



John Shook (Autobiography)  
1<sup>st</sup> Squadron  
Message Center

I was born June 8, 1924 on the family farm, number ten of the eleven of my parents' children. The first six were all girls, followed by five sons. Of course, I was next to the last. At present I am the only one left of the family including uncles and aunts. One sister lived to be 103 and the others all lived into their 80's some 90's. The youngest sister died in 1929.

My father raised registered Jersey cows, which produce more butter fat in the cream. He was ahead of his time. He was self educated, as his father homesteaded the land, and he went only through three grades of school. He took extension courses, learned math, spoke and could write two languages, Dutch and English.

[Dad's] father emigrated from the Netherlands when he was three. His father left Holland because he lost his wealth (cattle) thru anthrax disease. He homesteaded the farm I was born on. My father took it over when his wife passed on. Grandpa lived to be 88. The location of the farm and my birthplace was in Central Lake Township, Antrim County in the NW part of the Lower Peninsula. It is an area of lakes and close to Lake Michigan and now is a golf playing destination.

In the spring of 1929 my father sold the farm having bought a general store in Ellsworth Michigan where I grew up. I did attend a one room rural school before we moved. In the fall of 1929 the great depression began. The move was born out of a desire of my father to make possible education for his five sons. We all worked in the store buying goods from farmers (cream - Eggs) and bartering them for groceries and dry goods.

Dad harvested ice in the winter and stored it to use in the summer, sold wallpaper and lots of fruit and vegetables for canning. He went into debt giving credit to people who had no

money for food. We boys all went to the local high school. We also worked for farmers in the summer to help with family finances.

I liked music and we always had a piano even on the farm. I was given piano lessons from five until I was a freshman in high school. At 16 I turned my musical attention to our church organ and played for services until I went into the Army Air Force.

I loved sports but we had only basketball and baseball to participate in. We all were good students. My oldest brother went to college when he graduated, to Western Michigan on his own. He lasted one semester and could not pay his second semester tuition. My second brother went to what was then the University of Grand Rapids also for a semester.

My memories of my growing up are one of gratitude for a loving family, always food and clothing, a good home with loving parents and brothers to play and work with - enough time to swim and play with all the work that was required. So a strong Christian example of my parents and attending my church.

The war broke out and one by one we all went into the service for a combined total of 17 years. The oldest brother landed in Normandy on D-Day in the second wave. The third brother was awarded the Bronze Star for saving the life of his Lieutenant in a mortar fight with the Germans. All survived.

Uncle Sam didn't wait long after my 18th birthday on June 8th, 1942 before he sent me greetings. But my dad appealed to the draft board, because three of his sons had already been called, and he needed help with the store, especially through summer and fall. So they postponed my call-up until April 1943.

I was in charge of a group of draftees taking the train from Bellaire (Michigan) to Ft. Custer for induction. Marvin Wynsma, my brother-in-law's nephew, and Lou Essenberg were in the group. Upon our arrival at Ft. Custer, we were inducted and had the usual medical shots, then outfitted with uniforms and lots of clothes and gear that none of us knew what to do with. After three days of orientation, in the early evening I boarded a troop train, not knowing where I was going. I fell asleep in my bunk and woke up somewhere in the Kentucky hills. It was a frosty morning, and as we traveled through the valleys, smoke from mountain homes was going straight up. I started a diary, but I never could find it after the war.

On the third morning when I awoke I knew I was in Florida, because I saw palm trees outside the train window. I was feeling pretty good about the scenery, but I still didn't know where the end of the line was. The train stopped outside of St.

Petersburg, Florida, at a place called "Tent City". We disembarked, and I was assigned a tent with three young men from Chicago. They were nice fellows.

On the way to our first mess, some soldiers who were in basic training alerted us not to eat the food at the mess tent. They said there had been an outbreak of spinal meningitis. I wondered if this was some kind of Army ruse. But it turned out to be true, as a Grand Rapids soldier and one of the founders of Amway, Jay Vanandel, was stricken, along with many others. Tent City was on a golf course, and with all the basic training and marching around, sand and dust were everywhere. Instead of eating at the mess tent, I and three others bought wrapped sandwiches, milk, and pop from the PX.

After two days of sandwiches, our group was marched to downtown St. Petersburg, to the ten story Princess Martha hotel, where I was placed on the 10th floor. There were four of us in a room. Basic training was taken in the baseball park down by the harbor, where the New York Yankees had just finished spring training. Like every soldier, we learned close order drill, took tests of every kind, and went on bivouac in the Florida back country. We had big parades with other trainees, who were housed in hotels and apartment complexes all over the city.

After six weeks of training, I was put on a train destined for Virginia Polytechnic Institute (VPI), in Blacksburg, VA, alone. There I was housed in a campus building used for the cadet program, and I attended college classes in the morning and had lots of recreation in the afternoon. I discovered I was in the ASTP, the Army Special Training Program. I didn't know what the result would be, but I knew I wasn't ready for a year of chemistry in three months, since I didn't have it in high school. In class I sat with a soldier who'd had two years of it at MIT. After a month, I requested and was granted a transfer back to the Air Force.

I shipped out in June of 1943 to Mitchell Air Force Base in Hempstead, New York for reassignment. I was at First Air Force headquarters, which control[ed] air space over the east coast. Eventually I was transferred to Hillsboro AFB in Providence, RI, where I was part of a small detachment running a message center of phones, FM radios, teletypes, and cryptography work. We were part of a retraining program for pilots coming back from Europe to learn the intricate aspects of the P-47 fighter plane. It was well-armed and had lots of fire power and range. The Germans hated the plane, because it was difficult to shoot down. I enjoyed my time in the east from July 1943 to September 1944.

Early in October of 1944 I and others in our group were shipped out to Seymour AFB in Goldsboro, NC, to form a P-47 fighter wing. I was assigned to the 1st Fighter Squadron of the

413th Fighter Group to train for overseas duty. We were transferred to Blumenthal AFB in Wilmington on November 9, 1944. We remained at Blumenthal AFB until April 7, 1945. During that period we received extensive training, readying us for overseas duty.

We embarked on the "USAT Kota Inten," a Dutch ship converted to a troop ship, with a crew of men from Dutch Indonesia. We departed at 1800 hours into Puget Sound and then the Pacific Ocean. Some of the troops were seasick before we left Puget Sound. Little did they know they were going to be on this ship for 31 days.

I had my first meal aboard a troop ship. It was terrible. Everything was steam-cooked. When my Sergeant told me they wanted volunteers for the officer's mess, I volunteered and spent the rest of the trip eating and drinking well. Best deal I ever had on K-P.

At night we had boxing events on the poop deck. We also had Sunday services on deck, at which I played an Army-issue pump organ. We often slept on the deck because of the heat.

On May 6th we stopped at Eniwetok, a small atoll in the Marshall Islands. Then, on May 12th, we stopped at Ulithi, a large atoll lagoon that could hold more than 350 ships. While there we dove off the rails into water for a swim, until we noticed toilet paper floating by. That ended our swimming. I saw part of the 5th naval fleet come into the lagoon with considerable damage to their decks and gun turrets from the Japanese kamikaze planes off the coast of Okinawa. Little did I know we were going to go to the same area.

As we disembarked from the ship, our soldiers were escorting [native] men, woman and children to the eastern part of the island. We were told they were sending them to Okinawa.

The first night on Ie Shima I heard rifle shots all night from the guards posted (the first time for that duty for most of them). The reason was the horses left by the natives were moving around and the guards were not sure what they were seeing or hearing and shot away.

I remember the monsoon. It seemed like it lasted forever. My tent mate and I just laid in our tent until it was over. The mess hall had only canned stew to offer. Our tents were saturated.

I was a message center chief and had three men with me who operated teletype and FM radios, connected to Wing headquarters, for inter-group info and orders. My message center was located by operational headquarters. In our limited spare time we played



softball until a quick, tropical shower would run us off the field.

Our P-47s were the first aircrafts equipped with wing tanks to fly over the main Japanese island of Honshu. One of our pilots was shot down over Shanghai and picked up in the harbor by the Chinese, who took him to a submarine. He showed up safe and sound a month later wearing a coolie hat and Chinese clothes. [Most likely Robert H. Allard, possibly George C. Fuller]

About a month or two after we came ashore I was coming to breakfast. I came upon four Japanese soldiers sitting in front of our squadron headquarters smoking cigarettes. They turned themselves in from hiding in the many caves on our side of the island. They probably ran out of food.

I heard some moonshiners in Okinawa were running... methanol in a still to make it palatable and flying it over in courier planes. The demand became too great and the process was shortened which made it too dangerous to drink. The episode... ..was sad indeed. I saw six or seven soldiers laid out at the island cemetery where Ernie Pyle was buried awaiting burial. I believe one was from our squadron. Some survived but were blinded from the effects.

As I remember Lloyd Vestal was in my squadron. He always presented himself as a gentlemen, well dressed and trim and somewhat reserved. I am sure he must have had an important career.

A B-24 bomber had to land on Ie Shima for some reason after the war was over. It probably could not take off again on our runways. I remember Seabees cutting in up in to pieces and dumping it into excavations where coral was removed.

For me, as a young, un-traveled kid, this whole experience was very educational. Being young, it seemed we never completely recognized the danger that was always around us. We had over 70 bombing runs at night against our little island. They always hit something, because the island was loaded with aircraft. I dug an air shelter trench, but when I was told the snakes liked to live in them, I gave it up. When an air raid came, I jumped out of my cot, hit the deck, and prayed and hoped for the best.

In the fall we were ordered to pack our gear for an invasion of the Japanese mainland. That was not good news. However, the Lord had other ideas. The atomic bomb came into the picture in August 1945, and, on August 12th, the Japanese accepted the terms of unconditional surrender. The terms called for a contingent of Japanese to fly down to the Philippines to General MacArthur's headquarters. The group flew into our airfield on Ie Shima, in a plane painted white with a green cross

on the fuselage. They were then transferred to a C-48 Constellation for the meeting in the Philippines. The Japanese accepted the surrender terms on August 15, 1945.

Unfortunately [I] was on duty that day at the message center although I saw the Japanese planes come in painted white with a green cross on the fuselage and tail. That was a historical moment. Major Bongs' squadron escorted them into Ie Shima.

When the war ended, everyone was adding up the points needed to go home. Meanwhile, I and four others got a pass to go to Tokyo. We hitchhiked on C-46 planes and rode first to Kyushu Island, where we were stuck for two days, because of the weather. Then we went on to Tokyo for four days. The people were exceedingly friendly, considering that everywhere I looked, fire bombing had caused complete destruction for miles. We stayed at the Maranouchi Hotel, across from the Imperial Palace, which remained undamaged. We ate seven-course meals and drank good sake beer. The street cars were working. We saw MacArthur and his big entourage come out of his headquarters in the Dai-Ichi building. The Japanese all bowed when he passed by. It was a great experience for a kid from Ellsworth, Michigan.

We hitchhiked our way back to Ie Shima, and then we were transferred over to central Okinawa, to Kadena AFB, to a Seabee encampment. Boy, did those guys have it good! I got on K-P and ate ice cream every time I could. They must have hauled that machine all the way from the states.

Before our discharge, we toured the island to the south, where the heavy fighting had occurred. Our troops' casualties were very heavy. You could see all the cemeteries built into the hillsides, where they were well protected. One of our generals, General Bruckner, was killed at the very end of the war.

On December 29, 1945, I climbed the ropes up into a troopship for the trip home. No submarines or bombers to worry about. I arrived in the port of San Pedro, which serves Los Angeles, on January 13, 1946, Upon landing, we were served a wonderful steak dinner with all the trimmings and ice cream by German prisoners of war. They all smiled and were friendly to us. I guess they were also glad that the war was over. Obviously, they were treated far better than the Japanese had treated our prisoners.

After a night's sleep - in a bed for a change - we boarded a troop train for the trip to Ft. Sheridan, IL, for discharge. We stopped in Albuquerque, and at the train station many Indian folk displayed their good on beautiful Navajo blankets. No money, no buy.

I was discharged at Ft. Sheridan, IL, on February 14, 1946 as a Corporal. I received \$19.35 travel pay, \$100.00 mustering out pay, and a few dollars of back pay. I declined a strong pitch to stay in the service.

It was quite an experience. I thank the Lord for my safe return. God bless the United States. I was proud to serve.

I spent the summer trying to put my thoughts together for the future. My two oldest brothers bought the store from my Dad who was tired of [receiving] the government stamps for everything he sold. My next oldest brother (the third one with the bronze star) and I decided to go to Calvin College, a college born out of our church denomination, started in the 1890's. The enrollment was about 350 and the fall of 1945 when we and other servicemen arrived it swelled to 1250. There was much confusion in schedules and some awfully new professors. I signed in for Business administration such as it was and my brother went into science.

I met my wife to be in the second semester in an elective I took "Music appreciation". Because the enrollment had spiraled so fast I was getting the same professor in too many classes. The curriculum was strong [in] liberal arts. I stayed two years and then transferred to a business college where my accounting classes were taught by practicing CPA's and business law by lawyers.

My wife-to-be graduated after my first year at Calvin. We married in 1948. She taught school while I finished my professional accounting program. When I finished college in 1950 I went to work for the treasurer of a transportation company. The division I worked for owned the equipment which we leased to the operating company. I was advanced in pay from a \$35 start to \$70 the first year.

A friend from the business college called and said there was an opening in a produce brokerage firm where he worked as the boss's son was drafted into the Korean War. I interviewed and the work appealed to me. The work was all on the phone and some teletype activity in representing fruit and vegetable growers from all over the US, and arranging sales to local distributors. Only bananas were not distributed. I stayed ten years and took a national sales job for one of the accounts we represented in Yuma and Phoenix Az. The hours were long, six days a week, selling as many as 25 carloads of head lettuce a day.

That work too was all by telephone except at shipping point many large users had a ground broker who represented there company. The company then bought a large operation in central California for summer sales. I had to stop and see if I wanted to be a nomad like the ground brokers who followed the crops. I

decided not to continue and approached my old firm for re-hiring me. They did, at more pay than when I left. The son came back from Korea and was going to succeed his father. He was not my kind of boss.

In February of 1964 I decided if I could do well for the previous company just maybe I could make my own way. I made the break and hung out my shingle. One of the other employees left with me which was from an operational standpoint a good thing. We were profitable the first month of operation thanks to some customers I had worked with for several years. We built the firm into six brokers and imported products from Mexico, South Africa and New Zealand. I continued with the firm until 1987 when I retired.

During the 70's and 80's my wife and I traveled extensively in almost 50 countries. Since third grade in school I always had a fascination of geography never dreaming I would visit so many places. We have lived in the winter in south Florida for 22 years. We have a son who took over part of the business (Washington Fruit), a daughter who is a school social worker, [and,] two special granddaughters both in education in Chicago. Our son joined our firm in 1969 after college and [my] partner's son came in 1972. We took in a third owner early on and hired one other young man who has stayed in the business. Big box companies bought up all our outlets and diminished the opportunities that I had in my working years.

I have been blessed with good health and still work out two to three times a week and play golf at my club which I have enjoyed for 32 years. We have our Florida condo for sale and will continue coming here if we have good health. We have a condo on Lake Michigan in Grand Haven which is our family gathering place and used by our family in the winter on weekends.

My life was like [that of] so many servicemen. How can you keep them down on the farm when they have been to 'Paree'. I believe that the GI bill for WWII veterans was a great investment for our nation. My oldest brother at the prime of his life gave 5 years to his country. He is my hero.