

Honoring & Remembering – Ernie Cap

Radioman 2nd Class Ernie Cap was born May 20, 1925 in a farmhouse about 11 miles northwest of Yankton, near Tabor and Utica to Frank and Hattie (Kaiser) Cap. He was the third of seven children.

"There were nine eligible young men for military service on my dad's side," Ernie said. "The first one that enlisted, a dear cousin, was killed on the USS Boise in a famous night battle early in the war. I was the first of six who followed him. I enlisted to avenge his death.

"I graduated from Meckling Consolidated School on May 16, 1943. The next day I enlisted in the Navy at Yankton, May 17, 1943, at the age of 17. I quietly had my 18th birthday on a crowded train heading for Farragut, Idaho, Boot Camp," he said. "In boot camp, I was asked to name three choices of specialties. My first choice was radioman. I received my training at the University of Idaho at Moscow, ID. I ended up as a Radioman 2nd Class.

"Only myself and another radioman was shipped out on a Merchant Marine (civilian) ship with a Navy gun crew. I volunteered for the shore based communication unit in New Caledonia," Ernie said. "On April 22, 1944, about the fourth wave, my unit made our first invasion at Hollandia, New Guinea with the Army. I carried my rifle, 15 shot clip, extra bullets, shovel to dig a foxhole and canteen. Standing by the rail to go down the rope ladder, it seemed like a long way down to get on the landing craft which was bobbing up and down with the waves. As I near the bottom of the rope ladder I had to time it just right to step onto the craft but not when the ship was bobbing upwards and the Higgins boat was three feet downward. We didn't practice this in boot camp.

"When we had arrived at the beach and we were unloading, I started to walk to the beach, I noticed a young American soldier, lifeless, face downward in the water. He had stopped a Jap bullet before he got to shore. Our unit stayed for eight months and had a fine radio station. We could send messages to any part of the world. When we operated we had three shifts. I guess it was eight hours on and 16 hours off. After the third or fourth month, I suddenly came down with Hepatitis C, a virus from a rodent. Your liver stops functioning prop-

erly. I was put in a quarantined quonset hut with about 40 other shore-based Navy or Army young men. I lost a pound a day for 30 days. My unit was moving from tents to quonset huts.

"With their large trucks, the Navy Construction Battalion (SeaBees) was raising red dust which filtered to the bottom of my seabag. Weakly, I'm in the laundry room washing all my clothes by hand when a mechanic from the unit come in and announces, "Anyone who can be ready in one hour, can go to Australia." I said I can't go because I have a seabag full of wet clothes. The Executive Officer was three steps behind. He heard me and said, "Cap, you aren't going? I'll put you in charge of ALL the Unit's property; trucks, eight man receiving van, tents, cots, personal property for about 200 men!" So, I had a very quiet but demanding job while the rest of the unit enjoyed Australia.

"By then the Seventh Fleet had taken over the large Navy Radio Station where messages could be relayed or received from all over the world and to any Navy ship in the Pacific. Being a radioman, I had access to a secret code book that contained the four-letter call signs of every ship. I learned my brother Ray's ship was in the harbor. I spent the best of 10 hours visiting with him. His LST was part of the invasion fleet at Leyte Gulf.

"After spending eight months in Hollandia, New Guinea, my Communication Unit loaded onto two LSTs for another invasion. The same amount of Radiomen were put on each ship, so if I was damaged or sunk by the Japs, the other part of the Unit could carry on. It was on Christmas Day, Dec. 25, 1944, when 50 or 100 ships departed for Luzon, PL. On Jan. 6, 1945 two Jap planes came over the convoy, one near my LST. The pilot dropped a bomb, which exploded about 90 feet from the ship I was on. The other plane was hit by anti-aircraft shells. The pilot realized he would not be able to make it safely back to land and dove into a ship in the next column. Because of that a lot of young soldiers crammed on that ship were wiped out, Jan. 7, 1945.

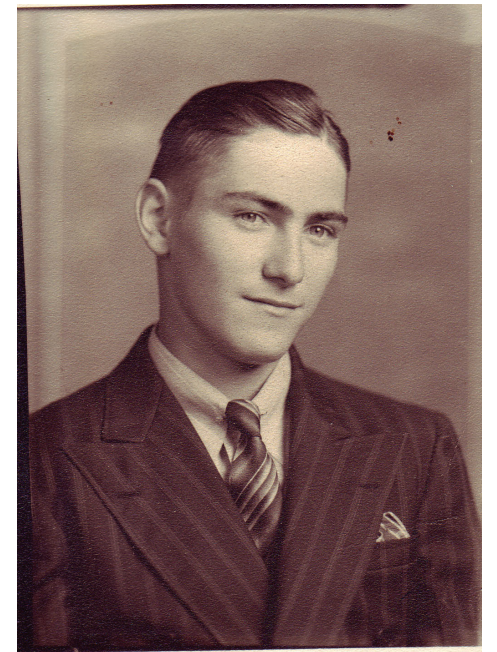
"My unit was issued new 15 shot carbine rifles. The rifles were greased to prevent rust. I had neither rags or ramrod to clean

my rifle. I took my gun to the Gunnery compartment. A young gunner, my age, said yes, he would clean my gun quickly. My newly found friend and I chatted. I asked him how a person makes it back home in one piece. He said, "Just duck at the right time!"

"I was uncertain if a Jap bullet or hand grenade on Luzon had my name on it. I did not know when or what part of the LST the young gunner would go on watch. I tried always to sleep on deck in case the ship was torpedoed. I was fast asleep the next morning at 5 a.m. when I am awakened by the screaming plane engine in a dive. The Jap suicide plane crashed on the rear part of the ship. My boss saw me and said, "Cap, go help put the bodies in bags!"

"Imagine my deep shock as I put my newly found gunner friend in a bag! I met him at 3 p.m. the prior afternoon, he went on watch at 4 a.m. His life was snuffed out with the others at 5 a.m. I am putting his remains in a bag at 5:30 p.m. This experience has haunted me ever since. I regret that I did not receive the next of kin's address from the ship's office. Three hours later, we had a burial at sea. I still weep when I tell anyone of this experience.

"January 9, 1945 was invasion day. The LST finally pulls up to the beach and drops the huge door. I had not slept much since the plane crash. I have my steel helmet, new rifle, four extra clips of shells, canteen and poncho. I spot an empty 10 wheeler



truck with no driver. I climb beneath the rear wheels, put my poncho on the sand, have my rifle ready and fall asleep. About 2 a.m., I wake up to see a starry sky. The driver had moved the truck! That day, our unit moved all our equipment about 100 yards inland off the beach. My boss asked

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