

Interview With a Battle of Okinawa Veteran

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Today marks the 70th Anniversary of the American invasion of Okinawa - Easter Sunday, April 1st 1945 - the final and bloodiest battle of the Pacific War.

Over the years, I've had the opportunity of interviewing a number of World War II combat veterans. Each had performed heroic exploits but, in virtually every case, their actions were known only to their buddies, not even their families. The mere inference that they were heroic often prompted the quick response, "The only heroes were those who didn't return."

At this time of year, the name of one man in particular - Ray Hyman - comes to mind. The affable, former-UDT (Underwater Demolitions Team) frogman had remained a fighting-trim, crew-cutted six footer, with a softly graveled voice that commanded respect.

One of his fondest mementos was a picture of his dad, a World War I Army Cavalryman, shipping off to France. His dad died when Ray was just 9. At 13, Ray ran away from his South Bronx streets to join the Navy. Soon caught, a Juvenile Court Judge warned him to wait until 16 or be sent away to reform school as a delinquent minor.

On December 7, 1941, the 17-year-old Machinist Mate's war began in earnest, becoming up-close and personal in 1942 and 1943 at the Battles of the Coral Sea, the Solomon Islands and Guadalcanal. Soon after, Ray, who learned to swim in the Bronx River, volunteered for the UDTs. Armed only with a knife, he and his fellow UDT "Naked Warriors" performed reconnaissance missions in Japanese waters - charting channels and enemy fortifications and clearing the beach obstacles for the U. S. Marines' island-hopping invasions, including Iwo Jima.

In the early-morning hours of Easter Sunday, April 1, 1945, his UDT Team 14 led a feint assault on the island of Okinawa as part of the final invasion of the war in the Pacific. Told to disregard all their previous disciplined training in stealth and concealment, they were to make as much noise and draw as much attention as possible. Armed with satchel charges, they blasted the coral reefs and selflessly exposed themselves in the face of heavy Japanese machine gun and mortar fire. In the process, they diverted a Japanese division of 20,000 troops from the main invasion site to the other end of the island, accomplishing one of the great military feints of the war. That morning, the Marines suffered only minimal casualties during their landing.

This may have also been the most significant April Fool's Day in military history. In 1997 - 52 years later - Ray received a plain, unadorned envelope in the mail. Inside was the Presidential Unit Citation he and his Team 14 had earned for their heroic actions that day.

Ray mentioned that he often wanted to send his story about that long-ago April Fool's Day to a newspaper, but he never got around to it. He died in 2000. So, each year at this time, I would like to tell his story for him and do him that favor as a very small token of my appreciation for his service and sacrifice. Ray would be the first to say he didn't do anything special - he was just doing his duty.