

## A VOYAGE TO WAR

(A Telfair story provided by Sgt. Terry V. Bills, Jr., USMC, Lafayette, Louisiana)

Historical records indicate that during the Korean War the USS Telfair (APA-210) made three deployments transporting troops to the Far East. It was on the earliest deployment that I became acquainted with this ship. Obviously, it was impossible for the Naval personnel manning this vessel at that time to know what the immediate and near future held for such troops after they disembarked and reached their various destinations and unit assignments. Therefore, in the event that it may now be of interest to such ship's former personnel in learning what subsequently was the fate of at least two of the Marines aboard the Telfair's deployment during the lattermost part of 1950, the following is presented.

During December, 2003, while reviewing the August, 2002 issue of Leatherneck Magazine, there was a notice of reunion of the USS Telfair (APA-210), scheduled for October 4-6, 2002 in Orlando, Florida. The name of this ship certainly caught my eye and aroused my curiosity, and, although more than a year late, I contacted John Tonyes of Lakeland, Florida, regarding my association with this ship.

Because I am in the process of documenting my Korean War experiences to submit to the Marine Corps Historical Center, the Telfair is a part of those experiences. Therefore, the following is an account of how this ship was instrumental in introducing said war to two specific young Marines, and their outcome thereafter.

During early December, 1950, the sudden Chinese intervention into Korea interrupted our combat training at Camp Jos. H. Pendleton located about 38 miles north of San Diego near Oceanside, California. My training unit, "D" Company of the Second Infantry Training Battalion, was immediately integrated into the Fourth (4th) Replacement Draft to the First Marine Division. This Division had embarked at San Diego four months earlier during August, and on September 15, 1950, performed a very successful amphibious combat assault at the Port of Inchon, on the west coast of Korea. Subsequently, during November, 1950, following its capture of the nearby South Korean capital of Seoul, the Division then embarked at Inchon for an end run around the Korean Peninsula and made an administrative landing at Wonson, on the Northeastern coast of North Korea in preparation for what was to be an attack northward to the Yalu River, the boundary between North Korea and Manchuria.

From late November through the first two weeks of December, 1950, in bitterly cold weather, the 1st Marine Division, along with other units of the U.S. Army Tenth Corps, were attacked and surrounded by thousands of Communist Chinese troops who clandestinely had infiltrated southward from Manchuria. The U.S. forces were then forced to undertake a strategic and fighting withdrawal from the Changin Reservoir area of northeastern North Korea. Simultaneously, in northwestern North Korea, the remainder of the U.S. Eighth Army, along with attached South Korean (ROK) and UN troops, were also in full retreat, after being suddenly and unexpectedly attacked near the Manchurian border by another overwhelming Chinese contingent.

Meanwhile, the future movement and final destination of our 2,000 strong assembled replacement draft at Camp Pendleton was very uncertain and scuttlebutt was rampant. Also, at that time, there was serious official discussion that all U.S. and other United Nations troops may soon evacuate Korea. However, on December 9, 1950, while in full Company formation, every other man was instructed to step forward and such men, along with a like number from the other Units of the Second Training Battalion, were ordered to prepare for immediate air lift to the Far East to help replace the numerous First Division battle casualties. Those of us, only through chance and not so designated, were ordered to prepare to sail from San Diego on December 16, 1950. During that particular Saturday morning, we Marines arrived by bus convoy at the prescribed Pier, and, tied up alongside and ready for immediate boarding was the U.S.S. Telfair! Because of the airlift reducing the 4<sup>th</sup> Replacement Draft by half, certain U.S. Army Reserve troops also boarded the Telfair for what turned out to be a lengthy 19-day sea voyage, which ended on January 4, 1951 at Kobe, Japan.

After boarding and stowing our gear below, I and my good buddy Roy Ploeger, with whom I had bunked next to, trained, and went on liberties, returned topside and stood at the ship's rail as the Telfair pulled away from the Pier, and maneuvered the harbor. We continuously and solemnly gazed eastward as San Diego slowly faded from sight. Lingering at the rail, we very seriously speculated on our future and wondered when, and if, we would ever again see this beautiful area and/or our homes and families. Eventually I would, but Roy would not, because about ten months later, on October 6, 1951, as I observed his bunkered position on the very bleak and barren Hill 854, on the east central front, he was instantly killed by a direct hit by enemy artillery.

As I remember, the ship's mess hall was located about amidships immediately below the main deck, and I believe the overhead was a covered hatch high above the deck. Standing at tables, which during heavy seas were lashed to the deck by ropes, we ate cafeteria style from metal trays. During chow, when one man vomited from seasickness, a chain reaction was set off and a multitude of men hurriedly tried to maneuver the obstacle course of ropes while heading topside to the rail to throw up. Many did not make it and much chaos resulted.

On the mess deck, lashed to the aft bulkhead, was an old upright piano. In the evenings, after chow was secured, a group of us often gathered around and harmonized favorite old songs such as "Good Night Irene", "Beer Barrel Polka", and "Tennessee Waltz" while, Roy, a good piano player, accompanied us.

The troop quarters to which Roy and I were assigned was G Compartment, located below the water line and had no portholes. The lights were never extinguished, enabling numerous card and dice games to continue on a 24 hours basis. Tobacco smoke was so thick and the ventilation so bad it was like existing in a perpetual nicotine fog. I spent the first night, but very few additional nights there, sleeping in a top rack. At this height above the deck, I was not a victim of another's illness. Thereafter, when the sea was fairly calm, and against all regulations, Roy and I would crawl under the covering tarpaulin and sleep in one of the numerous davit mounted landing craft which the ship carried. Many of the nights were clear and star lighted, and the sky was beautiful. Because this was our first ocean voyage, we were fascinated by the phosphorescence on the water, which was often accentuated by the bright moonlight.

I remember one storm we endured for several days when only the ship's deck crew was allowed topside, and then only if they wore lifelines. Many of the crew were young seamen who suffered seasickness as much as the troops. During this time, reportedly, either the ship's engine, or its screw, was not fully operational and it seemed like we were dog paddling our way to Japan. This reduced speed became more apparent when, about a mile or two north and parallel to us, we were passed by another larger twin stacked troop ship also headed westward. I believe it was designated an AP, which ship, in what seemed like a short time, disappeared from view.

We were told that the only cargo on board was aircraft auxiliary fuel tanks, which collectively were not very heavy, allowing the ship to ride high in the water. Later in Korea, we became very familiar with such equipment when they were widely utilized as napalm drop tanks by Navy and Marine aircraft who closely supported us during the numerous ground attacks we conducted against strongly fortified enemy positions.

Because I didn't smoke and could not tolerate tobacco smoke, and, did not understand or care to learn to play card or dice games, I was becoming stir crazy on the ship and needed to do something to keep occupied. Chow was served twice a day, and there was almost always a chow line winding around throughout the ship's decks. I noticed an older salty sailor frequently standing near the galley serving area giving orders to members of the crew. He wore a badge of sorts, and I assumed he was probably a Senior Petty Officer. I believe he was designated the Sergeant at Arms. Regardless, I approached him early on and asked him if he was in charge of the galley, and, if so, could he put me to work doing anything. Apparently, the authority was his because after giving me a strange look of who is this crazy Marine volunteer, I was put to work hauling food, which included crates of apples and oranges, from a cold storage locker located in the ship's hold. Additionally, except on Christmas Day, I could eat when I wished and was not confined to two meals per day. Also, I could have all of the fresh fruit I wanted. My other duty, during and after each chow call, was to monitor and empty the uneaten food discarded into metal (G.I.) cans of about 30 gallons capacity. When nearly full, along with a seaman, we carried these cans to the fantail and dumped the contents over the side. As soon as we began our garbage dumping, there always appeared out of nowhere countless seagulls to begin their feast. The importance of the timing of the dumping was something we learned very soon if we didn't want the contents coming back on us. Each time the ship's bow plunged into a swell, its stern rose out of the water to a point where the prop was partially exposed, causing a very apparent vibration throughout the ship. One of the crewmembers told me the vibration resulted from a Kamakazi impact the ship experienced in 1945 during the World War II Battle for Okinawa. Many years later in a book I read about this great battle in which three Marine Divisions participated, I learned that this was true and the attack on the Telfair was recorded therein.

The ship's fantail area was also the area where I did my laundry. I ran a rope line through the sleeves and legs of my dungarees and skivvies and dragged them through the sea. Then I dried them using one of the ship's large exhaust fans.

On Christmas day, 1950, the Telfair crossed the International Date Line just north and west of Midway Island; this holiday lasted for only about three (3) hours. A ceremony was held and each passenger was presented with a small certificate (see attached), and which reads, as follows:

**REGION OF THE GOLDEN DRAGON  
TO ALL GOLDEN DRAGONS WHEREVER YE MAY  
BE: KNOW YE BY THESE PRESENTS THAT:  
/s/ Terry V. Bills, Jr.  
WAS DULY INITIATED ON BOARD THE USS  
TELFAIR (APA-210) ON THE 25TH DAY OF  
DECEMBER, 1950. LATITUDE 31 10' 00",  
LONGITUDE 180 00' 00".  
/s/ PAUL J. DUPRE  
PAUL J. DUPRE  
1st LT., USMCR**

To celebrate Christmas, the ship's crew provided a Santa Claus who passed out Christmas gifts to all hands. This presentation was amazing to us because here we were in Mid Pacific and nine days out from San Diego, and how was this possible? It turned out that the sources of these greatly appreciated mystery gifts were various ladies' social groups throughout the United States who had prepared and forwarded such to the Navy for distribution to men who would be in transit during Christmas, 1950. My gifts, sent from groups located in South Carolina and one in Starkville, Mississippi, included such useful items as razor blades, comb, pocket books and stationery. I also received a miniature chess set, which I still possess. Also, we were served an extensive and very enjoyable turkey dinner with all the trimmings.

Following my escape from the perils of G Compartment, I discovered that my queasiness was not from motion but rather from lack of oxygen and fresh air. Each morning at 0600, roll call was taken by the Marine Officer in charge of our compartment. Therefore, so as to not be reported missing, we left our refuge in the landing craft before 0600 hours and descended the several ladders leading to G Compartment. First, we passed the usually fully occupied and not well-ventilated head, (the use and description of which is a story of its own), and then on downward further into the depleted air of our assigned compartment, and my nausea would begin to recur. As soon as my name was called and acknowledged, I headed topside and the wonderful fresh salt air and the return of my sea legs.

Periodically and without prior notice, a ship's officer, accompanied by several Senior Petty Officers, made routine searches of the ship for whiskey which apparently had been brought aboard by the troops in large quantities. Our replacement draft consisted of many Marine Reservists recently called to active duty who apparently had learned the needs of a long sea voyage from their World War II service, and were certainly well prepared for this voyage. The ship's inspectors knew the obvious hiding places to stow the booze, such as the ventilating system, but it was surprising how little of the hoard was discovered because the drinking was still occurring when we reached Kobe. There was also an active black market with pints and half pints frequently changing hands. I suspected that some of the ship's crewmembers may have played a role in those black market sales!

As a child during American's great financial depression, and being one from a large family, beans in every form were almost always part of our daily diet, and I was very fond of them. Some of the best cooked beans I have ever eaten were on the Telfair. I especially enjoyed white navy beans served over freshly baked bread during morning chow. Also, when the cooks were preparing the beans in those huge stainless steel steam pots and stirring them with what appeared to be canoe paddles, one could smell the aroma throughout the ship.

Because of the dire news being reported over the ship's PA system and in newsletters circulated covering the daily events in Korea, the Military situation there seemed to be constantly unraveling, and the Telfair's destination was changed enroute from Yokohama (Yokosuka) to Kobe, the latter port being much closer to the First Provisional Casual Company of the First Marine Division located a short distance inland from Kobe at Camp Otsu, near Kyoto. At that site, the 4th replacement draft would be assigned to various units of the Division before moving on to Korea.

One thing I knew for certain was that it would be very cold in Korea because our First Division, when in Northeastern Korea, had experienced temperatures as low as -40 F. Therefore, I decided to supplement my cold weather gear. Some of the Telfair's seamen wore black wool knitted watch caps, which could easily fit under my steel helmet. I found one of the crew who traded his cap for my bayonet. As soon as I reached Korea I got a replacement bayonet which I used during frontal assaults. I wore his cap for the remainder of that winter. My fellow Marines in Korea were all very envious because although my feet were always cold and suffered frostbite, my ears were always warm and never frost bitten. This made me believe that I got the best of the trade because I never understood what use that sailor had for my bayonet.

During the ample free time we had aboard ship, Roy Ploeger and I often pondered our future and life after the Marine Corps. Roy, who was 21 years of age, was called to active duty after completing his third year of pre-med at the University of Toledo. Instead of being enrolled in his 1950-1951 senior year, and then entering medical school later in 1951 to become a doctor, he was headed to Korea where he would soon become a machine gunner, a Sergeant, and lead a machine gun section in "I" (Item) Company, Third Battalion, 1st Marines (Regiment). On September 14, 1951, shortly before his death, he was awarded the Bronze Star Medal for continuously manning his Browning light machine gun and holding off an enemy night counterattack during our Division's three weeks battle for Kanmubong Ridge, where we suffered over 2,000 casualties. I was 20, and after completing my freshman college year majoring in Geology and Engineering, had enlisted and spent my first peace time year in the Marine Corps as a bandsman with the First Marine Aircraft Wing Band at the El Toro, California Marine Air Station. All Marines are basically rifleman, and during the latter part of 1950 a shooting war was ongoing and bandsmen were not a priority; thereafter, I was to become a Sergeant, and lead a 13 man rifle squad. After additional extensive training in Korea, I also operated as a sniper for "B" (Baker) Company, First Battalion, 1st Marines (Regiment). Both "I" Company and "B" Company were rifle companies within the 1st Regiment of the 1st Marine Division. Roy and I both experienced our initial combat within two weeks after arriving in Korea and shortly thereafter were wounded in action: mine in late February from white phosphorous burns and concussion from an almost direct artillery hit; Roy's, during early March from a gunshot in the leg.

As the Telfair finally entered Kobe harbor on January 4, 1951, Roy and I went on deck to watch the event. I had my camera and began to take a number of photographs. As we were approaching the dock, a U.S. Army band was there in formation and greeted us with a popular tune of that time, "If I Knew You Were Coming I'd Have Baked A Cake" (see attached photographs). As soon as night fell, which was about 1800 hours at that time of year, and the ship was tied down, the horniest and thirstiest of the Marines, in spite of being restricted to the ship, began to go over the side using the hawsers to reach the dock. There was lots of activity taking place down there and no one on the ship or on the well lighted dock paid much attention to this Marine exodus. A large number (possibly two hundred) of Japanese laborers and some of the ship's crew were both below on the dock, and, aboard ship operating cranes and up in the ship's rigging. Our sea bags and other combat gear were being offloaded because the next morning we Marines were to disembark the Telfair and march in formation to a train which was to take us inland and northward to Camp Otsu. Those of us who did not go over the side that night stood at the rail and watched as U.S. Army Military Police periodically returned groups of the more worldly restriction violators who were trying to find some "entertainment" ashore. Apparently, the MP's were waiting nearby, out of sight, to collar the escapees and return them to the ship. Each time the MP's appeared with their catch, the mass of us who remained on board lining the rails would let go with thunderous unkind shouts about the Army and what the MP's might elect to do to themselves; however, the MP's acted as if everything was under control and totally ignored those of us aboard who were in the jeering section!

The next morning when we troops went down the gangway to muster on the dock, the crew and the Japanese laborers had the ship squared away. Because I did not smoke I always had excess cigarettes, as did everyone. That morning I gave away to some very pleased Japanese laborers about ten packs which I did not want to carry. Within a day or two, on my first and only liberty ashore, I was to learn that a carton of cigarettes was worth the equivalent of \$5.00 in Yen. My monthly pay at that time was \$55.00 and as a qualified expert rifleman, I was paid by the Marine Corps a bonus of \$5.00 a month. That was the last time I ever gave away cigarettes. It was then that I realized why the Japanese had continuously smiled and bowed when they received my smokes. At the time, Japan was still suffering the disastrous economic effects resulting from their loss of World War II.

In spite of what turned out to be minor problems encountered while on the Telfair, in the very near future we would be longing to be back aboard her. Leaving Camp Otsu, it was a long cold crowded train ride southward through Hiroshima to Camp Drake at Sasebo on southernmost Kyushu Island. There we boarded the Japanese "luxury liner" Takasago Maru for the passage over the Korea Strait to the Korean port of Pusan. As night approached and as we slowly proceeded out of the narrow and lengthy Sasebo Harbor, we observed several large U.S. Navy aircraft carriers and all of their escorts and supply ships at anchor and fully lighted, which at the time seemed strange to us Marines who, in a short time, would be in a combat area. On the Maru there was no galley, only sleeping platforms instead of racks, and it had a very strange fish and diesel odor. Chow was skimpy K rations which came in a container which looked like a crackerjack box. There were no showers, not even the saltwater type which we had available on the Telfair for use by enlisted men. We were aboard about 1-1/2 days after which we offloaded late at night on January 10, 1951 and marched a lengthy distance to another part of the Pusan harbor, guarded by British Royal Marines gathered around fires brewing tea. To reach this area we passed by the hovels of thousands of Korean refugees which was a pitiful sight. There we boarded the poorly maintained Japanese manned LST Q059 operated by SCAJAP (Shipping Control Administrator, Japan) and where about 1,000 of us were crammed into the tank deck where there was actually standing room only. We then departed Pusan for the more southern port of Chinhae and after a windy, freezing, sleepless and totally miserable overnight trip, disembarked. Roy and I soon joined with our separately

assigned Units at the First Marine Division camp located near Masan. My specific unit, "B" Company, along with the remainder of the 1st Battalion of the 1st Regiment, had departed by motor convoy to Uisong earlier that morning. Therefore, two days later, about midnight, I was put aboard another LST, which I believe was the 898 (Lincoln County), but this time U.S. Navy manned and well maintained, and headed northward for the LST landing site at Kuryong-Po, near the Port of Pohang. This 24 hour voyage was not crowded with troops, and because the tank deck was full of equipment of the 1st Engineer Battalion, I shared the forward 40 millimeter gun tub with several other replacement Marines. There we were out of the cold wind and were very comfortable in our newly issued and soon to be life saving goose down sleeping bags. This was to be my last movement by ship. Thereafter, it would be mostly and extensively on foot, infrequently by truck, and a few times by air, including one of the first ever undertaken helicopter combat missions on October 22, 1951.

During January, 1952, about one year after landing in Korea, I was held over from rotation an additional month while waiting on a Sergeant to replace me, because only recently enlisted Marines were arriving as replacements. We were still on the front line in daily contact with the enemy and that additional month seemed like a year! However, because of this rotation delay, and that no Marine was supposed to spend two winters in Korea, I was provided air transportation back to the United States via Japan, Midway Island, Pearl Harbor and finally California's Alameda Naval Air Station and the Treasure Island Naval Station in the San Francisco Bay area.

A short time later, on April 15, 1952, I was released to inactive duty at Camp Pendleton, California, but continued an obligation in the Marine Corps Reserve until January, 1956. I declined to reenlist in the Reserve because, after surviving five major campaigns in 13 months of combat, being wounded, suffering frostbitten feet and two Korean winters, I had had enough. All I was trained for was being a professional hit man, and this occupation was limited in civilian life, unless you are Mafia! Besides, in 1955, I had received my B.S. degree in Geology at the University of Texas and was continuing my education there for my Masters Degree which I finalized in 1957. It was time to move on in life and do something different which I have done, and continue to do, in the oil and gas industry for over 50 years. Although my life has been rewarding both professionally, financially and very interesting, it pales in comparison to my service in the Marine Corps and the actions I experienced, including my initial ride to war on the U.S.S. Telfair. I often think about various aspects of it and the fine men I served with and under.

For years I corresponded with the parents of Roy Ploeger for I was the one who, upon their insistence, described to them in written detail, how his death occurred on barren Hill 854, 2,775 feet above sea level, located north of the 38th Parallel on the rugged, mountainous, east central front.

From this peak we Marines had a panoramic view of the Sea of Japan, the sight of which was certainly inspirational. Although the Marine Corps was never to operate outside the range of Naval gunfire, the U.S. Eighth Army, of which we were a part, required us to do so during the first eight (8) months of 1951. There on Hill 854, from which position, utilizing a scope mounted 1903 Springfield rifle and an enplaced .50 caliber Browning, I conducted continual sniping activities. Also, I led night ambushes and conducted many patrols into enemy held territory. We were supported by 16 inch gunfire from the Battleships USS New Jersey (BB 62) and USS Wisconsin (BB 64). We additionally received 8 inch gunfire from the Heavy Cruisers USS Toledo (CA 73), USS Los Angeles (CA135) and the USS St. Paul (CA 73). Usually these ships respectively fired at their maximum ranges of 23 and 16 miles. Such accurate Naval gunfire support really was a wonder to behold, and was greatly appreciated by all front line Marines. Another vivid recollection was on November 10, 1951 (Marine Corp's 176th birthday (created November 10, 1775) when the USS Los Angeles joined in with 83 aircraft of the First Marine Air Wing to blast enemy positions on Hill 951 directly to my front and to the west on Hill 1052. The next day, November 11, Armistice Day, now Veterans Day, my regiment, the First Marines, was temporarily relieved on the front line by our Fifth Marine regiment, and this relief was covered by gunfire from the USS New Jersey. Although I could not see the capital ships through my sniping binoculars, I could easily see Destroyers moving forward and back parallel to and just off the beach firing at shore targets with their five-inch guns. It was a huge morale builder and made us very proud to be part of the U.S. Naval Service.

Not a day goes by without my thinking about Roy Ploeger: how his life would have unfolded, and if his loss, an only son, was worth it all! Since 1952, I have returned to Korea on three separate occasions, during 1964, 1975 and 1999, as if I am searching for something I cannot identify. Each time that I have visited there, I have seen an obvious and dramatic improvement in South Korea. However, the fully armed North Korean soldiers I saw on each occasion positioned at the Panmunjom Truce Site situated in the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), are as cocky and as belligerent as they were when I engaged them in close combat in the early 1950's when we took very few prisoners (see photo) because most of the enemy I encountered and engaged chose to die fighting even when their situation was hopeless.

The above, as set forth regarding the U.S.S. Telfair and my experiences thereafter in Korea, are based on my observations of that time which were recorded in over 100 letters I wrote to my parents and another 100 to a life long friend, the first of which letter to her I wrote and mailed on the Telfair, and, whose postmark is affixed, a copy of which mailing envelope and letter is attached hereto. I also took more than 100 photographs, and I still have the letters, photo negatives and prints, which reflect that long ago time. These items, along with Official CD copies of Marine Corps Unit Diaries, and Korean Topographic Maps, which maps are obtainable from the United States National Archives, enable me to almost completely reconstruct the events which occurred from December, 1950 through February, 1952.

Terry V. Bills, Jr.