

War Stories and More in the Age of the Internet

By MAYNARD JOHNSON

I don't generally do much to observe Veterans Day anymore. This year I managed to stick a half dozen small flags in the wife's flowerpots outside, as a sort of tribute to Gary and Hank and Ginzo and all the rest of them. I liked it better when it was called Armistice Day, but that was years ago, before World War II. At that time everything in the United States would stop at 11 o'clock on the 11th day of the 11th month — the people, the vehicles, the factory machinery. In the school classrooms, we kids would bow our heads and be quiet for a minute, and the teachers would heave a sigh of relief at the silence.

It was a different time, I guess. There was a common denominator of patriotism among all our people, and an overall feeling of pride in our country. We had presidents in those days that we didn't have to feel ashamed of. But things change, don't they?

Now, after World War II, and Korea, and Vietnam, and the Persian Gulf, etc., it has become simply too overwhelming to remember all the wars, all the veterans, all the dead. You must understand that it's not because I don't *want* to remember; it's more because I can't seem to forget. For me, it's like every day of the year is Memorial Day or Veterans Day. And sometimes even when would like to ignore the events of some 50 years ago, which is most of the time, it seem that I'm not going to be allowed to — at least, not in this age of the Internet. So now, two days after Veterans Day, I find myself sitting here in front of the computer, staring at an e-mail printout, and remembering all the little bits and pieces of a half-century ago.

I guess it's my own fault for owning a computer, and for always wanting to know a little something extra, and maybe even for showing off from time to time.

And especially for getting on the Internet in the first place.

Now, if you have never surfed the Internet, probably the best way to think of it

is to envision a huge black hole in outer space that is constantly sucking in all the knowledge ever compiled by the human race. It lies there like a limitless electronic library, just waiting to be tapped by anyone who happens to have access to the proper gadgetry, and people with enquiring minds just love to surf it to see what they can learn. There are bulletin boards, newsgroups, chat rooms and all kinds of good stuff that a surfer can stick one's nose into. There is also, I'm told, pornography on the Internet. I haven't found any myself, but I'm sure it's there because pornography seems to be what we do best in this country.

Anyway, one of the 'net's larger "bulletin boards" (which is merely a cute name for an electronic post office) is for anything that has to do with World War II. Here you can leave a note for a friend, ask a question of the group, read a memo from someone. From time to time I have made various comments, and have gotten some good answers, and acquired some very great knowledge that couldn't be found in books. If you are interested in the workings of depth-charges, or the parabola of an artillery shell, this is the place to ask. It is a good source of technical data and in-depth history of various battles, and is used extensively by scholars and historians. It seems to be used mostly by younger people who are not intimidated by the world of computers.

On the Internet, by its very nature, all interaction is on a very anonymous basis. We don't really want to know the other guy all that intimately; we only want to pick his brains. But when we do send a message out there into the black hole, our electronic address is automatically posted. This, you see, makes it easy for respondents to flash back an answer.

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So I was, as you can imagine, more than surprised to find an e-mail note posted to me from a total stranger saying, "Hello, Mr. Johnson. I saw your name on a list of troopship passengers and thought I'd drop you a note." He went on to say how his father had been in my army division, and what did I know, and how did I come to know it, and did I know his father, and two more feet of questions. My big question was: How did my name get on a list of GIs on a troopship, and what is it doing cropping up 53 years later? On the Internet, yet.

I e-mailed back to this interloper and got the address of the website that contained all this data about my ship. When I brought the webpage up on the screen it was, sure enough, a listing of troopships from WWII, and the ships were listed chronologically by the sailing date of the vessel. Now, as we had sailed from Newport News, Va., on Jan. 1, 1944, it wasn't too difficult to find the ship. There it was at the top of the list for 1944, along with my own name and Army outfit, and the name of the ship, which I had not known before.

By clicking the mouse pointer over the word "more" I brought up all the sentences I had so laboriously written for the War College at Carlisle, Pa., some thousand years ago! Words that I thought had long been relegated to some dusty bin in a cellar somewhere, out of sight and mind. Words that I was sure when I wrote them would never come back to haunt me.

It all came about because years ago the War College had asked me to complete a questionnaire about my war years, and I said sure, why not? Two years later I was still working on it! Finally I sent the whole thick package, with my notes and abstracts, back to the War College. I thanked them for the privilege, and put the whole episode out of my mind.

And now, because of the Internet and my own little conceits, here was the whole era popping up again, like a flea-cursed dog that can't lie still for scratching! I couldn't help it — I stared at the paper in my hand. "We were on a converted British passenger liner, and we sailed alone, not in convoy or with any escort." Jan. 1, 1944! "The crossing took about four days." My memory, trustworthy in most things, was at fault here. Someone had noted that it was *HMS Andes*, and the ship actually reached Casablanca on Jan. 9, so somewhere along the line I seem to have lost four days.

I checked a little further into 1945 for the return trip to the States on a U.S. Navy hospital ship, and it was there, having sailed from Marina di Pisa, Italy, bound for the Philippines, in "early August." Here the notes become a bit more terse, almost as though I was anxious to get it all over and done with.

"Embarked from Marina di Pisa, Italy. Crossed Med to Gibraltar. Hiroshima bombed. Sailed from Gibraltar. Nagasaki bombed. Ship ordered to New York. Vacationing on Jersey coast by 8/15."

So, for all future historians of WWII, there it is in the proverbial nutshell. The summation of VJ-Day, reduced to its absolute minimum!

The old bones used to rattle by themselves; only I could hear them. Now, it seems, they are banging out all over the Internet, and anyone who has a mouse and a modem can get into my head. God knows what else is in there! I certainly don't intend to look anymore. Not me!

Well, maybe just a peek!
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