

June 1945 – World War II at 80

(Part 2)

Victory on Okinawa

By Ronald P. May

While the month of June brought peace to Europe, the fighting in the Pacific theater raged on.

After ten weeks of grueling combat, U.S. Army and Marine forces pushed to the last Japanese stronghold in the southern part of the island, the Shuri line.

The line was made up of hills, the most famous of which was Sugar Loaf Hill, which provided the Japanese army with excellent fortified defensive positions.

Shuri Castle dominated the landscape and became the backdrop for intense combat.

A Morgan County man was in the thick of the action there.

And he almost didn't make it out alive. Twice.

Corporal Perry Lewis, Jr., a 1934 Eminence High School graduate, served with the 4th Marine Regiment, part of the 6th Marine Division.

He enlisted in the Marines at the end of 1943 and graduated from Marine Tank School in July 1944.

On June 4, Lewis and others in his unit, known as Walker's Raiders, made the last opposed amphibious landing of the war on the Oroku Peninsula of Okinawa where the Naha airfield was located.

Lewis was in an Army amphibious tank that crossed the 100-yard-long estuary to reach the peninsula.

Heading toward Sugar Loaf Hill, his tank slid off a mud bank and lost one of her tracks.

Now immobile, it came under Japanese gunfire.

"Our tank was set afire by a Jap 47-MM anti-tank gun when we were 100 yards ahead of our infantry on Sugar Loaf Hill, and we all had to bail out in Jap territory and hide in a ditch until we got smoke screen protection," Lewis recalled in a June 13, 1945, article that appeared in The Daily Reporter.

Bad luck ensued again as Lewis and his crew got on a second tank.

“We got this new tank and had it knocked out again, the same way. We had to leave it for three days before Sugar Loaf got safe enough for us to recover it for repairs.”

The 4th Marine Regiment endured a week of fighting to help claim Sugar Loaf Hill and bring the war to a close on Okinawa.

Combat operations, which had lasted 82 days, ended on June 21 with an American victory.

That victory came at a high cost for both U.S. and Japanese forces.

Those killed during the battle of Okinawa included over 12,500 Americans and an estimated 110,000 Japanese and 100,000 Okinawans.

Lewis survived the war and made it home to his wife, Faye, and their two daughters in Lewisville, Indiana.

He died in 1983 at the age of 65.

Madge Hampton was kept busy during the Okinawan campaign keeping as many of the wounded alive as possible.

One of many “angels of mercy”, Hampton was a Navy Nurse on board a Navy ship during the battle for Okinawa.

She graduated from Martinsville High School in 1929 and from Methodist School of Nursing in 1932.

Following her completion of nursing school, Hampton joined the Navy and made a career of tending to injured and sick marines and sailors.

She served for a time at the Mare Island Navy Hospital in California before heading to the Pacific theater.

Hampton shared recollections of service during World War II in a November 11, 2000, article by Elmer Reynolds in The Reporter-Times newspaper.

“The young boys [were] in mortal pain, and wanted so much to hold my hand. Some realized that they would never again see their homes, wives, or mothers again...it was hard to hold back our tears as they lay dying. One boy’s final words were, ‘mother...mother...I love you...’”

Hampton retired from the Navy as a Lieutenant Commander in 1964 and returned to Morgan County to be near her sister.

She died at the age of 82 in 1991.

Three hundred and sixty miles southeast of Okinawa, Coast Guardsman Russell Howard Barrick of Martinsville faced his own daunting challenge in June.

A 1943 graduate of Martinsville High School, Barrick was a radio operator serving on board the USS *Sheepscot* (AOG-24), a gasoline tanker in the Pacific Ocean.

The ship made routine 800 mile runs from the islands of Saipan to Iwo Jima to deliver high octane fuel for the B-29's stationed there after the island was secured by the Marines in February.

In early June, while off the coast of Iwo Jima, his ship came into the path of an enemy equally as deadly as Japanese forces, a typhoon.

"The storm hit about 5 am, and before we could gather our senses, the storm caused a big line to snap, and it got caught in the propeller of the ship, which meant we had no power," recalled Barrick in an April 26, 2009, article written by Bette Nunn in The Reporter-Times.

"At that time, we had to abandon ship, but we had to take all the radio gear and throw it overboard to keep it from the enemy."

"I went to the rear of the ship to jump over, and the gunner's mate standing beside me said he couldn't swim. Since we both had on life jackets, I pushed him over the side, and everybody on the ship swam to the beach safely."

Pushed by the storm, the *Sheepscot* ran aground and capsized on June 6, 1945.

Damaged beyond repair, the ship, which had been in naval service for less than a year, was a total loss.

Barrick survived the storm and the war.

He returned to the U.S. in July.

In a touch of irony, he was reassigned to a "weather" ship, the USS *Charlotte* (PF-60), which served in the Atlantic Ocean.

Following his discharge in 1946, Barrick returned to Morgan County and resumed his passion for music, which had begun much earlier in his life.

At the age of 8 years old, he was part of a country western band trio with his two older brothers.

In 1952 Barrick joined the Jimmy Nash band and played gigs throughout Indianapolis for the next 25 years.

Barrick died in 2018 at the age of 92.

The "music" of war was not yet finished in June 1945.

But the final movement of loud and chaotic stanzas were about to reach their crescendo.

Next time: July 1945 (part 1) – The Potsdam Conference: Planning for the End of War

Learn more about Ronald P. May and his books at <https://ronaldpmay.com> or contact him by email at ron@ronaldpmay.com. Check out his videos on YouTube at: *World War II History & Stories with Ron May*.