



A Story for Everything

An Interview with Walt Davidson
By Ashley Durham

As sharp as a tack, Walter “Walt” Davidson has a memory teeming with unmatched stories. To this day he lives eventfully, getting his High School Diploma at the age of eighty-seven, and even adopted as a grandfather. Walt began his very first story as a working thirteen-year-old, picking cucumbers for a kind farmer in order to afford food. As Walt became a reliable employee, the farmer taught him to use the farm’s hefty McCormick tractor. This allowed Walt an increased pay of a dollar a day when he worked twelve hours a day, six days a week.

As Walt grew older, he grew out of doing odd jobs on the farm and began guiding tours on horseback through Rocky Mountain National Park. He would ride fifty miles a day through the park’s trails. Walt rode so much that the winding trails on a park map were as much a part of him as the veins in his hand. Riding the trails was a job Walt thoroughly enjoyed and could get paid for. When he was confronted with the requirement of a Tour Guide License, however, his job was threatened. At this point, Walt was only seventeen years old—four years too young to get this license—but he was not going to give up this job so easily. Encouraged to confront the Commissioner Ranger, Walt was quizzed over his knowledge of the park. The Commissioner gave him the same test twenty-one-year-olds had to take in order to get their Tour Guide License. He found that Walt scored significantly higher than all other rangers who had previously taken the test. Upon discovering this, the Commissioner used a typewriter to ink “Junior” at the top of a Tour Guide License and gave it to Walt.

Walt continued doing odd jobs. He had absolutely no reservations when it came to strenuous physical labor—especially if it helped pay the bills. In August of 1942, Walt was digging a gas pipeline out of the ground when he heard that the United States was officially involved in a war with Japan. Walt’s friends urged him to join in the war effort and enlist, but he was initially hesitant; Walt figured he would be drafted within the next eight months anyway. Pretty soon, however, he gave in to his friend’s urgings and was accepted into the Navy.

Walt was stationed at Balboa Park Naval Hospital. He didn’t know it, but fifty-nine years later he would be a guest speaker at the Hospital Corporation Ball’s 103rd Anniversary. In regards to speaking at the distinguished ball, Walt said, “I was forty-four years old and didn’t even know what I was doing.” Regardless, being back in the hospital brought back a wave of old memories. At the hospital during the war, Walt was doing odd jobs in a new venue. After a

nurse decided he was good for more than changing bed pans, she taught Walt how to sharpen, sterilize, and store syringes. He was at that hospital for three months before moving on to Parris Island. “I must’ve given ten-thousand shots,” Walt said, recalling his time at Parris Island. Perhaps even more clearly than his time at the hospital, Walt remembers his twelve weeks of training camp. “Those Marines got close to killing me, I’ll tell you,” he said; nonetheless, Walt admits that he would not have survived combat if it hadn’t been for that training.

After being shuffled around a bit and following several orders which seemed to point in many different directions, Walt found himself on a ship heading to Manus in the Admiralty Islands. For the five-day trip, Walt was being ship-broken. He became sick as a dog, puking and feeling all-around miserable. Ironically, he never became queasy on the water since that trip. Once in Manus, Walt spent three days working at the local hospital before finding himself in Guadalcanal. He did not expect to be going to Guadalcanal initially. At the outset, Walt had been told he was going to the Panama Canal. There wasn’t much he could say to change his situation now; he was in Guadalcanal and there was not much he could do about it. For Walt’s war experience, each new territory was usually a quick stop anyway. After only two weeks, Walt was sent to the Russell Islands, the muddy coconut plantations of Pavuvu. “There were rats everywhere,” Walt remembers. Although futile, men shot at the rats in disgust. It was here that Walt had his twenty-second birthday.

At one point in Pavuvu, Walt stumbled on a group of Marines comparing accuracy with their .45s. Lieutenant Colonel “Silent Lou,” who had just become a two-star Lieutenant General, invited Walt to join. Hesitant among the group of high-ranked Marines, Walt joined in. In their game of accuracy, Walt beat them three times. “You’re a sorry bunch of Marines. You let a Corpsman beat you!” “Silent Lou” chewed out the men. Twenty-eight years later, “Silent Lou” came to Walt’s hometown. He didn’t immediately recognize Walt, but once Walt refreshed Lou’s memory, his face lit up as he exclaimed, “This guy’s a troublemaker!” He proceeded to explain how Walt had given his Marines such a hard time all those years ago, grinning the entire time.

Reminiscing, Walt said, “That was another life and another world. I think of the things I’ve done—[such as] going for three-mile runs in the morning—and now it’s even difficult to get out of bed.” Walt has learned how to be satisfied with his present circumstances, making the best out of what he has at any given time. During his time at Pavuvu, each man was given four ten-ounce bottles of Foster’s beer, six bottles of Coke, a carton of cigarettes, a K-bar, and a .45. Some of these items would prove to be more useful than others. It wasn’t long until Walt’s battalion got notice from Tokyo Rose that they were “going to Peleliu and never coming back.”

He bounced from Australia to Peleliu on September 1st. What he found would require every ounce of basic training along with a whole lot of luck. Peleliu was “an island of fire,” as Walt described it. Fourteen to sixteen-inch shells took flight in a way that they “looked like a Volkswagen flying through the air.” It was an island of chaos. Parts of tanks and bodies floated on the surface of the water. When the Amtrak motors died, Walt, accompanied by the 7th Marines, waded through knee-deep water to shore, among the bodies and rubble while trying to avoid being shot. No easy task. Walt made it to shore and then ran straight into a tank trap. He stuck his head up to see whether the coast was clear. American tanks barricaded one side and Japanese tanks occupied the opposing side. Walt remembers seeing another Marine, “as stupid as [he].” After exchanging expressions of shock and forms of identification, the other Corpsman exclaimed, “You’re in the wrong place!” “I know!” replied Walt. Finally, taking his chances, Walt stuck his head out of the tank trap to ensure the coast was clear—or relatively clear—and

managed to make it out. As Walt sprinted back to his respective company, a man ran up to him with a bleeding arm, asking for assistance. The man introduced himself as Yates. Yates had been shot in the arm. Many years later, Walt would encounter Yates under very unexpected circumstances.

Soon after Walt's experience at Peleliu, the Japanese launched a full attack. This was a big mistake on their part. Out of the eighteen tanks involved in the attack, three made it out. Peleliu today has a population of 700. During that attack, there were 10,000 Japanese and 20,000 Marines involved. The second night, the Japanese tried to make it to shore while the Navy "shelled them." Two hundred and fifty made it ashore, so the fighting continued. In this fighting, the U.S. lost sixteen men. After fighting nonstop, Walt tried to get some rest. He woke up hearing something moving and a strange feeling around his foot. Pulling out his .45, Walt attempted to threaten the enemy. In better light, he realized the "enemy" was a land crab pinching at his foot.

Walt remembers the ingenuity he and other Marines had to employ. There was one situation where several Japanese were hiding in a cave and his job was to get them out. Walt and a few others tried launching grenades into the cave but the men inside just threw them right back. Finally, one of the Marines took a can of bug spray and generated a "bug bomb" out of it. They threw this in and fourteen men ran out of the cave. Being forewarned that these Japanese would kill the Marines before ever surrendering, each of the Japanese was immediately shot.

Walt experienced quite a few nasty realities of war. He saw the treatment between men of opposing sides, soldier to soldier or innocent to soldier that was filled with resentment and bitterness. In one case, a native named Jacob Vuza had been captured by the Japanese, tied to a tree, and used for bayonet practice. Somehow Vuza managed to survive. Leading the Marines on a mission through the jungle, Vuza found the Japanese who had given the order to perform such a cruel exercise on an innocent man. No forgiveness or room for mercy in the world of war, Vuza shot the man in the face with a .45 and chopped his head off with a machete. Keeping the head as a trophy—apparently a common practice—he shrunk it. Vuza was later knighted by Queen Elizabeth.

One night Walt experienced a situation that would really shake up his war-time travels. While in the Five Sisters Area, his battalion was spending the night in a Japanese gun emplacement. "We shouldn't be in here," Walt told his Captain. An explosion burst out at his feet and he felt like someone had hit him "across the chest with a baseball bat." Another man was shot and bleeding profusely. Because there was no rear exit, Walt was left bleeding from his chest while trying to bandage up the other man. Hill Billy Jones, a member of Walt's battalion, ran up to Walt and insisted he needed to bandage up Walt's leg. Walt insisted there was nothing wrong with his leg; it was his chest that was bleeding. Finally making it out, Walt realized his leg had been injured. There was a "hole clear through the back of the knee." Walt needed to make it to a self-aid station to get patched up. After peeling off the bloody clothes he had been wearing for the past twenty-six days, Walt made it to a doctor who gave him the care he desperately needed.

Walt was going to be healing for a while. Entering the war at 150 pounds, he weighed 123 at this point. Getting Walt healed and back into general health was the next order of business. The next stop was the *USS Bonneville*, "the slowest ship in the Navy." Some men joked about how the massive ship would go faster if a sail were hoisted. Carried aboard on a stretcher and accompanied by two Army medics and a nurse, the sail to Guadalcanal that should have taken three days took six. Once at Guadalcanal, Walt received X-rays from a doctor who

told him that the shrapnel he had in his body could be removed, but it would be much easier just to leave it. October 10, 2012 will be the 68th anniversary of receiving his “souvenirs.” Although Walt was to keep the shrapnel, he had quite a bit of other healing to go through. He was sent to Balboa Park Hospital in San Diego, where it was decided there was not enough room to tend to him. Shipped off from San Diego, Walt spent two weeks healing at Camp Pendleton. He was then allowed to go home to Wellington, Colorado, in time to see his mother for Christmas Eve. Just before going back to the Pacific, Walt’s healing was finalized at Great Lakes Hospital in Illinois. Finally, Walt was released at Treasure Island on February 23rd and sent back—to his delight—to Guadalcanal.

Now qualified for independent duty, Walt replaced another Corpsman who was going home. Walt was told he would fit right in. Occupying his new job, Walt ran into one of the doctors that had helped nurse him back to health. “Just don’t attempt any brain surgery,” the doctor said, shocked that Walt was working in hospitals again. Now at Okinawa, Walt saw planes crash into plumes of water. It seemed there was much more dramatic scenery here. The night the war ended, Walt saw “Washing Machine Charlie” fly overhead. He saw two Betty bombers land with surrender documents. Even though it was the end of the war, Walt’s time in the Pacific would play an active part in the rest of his life.

During the war, Walt bandaged many men. He cleaned, stitched, and protected wounds. While in Peleliu, the man who ran up to Walt with his sleeve turned up and a bullet through his arm had left an impression. His name was Yates. In 1947, Walt was in Fort Collins, Colorado. He saw a young Marine looking for the dry cleaners. The Marine’s girlfriend was at Colorado State and he was going to see her but he needed his uniform cleaned. Walt offered him a ride. While making conversation, the Marine offered to show Walt his “neatest wound.” The Marine rolled up his sleeve and showed a wound that had been healed by Walt’s own handiwork. Walt exclaimed, “Yates!” Yates did not immediately remember him, so Walt explained that he had been the doctor that patched him up those many years ago.

Today, Walt is actively involved in the Lions Club along with several other service organizations. He has dedicated his life to people. Although it isn’t as easy to get out into the community anymore, every person with whom Walt comes in contact is easily affected by his kindness and compassion. Regardless of the person—his personality, his social status, or his possessions—Walt appreciates each person individually with infinite understanding. He lives with his two poodles, Elmo and Zoey, who keep Walt company, greet visitors, and terrorize the mailman. Walt’s world revolves around his granddaughter Paige’s visits, and all the ways he is involved in the community. His dedication to service is undoubtedly a lifelong dedication.

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Walter “Doc” Davidson was digging up pipeline in 1942 when he found out war had broken out. He was sent to the Admiralty Islands, then to Guadalcanal, Pavuvu, and Peleliu. He was injured at Guadalcanal and sent back to Great Lakes Hospital. He returned to Guadalcanal and continued his service until war’s end and his Notice of Separation on November 28, 1945. Walt boasts only of the satisfaction he has found in attempting to live a stress-free life. Today he lives in Scottsdale with his two adorable poodles—

Zoey and Elmo—and frequently enjoys the company of his granddaughter Paige, along with anyone else willing to listen to his stories.