

From Boots to Iwo Jima

A MARINE CORPSMAN'S STORY IN LETTERS TO
HIS WIFE 1943-1945

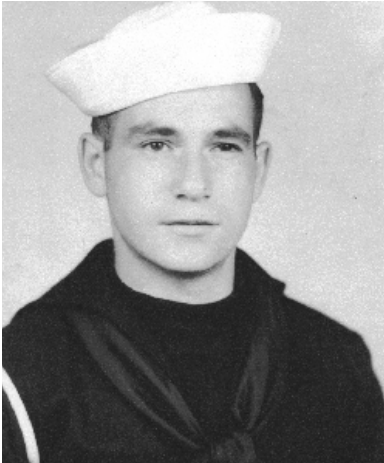
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Corpsman 1st Class

3d Division, 21st Marines, 3d Battalion

Purple Heart: Guam

Presidential Citation: Iwo Jima



*From Boots to Iwo Jima:
A Marine Corpsman's Story in Letters to his Wife 1943-1945*

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It's very important to me that you believe everything exactly as I tell it to you, even if it is told in, what I like to think, a somewhat humorous manner. Because I tell you about mud after heavy rains in one letter doesn't mean I can't be eating marmalade and peanuts in the next or even the same letter . . . Please hurry and answer that you'll believe, exactly, everything I tell you; I've been trying so hard to give you an accurate picture of my life down here – and that goes for my previous letters written to you and those to follow!

To our grandson,

Jonathan

Preface

I received my “Greetings” in September 1943. The draft board wanted to see me and decided the service needed me more than the Ira Bushey shipyard. I went into the medical office for my physical and finished up with flying colors, including the psychiatric testing which, in my case, consisted of one sentence. The sentence was, “Do you like girls?” I told him “Yes, but my wife frowned on this kind of behavior.” He then asked me if I wanted the Army or the Navy. I told him I wanted the Army and he responded, “Congratulations, you’re in the NAVY.” I had to report for training at the U.S. Naval Training Station in Sampson, New York, as soon as they let me know when. The following letters and commentary narrate what happened to me during the next two years and two months, until I returned to civilian life.

The preparation of this book necessitated a considerable editing of the letters. As a consequence, the collection of letters appears more like a diary. This seemed the best way to present the letters to the reader.

Special thanks to my wife Terry for keeping safe my wartime letters to her, for now almost 60 years, and for her vast effort in typing up the letters. Thanks also to my son Larry for preparing the material for publication.

Sid Landau
Miami Beach, Florida

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Chapter 1

Boot Camp: Sampson

U. S. NAVAL TRAINING STATION
SAMPSON, NEW YORK

My Dear Madam or Sir:

We are happy to inform you that a member of your family has reported to this Station to begin training for the United States Navy. The Navy has gladly accepted the responsibility for his welfare and security.

When a man enlists in the Navy, he is assigned to a Naval Training Station for fundamental recruit training. During this period, the Navy endeavors to produce a future leader of men, a man of whom his family, his community, and the Service will be proud. The Navy guarantees you that the recruit will receive the best medical and dental care possible, and his mental and moral welfare is assured. Religious counsel and opportunities for public worship are ever present. Men of all faiths are under the constant supervision of the Chaplain Corps, and services are conducted on the Station weekly.

The first twenty-one days at the Training Station are spent in detention, which is necessary as a health measure. Good health, a Navy tradition, is furthered by prohibiting visitors during the detention period, thereby guarding against the spread of contagious diseases.

While visiting is not prohibited after this detention period, it is

restricted. Your attention is particularly invited to the total lack of hotel and restaurant accommodations, as well as transportation facilities in this vicinity. Recruits are here but a comparatively short period, and will ordinarily be granted leave at the end of their recruit training. You can save rubber, oil and gasoline, or space on a train vitally needed for troop movements, thereby contributing your part to the national war effort, by remaining at home with positive assurance that he is busy, healthy and happy.

If unusual circumstances indicate the necessity of visiting a member of the family at this Station, it will be necessary to have him request a pass, which he will mail to you. Each pass is good for the date specified only. Since visiting is restricted to immediate members of the family, this pass is necessary to identify you as an authorized visitor. Visiting under these conditions is limited to Sundays from 1:00 P.M. until 4:30 P.M. Patients at the Naval Hospital may receive visitors on Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday between 2:00 P.M. and 4:00 P.M.

Cheerful letters from home are of real benefit to the recruit, and are the best means of encouraging him to correspond frequently. Although the recruit is instructed to write home often, he sometimes fails to do so. This should not be cause for alarm, however, for you will be notified immediately in case of serious illness. Letters addressed to him at "U. S. Naval Training Station, Sampson, New York, Company 454" will be delivered promptly to him while he is in training. You should instruct him to keep you informed of any change in his address, so that his incoming mail will not be delayed.

In the event of serious emergencies arising at home, the recruit should be notified by telegraph, preferably through your local Red Cross Chapter, as incoming telephone lines are required for official use. If a return call is requested, public telephones are available.

Inquiries regarding recruits should be addressed to the Recruit Training Officer, U.S. Naval Training Station, Sampson, New York.

Sincerely yours, H.A.BADT, Captain, U.S.N., Commandant.

Sept. 9 1943

Aboard Train

En route to Sampson, N.Y., in pleasant company. Expect to travel about 10 hours.

Sept. 10 1943

Date 9/10/43

I have arrived at the Naval Training Station.

My address is: Sidney Landau A.S.
(Name & Rate)

Company # 454, U.S. Naval Training Station,
Sampson (Geneva), New York.

Sept. 11 1943

I have so much to tell you. I'll start from the very beginning of my Naval career and tell you all about it. First, before I go any further, darling, remember that we are rushed quite a bit up here and I won't be able to write very long letters for a week or possibly a little longer until things get a little easier as the routine becomes familiar. Another thing, my English will be abominable as I haven't the time I'd like to spend on the letters to my darling. I'll scribble a few lines whenever I can and every minute I have to spare from my duties, which, at present, are plenty.

This temporary separation from you and the baby is even tougher than I thought it would be, and I look forward so eagerly to coming home in six or seven weeks. I miss you very much, Terry darling.

Sept. 14 1943

You should see me now in my uniform and “skinhead” haircut. We wear boots and dungarees while working, and the regular sailor suit and boots at other times. The boots, as you know, are the mark of the recruit, and must be worn for the 7 weeks.

Apprentice seaman is designated by A/S. When we graduate, we become S/2C - Seaman second class. Next grade upward is third class petty officer, then second class, then first class, and finally chief petty officer, C.P.O.

Sept. 16 1943

Last night one of the C.P.O.s came in after lights out, when we were all in our bunks, and found a couple of pieces of paper on one of our writing tables we have in the center of the barracks. This “heinous crime” almost caused him apoplexy, and he ordered us out of our bunks to clean and mop up. Frankly, I enjoyed the whole thing. It was like a movie. Captain Bligh could learn a few tricks from the officers up here.

Sept. 17 1943

Yesterday we took our G.C.T. (General Classification Test) and several other tests to determine mechanical aptitude, electrical and mechanical knowledge, arithmetic, block counting, and pattern visualization. The Selection Officer told me my marks entitled me to attend a Service School, and naturally I chose Pharmacist’s Mate.

The Jewish service we went to tonight was really very beautiful and moving. We have some fine singers in the choir, and the Cantor, a seaman, has a beautiful voice.

Several of the fellows cried. No one noticed, however, by the simple expedient of ignoring it completely – not a word mentioned.

Sept. 18 1943

Today's activities consisted of a lecture on Naval traditions, drilling of the Manual of Arms, a swimming test in our beautiful swimming pool – which I failed, by the way. (Now I have to go with quite a few others from my company for special instruction.) Then there's the Commando Run. It's a pretty tough course, especially if you're not a decathlon champ, and I suppose most of us aren't. It consists of a series of obstacles to run around, jump over, jump in, run across, pull yourself over on rope ladders, running across rope bridges, and in general making a monkey of oneself.

I'm glad to keep too busy to think. That's really the purpose of this preliminary training – to get us to obey orders without thinking.

Sept. 19 1943

Very good company up here. In our barracks we have some teachers, lawyers, cops, engineers, ship workers, youngsters who enlisted, and sundry other types and trades represented. The way these different types meet the different situations is interesting to observe. These men, from all walks of life, quite a few from Brooklyn, thrown together, forced to live together, get on remarkably well with each other. Such names as Lefkowitz, McGreany, Rubin and Hanafin. We have quite a mixed group, many nationalities. The talk around is colorful and spicy, and curses and

epithets are not at all rare. Our C.O. is pretty good at it too. Today he had us out drilling in the rain for a while – the Captain Bligh type. We lose him this weekend and good riddance.

Sept. 20 1943

We are confined to barracks, as the inspecting officer found a couple of spots on one of the urinals. This isn't as bad as it sounds, as there really isn't any place to go anyhow. Most of the fellows stay in and write, though of course some do, I like to myself, occasionally go to the ships service for cokes or to the library. (The Ships Service is the equivalent of the Army's P.X.–Post Exchange.) I suppose the real purpose is to toughen us up; get us used to discipline.

Sept. 21 1943

We had a few fairly easy days. But today we had quite a bit of marching and were very busy with lectures and a movie. The movie was very interesting. It was official German movies of the conquest of Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Poland. Showed Chamberlain's mission, and its failure. Good propaganda film. Showed the brutality in their conquests.

Sept. 22 1943

We were away most of the day on a hike. We marched 8 miles out of the S. S. Sampson, as the training station is called, to a little tavern where we had sodas, and then marched back to camp. It was quite a jaunt. The blister crop was bountiful.

Sept. 24 1943

I'm writing this in our large drill hall which also serves as an auditorium. It is 9:30 AM (0930) and we're here for a lecture in First Aid. The weather is dreary and rainy. For our first period we had calisthenics outdoors in a drizzle. The instructor is droning on in an uninteresting manner, reading from some manual.

Another lecture, this time on nomenclature of ships and boats, quite interesting. He is describing the small whaleboat, its different parts, how it is constructed. Especially of interest to me since I've been in them and know their construction.

Sept. 25 1943

We had an air raid alarm up here the other night. It came shortly after lights out. We all had to get out of our bunks, get into dungarees and sneakers, and stand near our bunks in absolute silence while the sirens wailed. The sirens up here have a different sound – it is something like the croak of a frog but undulating in pitch. It was most weird hearing this in the dark, quiet night.

Sept. 26 1943

You ask me for details on my activities up here. I could say it's a military secret and get out of it, but I won't. I'll tell you all the gory details. Mind you now, I'm not an author, and when you ask me to describe the life up here, the "feel of the place," it's a tough assignment; better writers than I am have failed. One of the fellows noticed me crossing out and just asked if I censor my own mail!

One of our mates is playing the harmonica and very well too, as I write. Several fellows around me are also writing. Some are talking about home, girls, clowning around, or whistling *Anchors Away* while the harmonica plays it. The language up here is of the ribald kind. Of course not all speak this way. We have several well educated fellows in the barracks. A lawyer and a teacher are my buddies, mates, as we call them up here.

After supper, we sit outside in the cool evening air on nice, comfortable chairs, writing letters, reading, or just "shooting the breeze."

Sept. 27 1943

Saw a fine picture this morning on Hitler's conquest of France. Actual pictures of his invasion. They certainly show the brutality and horror of war. All the movies were the real thing.

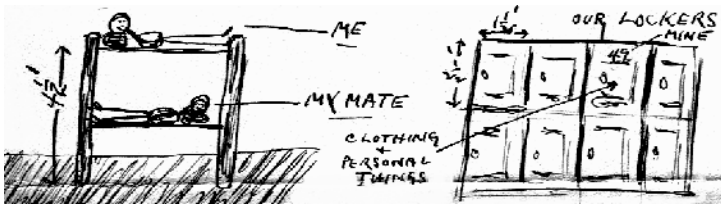
Tonight at the movies we saw "Mr. Big," a musical, in company with 1500 other men. One man in charge, a Lieutenant J.G., controlled all the men. Can you imagine one usher controlling a group that large alone in a civilian movie. Great thing, discipline, or is it?

Sept. 28, 1943

Just got back from the gas chamber, where we practiced how to go through a gas attack. We were all given gas masks, shown how to wear them, and then all entered the gas chamber. This chamber is a large room full of tear gas. After staying in the room for about 15 minutes, we were told to take off our masks, to give us a taste of it. Believe me, it was pretty bad. Not dangerous, of course,

but irritating to the mucous membrane. After about 10 seconds they let us out, our eyes tearing, noses running. The idea behind taking off masks is to give you confidence in your mask, by showing you that while in the chamber with it on, you're all right.

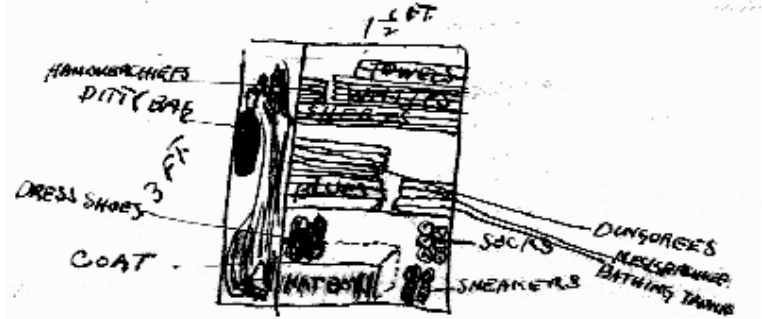
You ask what a bunk is. A bunk is nothing more or less than a place to sleep. In this case, a double tiered wooden cot, a mattress above and one below, thusly:



Underneath the mattress is my hammock and large duffel bag, in which are coiled sundry ropes. On top of me are 2 very warm blankets. I sleep very comfortably but very lonesomely, although 112 men are sleeping all around and under me.

Our clothing is very well made of excellent material. We have 3 white sailor hats, 2 white and 3 blue suits, 2 pairs of leggings called boots, a high and dress pair of shoes, a blue dress sailor hat, a warm hat, a pea coat, 2 large and small towels, 3 sheets, 3 pillow cases, 12 handkerchiefs, 2 shirts and trousers (denims), a work blouse, 3 pairs of underwear, a crew neck sweater, half a dozen pair of black socks, and a knife, neckerchief, ropes, mattress, pillow, hammock, more ropes, pair of trunks (for bathing), and sneakers. All of which, with the exception of the mattress, go into our small lockers with plenty of room to spare, because of the way we pack everything. Oh yes, a shoe polish outfit and a blue ditty bag, as we

call it, also hang in our locker. In this bag we place all incidentals and dirty clothes. They also gave us thread and buttons, but no needle. I suppose you're wondering how we ever managed to pack all these things in one small locker. So did we. Here's a diagram of regulation packing:

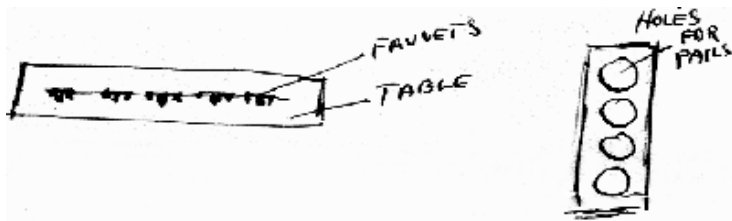


The picture is of the front of the locker. It's about $1\frac{1}{2}$ feet deep and in the back are my leggings, warm hat, extra pillow case, 2 white hats, 2 belts.

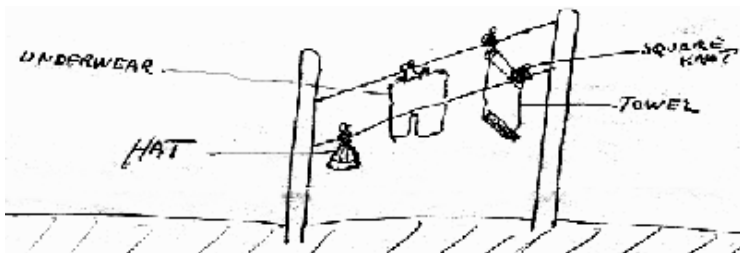
The barracks is operated just like a ship. We have to scrub the deck, do all brass polishing, clean the head (toilet), etc. All the men are divided into details and do the different jobs. Also, just like on a ship, there is a 24 hour continuous watch at the several exits and the front entrance. Four men to a watch, and it is changed every 2 hours throughout the 24. I had a watch this morning from 0400 to 0600, that is, from 4 AM to 6 AM. Boy, was I sleepy. I could hardly keep my eyes open. Better not fall asleep, though. One of the men in camp was caught, and was given 5 days on bread and water in the brig. Full rations every 3rd day. I know about this as all punishments are posted in all the barracks. Don't know the fellow personally. It's a fair Navy and if you do as you're told, keep your nose clean, you get along fine.

In our ship, like in the others, there are 2 companies of about 112 men each. 10 companies make a battalion and 4 battalions make a regiment. We're in the 4th regiment 1st battalion. Also I am in the 2nd platoon, of which there are two to each company. At the head of each company is a C.P.O. (Chief Petty Officer), about the equivalent of a top sergeant in the army. He appoints an apprentice P.O. (Petty Officer) – in our case a hick from Syracuse with a provincial outlook and as narrow a mind.

We wash clothes in our wash room, where we have about 15 faucets of hot and cold running water above 2 long tables. Here we rub and scrub to our heart's content. I'd like to have a laundry concession up here. I'd be able to own my own battleship after a while.



Did I tell you how we hang our clothes? Each piece is tied with small cords to the line with a square knot, thusly:



(I drew the underwear tied wrong. It should be tied like the towel.)

Sept. 29 1943

We have just returned from the Rosh Hashona service at Sullivan auditorium. It was very impressive. The stage was made over to resemble the dias of a synagogue. Two large Jewish stars hung from the ceiling above. Also on the stage were the choir, the cantor, and the Rabbi – a lieutenant in the chaplain section of the Navy. About 3,500 men were present, I should approximate. Church is a must in the Navy, so I suppose all Jews in camp, with the exception of those in sick bay, were present. The singing was excellent and the cantor's voice of operatic caliber. He is an A.B. (Able Seaman) in O.G.U. (Out Going Unit).

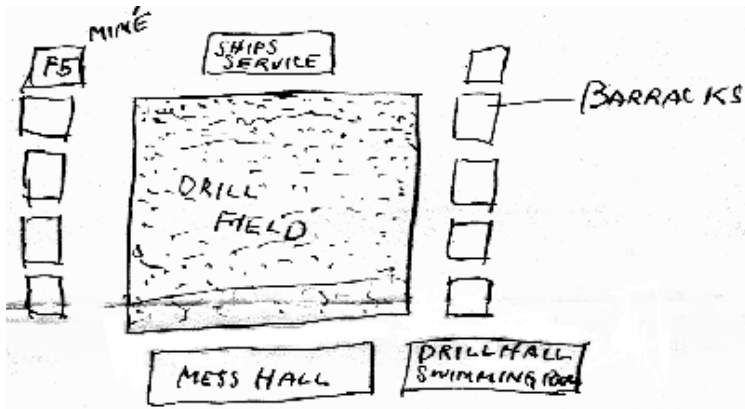
We heard the blowing of the shofar, the rams horn, a wild ancient call to prayer. The call on the rams horn is divided into 4 separate calls: first, the long blast of assembly; second, the short interrupted staccato blasts, which the Rabbi compared with the interrupted history of the Jews by the tyrants of all ages. One of my religious mates just told me the third and fourth. They are morality and faith. The Rabbi in his sermon also used these tenets as lessons for today: the high morality and sense of justice in the Navy and our faith in the future and victory; the conscience of united world Jewry to remember the fate of Jews all over the world and our obligation to them and to our country, to acquit ourselves in a manner so that our relatives and country will be proud of us.

The attitude of the Navy towards religion is absolutely democratic, but you do have to go to the church of your parents. In other words, it is assumed that the religion of

your birth continues with you through life. There is no such thing as an atheist or agnostic in the Navy. That is, you may be, but you go to church anyway. Any Jew who missed these services is threatened with a day's less boot leave. Practically without exception, all want to go and enjoy it.

Sept. 30 1943

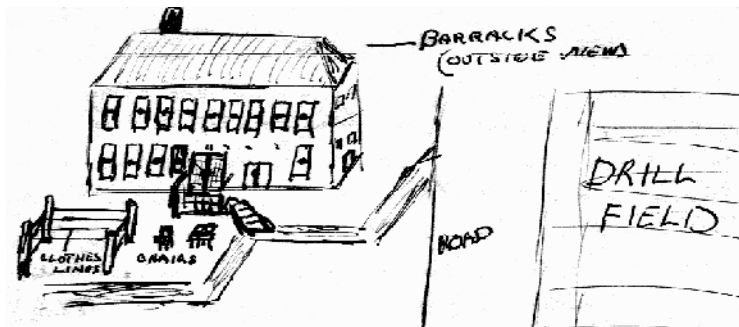
We line up outside the mess hall at chow time by companies. We march from the barracks in a predetermined way. Everything, in fact, is done exactly according to regulations. As soon as we enter the mess hall, we take a tray, knife, fork, spoon, and bowl if cereal or soup is served. We then pass in front, cafeteria style, and each of several men puts the different foods in sections of the tray. We sit at long tables, scrupulously clean – everything is. On our way out, we throw the utensils in boxes, hand the empty bowl and cup to mess attendants, bang the tray over a container which collects the debris, and make our escape to the porch.



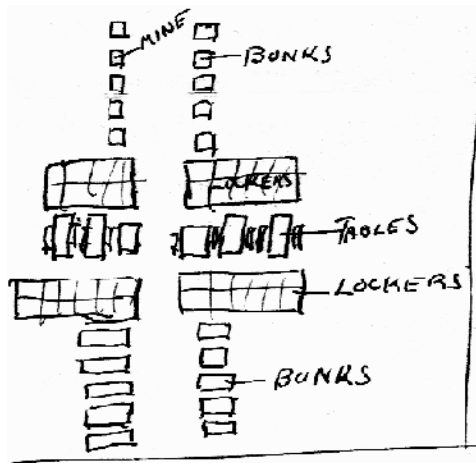
Out here in our front yard in front of the barracks, it's very comfortable. The fellows are sitting around, some reading, some writing, others just exchanging scuttlebutt. Scuttlebutt is a term that comes down from the old sailing days, when it was the custom of the sailors to gather around the scuttlebutt or drinking place (for water) aboard ship and exchange gossip and small talk while getting a drink. Mutinies often started around the scuttlebutt.

Oct. 3 1943

You ask what the barracks look like. Well the outside is like a barn with lots of windows:



Inside there are two very large rooms, one above and one below. My company is in the one below. Our room has 6 tables amidship, lockers on each side of the tables, and on each side of the lockers, the bunks. The sketch will give you a rough idea of the inside, very rough:



Oct. 4 1943

Still have 5 dollars left. We got one pay already called the Flying Fin. This just means that you are paid 5 dollars at one table. You then walk to the next, where \$2.60 is taken out of it for chits. These chits are used for haircuts, blue-jackets manual, etc. I understand we are to get another Fin in a few days, this one not to fly.

Oct. 5 1943

Tomorrow we go out on the lake in whaleboats for small boat drill. There are 13 men to a boat, 12 rowers, and a coxswain for steering.

Oct. 7 1943

I'm in the large waiting room of the dental building, waiting my turn to the torture chamber. The other fellows around me, also waiting, look as if they were about to