

War Era Story Project 2012

Submitted by: Donna Puthoff Kitta

Current home town: Vandalia

Age: Not given

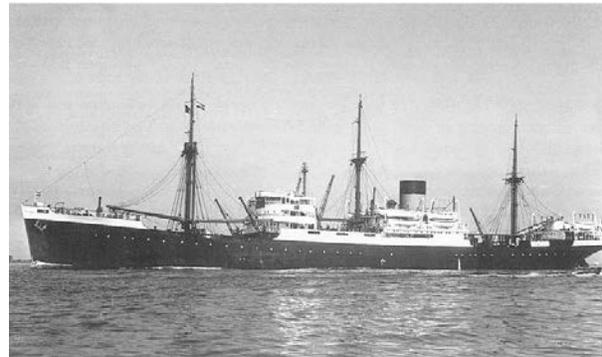
His Comrade from Hays



My Dad, (Army) Lt. Colonel Francis U. Puthoff, was a WWII veteran. He was born and raised in St. Patrick, Ohio. Dad served in the South Pacific with the 198th AAA, A Battery, 2nd Platoon, Gun section #7. I would like to impart one of his most haunting wartime experiences that occurred on Middleburg Island, New Guinea. He often shared this story with his children and grandchildren.

In 1944, then Lt. Puthoff departed San Francisco, California, on the Dutch troop transport MS Tabinta enroute to Finchafen, New Guinea. It was a 30 day voyage that concluded in his transfer to the LST 325 headed for the Finchafen beachhead. He remained in Finchafen for a short time.

In July 1944, Dad left Finchafen and proceeded to the D-Day landings at Sansapor, New Guinea. "A" Battery took two small islands off the coast of Sansapor. Middleburg Island was the island to which Dad was assigned. Each month, the full moon brought expected yet unwelcome visitors. Japanese aircraft arrived at night over Middleburg Island, appearing out of nowhere from behind the Sansapor hills. This always dictated a "Red Alert" and the anti-aircraft artillery began shelling. In addition to aircraft, Japanese snipers were also a constant threat on the island.



On August 23, 1944, at 8:00 PM on the night of a full moon, Dad was in his bunker when he was approached by Pvt. Francis Korbe. Pvt. Korbe asked Dad to come out and talk. The two had become good friends. Filled with a sense of foreboding, Pvt. Korbe could not hold back the tears. He shared his fear that his life would be in danger that night during his assigned sniper watch duty. Dad, the lieutenant in charge, asked Pvt Korbe if they might trade duty so that Dad would keep the sniper watch that night. Pvt. Korbe stated: "No, it is my duty and responsibility." I do not know the rest of the personal conversation, but I do know that Pvt. Korbe asked Dad to pray the *Our Father* with him before his watch began. By 10:00 PM, Pvt. Korbe was dead from a sniper's bullet. He was buried in a raincoat on the island.

Dad never forgot that night nor did he forget his friend, Pvt. Francis Korbe. Fifty-three years later to the day, on August 23, 1997, Dad phoned St. Joseph Catholic Church in Hays, Kansas, the town where Pvt. Korbe was born and raised. It was then that he learned that Pvt. Korbe's body had been retrieved from New Guinea in 1949 and was now interred at the church cemetery. Dad spoke with two of Pvt. Korbe's sisters to whom he related the circumstances of their brother's last day. They were very grateful to learn about their brother's last night on earth and told Dad it really helped to know they had prayed together on that fateful night. Afterwards, Dad went alone to his office and wrote the following poem:

Premonition of Death

I had a comrade from Hays,
We were alike in many ways.
With the drums beating to battle in New Guinea
We walked together in the same step and trod.
ON GO THE LIGHTS WITH THE BOMBS DOWN SCREAMING!
Were they meant for you or for me?
I reached for his arm but it wasn't there.
I reached for the other and together,
The Our Father we prayed.
May he be my comrade in eternal life.

He continued to communicate this story until his death on April 26, 2009. Dad's six children had the pleasure of accompanying him to the National World War II Memorial in Washington D.C. in May, 2007. Dad was greeted by grateful citizens who thanked him for his military service. He took great pride in responding by telling this story and reciting this poem. The only personal tribute to Pvt. Francis Korbe in the WWII Memorial registry is from Dad. It was important for Dad to reveal this story about the gift of life and how quickly it can be extinguished. He loved life and he lived every moment with optimism. Perhaps this can be attributed to his wartime experiences.