



Memories Of Jim Klassen

And Our Experiences In The 41st In The Southwest Pacific, 1943-1946

By Pete Gianopulos, with Gilbert Gia

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Our long-time friendship actually started when our high schools competed in sports — particularly basketball and track. At that time Jim Klassen was going to Wasco High, and I was going to Taft High. Our original greeting was "Hi, Wasco!"-"Hi, Taft!" That was in the late 1930's. Little did we know that in March 1943 we would find each other in the same barracks at Presidio Induction Center at Monterey, California. Our friendship began with "Hi, Taft!"-"Hi, Wasco!", but of course after we bunked in the same barracks at the Presidio we did learn to call each other by our real names. From then on we were very close Army buddies. In fact I vaguely remember a time when we were being moved, and we actually held hands so we wouldn't get separated as we trudged along

carrying all our belongings in those big duffel bags the Army issued to a new assignment.



Pete Gianopulos at Camp Roberts, 1943

After Monterey we were sent to Camp Roberts, and on March 16, 1943 we began our 13 weeks of Basic Training in the 90th Infantry Training – a heavy weapons battalion. On June 21st we left Camp Roberts, were sent to Pittsburgh, California, and then on to Camp Stoneman. On July 3rd after three days there, we were on our way overseas – by way of a ferryboat ride down the Sacramento River to Oakland. We loaded into an Army transport ship called the SS Mormacsea and sailed out of San Francisco Bay that month.

Jim always carried a large picture of his sweetie, Maxine, wherever he traveled. We all knew he was going to marry the sweetheart he left behind. Jim always very proudly showed us Maxine's picture.

The trip to Australia took 18 days, and it was not a pleasant voyage. There was no fresh water for showers, but we could get drinking water for our canteens at a faucet at a certain time of the day. We tried showering with soap and salt water once — a horrible experience. Never again! In fact we never changed from our fatigues during the 18 days to Australia. One can imagine sleeping in our quarters in canvas bunks, stacked six or seven deep in the bowels of that miserable ship. We did get into a rainstorm once. It seemed that all of the troops took their clothes off and ran upstairs with a bar of soap for a rainstorm shower.

There were no convoys sailing with us across the Pacific. We were by ourselves, zigzagging across the water to avoid submarines. We landed in Brisbane, Australia, on July 26, 1943. In Brisbane we lived in tents for 14 days at the Ascot horse racing track. Because Jim had experience as a butcher we were able to get jobs in the kitchen cutting meat. I was a complete neophyte as a butcher, and I showed it when I accidentally cut somebody's hand. (Jim was standing too close to me.) A big day came periodically when we had to take all of the meat we had cut

to downtown Brisbane and get it ground.

From Brisbane we traveled by train to Rockhampton, Queensland, and by bus into a wooded country area where the 41st Infantry Division was camped. It was the first American Army division sent overseas to the Southwest Pacific.

When we arrived, the division had just returned from combat at such places as Buna and Sanananda in northwest New Guinea. We were all replacements. Jim and I were eventually assigned to the Regimental Headquarters Company of the 163rd Infantry Regiment of the 41st Division.

Jim became the Company Clerk. He'd taken typing in high school. I have always regretted that I had never taken typing. He also played the tuba in the regimental band. The band played for dances held in the mess hall on Saturday nights. Jim was always busy playing the tuba. I didn't know how to dance well and was afraid to go to get out on the floor.



**David Conant, Pete Gianopulos, and Jim Klassen
Reg. Hqs. Co., 163rd Inf. Reg. Hqs. on Biak Island, Schouten Island Group,
Northwestern New Guinea**

When we could get weekend passes we would often go into the city of Rockhampton where we could stay at the home of the Powers family that lived at 57 West Street in Rockhampton. They were very nice and allowed usually four of us to stay at their home overnight on the weekends. Nell Powers was their daughter and probably in her 40's at that time. Most of the time while visiting the Powers we would go see a movie or go to the city's very beautiful gardens.

I became a member of the Intelligence and Reconnaissance Platoon. The I & R Platoon, as we were called, began our training to be scouts. Up to this time we were of the opinion that we would be overseas for six-months and then return to the States. You can imagine how we felt when we found out that those combat veterans we joined had been overseas for 18-months. It did not take too much figuring to know that we would

not get back to the States until they had left for home, and some of them were overseas for 40-months or longer before they went back. We eventually got to go home, but it was after the war was over. We were overseas for 30-months. By that time we were stationed in barracks in the town of Hiro north of Hiroshima, and we were part of the Army of Occupation, having participated in the "peaceful invasion of Japan."

Our training for combat began in earnest in Australia. Before we boarded troop carriers for the trip north to New Guinea, the whole division took a 100-mile hike to get in shape. The suppression of the symptoms of Malaria was possible by the medication we had to take before ever reaching New Guinea. The drug was called Atabrine – a little very bitter, yellow pill, which we were required to take every Monday and Friday in front of the officers. At a company fall-out after lunch, water was provided for our cups. Five pills were handed out to each soldier who had to swallow the pills and drink the water out of the cup, turn the cup over and strike it on a board that had been provided for this occasion. By striking the cup on the board you were showing that you had not spit out the pills in your cup. After all had taken their pills the soldiers would have to stand around there for about 15 minutes which was to show those soldiers who had hidden these terribly bitter pills under their tongues and were holding them in their mouths.

While these pills suppressed Malaria, we were no longer required to take Atabrine after we left for the States. It was then that the malaria symptoms appeared. Those little yellow pills made our skins yellow. People who saw us thought we had yellow jaundice.

We had landed at Finschhafen on the north coast of New Guinea where we stayed about one month. The whole division again boarded large troop ships to prepare for the landings yet to come.



I & R Platoon, Finschhafen, New Guinea before combat landing at Aitape. Pete Gianopulos is third from left, front row.

Two Regiments, the 162nd and the 186th, made the landing at Hollandia, north of Finchhafen, while the 163rd landed at Aitape, New Guinea. The sight of all of the ships that made up the armada for those

landings was unbelievable. There were at least two aircraft carriers, many destroyers, and other warships in the convoy as it left Finchhafen.

Naval bombardment and Air Force bombing and strafing of the landing area always preceded our landings. We were awakened about 3:00 AM to prepare for the landing. After breakfast we packed our gear and made preparations to climb down the side of the ship on rope ladders into the landing barges, which were bobbing up and down on the ocean. After we were loaded the boats formed into the several waves to attack the island.



On Aitape where Pete was shot at by US troops

We circled around in the dark until it was time to head to the beach. Meanwhile, we watched the bombardment "show" that was going on. One thing very impressive was the destroyers parallel to the beach with their large guns firing over our heads, and pointblank, toward the island.

What a sight! Then came the bombers and lighter fighter planes doing bombing and strafing.

On April 22, 1944, as the sun began to rise, and at the appointed hour, troops in waves of small landing craft began their journey to the beach to the predetermined landing sites. Four of us from the I & R Platoon had to find a dirt road and head inland to a landing field some miles from the beach. We had to determine if the road was mined and if our tanks could cross over a small bridge along the way.



Pete Gianopulos: "I was on this patrol."

Becoming a scout was not my choice. I had been sent from a line company to Regimental Headquarters company with no idea why I was assigned to be a scout. Those others assigned to the I and R Platoon wondered why, too. We had some things in common. Most of us were

going to college when we were called into the service. I had over four years of drafting, which may have contributed to the decision. That was about all that I know about why the Army made me a scout.

When we were on patrols I mapped the trail. The maps they gave us showed no roads because they were taken from aerial photographs, and being in the jungle, the trails did not show. I used a compass to keep track of the direction we were going, counted the number of steps we took, and recorded them on the map.

The jungle had no front line; the enemy could be anywhere around us. Our platoon always walked in single file on trails. The leader up front, with rifle ready, looked ahead for tracks, broken vegetation, or other signs of the enemy. The man in front was our eyes and ears. I did that job at times.

The rest of us following behind looked to the right and left, but as the jungle was so dense, one could not see more than a few yards. On most patrols the people in front couldn't see the men behind them. The last man kept his eye peeled for enemy behind us. We were usually out all day in the jungle before we returned to where we started, either to a dirt road or to the company's area.

At night our company formed a large circle, and each member of the company dug a fox hole big enough for two or more to sleep in, but one man was always awake for a two hour-shift.

Before dark we tried to memorize the objects out in front so we wouldn't mistake them for enemy soldiers sneaking up after dark, but on the really dark nights we couldn't see anything ahead of us. Those times I placed my hand on the ground to feel if anyone was moving out there. When it rained, it was very difficult to see, hear, or feel anything at all.

After the landing we headed inland and proceeded through a village made up of a small grass huts where the Japanese had lived. Those of us who landed in the second wave had gotten out far in front of the first wave that was still near the beach. We soon found ourselves in trouble. We were on the other side of the village heading inland when we heard the troops behind us on the beach firing toward the grass huts-- toward us.

I do recall seeing Jim with our Colonel and others near us as we tried to find the dirt road. We had no such luck until later. We had been landed on the wrong beach.



**I & R Platoon after patrol in the caves on Biak Island, New Guinea.
Pete Gianopulos: "We had some wounded."**

We finally located the airstrip, dug our foxholes, and spent the first night there. I learned that one never dared to get up out of the foxhole during the night. That was an invitation to be shot at by our own men, and that happened from time to time when somebody panicked and stood up. Oh, when you got the call of nature, you went in your helmet. You'd set it aside until morning when it was safe to clean it. The sun coming up was a welcome sight.

Scouting ahead we found that the Japanese had planted landmines along the roads and booby traps in the bushes along trails. There were other incidents that would add to this narrative, but it would require a great deal of writing. Suffice to say we were bombed, strafed, shot at by

rifles, machine guns and anti-aircraft guns. One night a bomb landed within our company perimeter but didn't go off. It was a dud.

The 163rd infantry Regiment and the support groups that made up the 22,000-man combat team pulled out of Aitape and got ready for a second landing on the 17th of May in the Arare and Toem areas of Dutch New Guinea. After three days of shelling, artillery and cannon fire, and bombing and strafing, one battalion in our regiment made an amphibious landing on Wakde Island, which was about two miles across the ocean from Toem.



Pete at left. The only Japanese prisoner is in the back corner.

Wakde and its airstrip was only about 1,000 yards wide by 3,000 yards long, but the battle went on for three days. The Japanese were fierce fighters and did not surrender. Not many prisoners were taken. Eight-hundred-three enemy soldiers' bodies were counted after the

battle was over. We had taken only one prisoner. I helped escort him back to Toem on a landing barge.

More fierce battles were fought on the mainland, up and down the beach, and north and south of Toem and Arare. This was when we experienced our first full-scale enemy attack. Archie Shovan, while in the bottom of his foxhole, was struck across the side of the head and on the shoulder by a Japanese soldier using a sword. The only thing that saved Archie was a sandbag on top the foxhole. Otherwise he would have been cut in half.

Ten days later, the 163rd left Toem and landed on Biak Island where the other two regiments had made a landing against strong opposition. The Army had made a serious miscalculation of the number of enemy troops on bloody Biak Island. There were many more than had been expected.

On Biak, I had a very exciting adventure. Our platoon was sent across the island to map the trails and search for enemy. The patrol lasted three days. When we got nearer to the other side of the island, where we expected to be picked up by landing boats, our platoon was ambushed.

I really didn't think I would ever see my buddy Jim again, and he thought we were goners, too. Jim was generally aware of what was happening through the company commander, but headquarters had lost contact with us. While we had radios in the jungle, the signals did not carry very far.

We had men wounded, but the next morning we managed to find our way to the beach, and we had one prisoner with us. We got there just in time to attract a landing boat that was leaving the area from where it had been anchored during the night. Luckily, I had a phosphorus grenade, which I threw, and that attracted the boat crew. They returned to the water's edge and picked us up for the long journey back to the other side of the island.

The next morning we arrived at our camp and had a happy reunion. After the Biak Island campaign, the 41st enjoyed a period of more-or-less housecleaning activities.

Our next boat ride was to the Island of Mindoro in the Philippines. We stayed there for just a short while. From there we again loaded on landing ships, this time for the invasion of Zamboango on the Island of

Mindanao. That landing was executed on March 10, 1945.

By April 5th the 163rd Infantry Regiment had left Zamboango and was making a landing on Jolo Island in the Sulu Archipelago. General Douglas MacArthur was with the Regiment during that amphibious assault. In fact he visited our infantry regimental headquarters area and met the Sultan of the Sulu Archipelago, a Muslim warrior that MacArthur fought against in the Philippines during the Spanish American War. The Sultan presented MacArthur with a large Moro battle knife.

Another visitor while we were on Jolo was Joe E. Brown, the movie star and comedian. Brown talked to the troops on the battle lines from a radio mounted on the back of my truck. This was the radio we used to communicate with fighter planes, guiding them to their target for bombing runs.

Other units of the 41st Division made landings elsewhere. It is written that six islands -- Palawan, Zamboango, Basilan, Tawi Tawi, Jolo, and Busanga fell to the 41st Division within 40 days. It was later acknowledged that this was one of the most sensational and least publicized campaigns of a single division during the Pacific War — some 136,000 square miles of territory. It should be also remembered that

artillery units, and many other units, made up combat teams for those operations. For the most part, the 41st was in continuous combat from April 22nd until about August 20, 1945.



Hiroshima Catholic Church

While we were still in Zamboango, our division began to train for the invasion of Japan. Captain Boyd Budge, who was the officer in charge of the I & R Platoon, was then transferred to Division Headquarters. The plan was that the 41st and the 32nd Army Divisions would make the initial landing on the southern island of Japan [Kyushu]. It was expected that US deaths and casualties would reach 50% of the

invasion force. President Harry Truman's decision to drop the atomic bomb prevented the planned invasion from being carried out. Needless to say, we were very grateful and supported Truman's decision.



Pete in Hiroshima, Nov. 1945

When Americans occupied Japan they found that the southern island were riddled with caves and well-stocked with ammunition from which their Army and civilian populations were prepared to fight to the death. It would have been a bloody battle.

The war was over. We were happy about that. Our division suffered 715 combat dead, and we had countless wounded servicemen. Our I & R Platoon lost Edgar W. Bengé while on patrol at Aitape. There were others

who were wounded on our patrols. One member of our platoon, Jack Pearson, had an unfortunate experience. He was hit by shrapnel under the armpit. When he got to the field hospital he had lost a lot of blood. They stopped the bleeding then began trying to save his arm. A call came that they needed blood donors. We rushed to the hospital and volunteered to donate blood for our 20-year old Army buddy. I was one of those who donated.

The last time I saw Jack before he was shipped home was in that hospital. He knew they were going to amputate his arm. The last time I saw him was when I visited with him and his mother when they lived in Santa Paula.

After the signing of the surrender aboard the USS Missouri in Tokyo Bay, our division boarded ship and sailed for Japan. One of the problems we had was mines. They had to be cleared out of the channel that our convoy of ships had to pass through in order to reach Kure.

We had made a stop in Okinawa but left rather hurriedly to avoid a Pacific typhoon headed for Okinawa. Every ship that could sail left the harbor to ride-out the storm. We rode into a very rough sea and sailed directly toward the typhoon. It devastated Okinawa.

Our landing in Japan was made at night. We did not know what to expect. We were on a large area covered with asphalt, and our unit did not move off until daylight. We drove in a convoy of trucks to the city of Kure, passed their large Naval yard and docks on the way, and saw many ships and midget submarines that the Japanese used so effectively during the war.

As we drove through the city's main street to our camp, Japanese soldiers were standing about 20-yards apart and facing away from the street, their backs toward us and their rifles hanging from the sling over their shoulders with the muzzles pointed downward. We were told later this was the way the Japanese showed their respect. There were no civilians out of doors or on the streets.

Many families had left the city in fear of the Americans and what they would do to them but in several days the people began to reappear. There was never any trouble, and all of us seemed to get along very well with the Japanese. Before long, the families were inviting the American soldiers into their homes.



Hiroshima City Hall

With Hiroshima being just a short drive to the south from where we were stationed, we were able to see the devastation that this one bomb had produced. Hiroshima had been made off-limits for only a short period of time. We were in there before anything was known about the radiation from this bomb.

The old Japanese Army barracks we occupied in Hero were not very good. They had no central heating, and wintertime was setting in. We had a large upright heating stove in the middle of our barracks, but it was not adequate. We were very glad when the Army began sending us back home based on a point system.

Our turn finally arrived, and we were out of there. A train took us to Nagoya where we boarded a troopship for the States. We shipped

out just before Christmas, so that made the third Christmas we spent overseas and away from home. Our ship arrived in Seattle late at night just before New Year's.

We were all looking forward to seeing the large, lighted sign the city had in the harbor that announced to the troops "Welcome Home!" It was always lit at night, but when we were just able to read the sign, they turned it off. That was our welcome back to the good old USA.

Our little group (Jim, I, and one other who I can't remember now) was able to get a pass to go to town, and that was an interesting adventure. As we checked into a hotel the clerk asked us if we wanted a room with a bath. That startled us. We looked at one another. It was the first time we had heard the word bath for many years, and we got that room with a bath. There was no time wasted before we had all taken a bath in the tub. What a wonderful experience!

What did we do that evening? Of all the things to do, we went ice skating in a downtown rink. The rest of the time we just stared at buildings and the clothing in the shops and generally began our re-adjustment to life in our long-forgotten world.

Two other events come to mind. The mess hall at the Army camp where we were sent when we got back had German POWs doing kitchen duty. That was a strange sight. But the great event was we could drink all the ice-cold fresh milk we wanted. We had not had fresh milk anywhere overseas. What a treat!

Before long we were back in California and discharged after three years in the Army. The Army was so busy discharging servicemen at Ft. MacArthur in San Pedro that they did not have time to give us all the ribbons and medals we had earned as shown on our discharge papers.

I do not know what those were in Jim's case, but since we had been at the same places and participated in the same events, I am assuming that our medals and citations were the same. Here is a list of mine: 1) The Bronze Star for "Meritorious achievement in ground combat against the armed enemy during World War II in the Asiatic-Pacific Eastern Operations. 2) The Good Conduct Medal. 3) The Presidential Unit Citation awarded to the 163rd Infantry Regiment, "The Papuan Force; Southwest Pacific for outstanding performance of duty in action when ground combat forces, operating over road-less jungle covered mountains and swamps demonstrated their courage and resourcefulness and spirit and

devotion to duty of all elements of the command and made possible the complete victory attained." 4) The Asiatic Pacific Campaign Medal for Campaigns in New Guinea, Mindanao, and the Southern Philippine Liberation, with one arrowhead and three Bronze Stars. 5) The Philippine Government's Philippine Liberation Medal, with one Bronze Star. 6) The World War II Victory Medal. 7) The Army of Occupation Medal, with insignia with five bars, one bar for each six-months served overseas. 8) another insignia with one diagonal strip for each of three years of service in the Army, and 9) The Honorable Discharge Lapel Button.

Not long after I was discharged I attended Jim and Maxine Klassen's wedding. They now have been married for 56 years. I recall visits to the Klassen's home after football games and remember the pies Maxine served us. Delicious! If you visited the Klassen brothers' business building in Bakersfield on certain days, you might also have devoured one of Maxine's delicious baked desserts. Yum, yum!

Captain Budge, who lived in Oregon after the war, was a rather frequent visitor to Jim and Maxine's house. When Budge and his wife drove through the area, Jim would always call me, and I would drive to Shafter to visit with all of them.

Another memorable event was their 50th anniversary held at one of their son's homes with a large group of friends and relatives in attendance. Family was very important to Jim; he always talked about how proud he was of his wife, their sons, and their families.

Down through the years we visited or called one another rather frequently. What always amazed me was how Jim could remember my Army serial number, even during my last call to him before his death. Because of Jim's illness, his memory was then not too good, but as soon as he recognized my voice, he repeated my serial number -- "1920" I was saddened to read Jim's obituary on April 30 in the Bakersfield Californian.

Down through the years I've communicated regularly with about 12 former Army friends. Time has taken its toll. Now, there are only about seven left. My Army buddy Jim is gone but not forgotten. Not many men come along like him. I have many memories of Jim Klassen, but I especially remember when he would say, "Hi Taft!" and repeat my Army serial number, "1920"

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