

A Moment of Valor: *Bill Harvey*

by Sonny Hays-Eberts

Some readers may know Bill Harvey as the owner of the former Harvey's Meat Locker. I remembered purchasing beef from his locker when we first moved here, as I drove up. Bill is retired now, and lives in the country with his lovely wife Colleen. It must seem a far cry from the jungles of New Guinea and the Philippines.

Bill moved to Oregon from Tennessee in 1940. Unable to find work back East, he came West with the CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) to fight forest fires. He fought in several, including the Mary's Peak blaze of 1941, where he saw one of his friends perish. Bill moved on to the Dalles and was drafted in April of 1943.

He did his Basic Training in Little Rock, Arkansas and was then shipped to Camp Edwards, Massachusetts. During the train ride there, he asked an officer what sort of duty they would be assigned. The response was "something amphibian." Being country boys, they spent some time wondering what they would be doing with frogs. Bill was assigned to the 551st Engineer Boat and Special Regiment (EB&SR), the first amphibious unit in the Army. The 551st was shipped to North Africa and Bill was cadred, an Army term meaning that he was left behind to form the core of the next unit, the 552nd EB&SR. After training in Florida and shipping out to Fort Ord, California, the 552nd was then used to create the 553rd where Bill was finally assigned. Being in an Army amphibious unit made for some interesting encounters with Navy men – often they were very physical encounters!

Bill recounts the trip from California to New Guinea in a funny manner, even if the subject matter is serious. He talks about thinking the small shuttle boat was his transport overseas, and being awed by the real troop ship, the converted *Queen Mary*, that was capable of holding an entire infantry division, and was forced to lay offshore because of its size. He reminisced about the long journey, seeing flying fish, avoiding the initiation of crossing the Equator by slicing bread and listening to Tokyo Rose on the radio.

The 553rd was involved in the fighting in New Guinea along with the 32nd Infantry. It was bitter fighting along the shore, with few inland marches made. The 553rd spent much time ferrying supplies inland, dodging Zeros and hoping to escape tropical illness. When the New Guinea/Papuan Campaign ended, the 553rd EB&SR was sent to the Philippines to assist in the invasion of Lingayen Gulf. Operations in the Philippines were far vaster than those in New Guinea and the 553rd worked very hard. Massive amounts of supplies were loaded and unloaded, and that work was hazardous, as the 553rd EB&SR did not wait for the beachhead to be secure

before setting up a depot. Bill eventually succumbed to the stress and illness of the campaign. He spent the remainder of the war recuperating from his weight loss to 120 pounds and was hospitalized when the war finally ended.

The time I spent with Bill went by in a blur. It would take a little prodding now and then, because often Bill would say "I don't have much to say about that," or "No one is really interested in what we did." I would have to remind him that he was quite wrong – many people, especially myself, care greatly about these stories. But once Bill took some time to think on it, he brought forth interesting and detailed stories on a variety of his experiences. It is impossible to recount them all in the detail they deserve without depriving others of space in this issue; but they covered searching for beer in the rain and how a Negro driver (the armed forces were segregated in the 1940's) was better to him than white officers, sleeping on snake infested coconuts, stories of snipers hunting Japanese snipers in the jungles of New Guinea, running his winch, explosions on ship and watching a piece of shrapnel blow a map out of a man's hands without touching him.

It is a telling comment about Bill Harvey himself that every recollection of his comrades begins with "He was a swell guy..." or words to that effect. I heard Bill say several times "I was not a hero or anything." I would disagree. Not only because he operated under fire and under harsh conditions, but because he did what he had to, knowing what was involved. Bill certainly knew the consequences. His brother, a member of the 7th Infantry, was killed on Okinawa and Bill feels that loss every day. Bill himself came under fire several times, and he is quite nonchalant about being blown backwards in an LCM incident that injured fourteen others. More than sixty years later, he is insistent others had it far worse than he.

That is why Bill Harvey is a hero. *If you get a chance, listen to his stories.*

