The Memoirs of Armand Charest Part III

Armand Charest in 2000

The Charest-Frenchette Family in America: A Success Story

Editors Note: Shortly before my father had his stroke which ultimately was fatal, I managed to convince him to write some stories and family history. I promised him I would get them at least published on a family website if he did. Well, with a lot of "encouragement" from myself and possibly my brother Howard, Dad did write some of the family stories. This is part III in a three part series.

I have taken the liberty of re-formatting Dad's writings to be suitable for this website. Otherwise, I have posted them as written. I may on occasion add some editorial comments of my own; these will be clearly marked when I do.

Ron Charest

Part III: Winding Down the War, and Afterwards Chapter 17

Rest, Relaxation, and Retraining

The division entered a period of rest and rehabilitation. New recruits filled the depleted ranks of the rifle companies; we received new clothing and weapon all line companies entered into extensive training, melding the new inexperienced soldiers with the veterans. So, at the ripe old age of nineteen, I was a veteran.

At the same time, in the summer of 1944, the army decided to rotate men back to the States who had accumulated a certain amount of points based on their time in the service and time overseas. The division had arrived in Australia in February of 1942. The surviving members had been overseas for over two years. Therefore, two men from each company were picked from a lottery and sent home each month. This process continued until the last original soldier departed in January of 1945, exactly three years after his arrival in the South Pacific.

The war picked up momentum at this time. Fresh divisions reached the theater and went into action in different areas. The First Cavalry Division, an amalgam of various cavalry regiments, cleaned up the Admiralty Islands. The New Zealanders and Australians dislodged the Japanese from islands in the Solomon's group and New Britain. Several divisions took over and moved up the New Guinea coast. The High Command then announced that the New Guinea campaign was over. We chuckled over that report.

The tough Japanese soldiers had only been ousted from their coastal bases and not entirely defeated. They merely retreated to the interior. Even though they were cut off from supplies and support from their country, they continued the fight. E Company was now stationed at the end of the line, so to speak. Ours was the last outpost this side of no-man's land. A high ridge marked the demarcation line broken only by a Japanese built road that cut through it and meandered to the other side of the island. This is where the serious re-training took place.

Patrols, made up of new men and veterans, went out every day into the interior and inevitably ran into enemy soldiers. We were under strict orders to bring in prisoners and we did. They were useful because they pointed out hiding places of other Japanese. There were sections of the road that turned our brains to jelly. I still remember a canyon that dipped downward into which the sun never penetrated. It was dark, gloomy, and ominous. We first reached it in late afternoon. The Lieutenant in charge called a halt and he and his Sergeant debated the point of moving on or staying put for the night. They decided to move on. Two scouts went ahead, slowly and warily. We had gone barely one hundred yards into the canyon when the scouts came back and reported the news that the gorge extended for a long distance and they were of the opinion that the patrol should turn back and spend the night at the entrance. The officer agreed. It was a lucky and wise decision. That night we were attacked and a vicious fight took place in which we suffered several casualties. From that time on, no patrol ventured through that canyon in late afternoon. The honor of being the first through Hell's Canyon fell to the next patrol because our Lieutenant decided to return to camp with the dead and wounded men.

The rest and rehabilitation period provided E Company with many light moments. For instance, one day the Southerners decided to do something about their age-old avocation—moonshining! To this day I have no idea where the boys acquired the materials for the still they built on our side of the ridge. All I remember was a strange odor that wafted over the area one bright and sunny day.

Sometimes the boys would get a bit feisty and they would decide to settle their century-old differences with the Northerners. So it was rather amusing to hear the boys from the South stand in the company street and invite the "Yankees to come out and settle this thing once and for all." A request from the company commander, himself a New Yorker, to get some sleep usually defused the situation. No one ever mentioned the incident as we all took part in the next patrol.

I must mention another comical incident before we move on.

One day the company commander received a call from the Air Corps supply base commander for some help in guarding the supplies. It seems that the previous watchmen had turned into "crooks" who stole widely and indiscriminately. So a call went out to the first squad, first platoon to get into gear and to prepare to move out that same afternoon along with its rations and equipment. Let me say a few things about rations.

The army classified rations by letter: “A” rations stood for the hot food served in regular camps and forts throughout the country; “B” rations indicated the hot food served overseas in regular camps; “C” rations indicated the food that the troops ate in the field if they had cooking facilities: that may include camp stoves or something called canned heat, a small can the size of a tuna fish can. A “C” ration can was the size roughly of a tomato can containing various and mysterious foods such as: spaghetti and meat balls made from unknown animals, meat loaf made in enemy countries, beef stew canned during the first world war; pork and beans, of course, that eventually gave away our positions to the Japanese.

The next ration was called, “K” for no reason that we could figure out. The box was about the size of a crackerjack box. It fit in very well in our wide pants or deep shirt pockets. The box held a small can of condensed food: bacon and eggs for breakfast, ham and cheese for lunch, unknown ingredients for dinner. It also had a pack of three cigarettes, coffee or lemonade, sugar, cookies and a chocolate bar Since I did not smoke, I was a very popular figure as most smokers tried to be nice to me. The next ration was called, “D”, a large chunk of chocolate that contained thousands of calories. Fortunately, it was used only in an emergency. The best field rations were called 10-in-one rations that came in a large box. Here again the designation baffled us. A squad of men contained twelve men, so we had to ration the rations. Why no one ever told the packing companies about the twelve men was another unexplained and unexplainable mystery.

So we reached the air corps supply base in late afternoon and we proceeded to set up quarters in two large tents.

The next morning we moved to our designated guard stations. Then we looked around and made some startling discoveries. The people ate like bloody millionaires. We gaped at the boxes of fruit cocktail, canned pure chicken, first- class beef stew, real eggs. No less startling were the warehouses full of clothing and shoes! We took one look at our rations, another at the air corps rations. We dug holes and the Cs disappeared. We proceeded to gorge ourselves on the fruit cans and boned chicken. All of us acquired new clothes and shoes. It was a great life—for a week. Then we got the bad news: we were going home.

The First Sergeant clued us in upon our return. It seems that the Colonel who had made the original demand called up and demanded that E Company take back the crooks who had replaced the other crooks. To his great credit our company commander reminded the Colonel that these same crooks had made it possible for the Air Corps to be here on this island. He also wanted to know where the same man was at the time of the fighting. The man simply hung up the phone. But as we

disembarked from the truck, every man was ten pounds heavier, wore new clothes and also each man had ten shirts, ten pairs of pants and ten pairs of socks that made it difficult to walk. What made the whole episode worthwhile was the smile on the Captain's face.

I need to make two more comment about life on the islands. One concerns the movies. Each company could borrow movie projectors from Special Services. The problem was that the same movies went from company to company. Therefore, they wore out. It seems that every time we had movie night, two things happened: the film broke sometime during the showing and it rained, not your ordinary summer rain but usually a downpour. So we sat on coconut logs getting soaked and stomping our feet and yelling while waiting for the projectionist to repair the film.

The other event occurred one day as the first platoon headed out for a regular three day patrol in which we checked for enemy activity, sometimes engaged in a fight and sometimes brought back prisoners. In early afternoon of the first day the first scout reported a strange thing. He had come across a waterfall where none had previously existed. Sure enough there it was, a beautiful falls tumbling down into a large reservoir. The Sergeant took one look and declared the war over for two days. We had lemon powder and sugar in our rations so we got sick on lemonade. The water was cool and refreshing.

So we spent two days splashing around in the pool and getting high on lemonade. When we returned to camp, we passed the word along to the other men about the waterfalls. Strangely enough no one, including ourselves, ever found it To this day I wonder if I dreamed the whole thing up or did the river dry up in some ways.

Our rest period ended when we received the news: we were headed for The Philippines. In late 1944 we went north to renew our war.

Websites About Present Day Biak Island:

Biak

A database of photographs, descriptions and locations of WWII wreckage remaining on Biak Island, Irian Jaya, Indonesia.

Chapter 18

Armand Goes to the Philippines…

In the meanwhile other Charest family members were participating, foremost among them being Louis George. Even though he was severely handicapped, he joined the Merchant Marine that was responsible for bringing supplies and men to all theaters of war. Without the help of the brave civilian sailors who sailed through waters dominated by German and Japanese submarines, we could never have won the war. Here's a salute to all of them.

Adrian Paquin joined me in New Guinea; Leo Forand landed in Europe; John Danese landed in North Africa; Lionel Hurteau went to North Africa.

The first island we hit was the large island of Mindoro, in the Central Philippines. Then we moved on to invade Mindanao and capture the city called Zamboanga, the second largest in the islands. It was my first and only taste of house-to-house fighting, the cruelest kind of war activity. Then followed a series of landings throughout the Southern islands: Basilan, Palawan, the Jolo archipelago are places that I remember most vividly. There occurred an incident on Palawan, the westernmost island that typified the cruelty of war.

Word reached headquarters of the 186th Regiment that the Japanese were holding a group of American and Filipino prisoners of war. The men hastily embarked on whatever ships were available. Even after a quick journey, the men were too late. Upon hearing of the impending rescue, the enemy high command ordered the prisoners to their barracks, whereupon the doors were locked and the buildings set on fire. Anyone who tried to escape was shot dead. There was no trial after the war to punish the guilty. Why, who knows?

We crossed the Bay and moved into the central part of the large island, in those days still largely uninhabited. I remember exploring the rivers as passengers on Amphibious Engineer boats and feeling that I was back in time. Most of the military

actions concerned hills, climbing them while chasing away enemy soldiers. One particular hill has remained in my memory. It was somewhere on the Zamboanga peninsula. The Air corps (again) said it needed the area air base. All air bases were important, especially those the Air Corps boys and pilots did not attack on the ground.

We hit this particular hill overlooking the base at sun-up. The first and second platoons went up side by side with the third platoon in reserve. I was a machine gunner by then, so my main job was to give covering fire. It meant that I would fire live ammunition a few feet above the troops' heads that had the hoped— for effect of keeping the enemy soldiers from hitting our own. Every time I received a certain signal I would then raise my sights, thus keeping my fire ahead of the attacking troops. At one point, perhaps because I was inattentive, the company commander screamed at me; "Frenchy, (as I was affectionately known) raise those blankety sights, you blankety dummy. You are in danger of hitting your own men."

Eventually, the men reached the top, dislodging the enemy soldiers. I then moved my gun to the hilltop where I concentrated on protecting the boys. In some cases the Japanese would retire to the reverse side of the hill and would continue the attack by using hand grenades and mortars. It is now time to talk about that.

The Japanese hand grenade was shaped differently than ours. It had a pineapple shape, like ours but with a long neck. American grenades were stable unless the soldier pulled a pin that activated the powder train. When that occurred, the grenade exploded 4.5 seconds after the soldier threw it. On the other hand the Japanese grenade had a long neck and it was necessary for the soldier to hit the tip of the neck against a solid object like a rock or his helmet. We were awake to that sound. When we heard it, someone would yell: "grenade". We would take appropriate action to avoid it as it came hurtling toward us.

Due to the Japanese method of training, Japanese military personnel were told not to surrender because the American soldiers were under orders to kill prisoners and civilians. That belief forced thousands of Japanese women to throw their babies and themselves over cliffs into the ocean. That happened on the islands of Saipan and Okinawa. In our situation sometimes when we heard the knocking noise we would see bits of belt buckles, shoes or helmets fly into the air as Japanese soldiers, who felt themselves trapped, would commit suicide by holding their grenades against their bodies.

We spent several months on Mindanao Island sometimes chasing, sometimes coming under fire, sometimes bringing back prisoners and American casualties and sometimes running into problems with Muslim guerrillas also called the Moros, the same people causing agonies to the present Filipino government. A funny incident happened that needs retelling. The Filipinos were crazy about American cigarettes. Since I did not smoke I exchanged my smokes for chickens.

One time I had a dozen chickens in my possession. I did not know how to hold them. So, I hit on the brilliant idea of tying them to the machine gun tripod. All night long the animals chipped and chirped, thus keeping the whole company on full alert. At daybreak came the fateful order from the company commander for that blankety-blank Frenchy to get rid of the blankety-blank chickens or else. We had fried chickens for several days!!!

Along with the local liquor concoction called Tuba, a vile smelling drink imbibed through a long bamboo pole. In the month of July, we got word to return to Zamboanga. We were not told the reason but we knew there was only one target left to hit: Japan itself.

We were right in our assumptions. That's exactly what we were told. So once again we went into training with new recruits, new weapons and new techniques. There was one major difference. We would train and maneuver with other large bodies of men. To us that meant a major offensive somewhere on open land and no more jungle warfare.

At this time there had been some deep changes in the company roster, all the original National Guardsmen had gone home. It saddened me as well as delighted me that the old boys had survived and were going home for a well- deserved discharge. In the month of August there occurred two events of great importance: I became twenty-one; we dropped the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The end of the war was in sight. We were relieved that we possibly would not invade Japan in an unfriendly way. On August 14th, the Japanese high command threw in the towel: the war was over.

Chapter 19

Armand Goes to Japan as Part of the US Occupation Forces…

In the beginning of September we embarked on transports bound for Japan. It was a perilous journey since it was also typhoon season. Things moved along peacefully until we entered Japanese waters. Our destination, the naval base of Kure, was located at the southern tip of the main island, Honshu. It was also the location of the remnants of the Japanese fleet that at one time was the world's largest after Great Britain and the United States. The surrender terms obligated Japan to bring its remaining ships to Kure. The way to the base lay through a narrow channel that meandered between rocky islands. Sure enough the tail end of a typhoon hit us just as we entered the narrows. The ship reared and plunged into the deep troughs, rolled sideways, dipped and twisted, rocked and rolled. We were told, needlessly it seemed to us, not to bother the sailors (as if we would). Most of us were too sick to do or say anything. I was never so afraid in my life. How the naval crew brought the ship into port remains a mystery. My hat's off to them all!

Kure was a large city but we saw signs of war everywhere. I don't think I need to explain once more war's destructive fury. The 162nd Regiment had to move into Japanese Naval barracks, perhaps ten miles from the debarkation point. We saw no civilian the first day. Our march proceeded without incident. It was an eerie feeling that put us on edge. We certainly realized that there were just a few thousands of us and several million Japanese. We thought we were on a typical war movie set. Japanese policemen lined the streets with their backs to us as they faced the houses. The only sound was that of marching feet. We realized that we were making history since we were the first foreign soldiers to set foot in Japan. To their great credit the Japanese population accepted occupation with a brave face. A week later we were all mixing like a big family.

We were in the area for two reasons: to disarm the military, that is to find and destroy all weapons of war; to set up road blocks leading into Hiroshima, the site of the first atomic bomb drop.

During the last week of September we visited the city in truck parties. No one was allowed to stroll or to wander through the ruins. There were only a few buildings still standing, although the stairs had crumbled and the windows had disappeared. It was a desolate and sad, lonely place. Picture Los Angeles with only a few buildings with the rest of the city a heap of jumbled stones and burned out houses reaching from the ocean to the Santa Monica Mountains. I saw no living human

beings except ourselves. The bridges over the river had been cut in half. At the airfield on the city's outskirts the remains of countless airplanes were jumbled up in one corner of the field as if a giant hand had flung them there.

We observed from a distance the bomb's destructive power. Miles from the city center houses tilted away from the blast's effect; closer yet, roofs had disappeared and windows blown away. We saw very few people in the general area.

Our daily routine consisted of going on jeep patrols into the surrounding hills looking for concealed or emplaced weapons. We would bring in reports to headquarters. The weapons were then carted off to be destroyed.

We were surprised by the number of large storage tanks in every village into which the people dumped their nightly accumulation of human waste. The farmers would then scoop up the mess, by means of long-handled buckets, that would be used as fertilizers. Due to our lack of resistance to this farming method we were under orders not to eat local food.

In Kure lay a vast dry-dock loaded with midget submarines. The engineers dumped everything into it including the kitchen sink. The dock was eventually towed away and sunk in the ocean. There was also guard duty in town and at the checkpoints leading into the city. These were handled by the military police. We stepped aside and allowed the scientists and moralists to visit Hiroshima. Then they would write about the immorality of dropping the bomb. The act itself was not immoral. What made it immoral was the building of more and bigger bombs after the war.

The city buildings were filled with concrete bunkers, shaped like igloos with large openings through which soldiers could fire weapons, thus preventing other enemy soldiers from moving forward. We had two weapons to destroy bunkers. There was something called a "satchel charge", a large cumbersome device shaped like a suitcase filled with explosives that some unfortunate soldier carried as he sneaked around the back, climbed on top and heaved the case through the opening.

The other weapon was the flamethrower, a combustible fuel discharged through a nozzle attached to a flexible line. The fuel came from two tanks that a soldier carried on his back. Upon depressing the nozzle button, the two fuels in the tanks combined. The result: a tongue of fire shot out and traveled perhaps thirty feet that found its way into the bunker through the opening. The result was horrifying. There is no need to say more. I have always refused to contemplate the fall-out from an armed invasion. It would have been a bloodbath of infinite order.

The civilian population was rather friendly, even though it faced the possibility of mass starvation in the winter of 1945-46. The army did its best, distributing whatever food it could spare. It did not prevent the civilians from searching through our garbage dumps for food. It became so bad that the army stationed troops at the dumps. The idea being to limit the possibility of disease.

It took a while for us to make friends with Japanese families. I suppose that in their own ways the Japanese people gave us back our humanity by their acceptance of foreigners, even some who probably had killed their family members. I remember speaking to families who had relatives disappear in the South Pacific Islands. But we seldom if ever discussed the war and certainly not the dropping of the bomb. It was as if all of us were extremely tired of war and killing.

In October we moved up the Eastern Coast of Honshu; other companies went to the West Coast to continue the disarming of Japan. Believe me there were plenty of armaments to destroy. I still shiver today when I contemplate the U.S.Army's effort to fight the Japanese in their home territory. By early December the division was deactivated. At Christmas time we headed for home.

Chapter 20

On Justification for the Atomic Bomb…

Hiroshima lay in a basin similar to the city of Los Angeles with mountains on three sides. When the bomb exploded at 7,000 feet, the hot wind traveled at supersonic speed toward the mountains and then ricocheted to the city catching the population outside their bomb shelters. At this point it may be the right time to discuss the bomb, its effect, the reasons for using it and ramifications.

There have been countless books and articles written about that event. By and large most authors condemned the use of the bomb. Some writers objected for theological reasons, some for humanitarian reasons, and others for political reasons. Very

few writers discussed the war from the point of view of the men fighting the war, the men who died every day the war went on.

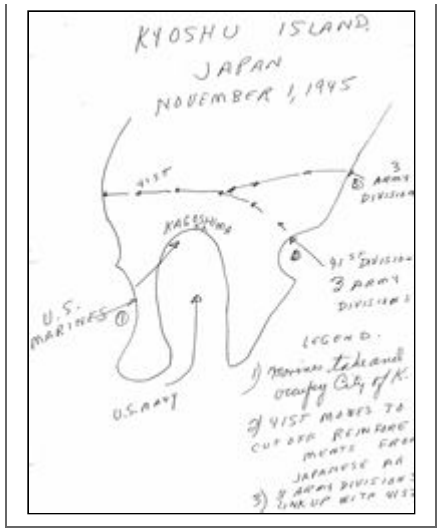
As late as July, 1945, the Allies meaning the United States, China, Great Britain, Australia, Holland and India were suffering a huge amount of casualties; some historians estimated as many as 7,500 per day. Japan was far from being defeated. True, its navy was reduced to a few ships and its air force consisted mainly of airplanes flown by suicide-prone pilots. But its army was still intact. Its strength on Japan proper was placed at two million men; in Korea, Formosa (Taiwan), China there were over two millions; in French Indo-China (Vietnam), Thailand and Burma, over 200,000; in Indonesia and The Philippines, over 300,000; in the by-passed Southern Pacific Islands well over 100,000 still roamed the jungles.

The U.S. Navy was losing one ship per week; the British and Indian armies were fighting in Burma; The Philippines and Okinawa had still not been pacified; fighting was still going on in the Solomon Islands, 1,500 miles from Japan. There's no way to estimate the Chinese casualties. In fact, Great Britain was already planning the invasion of Malaya in September 1945. So Japan still showed much fighting ability.

Some historians insist that Japan had already approached Russia with overtures of peace. That is correct. The terms included the right to keep conquered lands. The idea was never taken seriously by the Allies.

I leave it to Secretary of War, Henry Stimson, to further instruct the readers concerning the war's last days.

"As we understood the situation in July 1945, there was a very strong possibility that the Japanese Government might determine upon resistance to the end, in all areas of the Far East under its control. In such an event the Allies would be faced with the enormous task of destroying an armed force of five million men and five thousand suicide aircraft, belonging to a race that had already amply demonstrated its ability to fight literally to the death.



KYOSHU ISLAND,

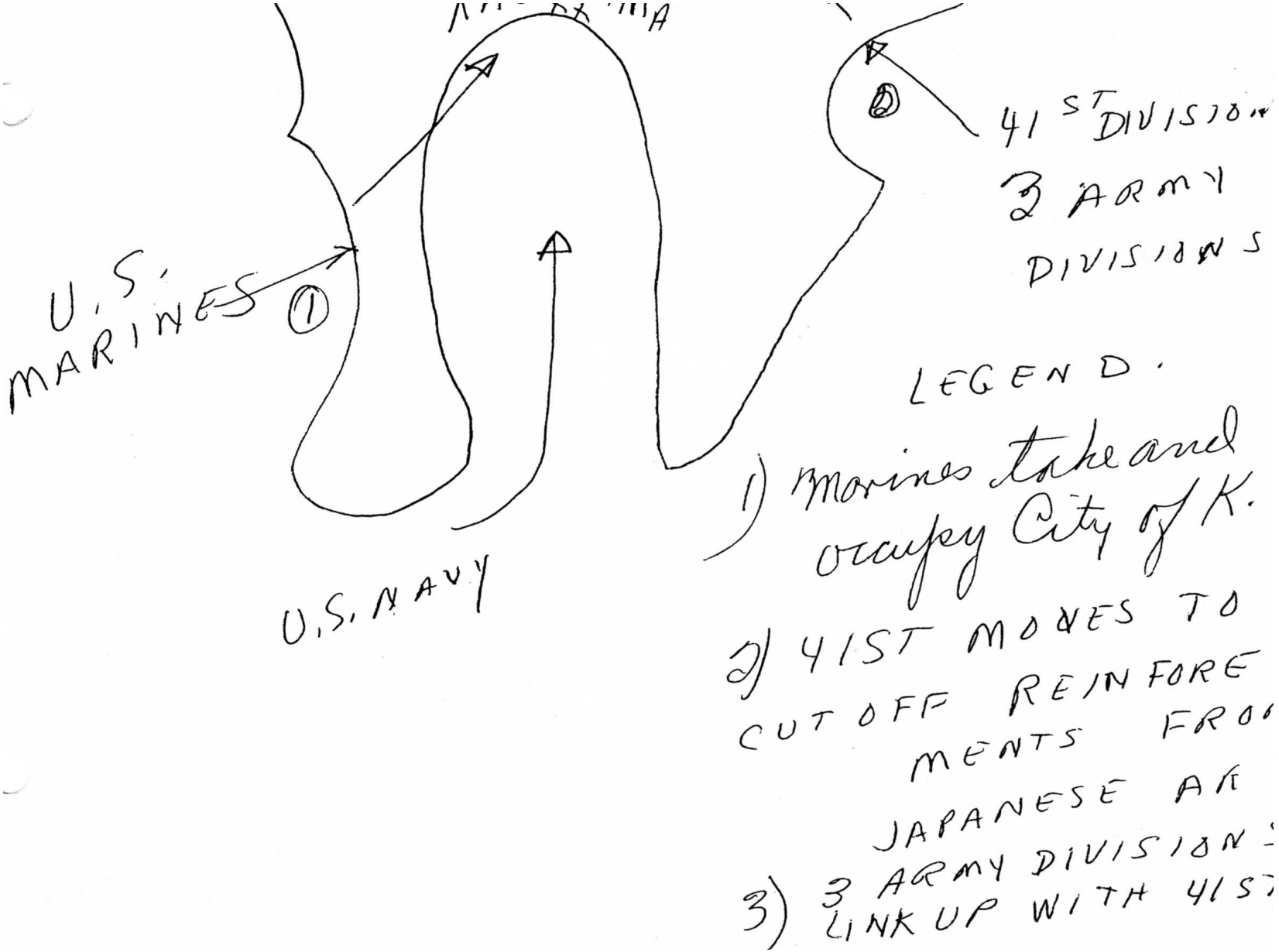
JAPAN

NOVEMBER 1, 1945

41ST

3 ARMY DIVISION

KAGOSHIMA



Kyoshu Island, Japan on November 1, 1945

The strategic plans of our armed forces for the defeat of Japan as they stood in July had been prepared without reliance upon the atomic bomb, which had not yet been tested in New Mexico. We were planning an intensified sea and air blockade and strategic air bombing through the summer and early Fall, to be followed on November 1 by an invasion of the southern

island of Kyushu. This would be followed in turn by an invasion of the main island of Honshu in the spring of 1946. The total U.S. military and naval force involved in this grand design was of the order of five million men.

Let me interrupt the narrative.

I have drawn a map of the invasion of Kyushu Island scheduled for November 1, 1945. The reader will notice that the Marines were given the dangerous job of taking the city, a major port and industrial center. The 4ls Division (mine) along with two others would have had the mission of cutting the peninsula off from reinforcements most likely rushed in by the Japanese army. It would have been a fight to the finish because the Japanese soldiers as well as the civilians would have fought to the last survivor. After so many years I still shudder at the thought of it! I have already described the prevalence of bunkers in buildings. I forgot to add that there existed larger bunkers on every major street intersection. The large Bay would then have become the staging area for the invasion of Honshu Island in the following spring. The area could easily have accommodated the entire American Pacific Fleet. The Secretary continued with his assessment:

“We estimated that if we should be forced to carry this plan to its conclusion, the major fighting would not end until the latter part of 1946, at the earliest. I was informed that such operations might be expected to cost over a million casualties to American forces alone. Additional large losses might be expected among our Allies and, of course, if our campaign were successful and if we could judge by previous experiences enemy casualties would be much larger than ours.

It was already clear in July that even before the invasion we should be able to inflict enormously severe damage on the Japanese homeland by the combined applications of conventional sea and air power. The critical question was whether this kind of action would induce surrender. It therefore became necessary to consider very carefully the probable state of mind of the enemy and end his will to resist.”

Stimson wrote a memorandum to the President on July 2, 1945 on the proposed program toward Japan.

1) The plans of operation up to and including the first landing have been authorized and the preparations for the operation are now actually going on;

2) There is reason to believe that the operation for the occupation of Japan after the landing may be very a very long, costly and arduous struggle on our part. The terrain, much of which I have visited several times, has left the impression on my memory of being one that would be susceptible to a last ditch defense such as been made on Iwo Jima and Okinawa. The home islands are very much larger than either of those two places.

3) If we once land on the main islands and begin a forceful occupation of Japan, we shall probably have cast the die of last ditch resistance. The Japanese are highly patriotic and certainly susceptible to calls for fanatical resistance to repel an invasion. Once started in actual invasion we shall in my opinion have to go through with an even more bitter fight than we had with Germany. We shall incur the losses incident to such a war and we shall have to leave the Japanese Islands even more thoroughly destroyed than was the case with Germany."

The Secretary goes on to question whether it would be worthwhile for the U.S. to give Japan a warning, thus giving it time to think about surrender. He then wonders if a demonstration of the bomb's destructive power would serve the same purpose. But since the country only had enough materials for two bombs, the decision was made to drop them on Hiroshima on August 6 and on Nagasaki on August 9. After much deliberation among the Japanese commanders and politicians failed to produce a decision, the Emperor settled matters by agreeing to peace terms. And that's how your grandpa lived to a ripe old age. May I say one final word on the subject?

President Truman was duty bound to use every weapon at his disposal to end the war and prevent more American casualties. He could not, in good conscience, ignore a weapon that could end hostilities. He had to use it. It was not the dropping of the bomb that was immoral, it was what happened after the war when the leading powers, with the help of scientists of all nations, continued to develop more dangerous weapons such as the hydrogen bomb and intercontinental missiles some of which carried as many as ten warheads, capable of hitting ten different targets and obliterating every one of them. When will the human race ever destroy its nuclear arsenals? I don't know but I pray and hope that future generations become wiser than the previous generations and eradicate them once and for all, before the weapons eradicate the human race!

I hope and pray that every Charest child studies and remembers this story. Grandpa possibly participated in the last major war on this suffering planet. I feel at times that the sacrifices and lives we lost were in vain, especially when I perceive that

the world's leaders are still uncaring and corrupt, that the munitions makers and bankers still profit off the misery of the working classes. Then I think of all my wonderful family members, children, grandchildren and great- grandchildren. I smile and I realize that there is my reward!

Chapter 21

Armand Comes Home From the War…and His parting Words

We all returned from the war and settled down raising families. There was a big and warm welcome party for me. I had been gone for two long years. I still remember the voyage home in a big lumbering navy transport. We docked in San Francisco with a brass band on the pier and ladies from the Salvation Army handing out coffee and donuts. We proceeded to camp aboard a ferry through the bay with another big band on board. The first meal at midnight consisted of steak along with all the milk we could drink; it was the first taste of milk in two years! We traveled to Mass. in a special train to be discharged. Mine came on January 20, 1946. The war was really over.

Alphonse Charest died in January 1945; Emilie Charest followed him in October 1957. Some children of the next generation followed us into the service: Roger Forbes served in Germany; two of Theresa's boys served in the Marines. My oldest son, Ronald, served in the navy for 22 years retiring as a Senior Chief, the top rank among enlisted personnel. A son-in-law Lazslo Fodor served in the army in Germany. The oldest of the nine Charest children died in 1994. At this time the remaining eight are still in relatively good health. Some of the grandchildren have married and are raising families of their own. And life goes on, one generation following another. I have placed our ancestors on a family tree, hoping that those who follow think of them once in a while.

In 1954 I met Miss Martha Wilkens in New York, the only child of hardworking German immigrants, at a dance in the local YMCA of all places. We had four great children and twenty years of a good marriage. I had moved to the New York area in

early 1951 to search for work. I intended to pick up a few dollars and then to move on to Calif. As it turned out I stayed for 25 years.

I retired in 1987 and I then toured to country for four months. I saw beautiful scenery and then I met Joe the Greek. I had heard while overseas that a shadowy figure somewhere in the division had the moonshine (again) concession. He sold the stuff at $5.00 per gallon. Nobody really knew who he was. On my trip I happened to have been in Western Montana on Labor Day weekend. I noticed a sign in the local motel advertising the meeting of the 41 St Division survivors. I took what was possibly the last available room in town. As stepped out of my room I encountered an ex-soldier. You guessed it. It was Joe the Greek!!! We had many laughs during those few days. One night got drunk on liquor and old stories. I looked for men of E Company. None showed up. It was the final chapter and the last roundup.

It has been a generally good life for the Charest family. Tragedies have been few and far between. We were all blessed with good genes from Alphonse and Emilie. May the good times roll on for all of us!

Epilogue:

It is now time to speak to my children, my grandchildren and all other beautiful children who will succeed them.

I end the Charest family history with a few thoughts for its descendants. You must become more civilized than the previous generations, as all generations should do. That means working for peace, striving for understanding between nations, cultures and religions. You must abolish wars. If you intend to live Christian lives, then live them m practice, not only in beliefs. No one has the right to take another’s life, not even the state. The real evils are ignorance, the absence of civil rights, the lack of educational opportunities, the abuse of the working class by employers and governments alike, a corrosive weapons-building industry that keeps the world in turmoil, that makes it possible for ambitious politicians to acquire those weapons at bargain rates to subvert and overthrow governments, thus preventing those same governments from devoting resources to benefit all their people. It is a sad thing to say but our own government is the world’s biggest weapon supplier.

Future generations must reverse that situation if they want to feel civilized. The Constitution must be preserved and strengthened, especially the First and 14th amendments. To deny rights to someone because others do no agree with. that someone is to run the risk of denying those rights to everyone at some time or other. My descendants should heed the words of a Roman poet by the name of Virgil who wrote in the First Century BC: "The majestic roll of circling centuries begins anew; justice returns with a new breed on men from heaven and the iron age shall cease, the golden age arise and wars will be no more."

I wish all my descendants good health, good fortune and good lives!

November, 2001
Armand Charest
Armand Charest

Editors Note: Armand was still active and healthy until late August 2002. Then one morning he fell in the lobby of the senior citizens home where he was living in Costa Mesa, California. There was a subsequent series of cascading events, and a week later he suffered a stroke that left him paralyzed on his left side. He recovered somewhat, but was confined to a wheelchair and required constant medical care. His middle son Howard and Howard's wife Pam, daughter Katie, took care of him in their home in Whittier, California for the next year.

Armand's health continued to deteriorate during the year, and by September 2003 he needed to be in a nursing home with 24 hour care. During this year all of his children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren were able to come out for a visit. He lost his last battle and passed away the evening of February 14, 2004. He was buried as per his wishes in a Military Cemetery in Riverside, California, with full military honors. I received his flag.

Armand, at the age of 79, was only the second of the nine children of Alphonse and Emilie Charest to pass on.

Index:

- The Memoirs of Armand Charest Part II
- The Memoirs of Armand Charest Part III

Related Posts

Eyewitness to 1984, Part Two : Part two of a two-part story of Armand's adventures visiting and performing relief work in Albania.
A Lifetime Of War : Reminiscing on the fact that the United States has been in at least one war during my entire lifetime.
It's The Cows : A reflection on the real cause of global climate change.