

A Moment of Valor – Carl Puchacz

By Sonny Hays-Eberts

Art comes in many mediums. Some draw, some sculpt and some paint broad swaths on the canvas of life using tears, blood, sweat and toil. Carl Puchacz is an artist of all forms. My wife, Judy, suggested I interview ‘Pooch,’ as he was dubbed by fellow Marines, and he willingly accepted my request.

I stopped by in the evening and introduced myself and explained why I write *Moment of Valor*. I asked him to outline his service history, and for the next two hours I was treated to a series of tales that ranged from Guadalcanal to Northern China and touched upon orphans, sergeants, ministers and generals. It would be impossible to recount the variety of stories Pooch regaled me with in the detail they deserve, so I will focus on just a few which illustrate the depth of character of this man.

Pooch went to Detroit from Saginaw in 1944 for his physical. He was not drafted and expected to return home, but when a sergeant came in and asked for volunteers for the Marine Corps, he stepped forward with nine others. Six of them passed the physical and were billeted in a hotel and fed before being shipped to San Diego. Carl was still expecting to go home when he began Boot Camp and Lion Training and then assigned as an engineer to the Sixth Marine Division.

His stories of liberty and events in training camp are full of much of the USMC-Navy rivalry, and the actions of young men away from home who are being sent off to face combat conditions. They sought whatever creature comforts they could secure, and the stories of the engineer efforts involved in liberating and hiding Naval beverage rations are cut from the legendary cloth of ‘the Old Breed’ (a distinction made in the USMC in the ‘40s and ‘50s to denote members of the First Division as well as China Marines).

The engineers shipped from San Diego to Pearl Harbor, then onto Guadalcanal which was occupied. There, they engaged in additional training before heading to Okinawa. On April 1, the invasion of Okinawa began and Pooch was one of many Marines humping his gear onto the beach. Luckily, the invasion was launched in a weakly defended area, and his entire unit suffered a single skinned knee. Carl talked about later watching the kamikaze attacks on the fleet from shore and fearing the shells that landed short, as well as what happened to some of his friends. He never requested a Purple Heart, yet his wife still picks pieces of shrapnel from his back. He recounted the stories of Tokyo Rose, the attack on the crossroads where he was subject to attack by US airplanes, the soupy mud of Okinawa and stories of Oi’ Charlie, eerily similar to those of a couple of others in the Pacific Theater who were subject to the same type of actions.

The Atomic Bomb was dropped shortly afterwards and, after VJ day, Carl found himself transferred to Northern China, where they would work on building a road from Pei Tai Ho beach to the town of Ching Wang Tao, in Manchuria. His unit would try to leave at 0730 and return after 1800, as he mentioned the Chinese Nationalists and Communists would fight across the road from the hours of 0800 until 1800, when they would then stop and fraternize with each other. “What a weird way to fight a war,” was his comment.

It was in China that another side of Pooch emerged from the stories, a side that contrasts deeply with the tales of drinking and skirt chasing. After a night of carousing on Christmas Eve, Pooch emerged to find a young, starving Chinese boy sitting on the curb outside with his dead grandfather. Pooch brought the young lad inside and fed him, then took him back to the post. A strenuous disagreement with a green SP with no combat experience ensued before Pooch was allowed to bring ‘Jinglebells’ Lu Mein Heu on to the post, but Pooch succeeded. ‘Jingle’ became the camp mascot and even garnered a uniform and monthly pay. Sadly, when the unit transferred, Pooch couldn’t be as convincing to the Officer of the Watch on ship, and his attempt to smuggle Jinglebells was foiled. It was touching to hear how many hard Marines cried at that scene.

Pooch left the USMC for a brief period in 1946, but realized the USMC was his family now. He reenlisted and served twenty years as a graphic artist. He worked with the famous Chesty Puller, and his stories of the man are down to earth and, as Chesty himself might have said, true Marine.

After giving twenty years of his life to the Corps, Carl retired and began his own graphic arts business. Now he is retired and lives with his wife of twenty-five years, Lucille, in Veneta. He continues to offer his services to those who need them. He showed me some of the restoration work he performed on statuary for churches, and the results are incredible. The man is a fantastic artist.

In closing, Pooch said he would do it all over the exact same way again. The Corps is in his blood and he said he broke down and cried the day he learned of the Marines killed in the Beirut bombing. It is obvious this man cares about those in the brotherhood of the Corps. But it is also obvious that Pooch cares for those in need and to this day will seek to help them. He may be a master of the airbrush, but his true masterpiece is his life.

