MY SAIPAN DIARY

by

CARROLL CLOAR

By a remarkable coincidence, one week after reading John Ciardi's *Saipan Diary* (published posthumously, 1988), I came across my own diary in a box of odds and ends. Ciardi and I were in the same squadron but we never met. He was a gunner in a bomber crew and I was a groundling. I had started out to be a flier myself. At basic training in Shepherd Field, Texas, I took all the tests, mental and physical, and I thought I would probably be an instructor, but "No," my interviewer said, "You passed the physical. You're going to fly." (I shudder now to think that I was actually thrilled with the idea of flying with a bomber crew.) I was sent to radio school in Chicago and, if I had finished the course, I would have been in the first wave of B17's over Europe. (That was dangerous work). However, I was transferred to Intelligence School because I spoke Spanish. Speaking Spanish probably saved my life.

When I finished the course Spain definitely was not coming into the war and I was not needed either as an interpreter for friendly soldiers or as an interrogator of prisoners. I was shipped out to an infantry division and spent some time in an anti-tank platoon. Finally I managed to get transferred back to the Army
Air Corps. I finished radio school this time and took a postgraduate course for B29s. I was sent to Lincoln, Nebraska, for assignment and had another physical, which I failed. I was declared underweight. I was tough and wiry, a semi-pro ball player, but the Air Corps weight requirements varied according to height, weight, and age, and I had aged another year since my first physical. Being 30 years old, 5 ft. 8, and 135 pounds probably saved my life (I would have been in the first wave over Japan and that was dangerous work).

John Ciardi was eventually grounded himself, for what he called "Literary Reasons." Most of his crew mates were killed.

Dec. 10, 1944, Saipan

I arrived at Saipan on or about Nov. 19, having omitted Nov. 18 enroute. On the way we stopped off at Oahu, Johnston Island, and Kwajalien. I liked Saipan right away. It is tropical in vegetation but not too much as to climate. The heat is moderate and there is always a breeze, like in Walker Field, Kansas, but not as unpleasant.

There was some bloody fighting here and battle scars are all about—burned-out tanks, shattered pill boxes, shells, Japanese guns, etc. Garopan and Charan Kanoa are rubble but at least one Shinto shrine is still standing. Some 63,000 Japs have been killed or captured on Saipan, mostly killed. This includes about 5000 mopped up in recent weeks.

There are quite a few Chamorros and Kanakas remaining on the island. Squatting in their fields they give the landscape an
appearance not unlike Japan itself. These people are amiable and
unselfconscious. They hardly notice passersby and they bathe
themselves al fresco. They are modest enough, however, to turn
their backs to the road.

I had only been here a few days when we had a visit of the
little sons of heaven. They came in the night and were on their
way again before I even knew what was happening. I was disappointed
to have missed it, but I didn't have long to wait. The next day I
had just finished chow and was back in my tent when I heard some-
thing I thought was thunder. I stepped outside to see what was
happening and two Zeroes flew over my head. They were so low I
could easily see the red balls on their wings. I hit the ground
fast and watched them bank around for another go at the runway.
Then Rufus Brown and I decided to head for the woods. We dashed
down the squadron street and as we entered the wooded area I could
hear slugs hitting the limbs above us. We hit the ground again and
finally I crawled into a shallow fox hole with another fellow. I
looked out and saw two more planes winging in over the ocean, very
close to the water. Just then all the guns on the island opened
up and the sound was like hell on earth. Then, for the first time,
I was really scared. I could only think of a bullet going through
my head and I tried to bury it in the ground (I had not brought my
helmet).

Presently a Jap crashed about 50 yards away. The plane burned
quickly, but the pilot was thrown clear. After things quieted
down I got a chance to see him. First I saw a head, with the face
sliced off. Then someone found a leg in a boot. Then we found the
torso. The Jap had a tiny hand and looked like a child—but not quite human.

Up the hill from our squadron is a black unit. They are a labor squadron but they have anti-aircraft. They shot down 5 planes.

Dec. 13, 1944

The other night we were entertained by the Chamorros and Kanakas. They are friendly and gracious people but it is obvious that they are learning rapidly from us. When they arrived almost all of them were smoking or chewing gum. They smoked very ostentatiously, as one might wear a new pair of shoes. The elders were barefooted, but the younger ones wore shoes of all descriptions. Some had clumsy brogans, others sported split-toed Japanese shoes. In fact, the group as a whole gave the impression of being overdressed. All of the women and most of the men put their grass skirts on over their print dresses or blue jeans.

In spite of the discrepancies in costumes, and in spite of the fact that one of their number insisted on accompanying them with a harmonica, the dances and chants were really delightful.

The multi-lingual announcer described the first dance as a Chamorro "women and men dance...The next coming dance will be a Kanaka marching dance," he announced for the second number. This was a dance by twenty warriors and I was amused to hear how much English had been mixed in with their ritual. From time to time the caller shouted, "One, two, three, zlinta." Another hollered,
"Left right, left right," but he always put his right foot down on the word "left."

After each number the G.I.'s applauded and whistled, as they always applaud and whistle at all flesh and blood entertainers.

Afterwards, the Chamorros remained for the movie. In the short subject there were three men who played harmonicas. The Chamorros, who seem to be fascinated with harmonicas, applauded and whistled like mad. And every time there was something in the picture they understood well enough to be amused, they applauded.

Dec. 26, 1944

The second anniversary of my entry into the army finds me on K.P. This rather points up the futility of my army career to date. In view of all that has happened to me, it is appropriate to the occasion that I be on K. P. Anyway, "There are gains for all our losses," as Witter Bynner, or Colly Sibber, or some such poet said. Today I saw all the squadron face to face for the first time. They didn't take very well to the kraut, except Schultz, who did so merely to assert his Germanness (you could get away with that in this theatre of operations). The spinach almost went begging, but one can read a lot of character just in the way a person refuses spinach. Schultz's sudden decision to take a double portion of kraut was more revealing than he ever dreamed. I am sure he doesn't really like kraut that well.

The faces of the squadron are more interesting than I had realized. There is a lot of humor, considerable cunning and intelligence, a modicum of greed and gluttony, and less stupidity than I might have thought.
Yesterday started off dull but became very exciting. It was
dull because I had only a tiny portion of gin concealed in a canteen
cup of grapefruit juice—my first salty dog.

The excitement started when the alert sounded and I had to
grab my gas mask and helmet and roll off my cot into my foxhole,
which is tent side. The Japs came in under the radar and they were
upon us before we knew it. They put on quite a show. There was a
lot of ack-ack and tracers, and once, during a lull, a Betty came
zooming in, laid her egg and flew off over our heads without being
fired upon. The explosion was terrific and lit up the sky. This
was followed by the usual heavy black smoke.

Jan. 8, 1945

In a place like this one's hearing is sharpened. You are always
listening. Even asleep, you sleep lightly, because you are listening.
All kinds of sounds are picked up and quickly analyzed—the backfire
of a truck, the motor straining up a hill that sounds like the
beginning of the air raid siren. Dusting a blanket gives a soft
popping like distant ack-ack. Tapping on the mike of the P.A.
system for testing amplifies into a sound like the crackly pop of
20Mms. Then there are times when the ack-ack actually goes off and
you have to judge from the calmness of the rhythm whether they're
practicing or not. Ack-ack in earnest has an excited sound. At
12 o'clock every day the siren goes off and every man jack takes
a quick look at his watch.
March 13, 1945

It's getting to be less and less excitement and more and more work on this coral heap (I have just had an unpleasant experience with a jackhammer). The other night we had a practice alert. The siren blew and the lights went out. Everybody stood around and reminisced about the air raids we used to have. Nobody said as much, but it was obvious that we all wished it was a real air raid. When we had air raids there was excitement and something to talk about. People were closer, more contented by virtue of being less bored, and there was less C. S.

So that is, more or less, the situation here on Saipan. Of course, we have our rumors to divert us--That we are moving to: The Bonins, The Philippines, Guam, The United States, etc.

March 28, 1945

Work has increased and time off is at a minimum. About my only diversion is two-bit poker, since the bomber command banned painting pin-up girls on the planes. The first of the month I plan to try to get drunk on beer. This month I haven't drunk any because I traded my ration for a quart of white lacquer (Don't ever try to paint nudes or portraits with lacquer. It won't thin, even with 100 octane gasoline).

Night before last we heard a good rumor. The war in Europe had ended. Our rejoicing was short lived but it made me realize that the war over there--that other war--could end any day now.
May 8, 1945

It has been rumored for days, and last night the news seeped through to us. We heard an exclamation, "Quiet everyone," from a nearby tent where a radio was crackling. We strained to hear the news but never did quite get it clearly although it ran like a ripple through the area. A far off loud speaker began to blare, then a nearer one. Still we couldn't understand it but we all knew it couldn't be anything else. We waited for our own announcement, but our C. O. vacillated, fearing to make a false report.

At breakfast time it was being quietly passed from one to another. No one was sure, everyone was calm, but there was little doubt in anyone's mind but that this time, for sure, it was over. Germany had finally surrendered, and the news came as a deadening anti-climax for all of us.

Aug. 15

The first person I heard speak of the Japanese surrender offer was Pvt. Giura. We were playing poker at the Enlisted Men's Club--Pope, Pappy, Bianci, Trivoli, Goshlak and I--and we thought he said the Japs would surrender if they could keep the empire, and we were not impressed. Several minutes later we realized that he was saying "Emperor" and the full impact of the idea hit us. Here for the first time peace seemed a plausible reality. There was no shouting, but faces began to beam, and excited conjecture burst forth.

A little later the news was broadcast again and Braun rushed over from the mess hall to tell us. He was bubbling over and his enthusiasm was contagious. Still there was no shouting or
shooting—everyone had been caught cold sober. I wanted to holler, but I was self conscious, as was everyone else. I headed for my tent, and I walked swiftly and unseeing and crashed into trash barrels twice.

Then came the days of sweating it out. Another mission went out and came back. Finally, today the news came through. It began to filter through the switchboard where I was working around 9 o'clock this morning, and the siren went off and everybody began to call in. It is hard to realize that the long, hideous struggle is over.