



Dick Gardner

United States Army WWII
63rd Infantry Regiment
6th Division • 1st Army

Dick Gardner served first as a Rifleman, then as a Cryptographer in the United States Army Infantry.

An Unlikely Meeting

I was stationed on Luzon in the Philippine Islands. Some of us had walkie-talkies, which we used to converse back and forth. It was good within about a mile. While listening I heard someone calling a Sergeant Gardner. I was a PFC. at the time and it just struck me. Who do I know that's a Sergeant Gardner out here? I took off and went from unit to unit. Actually I was AWOL doing that. I was a PFC., got busted back to a private. I wasn't supposed to leave my unit. I found a first sergeant, at one of the nearby camps. And he said, "Hey Ernie, there's a kid here looking for you." And out walks Ernest Wardell Gardner, my dad. Prior to us meeting, I was probably about 10 or 11 years old when we last saw each other before our reunion. So he saw me as a child and then as a young soldier. But it didn't take much to recognize each other. It was a very strange feeling. And the guys in the unit I guess, if their jaws could have dropped, I don't think they had ever seen anything like that. And whenever I talk about this with anybody, they say, "You got to be kidding." And I say, no. This is an incredible thing. What are the chances with thousands and thousands of men of us meeting each other? But things like that do happen. Rarely, but they do happen. It was unusual. When he walked out, there was no denying each other. That was -- I would call it instantaneous. But I don't think either one of us probably thought of our disconnection prior to this. We spent the day together. Which, a day under those circumstances could be a long time. So whatever time we had, we made the most of that. I think that was probably the closest we've ever been and it was definitely worth getting busted. I think we both realized if this forthcoming invasion of Japan ever happened, we would have both been gone. (Their military estimate was US Forces would have suffered over 1 million losses if an invasion occurred). I know that we would have had no chance whatsoever of

returning. When I returned home we still weren't close, but that was the magic moment, a magic day I'll always remember.

Growing Up Disconnected

My mom's dad (with my mom) raised one of my sisters and myself. The family had split up. They were married so young, there were three kids involved. I was the first and then the two girls. My mom never remarried. He did and had a second family. So we only saw each other intermittently. Yeah the day was very meaningful. And you would think after an event like this that, oh, wow, everything is going to come right back together. Even when we were all back home again. We still didn't -- that moment didn't return. We might see each other on occasion. But nothing, it didn't bring you into this wonderful thing that you would find in the movies. Unfortunately, he and my mother were like gasoline and matches. They could not be together. It was explosive. The grandfather that raised me, I worshipped because I didn't have a father close to me. He was in his 60s when he took my mom and one of my sisters and I in. He died when I was 25, and I was crushed. I think I was hurt more -- and that's a strange thing to say maybe -- I was crushed more with my granddad, which was my mom's father, than when I heard of my father's death. But that one day with my real Dad, not knowing if this would be our last, was very special. And sometime I ask why, with all the combat that he went through,

Dick Gardner Philippine Islands



Ernie Gardner Philippine Islands

In three theatres -- Africa, Europe, then the Pacific -- did he end up on Luzon. In all his service, he never got a scratch. One story he told me -- there was a typhoon that they got caught in on one of the islands, and he tied himself to a tree. That's the only way they survived being washed away. I mean, he had some fantastic stories, too, which I didn't get to hear too many of them. But I remember him telling me about that one. He would have been washed out to sea, but he had the presence of mind to lash himself to a tree, which stayed there.

Left to Fate

We were headed to the Philippine Islands. It was on the island of Luzon, one of the bigger Philippine Islands, probably the biggest. Manila, the capital was also on Luzon. On the way over we were scheduled

to be part of one of the forces that would be going in, probably under fire. Although there would be several attempts to be made to go in -- the Japanese had over 100,000 troops, so that was pretty heavily fortified and they had control of the island. When our ship broke down, the convoy left us completely alone.

I still remember watching the convoy disappear over the horizon. We put into a small uninhabited island and made temporary repairs first, and then put in to what was, I believe, part of the northern chain of Hawaii. That's a string of islands. Nothing like what you would see today. But we made a little more permanent repairs and moved on. We were halfway across the Pacific and made the rest of the trip by ourselves. Not at, I'm sure, full speed. We were kind of crippled at the time and that was a very weird sensation. We were completely alone and we had ammunition on board, so we would have been one giant firecracker had a submarine found us. When we realized all of this, it was not only disturbing but also extremely frightening to most of us who were either in our early 20s or in our teens at that point. I would say that most of the folks on board, including probably the naval personnel were pretty uptight over that, too. I think, as a teenager at that point, we certainly realized that we were not boys anymore. A lot of us started writing our good-byes to our family members. Had we been torpedoed, all of that would have been gone anyway. At 18 years of age, that was a pretty scary feeling.

By the time we got to the Philippines, the convoy's personnel were already engaged since we were late coming in. We became sort of a replacement group for the force that was ahead of us. We would have been part of the invasion group had we not broken down.

His Father's History

My father was in the service at that point. He was regular army. He went in the late '30s, before World War II. He started out with a tank unit and went to Africa. Developed a number of problems. Those tanks weren't the most comfortable thing in the world. And he had to get out of that. He was a driver for a while. He was there during the time of Rommel, the German General known as the Desert Fox. Luckily, he got out of that situation. From there, they went to Europe, I believe Italy. He was in a heavy weapons platoon. And he spent quite some time I believe in Italy, mostly. The Germans had that country very well covered and fortified. From there, he transferred to the Pacific. He was doing some island hopping before his group came to the Philippines. And one of my stories will mention why they were there. We were getting ready to invade Japan. So they needed all the men they could muster. And he should have been sent home.

Reflections

As I think back about being caught in the middle of the ocean, hoping to God that we wouldn't get sunk. Not even -- that would have been horrible, because we wouldn't have

even gotten there. To be lost like that. And I'm sure that's happened so many times. In two years, I lived almost a lifetime. Seemed like it. As I mentioned before as a teenager, to live and experience these things was unreal. I was a kid that never went more than 50 miles away from home. And suddenly you were halfway around the world having trouble even trying to get there. Yeah, it was interesting, and it was scary. It was profound and unbelievable. When I had mentioned this to some of my friends, even this fellow soldier that I was assigned to, that was so well-decorated, I heard him say to somebody, "Hey, he met his father over here." That, to him was pretty fantastic -- here's this guy with a chest full of medals and he thinks, "Wow, what an experience." Something so simple but so unusual, can have such a great impact. As an old guy in reflecting back on some of these things, I'm a history student by nature. I had a double major in college. Either I was going to be a history teacher or go into the business world. And in reflection now, I think, wow, I think I might have missed the boat. I enjoy people and over the years my work has been very rewarding. But history is so important. It's terribly meaningful. What I told my granddaughter when she wrote this piece on The Philippine Liberation Medal, she asked, "What was the biggest feeling that you got as a young soldier in the Philippines?" "It was freeing people from a horrible enemy," I told her. And the atrocities there were unbelievable. As the Japanese

retreated, they took men, women, and children out, shot them in the streets, left them lying there. They didn't have to do that. Just get out of there and go. These are horrible things for anyone to see. But to be part of freeing these people, even though my part was so tiny and insignificant, was a wonderful feeling. But if you think about it, myself, multiplied by thousands and thousands of other young men, things were accomplished. And to me, that medal was the finest one. That meant a great deal to me. And I only got that about six or seven years ago when one of our local congressmen knocked on the door one night around dinnertime. There was this young man with a suit on, a tie. He said, "I think I have something you want." And I said, "What do you mean?" He gave me this little box. And it was this medal. He says, "It's a little late. But -- I'm sure it will be meaningful for you." And indeed it was. A little late, yeah, 50 some years later. But this has happened to a lot of fellows. And nothing I received was personal. It was all part of the unit I was in. Everything I got, they got. And some fellows who were personally decorated, of course they earned and deserved every bit of that. I was just part of the big machine. Everybody had to do his or her part. But you felt a certain pride inside that you had offered something. And that was important to me.

Epilog

Someone once said 'The Past is Prologue'. This unprecedented meeting of my father and I on Luzon, Philippine Islands in 1945 was really the start of a 'new beginning' for it brought forth new thoughts of this event of over 60 years past. When I went to Washington D.C. with a large group of Pennsylvania WWII Veterans, I was truly overwhelmed by that day. Even thinking about it puts a lump in my throat. Many thought and distant memories came forth in my mind. Our trip leader and friend, Dan Cavanaugh (whose passion is to tell our stories of that fantastic period of the men and women who were there) created a brand new and exciting interest in my memory bank. I thought so many times, why and how did the chance meeting take place half a world away and with a war going on! At age 18, I experienced an almost impossible meeting. By investigating some old family records and documents, I conclude this 'chance meeting' was really 'predestined' to take place. My reason is as follows:

- My father's oldest and only brother was killed in battle in France in 1918 (WWI). As an army infantryman, he attempt to 'take out' a German machine gun emplacement, but he took a bullet through his heart and died instantly. This information was requested of the US War Department by his dad (my grandfather). My uncle still rests in France. His name : Richard A Gardner.

Fast forward to 1945 WWII Philippine Islands.

-A young soldier hear the words 'Sergeant Gardner' on a 'walkie talkie'. He quickly takes off (without permission) to find this man. After inquiring at army unit after army unit this 18 year old Army Infantryman comes face to face with this Sergeant Gardner who is actually his own father. Approximately 10 years has gone by since one has see the other - neither on knowing where the other was. An embrace and hardly very many words this virtually incredible reunion takes place. This young soldier's name: Richard A. Gardner. Exactly the same name as his uncle, Richard

A. Gardner. Both army, both infantry, both family. There are those who consider this merely a 'coincidence'. I believe it to be much more than that. Even 'small miracle' happen. My father served in Africa, Europe, and the Islands of the Pacific. I believe he wanted to be as good and as brave a soldier as his brother was. I truly believe he achieved that goal. I am honored and proud to be a part of this family in two different time periods and two different wars, who put our country before themselves.

Richard A. Gardner

Uncle Dick



Thanks for your service.