

It wasn't a Royal Caribbean, Princess, Holland American, Disney nor Norwegian cruise. Uncle Sam paid for my first ocean voyage. When, in wartime 1943, my local draft board was dragging as many 18-year-olds as they could grab into the Army, I decided sea air was much healthier than foxhole mud. I enlisted in the Navy.

Fortunately for my ego and reputation among my shipmates, I wasn't seasick as we sailed through the choppy waters of San Francisco Bay and headed out to the Pacific. However, it seemed every one of the 2,800 young Marines aboard were. As one of the lowest-ranking members of the crew, my first Navy job was to help clean up the grossly messy passenger bunking areas, chow (cafeteria) compartments and heads (toilets).



After several days of working in that muck, I did get time to go up on deck to once again breathe the fresh sea air. Then I saw that many Marines had recovered enough to be involved in poker games. Almost all the Marines aboard our ship were 17- and 18-year-olds, some just out of boot camp and others with a few more weeks of basic combat training. Additionally, many of the Marines were 14 to 16, having faked their ages and forged parents' signatures to enlist.

At age 19, I felt like a wise old salt as I joined in on some of the poker games. I had learned poker at age ten from gambler and bookie uncles, including a basic form of card counting on stud poker, where the cards are dealt face up. So, what leisurely ocean cruise could be more enjoyable than one where I could supplement my \$50-a-month Navy pay with some of the \$50-a-month pay the young Marines were anxious to invest?

Our cruise took three weeks to get to our destination. During that time, whenever I wasn't standing watch, at general quarters or cleaning up the messy areas, I played poker. By the time our cruise was about to reach its destination, I had stashed away nearly \$2,000, more than three years' pay for me, an enormous sum at that time. One of my fellow winners, a Navy storekeeper third class who managed the ship's gedunk (retail store), stashed our money in his safe.

Then, on about the 20th day after we left San Francisco, the mood of the ship suddenly changed drastically. Poker games were banned, to be replaced by serious gatherings of Marine

officers and their units. On all areas of the deck they studied maps of the destination and discussed combat tactics. Some Marines sat against bulkheads and cleaned their bayonets, BARs, carbines and M1 rifles. At the time I guessed they'd soon do a practice landing on some US-held Pacific island.

However, when the tactical meetings ended with Navy chaplains saying prayers with groups of bare-headed Marines, the secret was soon revealed to all of us. This wasn't to be a practice landing. It was the real thing, and our Marines were to participate as back-up troops for an operation that wasn't going well on a murderous little Pacific rock called Iwo Jima.

As we anchored offshore, watch American aircraft pound the island, we prepared to disembark Marines. At my battle station on a gun mount, I could see some of the results of the first three days of the invasion. Burned out hulks of landing boats lined the shore, and the beach was littered with wrecked equipment and bodies.

Our ship's Marines were to be the third wave, to replace the unexpectedly heavy casualties. When the traditional order came over the squawk box, "Away the landing party", we watched our young poker pals climb down the nets and into our ship's Higgins boats.

We immediately became an emergency hospital ship, as Higgins boats loaded with casualties came alongside. The two big hospital ships were already overloaded, and soon the troop transport decks were covered with wounded and dying Marines. Assigned as a stretcher bearer, I helped take the wounded from the cargo net hoists to the deck, and then carry some of the worst cases down below to our medical facilities (sick bay) and in the cargo deck and troop compartments.

I recognized some wounded young Marines as those who had played in our on-deck poker games. When I had a moment to spare, I sat with them and tried to offer comfort while they waited for medical attention. Many died before help could arrive.

My first cruise started out as a pleasant trip on the warm Pacific Ocean, surrounded by friendly companions and featuring enjoyable on-deck activities. It ended with the stark reality and terrible waste of war, and the tragedy of how pleasure can suddenly turn into pain.