty in Korea and the Philippines. Operating secretly, Truman called another war cabinet meeting Monday evening.

(Truman's concern about Indochina is a chilling reminder that America's involvement in Vietnam occurred long before the United States landed troops there in the 1960s to fight Viet Minh nationalists under Communist leader Ho Chi Minh. In 1946 French Indochina became a Cold War pawn between Communism and Capitalism. There the United States was reluctantly supporting France's attempt to regain control of its Indochina colony that it had ceded to the Japanese early in WWII. When the British and Chinese drove the Japanese out of Indochina, the Vietnamese nationalist movement began to fill the power vacuum. The French never fully regained control of their colonial Southeast Asia empire. The United States underwrote much of France's costs fighting against Indochinese nationalism until mid-1954 when the United States itself assumed full responsibility for turning back Communism in the former French colony.)

On Tuesday, June 27, 1950, the U.N. Security Council adopted a resolution that called for all U.N. members to come to South Korea's aid. Armed with international sanction and support, Truman went public with a press release that outlined the United Nations' decision and his own instructions to General MacArthur in Japan who was responsible for carrying out Truman's war orders. His statement ominously concluded:

The attack on Korea makes it plain beyond all doubt that Communism has passed beyond the use of subversion to conquer independent nations and will now use armed invasion and war.[256]

Truman's statement was released at noon that day. Congress' response was described by David McCullough:

Cheers broke out in the House and Senate when the statement was read aloud. By a vote of 315 to 4, the House promptly voted a one-year extension of the draft law.

At the United Nations, debate began on a resolution to back the American decision – a resolution adopted that night at 10:45. The Soviet Union was still absent. For the first time in history, a world organization voted to use armed force to stop armed force.[257]

Truman's statement came into Austin's Western Union office in late morning. Mr. Hamilton led the cheers. The Free World was united with Congress and the American people against the invasion of South Korea by Communist forces.

The United States was ill-prepared to carry out Truman's orders. He had not yet decided to send ground troops to Korea. After World War II, the United States had severely reduced its military forces and its military spending. It was neither manned nor equipped to fulfill worldwide military obligations and fight a war in Korea. Under strong pressure from Congress to reduce military spending after WWII, the government had withdrawn 45,000 troops from the United States Army occupation force in Korea.[258] This was done June 29, 1949 – almost a year to the day before the Communists invaded South Korea. The United States 24th and 25th infantry divisions, about 30,000 men, were stationed in Japan to maintain the post-WWII occupation and as the first line of defense against Communist expansion in the region.[259]

Those two divisions would soon join the battle in Korea. According to Truman's memoirs, MacArthur informed the Joint Chiefs of Staff on Friday, June 30, that "only American ground units could stop the North Korean advance." The general asked for permission to commit one regimental combat team at once and to build two divisions as rapidly as possible. Truman okayed the use of a regimental combat team, met with his National Security Council staff and decided to give MacArthur "full authority to use the ground forces under his command."[260] On July 6 the President called for the Selective Service System to provide the military services with manpower to man the units and ships that he was calling to duty.[261] The draft had expired in 1947.

Fortunately, due to Cold War pressures, Congress had reinstated the draft in 1948. Conscription was later expanded by the Universal Military Training and Service Act in 1951.

With presidential authority, the 24th Infantry Division was rushed to Korea to slow down the Communist advance. The 25th Division was fully deployed to Korea in the middle of July. The Army's 2nd Division arrived in the port city of Pusan on July 23. The 2nd Division was the first unit to reach Korea directly from the United States. In less than a month after the Communist invasion, American Army troops were in action, fighting a rear-guard battle shoring up the sagging ROK Army and establishing an orderly strategic retreat to the beachhead being formed at Pusan.

Back home, the news was disturbing and frightening, and the cheers for Truman and the war quickly turned sour. Truman wrote:

> *The American press made dramatic news out of this retreat. News stories spoke of entire units being wiped out and exaggerated the rout and confusion. Truth was that a small band of heroic youngsters led by a few remarkable generals was holding off a landslide so the strength for the counterpunch could be mustered behind their thin curtain of resistance. The fact is that there was more panic among the civilians at home than among the soldiers in Korea.*[262]

Truman called up four National Guard divisions, asked Congress to increase the authorized size of the military and sought authority to establish "priorities and allocations of war supplies" so he could raise taxes and add ten billion dollars to the defense budget.[263]

By the end of August 1950, the tide began to turn against the Communist advance. The 1st Marine Division's 1st Provisional Marine Brigade, with strength of 6,500, sailed on July 12 from San Diego to Pusan. The brigade came ashore at Pusan on August 2. Marine Corsairs, launched the next day from the United States aircraft carrier *USS Badoeng Strait* (CVE-116), raided North Korean installations. Marine ground forces engaged the Communists on August 7. Twelve days later the Pusan Perimeter defense was stabilized.[264] On August 12 the very cautious General Omar Bradley, Army Chief of Staff, described the situation as "fluid but improving."[265]

As an impressionable child of the Depression during WWII, I had developed a very strong sense of patriotism. I was energized by the President's actions and thrilled that my country was once again challenged to defend freedom and democracy. Now, in this new war, I felt duty-bound to join the military. But I was only sixteen and the enlistment age was eighteen. WWII

had lasted four years, but unless the world plunged into WWIII, this one would probably be over before I could join.

Bill McIver, Austin High School, 1950

One day during my deliveries, I passed the military recruiting office on West 6th and decided to inquire about enlisting. The Army and Navy recruiters were happy to see me until they found out I was only sixteen. However, I learned that I could join when I was seventeen with my parents' permission. The recruiters encouraged me to come back when I was of age and gave me some promotional material. After going through the brochures that evening, I was hooked on the Navy with its captivating slogan, "Join the Navy and See the World." From that moment on, I could hardly wait until November 10th of that year when I would turn seventeen.

My early shift at Western Union gave me time to get home by mid-afternoon to check on the situation there. Tommy turned thirteen in June 1950. He was responsible for taking care of the five Tait children while my mother, Bob Tait and I worked. In addition to rounding up my brother and the Tait children, I had to put the house in order, clean up the kitchen and have dinner going when my mother and Bob Tait came home. Of course the house was always a mess, the Tait kids were always dirty and hungry, and my brother was usually off playing somewhere with neighborhood kids instead of staying home and attending to his babysitting duties.

There was always a pot of pinto beans that had soaked all day, or a bowl of leftover pintos in the refrigerator from the previous day. If the beans were

soaking in the pot on the stove, I poured off the water, covered the beans with fresh water, stirred in salt, pepper and chili powder, and lit the fire under the pot so the beans would be done by suppertime. I then turned on the oven, greased a cast-iron skillet with bacon fat from the old coffee pot that always sat on top of the stove and stuck the skillet in the oven. I mixed up a batch of corn bread. When the fat in the skillet was sizzling I removed the skillet from the oven, poured the batter into the hot skillet, and left it setting out until it was time to bake. Our protein course was usually a pullet that I took from the chicken coop in the backyard. I wrung its neck, skinned it, chopped it into pieces, salt-and-peppered it, rolled it in flour, and set it aside. If we had vegetables in the garden, I would pick and wash some greens and tomatoes. About a half hour before my mother and Bob Tait came home from work, I would put the cornbread skillet in the oven, put the greens in boiling water, slice the tomatoes, and start deep frying the chicken in a deep skillet.

If I had time between attending to the kids' needs and the time to start cooking, I usually tried to get into the neighborhood baseball game in the vacant lot next door. The game started in the afternoon about the time I came home from school. Sometimes I would lose track of time while playing ball, and my mother and Bob would arrive to find that my chores and the cooking were unfinished. Bob Tait was a kind man and had nothing to say about my behavior, but my mother, tired from ten-hour days on the seat cover machines at Wesley Pearson's, was unforgiving. Embarrassed by her tongue-lashing, I would leave the game and get back to my duties before she got madder. She knew only one method of discipline – it was with a leather strap.

I remember, more than fifty years later, that I felt hopeless and angry most of the time. I missed my father and didn't even know where he was. I felt completely boxed in by my circumstances. I hated living in poverty with my mother's new husband and his kids in my father's house. I hated the affluence I saw in the wealthy parts of Austin while delivering telegrams. I hated the socioeconomic conditions that relegated poor whites, Negroes and Mexicans to rundown districts. A decade or so later those feelings would propel me into the middle of the country's epic civil rights battles and the fight for social justice inspired by Martin Luther King, John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson. But in 1950 I was thinking of escape, not civil rights.

One day I lost track of time while playing baseball and did not have dinner ready when my mother came home. She was in an unusually bad mood. When she saw that dinner wasn't ready she beat me with that leather strap – a beating I swore to myself would be the last one.

I made up my mind to run away as soon as I could leave without attracting attention. After supper, with an hour or so of daylight left, I sneaked out of

the house with a dollar or two and some change in my pocket and the clothes I was wearing. I walked the couple of blocks to Fredericksburg Highway in the hot Texas summer, stuck my thumb out to passing motorists and started hitching rides, headed west. I was intent on finding my dad and hoped to find him at his sister's farm near Big Spring in West Texas, over three hundred miles from Austin. The first ride dropped me off in Mason. That night I slept in a culvert beside the highway.

On the second day I made it to San Angelo in mid-afternoon. My ride dropped me off downtown. It was a hot day and I had to walk across town to the city limits where the highway forked. The road I wanted went north to Big Spring, about two hours away. The other road went west. My hitchhiking luck ran out. As dusk came on, I began to think I would have to spend another night on the side of the road. About dark a big 1948 Chrysler New Yorker started slowing down as it approached. I thought I was in luck after all. But, instead of turning to the right where I was standing, the driver coasted to a stop on the road leading west. He motioned for me to come over and asked me where I was going. I answered, "Big Spring." He asked me if I knew how to drive a car with "Fluid Drive." I had no idea what that was but I said could drive anything. He said he had some bills to pay in Monahans and if I would drive him there he would take me to Big Spring the next day, after taking care of his business.

I considered my options, which were to take a chance on sleeping in a ditch again or driving a fancy car with an early automatic transmission to Monahans. Since I was traveling by dead reckoning anyway, I took the most favorable path available at the moment. After I got lined up on the road and got the hang of the vehicle, the man pulled out a pint of whiskey and took a swallow. He said he had been drinking and when he drank he usually wound up getting drunk and losing his money. He said he had just enough money to pay the bills he owed in Monahans. He handed a wad of greenbacks to me. I had never held that much money in my life. It was clear the man was harmless. He took a few more nips from the bottle and fell asleep.

It was a long drive to Monahans. We arrived there about midnight and the man directed me to his house in the barren, sparsely populated town. He was weaving a little and went straight to bed, waving me to the couch in the living room. I lay there wide-awake, listening to him snore in the other room. The lump of money was burning a hole in my pocket. I found that I had larceny in my heart. After a little internal debate, I got up as quietly as I could, put my shoes on outside and headed to the center of town where I had noticed a café that served as the Greyhound bus station. Dogs began barking no sooner than I got out of the house. It almost made me rethink my plan.

But I kept walking. I hoped to get out of town quickly, but when I arrived at the highway, there were no cars moving in either direction, so I went to the bus station to find out when the next bus came through to San Angelo. The next bus was due before daybreak. I decided to take a chance that I'd be gone by the time the man awakened. It was either that or returning to his house, which would have been the wise decision.

Except for the sleepy bus station, the town was dead. I went back to the side of the road, praying for a ride out of town. The night had turned cold and I had left home without a jacket. There were several school buses parked by the highway. Shivering, I pushed open the door of one, went in and curled up on the long backset, trying to get warm. After shivering for an hour or so, I roused myself and walked down to the bus station to check on the bus arrival time. When I came into the ticket office, the ticket agent saw me, and motioned me to wait while he fussed with paper work. Moments later my benefactor walked in with a burly man under a big hat with a star on his vest. They had been there and learned from the ticket agent that I had been in earlier.

Caught red-handed, I silently handed over the money and expected to be hauled away to jail. The man told the sheriff he wouldn't press charges and told me he would still take me to Big Spring when he finished with his business. I was too embarrassed to accept his offer. The kind man gave me a few dollars for driving him to Monahans. That brush with the law ended my life of crime. Traffic had started moving on the highway. I went out, caught a ride right away and in two hours I was in Big Spring. I had escaped from the site of my mortification, but to this day I still feel the disgrace of trying to steal that good man's money. It was one of my early lessons, learned the hard way.

My Aunt Mae and Uncle Arthur Franklin welcomed me with open arms and gave me my first good meal in two days. She was amazed that I had come so far alone. Happily for me, she knew that my dad was visiting his brother Gerald and family in Tishomingo, Oklahoma. Aunt Mae and Uncle Arthur gave me a cotton-chopping job for a week. They didn't really need a hand but gave me the work to help me out. With the earned money, I set out hitching rides to Oklahoma with a lunch sack of fried chicken and a piece of cake that Aunt Mae made for me.

My dad and I had a tearful reunion in Tishomingo. He had recovered some of his old *joie de vivre* since leaving Austin, his sons and a twenty-year marriage. Aunt Margaret's fine country cooking and cheery disposition contributed to his revitalization. Also, spending time with Gerald, with whom my dad was close, always rejuvenated him.

I had a special relationship with Aunt Margaret because she had shared her mother's milk with me when my own mother was too ill to breast-feed

me. She was as beautiful as my mother but much more affectionate with her children. I could tell that my father had a crush on her. Widowed men circled around Margaret like bees to honey when Uncle Gerald died a few months later in September of 1950. One of my cousins said that my dad proposed to Margaret on a visit to Oklahoma after his brother's death. The cousin said her mother refused the offer and gently "told him he was like her own brother." She added that "Uncle Jeff [Dobbs] also tried to court mother after Aunt Minta died, but she likewise discouraged him."[266]

Of all my father's brothers and sisters, Uncle Gerald and Aunt Margaret were the closest of my McIver relatives, because we had spent several months together in 1942 picking Texas cotton. Now, years later, I had a great time getting reacquainted with my cousins Jack and Pat and their pretty sister Gaynelle. The three had been with Uncle Gerald on the 1942 cotton-picking tour with my family. I hadn't seen them since the family reunion in 1946 at our Spur farm. I met for the first time the three youngest of Uncle Gerald's and Aunt Margaret's children – Loutrelle, Mike and Billy. My cousin Billy McIver was named William Wood after our great grandfather. I missed seeing my other cotton-picking cousin, Van, who was married and no longer at home. Neither were Geraldine and Claire, who were grown up and on their own before that 1942 summer in the Texas cotton fields.

Gerald McIver, like my parents, had not ridden the good post-WWII economic times to prosperity, as had most Americans. But unlike my parents, he had a stable marriage and deep roots in the Tishomingo area. Uncle Gerald once had a cotton farm in the vicinity. Now his family lived within walking distance of the town on a rustic piece of property with big shade trees. Aunt Margaret maintained a large vegetable garden. They had farm animals that provided eggs, milk, butter and meat. Uncle Gerald tended a flock of prize fighting cocks that he raised for sale to markets in South America. His fighting cocks were an important source of the family's income and a source of pride for Uncle Gerald.

Another highlight of my trip to Tishomingo was visiting Aunt Minta and Uncle Jeff Dobbs, who lived on a defunct peanut farm in a very old house several miles from Uncle Gerald's place. Aunt Minta, who never minced her words, was glad to see me. Auntie was understanding of my reasons for running away from home. She made it directly clear to me that she never liked my mother and was angry at her for casting my father out. At the same time, she was very much against my decision to quit school and enlist in the military. One evening, when my dad and I were there for dinner, she blessed the meal and said a prayer for my salvation.

I wrote about Aunt Minta and her activities in the first chapter. I leave it to my cousin Larry McMurtry to portray Uncle Jeff Dobbs in this one. Larry's book of essays on Texas, *In a Narrow Grave*, was dedicated to Uncle Jeff's memory. Larry wrote about, and quoted a letter from Uncle Jeff in the book:

> *He had been a cowboy and a Texas Ranger, and when he had had enough of the great world he retired to the backwoods of Oklahoma to farm peanuts and meditate the Gospels. He was a self-styled Primitive Baptist, which meant that he had a theology all his own, and he had honed his scriptural knife to fine edge in some forty years of nightly arguments with his wife, my Aunt Minta. Neither of them yielded a point, and when my aunt was killed I don't think they even agreed on the book of Zechariah.*
>
> *One morning not unlike any other, Aunt Minta went out in her car, was hit by a truck, and killed instantly. At this time I was in graduate school in Houston, doctoral longings in me, and I wrote Uncle Jeff to offer condolence. His reply is echt-cowboy:*
>
> *Larry,*
>
> *Will answer your welcome letter.*
>
> *Was glad to heare from you again, well it has rained a-plenty here the last week, the grass is good and everything is lovely . . .*
>
> *Would like for you to visit me, we could talk the things over that we're interested in. What does PhD stand for? to me its post-hole digger, guess that would be about what it would stand for with all the other old Texas cowpokes . . .*
>
> *I could never understand why a man wanted to spend all his life going to school, ide get to thinking about the Rancho Grandy, and get rambling on my mind, freedom to quote O.M. Roberts [former Texas Governor]:*
>
> *to what avail the plow or sail or land.*
>
> *or life if freedom fail . . .*
>
> *Going to school was always like being in jail to me, life is too short, sweet and uncertain to spend it all in jail.*
>
> *Well, Larry, am still having trouble with my sore eye, must have had it five months now, it looks like pinkeye to me, might have took it from the pink-eye cow.*
>
> *Yes it was an awful tragidy to have Mint [Minta] crushed in the smashup, my car was a total loss too.*
>
> *Things like that will just hoppen though. It is lonesome dreary out here in the backwoods by myself,*

Don't ever join the army, if you do you will have to stay in for four years, that would be a long time to stay in the danged army, this conscription is not according to the constitution of the U.S. its involuntary servitude which is slavery.

Well I have just had a couple of Jehovah's witnesses visit me but I soon got them told, I think they are as crazy as a betsie bug and I don't like to be bothered with them, with this sore eye I am in a bad humour most of the time anyway, yours truly

Jeff Dobbs[267]

After a week or so of visiting my kin, playing with my cousins under their big shade trees and cavorting in their nearby swimming hole with its daredevil cliff from which I refused to jump as they did, Dad and I set off on a camping trip. Lubbock was our destination but the route was decided day by day. Our conveyance was the old Ford pickup truck he left Austin with. He had built a cabin with a pitched roof on the truck's bed. His rig was a forerunner of the now-modern pickup-truck campers. All of his possessions were in his camping outfit. We cooked over an open fire, ate at campground tables and slept in the camper.

When we got to Wichita Falls, we decided to drive the twenty-five miles to Archer City to visit my McIver grandparents, Oscar and Mary, and my Aunt Hazel, Uncle Jeff McMurtry and Cousin Larry. My grandparents were glad to see us. Grampa McIver took me aside for a lecture on the sins and evils that awaited me in California and military life. He advised me to attend church services every Sunday and to stay away from liquor and loose women who prey on young boys away from home. Aunt Hazel was nice as always. Uncle Jeff was put off by us light-traveling, restless, undisciplined McIvers with nothing to do but meander around the country and fish. Larry seemed stuck up as usual and wasn't at all interested in my plans to join the Navy.

Sadly, I don't recall what Dad and I talked about as we wended our way to Lubbock. Now I can think of many things I wish I had asked him – about growing up with his preacher-father, about his heydays in the 1920s, and most of all how he had met and married my mother. But we broke no communication barriers. I grew up in a closed family system – feelings were felt but seldom spoken and never examined; and it was understood that "family business" was not talked about outside the family. My parents' emotional pasts were closed books. Snippets of insights came out in their arguments that aroused my curiosity, but I never felt I could make inquiries and clarify questions. The emotional system remained closed throughout the trip.

As we neared Lubbock his spirits began to sag and his strength declined. It seemed he had left his heart and energy in Tishomingo and on the road with me. When we arrived in Lubbock he was ill. Woodine and Maenard Dagley had provided Dad with a small store front building in Lubbock's warehouse district. He lived in the back of the store and sold used clothing in the front half of the single-room building. I was glad that my half-sisters, Woodine and Jessie, were there to look after him. Jessie occasionally prepared meals for him and checked on him, but most of his care fell to Woodine.

At sixteen I was stuck with only one parent who could contribute to my welfare – my mother – and I didn't get along well with her. I came face to face with the fact that I was on my own.

Woodine and Maenard also supported Dad's ex-wife Alta, who lived in a small cottage behind the Dagley house. My father and Alta were both living in the same town where they lived when they divorced twenty years earlier, and both were under the care of their children. The rift between my father and Alta was so deep and painful that they never spoke to each other or occupied the same space after their divorce.

While I was in Lubbock deciding what I would do next, I got more first-hand knowledge of Maenard's philandering. He was the principal owner of a Piper Cub sales and service company. He hired me to wash airplanes, wipe up oil, sweep the hangar floor and run errands. One afternoon after work, we were having a few beers with some of his flying and maintenance crew. He made a phone call, hung up, tossed his Cadillac keys to me and said, "Let's go get laid." I drove him to the door of a nice little suburban house with a good-looking woman on the porch beckoning us in. Virgin that I was, the invitation was too embarrassing to accept. He laughed, gave me a few bucks and told me to go to a movie or something and pick him up in a couple of hours.

Maenard and Woodine had kept the farm and planned to build a second home on the property. In the meantime, Maenard hired Tom Williams to look after the farm and take care of the horses and a couple of steers that remained after the auction sale. No cotton was planted after my family left, but Tom had planted a feed grain and corn crop for the livestock. I wanted to visit the farm and spend some time there. Maenard gave me a job weeding, fixing fences and getting the maize and corn crop in. I had planned to stay in the barn by myself, but the place was so spooky that I spent only one night there. After that I stayed with Tom and old Joe at the Hancock Ranch house across the road.

It was very strange and lonely returning to that farm of such fond memories. There were few remnants of our house left. The site had been cleaned up and prepared for rebuilding. I didn't have transportation, so I didn't have

an opportunity to see much of my old friends, except on Saturdays when Tom Williams took me to town. Woodine gave me an old radio for company. In the evenings I listened to music and news about the war in Korea. I counted the days until I could enlist and get into the war.

It made me feel good and proud to say I was going to go fight for my country. But it was still only August. I had three months to wait. Isolation on the farm made me more determined to get myself headed in a new direction. I survived the summer, thanks largely to Woodine and Maenard, who gave me work, and Tom Williams, who gave me room and board and refused to take pay for it.

In September, work on the farm ran out. I'd had my fill of living on the road. I had no place to go but home. I called my mother and told her I was returning. She was happy about it, but not at all pleased that my mind was made up about not going back to school. I hitchhiked back to Austin to a somber reunion with my mother and a happy one with my brother Tommy. Boilermaker Bob Tait was on a crew constructing boilers for a new Austin power plant on West 1st Street along the Colorado River. He arranged a job for me as a helper on a crew of carpenters building forms for the plant's concrete walls. It was a man's job. I enjoyed working with the carpenters who were always cheery and constantly telling ribald jokes that kept us laughing. The work was hard but the pay was much better than riding a bicycle for Western Union.

Another helper on the crew was a young Negro, a little older than I. One day, during our lunch break, we got into a conversation about the war in Korea. I mentioned that I would join the Navy just as soon as I was seventeen. I asked him if he was considering going into the service, which seemed to me to be much better than being a common laborer. My friend said he would not fight for a country that didn't allow him equal rights. I was taken aback; I should not have been. One would have to be blind in Texas to not realize how Negroes felt about the South's Jim Crow laws. He and I were on the same economic level, but segregation laws treated him as my inferior. It was another eye-opening experience that harked back to the time at Spur when our school bus driver wouldn't let a little black girl ride to town with us.

I returned to attending services at Kinney Avenue Baptist Church. The church ladies heard I was joining the Navy. They arranged a meeting to urge me not to join. Failing that, they insisted that I had to be baptized. With only a few days left before my enlistment, they organized a special baptismal service. My seventeenth birthday was Friday, November 10, 1950.

The following Monday morning I walked into the Navy recruiting office with my mother's signature on a document that gave permission for my under-

age enlistment. I took and passed simple aptitude tests and signed enlistment papers. That evening I was baptized by immersion before a small congregation at Kinney Avenue Baptist Church. My Methodist preacher grandfather, Oscar McIver, who spent years arguing that the only satisfactory baptism was a mere sprinkling, was not told of my apostasy.

Fifty years later I wrote a story of my boot camp experiences to my twin grandsons when they were seventeen and leaving home for prep school. The following is an adaptation of that story:

News Bulletin: June 25, 1950 - At approximately 4 a.m. (Korean Standard Time) on a rainy Sunday morning Democratic People's Republic of Korea Army (DPRK - North Korea) artillery and mortars open fire on Republic of Korea (ROK - South Korea) Army positions south of the 38th Parallel, the line then serving as the border between the two countries.

As so many did at the outbreak of World War II, I wanted to join the fight – this time against Communism. I was sixteen at the time and too young to get into military service. In November when I turned seventeen, my mother signed papers that allowed me to enlist in the United States Navy. The next day the Navy recruiter put me on a bus to Houston. My mother took off work to see me off. We waved goodbye as the bus pulled out of the Greyhound Bus terminal at Congress Avenue and Ninth Street. It would be a year and three months before I saw my family again.

When the bus made its first rest stop, I bought a package of Pall Mall cigarettes and began to learn how to smoke. Upon arrival at the big Navy recruiting office in Houston, along with several hundred others herded into a big room, I swore to protect and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies and to obey all orders I was given. In a matter of a few seconds I was an American fighting man. I stood a skinny five feet and nine inches tall, and weighed one hundred thirty pounds.

Four days later I was a scared little bunny in boot camp in San Diego, California, with big men yelling, cursing and pushing new recruits through naked medical exams, a jillion vaccinations and clothing distributions. We were marched in formation everywhere we went.

Boot camp was scary and hard for me. I was excruciatingly homesick. Even though I lived and trained in extremely close quarters for nine weeks with one hundred other boys, I felt alone. I say "boys," not "men," because most of us were in our teens. Many were high school dropouts as I was and some were just a semester out of high school. The only positive aspect of boot camp was our fatherly company commander – gray-haired Chief Gunner's Mate Cramer. Chief Cramer retired from active duty after World War II. He was called back to active duty in the rapid military buildup following

the June 1950 North Korean invasion of South Korea. The Chief was a kind, fatherly man.

Bill McIver, November 1950
USNTC San Diego

Of course, I have that view of the Chief now from the vantage point of looking back fifty years. In 1950 he scared the daylights out of me. My difficulty following orders gave him plenty of reasons to be hard on me. Teaching recruits discipline in following orders is the primary purpose of boot camp. Instructions were precise and the quicker a recruit mastered them, the sooner he was off the "shit list." I seldom got off that list but I was determined not to fail. I managed to discipline myself enough to graduate, which was certainly due more to pluck and the Navy's need for manpower than my aptitude.

Each boot camp company had about one hundred recruits. Our company was divided into two platoons. Platoons were broken down into squads of about fifteen recruits. We lived in an open-bay barracks with a row of two-tiered bunk beds down each side of the long building. Training consisted of marching, attending classes, military drills on the parade grounds, keeping the barracks "shipshape," shining shoes and taking care of clothing. Class work and tests were easy for me. I was inept at shining my shoes, washing my clothes, cleaning my area, marching, and dressing for inspections.

We were issued World War I Springfield rifles. The Springfields became a part of us. We shouldered them every day as we marched to and from classes, the chow hall and the parade ground – "grinder" as it was called. We drilled daily on the Manual of Arms, which included shouldering, marching, saluting and handling rifles in military formations. We were admonished that our outdated firearms were "rifles" or "pieces" and never "guns."

In those days sailors carried all of their clothing in duffel bags – the Navy calls them sea bags. A small canvas sack called a "ditty bag" was provided for toiletries. Each article of clothing had to be rolled to strict specifications and kept in inspection order in our sea bags. Sea bags were lashed by their drawstrings to the foot of the top bunk. At least once weekly, without notice, we were required to remove all items from our sea bags and display them on our bunks, properly rolled and aligned like troops in formation. I seldom passed these inspections. My usual punishment for failing inspections was assignment as "head" cleaner – "latrine" to land lubbers.

Another of my problems was the frequency that I failed personal inspections on the parade grounds. Simply dressing in the morning was a daunting exercise for me. The hardest part was strapping on leggings. They were made of canvas and covered one's legs from ankle to about mid-calf. I never really mastered folding my pants leg just right and lacing up the leggings without messing up the fold that had to show in just the right place above the leggings. It took me so long to get my leggings on properly that I had to get up a half hour before everyone else so I would be dressed when we fell out for morning inspection and breakfast.

In those days, recruits washed their clothing by hand. The insides of our hatbands and tee-shirt collars were inspected for cleanliness every morning on the parade ground. While standing at attention, we were ordered to remove our hats and hold them bottom side up so the company commander could walk by and examine our hats, check our shoe shines and legging lacing. After passing or failing that part of the inspection, the order was given to put our hats back on our heads, followed by an order to expose our tee-shirt collars for inspection by holding the inside of the collars open with a thumb. My hatband and shirt collar were usually yellow from sweat that I had not thoroughly washed out. Likely as not, my shoes or leggings would also fail inspection. There were simply too many things to do and not enough time for me to get everything right before lining up for inspection.

Chow line order was based on the number of demerits each company got. My tendency to fail personal inspections always hurt my company's chance of winning a better place in the chow line, so the Chief put me on barracks and head cleaning duty on competition days.

Marching, close order drilling, and standing at attention for interminable lengths of time on the "grinder" were boot camp low points. It was difficult for me to stay in step. I spent a lot of marching time skipping back into step. I invariably lost step when the "eyes right" command

was given as my company passed the base commander's reviewing stand. Those mistakes lowered the company's score, added demerits to my record, and put the company at the end of the chow line.

Learning and practicing military fundamentals – saluting, marching maneuvers, manual of arms drills (rifle handling) and memorizing the sentry's eleven general orders – filled our days. Because we had sentry duty only at night, we got the most experience with sentry order number eleven: "To be especially watchful at night and, during the time for challenging, to challenge all persons on or near my post, and to allow no one to pass without proper authority." General order number one, "To take charge of this post and all government property in view," was a heady assignment that I took seriously. I was always disappointed that there were never any officers or "colors and standards" around to salute, no one to challenge, or a "corporal of the guard" to call "in any case not covered by instructions." It was easy to obey order number seven, "talk to no one except in line of duty."

Except for being awakened at midnight, 2:00 or 4:00 a.m. and trying to stay awake, I didn't mind standing watch. In fact, I liked being in charge of something and stayed alert for someone to challenge or salute. I got to wear a big white webbed "ammo" belt that held a billy club in a leather holster. I liked general order number two, "To walk my post in a military manner, keeping always on the alert, and observing everything that takes place within sight or hearing," with my Springfield on my shoulder and the club swinging at my side. I practiced the manual of arms because it was supposed to teach me discipline. I marched myself around to silent commands and learned to count cadence and stay in step. I felt very military. The lessons I taught myself during those nocturnal hours when no one was watching prepared me for passing final parade-ground drills.

For an uneducated kid from racist Texas, one of the great shocks in my young life was experiencing racial integration on the train trip from segregated Texas to boot camp in integrated California. Jim Crow laws weren't outlawed in Texas until the Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964, fourteen years later.

The group I enlisted with was segregated by race when we boarded the train in Houston. We ate, slept and spent two days and one night in separate cars on the eight hundred miles of rail between Houston and El Paso. We were ordered off the train at the El Paso train station and allowed to stretch our legs for an hour or so. When we came back aboard, we were integrated. Moments later the train crossed the border into New Mexico where segregation was against the law. Overnight, what had so recently been taboo was suddenly commonplace. Black enlistees (the term "African-American" would

not become vogue until many years later) were sleeping and eating in the same compartments as whites! That was a cultural shock and very hard for us rednecks to accept.

However, I adjusted to integration quickly – more quickly than I would have thought before I left Texas. A couple of incidents early in my boot camp training were big factors in my transition. My squad leader was a white boy named Fouts from Wichita Falls, Texas. As the military aphorism goes, Rank Has Its Privileges (RHIP). Squad leaders had rank, authority, and privileges. They were excused from menial duties such as barracks and head cleaning. They could mete out punishment for infractions alleged or real. Fouts was an unreconstructed Southerner. One day Fouts called one of the Negroes in our squad a "black son-of-a-bitch." The black recruit reported the matter to Chief Cramer. The Chief demoted Fouts and promoted black recruit Leroy Woods to the squad leader position. All of a sudden, we Southern white boys were not only living and eating with blacks. One was now our superior with power over us!

It happened that our company was allowed to go to town for the first time on the Sunday following the change in my squad's leadership. Earlier that week, my parade ground demerits had caused our company to lose an inspection competition and go to the end of the chow line. Chief Cramer withheld my liberty card and ordered me to wash every squad member's sea bag on liberty day. As my squad members left for town, they dropped their sea bag at the foot of my bunk – all but squad leader Woods. I was left with the humbling experience of asking him, my inferior if we had still been in Texas, to give me his sea bag. He said, "McIver, you're such a fuck-up, I don't trust you to wash my bag well enough to pass inspection." That was a great lesson in humility. Leroy Woods was a better man than I.

That incident went a long way toward changing my Southern-born racial instincts. My feelings favoring civil rights grew when I learned that President Truman issued a 1948 executive order for the War Department to end racial segregation. The hidebound Navy had not yet fully complied with the presidential order. When orders came down for my company's duty assignments after boot camp, most of the blacks were sent to duty as servants (the Navy called them "stewards") and cooks for officers. Chief Cramer was way ahead of the Navy's top brass when he made Leroy Woods my squad leader.

The firing range was the highlight of boot camp for me. When Chief Cramer marched us to the firing range, we stacked our old Springfield drill rifles and were issued M1 Garand automatic rifles that General George Patton called "the greatest battle implement ever devised."[268] The Chief turned us over to dour-faced Marine training instructors. The ramrod stiff Marines

treated us as unworthy military specimens while curtly dictating range ground rules and instructions for handling the M1.

Growing up in the country and accustomed to handling large and small firearms, I was ready to show my stuff. My brother-in-law Maenard had a "thirty-ought-six" hunting rifle that he left at the Spur farm. It was the same caliber as the M1. I fired many rounds from the rifle and loved its heft. I was a good shot when I could rest the heavy firearm on a stable platform. I figured to do well on the firing range. I did not anticipate the problem I would have with the Marine technique for firing the M1.

The Marine instructors taught us to rig the M1's sling around our left arm in a manner that kept the eleven-and-a-quarter-pound rifle steady for firing in sitting, kneeling and prone positions. That sling configuration made everyone a right-handed shooter. I grew up shooting left-handed due to a quirk of nature – I can't wink my left eye and focus on a target with my right eye. The Marine training sergeants couldn't have cared less about my unorthodox left-handedness. Everyone fired right-handed and that was that. Despite the disadvantage, I passed the course as a Marksman by turning my white hat inside out and pulling it down over my left eye and squinting down the barrel with my right eye

When I went into boot camp in November 1950, the war in Korea was in its fifth month. The United States was mobilizing for war at flank speed. Midway through boot camp our training was reduced from twelve weeks to nine weeks. One of the courses I missed was knot tying. It turned out that the only knot I needed to know was the simple "figure eight" for tying my kerchief when wearing dress blues for liberty.

My shortened training period compressed what should have been the meat of our training – survival at sea. Firefighting, damage control, swimming and lifesaving were squeezed into a few days. The training was sprinkled with war stories by World War II petty officers who had kept battle-damaged ships afloat. As water blasted through holes in the boot camp *USS Recruit* mock-up training ship, the "old salts" showed us how to shore up damaged bulkheads and pump water out of damaged spaces with gas-driven "Handy Billy" pumps. We chuckled when our instructor told us that the British called the pumps "Convenient Williams." We learned the basics of firefighting by suppressing oil and electrical fires.

The Navy's water survival program was initiated by Franklin D. Roosevelt during his seven years as Under Secretary of the Navy (1913-1920).[269] Swimming was taught by sailors who had ships shot out from under them in WWII. I was not, and never became, a good swimmer. But my dog paddle stroke, learned in the waterhole on the Crosby County ranch and perfected

at Austin's Barton Springs, was sufficient to keep me out of the after-duty non-swimmer class.

Somehow, despite private tears, fears and homesickness, I graduated from boot camp in January 1951. I received my first duty assignment – *USS Cape Esperance* (TCVE-88), an aircraft carrier. My shipmates and I sewed Seaman Apprentice stripes on the left sleeve of our uniform jumpers that night in transient barracks where we awaited transportation to assignments. Boot camp hell was over. The kid from Texas would soon be aboard ship and off to war.

Besides shortening the training period, the Navy suspended the traditional two weeks of leave normally given to recruits at the end of boot camp. The Navy was filling sea-going billets as fast as possible on "mothballed" World War II ships that had been pressed back to duty. Canceled leaves were a big disappointment to me and my boot camp mates. We had stood up for our country, endured training and expected to go home to celebrate our rite of passage with families and friends. It would be after another Christmas and another New Year before I would go home.

On January 27, 1951, the day after graduation from boot camp, twenty-one of my boot camp shipmates and I were flown in a Navy R5D transport aircraft from San Diego Naval Air Station to Moffitt Field Naval Air Station, near San Jose, California. We landed on a typically cold, cloudy, rainy Northern California day. A blue Navy bus awaited us on the tarmac. With sea bags on our shoulders and ditty bags in hand, we boarded the bus and set off in the rain for Alameda Naval Air Station. Excitement filled the chilled air as we drove through the Alameda NAS main gate. We were giddy with anticipation not only because it was our first duty assignment, but because we were assigned to an aircraft carrier – a warship that I imagined would be bristling with gun turrets and carrying a squadron of Corsair fighter planes (the same fighters my brother-in-law Maenard Dagley flew during World War II). Sure enough, through the mist and fast-approaching evening darkness, there she stood – a mighty warship. Not even our imaginations could have prepared us for the sight. We gasped in unison at the size and power displayed before us. As we drew nearer, the huge ship blacked out the remnants of the sun setting to the west.

To our dismay, the bus continued to the next dock and stopped at the gangway of our assigned ship, the insignificant *Cape Esperance* – a baby flat-top.

As we hoisted our sea bags on our shoulders and walked up the gangway of our sad-looking old tub, we looked back longingly at the big carrier. Our disappointment was even greater when we learned that the ship of our mo-

mentary dream was the famous *USS Shangri La* (CV-38). *Shangri La* played a major role in ending the war against Japan in 1945. It had been the flagship of a Carrier Task Force under the command of Vice Admiral John S. McCain, grandfather of Vietnam Navy pilot and North Vietnamese prisoner John McCain, now United States senator from Arizona.

The next morning, as we were given our duty assignments, we learned that the "T" in *Cape Esperance*'s TCVE designation meant "transport." ("CV" indicates combat aircraft carrier, and "E" stands for escort.) The ship had several nicknames: *"Double Eight," "Rocket Eighty-Eight"* and *"Little E"*– after the *"Big E," USS Essex* (CV-9). Most of the crew called her "the *Cape*," as did I.

Cape Esperance's humble role as a transport, though vital to the war effort, was disappointing to some of us who were eager to get close to the war. I had read Thomas Heggen's novel, *Mister. Roberts*, related to the hero's anguish for being aboard a transport, rather than a warship in WWII. I had a sinking feeling about being assigned to *Cape Esperance* and my fear of missing the war. *Mister Roberts* provides a dramatic example of the frustrations of sailors serving on a support ship far from the fighting front.

Bill McIver, Fireman Apprentice, 1951

As a seaman apprentice, I was assigned to the Deck Division as a "deck ape" – a title that aptly described the menial duties of keeping the ship paint-

ed and shipshape. My first assignment was unloading and stacking crew food provisions in the ship's keel. All morning, pallets of goods were lowered several decks down from the hangar deck, to storage areas. At noon, when I went topside for lunch, deck crews were crane-loading R4D aircraft on the flight deck.

After lunch, I returned to the hot and stuffy cargo compartments and continued loading provisions. In mid-afternoon, an officer yelled down to us, "Anyone down there want to get into the Engineering Division?" I didn't know what that meant, but I knew I didn't want to be a deck ape, so I yelled back, "Yes sir!" and took the next lift up.

When I reached the hangar deck, the officer told me to report to the chief petty officer in the forward engine room. Even though the *Cape* was a small aircraft carrier, it was a large ship, 512 feet long and 108 feet at its widest point. I followed a sailor who knew his way around the ship. He took me down two decks, through a maze of passageways to a big door with machinery rumbling behind it.

I opened the engine room door and a blast of heated fuel-oil vapors hit me in the face and filled my lungs. Before the door closed behind me, every pore in my body was perspiring. I stood for a moment on the grated steel deck landing and looked about. Cavernous white steam pipes crisscrossed the huge room. Two decks below were a gigantic steam engine and two equally large boilers. Steel-grated walkways and insulated steam pipes wound their way around machinery. It was an intimidating sight, but it was too late to back out, so I proceeded gingerly down the steep steel ladders, holding onto hot handrails. In another dead reckoning decision, I had jumped from the frying pan into the fire.

As a part of my transfer from the deck force to engineering, the Personnel Office changed my rating from Seaman Apprentice to Fireman Apprentice. I was happy to remove the two white seaman stripes and sew on two red engineering stripes. Instead of being a "deck ape," I was officially a "snipe." Despite the heat and noise and overwhelming things to learn in the engine room, I felt I had been promoted.

Chapter Eleven

CVEs and War Stories

They stood toe-to-toe against battleships and cruisers and won, fought enemy submarines around the world, suffered under the onslaught of the kamikazes, supported amphibious landings from North Africa to Okinawa, carried planes and supplies to places few of the escort carrier men had ever heard of before, battled typhoons in the Pacific, and gales in the Atlantic. And they never flinched from their duty. They all came to serve their country and some did not return from those shores so far from home. These men, these ships, served the United States of America with the honor, courage, loyalty and selfless devotion to duty that placed them in the revered ranks of the American patriots. Let their exploits be remembered by generations to come.

Escort Carrier Sailors & Airmen Association

My ship – *USS Cape Esperance* – was a Casablanca-class aircraft carrier. *Cape Esperance* was designated and numbered CVE-88 when she reported for World War II duty on April 9, 1944. She served as a launch pad for air strikes against the Japanese and steamed 85,000 ocean miles transporting aircraft and materiel to Pacific battlefields. She heroically survived crashed and burning aircraft on her flight deck, refused to yield to the most devastating typhoon that hit the fleet during the war, and won two battle stars.

From May to September 1944, *Cape Esperance* made three long hauls from the California coast with aircraft, munitions, and troops to Finschhafen, New Guinea; Espiritu Santo, Vanuatu, (now New Hebrides); Pago Pago, Samoa; Kukum, Guadalcanal; and Manus, Admiralty Islands. As Japanese forces were driven from the far South Pacific islands, the cargo was staged on liberated islands for the fight to isolate Japan from its Indonesian re-supply bases, and for the planned island-hopping campaign from the Coral Sea to Japan's homeland islands.

With troops, materiel, aircraft and armaments massed on liberated Pacific islands from September 1944 to March 1945, *Cape Esperance* became

a combat carrier catapulting combat-ready aircraft to various fast carrier task groups in Admiral William F. "Bull" Halsey's Third Fleet. In January 1945, the *Cape*'s task group was detached to replenish Halsey's carrier fleet in the South China Sea. A *Cape Esperance* historian wrote, "Passage was made through the Philippine Islands by way of Surigao Straits. Passage was uneventful even though this was the first replenishment task unit to use that route" since the Battle of Leyte Gulf in October 1944.[270] The reason the route was noteworthy was that the battle to liberate the Philippines was still raging and would continue for more than six months. Here's how the writer for the *Cape*'s newspaper reported the passage:

> *January 1945: Up off the Philippines and then suddenly we cut through the Surigao Straits, so close to some of their airfields we could see the Nips warming up their planes at night. Out into the South China Sea and onto another monsoon. Did our job with the big boys ... looks like they may send us home.*[271]

While American forces were fighting to liberate the Philippines, *Cape Esperance* delivered combat-ready aircraft from the Ulithi Atoll supply base in the Philippine Sea to the Third Fleet as the Japanese were being defeated and pushed closer to their Japan homelands. She "made supporting attacks with Task Force 38 on Luzon, Formosa, Hong Kong and the China Coast, and participated in Third Fleet operations supporting the landings on Mindoro and in the Lingayen Gulf of the Philippines."[272] Rear Admiral Worrall Reed Carter in his book, *Beans, Bullets and Black Oil*, on naval logistics in the Pacific during WWII, cites *Cape Esperance*'s Captain R.W. Bockius' war diary on January 17, 1945 as an example of an escort carrier's replenishment work while operating with Halsey's forces in the South China Sea:

> *At 0546 in accordance with orders of Commander Task Group 30.8, Task Group 30.8.11, consisting of the USS Cape Esperance [and other ships] … left Task Group 30.8 and took station for replenishment operation … at 1230 USS Hank [DD 702] came alongside to receive 2 pilots and 2 aircrewmen for the USS Hancock [CV 19]. At 1315 the USS Charles S. Sperry [DD 697] came alongside to receive four pilots and 8 aircrewmen for the USS Lexington [CV 16]. At 1615 began launching planes. At 1651 USS Callaghan [DD 792] came alongside to receive 1 pilot and 2 aircrewmen for the USS San Jacinto [CVL 30] and to transfer 24 pilots on board to fly off replacement planes. We*

completed launching planes at 1643, having launched 8 F6Fs-5s [fighters], 1 F6FSP and two TBM-3s [bombers] for the USS Essex [CV 9]. At 1647 the USS Caperton [DD 650] came alongside to transfer pilots but was unable to make transfers because of heavy seas.[273]

In February 1945, *Cape Esperance* made her final aircraft delivery at sea during the war. The planes landed on *USS Wasp* (CV-18).

After returning stateside in February, *Cape Esperance* returned to transport duties and made three trips to Saipan and Guam between March and June 1945. During a stop at Pearl Harbor in April, Captain Bockius and crew were formally commended by Admiral Halsey for excellent services during the logistics operation from October 23, 1944, to January 26, 1945.

In change of command ceremonies in San Diego on May 3, 1945, Captain Bockius relinquished command of *Cape Esperance* to Commander Patrick Henry.[274]

A news release by the organizers of the third *Cape Esperance* reunion in 1992 listed the deeds of some notable WWII shipmates. While serving with the Third Fleet in 1944, two of the ship's pilots became replacements on *Wasp* and *USS Ticonderoga* (CV-14). One, David McCampbell, shot down nine Japanese aircraft in ninety minutes and had a total of thirty "kills" by war's end. The other pilot downed thirteen enemy planes and became an admiral. The ship's radio-communications officer, John W. Magill, became an Assistant Secretary of the Navy.

In August 1946, *Cape Esperance* was mothballed in Bremerton, Washington. The *Cape* was called back to duty for the Korean War in August 1950. As in World War II, the United States was again unprepared for a transoceanic war. The Navy desperately needed transports to rapidly deliver war materiel to the Far East in response to North Korea's unexpected attack on South Korea. The *Cape* was assigned to the Military Sea Transportation Service and redesignated TCVE. The "T" meant she was no longer a combatant. I resented that "T" designation. "CVE" had the ring of a warship. A "TCVE" was just a plodding transport.

I was in boot camp when *Cape Esperance* pulled its first post-WWII duty. On November 29, 1950 the *Cape* departed San Diego with two squadrons of United States Air Force F-86 Sabre jet fighters, pilots and maintenance crews of the 4th Fighter Interceptor Wing. Instead of "cocooning" the aircraft in a rubberized material to protect them from corrosion at sea, the Sabrejets aboard the *Cape* were periodically oiled and greased at sea so they would be

ready to fly upon arrival in Japan. The 4th FIW's third squadron of aircraft were "cocooned" and transported to Japan on the decks of four oil tankers.

Cape Esperance arrived in Tokyo Bay on December 13. Despite being serviced during the crossing, many of the F-86s suffered corrosive damage, especially those on the forward end of the flight deck. The "cocooned" aircraft arrived in better condition than those transported on *Cape Esperance*, but removing the anti-corrosive material and preparing them for flight took more time when they arrived in Japan.

USS Cape Esperance, (CVE-88) 1951

The F-86s that were in condition to fly were quickly ferried by barge to Kisarazu Air Base, flown to Johnson AFB, Japan, where the 4th Fighter Interceptor Wing was headquartered. "The same day, the unit's group commander, Lt. Col. John Meyer, took a detachment of F-86s to Kimpo airfield outside of Seoul, Korea. The base was known to the USAF as K-14."[275] The F-86s flew their first combat mission on December 15.

The new, fast Sabrejets were desperately needed. The Soviet Union had provided its Korean Communist ally with the USSR's best fighter aircraft – the MiG-15. Moreover, the USSR sent experienced Russian MiG-15 pilots to fly them. Before the arrival of the F-86s, Soviet MiG-15 fighters were outfighting outdated USAF F-80 and F-84 jet fighters and downing our B-29 bombers.[276] The F-86s leveled the aerial battlefield and led the United States to air superiority in the Korean War.

On December 17, four of those *Cape Esperance*-delivered F-86s took off on a mission from the Kimpo airfield. One of the pilots Lt. Col. Bruce Hinton marked a milestone in Korean War history. He piloted the first F-86 to shoot down a MiG-15![277] Although history records the event as the first air battle between F-86s and MiG-15s, no glory was bestowed on my old WWII

warship, which had delivered the victorious F-86 to war. *Cape Esperance* had won some boasting rights, but the fact was not reported to the crew and exploited as a morale booster – something that I found, when I came aboard, was badly needed by the bored and weary crew.

The development of CVE escort aircraft carriers provides fascinating insights into America's prodigious industrial power, the United States Navy's resistance to change and the political daring of a strong president determined to steer the country in a direction not favored by the people or Congress and certainly not by the hidebound Navy. Rear Admiral Daniel V. Gallery in his book, *Twenty Million Tons Under the Sea*,[278] points out that the most decisive factor in winning WWII was "the amazing expansion of the U.S. shipbuilding industry."

> *The whole economy of the U.S., its industry, and most of its citizens were involved one way or the other in the Herculean effort. Finished ships put to sea in 1943, which had been almost buried in the ground among the ore deposits of the Mesabi Range in Minnesota when the war began. We dug the ore out of the ground, hauled it to Pittsburgh, made it into steel, and rolled the steel into plates, bars and beams. All over the country we manufactured steam and electric machinery, boilers, pipes and valves, shafts, propellers, anchors and chains, radio and electronic equipment. All this stuff, tailored to fit the places where it had to go, in many cases by workmen who had never seen salt water, was brought together in the shipyards and assembled into seaworthy ships by workers, many of whom were high school girls.*[279]

"CVE" designated the ship as a combat escort aircraft carrier. CVEs were designed for versatility. Armed with patrol aircraft and torpedo bombers, their first duty was escorting England-bound supply convoys, hunting German submarines (U-boats) and attacking enemy surface ships bent on sinking supply ships. In conjunction with escort duties, CVEs transported desperately needed warplanes and armaments for the defense of Great Britain against the German Luftwaffe that was trying to bomb England into submission. They also provided close air support for amphibious landings and supported invasion forces along enemy-held coast lines. Due to their small size, lack of armor and armament, and relatively slow speed, they were not expected to fight sea battles against warships, as were large carriers. Large carriers were called "attack" and "fast" carriers because they attained speeds of thirty knots as compared with the CVE top speed of nineteen knots.

The success of escort carriers in protecting Atlantic convoys and delivering fighter aircraft to England was instrumental in preventing Germany from invading and occupying the British Isles. For that accomplishment alone, their acclaim should have been recognized along with the large aircraft carriers that garnered great fame defending freedom and defeating tyranny. However, because America's antisubmarine warfare operations were top secret, the CVEs and their crews did not get the credit they deserved in the battle for the Atlantic with German U-boats.

Success in the Pacific War likewise turned on the versatility of escort carriers. There, across vast stretches of the Pacific Ocean, the hardworking CVEs carried out vital transport duties that kept fast aircraft carriers and the Army Air Corps supplied with aircraft and crews. The supply routes to support American and Allied forces began on America's West Coast and extended more than seven thousand miles across the Pacific to the Coral Sea strand of islands. Even though the transported aircraft were "cocooned," the long ocean crossings in damp, salty and stormy weather penetrated the anticorrosive material and damaged most of the aircraft on the trip – some so badly they were not fit for flying. The corrosion problem kept most Pacific CVEs in a transport role replacing aircraft that were damaged not only by enemy fire and wear and tear, but also due to weather damage across the Pacific's great distances.

As Americans, and our British, Australian and New Zealand allies, pushed the Japanese Army and Navy north, making the distance from the American West Coast shorter, some CVEs delivered squadrons of combat-ready fighter planes and torpedo bombers to airfields on captured islands. Other CVEs transferred squadrons of air crews and combat-ready aircraft directly from their decks to large carriers at sea, replenishing combat losses. Yet others were assigned to amphibious task forces as full-fledged warships. They hunted and destroyed submarines that threatened landing support ships, provided close air support over amphibious landings, and supported ground forces fighting across the many Japanese-held island bastions in the Pacific. Around the clock servicing by carrier aircraft maintenance crews ("airdales" in Navy jargon) prevented corrosion and kept carrier aircraft in flying conditions.

Admiral Carter in his book described the dramatic impact CVEs had on the war effort. Supplied with replacement aircraft, crews and equipment, the fast carrier fleet was able to stay at sea fighting, despite suffering great losses during costly aircraft carrier battles. The following *USS Copahee* (CVE-12) operations exemplify the versatility of the escort carrier and the logistical innovations that hastened the Japanese defeat:

On 17 April [1944], 2 months before D-day for the Marianas [battle], the Copahee left Pearl [Harbor] with 86 aircraft, 390 passengers, and 196 cases of equipment. On the 23rd she unloaded her planes at the Majuro [Atoll, Marshall Islands] for further transfer to the fleet, or for use as combat air patrols. Reloading, she took aboard 23 damaged planes, 2 aircraft engines, and 312 passengers, leaving on the 26th for Pearl. Back at Majuro again 12 May, she unloaded 58 planes, 20 of which she catapulted, and 7 cases of airplane parts. The next day she was underway once more for Pearl, where she loaded 61 planes: 25 fighters, 15 torpedo [planes], 20 [dive] bombers (SB2C) and 1 SBD [dive] bomber.

On 3 June she left Pearl to operate … as a part of [a task group]. On the eve of D-day 14 June, she launched planes to carriers as follows: 4 fighters and 1 torpedo to the Cowpens [CVL-25]; 1 fighter, 1 torpedo, 3 SB2C bombers to the Hornet [CV-12]; 4 fighters to the light carrier Bataan [CVL-29]; 5 fighters, 5 torpedo, and 7 SB2C bombers to the Yorktown [CV-10]; 4 fighters, 2 torpedo, and 2 Avenger [TBM torpedo bomber] pilots to the light carrier Belleau Wood [CVL-24]. … On 16 June she … launched planes; for the Wasp [CV-18], 3 torpedo bombers and 1 SB2C; for Lexington [CV-16], 1 torpedo bomber; for the Bunker Hill [CV-17], 4 dive bombers and 2 Avenger pilots; for the Enterprise [CV-6], 1 torpedo bomber and 1 TBM [Avenger] pilot.[280]

Escort aircraft carriers were affectionately called "baby flat tops," derided as "jeep carriers" by fast carrier pilots, and considered expendable by fleet commanders who assigned CVEs to combat duties too risky or mundane for big carriers. Despite the disdain of big ship sailors, a WWII CVE fighter pilot, Bob Chapman, said CVEs earned respect and the sobriquet of "little giants." When put to the test, "they often fought as bigger units and earned a string of battle awards for actions across the Atlantic and Pacific."[281]

President Roosevelt, a naval enthusiast since childhood, championed escort carriers and ordered their development. As the youngest-ever Assistant Secretary of the Navy, FDR served under Woodrow Wilson from 1913 to 1920 – longer than any assistant secretary in history. (Coincidentally, Franklin filled the same seat that his cousin Theodore once held.)

According to Eric Larrabee in his book, *Commander in Chief,* FDR was instrumental in modernizing the Navy during his term as a Department of the Navy administrator. Larrabee wrote: He "was in charge of all civilian

personnel, he negotiated most contracts, and he took a large role in preparing annual estimates for the budget." Moreover, he was an innovator. "He saw to it that Pearl Harbor had a dry dock, which the experts had said was impossible ... he promoted the use of submarine chasers, pushed on behalf of naval aviation ... urged that a mine barrage be laid across the North Sea, and made swimming a part of training sailors."[282] When he became President he knew the "up and coming" naval officers, which helped immeasurably in selecting the flag officers he needed to direct naval operations in WWII.

Despite his insights into the internal working of the naval bureaucracy, the knowledge of the admirals who ran the department and his power as Commander in Chief, FDR had to suffer through the Navy's stubborn adherence to naval war doctrine[283] that made battleships the centerpiece of naval warfare. Aircraft carriers would succeed battleships as the focus of naval war operations, but not until a lot of Navy deadwood was retired and Roosevelt had the power to promote and appoint new leaders for WWII. Considering the Navy's reluctance to accept aircraft carriers as the principal naval weapon, it was even more difficult to persuade obdurate Navy brass and the department's slow-changing bureaucracy to accept FDR's CVE agenda, which he pushed in the late 1930s to contend with German submarines. U-boats were sinking ships supplying England at an alarming rate. The United States Navy had not conceived a counterforce or reacted with alacrity.

In 1938, Great Britain was under pressure from a rearmed and *revanche*-bent Germany. On the other side of the globe, Japan had already conquered a great deal of China and was poised to extend hegemony over all of east and south Asia. Despite German and Japanese threats to world peace, the American people and Congress remained adamantly isolationist and lawfully neutral. Although Roosevelt professed agreement with the non-intervention policy, he was covertly committed to maintaining the United States' enduring alliance with England and insuring England's survival by providing American ships, war planes and armaments.

To aid America's staunch ally, FDR ordered an increase in military aircraft production in 1938.[284] With American factories and assembly lines gearing up production, Roosevelt desperately needed transport ships to deliver hundreds of new aircraft to England. If war broke out, the Navy did not have enough escort ships to protect transport convoys from German U-boats in Atlantic shipping routes.

FDR's interest in sea power and his innovative ideas led to the development of the escort carrier, which could perform both delivery and protection duties while escorting unarmed transport ships. As early as 1939 he "actively enter[ed] the 'light' carrier controversy" and pressed the Navy to develop the

concept.[285] Even so, Roosevelt wasn't able to get the light carrier program rolling until 1942.

In September 1937, FDR pushed Congress to quarantine aggressor states. That bellicose proposal was aimed at the Japanese for their invasion of China and at Germany's unchecked aggression in Europe. The speech was prompted by Japan's bombing of American property and citizens around Shanghai.[286] In a cabinet meeting, Roosevelt called Italy, Germany and Japan "bandit nations." In December 1937, Japanese aviators, in an unprovoked attack, sunk the gunboat *USS Panay* (PR-5) gunboat in the Yangtze River. (A 1903 treaty with China allowed United States gunboats to patrol the Yangtze for protection of American interests and people.)[287] Despite the Japanese provocation, America remained a dedicated non-interventionist. Roosevelt was vocally neutral, but his actions were not.

FDR was walking a thin line because his bid for reelection in 1940 was looming. Tacitly, he supported non-involvement but, keeping his own counsel, he would not betray his commitment to England or fail to honor his oath to defend the United States. In November 1939, Congress acceded to Roosevelt's appeals to modify neutrality laws and permit the sale of arms to England and France. But Congress attached a severe qualification to the law – payments had to be made in cash and hauled on foreign ships.

Now that Roosevelt had overcome congressional opposition to providing armaments to the allies, he concocted a scheme to relieve the cash burden that Congress had placed on England's purchase of armaments. He presented the idea on December 17, 1940, in a press conference and in a Fireside Chat radio broadcast. In simple language, Roosevelt argued the case for loaning armaments to England rather than requiring our ally to make cash payments while fighting for survival. The plan became know as "lend-lease." Roosevelt's charming radio "chat" drew upon the trust that the American people placed in him in this great fight against tyranny.

I cite that 1940 "chat" as an illustration of a leader who repressed public fear while preparing the country for war, as contrasted with our leader in 2003 who took the country to war based on fear. In both cases our national security and vital interests were at stake. In 1940, America had a president, FDR, who led with calm assurance and built trust with the people step by step. More than sixty years later, America's leader, George W. Bush, blustered and uttered confrontational inanities while trusting only a coterie of like-minded advisors. Roosevelt led the country to a war supported by the American people and victory. Bush lost popular support in a war that may lead to disaster. Imagine if Bush had laid the issues before the people as Roosevelt did. In explaining his proposal for the WWII Lend Lease Program,

FDR compared Lend Lease with loaning a "garden hose" to help a neighbor put out a house fire. He said:

> *I have been exploring other methods of continuing the building up of our productive facilities and continuing automatically the flow of munitions to Great Britain. I will just put it this way, not as an exclusive alternative method but as one of several other possible methods that might be devised toward that end.*
>
> *It is possible – I will put it that way – for the United States to take over British orders and, because they are essentially the same kind of munitions that we use ourselves, turn them into American orders. We have enough money to do it. And thereupon, as to such portion of them as the military events of the future determine to be right and proper for us to allow to go to the other side, either lease or sell the materials, subject to mortgage, to the people on the other side. That would be on the general theory that it may still prove true that the best defense of Great Britain is the best defense of the United States, and therefore that these materials would be more useful to the defense of the United States if they were used in Great Britain than if they were kept in storage here….*
>
> *Well, let me give you an illustration: Suppose my neighbor's home catches fire, and I have a length of garden hose 400 or 500 feet away. If he can take my garden hose and connect it up with his hydrant, I may help him to put out his fire…. If it goes through the fire all right, intact, without any damage to it, he gives it back to me and thanks me very much for the use of it. But suppose it gets smashed up – holes in it – during the fire; we don't have to have too much formality about it, but I say to him, "I was glad to lend you that hose; I see I can't use it anymore, it's all smashed up." He says, "How many feet of it were there?" I tell him, "There were 150 feet of it." He says, "All right, I will replace it." Now, if I get a nice garden hose back, I am in pretty good shape….*
>
> *I can't go into details; and there is no use asking legal questions about how you would do it, because that is the thing that is now under study; but the thought is that we would take over not all, but a very large number of, future British orders; and when they came off the line, whether they were planes or guns or something else, we would enter into some kind of*

arrangement for their use by the British on the ground that it was the best thing for American defense, with the understanding that when the show was over, we would get repaid sometime in kind, thereby leaving out the dollar mark in the form of a dollar debt and substituting for it a gentleman's obligation to repay in kind. I think you all get it.[288]

Based on FDR's simple, compelling appeal to the people, Congress quickly debated and passed the Lend Lease Act three months later in March 1941.[289] Lend Lease saved Great Britain from being bombed to submission during the Battle of Britain air war. Lend Lease was later extended to France and Russia. The British treasury was empty but, with Lend Lease, help was now on the way. Roosevelt finally had cover and sanction for America's nascent war machine that he geared to full production. Lend Lease, Roosevelt's preparations for war, and his "quarantine" speech presaged the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and America's inevitable declaration of war against the Axis powers.

At the end of 1940, Roosevelt continued to say that he did not want to go to war. However, in a Fireside Chat delivered December 29, 1940, he carefully and chillingly laid the groundwork that prepared the American people for the possibility of war. The chat was based on his December 17th press conference speech. He said:

This is not a fireside chat on war. It is a talk on national security; because the nub of the whole purpose of your president is to keep you now, and your children later, and your grandchildren much later, out of a last-ditch war for the preservation of American independence, and all of the things that American independence means to you and to me and to ours.

We are planning our own defense with the utmost urgency, and in its vast scale we must integrate the war needs of Britain and the other free nations which are resisting aggression.

The experience of the past two years has proven beyond a doubt that no nation can appease the Nazis. No man can turn a tiger into a kitten by stroking it. There can be no appeasement with ruthlessness. There can be no reasoning with an incendiary bomb. We know now that a nation can have peace with the Nazis only at the price of total surrender. Even the people of Italy have been forced to become accomplices of the Nazis, but at this moment they do not know how soon they will be embraced to death by their allies.

Holding to the fiction that he was not preparing for direct United States intervention in the war, FDR continued:

> *Our national policy is not directed toward war. Its sole purpose is to keep war away from our country and our people. Democracy's fight against world conquest is being greatly aided, and must be more greatly aided, by the rearmament of the United States and by sending every ounce and every ton of munitions and supplies that we can possibly spare to help the defenders who are in the front lines. And it is no more unneutral for us to do that than it is for Sweden, Russia and other nations near Germany to send steel and ore and oil and other war materials into Germany every day in the week. We have furnished the British great material support and we will furnish far more in the future.*

Roosevelt closed the speech with a ringing phrase by which the speech is remembered:

> *We must be the great arsenal of democracy. For us this is an emergency as serious as war itself. We must apply ourselves to our task with the same resolution, the same sense of urgency, the same spirit of patriotism and sacrifice as we would show were we at war.*[290]

Roosevelt's "arsenal of democracy" speech rationalized his covert assistance to British Prime Minister Winston Churchill. It in no way explained the efficacy of the British returning used war material or what good it would be to the United States after the war, nor did the American people question the matter because FDR had built trust with them. Guided by Roosevelt, the United States did become the arsenal for western democracies, and Communist Russia as well, in WWII.

Now, armed with authority to aid allies England, France and Russia, Roosevelt was finally free to move forward with his escort carrier plan of converting some merchant ships to small carriers. His order produced two Long Island-class carriers. The first, *USS Long Island* (CVE-1), came out in June 1941. The second, in March 1942, went directly to the British Navy as the *HMS Archer* (BAVG-1). Initially, small carriers were considered auxiliary non-combatants and were designated as AVG. That des-

ignation was changed to CVE when they proved their mettle protecting Atlantic convoys.[291]

Before Roosevelt's push for escort carriers, the Navy had been considering the development of small carriers since 1927, but nothing came of the idea. In 1939 Captain John S. McCain, commander of the fast carrier *USS Ranger* (CV-4), wrote to the Secretary of the Navy advocating the building of at least eight "pocket-size" carriers. Scott MacDonald in an article in *Naval Aviation News* reports that McCain's superior "was not at all enthusiastic about the scheme."[292] However, MacDonald says, the Navy's Bureau of Construction reviewed McCain's proposal and proceeded to draw up plans to convert some passenger ships to carriers with short flight decks. The Chief of Naval Operations abruptly halted the program in November 1940 because the Secretary of the Navy decided that conversion of merchant ships was no longer a viable option for constructing aircraft carriers – a faulty conclusion, it seems, since very soon many merchant ships and hulls would become CVEs. Meanwhile, England remained in clear and present danger without shipping to deliver a steady supply of armaments, minerals and food.

Three weeks after Japan's sneak aircraft carrier attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 – the day that would "go down in infamy" – Roosevelt's Secretary of the Navy ordered Navy shipbuilders to convert twenty-four merchant ship hulls to CVEs. Finally, the CVE development ball would roll, but not fast enough to suit FDR or quell the U-boat threat.

Amazingly, Roosevelt had to assert himself as Commander in Chief and order the Navy to move forward in the production of escort carriers. Even direct orders by the President during war had their limits with Navy brass. In July of 1942 the new CNO, Admiral Ernest J. King, dragged his heels on FDR's pet project. Eric Larrabee in his book *Commander in Chief* outlined the conflict between Roosevelt and King:

> *So the "desperate situation" [loss of supply and transport ships in the Atlantic] continued while the Americans argued with each other. King insisted that it made better sense to build escorts that could sink U-boats, but the Maritime Commission differed [favoring more merchant ships] with him and nothing was resolved. For lack of escorts the President blamed the Navy and King … unfairly blamed the President; it was a debate over the size of escort ships in which the essential point, the compelling need for any warships appropriate to the task, did not find first place. Roosevelt said that the Navy thought too big, King that the President thought too small.*

On July 7, 1942, Roosevelt sent to King a table of successful U-boat attacks accompanied by a memorandum that began: "This furnishes excellent proof of what I have been talking about for many weeks." Losses of ships sailing independently were much greater (118) than those sailing under escort (20). Frankly, said the President, "I think it has taken an unconscionable time to get things going.... We must speed things up and we must use the available tools even though they are not just what we would like to have." A sentiment King could or should have echoed.[293]

Instead of echoing his Commander in Chief, King argued that the solution "was a very large number – roughly 1000 – of seagoing vessels of destroyer escort or corvette type. I am doing my best to get them quickly." Such was the independence of the Navy from outside influence that hadn't changed since John Paul Jones' Revolutionary War Navy. Larrabee quoted Admiral Samuel Morison, the honored naval historian: "If the President's wishes and recommendations had been followed, the Navy would have been better prepared to meet the U-boats."[294]

In August 1942, five Bogue-class CVEs were constructed on existing cargo ship hulls. Six more Bogue CVEs were ready for duty by April 1943. In all, forty-four Bogue-class carriers were built. Thirty-three were transferred to the British Navy.[295] The Bogues were primarily assigned duty in the Atlantic. Four more CVEs of the Sangamon-class were constructed on fast Cimarron-class fleet oiler hulls. The Sangamon flat-tops were hurriedly completed in August and September 1942 to provide air support for the invasion of North Africa late that year.

It would take United States shipyards until 1944 to deliver all the ships needed to fight the two-ocean war. To exacerbate the need for carriers, five of the Navy's eight large aircraft carriers were sunk by Japanese aircraft in 1942. They were *USS Langley* (CV-1)(commissioned in 1922), *USS Lexington* (CV-2)(1927), *USS Yorktown* (CV-5)(1937), *USS Wasp* (CV-7)(1940), and *USS Hornet* (CV-8)(1941). *Langley* went down in a Java Sea battle in February 1942. *Lexington* was sunk in the Battle for the Coral Sea in May 1942. *Yorktown* was lost in the Battle of Midway in June 1942. *Wasp* and *Hornet* hit the ocean bottom in September and October 1942 in the Solomon Island campaign.

Many new fast carrier hulls were laid by 1942, but only one, *USS Essex*, was commissioned in 1942, and that was on the last day of the year. The new lady joined the three big carriers *USS Saratoga* (CV-3)(commissioned 1927), *USS Ranger* (CV-4)(1934) and *USS Enterprise* (CV-6)(1938), all still afloat

as the second full year of the war began in January 1943. *Ranger* was the only large carrier in the Atlantic.

With the United States and Great Britain following their "Europe First" strategy, the war effort in the Pacific was starved for ships, men and airplanes. Roosevelt was desperate for CVEs in the Pacific. With only three large carriers ready to fight in 1942 (and one them in Europe), there were not nearly enough aircraft and aircraft carrier firepower to make serious inroads against the vastly superior Japanese fleet in the Western Pacific. The Japanese were threatening to isolate Australia. Early in 1942 they occupied Indonesia, New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, and were intent on capturing the islands nearest Australia, New Caledonia, Fiji and Samoa. The Japanese also planned to occupy Port Moresby, Papua, New Guinea, which would put them a stone's throw from Queensland, Australia – the perfect place from which to launch their planned invasion of the island continent. Loss of the critical islands and Port Moresby would cut lines of communication between the United States and Australia, isolate Australia and cost the U.S. its vital Pacific ally. It was imperative that Port Moresby and the islands nearest Australia not fall to the Japanese.[296]

Obviously, with such a threat brewing in the far Pacific, the two fast carriers in the Pacific fleet couldn't be spared for delivering new aircraft and pilots from America's West Coast to distant Pacific land bases. While there was a great need for more fast carriers, there was an equal need for CVEs that had proven themselves in escorting convoys safely across the Atlantic, transporting aircraft and materiel, sinking German submarines, and fighting off German surface ships attacking supply convoys.

Shipbuilding tycoon Henry J. Kaiser came to Roosevelt's rescue in early 1943. Kaiser, owner of Kaiser Shipyards on the Columbia River near Vancouver, Washington, presented the Navy Bureau of Ships (BuShips) a proposal to mass-produce fifty escort carriers in one year, with the first to roll down the launch ways in less than four months. The Navy was still not enthusiastic about the small carrier concept and rejected Kaiser's plan.[297]

Undaunted – he was accustomed to getting what he wanted – Kaiser took the Navy's rejection directly to FDR. Roosevelt, the champion of small carriers, could not have heard sweeter music. It would be a godsend to put fifty ships into production and launch the first in a mere four months. The new CVEs, designated Casablanca-class escort carriers, were unofficially called Kaiser carriers.

Tycoon Kaiser was confident that he could meet his delivery schedule because he had merchant ship hulls in production that CVEs could be built on. Moreover, he could mass-produce components with new assembly-line

prefabrication and welding techniques that allowed his CVEs to be assembled at breakneck speed.

After the first carrier was christened on July 8, 1943, Kaiser shipyards produced a ship a week. Exactly a year later, the fiftieth ship slid down the ways at Kaiser's shipyards in Vancouver, Washington. It was an incredible feat, but it was just one of the many examples of America's phenomenal power in resources, democracy, determination and patriotism, and its willingness to secure freedom "all over the world," as Roosevelt had proclaimed in his famous "Four Freedoms" speech.

The United States Navy remained unimpressed and skeptical. Captain Daniel V. Gallery, the first captain of *USS Guadalcanal* (CVE-60), "described *Guadalcanal* as a "Cinderella"[298] of ships when he assumed command at the Vancouver, Washington Kaiser shipyard. Captain Gallery recalled:

> *The decision to build these ships caused the greatest argument in naval circles since Noah built the Ark. By prewar navy standards these ships simply didn't make sense, and anyone with a few years' seagoing experience could tell from a glance that no good would ever come of them.*
>
> *A lot of people said so in no uncertain terms, too. When my crew was being formed I found it necessary to assemble them and scotch some of the rumors that began to circulate around the waterfront.*
>
> *One was to the effect the ships were structurally unsound, and would break in two in a seaway. I must admit this didn't seem too implausible at the time, especially when you looked around the building-yard and saw the farmers, shop assistants and high school girls who were assembling the ships.*[299]

When Captain Gallery got *Guadalcanal* into the rough Atlantic seas, he undoubtedly saw the concerns were unfounded. *Guadalcanal* was assigned duty as the flag ship of "hunter-killer," anti-submarine Task Group 22.3 under Captain Gallery's command. The task group sank four German submarines. Aircraft from *Guadalcanal* took credit for three of the kills. The task group's four screening destroyer escorts were involved in all kills and accounted for the fourth – *U-boat* 505. The damage inflicted on *U-505* by the destroyers forced the German to abandon the sinking sub. In an effort to obtain war secrets and knowledge of German submarine tactics, Captain Gallery ordered a boarding party from destroyer escort, *USS Pillsbury* (DE-133), to board the abandoned U-boat, prevent her from sinking, or at least procure code books

and other material of intelligence value. Saving the scuttled submarine is a hair-raising tale of American ingenuity and valor.

Capture of *U-505* was kept secret from the Germans until the end of the war. Captain Gallery stated in his fascinating account of the event, "The big thing we got out of it was the ability to read the German naval codes. We got current code books, the cipher machine, and hundreds of dispatches with code version on the side and German translation on the other."[300] *Guadalcanal* and her task group were awarded a Presidential Unit Citation for the deed. *U-505* became a war trophy and is on display at Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry.

Cape Esperance was the thirty-fourth Kaiser CVE. She was commissioned in April 1944 and made her first aircraft delivery from the West Coast to far-flung western Pacific war zones in May. Like *Guadalcanal*, *Cape Esperance* and all of Kaiser's CVEs would prove themselves worthy of FDR's decision.

The Kaiser carriers were 512 feet long with 477-foot flight decks. The extreme beam (width) of the flight deck was 108 feet, and the hull beam was 65 feet. Their Skinner Uniflow reciprocating steam engines were designed to propel the fully loaded 11,000-ton ships 7,000 miles at 19 knots per hour. At a standard speed of 15 knots, the range was over 10,000 miles.[301]

Like the earlier CVE's, Casablanca-class CVEs performed a wide range of duties. As combatants, their aircrews hunted and killed submarines, flew combat air patrols in support of invasion forces, and accomplished air combat missions when operating in small carrier combat fleets. As transports they brought replacement aircraft to frontline battle units at sea and forward air bases. At times they performed transport and combat duties concurrently. Aircraft were moved between the hangar and flight decks on two elevators – one forward and one aft.

When on duty as combatant carriers, the "Kaisers" carried a mix of about twenty-five Wildcat (FM-1 or FM-2) fighter and Avenger (TBM) torpedo planes to fulfill their varied combat missions. When serving as transport ships they could carry up to eighty aircraft to forward bases, plus war material, provisions, and several hundred passengers.

The admiral in charge of BuShips expressed some specific reasons for opposing the Kaiser proposal. One was basic design.

> *Casablanca-class carriers were notorious for their hard rolling characteristics. [Because of rough seas] they were considered unsuitable for North Atlantic operations and most of these carriers were assigned Pacific duty. Of the fifty carriers of this class built,*

only five were assigned Atlantic duty and of these five only one, Mission Bay, remained in the Atlantic to the end of the war.[302]

My shipmates and I can attest to the *Cape*'s "notorious hard rolling characteristics." *Cape Esperance* rolled constantly, even in calm water. She listed alarmingly in rough seas. In the engine room during stormy weather, we nervously kept our eye on the ship's inclinometer needle as the ship rolled side to side toward the ship's capsize point. Some crewmembers, like my friend, fireman Glenn Lassiter, never became accustomed to the ship's constant rolling. Lassiter was seasick from the time the ship left one port until it reached the next. Another shipmate, Bob Carver, who kept his division's log books, adds some humor to the ship's unsteadiness:

There was a little office on the starboard side just a few feet from where the brow would be put over [with water] and that is where I would try to type reports. The table is welded to the deck. The machine [typewriter] is bolted to the table. You and the chair are at the mercy of the ship's movement. There were times when I would give the carriage a whack and it wouldn't move because the ship had rolled the other way. Other times I thought it was going to shoot right thru the hull.[303]

Despite the Kaiser carriers' hard rolling traits, they were seaworthy. That was proved during the American invasion of the Philippine Islands on December 18, 1944. On that day, Bull Halsey's Third Fleet was caught refueling at sea when Typhoon Cobra hit the fleet. The ferocity of the storm and events on the ships have been extensively recorded in numerous books and articles, and command responsibility scrutinized in detail by a Naval Court of Inquiry.

On December 17, the sea was very rough. As a precautionary measure, Captain Bockius ordered deck crews to strengthen flight deck aircraft tiedown cabling with additional manila line and wire cables. Other steps were taken to lower the ship's center of gravity such as lowering the heavy forward aircraft elevator. The fury of the storm hit before 0800 hours. At 0950 the captain reported that *Cape Esperance* could not keep up with the fleet and dropped out of formation. Retired Navy Captain C. Raymond Calhoun wrote in his book, *Typhoon: The Other Enemy*:

Bockius ... was maneuvering to reduce the punishing effects of the sea. Rolling constantly from 36, often to 39 degrees, the Cape Esperance began to lose aircraft from the flight deck. First

one and then another broke loose, crashed into adjacent planes, tore them loose, skidded across the deck and went overboard. One of these perched on top of the forward starboard stack and burst into flames, which quickly rose to the level of the bridge. The captain ordered all hands to leave the area of the fire except those necessary to conn the ship.[304]

Powerful winds pounded *Cape Esperance* and lashing seas continued to roll her excessively. Admiral Halsey sent the cruiser *USS Miami* (CL-89) and destroyer *USS Thorn* (DD-988) to save crew members in case *Cape Esperance* went down. Calhoun continued:

When it seemed that there were no alternative actions left, and the storm was gradually but certainly overwhelming the ship, Fate intervened. First the wind-swept spume extinguished the fire. A huge wave then tossed the airplane from the stack into the air and over the side. The mountainous seas, the wind, and the excessive rolls, all rose to a new level of violence. First one and then another of the aircraft on the flight deck were swept overboard. As the numbers lost mounted, the deck load lightened, the center of gravity was lowered, and the rolling gradually lessened. By the time thirty-two planes had been lost from the flight deck, the ship rode more easily. Now she found herself able to survive the mauling. Had she not lost the majority of her flight deck load (only seven were left), there is every indication that the ship would have foundered.[305]

Bob Drury and Tom Clavin in their un-footnoted *Halsey's Typhoon* provide an interesting, perhaps apocryphal, scene on *Cape Esperance*'s bridge during the height of the typhoon:

So many planes had broken loose from their lashings on the flight deck that her commander, Capt. R.W. Bockius, feared that his bridge would topple, as it was being slammed by rogue aircraft. Ignoring protocol that forbade smoking in the wheelhouse, Bockius turned to his officers and offered each a condemned man's final cigarette. Having smoked them, however, and finding themselves still afloat, they left the bridge and joined their crews, including men released from the brig, in fighting fires burning on both decks.[306]

A *Baltimore Sun* newspaper reporter and an Associated Press photographer were aboard the *Cape* during the typhoon. Rambert James of the AP filed a bone-chilling report of the ordeal. With the *Cape* taking forty-degree rolls, James reported that Captain Bockius ordered all men not on watch to the hangar deck to weigh down the high side of the ship. As the ship listed, the men ran across the hangar deck to the other side. The "shifting human ballast" of 45,000 pounds running from one side to the other reportedly helped save the ship.[307]

It is doubtful such a maneuver happened. There are only two decks on the ship where one could run from one side to the other – the hangar and flight decks. Both decks were sloshing with fuel, oil, water and flotsam, and aircraft, loose from their moorings, were crashing around. Captain Calhoun in his book said there was an order to position weight to the port side of the ship at some point during the typhoon,[308] but common sense rules out any mass running from one side of the ship.The AP photographer-reporter probably got the story confused with the order to weigh down the ship's port side. From my experience in a bad storm while I was aboard *Cape Esperance*, crew members not directly involved in crucial tasks avoided traversing the ship and found something to hold onto to keep from slipping, sliding and getting injured on wet decks.

Cape Esperance's journal editor described the storm with typical Navy bravado:

> *December 1944: Out once more and this time was almost our last time. Caught in a typhoon on the 18th and a lot of boys caught religion as a result of the ol' 88 pulling herself out of a mighty tough spot. Anyone who calls these CVEs Kaiser Koffins is due to be whistling through teeth that aren't there any more. Limped back to Ulithi to await Christmas. [For Christmas] all hands were most grateful, the chow was special, the Padre held midnight services and many of us found time out to say thanks for being able to see this Christmas roll 'round.*[309]

Including *Cape Esperance*, four CVEs in the vicinity survived the typhoon, but the storm capsized three destroyers. Four light aircraft carriers, a light cruiser, seven destroyers, three destroyer escorts, an oiler and a fleet tug were seriously damaged. One must wonder what BuShips thought about Kaiser CVE seaworthiness after that storm sunk three destroyers but no CVEs.

About eight hundred officers and men died in Typhoon Cobra. The four CVEs contributed eighty-six of the one hundred forty-six aircraft lost

in the hurricane.[310] Fleet Admiral Nimitz called it "the greatest uncompensated loss that the Navy had taken since the Battle of Savo Island in the Solomon Island Theater."[311]

A naval court of inquiry placed the responsibility for the storm's damage and losses on Admiral Halsey. Halsey was not charged with negligence. The court judged his mistakes as "errors in judgment."[312] As we shall see, that was not the first time Halsey's poor judgment cost lives and ships.

Besides Casablanca carriers' "hard rolling characteristics" BuShips was also against building the fifty escort carriers "driven by inexpensive, idiosyncratic Skinner Uniflow [reciprocating] steam engines, peculiar in design and nonconforming with Navy "specs" for cylinder lubrication, filtering, quality of fittings and foreign to the young mechanics coming out of America's wartime technical schools."[313] The last new warships powered by reciprocating steam engines were the battleships *USS Texas* (BB-34) and *USS New York* (BB-35) in 1914. Except for those two battlewagons, the warships with reciprocating engines were commissioned before 1910.[314] However, in 1942, the steel gear-cutting industry was operating at full capacity, producing modern steam-turbine engines for higher priority fighting ships. Hence, CVEs were relegated to pre-World War I engines that did not require rotary gears with finely-machined tolerances.[315]

The Navy's final objection to Henry Kaiser's design was the paucity of watertight compartments and the lack of "blisters." Blisters are armored plates added to ship skins below the water line for protection against torpedoes. One critic stated, "the hull of a CVE was no better than its engines. High in sulfur and phosphorus content, the thin steel was brittle, a deficiency that worsened when all hatches, vents and other structural discontinuities were accounted for."[316]

BuShips' concerns with regard to armor and CVEs' thin skins were of consequence. CVE crews were highly vulnerable, as was proved in the Battle off Samar during the Leyte invasion and Japanese kamikaze attacks. However, the lack of blisters actually saved *USS White Plains* (CVE-66) from sinking. In the Battle off Samar the CVE's "thin armor permitted the Japanese shells to pass completely through without exploding."[317] In the same battle, *USS Kalinin Bay* (CVE 68) sustained [fifteen major-caliber] hits that penetrated the hull without exploding. The shelling turned "the ship into an oversized colander."[318] However, both ships proved that they could take major hits and survive.

The CVEs' dearth of armor became a joke among escort carrier crews. They said "CVE" stood for "Combustible, Vulnerable and Expendable." Hence, "Kaiser Coffins."

Roosevelt was completely vindicated in his support of Kaiser's proposal. The Casablanca baby flat-tops proved their mettle many times in the Pacific. CVEs were decisive offensive weapons, and they magnificently kept the fleet air arm supplied with aircraft, trained pilots and flight deck crews. In the island-hopping campaign, the Kaiser CVEs were invaluable. While the fleet, led by fast carriers, carried the fight to the enemy at sea, CVE fighter aircraft provided close air support above amphibious landings and softened up enemy fortifications ahead of infantry troops as they advanced inland. Just as the first merchant ship-converted CVEs had battled U-boats in the Atlantic, CVE torpedo bombers proved effective as submarine hunters and killers in the Pacific. In their transport role, CVEs kept fighting forces supplied, delivering thousands of warplanes and tons of war materiel to land bases and big carriers at sea. On re-supply voyages to the States, they ferried damaged aircraft and equipment back to shipyards for repairs.

The baby flat-tops bore the brunt of some sea battles in WWII. Several postwar CVEs carried the fight to the enemy in Korea as well.[319] Admiral Samuel Eliot Morison provides a historian's view of CVEs:

> *Owing to the stringent security on antisubmarine warfare, the public never knew the vital work done by CVEs in the Atlantic. And in the Pacific the big flat-tops of the fast carrier groups won the glory. There, ever increasing numbers of CVEs performed monotonous routine tasks of providing air cover for convoys and amphibious operations. They did this under conditions more rigorous than those on board the fast carriers, and in temperatures of 93° to 98° F. in berthing spaces and on the hangar deck. Marcus Island (CVE-77) had a temperature above 100° in the pilot's ready-room during the Battle off Samar Island. Seldom did the sailors in these useful and gallant ships enjoy a liberty ashore.*[320]

I find it humorous that Admiral Morison considered 93 to 100 degree temperatures in pilot ready rooms uncomfortable, but officers' quarters, mess and pilot ready rooms were at least ventilated. Kaiser cut his CVE construction costs by not installing blower systems for ventilation of crew sleeping compartments.[321] When *Cape Esperance* sailed in the South China Sea,

many of the crew slept topside on the deck. The engine rooms were ventilated; nevertheless, temperatures hovered around 120 degrees down there when operating in the South Seas.

Because CVEs were used extensively in Marine Corps amphibious assaults, Marine pilots were assigned to CVEs. The Marines were proud "tailhookers." With typical Marine gallows humor, the pilots ruefully derided "Kaiser Coffins," but they took pride in their ship and their mission. Their experiences flying Hellcat fighters and Avenger torpedo planes off the little ships led to the officer's club song. The following are a few of the doggerel's many verses:

Cuts and Guts

Navy fliers fly off the big carriers
Army fliers aren't seen oe'r the sea
But we're in the lousy Marine Corps
So we get these dang CVEs!

Chorus:
Cuts and guts, cuts and guts
The guys that make carriers are nuts, are nuts!
Cuts and guts, cuts and guts
The guys that make carriers are nuts!

We envy the boys on the big ones
And we'd trade in a minute or two,
'Cause we'd like to see those poor bastards,
Try to do the things we do!

Some day when this fracas is over,
And back at El Toro we'll be,
We'll load up with rockets and napalm
And we'll sink every damned CVE!

The chorus was bellowed between each verse.

Of course, I knew nothing about the CVE story when I came aboard *Cape Esperance* as a raw, barely-seventeen-year-old recruit with visions of glory in my head. Kaiser's CVEs were definitely workhorses, as I soon experienced. But to my disappointment, they had become obsolete as warships with the advent of jet aircraft. The post-WWII Commencement Bay-class carriers were the only CVEs that performed combat operations in Korea.

I had a chip on my shoulder about being exiled to an obsolete transport instead of a fighting ship. I grumbled a lot on watch about the ship's lowly duty – as if I had come from something grand. My complaints about my ship finally got to Chief Machinist Mate Michael Staats, who was a short, trim, blond, man. He was a spit and polish sailor who always wore a starched khaki shirt and pants even at sea on engine room watch when other engineering chiefs wore dungarees like the rest of us snipes. (Snipe was a designation that engineers wore proudly.)

Chief Michael Staats, 1951.

One day I made the very bad mistake of griping about my assignment on "this grubby flat-bottomed tub." The next time I came on watch, Staats had assembled a paint scraper, a wire brush, a pile of rags and a bucket of paint. He lifted a couple of deck plates behind the main condenser and pointed with a flashlight to the bilge area that he wanted scraped, cleaned and painted. I sweated out that job on my knees, barefoot in my skivvies, in dirty, greasy bilge water for several four-hour watches before Staats gave me a reprieve. It was a tough way to learn respect for my ship. Alas, I still learn most of my lessons the hard way.

I actually liked and respected Chief Staats before and after he sent me to the bilges. It turned out that Staats was the best teacher I had in the Navy. He spent time on every watch preparing me for the test for advancement from Apprentice to Fireman rating. Thanks to Staats' help, and diligent study of the *Fireman Training Manual* and *The Bluejackets Manual*, I easily passed the test on the first try. Getting through boot camp and earning my first pro-

motion boosted my confidence. They were big accomplishments for me after failing the tenth grade at Austin High School.

One night on the mid-watch, Staats and engine throttleman Ted Pennington and I were standing around on the throttle platform drinking coffee and chatting. We got Staats to talk about being on CVEs in World War II. As Staats talked, the reason for my banishment to the bilges became clear. Chief Staats loved CVEs. As a crass recruit, I had crossed the line by disrespecting one of his beloved ships. Despite my rookie transgression, Staats did not hold it against me. He liked the way I plugged away in the bilges and studied for advancement.

Staats didn't lecture, revert to hyperbole, or mix history with personal war stories, as did most veterans when talking to recruits. He had a chest full of medals but he did not talk down to me about his own war experiences. His stories were broad-brush historical strokes. He talked dispassionately about Navy history and answered technical machinery questions with the patience of a good teacher. War, duty and country were simply matters of fact to Chief Staats. He embellished nothing. Staats' stories about WWII sea battles hooked me, and I always looked forward to the next watch with him.

To refresh my memory of those nightly naval history sessions with Chief Staats, fifty-plus years ago, I brushed up on the history of the Western Pacific war. Stories told by Staats and other chiefs and senior petty officers on long night watches have stood the test of time. The old salts reminisced about the lightning-like Japanese victories in the Pacific and the American sea battles that blunted Japanese expansion to Australia's doorstep in May 1942. Here is a succinct outline of the Japan's successes from December 7, 1941, and May 1942:

> *After the Japanese attacked the U.S. Navy base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii on 7 December 1941, Imperial Japan appeared unstoppable. The Americans were quickly crushed in the Philippines, the British were run out of Hong Kong and Southeast Asia, and the Dutch East Indies were captured. The Japanese seized a widespread network of islands in the Pacific to provide bases to protect their new empire, and pushed southeast to the northern coast of New Guinea, as well as the Solomon Islands chain that flanked Australia to the northeast.*

I recalled the anxiety we felt at home during the darkest days of the war, while listening with my parents to radio reports of the tremendous loss of men, ships and airplanes in the western Pacific right after Pearl Harbor was bombed. The U.S. air and naval base on Wake Island was bombed the

day after Pearl Harbor. Bad judgment by the acting Commander of the Pacific Fleet for not sending his carrier force to defend the vital Wake Island refueling base doomed the Americans on the island. After two weeks of determined but futile resistance, the American commander struck the colors December 23, 1941.

As I wrote this and "boned up" on WWII naval history, my mind often drifted to those long *Cape Esperance* engine-room discussions with men, America's "greatest generation," who had actually served deep in the engineering spaces of warships while under attack by enemy surface ships, aircraft and submarines.

The Battle of the Coral Sea (May 7-8, 1942) was the first sea battle in history in which opposing ships could not see each other. The battle ended the dominance of battleships in naval war doctrine. For the remainder of the war, battleships were relegated to shore bombardment and screening aircraft carrier-led task forces.

Three United States ships were sunk in the Coral Sea battle – the carrier *USS Lexington* (CV-2), a destroyer and an oil tanker. *USS Yorktown* (CV-5) was badly damaged in the fight. The two-day battle ended in a draw. Japan scored the most battle points, but strategically the U.S. had stopped Japanese incursion into the western Pacific and ended the Japanese threat to Australia.

The Coral Sea engagement and the fight for the Solomons began the slow, costly Allied sea campaigns that ended Japan's control of the far western Pacific islands. Between August 9 and November 30, 1942, the Japanese and Allied fleets, tangled five times in the gulf between the Solomon Islands of Guadalcanal and Florida. The gulf became know as Iron Bottom Sound, so named because so many ships from both sides were sunk there.

The first Solomon Island sea battle occurred near Savo Island – ten miles across Iron Bottom Sound from Guadalcanal. During the Battle of Savo, the U.S. Navy suffered one of its most ignominious defeats. On August 9, a Japanese force of five heavy cruisers, two light cruisers and a destroyer passed Savo Island under the cover of darkness. The armada was unseen by radar operators on the United States destroyer assigned to alert American commanders of Japanese attempts to reinforce their troops on Guadalcanal. It was a deadly mistake. When the Savo Island fight was over, four heavy cruisers (three American and one Australian) were sunk. A U.S. heavy cruiser and a destroyer were badly damaged. One thousand, two hundred and seventy men were killed and more than seven hundred injured. The enemy was barely scratched.[323]

My ship *Cape Esperance* was named in honor of the Navy's first victory over Japanese warships in the Solomon Island campaigns. Cape Esperance

is located on the northwest tip of Guadalcanal Island. Japanese supply ships, escorted by large warships, had to pass Cape Esperance to deliver supplies and reinforcements to the Japanese Army that was battling United States troops on the island. There is a detailed account of the battle in a slim, 150-page book by Captain Charles Cook, USN (Ret.), *The Battle of Cape Esperance: Encounter at Guadalcanal* (Naval Institute Press, 1968).

On October 11, 1942, two nights after the Savo disaster, a Japanese force consisting of three heavy cruisers and two destroyers was on a mission to replenish troops and supplies on Guadalcanal. Near midnight, a United States task group of two heavy cruisers, two light cruisers and five destroyers engaged the Japanese force near Cape Esperance in the vicinity of Savo Island.

The American ships sank a Japanese heavy cruiser and a destroyer, and badly damaged a Japanese cruiser and a destroyer. The Americans lost a destroyer and suffered damage to both cruisers and one destroyer. After a draw in the Coral Sea battle and the crushing Savo defeat, the Navy had finally won a clear-cut battle in the Solomon Islands campaign off Guadalcanal's Cape Esperance – my ship's namesake.

During the *Cape*'s second WWII replenishing cruise, she was diverted to Guadalcanal where she passed near the scene of the Cape Esperance battle. The *Cape*'s journalist took note of the event.[324] He wrote: "now at Guadalcanal and Lt. Hal Schumacher makes history by taking the first beer party ashore with him: the first ever to land on this island which is inhabited by Marines, a ferocious, khaki-clad mammal."[325] (Hal Schumacher was a star pitcher for the New York Giants before the war.)

No CVE story is complete without a retelling of the Battle off Samar – the CVEs' finest hour. Naval historian Morison marked the moment in the following statement: "In no engagement of its entire history has the United States Navy shown more gallantry, guts and gumption."[326] Admiral Nimitz said, "The history of the United States Navy records no more glorious two hours of resolution, sacrifice and success."[327]

On the morning of October 25, 1944, in a two hour and twenty-five minute battle against an overwhelming Japanese force, a gallant band of six Kaiser Casablanca CVEs, three Fletcher-class destroyers and four Butler-class destroyer escorts delivered a crushing blow to the most powerful armada that Japan could muster. The little band of CVEs and destroyers ended the Japanese dream of winning the "decisive battle" that had eluded Japan in the twenty-eight months since their debacle at Midway. (At Midway in June 1942 American carriers surprised and gave the Japanese their first defeat of the war.)

The Battle off Samar occurred as American troops were securing beachheads on Leyte Island and moving forward against entrenched Japanese forces inland. The Leyte campaign was conducted to satisfy General Douglas MacArthur's ego and fulfill his vainglorious promise – "I shall return" and retake the Philippines from Japan.

In the summer of 1944, the Navy disagreed with MacArthur's plans to invade Japan's heavily manned and fortified Philippine stronghold. The Navy high command favored a plan to strangle the Japanese occupying the Philippines by first defeating Japan on Formosa and coastal China, thus cutting off communications and materiel support from the Japanese homeland. However, FDR continued siding with MacArthur and MacArthur got his photo-op. On a clear morning in October, Army photographers were set up on the invasion beach, which had been cleared of enemy forces by American soldiers. They photographed MacArthur as he dramatically waded ashore.

Without a sideways glance to the fact that it was a staged event, MacArthur stood before a battery of microphones and pronounced to the world that he had indeed returned. Photographs and MacArthur's speech were splashed in newspapers across America. It was a great morale boost to Americans at home and one of the reasons MacArthur is considered among America's greatest generals and heroes. I don't buy it. Neither does H.P. Willmott who wrote in his seminal study of the Leyte Gulf invasion:

> *MacArthur's incompetent defense of the Philippines[1941], his blatant self-advertisement and deceit, and his procurement of a fortune from the [Philippine] commonwealth government when on Corregidor should have resulted at least in dismissal from the army.... MacArthur's antics when in the southwest Pacific theater, his attempts to dictate policy to the American high command, and his sickening self-deceit again should have led to dismissal at any one of several times in 1942.*[328]

To that condemnation I would add his cheap public relations ploy on Leyte and the circumstances of being fired by President Harry Truman for insubordination in the Korean War, where he did nothing less than try to establish himself as arbiter of national policy in the Far East while violating orders from Truman.

There is no gainsaying MacArthur's self-serving behavior. To get his way he greatly underestimated the cost and difficulty of subduing the Philippines. H.P. Willmott said, "General MacArthur was willing to predict that his losses in a Luzon campaign would be 'inconsequential.' " Willmott cited MacAr-

thur's "personal guarantee" to General George Marshall [Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff], in which MacArthur stated that the Luzon campaign could be completed in a maximum of six weeks. Willmott retorted, "It is hard to resist the idea that this must represent a most scathing indictment of MacArthur's generalship, or its conspicuous absence." America's losses in MacArthur's return for glory to the Philippines were 10,380 dead, 36,550 wounded and non-battle-related casualties amounting to 93,410. More than 60,000 japanese soldiers were killed defending Leyte.[329]

Nine months after MacArthur's campaign to liberate the Philippines began, there were still 65,000 Japanese troops on the islands. Japanese forces were not subdued until Japan unconditionally surrendered on August 14, 1945.[330] Indeed, MacArthur did reveal a "conspicuous absence" of generalship.

On the Japanese side of the Philippine invasion, the Imperial Command devised a last-ditch defense of its vital Philippine power base. The plan, called SHO-1, if successful, would surprise and overwhelm the American Seventh Fleet that was protecting and supporting the Leyte invasion forces. During Japan's "run up" to attacking Pearl Harbor, the Imperial Command realized that they needed an early decisive battle to have any hope of defeating the United States after it mobilized. The Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor failed to produce their first decisive victory because all the American carriers in the Pacific were at sea. They also failed to win a decisive sea or air battle throughout the Pacific despite their great superiority in the first years of the war. Nevertheless, the Japanese clung to the hope that they could achieve the long-dreamed "decisive battle."

At Leyte, however, Japan's hopes were fairly modest. If their Leyte Gulf plan succeeded, they would set the Americans back enough to prolong the war, avoid the fall of their home islands and find some way to engineer a final decisive battle. Even though their chances of achieving a stand-off with the United States were non-existent, the Imperial High Command would demand that their forces defend the homeland to the last ounce of their blood.

The Seventh Fleet's job, under Admiral Thomas Kinkaid, was to bombard Japanese positions, land American invasion forces, supply them, and provide close air support over the battleground. Kinkaid's support forces included four old battleships (some that were sunk at Pearl Harbor, raised and repaired for duty), eight cruisers, sixteen CVEs, screening destroyers and supporting oil tankers, supply ships and landing craft.

Admiral Halsey's Third Fleet's job was to prevent the Japanese fleet from threatening Kinkaid's Seventh Fleet and interdicting MacArthur's invasion forces. Halsey's fleet consisted of the Navy's six newest and most powerful

battleships, fifteen cruisers, sixteen fast carriers and innumerable destroyers. Combined Japanese naval forces could not come close to matching Halsey's fast carriers that were backed by the largest fleet of battleships, heavy and light cruisers and screening destroyers ever assembled.

To overcome the odds against them, the Japanese massed as much of their battered and depleted naval forces as possible for a last-ditch battle in Leyte Gulf. The Japanese fleet was divided into three elements and each was assigned a different route to the gulf. The Japanese aircraft carrier fleet, decimated and rendered ineffective as a fighting force in the air battle over the Philippine Sea a few months before, was deployed to decoy the powerful Third Fleet away from Leyte.

If the grand SHO-1 plan worked perfectly, the Japanese battleship fleet would easily outfight Kinkaid's obsolete warships, destroy the helpless supply ships, and wipe out American troops on Leyte beachheads. If, and only if, the Japanese achieved the element of surprise in Leyte Gulf, and Halsey went on a wild goose chase of the Japanese aircraft carriers, would the Japanese fleet be able to regroup to fight again at another time and place, perhaps of their choosing. A lot of "ifs" for sure, but "if" successful, Japan might encourage the United States to negotiate a face-saving ending of the war and save the Japanese homeland from invasion. It was a long shot, in fact a suicide plan, but the only one left in Japan's sagging strategic arsenal.

Making the Japanese plan more hopeless, the element of surprise was lost when an element of the Japanese fleet was discovered in the Philippine's Surigao Strait. Halsey knew that the Japanese fleet had formed and was headed to Leyte Gulf. Nevertheless, throwing caution to the winds along with his primary mission, bully-boy Halsey got word of the Japanese aircraft carriers' location, took the bait, ordered the entire Third Fleet to abandon Leyte Gulf, and sail in hot pursuit of the toothless Japanese aircraft carriers.[331]

Despite major losses and the quick withdrawal of Admiral Shoji Nishimura's battleship task force the day before in the Battle of Surigao Strait, the main body of the Japanese fleet, under Admiral Takeo Kurita, was not detected. On the morning of October 25, 1944, with Halsey's fleet absent from its duties guarding the San Bernardino Strait, Kurita's armada sailed from the Sibuyan Sea into the Philippine Sea without being noticed. So far, so good. Even though he didn't know that Halsey was chasing the decoyed carriers and was not in the area, the circumstances could not have been better for Kurita's fleet. He expected to be in action at any moment and was ready to fight.

As MacArthur would do later in Korea, Bull Halsey deliberately disobeyed his orders. His dash for personal glory was compounded when he

failed to notify Kinkaid or his boss, Chester Nimitz in Pearl Harbor, that the Third Fleet had departed Leyte Gulf.

CVE Task Group 77.4, a CVE element of Kinkaid's Seventh Fleet under Admiral Thomas Sprague (not to be confused with Clifton "Ziggy" Sprague, commander of the group's "Taffy 3" unit), was providing close air support over Leyte Gulf landing forces and conducting antisubmarine patrols on that October 25 morning. Task Group 77.4 was not prepared to fight surface ships. That was the job of Halsey's fast carriers and the new, heavily armed battleships and cruisers of the Third Fleet.

The CVE task group was divided into three escort carrier units of six CVEs each. Each CVE element was screened by three Fletcher class-destroyers and four destroyer escorts. The small ships, in Navy jargon, were called "tin cans" or just "cans." All but three of the CVEs in the task group were Casablanca-class. The task group's unit radio call signs – Taffy 1, Taffy 2 and Taffy 3 – would become famous and embedded in U.S. Navy war lore. The CVEs in Taffy 2 and Taffy 3 were all Kaiser-built.

When morning broke on October 25, a scout plane from one of the CVEs spotted the Japanese fleet at about 0645 and sent a warning signal back to his ship. The warning was quickly signaled to Fleet Commander Nimitz at Pearl Harbor. The pilot accurately identified the armada's strength – four battleships, eight cruisers and eleven destroyers. Taffy 3 was directly in the path of Kurita's big guns. James D. Hornfischer provides the definitive description of the one-sided fight Taffy 3 was forced into:

> *By any measure the mathematics of the engagement were preposterously against them. The [IJN] Yamato displaced nearly seventy thousand tons. She alone matched almost exactly in weight all thirteen ships of Taffy 3. Each of her three main gun turrets weighed more than an entire Fletcher-class destroyer. Her armor belts – sixteen inches thick at the waterline and more than two feet thick on her gun turrets – were impenetrable to an American destroyer's guns. Her nine 18.1-inch rifles were the biggest guns that ever went to sea, firing 3,200-pound shells more than twenty-six miles.… The superbattleship's secondary battery of six six-inch guns packed twice the hitting power of anything Ziggy Sprague's [Admiral Clifton Sprague, commander of Taffy 3] largest escorts had.*
>
> *The Yamato was not the only ship that completely outgunned Sprague's task unit. The [IJN] Nagato, displacing 42,850 tons, fielded eight sixteen-inch guns, and the [IJN] Kongo and her*

> *sister ship the [IJN] Haruna (36,600 tons) were fast frontline battleships armed with eight-gun fourteen-inch batteries. Kurita's six heavy cruisers were thirty-five-knot killers with a cumulative displacement equal to that of the Yamato. Finally, Kurita had two flotillas of destroyers, eleven in all, each led by a light cruiser, the [IJN] Yahagi and the [IJN] Noshiro (8,543 tons) with six-inch batteries. On paper each of the destroyers matched the [three Taffy 3 destroyers] in speed and torpedo power if not quite in gunnery. The only weapon in Sprague's modest arsenal that Kurita could not match was aircraft. Each of the six American jeeps carried about thirty planes. But … they were not armed for attacking heavy surface ships.*[332]

Moments after the scout plane pilot reported Kurita's fleet, heavy fire began falling near Taffy 3 – the task element closest to Kurita's position. Taffies 1 and 2 were on duty stations farther south. Taffy 3 was alone, drastically outgunned, with about half the speed of the onrushing heavy warships. The ships of Taffy 3 that met the Japanese behemoths were CVEs *USS Fanshaw Bay* (Ziggy Sprague's flagship), *USS St. Lo* (CVE-63), *White Plains*, *Kalinin Bay*, *USS Gambier Bay* (CVE-73) and *USS Kitkun Bay* (CVE-71); Fletcher destroyers *USS Hoel (DD-533)*, *USS Johnston (DD557)* and *USS Heermann* (DD-532), and destroyer escorts *USS Samuel B. Roberts (DE-143), USS Dennis (DE-405), USS Raymond (DE-341)* and *USS John C. Butler (DE-339)*. The destroyers had five 5-inch guns and the destroyer escorts two. Their principle weapon was torpedoes. Their depth charges obviously were of no consequence against surface ships.

Taffy 3 was the beneficiary of two crucial Japanese mistakes. First, Japanese lookouts on Kurita's screening ships providentially mistook Taffy 3's baby flat-tops for Halsey's fleet of fast carriers. Further, Japanese gunnery officers identified Taffy 3's destroyers as battleships and the destroyer escorts as heavy cruisers. Although the size of the misidentified ships was obvious, it was somewhat understandable, because Kurita did not know that Halsey's Third Fleet was chasing the decoys up north.

Besides thinking he was facing an element of the Third Fleet, Kurita assumed other Third Fleet task groups were nearby and might arrive at any moment. Consequently, he proceeded cautiously rather than exploiting his vastly superior speed and strength and quickly destroying insignificant Taffy 3 ships. He compounded the misinformation by giving an inopportune "attack order," which meant that each captain in the armada was free to choose targets of opportunity. Without command control over the battle, Kurita had,

in a sense, left his fleet rudderless. But despite the mistakes, the Japanese warships should have exploited their advantage, pounced on their prey, and quickly annihilated it.

Halsey's dereliction of duty was the last break the Japanese got in the fight off Samar Island.

With the Japanese warships closing fast, Taffy 3 commander Ziggy Sprague directed evasive action, deployed his destroyer screen to protect the carriers and ordered all ships to lay covering smoke screens over the unit. The smoke screen was accomplished by reducing the air-to-fuel feed to the ships' boilers, which produced thick clouds of heavy black smoke from smokestacks.

CVE flight deck crews labored desperately, positioning aircraft for take-off. Because of the day's planned close air support, operations and antisubmarine patrol duty, the CVE squadrons of FM-2 Hellcat fighters and TBM-2 Avenger torpedo bombers were loaded with anti-personnel bombs for attacking ground fortifications, and depth charges in case Japanese submarines were detected in the area. The Avengers needed torpedoes and the Hellcats needed armor-piercing bombs to fight surface ships. Initially the CVE pilots had few of either.

Nevertheless, the CVE aircraft attacked with what they had. When ordinance was depleted, they found a flight deck or airfield where they could get loaded with armor-piercing bombs and torpedoes and return to the fight. Some pilots, before seeking rearmament, darted in and out of rain squalls and screening smoke and made harassing "dummy runs" at Japanese ships that were closing in on the CVEs. That resourceful action caused the enemy ships to make time-losing course changes and created more confusion among Kurita's ships.

Ziggy Sprague signaled Taffies 1 and 2 to send aircraft while he maneuvered his six slow, highly vulnerable CVEs beneath rain squalls and smoke screens. Desperation forced him to order his Fletchers to attack the vastly superior ships – a virtual suicide order. Disdaining the obvious, Sprague's destroyer captains heroically pitted their five-inchers and torpedoes against an array of high-powered enemy guns. The phrase "no guts, no glory" is an empty aphorism in barroom brawls, but on October 25, 1944, in Leyte Gulf, the term was shorn of mere bravado.

Thirty minutes after the Fletchers attacked the Japanese armada, the destroyer escorts joined the fight. Not waiting for orders to enter the fray, the captain of destroyer escort *Samuel Roberts* drove straight into the face of a Japanese cruiser's eight-inch gun batteries, fired all three of its torpedoes, hit the cruiser and knocked it out of action. In turn, the cruiser gun crews

smashed the heroic DE with death blows. The "*Sammy B*" crew fought on as their ship sunk beneath them. The three heftier destroyers fought with equal valor. *Hoel* and *Johnston* joined *Samuel Roberts* at the bottom of the Philippine Sea before the fight ended.

While the small "cans" flung themselves headlong into the face of Kurita's big guns, Ziggy Sprague concentrated on getting all of Taffy 3's aircraft in the air. He directed course changes that allowed his CVEs to dodge salvos from the pursuing Japanese warships. With a touch of maudlin humor, Sprague ordered the CVE captains to "Open fire with the pea-shooters when the range is clear."[333] The "pea-shooters" were the single five-inch guns on CVE fantails. One of the CVEs actually did some damage to one of the pursuing Japanese ships.

The duped Halsey belatedly abandoned his decoy hunt and scrambled to cover his error in judgment. In the anticlimactic Battle off Cape Engaño, off the northeastern most point of Luzon Island, Halsey's fleet did sink four decoy Japanese carriers, including the last of those that had attacked Pearl Harbor. The battle was well named. In Spanish *engaño* means "lure" or "deceit." Wags, however, prefer to call it the Battle of Bull's Run.

Nimitz, immediately upon learning that Kurita's forces were chasing the CVEs, radioed Halsey wanting to know the whereabouts of the task force that was supposed to be guarding Seventh Fleet operations in Leyte Gulf. Nimitz's simple question – "Where is Task Force 34?" – was delivered to Halsey with additional wording meant only to confuse unauthorized readers. The message handed to Halsey read, "WHERE IS RPT [repeat] WHERE IS TASK FORCE THIRTY-FOUR … THE WORLD WONDERS."[334] Halsey took the last phrase, meant to confuse the enemy, as a rebuke. He threw his cap on the deck and had an out-of-control fit. By Halsey's own admission, his chief of staff had to tell him to pull himself together.[335]

I am indebted to my friend Ted Knudson who served on *USS Colahan* (DD-658) during WWII. He led me to information that explains why Nimitz "wondered" about Task Force 34's whereabouts. Knudson, *Colahan*'s supply officer, also pulled duty decoding messages in the communications room. *Colahan* was one of Halsey's screening ships during the Third Fleet's chase of the Japanese carrier decoys. Knudson pointed out that Task Force 34 "had been organized on paper but had not yet been ordered to form."[336]

H.P. Willmottt, in the most in-depth study yet of the Leyte Gulf fight, reveals that a signal from Halsey on the afternoon of October 24th stated that he would form Task Force 34 if it was needed to protect Seventh Fleet ships. The task force was to have four battleships, two heavy cruisers, three light cruisers and two divisions of destroyers. Admiral Nimitz in Hawaii and Fleet

Admiral Ernest King in Washington were addressed in the message. Kinkaid was not addressed, but he saw Halsey's signal to King and Nimitz and rightly assumed that Halsey had a battle group ready to protect Seventh Fleet operations when the Japanese came through the San Bernardino Strait. It was a great surprise to all when they learned that the ships for Task Force 34 were with Halsey chasing the decoy carriers.[337]

Taffy 3's destroyer guns and torpedoes, plus aircraft from the three Taffy carrier groups, put three Japanese heavy cruisers out of action, and damaged and distracted others from their hot pursuit of the CVEs. This gave the CVEs time to get aircraft airborne and extend their distance from the attackers. Early in the short fight, the tin cans forced Kurita's flagship out of action. The command ship had to flee far from the battle, taking drastic evasive action to avoid torpedo hits. Except for his significant mistakes, Kurita and his flagship were not factors in the fight. One of the crippled cruisers was so badly damaged that it had to be scuttled.

In less than three hours of bloody fighting, the Japanese fleet withdrew. Ziggy Sprague, engaged in commanding the flight and the fight, avoiding Japanese torpedoes, and trying to delay destruction of his ships as long as possible, heard the unbelievable – a signalman on the bridge shouted, "God damn it, boys, they're getting away!" Hornfischer dramatizes Sprague's thoughts when he heard the news:

> *It was beyond comprehension. Sprague had begun the battle expecting to make history as the commander of the first carriers ever destroyed by naval gunfire. Now he made history as the victor in the most unlikely win in U.S. Naval history.*
>
> *[Sprague said,] "I could not believe my eyes, but it looked like the whole Japanese fleet was indeed retiring." Sprague didn't accept the astonishing turn of events until several different pilots circling overhead confirmed it for him. Even then, Sprague wrote afterward, "I could not get the fact to soak into my battle-numbed brain. At best, I had expected to be swimming by this time."*[338]

In the end, the fighters aloft and the scrappy tin cans below had succeeded in fighting off, distracting and disorganizing the Japanese flotilla enough to allow five of the CVEs to escape the onslaught.

The Fletchers *Hoel* and *Johnston* and the destroyer escort *Samuel Roberts* were sunk in blazes of glory and gallantry to be forever immortalized in naval war history. One of the six barely armed and unarmored CVEs, the *Gambier Bay,* was blown apart and sunk. Like the three destroyers that were "over-

whelmed by the heavy cruisers, *Gambier Bay* refused to strike her colors and admit defeat. Her gunners kept firing back as the ship was going down. Her sailors reflected the Navy's indomitable fighting spirit."[339] *Gambier Bay* was the only United States carrier ever sunk by surface gunfire.

The Japanese fleet was turned back from its mission by the Navy's most expendable ships – CVEs and destroyers. The American survivors of the Battle off Samar owed their lives to the fact that Ziggy Sprague's Taffy 3 out-sailed and outfought Kurita's cruisers and battleships.

Task Group 77.4 alone ended Japan's last hope for a decisive victory. The Japanese would never see the castle-in-the-sky battle. The Imperial Command's hopes evaporated in the Samar defeat.

Desperation was the only weapon left in Japan's naval arsenal. Clear evidence that the Japanese fleet's back was broken came later that day with the first organized kamikaze attack of the war. After surviving the Samar battle in the morning, *CVE St. Lo* was sunk by a kamikaze attack in the afternoon. "The tragic loss of *St. Lo* proved to the Americans that their enemy was more desperate than ever to save their shrinking empire."[340] The suicide missions continued as the American invasion forces liberated the Philippines and island-hopped to Japan's doorstep. Before the war was over, six CVEs were damaged by kamikazes and naval gunfire.[341]

Counts of Taffy 3's deaths, missing and wounded vary from source to source. Hornfischer's count is six hundred sixty-four killed in action. Willmott's count is seven hundred ninety-three killed and missing. Willmott also reports a count of seven hundred thirty-three wounded in the fight. The Navy did not hold Halsey accountable. That judgment is left to history.

Taffy 3's commander and his ships' captains and crews never got the credit they deserved for their victory and sacrifice. Their heroism was overlooked at the time because Nimitz stuck to an early career vow to never let public controversy cloud the Navy's achievements. After the war, Nimitz tried to quash official criticism of Halsey. Though Nimitz believed Halsey had blundered at Leyte and failed to protect the fleet from Typhoon Cobra, Nimitz said: "It never occurred to me that Halsey, knowing the composition of the [Japanese] ships, would leave [Leyte Gulf] unguarded." Nimitz's boss in Washington Admiral Ernest King was "outraged" by Halsey's decision, but he too suppressed criticism of him.[342]

"Haul-ass" Halsey blackened his name further in the eyes of CVE and tin can sailors. Instead of admitting that he had failed to carry out his orders, Halsey showed no shame. He gratuitously took credit for the victory that so many bled and died for. Wounded sailors and their mates withstood agonizing forty-eight to seventy-two hours in the cold waters off

Samar awaiting rescue after their ships were knocked out from under them. James Hornfischer, in his book, said this about Halsey's perfidy and gross self-promotion:

> *Halsey himself seemed less sheepish [than top Navy brass], maneuvering to receive as much credit for as much of the Leyte victory as possible while deflecting fallout from the near disaster at Samar. As Taffy 3's survivors were hunkering down for their first night in the sea [waiting for rescue], Halsey radioed Nimitz, "It can be announced with assurance that the Japanese Navy has been beaten, routed, and broken by the Third and Seventh fleets." As Halsey must have anticipated, President Roosevelt read the dispatch to the Washington press corps, at six P.M. EST on October 25. A naval historian observed, "Though he participated in only portions of the far-flung [Leyte campaign] battle, Halsey upstaged his fellow commanders and announced the victorious news as though his had been the directing hand." In his 1947 autobiography Halsey sustained his defensive stance, torpedoing his close friendship with Kinkaid with a single sentence: "I wondered how Kinkaid had let Ziggy Sprague get caught like this."*[343]

Willmott wrote a full chapter analyzing all that occurred off Samar on October 25, 1944. He concluded that only Halsey was to blame for the Japanese attack on Taffy 3. He said Halsey "could never bring himself to admit error and never admitted that the [Japanese carriers] had been bait…. [Moreover] Halsey's version of events … alienated most of his peers and turned Kinkaid from a lifelong friend into an embittered foe."[344]

While Admiral Nimitz had compunctions about censuring Halsey, MacArthur apparently took some pleasure in rubbing the matter in Halsey's nose for many in the Pacific Fleet to see. *Colahan* plank-owner LTJG Ted Knudson said that he "broke a message from MacArthur to Halsey which said in effect that when we go in at Manila I want you to back us up – don't go wandering up toward Japan chasing decoys. Apparently the message was received and understood." Knudson went on to say that the rebuke "followed a meeting in Guam between Nimitz, MacArthur and Halsey, as I remember."[345] Obviously, if a low-ranking officer on a lowly tin can saw MacArthur's admonition, it is certain that all Third and Seventh Fleet com-

munication officers, admirals, ship captains, and perhaps crews got the message as well.

Halsey's apologists must resolve at least two of his deeds with exculpatory evidence:

1) Well before the Battle off Samar, according to Willmott, Nimitz had "reminded Halsey that his task was to cover and support forces of the Southwest Pacific and specifically forbade any movement of Halsey's forces into central Philippine waters without direct orders from himself."[346] Halsey disobeyed those orders.

2) Many hours before Kurita's force engaged Taffy 3, Halsey knew that Kurita was less than forty miles from entering the Philippine Sea north of Leyte Gulf. Halsey's fleet was within easy distance of intercepting Kurita's fleet. Nevertheless, Halsey refused to turn back. Willmott writes, "Presumably at this stage Halsey and his staff must have assumed that any losses incurred at the hands of this force would be inconsequential; then perhaps it is even more surprising that this final contact report was never forwarded to Kinkaid."[347] Halsey let the men under him down.

I had the honor in the 1950s of serving on the Fletcher-class destroyer *Colahan*, the very ship that Ted Knudson was aboard when Halsey made his wild-goose chase.

Hornfischer provides a fitting tribute to the American fighting men and women who still die on battlefields for freedom, fulfilling Roosevelt's call for America to defend the Four Freedoms all over the world:

> *If Samar had never happened – if Halsey had left behind Task Force 34 to butcher the [Japanese] Center Force as it sailed through San Bernardino Strait – Leyte Gulf would probably have gone down in naval history as a major mop-up operation and a bloody one-way slaughter. As catastrophic as it was, Taffy 3's last stand at Samar conferred to the bloody campaign an aspect of transcendence. The victory [Leyte Gulf invasion] was the product of Allied planning, savvy and panache, to be sure. But only Samar showed the world something else: how Americans handle having their backs pushed to the wall. As Herman Wouk wrote in War and Remembrance, "The vision of Sprague's three destroyers – the Johnston, the Hoel, and the Heermann – charging out of the smoke*

and rain straight toward the main batteries of Kurita's battleships and cruisers, can endure as a picture of the way Americans fight when they don't have superiority. Our schoolchildren should know about that incident, and our enemies should ponder it."[348]

A week after the Samar battle, *Cape Esperance* arrived in the Philippines with combat-ready aircraft that flew off her decks to Halsey's fast carriers. She brought pilots and aircraft to replace those lost during the Leyte Gulf campaign and carried out assignments through the end of the war. For her service in the battles to liberate the Philippines, she won a battle star in November 1944 and another battle star fighting in the Third Fleet's Formosa and China Coast attacks in January 1945.[349]

As with most of the thousands of sailors and hundreds of ships, *Cape Esperance* did her duty with little historical comment. I regret that I did not appreciate the *Cape*'s war record and the gallant history of CVEs when I came aboard that day after graduating from boot camp. She and her sister CVEs deserved awe and praise, not the condemnation of a raw recruit.

Chapter Sixteen

Falling Dominoes

As early as January 5, 1946, the new American president, Harry S. Truman, worried out loud to his secretary of state, James Byrnes, that the Soviets intended to invade Turkey. "Unless Russia is faced with an iron fist and strong language," Truman said, "another war is in the making." Then he added, "Only one language do they understand – How many divisions have you?"

Robert Cowley, editor, *The Cold War, A Military History*

I diverge from my personal narrative to discuss the historical events that led my ship *Colahan* and the three destroyers of Destroyer Division 172 to Southeast Asian waters in 1954. This chapter reflects on the geopolitics that led to two post Korean War conflicts in the former French Indochina colonies (Vietman, Cambodia and Laos) that would sharply divide Americans politically in the 1960s, force a president from power and drive a wedge in the body politic that remains an open wound well into the 21st century.

A month after Truman expressed his concern to Secretary Byrnes, the Soviet Union's Communist dictator, Joseph Stalin, attacked capitalism in a speech and warned his people to be prepared for "all kinds of eventualities."[456] Upon hearing of Stalin's speech, United States Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas remarked to Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal that Stalin had declared World War III.[457] In March of 1947 Truman proclaimed the Truman Doctrine to thwart a Soviet-inspired Communist takeover of Greece and Turkey. Truman dispatched a fleet to the Dardanelle Straits led by battleship *Missouri* and accompanied by aircraft carrier *USS Franklin D. Roosevelt* (CVB-42), two cruisers and five destroyers. He also committed financial and military aid to both countries. The Cold War began.

Undersecretary of State Dean Acheson was the first to articulate the proposition that the fall of one state to Communism would trigger the fall of others in succession. The idea became known as the domino theory. It was accepted as an article of faith by a procession of American presidents into the 1970s. Acheson believed more was at stake than Greece and Turkey, for if those two key states should fall, Communism would likely spread south

to Iran and as far east as India. On March 12, 1947, President Truman declared to Congress that "wherever aggression, direct or indirect, threatened the peace, the security of the United States was involved."[458] The speech was prelude to the Truman Doctrine. Its intent was containment of Communism.

On April 4, 1954, President Dwight Eisenhower, speaking on the strategic importance of Indochina to the Free World, said: "You have a row of dominoes set up, you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly. So you could have a beginning of a disintegration that would have the most profound influences."[459]

On September 6, 1963, President John Kennedy was asked if he believed in the domino hypothesis. Kennedy said, "I believe it. I believe it. I think that the struggle is close enough. China is so large, looms so high just beyond the frontiers, that if South Vietnam went, it would not only give them an improved geographic position for a guerrilla assault on Malaya, but would also give the impression that the wave of the future in southeast Asia was China and the Communists. So I believe it."[460]

Late in 1967, with reporters repeatedly pressing President Lyndon Johnson on why he was so committed to the Vietnam War, Johnson said: "If we allow Vietnam to fall, tomorrow we'll be fighting in Hawaii, and next week in San Francisco. That is why."[461]

Fear of the spread of Communist dictatorships drove United States foreign policy from 1946 until the Soviet Union imploded in 1991. Fear of dominoes falling in Southeast Asia drove the United States into two disastrous wars in Vietnam.

In terms of raw geopolitics, America's powerful Western Pacific force in 1954 offered the same mailed fist that Truman shook when he sent ships to the Dardanelle Straits in 1947. The United States was arrayed to forcibly oppose Communist expansion in Southeast Asia. The fast carrier sea force, Carrier Division 3 of Task Force 77, patrolled the waters off the coasts of French Indochina and Thailand in the South China Sea. Indochina included three Vietnam provinces (Tonkin, Annam and Cochin China) and the nations of Cambodia and Laos. The Seventh Fleet, of which Task Force 77 was a part, was responsible for the entire Western Pacific coastline arc from Korea and Formosa in the East China Sea, through the South China Sea, and past Burma to India in the Indian Ocean. My ship, along with the others in DesDiv 172, would be assigned to the Seventh Fleet.

I knew a little about the post-WWII conflict in the region and probably had an above-average interest in United States efforts to contain the spread of Communism.

During my two years of high school in Austin, before the Domino Theory became vogue, the only courses that interested me were history. My interest

was encouraged by Mrs. Schilling, my ninth-grade history teacher. Mrs. Schilling started each class with a discussion of current events. She expected the class to listen to radio newscasts, read the front page of Austin's daily newspaper, and be ready to discuss the news of the day. That got me in the habit of listening to the news on the radio and looking for stories in the *Austin Statesman* newspaper.

Between 1946 and 1954, the United States supported France's attempt to retain colonial control of the Indochinese peninsula, instead of supporting the nationalistically-awakened Vietnamese people whose leader, Ho Chi Minh, expected United States support after WWII, just as he had received it during the war. But regional geopolitics had changed. As the USSR and China attempted to buffer their borders with client states and advance the cause of Communism, capitalistic Europe and the United States became inalterably committed to the Truman policy of containing their WWII allies – China and the USSR.

Retrospectively, too little thought was given to the inevitability that Communist theory and economies would fall of their own weight. Certainly by 1954, when the French were defeated in Indochina, America's national interests would have been better served if we had helped mold Indochinese nationalism with economic aid rather than supporting the French-installed, corrupt Vietnamese government in South Vietnam that did not represent the anti-colonial, nationalistic aspirations of the Vietnamese majority.

America's failure to acknowledge the Indochinese desire for independence and the inevitability of Communism's demise would be paid for in blood, treasure and prestige in the 1965-75 decade. The failure of American political leadership in 1954 to challenge and revise entrenched, outdated anti-Communist policy – a policy that was propelled by fear and exacerbated by Senator Joe McCarthy's "red scare" tactics in the 1950s – brought a crushing defeat in 1975 when the United States was expelled from the Indochinese peninsula by its former ally, the forces of Communist Ho Chi Minh.

The events that led to the eventual Communist triumph in Vietnam in the 1970s date back to the Japanese-Sino (Chinese) war in 1937 that heralded the rise of Japanese imperialism in Asia. However, the roots of America's debacle were much deeper. The seeds were planted by Western colonialism in Southeast Asia in the 18th century. Just as medieval feudalism in the West succumbed to nationalism, so would nationalism come to Southeast Asia – but not before more than a century of foreign domination.

To the credit of Great Britain and the United States, the natural drive of their colonies toward nationalism was recognized. Both countries prepared their colonies for independence. But France refused to yield to the aspira-

tions of its subject nationalities. Much as it is today with France's Islamic immigrants, France did not absorb its Indochinese subjects into French culture and accept them as equal citizens. Unlike the United States and England, who educated and taught their subjects democracy, the French in Indochina governed autocratically and kept their subjects subservient and dependent.

Diplomatic historian Russell H. Fiefield outlined the policies of Western nations toward their Southeast Asia colonies in his history, *The Diplomacy of Southeast Asia: 1945-1958*. According to Fiefield, each Western power wanted its own type of government and political institutions to gain root in Asian soil – each took different routes. The United States "established an education program directed at the attainment of independence for the Philippines"[462] and established a date for the Philippines to become independent. The termination of American sovereignty in the archipelago was "a milestone in the political development of Southeast Asia."[463] England hoped its Burmese and Malayan citizens would gravitate toward membership in the British Commonwealth. France, on the other hand, wanted its subjects to become "Frenchified Asians." Accordingly, France "did not provide for the development of independence and democratic institutions in Indochina."[464]

The United States, itself a child of colonialism, tended toward exporting American technology and work ethic, and building institutions for democratic government. Driven by a questionable appraisal of its national interests, America's imperial intentions were cloaked in the belief that the United States was divinely inspired to spread democracy and capitalism. That quaint impulse was called Manifest Destiny. It began as justification for expansion across North America in the 1840s, and spread to the Caribbean, South America and the Pacific in the last years of the 19th century.

-In 1961 historian Harvey Wish highlighted the contradiction between America's altruistic and selfish intentions regarding the Philippines:

> *In this uncertain spirit [of Manifest Destiny] American administrators from [President William McKinley's] day to that of F.D. Roosevelt's went ahead with a program of gradually preparing the Filipinos for self-rule.... Political democracy and physical stability rather than basic social changes were the goals, and the bogey of exploitative imperialism was never realized.*[465]

America's evangelistic, some would say hubristic, spirit is embodied in our history from President Andrew Jackson's justifications for Indian removals to George W. Bush's rationale for the policy of preemptive war against terrorist states. Peacemaker Woodrow Wilson justified World War I with the

slogan "saving the world for democracy." Franklin D. Roosevelt called the United States to become the "arsenal of democracy" in WWII. John F. Kennedy in his 1961 inaugural address, when Cold War tensions were at their height, stressed that the United States would "pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, to assure the survival and the success of liberty." In the run up to the war in Iraq, George W. Bush proclaimed in response to the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in 2001, "Our responsibility to history is already clear: To answer these attacks and rid the world of evil."[466] Such statements have a ring of jingoism, but they express the continuity of America's role as world leader since WWII.

Ridding the Philippines of Spanish tyranny was a rallying call, but America's geopolitical need for a naval base in Southeast Asia to establish trade routes and keep them open to American shipping was the imperative for the Spanish-American War in 1898. Unlike the other imperial powers, the United States soon began transitioning the Philippines to popularly elected government. In May 1934 the United States approved the establishment of the Philippine Legislature. The Filipino legislature convened a convention and drafted a constitution that was approved by the people in a national plebiscite. In 1935 the Commonwealth of the Philippines was established to last for ten years. July 4, 1946, was set as Philippine Independence Day. In 1939 the Filipino government was running the country under a Filipino president, a unicameral national assembly and a supreme court in Manila. Independence was granted on the established date.[467]

Japan's invasion of Indochina came on the heels of Germany's blitzkrieg across Western Europe in early 1940 that demolished France's weak defenses. In June 1940 the German-controlled French "Vichy" government under French Army Marshall Philippe Petain broke relations with Great Britain and ran the country on orders from Adolph Hitler.[468] The French colonial government in Indochina showed no more spunk than did the Vichy French collaborators at home.

In September 1940 the French colonial government in Indochina was overthrown by Japan's military onslaught. Joseph Smith, in his cold war history, wrote that Japan's victory

> *"…temporarily swept away white colonial rule throughout East Asia. Already demoralized by their country's defeat at the hands of Germany in Europe, the French officials who administered the government of Indochina obediently surrendered to the Japanese*

invaders. In choosing collaboration instead of resistance, French authority and prestige were fatally compromised in Indochina."[469]

In March 1945 Japan ousted the collaborating French administration in Saigon and proclaimed the three Vietnam provinces, Annam, Tonkin and Cochin China, united as the independent state of Vietnam under the emperor of Annam, Bao Dai. That measure separated Vietnam from Laos and Cambodia. The Japanese surrender later in 1945 set the stage for the long first and second Vietnam Wars – 1946 to 1975 – waged by Western democracies against Vietnamese nationalism. The wars were fought under the banner of French colonialism and anti-communism.

The seeds of the eventual Communist takeover of Vietnam were planted by Ho Chi Minh before the Japanese invasion. Ho had studied revolutionary tactics in France and Russia. In the 1930s he went to China to help Mao Tsetung's aspiring Communist organization. During WWII, Ho organized the Viet Minh (Vietnam Federation of Independence) political organization. The military arm of the Viet Minh was directed by the brilliant military leader Vo Nguyen Giap, who led the Vietnamese resistance fighters against the Japanese. The Viet Minh was aided by Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist China and the United States. Although Ho and Giap were dedicated Communists, their principal drive was toward nationalism and continuing rapport with the United States.[470]

Before the end of WWII in 1945, the allies at the Potsdam Conference decided the fate of Indochina. In doing so, they disregarded Ho Chi Minh's Viet Minh resistance against the Japanese and his desire for an alliance with the United States. Instead of aligning with Ho, the allies agreed that Britain would accept the Japanese surrender below the 17th parallel and Nationalist China would occupy the northern region.

The postwar Indochina geopolitical plot thickened on August 16, 1945, when Ho Chi Minh boldly declared the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam under his leadership. The act received little international notice. Ho acknowledged that the United States was the overwhelming power in the Far East, and he appealed to America to support the DRV. Joseph Smith in his book on the Cold War observed:

[Ho] told an America secret agent that he would welcome "a million American soldiers ... but no French." In a similar vein, General Giap described the United States as a "good friend" because "it is a democracy without territorial ambitions." This image of the United States as a friendly and disinterested power derived from President Roosevelt's well-known opposition to the

restoration of French sovereignty in Indochina. On one occasion, he had denounced France for having "done nothing for the Indochinese people under their care."[471]

General Bruce Palmer, in his book on the Vietnam War, summarized the Indochina situation as the Pacific War ended in 1945:

The United States at the time supported Ho Chi Minh, who had led ... the nationalist movement for Vietnamese independence for many years and had been waging a campaign against the Japanese since 1941. By the time Chinese Nationalist troops arrived to receive the Japanese surrender, Ho Chi Minh had gained control of much of northern and central Vietnam and the Chinese tacitly allowed the Viet Minh to remain in control, there being no French troops in the region to dispute the issue. By September 1945, British and Free French troops established firm control of the Saigon area, the Viet Minh being relatively weak in the south. The British, sympathetic to the French position, persuaded the allies to turn over responsibility in the south to the Free French [the French underground during the war] in October 1945.[472]

As with the agreement with Russia to reunite Korea after the war, the United States again revealed its geopolitical *naiveté* by trusting that its ally France would accede to Indochina nationalism as America did in the Philippines.

There was flutter of hope for that in March 1946 when Ho Chi Minh agreed to the French offer of becoming an independent state within the French Union along with Laos and Cambodia. However, at the end of 1946, Ho renounced the agreement and his army dug into the Viet Minh's rural and mountainous bastions in the north. Indochina remained divided at the 17th parallel.

While France was fighting to regain its colonial power in Indochina, the interregnum between WWII and the Korean War allowed America to concentrate on restoring Japan's economy and establishing a democratic government under the direction of General Douglas MacArthur. Truman believed that encouraging capitalism was the route to peace and containment of Communism in Southeast Asia. Accordingly, the United States' Asian policy rested on Japan becoming America's Far East ally – a partner that would once again drive the region's economy as it had before the war. That required Japan's return as Asia's biggest trading partner and premier

producer of consumer and industrial goods. Once again, Southeast Asia's abundant natural resources flowed north to Japan – now under the auspices of the United States.

Trade in foodstuffs and raw materials were crucial to the Far East's economy and Japan's productive capability was the key. A 1958 study reported that before WWII, Southeast Asia produced 90% of the world's rubber, 60% of the tin, about 20% of the iron ore, 8.5% of the bauxite, 22% of the tungsten and 3.6% of the petroleum. Southeast Asia was also the region's rice bowl. Agriculture and food gathering occupied about 90% of the region's population.[479]

The United States had a clear interest in the region and that was why the Seventh Fleet was there in force. America's Southeast Asia trade plan required a friendly Indochina and Thailand. It was imperative that Japan have free trade routes throughout the Southeast Asia landmass and that borders be protected from Chinese and Russian hegemony.

Containment of Communism and protecting Japan's trading interests led Truman to agree to support France's return to power in Indochina. Truman desperately needed France in NATO. But France's Charles de Gaulle, determined to restore French dignity and power, refused to join NATO until Truman agreed to back France in Indochina. Truman agreed after de Gaulle promised that "France intended to grant independence to its colonies."[480] The deal came at a very high moral price. France failed to keep its promise. Truman's sop to recalcitrant, egocentric, imperialistic France sealed America's defeat in Vietnam a quarter of a century later.

Historian Stephen Ambrose observed the following, which harkens back to Ho Chi Minh's 1945 petition for United States aid in defeating French colonial government in Indochina:

> *The Viet Minh were fighting for their independence from the French. Ho told the Americans he wanted independence within five to ten years, land reform, a democracy based on universal suffrage, and national purchase of French holdings. He had worked closely with American agents during the Second World War and had copied the Vietnamese Declaration of Independence from the American document. And the French were crucial to the anti-Soviet alliance the United States was creating in Europe to fight the Cold War. So to appease the French, the Americans helped them try to regain their rule in Vietnam. It was Truman's decision and he was wrong on that one. It got worse. Beginning in 1952, as the Viet Minh went into open revolt against the French,*

the United States paid as much as 90 percent of the cost of the war to the French.[481]

Ambrose was wrong placing all the blame on my hero Harry Truman. Not only was the full force of United States foreign policy directed to containment of Communism, but Franklin Roosevelt also went against American anti-colonial heritage by default. Instead of standing by his anti-colonial resolve, according to *The Pentagon Papers*, he agreed to resolve the matter after the war:

> *On the one hand, the U.S. repeatedly reassured the French that its colonial possessions would be returned after the War. On the other hand, the U.S. committed itself to the Atlantic Charter to support national self-determination, and President Roosevelt personally and vehemently advocated independence for Indochina.*
>
> *Ultimately, U.S. policy was governed neither by the principles of the Atlantic Charter, nor by the President's anti-colonialism but by the dictates of military strategy and by British intransigence on the colonial issue. The United States, concentrating its forces against Japan, accepted British military primacy in Southeast Asia, and divided Indochina at 16th [sic] parallel between the British and Chinese.... Pressed by both the British and the French for clarification of U.S. intentions regarding the political status of Indochina, F.D.R. maintained that "it is a matter for postwar."*
>
> *Despite his lip service to trusteeship and anti-colonialism, F.D.R. in fact assigned to Indochina a status correlative to Burma, Malay, Singapore and Indonesia [British colonies]: free territory to be reconquered and returned to its former owners. Non-intervention by the U.S. on behalf of the Vietnamese was tantamount to acceptance of the French return.*[482]

Considering the past sixty years of history, it was not ironical in the politics of international relations for *The New York Times* foreign affairs columnist Thomas Friedman to assert on September 18, 2003: "It's time we Americans came to terms with something: France is not just our annoying ally. It is not just our jealous rival. France is becoming our enemy."

For good or ill, the United States is again, as I write in 2006, following the course of its 19th century belief that America must assume responsibility for bringing the blessings of democracy to people under despotic rule. Hopefully, my children and grandchildren will live to see democracy evolve in the Middle East as it did in the Philippines and South Korea where it arose

under American auspices. And may it never be forgotten that America saved Europe and Asia from fascism in WWII, based on Franklin D. Roosevelt's dictum that it was America's duty to advance the Four Freedoms "everywhere in the world."

In February 1954 my ship, *Colahan,* was headed for a showdown between Communist Chinese-backed Viet Minh and United States-backed France. That conflict would continue for a couple of decades as the United States attempted to achieve a Korean War-style settlement that would divide Vietnam between a Communist-ruled North Vietnam and a democratically-ruled South Vietnam. In April 1954, *Colahan*'s role in America's effort to help France restore its honor would be of interest only to those who served on her then and went into harm's way to support France's last Indochina stand at Fortress Dien Bien Phu.

In May 1950 the United States signed a military assistance agreement with France that provided for the evolution of Indochina to independent states within the French Union.[483] The United States steadily increased its military support of France after 1950 and eventually underwrote eighty to ninety percent[484] of the cost of France's war in Indochina. The aid came with a quid pro quo – France agreed to support Truman and Churchill's push for the establishment of the European Defense Community. Although American aid to France began in 1950, Dwight Eisenhower was still trying to gain France's support for the EDC in 1953.[485]

As I wrote in Chapter 12, my ship, *Cape Esperance* (CVE-88), sailed to Thailand in support of the October 1950 Thai-United States Military Assistance Agreement that provided Thailand with aircraft, military equipment, supplies, training and assistance in the construction and improvement of facilities and installations. In April 1951, *Cape Esperance* was the first large ship to bring arms to Thailand in America's bid to blunt Communist aggression into Southeast Asia.

In 1950 the United States established the Military Advisory Assistance Group (MAAG) in Vietnam to allocate military equipment and funds to France's war effort and to train the Vietnamese Army. The funds were not reimbursable. By 1951 the United States had supplied France with a squadron of B-26 bombers and had trained French airmen to fly and maintain them. In addition, French forces in Vietnam were provided C-47 (the famous Gooney Birds of WWII) and C-119 (Flying Boxcars) transport planes that were used to supply French outposts and conduct paratroop operations. In addition to arms, trucks, armor and supplies for French and Vietnamese ground troops, the United States transferred aircraft carrier *Langley* to France in January 1951. *Langley* was renamed *FS La Fayette*

(R-96). *USS Belleau Wood* (CVL-24) was loaned to France in 1953, who renamed her *FS Bois Belleau* (R-97).

I became aware of United States assistance to the French in Indochina in 1951. A month before *Cape Esperance* delivered F8F Bearcat fighters to Thailand in April, her sister ship, *USS Sitkoh Bay* (CVE-86), delivered a load of Bearcat fighters to French forces in Saigon.[486] I was jealous when I learned from a friend on *Sitkoh Bay* about his ship's cruise up the narrow, polluted, muddy Saigon River. He said they were on GQ battle stations during the passage and that *Sitkoh Bay* received small arms fire along the way.

Under the cover of the Central Intelligence Agency, the United States covertly provided American civilian pilots to fly support missions for the French. The operation was conducted by the Civil Air Transport airline that General Claire Chennault established and made famous in WWII as the "Flying Tigers." The "Tigers" flew combat missions against the Japanese from bases in China. In 1950 the CIA purchased CAT to conduct clandestine anti-Communist missions in Asia. CIA CAT also ran an air transport service for the United States in the Korean War.[487]

American CAT pilots were first assigned to the French in Indochina in April 1953. On May 8, 1953, CAT pilots made the first American transport flight into an Indochina combat zone flying C-119s to a French army encampment entrenched in Laos.[488] The CIA pilots may not have been the only American pilots engaged directly in the war. There are unofficial reports that American Air Force pilots stationed with MAAG in Vietnam flew combat missions in American planes painted with French Tricolor markings.[489]

It is certain that United States airmen were assigned to Vietnam. In fact, without American ground maintenance technicians, the French could not keep their aircraft flying. In January 1953 a detachment of airmen from Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines was sent for eight months temporary duty to Nha Trang airbase on Vietnam's coast. In August 1953 the airmen were replaced with fifty-three Air Force specialists who served with the French Air Force on temporary assignment. The extreme shortage of French technicians to maintain the C-119 aircraft brought two United States "provisional maintenance squadrons" and a parachute packing company from U.S. Far East military bases to support the French air effort. At the end of 1953 the French, desperate for maintenance personnel, requested four hundred American mechanics to service French aircraft.[490]

Less than a week before DesDiv 172 joined TF 77 in February 1954, the United States sent forty B-26 medium bombers to Vietnam with two hundred Air Force aircraft maintenance technicians and officers to two of France's airfields. The United States ground maintenance crews were classi-

fied as non-combatants, which meant that the Americans would not be armed. However, as Viet Minh forces pressed closer to French airbases in the south, the Americans had to be armed for self-protection. In fact, they were assigned to defend sectors of the bases where they were stationed. Within a few months the USAF had over four hundred fifty men in Vietnam. Five were captured by the Viet Minh.[491]

The United States was being drawn deeper into the French Indochina War. This deepening military intervention can be traced back to May 19, 1953, when French General Henri Navarre became commander of French forces in Indochina. The war was stalemated with the Viet Minh insurgency in control of Tonkin Province on Indochina's border with Communist China. The seven-year war was draining the French treasury and being fought without the support of the French people, who called it *"la guerre sale"* – the dirty war. The French National Assembly prohibited sending draftees to Indochina, so the war was fought by France's professional military, Foreign Legionnaires, African colonials (Senegalese and Moroccan) and loyal Indochina troops.[492]

The highly respected Navarre was instructed to go to Indochina, study the deteriorating situation, and develop a war plan that would give France negotiating power at the scheduled July 1954 Geneva Convention. Navarre found that France's military, with the combined troops of the Associated States (Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam) and the French Expeditionary Corps, was superior in numbers and training to the Viet Minh's. However, because French forces were scattered in posts throughout Indochina, the French were in a defensive-reactive posture and could not launch a force large enough to destroy the Viet Minh army in Tonkin. The Navarre Plan, as it became known, called for consolidation of French combat forces in the region with reinforcements from France, a speedup in the formation and training of loyal forces, and a buildup of reserve forces. The forces were to be powerfully armed and organized into mobile battalions that could move suddenly and quickly to trap, surround and destroy inferior Viet Minh fighting units. The existing French Union forces would be ready to fight April 1, 1954, but Navarre didn't plan to launch a full-scale offensive until October 1954. The full force would be achieved in 1955 with the addition of 160,000 men.

With agreement from his General Staff in Vietnam, Navarre took the plan to Paris for government approval in July 1953 – coincidentally, just as *Colahan* and DesDiv 172 began training for our 1954 deployment to Southeast Asia. The French cabinet approved the Navarre Plan, but held in abeyance a decision on Navarre's reinforcement request. Nor did Navarre get a straight answer on the defense of Laos, to which the government was obligat-

ed by treaty. To make the approval more absurd, the Finance Minister said he would not give "one *sou* for the Navarre Plan."[493] With France's glory and colonial power at stake in Indochina, the French cabinet took a Machiavellian position. The willful French government knew America would have to agree with the Navarre Plan because, without agreement and aid, France would not honor its NATO commitment to the European Defense Community.

The July 1953 cessation of hostilities in Korea allowed the United States to turn its attention to Communist aggression into Southeast Asia. The 1953 French request for aid was answered with $400 million in aid for the Franco-Indochina War in the 1954 budget that Eisenhower pushed through the Republican Congress. Eisenhower insisted that aid to France was "the cheapest way we can prevent the occurrence of something that would be of the most terrible significance to the United States of America – our security, our power and ability to get certain things we need."[494] The U.S. government ignored the obvious: France did not intend to abandon its colonial control of Indochina even though approval of American aid was based on "complete independence of the Associated States."[495]

In June 1953 a contingent of ranking American military officers went to Indochina to review the Navarre Plan and assess the military situation. General John O'Daniel, the survey group's leader, blessed the French plan with the proviso that more forces were needed for total victory. The Navarre Plan did not contemplate "total victory" that the United States wanted. Instead the plan projected a stalemate upon which a negotiated settlement could be based. That conflicted with the United States goal, but did not deter the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (Admiral Arthur Radford), the Secretary of State (John Foster Dulles), the CIA Director (Allen Dulles) or the Vice President (Richard Nixon) from supporting American intervention in the war or from advocating more aid and direct American intervention. They believed in the United States' crusade against Communism, and that the war in Indochina was part of that crusade. At the time, the United States was reeling from the "Red Scare" that was being stoked by Senator Joe McCarthy. McCarthy's scare tactics strengthened the hand of the Administration's high officials.

America was in a white heat in fear of the spread of Communism. It is to Eisenhower's great credit that hot passions did not override moderation. He strongly supported the anti-Communist movement, favored direct intervention in Indochina, and had told Churchill "there was no logical distinction between conventional and atomic weapons."[496] But he would not use nuclear weapons or introduce American troops or air forces in Indochina without Churchill's support. However, Ike was very clear that in the event of war with China, the United States would "go all the way" without restrictions.[497]

Despite Eisenhower's endeavors to get Winston Churchill to bring Great Britain into the war, Churchill steadfastly refused to intervene, even though he wanted France to prevail in Indochina. He knew the United States would pay the bill. To make the matter more critical, the United States had adopted a new defense posture called "New Look." This "New Look" was based on nuclear power with land-based Air Force and seagoing Navy aircraft carrier forces providing nuclear striking power. The Army would be cut by a third, while the Air Force and Navy budgets would be vastly increased. "For forces on the ground, the United States would have to depend on local and indigenous forces allied with the United States."[498] Reflecting back on *Colahan*'s preparation in 1953 for its 1954 tour in Southeast Asia, it was clear to all of us who even remotely followed the news of the day that we were headed for possible involvement in a war that could turn nuclear.

Meanwhile, in Indochina, Navarre didn't take into account that nationalist Ho Chi Minh's long fight for Vietnamese independence had won the Tonkin people's adoration and support. Galvanizing political support to Ho's side was made all the easier because France's arrogant colonial policies had villanized the French.

General Giap was quickly training and building a large, well-armed Viet Minh army in Tonkin. With the Viet Minh supply bases safe in Communist China just across the border, and with a large, committed population base to supply soldiers and manpower, Giap had the basis for a formidable force. Giap could choose where and when to engage the enemy. He avoided set battles against superior numbers and weaponry. Instead, he employed guerilla harassment techniques that kept the French off balance and wore down their morale.

Unaccountably, in contravention of his plan and his government's indecision to defend Laos,[499] Navarre made a colossal mistake by deciding on November 2, 1953, to regain and build up an outpost at Dien Bien Phu in the far northeast corner of Tonkin bordering China and Laos. His ostensible purpose was to prevent the Viet Minh from invading Laos, which had signed an agreement with the French to remain in the French Union after WWII. Because Navarre's intention was to stage an overwhelming force and mount an offensive campaign against the Viet Minh, his plan did not include adequate thought to defense and resupply, even though Dien Bien Phu lay in a valley capped by mountains and could only be supplied and reinforced by air in the winter.

Objectively, the idea of protecting Laos at Dien Bien Phu was absurd. There were no roads, only jungle trails, through the mountains between Dien Bien Phu and the Laotian border. Unquestionably, Navarre's purpose was

to tempt General Giap into a decisive battle on the Dien Bien Phu plain. However, the French plan was a diagram for disaster because Dien Bien Phu was easily surrounded and the enemy would soon command the high ground around the fortress.

Some of Navarre's operations staff worried that Dien Bien Phu would become a *grève de bataillons* (battalion meat grinder) and his air transport chief reported that supporting Dien Bien Phu by air was beyond the capability of the French transport service. Not only was there not enough transport aircraft, the three-hour flight from air bases on the coast and in the south reduced the number of sorties that could be made each day.[500]

On November 22, 1953, three French paratroop battalions, plus artillery, engineers and a bulldozer, were dropped into Dien Bien Phu. The troops quickly routed the Viet Minh and secured the airport. The next day, more troops landed at the airfield. That brought the garrison to planned full strength. On November 30, the commander at Dien Bien Phu received orders to keep the airfield open, to prevent buildup of Viet Minh forces in the area, and to defend Dien Bien Phu *sans esprit de recul* (to the last man).[501] Navarre did not notify the French government of his plans until six hours after Dien Bien Phu was taken.

Back in San Diego, I celebrated my 20th birthday as *Colahan*'s arduous training for our forthcoming Southeast Asia deployment was coming to an end. *Colahan* and her crew were weary but ready. Between December 12, 1953, and January 6, 1954, we rested in balmy, tropical San Diego. I was contemplating, but not clearly reckoning, my course in less than a year when my enlistment would end.

BY DEAD RECKONING

From the Great Depression to the First Vietnam War

By Dead Reckoning began as just a story for Bill McIver's children and grandchildren, so they could understand how they got to where they are today. But the story morphed from pure genealogy to historical autobiography as the author researched the westward migration of his 18th century immigrant forbearers and studied the profound historical events of his early life – the Great Depression of the 1930s, World War II of the 1940s, the Korean War of the early 1950s and the First Vietnam War of the mid-'50s.

Through personal stories, family characterizations and vignettes of history makers, we follow the McIver clan as they navigated, seemingly by dead reckoning, from Scotland to Texas by way of North Carolina and other Southern states. Bill's story is commingled with historical events that comprised the first twenty-one years of his life – 1933 to 1954.

In Bill's search for his roots, for the elusive basis of his innate feeling that "there was something special about being a McIver," he researched his Scottish ancestors from their American origins in colonial North Carolina to their slaveholding years in Georgia and Alabama, to soldiering for the Confederacy, to Methodist ministries in Texas.

The proud McIvers contrasted sharply with the Arkansas hillbilly Lewises on Bill's maternal side. The Lewises were starved out of the Ozarks and forced into the Great Depression's destitute army of millions. Although the McIvers were themselves hit hard by the Depression, they were mostly farmers and ranchers with lands that provided a living and patriarchs with vocations that sustained their respectability. The Lewises had to scratch out a living as day laborers. They took government handouts, lived in tents in hobo camps and suffered from loss of their independent, backwoods way of life.

During the first ten years of Bill's life, his parents were itinerant farm workers. He joined them in the cotton fields when he was old enough to pull a cotton sack. Despite a WWII economic upswing, Bill's family and the Lewises did not ride the post war wave of prosperity. Desperate to escape poverty, Bill quit school at age seventeen and joined the Navy at the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950. Duty took him to the war in Korea and made him a nominal participant in the First Vietnam War. As a common sailor, Bill enjoyed the Far East fleshpots, pulled war duty during the naval blockade of North Korea, and stood war-ready in Vietnam's Gulf of Tonkin awaiting orders to go to the defense of Dien Bien Phu in the Vietnam highlands. His story treads the path taken by many Depression-era Americans who sought to rise out of poverty and become somebody important.

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