

Daily terror at Munda for Seabee

Eli Merchant
Seabee Vet

1943

July 18 — Came back on board (ship) last night and sailed sometime during (the night). Arrived off New Georgia and Munda air base. Only 8 miles from a big battle.

July 19 — The battle of Munda is still going on. The 155 mms roared over our heads all night last night. This morning the air force gave them plenty.

July 20 — Last night the bastards raided us 8 times. There was not much sleep. These guns roaring over our heads sure do worry.

July 21 — Another night of guns roaring and air raids. These fox holes are our best friends.

July 23 — Last night we had some of our worst air raids. They were continuous from 1 o'clock to 5. Looks as if we will have to live in our fox holes. This morning we had several raids. Several bombs were dropped in the camp. Boy oh Boy.

July 25 — Have been feeling bad the last few days. Last night "Nip" called on us 2 times. Dropped 3 bombs in channel. Believe me these bombs scare you when they come down. Our bombers have been giving Munda a working over. Wow! The yellow devils raided us again this morning, dropping bombs on our other camp killing two of our boys and wounding several more. This makes 23 since coming here.

July 26 — Two more of our men died. Had a big raid this morning. I walked down the road and watched them load wounded and wonder if it is worth fighting.

July 27 — The wounded are laying all around us. Almost makes me sick. Men with legs off — shot in the head and every other way possible. Spent some time watching our men load some badly injured men. This is a cruel old war.

July 28 — There is something wonderful about our soldiers. I have helped handle scores of them who were badly wounded. Some had lost legs, some arms, and almost every conceivable (type of) wound. Yet I have never heard a groan or complaint from any man, as they lay on cots or stretchers. What a wonderful bunch of men.

July 30 — The work is hard and the food is scarce. Came very near working all day with no food. Had one air raid.

August 1 — Chaplain Lemmons



Eli Merchant, a native of Jasper, Alabama, maintained a life long devotion to his Seabee unit throughout his life. His brief diary entries reveal much about the character of a gentle, patriotic man, who found himself on some of the great battlefields of the Pacific War. **R.E. MERCHANT DIED Nov. 9, 1985**

held church (today). As he was preaching several of our wounded men from Munda were brought by on trucks. This is a sad picture. Later today as we were unloading some of our own wounded from boats, they raided us and we had to run for our fox holes.

August 7 — We moved from Kokorona to Munda on the 6th and camped last night in the woods. We worked at the airport all day. Does not seem possible anything could be torn up so bad. There were shell holes all around. Also dead Japs everywhere. I will never forget this scene. **NEITHER DO I EVER WANT TO SEE ANOTHER ONE.**

August 8 — Another dreadful day at the air port. Those awful dead Japs laying around all over the place. Field can land some planes tomorrow. The Japs dropped bombs all around us this morning, also strafed us with machine gun fire. Should we tell the folks back home what we are going through, they would not

the field about a mile away. This life is killing me.

August 18 — Our shelling of the Japs is very noisy going over our heads. Our big guns are firing across our camp. Can hear the projectiles as they pass on their journey. The airport is a beehive of activity. The yellow devils keep throwing shells around our camp. Hope their aim continues bad.

August 19 — One raid last night. Nips must be getting weak. Our big guns are blasting the pants off the bastards. You can't talk for the noise.

August 23 — We had two air raids last night without much ac-

sided, Merchant and his fellow Seabees settled into routine camp life. Only selected portions of the diary are given hereafter to reveal his thought patterns as the days ground slowly by.)

November 28 — This morning we stood inspection. Last night there was a movie "Yankee Doodle Dandy." Good picture. One year ago we sailed from San Pedro. Many things have happened since that day. About all we have to talk about these days is movies.

December 25 — Christmas! This brings up thoughts of a happy home. Wish I could see my loved ones.

"There is something wonderful about our soldiers. I have helped handle scores of them who were badly wounded. Yet I have never heard a groan or complaint from any man."

tivity. Our big guns have quit firing. How long can this way of life go on? Have lived in the woods, slept on the ground, and endured hardships until a little bit of civilization would be good.

August 29 — All was quiet last night. We are getting awfully tired of this climate.

September 12 — Sunday morning. How would I love to be at home this morning. One air raid last night.

September 15 — The bastards threw everything at us including the kitchen sink. There were 8 raids last from 8:30 until daylight. One bomb fell in our camp hurting several (men).

September 19 — Sure do wish we could get out where we might get a good night's sleep. These bombs are getting close. Then the heat is almost unbearable.

September 30 — One air raid last night and one yesterday. Have had 201 air raids since coming to this area.

October 15 — Spent the day up in the timber where we are going to put a saw mill. I love these beautiful trees. No raids.

October 21 — New mess hall last night. The air activity here at the field has been heavy for the last few days. Must be giving "Nip" plenty of eggs. We Seabees just work, this, of course, is important. We were the first construction men on the field here after its capture.

October 31 — Visited the air port and cemetery. Saw the grave of John South from Jasper (Alabama). Went to church.

(As the Japanese air raids sub-

1944

January 1 — The new year — at the Smoker last night the commander said we would either march down the streets of 'Frisco or Tokyo this year.

February 29 — Standing by preparatory to embarking on a trip. Don't know where. Hope it is the good "ole" U.S.A.

March 14 — Well, as usual we miss (getting) leave. After loading our bags on a barge, our leave was cancelled. This is the Navy's way.

March 15 — Here we are back in camp set up for leaving again. Last night we slept on the deck in our tent. During the night a honey bear crawled up on me, then ran up a pole. What a life!

March 22 — Loaded onto a ship, the Anita. Sailed at sunset. (Note: ship's name was inserted in the diary after the war.)

March 27 — Anchored in the harbor at Guadalcanal. Remarkable how we learn to be happy under all conditions. Needless to say, we are very uncomfortable on these ships, crowded as we are.

March 29 — The old blue pond is rough as pig iron today. Heard one man say he had rather be back in the war zone in a fox hole than on this ship. Don't guess he really meant what he said.

March 30 — I lay on my back today and watched a gull floating over the ship. Marveled at the grace and beauty God has given the creatures of His creation. The weather is beginning to be cooler each day.

April 4 — Came from the ship to camp (Auckland, New Zealand). Had the swiftest meal yet.

April 7 — Met some very charming people last night. Had tea with them. Am going back for a visit with them.

April 21 — Have been on leave and done various things — walked the streets, gone to church, shows — the chow has been real good here at camp.

(On May 4 Merchant sailed from Auckland to the Russell Islands, where he was involved in camp construction for several weeks. There he found the chow good and the men easy to please. On September 14 he boarded a ship heading for the States and made this entry: "Hope I never see the south Pacific again. It is not what the book says or the movies.")

Memorable evening enroute to Iwo

Dan Levin
Times Editor

On the troop transport headed for Iwo Jima, I gave the memorable title "Memorable Evening" to the first story I filed. The dateline read: EN ROUTE TO — (Delayed) —.

A soft evening. The transport rocking forward rhythmically. Mauve clouds ringing a horizon suffused with slowly fading rose.

On the hatch cover, perched on boxes and camp stools, were four Marines in dungarees. They fingered their battered instruments — a sax, a clarinet, drums, a bass horn. Massed around them, standing, sitting on the deck or on piles of rope, astride machinery, or braced against the rail, were their buddies of the Marine infantry.

The ship's loudspeaker had brought the radio news: "Two Jima hit by B-29's...Red Army advances...New landings on Luzon..." Now they waited patiently for the evening concert.

The clarinet suddenly tootled, and the band swung into Beer Barrel Polka.

A British army colonel, with the troops as an observer, stood on the deck above in his highland kilts, beaming on the assemblage.

"He'll freeze his balls off," one of the Marines observed.

Two men bumped together as they squirmed toward a better spot. They glared, then recognized one another as hometown buddies.

"Hey, you old fucker" the first man shouted. "How long you been out here?"

"Eighteen months. Three cam-

paigns. I'll get stateside after this."

"Hell, you'll be here for the China coast," the other replied calmly.

They turned to listen to the music.

"Put on your Easter bonnet..." Many sang or hummed.

The general came out and stood at the rail, looking down.

"Who kin play the gee-tar?" one of the musicians yelled.

A lanky North Carolina boy pushed through the massed Marines and jumped up on the hatch. They gave him the idle guitar. He strummed.

"Hotdog. He's good." "I'll be down to get you in a taxi, honey..." The guitar strummed, clarinet tootled, sax moaned and lilted.

Darkness had descended, like a gentle curtain, veiling the future.

The rose had faded, the mauve clouds had sunken. The constellation of Orion unfolded. A large planet burned.

When the music ended, the men broke into restless groups. Some stood shooting the breeze on deck. Others filed down the steep iron stairs into the holds. On the walls of their compartments, terrain maps had been put up. This was The Word. They were to assault.

The name of the lanky North Carolina boy I filled in later, on the original copy which was sent Stateside, to go to his hometown paper — only after the landing had been made. IWO JIMA would be filled in on the dateline, and at the end of the story, in Washington — also after the landing. We were still many days away from the Volcano Islands (the Bonins).

I have no idea if that young gee-tar survived the battle.