

Abe Zendle, USMC:

A Memoir

February 4, 2019

Night. My father, Corporal Abraham Zendle, is in a foxhole on the island of Saipan in mid-June, 1944.<sup>i</sup> He's keeping watch over 9 sleeping marines who comprise the machine gun squad he commands. No light of any kind, no lit cigarettes are allowed. On the front lines, darkness is both a shield and a danger. Completely blacked out, Abe's position is hard to find by Japanese infiltrators. If he hears anyone or thing approaching in the pitch-black, Abe shouts out a challenge. Every marine is given a new password each night. If the intruder's response is correct, Abe allows him to enter his patch of turf. Otherwise, Abe opens fire.

One night, Abe kept such a watch and opened up a can of K-rations to keep him alert. At sunrise, he observed the can was full of maggots which had crawled over from nearby dead bodies. On another such night, an enemy soldier crawled into Abe's foxhole. "He was more scared than I was," Abe told me. "What'd you do?", I asked. Abe's answer: "I punched him out and he ran away." Abe's squad handled two 0.30 caliber machine guns. With the mounts which they rested on, ammo, water tanks for cooling the guns, and maintenance tools, there was plenty enough for each man to bear. During advanced training, he passed a test which required him to disassemble and reassemble a machine gun in total darkness. The standard machine gun had two types of barrels: air-cooled and water-cooled. I asked Abe which kind he preferred. "Water-cooled", he told me firmly, despite the added weight of the water tank and tubing. "The air-cooled versions glowed red-hot in night battles and gave away our position".

This narrative begins at night but by June 1944 in the Central Pacific Theatre of American Combat forces a glimmer of daylight had begun to appear at the end of a tunnel still to be traversed at great cost in Allied casualties. The Pacific War had begun on December 7, 1941 with a Japanese raid on Pearl Harbor that crippled the US surface fleet centered on large battleships, but luckily left our 3 precious aircraft carriers (which were out to sea) untouched. Wide swaths of Southeast Asia, including Burma, Malaya, French Indochina, the Philippines, Thailand, and

Hong Kong fell to Japan in simultaneous attacks. Strategically, the Japanese goal was the oil of what we now call Indonesia.<sup>ii</sup> For the US, World War 2 had begun.

By April 1942, a fleet built around our remaining carriers had stopped the Japanese Invasion of Australia at the Battle of the Coral Sea. This was the first to be fought by two opposing fleets which, because their fighting power was provided by carrier-borne aircraft, never came within sight of each other. In May 1942, in an attempt to capture the Midway Islands which guarded Hawaii's western approach, US Navy Carrier planes sank 4 Japanese carriers along with the cream of their carrier pilots. Because of their failure to take a cadre of trained pilots back as feedstock to train new pilots, these pilots were never adequately replaced, although about 10 Japanese carriers were left. Late in August 1942, the First Marine Division invaded Guadalcanal and engaged the Japanese on the ground for the first time, finding them wily, stealthy foes able to live, as Abe would say, "off the fat of the land." After a sprawling, air-sea-naval battle ranging over the vast expanse of the "Slot" comprising the Solomon Islands, the Japanese were driven from Guadalcanal by mid-1943. In November 1943, the Second Marine division ejected the Japanese from the Tarawa Atoll at heavy cost. Meanwhile, Army troops under MacArthur had begun the slog up the jungles and offshore islands of New Guinea in order to reach and retake the Philippines. At home, 1942 and 1943 saw the mobilization of the American military industrial complex to provide the thousands of aircraft, ships, and tanks needed to support these victory.

And where was Abe as these events unfolded? In 1941 he was working for the Greenhouse Bros. Slaughterhouse in Syracuse, NY. He was married, with two daughters born in 1940 and 1942 respectively. His family was living in a nice apartment on Renwick Place. It bears noting that at this time Abe was an unlikely candidate for military service as a severe bout of asthma had caused him to be bedridden soon after his marriage in 1939. He and wife Evelyn had to move in with Abe's parents on Taylor St. Evelyn hated this because Grandpa (Zaide) Zendle used to soak stale bread in the bathtub for the horse that pulled his junk wagon.<sup>iii</sup> While Abe recovered he knew what was happening overseas and felt a need, like many Americans, to guard against America's enemies. Having become a citizen in 1940, he bought into America and its Constitution. After the war began the National Guard Divisions of each state, including New York, were subsumed as the nucleus of the United States Army for overseas deployment to the battlefields of

Europe and the Pacific Oceans areas. As in the present day, the National Guard provided disaster assistance and underlied civil control of catastrophic conditions at home. With the National Guard gone a vacuum existed. In NY this was filled by a separate organization called the State Guard. Making a Captain America-like transformation from infirmity to fitness, Abe joined the State Guard and learned use of firearms, infantry, and police tactics, and performed military drill at Camp Smith, Peekskill, NY.<sup>iv</sup>

By 1943, Abe craved frontline combat. He enlisted in the United States Marine Corps at the age of 31 and went through boot camp with teenagers at Parris Island, South Carolina. His State Guard training came in handy when on the first day of boot Camp, Abe marched at the head of his training platoon, shouting out the maneuver orders when the provisional lieutenant, a Harvard man, proved inept.<sup>v</sup> In boot camp, he met kids from the Deep South who had never seen a Jew before. Some expected Jews to have horns. Of course, Anti-Semitism spread by the radio figure Father Coughlin, Henry Ford's *Dearborn Independent*, and other less outspoken institutions was rife at this time. A Jewish chaplain told Abe that if anyone criticized his Jewishness, try to talk him out of it. If not, Abe should slap him down, something that he was well equipped to do.<sup>vi</sup> Also, the chaplain said that the laws of Kashrut (kosher) were suspended for combat soldiers for the duration of the war.

Among the rigors of bootcamp were the need to learn a new system of Marine think. The idea was to respond to your orders whatever they might be. The Marines were a light infantry organization who were expected to seize their objectives quickly notwithstanding the large casualties required to do so. In Marine speak, a "gun" is called a rifle. Many years later, in Stanley Kubrick's Vietnam-era *Full Metal Jacket*, a Marine recruit who carelessly used the term gun was made to sleep with his rifle the next night in his bunk. I asked my father about this, which he affirmed with the addition that the drill instructor checked the recruit's body for rifle marks the next morning to prove that his penance had been paid.

Before continuing with Abe's wartime career, it's fair to look at these events from the point of view of his wife Evelyn. From the comfy apartment on Renwick Place she was forced to move with her two young daughters (aged 1 and 3) to a nearby public housing project. Here she had to shovel her own coal in a basement filled

with stray cats. Her brother-in-law made good money as an electrician supporting the buildup of war industries. Frankly, my mother was unhappy with her lot during the three years my father was deployed. I was born in 1949 and as a kid in the fifties and sixties this experience came up again and again in my mother's oral history. Then, like today, military deployments effected a heavy and lasting toll on the families behind them.

But now it is mid-1944 in the Central Pacific, and far from the improvisations of a year or two before, the US has in place a master strategy for driving the Japanese back to their homeland no matter what the cost. First, a giant fleet of powerful aircraft carriers, battleships, cruisers, submarines, and destroyers has been built to range at will over the huge Pacific, gaining the initiative to strike the enemy any place at command discretion. Second, a miracle weapon called the B-29 bomber able to strike Japan from 1500 miles away has undergone a difficult maturation process and is ready for effective use. And third, a bomb of incredible power, the atomic bomb, is being built by an army of scientists at enormous cost for delivery by the B-29 to Japan when and if needed. Abie has been promoted to corporal and assigned with his machine gun squad to the Second Battalion, Sixth Marine Regiment, Second Marine Division (SecMarDiv). After initial exercises in Hawaii he embarks on troopship to capture Saipan, the fulcrum point 1500 miles from Japan from which B-29s can bomb Japan at will.<sup>vii</sup>

Arriving at Saipan on June 15, 1944, as part of Admiral Raymond Spruance's Fifth Fleet, Abe's convoy waited while the fleet's battleships and cruisers softened up the island with days of shellfire by 8-in, 14-in, and 16-in cannon. Unfortunately, naval cannon are designed for long range fire to hit the sides of enemy ships. To destroy underground enemy bunkers, plunging, or vertically-directed fire is needed. Consequently, in most of the Pacific invasions the days of naval bombardment looked good to the sailors and marines but accomplished little. Same with aerial bombardment. Before the precision-guided air-to-ground sensors and weapons that came in the 1970s, air attack of ground targets was hit-or-miss. When the time came to disembark Marines for the attack, they climbed, fully armed with 60-lb. packs and supplies, into landing boats. The job of the first wave of marines was to capture a toehold on the island that could be held and extended. Abe's unit arrived in the second wave. When his platoon landed, its members immediately came under enemy fire, finding cover behind sand piles, shell-holes and a sea wall. Abe described how his platoon commander, a mild-

mannered school teacher in civilian life, dealt with a Marine reluctant to advance from the beach: “He took out his 45-caliber automatic sidearm, pointed it at the Marine, and ordered him to move off the beach in 20 seconds or else.” That night the main enemy counterattack of about 2000 Japanese led by tanks came against Abe’s Sixth Marines.<sup>viii</sup> The charge was repulsed by a wall of fire from 0.30 caliber machine guns (Abe’s weapon), 37mm cannons, and M1 infantry rifles. The Marines fought their way inland, by nightfall establishing a perimeter like that described at the start of this narrative.

The battle to neutralize the 30,000 Japanese troops evolved into a daily routine for the 40,000 marines of the Second and Fourth Divisions.<sup>ix</sup> Daily advances flushed resistors out of caves and bunkers with the use of demolition charges, flamethrowers, and gunfire. The task of Abe’s machine gun squad was to eliminate points of resistance, support attacks, and defend against banzai charges<sup>x</sup>. In terms of personal hygiene, Abe said that each day he was given a helmet full of water for drinking, bathing, shaving and washing. There were also personnel issues to deal with. One of his men woke up with nightmares, ready to strike out at the Japs. Abe had him sent home. For some reason Abe acquired the nickname “O’Brian”.

For 24 days the Marines and Army troops of the 27<sup>th</sup> Division drove from south to north up the mountainous spine of pear-shaped Saipan. Finally, on July 9, 1944, 5<sup>th</sup> Amphibious Corps commander Holland (or as Abe called him “Howlin’ Mad”) Smith declared Saipan “secure”. This was mainly a photo op as fighting continued for weeks. Soon Abe’s SecMarDiv regrouped and attacked nearby Tinian Island. The same daylong struggles followed by tense nights ensued. Abe always spoke highly of the Navaho code-talkers, whose non-written language confounded enemy counterintelligence who could not decode the secret voice messages they sent providing land target coordinates to Navy ships for bombardment.<sup>xi</sup> At some point Abe’s platoon captured a live steer and Abe used his civilian skills to slaughter and butcher it for his fellow marines to eat. As a result, Abe was offered a promotion to supply sergeant, which would put him in a support role behind the front lines. He declined, desiring continued direct contact with the enemy.<sup>xii</sup> With the omnipresent upgrade of technology, Abe was able to try out an experimental infrared “sniper scope” which enabled the enemy to be viewed in the dark.<sup>xiii</sup>

Before Saipan and Tinian were secured, engineers began grading and paving runways for the hundreds of Air Force B-29s to come. SecMarDiv moved back to Saipan, which became its home for over a year. During this period, it trained for future operations. As life settled into a routine, Abe and other Jewish marines attended weekly Sabbath services under a tent. They often had to flee to nearby shelters when enemy bombers from nearby Iwo Jima came over for nuisance but lethal attacks. (The threat ended when Iwo Jima was invaded by the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, and 5<sup>th</sup> Marine divisions on February 19, 1945.)<sup>xiv</sup> As the B-29s arrived on the island bases and began operating against Japan, Abe watched the damaged stragglers return, sometimes shot-up and sometimes crashing. Abe and other marines were treated by the Air Force to walkthroughs of the B-29 and Abe was impressed by its technology, the love for which he imbued in me. Living on an occupied island enabled “good” food and showers. My Grandmother (Bubbe) Zandle relieved the dietary tedium by mailing Abe dried kosher salamis which arrived in good condition from Syracuse 7600 miles away. On Tinian, a section of the airfield was cordoned off for the 509<sup>th</sup> Composite Group. Under tight security, they planned to receive and deliver the atomic bomb which the team led by Jewish physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer was racing in New Mexico to complete. I mention this because Abe’s youngest brother Bernie was sent by the Army to study nuclear physics at Princeton, where he met Albert Einstein, whose work made the atom bomb possible.

The last major island to be captured on the march to Japan was Okinawa. In mid-March 1945, Abe and the SecMarDiv embarked on transports which took them to this large, heavily defended fortress. One of the hazards of this journey was the enemy kamikaze planes, filled with explosives, which were flown directly into ships of the US invasion convoy. On Abe’s transport, the chatter of Navy fighter pilots defending against this menace was patched into the public address system. Abe heard a pilot enunciate “One duck at 12 o’clock” followed a few minutes later with the refrain “One duck swimming”, meaning that the attacker was shot down in the Pacific Ocean. Arriving off the southeast coast of Okinawa, Abe and the rest of the Second Division disembarked with full battle gear into landing craft and headed toward the shore. At the last viable moment, the boats by predesign turned around and returned to reembark on their mother ships. This was a planned feint maneuver to distract the enemy from the real attack by the 1<sup>st</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Marine and 7<sup>th</sup> and 96<sup>th</sup> Army divisions on the western shore.<sup>xv</sup> It was on the return voyage to Saipan that on April 12, 1945 it was announced that President

Franklin Roosevelt had died. Abe recalled how the battle-hardened marines wept at the loss of their beloved wartime commander.

As the battle for Okinawa raged through the summer, a call came for Abe's Sixth Regiment to return to neutralize a small pocket of the enemy. But one of the Sixth's sister regiments on secured Saipan, the Eighth, had gone on a hunger strike to protest the low food quality. So as punishment, the Eighth was sent instead of the Sixth, and my father was spared the possibility of harm on Okinawa, which produced 70000 American casualties. While on Saipan, Abe recalled how massive hospitals were built to handle casualties expected if the invasion of Japan by American soldiers and Marines (including the SecMarDiv) had taken place. But on August 6 and 9, 1945 two B-29 bombers rose from Tinian armed with atomic bombs which were delivered on the mainland Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. On September 2, the Japanese surrendered, and once again my father Abe Zendle was spared from the bloody battle which the sea-borne invasion of Japan would have been. After occupation duty at Nagasaki, Abe returned home to San Diego, USA where he was mustered out of the Marine Corps in January 1946.

And with this conclusion Abe returned to his family in Syracuse where he could once again pick up the threads of his civilian life. Late in 1946 Abe accepted the proprietorship of the Binghamton Kosher Market In that small but industrious town 80 miles south of Syracuse. When I was born in 1949 the family was complete. Abe was always proud to say that he put three children, my sisters and I through college and retired in 1975 to move to Florida and a well-deserved retirement. And while I was growing up, he told me the stories that make up this memoir, both of his life and my time with him. It was a life well lived.

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<sup>i</sup> For this and other dates and facts about Saipan I have referred to Chapin, John C. Breaching the Marianas: The Battle for Saipan, (Washington, 1994).

<sup>ii</sup> After Japan, which had invaded China in the early 1930's, took over Indochina when France fell to the Germans in 1940, The United States had embargoed the sale of oil to Japan. Probably 80-90% of Japanese oil had been imported from the US at this point

<sup>iii</sup> Zaide Zendle got in trouble with Syracuse University for letting the horse graze on their nearby campus.

<sup>iv</sup> I remember as a youth seeing a picture of my father among 3 rows of khaki-uniformed State Guardsmen, each cradling a Thompson submachine gun with a circular magazine.

<sup>v</sup> Forever after, when Abe and I watched a military drill of Revolutionary or Civil War recreators, Abe could not resist calling out the drill commands in his strong tenor Marine voice.

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<sup>vi</sup> Educated to the third grade level, Abe had boxed as a young man and indeed knocked out the intercollegiate champion in a bout at Syracuse.

<sup>vii</sup> As ever, Abe distinguishes himself early by becoming checkers champion of his troopship.

<sup>viii</sup> Chaplin, p. 5.

<sup>ix</sup> Chaplin, p. 7.

<sup>x</sup> A banzai charge was usually preformed at night by a mass of noisy, sword-wielding, drunken Japanese troops who expected not to survive.

<sup>xi</sup> In 2003, a Hollywood movie called *Windtalkers* with Nicholas Cage and Adam Beach provided a fictional account of these men. Especially stunning were the initial and final scenes of the Navaho homelands represented by Monument Valley, Utah.

<sup>xii</sup> On Tinian Abe sustained a shrapnel wound in his right leg. When the Purple Heart medals were handed out, Abe did not receive his because he was hospitalized for dengue fever. In 1999, he attended a reunion at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina and received his medal. And as a civilian, from the end of the war for the rest of his life he received a small monthly 20% disability stipend from the US government.

Abe's older brother, Morris had served in the 9<sup>th</sup> Division, US Army, and fought the Nazis in Tunisia, Sicily, and France soon after D-Day. Near Cherbourg, he suffered a severe headwound and after a year of treatment came home. He received a 100% government disability check and resumed his career as a barber until he too retired to Florida. He was a mild-mannered family man who, like my father, never complained.

<sup>xiii</sup> This story came out when I took Abe to view the Pave Tack pod, the first digitally-controlled airborne infrared laser designator sight at Eglin AFB in 1976. I wrote half the operational software for Tack and it was successfully deployed in Desert Storm in 1990.

<sup>xiv</sup> Nalty, Bernard C. and Crawford, Danny J., The US Marines on Iwo Jima: The Battle and the Flag Raisings, (Washington, 1995), p.3.

<sup>xv</sup> Bemis, Frank M. and Shaw, Henry L. Victory and Occupation: History of USMC Operations in WW2 , Vol. 5, (Washington, 1968), p. 59.