



God's Rope

An Interview with LaRocque DuBose
By Taylor Redmond

LaRocque DuBose enlisted in the Marine Corps in San Antonio, Texas, in April of 1944 two weeks before his eighteenth birthday. It wasn't until August the same year that he received orders to go to boot camp in Parris Island, South Carolina, for the next ten weeks. From there, LaRocque was off to Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, for advanced infantry training.

He was participating in a field problem one day when the Colonel came out and told the Marines to fall in on the road. He announced, "We need volunteers to go to Sea School. If you want to volunteer, take one step forward." Every man on the road stepped forward. The Colonel then explained that only 24 men were needed, about one in three of those who had volunteered. A buddy from Texas, who had been through boot camp with LaRocque, was the company driver and when he had walked through the company office that day he'd seen a Marine placing two record books on one card table and one record book on another, his method for selecting men for Sea School. His buddy noticed LaRocque's book on the "Don't Go" table, picked it up, and placed it on the other, telling the Marine that LaRocque was a buddy of his. "That's how I happened to go to Sea School," LaRocque explained.

During his senior year in high school, he had taken an exam for officer training and made excellent grades; however he failed the physical exam for being underweight. At Camp Lejeune, LaRocque brought his exam papers to his Sergeant and asked about attending Officer Candidate School in the Marine Corps. He knew that his group was on the verge of shipping out to California and then the Pacific and volunteering for Sea School seemed like an opportunity to stay longer and give his OCS application more time for processing. Later that night, the Sergeant came by and exclaimed, "What on earth were you thinking, volunteering for Sea School?" While the other guys would be shipping out in five days, the Sergeant informed him that he would be shipping out tomorrow, although he was just waiting for the Colonel's signature to get him into OCS.

LaRocque found Sea School in San Diego very interesting and enjoyable. While there he learned about shipboard protocol, how to be an Admiral's orderly and a Captain's orderly, how to greet important people, and how to use the 20-mm and 40-mm anti-aircraft guns. A few days before shipping out, LaRocque even had the pleasure of a visit from his mother.

The next day LaRocque found himself among the 26 men shipping from San Diego up to Puget Sound Naval Base in Bremerton, Washington. When the men could finally board the Pullman car, he decided not to push and shove for a lower berth, but when he finally was the last one to board the car there were no berths that were still empty. The Lieutenant informed him that there were two berths in the private compartment and that he'd have to share with him. "I got to ride in comfort all the way up to Bremerton," he recalled. Upon arriving at the mess hall at the naval base right in time for lunch, he was told he would immediately board a ship.

Down at the dock there was only a steel wall to the right and left. Puzzled, LaRocque asked, "Where's the ship?" That large steel wall, he soon realized when he craned his neck, was the ship! "I didn't realize how big a ship could be," he explained. As it goes, LaRocque was put on mess duty, which wasn't so bad because after duty he had liberty. At night he would take the old Kalakala Ferry into Seattle and go to the USO to write letters, read, dance, and play ping pong.

The ship then sailed to California to load planes at the Alameda Air Station on San Francisco Bay to be taken to Hawaii. On the last night in the Bay, being a pretty good pool player back home, LaRocque went to a bar to shoot some balls and make trick shots. With his back turned to the bar, he heard men's voices getting louder and louder. Next thing he heard was a gunshot, and he was out of there. LaRocque threw down his cue, ran down the stairs, raced down the street, hopped back onto the ferry, boarded the ship, and set sail the next day. He never knew what happened, but looking back, LaRocque thought it might have been nice to be stuck there as a witness to the shooting, compared to what was coming next.

Standing on the flight deck while the ship passed under the Golden Gate Bridge, LaRocque gave a sad farewell wave, hoping he would see it again someday. Five days later his ship docked at Pearl Harbor in Honolulu and he was on eight-to-twelve gun watch duty in the mornings. A terrible sore throat sent him to Sick Bay, where he was given APC tablets that didn't do much good. His throat felt even worse the next morning. He was sent back to Sick Bay and diagnosed with scarlet fever. In Sick Bay there were already three men with the mumps in the isolation ward so they simply put a curtain around LaRocque. He was delirious for three days and in the hospital for a total of 22. The doctors told LaRocque's CO that he was probably going to die, and to find a replacement.

Unfortunately, there wasn't a Sea School graduate to be found. They did have some luck in a bar in Honolulu, where they found a poor drunk Marine. The next thing the guy knew he had been shanghaied! It turns out the drunk Marine had been in eleven first-wave landings with the Marines in the Pacific. He had been in the Pacific for a year and a half when he got word that his parents, wife, and five-year-old son had died in a car wreck. They were going to send him back to Florida but he claimed, "I don't want to go. There's no one there for me to go back to." Several months later, they had ordered him back to the States on leave but now he found himself headed back to the combat zone. The ship sailed to Ulithi where the task force was forming in the Caroline Islands.

On March 19th LaRocque got off general quarters about 3:30 in the morning, went back to the Marine compartment, lay down on his bunk, and went to sleep. When he finally woke up, it was after 6:00 and he was the only man in the compartment. Thinking he had missed another general quarters, he began dressing quickly when he heard the men returning. He decided to pretend he was unddressing, but a Corporal came up and said, "What are you doing here, DuBose? You've got the four-to-eight gun watch. Get back up to your gun mount."

At mount fourteen at 6:30 in the morning there wasn't much going on except staring into the darkness. Knowing they would be relieved at 7:00 for breakfast, LaRocque didn't want to put on his life jacket. His Sergeant told him to put one on, but LaRocque said, "Look, I'm gonna be relieved here in about ten or fifteen minutes; I don't want to put it on." His Sergeant reprimanded him with, "Either put it on, or I'll report you for not being here for the earlier general quarters." Thankfully he put the jacket on, sat down on the deck, and leaned back against the forward bulkhead of the gun mount.

When his usual relief came onto the gun mount and said, "Relieving a second loader," LaRocque stood up, but a man behind him jumped up and said, "Second loader relieved." LaRocque replied, "Hey, wait a minute; he always takes my place." The Sergeant said, "He's not replacing a man, he's replacing a position. Sit back down, DuBose." While the other guy went on down to the hanger deck to the chow line, LaRocque sat back down on the deck. Five minutes later he heard an explosion and saw a flash of flame.

Thinking it was a five-inch gun firing, he jumped up to look for the shell burst to find the location of the "bogie," which was what enemy planes were called. Debris came down on top of the men from the deck and smoke billowed around until they couldn't see a thing. The Sergeant said, "We can't do any good here. Abandon the mount!" After stumbling around on shells that had popped out of their clips and were rolling around the deck, LaRocque came face to face with the Sergeant, tangled up in his telephone cable attached to the gun mount. So much adrenaline was rushing through LaRocque's body that he took the cable in his hands and broke it. Later on he was told by his Lieutenant that he had seen him from the catwalk ahead of them. "I saw the Sergeant was tangled up in that telephone cable and I saw you motion for him to step forward so you could take the cable in your hands, and I thought, 'That poor skinny little son of a bitch can't break that cable,' but you snapped it like it was a piece of spaghetti."

LaRocque and his Sergeant went to the aft end of the ship on a catwalk that was about four feet below the edge of the flight deck. There he found a hatch going under the flight deck that led to a little platform where there were steps up to a magazine of 20-mm shells. He made it under there and thought, "I'm gonna find a rope and get in the water; we can't stay here. The ship's on fire and it's burning in our direction." Below them on the fantail was all of the ship's napalm that was sure to explode soon.

LaRocque searched, yet he couldn't find a rope anywhere. Defeated, he sat down on the catwalk and leaned back against the bulkhead to begin saying his final prayers. In retrospect, he is very proud of himself for not praying for his own salvation, but praying that his parents wouldn't be completely devastated by their only son being killed in the war. Finding that he was still alive when he finished the prayer, LaRocque went back to the hatch and through it, and there was a rope going down to the water. "I've called it God's rope ever since," said LaRocque. "I *know* it wasn't there before, and I have no idea where it came from."

There were two sailors standing there, and LaRocque asked if they were going to get on the line. The men didn't have life jackets on and couldn't decide whether or not it'd be better to stay there or go into the ocean. Thanks to his Sergeant, LaRocque did have his jacket on. They stepped aside and he swung out on the rope. While he reached down trying to get the rope between his feet, the 20-mm magazine behind him exploded. LaRocque then went sailing through the air, plummeting the 87 feet to the water.

Remembering that he had his steel helmet strapped under his chin, he managed to turn over head down so his neck wouldn't be broken when he hit the water. He put his left arm out to try to ward off any floating debris, and the last thing he thought before hitting the water was,

"I'm going to ruin my wrist watch." To this day he has the same watch. It stopped at 10:20 a.m., 19 March 1945, while the *USS Franklin*, his ship, went up in flames. He only went three or four feet below the surface before bobbing back up. The neck on his life jacket hadn't been tied tight, and he had been drinking gas, oil, and whatever else was in the ocean.

He began swimming and looked up at the ship that he thought looked like "a bull fatally wounded charging off." The ship was going up in flames. A plane propeller was skipping across the water, while their own bombs and rockets shot off. Every life raft he saw was full of sailors. There was a six-foot swell that morning, taking LaRocque to the top and spinning him around two or three times, causing him to lose direction. When he finally lost sight of everyone, he felt completely alone out there in the ocean. At last he saw a plane diving towards him and his first thought was, "That damn Jap is gonna strafe me out here all by myself."

While trying to get under the water with his life jacket still on, he realized the plane was one of theirs when it flew over. The pilot waggled his wings and made a big circle back to him, flying over and pointing until LaRocque was led to an empty raft. Life rafts were a four-foot by eight-foot rectangular ring of balsa wood, only a foot thick, with a lattice work in the middle on which were fastened food and water, medical supplies, a radio, and a sail, but when he pulled himself onto the raft, the lattice work broke loose, its ropes having been burned almost in two when it was blown off the ship, and it sank out of reach. Once LaRocque was on the raft, the pilot came back around and waggled his wings once more. LaRocque saluted him and he took off. "Whoever he was, he saved my life," says LaRocque.

On the raft he picked up a Marine and two sailors and then noticed two pilots swimming out in the water. One of their "Mae West" life jackets had inflated and one had not, so LaRocque swam out to help. While swimming up he said, "Can I help you, Sirs?" to acknowledge that they were officers. The one with his head barely held above the water looked at LaRocque out of the corner of his eye and said, "Sir, hell! We're all the same rank now, buddy." He helped them onto the raft, and as they floated along the men hopped on and off, unable to decide whether it was warmer in the water or out of it. It snowed in Tokyo 235 miles to the north that day, so it was really cold. Finally, one of the pilots said, "Everybody stay on the raft. Otherwise you're gonna get too tired to get back on it."

LaRocque asked one of the pilots how far they were from land. The pilot said "six miles" and then pointed straight down. He also said they were only 34 miles from the coast of Japan and in a current that would take them into the coast. LaRocque and the other Marine decided that if they washed up on the coast they would do so naked and without their dog tags and say they were sailors, knowing how Marine prisoners were treated by the Japs.

When an American destroyer came into sight, the men started singing, "Oh, give me land, lots of land!" The sailors on the ship threw a line down to the raft and missed them twice, telling them that if they didn't catch it the third time the ship would have to get underway. It fell between LaRocque and Trauss, the other Marine, and they were both pulled off the raft. Trauss scrambled over LaRocque onto the fantail of the *USS Hunt*, the destroyer. LaRocque had "flash-hiding" gloves on in case of an explosion, but they were causing him to slide down the rope every time the destroyer rose out of the water. Two sailors finally pulled LaRocque on board.

His clothes were so cold and stiff they had to be cut off his body. While they were doing this a sailor yelled, "Look!" When LaRocque turned around he could see a mountain in Japan. "And that's as close to Japan as I wanted to get," he explained, though he did visit a few years ago. Then he was taken below and put in a bunk. Later on a sailor came around and said the skipper had donated a bottle of whiskey, from which they all had a drink. The skipper explained

that there were 400 survivors on board and the ship's company was only 375. If they had to take evasive action, all survivors were told to stay below deck to prevent capsizing. They rode the destroyer back to Ulithi.

In Ulithi, LaRocque and several Marines were transferred to a receiving ship and sent down six decks to the double bottoms where there were empty bunks. Finally the men learned it was not actually a receiving ship but an attack transport headed for Okinawa. The men heard news that anybody who had abandoned ship without a direct order would be court-martialed. This meant LaRocque and the others who were in the rear of the ship where they couldn't have possibly heard that command might face court-martial. A Lieutenant from the FMF (infantry) Marines on board came up to them and told them not to worry; they would issue whatever equipment they needed and the men could come with them for the invasion.

The men all thought, "The hell with that! We don't want to land on Okinawa. We already had our war!" For the next two days the men wondered what to do with themselves. There was no way for the ship to communicate with the *Franklin* to tell them they had survivors—no blinking light, and no radio. Finally, they went up to the ship's Captain and asked him when they were going to sail. The Captain said he couldn't tell them that, but if they weren't off his ship before 0630 the next morning, they'd be going with him, because he couldn't contact the *Franklin*. About 0330 the six of them were still awake, sitting on their bunks smoking Salvation Army-supplied cigarettes and all of a sudden a loudspeaker came on and a voice said, "The following-named men will report topside for transfer to the *Franklin*," then started reading the names. LaRocque and his buddies didn't wait to hear their names called; they made a hasty climb up the ladders to the top deck and then went over the side on nets and into the landing craft floating below. .

The *USS Franklin* was the most heavily damaged ship in naval history to make its way back to port under its own power. LaRocque climbed back aboard and rode all the way back to the only place it could be repaired: the Brooklyn Navy Yard, New York. Back aboard the *Franklin* they were asking for names. He asked the guy with the list if he saw Pfc. DuBose on it, and the man said, "We've got a Seaman First Class DuBose, but Pfc. DuBose has been reported as missing in action." Puzzled at first, LaRocque figured out that back on the destroyer, a sailor had given him some of his own gear to wear. Another sailor had come around asking for names, but what LaRocque didn't know was that he was listing survivors and had simply given him the name DuBose. Since he was wearing sailors' dungarees, he'd been listed as Seaman First Class DuBose.

They were still in Ulithi when LaRocque's Commanding Officer, a Major, came up and told LaRocque he had a message for him. The Major explained that what it said was that he had been awarded a principal appointment to Annapolis and that he would be sent back to the States by government transportation. He was told by the Major that he would get there faster on the *Franklin*.

The *Franklin's* Captain decided the men needed to be worked pretty hard or they would go crazy thinking about what they had been through. With remains of planes on deck, there was enough work to give the men two six-hour work details and two four-hour gun watches a day. LaRocque and the other Marines were assigned to a twin five-inch gun turret for their gun watch even though they had never learned how to fire five-inch guns. At night they would go into a powder room below the turret to sleep and smoke.

Finally back at Pearl Harbor, LaRocque knew that one of his high school teachers was stationed in Honolulu. The first shore liberty he got, he went to the USO in Honolulu and gave

Lieutenant Commander Peters's name for someone to locate him by phone. After what seemed like hours of reading magazines, someone gave the phone to him. "You're looking for Lieutenant Commander Peters?" he was asked. LaRocque said, "Yes, he was a high school teacher of mine." The person on the phone asked his name and LaRocque replied, "This is LaRocque DuBose." The man said, "Rokey [LaRocque's hometown nickname], this is Edward Talbot." LaRocque was very surprised that one of his teachers was in the service. Talbot also told LaRocque that another teacher had gone to sea and was on an aircraft carrier somewhere. After the war, LaRocque and Peters got together again, and Peters told him that he'd seen LaRocque's ship get hit. "I was on our flight deck when I saw it, and I knew you were on that ship. I just dropped to my knees and prayed for you." Talbot invited him to his place for lunch, where LaRocque told him and some other Navy officers everything that had happened.

LaRocque's mother and father had gotten the telegram reporting him as missing in action. Three Sundays later they were in church listening to the preacher when the back door opened. In came a past girlfriend of LaRocque's, now one of the Western Union operators, with tears streaming down her face and a telegram in hand. His mother thought, "Oh Lord, someone else is either dead or missing in action." The girl went up to the minister and whispered something to him, and he pointed back to LaRocque's folks who were sitting on the end of the pew. She went back and handed them the envelope and said, "They found LaRocque and he's okay! He's all right!" At that point the minister said he thought that day's service should end right there with them singing, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow."

When LaRocque finally got home on leave that summer his mother asked him if he knew what time it would have been in his hometown when his ship was hit. He said he'd figured out that it would have been a little before 3:00 on Sunday afternoon, March 18. She got out the calendar and turned it to that Sunday and showed him that she'd written, "Ask LaRocque if anything important happened that day." She and LaRocque's father had gone to church that day, then to lunch at a restaurant, and home to nap. His mother had shaken his father awake and said, "LaRocque is at the back door shaking the screen. Let him in." His Dad said, "LaRocque is somewhere in the Pacific." She said, "Well, I heard him shaking the screen door and saying, 'Dad, Mom, let me in.'" His Dad said, "I think we ought to get out of bed and pray for him." When LaRocque asked what time that happened, his mother said she'd looked at the clock and it was five minutes after 3:00, probably about the exact time LaRocque was saying what he was sure were his final prayers.

When his Major saw evidence of LaRocque's minor wounds, he informed him that he rated a Purple Heart. He would do the paperwork to get it for him since he hadn't been treated in the Sick Bay on the destroyer. There weren't enough Purple Hearts around to supply what they needed aboard the ship, and there weren't enough until they got back to the Brooklyn Navy Yard. The day after they docked there, though, LaRocque was transferred to the Naval Academy prep school in Virginia so missed the distribution of medals. He was finally awarded his Purple Heart at the *Franklin's* 50-year reunion—50 years to the day from when he'd been wounded.

When LaRocque arrived at the prep school, he discovered that he had six days to study for the final exams and was handed six textbooks. After thumbing through them and finding he could make no sense of things, LaRocque took the two three-hour exams per day for three days. Needless to say, he failed them miserably. A few weeks later he was called to Washington DC, where he had an 11:00 appointment with the Congressman who had gotten him the Annapolis appointment. He said, "DuBose, you had all these good grades on these other exams but you busted the hell out of that entrance exam to Annapolis. What happened?" LaRocque said,

“Well, I only had six days to study for it.” He said, “Where were you?” LaRocque replied, “When I got the appointment, I was in the Pacific on the *Franklin*.” The news about the *Franklin* had not been released at that time, but the Congressman had been told about it. The man got on the intercom and told his secretary to cancel his next two appointments; he was taking DuBose to lunch. After questioning him about everything that happened, he said, “After that experience, there’s no way you could have passed those exams. Would you like for me to give you the appointment for next year?” LaRocque gratefully accepted.

Since the Naval Academy prep school had been closed, LaRocque was put with the Marine guard detachment at the “retraining and redistribution” area where Marines and sailors who had been court-martialed and put in the brig for up to thirteen months were incarcerated. He was in a barracks with Marine infantry combat veterans who looked at the “sea-going” patch on his shoulder and wouldn’t talk to him. They thought of a sea-going Marine as having a dry bunk every night, three hot meals a day, and two four-hour gun watches. Basically, they thought of them as “at leisure.” Finally a Jewish Marine told him how to get to the mess hall, probably feeling that LaRocque was getting the kind of treatment Jews were so used to getting, but no one spoke to LaRocque for the next two weeks.

One day when he got off guard duty he walked into the barracks and there was a Marine standing at the end of the barracks with a newspaper spread out in front of him that he quickly shut and hid behind his back. He asked LaRocque what ship he’d said he was on and LaRocque said he’d been on the *USS Franklin*. The Marine took a quick look at the newspaper and then asked him if he’d been on it on March 19. LaRocque said he had. “Then you might want to see this,” the Marine responded, and handed him the *New York Times* filled with pictures and stories about the *Franklin*. LaRocque snapped. “You bastards!” he said. “All you could think of when you saw my sea-going patch was a warm dry bunk every night and three hot meals every day. Well, the most I could retreat was 890 feet. You guys could retreat until you found something to hide behind. All I had to hide behind was a million square miles of ocean.” One of the guys reached into his locker, pulled out a bottle of whiskey, and said, “Here, have a drink.” And he did.

They all got along fine after that, but sometime later LaRocque received a message with three alternatives. He could stay in the Marine Corps and go to Annapolis Prep School at the government’s expense, be discharged from the Marine Corps and enlist in the Navy and go to prep school at the government’s expense, or get discharged from the Marine Corps and go to a prep school at his own expense. Knowing they would be landing on the mainland of Japan in October, he figured if they discharged him and he went to school for a year he wouldn’t have to participate in that invasion even if he flunked the exam again. So he decided to request a discharge, though it was difficult to obtain. About a week later his CO passed him on the boardwalk and said, “Your discharge will be through in a couple of weeks, DuBose.”

Coming off guard post the next day, LaRocque walked up to a group of Marines sitting on the barracks stoop and someone said that they’d dropped a bomb equal to 20,000 tons of TNT on Japan. LaRocque said, “Twenty thousand *pounds*, you mean,” but they said no, it was tons. He just shook his head in disbelief, but they’d heard on the radio, of course, that the first atom bomb had been dropped. “Then they dropped the second one and that was the end of it,” he said. His discharge came through and he arrived home just too late to start college in the fall semester but enrolled at Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas, in January of 1946.

After a whirlwind year of service, LaRocque DuBose was a 19-year-old veteran with a newly found appreciation for fate—and how good it had been to him. It was time to move forward with the next chapter of his life.

***Taylor Redmond** was a member of Veterans Heritage Project for 5 years, interviewing six veterans, including LaRocque. We remember this interview so well because it was “the day of the hail.” Not only does my car still bear the dings, but Taylor and I had to reboot LaRocque’s power so we could continue to run the camera! Taylor is passionate about veterans, starting with her great grandfather, an Hispanic Bushmaster during World War II, continuing on through an interview with an Iraqi Freedom veteran, who turned his life around after our interview. When Taylor tried to make her friends understand the power the interview had on her, and their subsequent apathy, she commented, “I realize the change didn’t happen in them; it happened in me.”*

***LaRocque DuBose** enlisted in the Marines to prevent being drafted into the Army and decided to attend Sea School. In a very eventful year of service, his ship, the aircraft carrier USS Franklin, was hit by a Japanese bomber, leaving LaRocque stranded on a life raft in the middle of the ocean. At the time he was hit, he made a final prayer to his parents, when suddenly a rope appeared that allowed him to swing free from the ship. At that very hour, his mother awoke to the sound of rapping at the door, though no one was there. LaRocque’s watch still bears the time he landed in the ocean—10:20, 19 March 1945.*