

A Moment of Valor – Del Baker

By Sonny Hays-Eberts

When I first contacted Del Baker to ask if he would mind being interviewed for *Groundwaters*, his response, like that of many vets I contact, was ‘I didn’t do anything valorous.’

Del was born in 1916. Prior to the war, in the late 1930s, he studied at Fullerton (California) Junior College during the day, and with three of his buddies, drove up to Inglewood and worked building P-38 trainer airplanes for the Army Air Corps. Del worked with sheet metal at the time and worked a ten-hour shift at night, after going to school all day. In addition to the grueling hours, Del also mentioned other hazards, as the time the four of them woke up to the vehicle leaving the road! Del played as hard as he worked at the time, as he also recalled the work gang spending Friday mornings bowling after work and beach parties, such as those where he met his eventual wife. As he remarked, and I can confirm, it’s a lot easier to do this sort of stuff when you are younger!

Toward the latter part of the war, Del was drafted, and after basic training, was assigned to the Military Police.

For those unfamiliar with some of the history of the time, the US was involved in not only fighting the enemy, but also helping its Allies on a material level. The Soviet Union and Great Britain were battered and exhausted after 5 years of constant warfare and destruction. The US response was the Lend-Lease program, which shipped many tons of goods to our Allies. The southern Lend-Lease route ran through Kuwait, Iraq and Iran (all British protectorates at the time) into the southern Soviet Union.

Del’s service map showed the truck convoy route from Kuwait up to Kazvin and he talked about his detail, which was guarding the railroad, also shown on his service map. In WWI, the Germans installed a narrow gauge railway, and in WWII, the US and British converted it to standard gauge. It ran from Kuwait to Teheran, some 587 miles. There were repair and assembly stations along the route, and Qum, Iran, was the site of both an American and British railway depot.

It was here, to the 727th Military Police Battalion where Del was initially assigned. He talked about the long trip to the Mediterranean, through the Suez Canal and Red Sea and eventually to Khorramshahr, Kuwait. He talked about leaving the troop carrier at night and taking a large truck with perhaps ten other fellows through Kuwait, Iraq and Iran, up to Qum. It was rugged country, involving trips through passes of over 10,000 feet.

Del was responsible for guarding the depot, and his story of being given a machine gun and only three bullets for nightly sentry duty had me laughing, though only because he

came through it all safely.

It was only a short time before Germany surrendered, and as Del remarked, ‘When they dropped that bomb on Japan, it changed the world.’ (Did I mention Del has a penchant for understatement?) It was shortly afterwards he was assigned to The 55th Military Police in Italy. Del had several photos of himself in Rome and he



reminisced fondly about his service there. He was also happy his granddaughter, who serves in the US Navy, had been there, as they could now both swap stories of time spent at common locations.

Del returned to the US in 1946, and mustered out in Marysville, California. He mentioned a polio epidemic at the time and how when he finally hitch-hiked home to his wife, she was recovering from jaundice. Del worked the next 30 years as a map librarian at El Toro Air Station, for the US Marines, and as he flipped through his folder, I noted the many awards and recognitions he turned over without comment.

I also note with a morbid sense of irony how history does repeat itself. The 727th MP is again in the Persian Gulf, now in Baghdad. Del is excited to see the land where he once served on the nightly news, but expressed a keen and profound sense of caring for all those service members currently in the region.

I talked to Del a little longer after the interview, but not as long as I could have, should have, wanted to, or as long as I suspect he wanted to. Sadly, I was called by other *Groundwaters* duties, but I hope those who read these words will seek Del out and join me in congratulating him. It saddens me these men have stories of service and strange places to share, yet so few seem to want to hear them.

As I spent the last few moments in Del’s office, I noted the many other civic and social awards, the recognition of charitable donations, aid to veterans and the disabled and religious organizations. So often we only consider those who are cut down in the prime of their lives to be valorous. It is just as valorous to give one’s life through extended service to his country and his fellow man.

