

HELL DAY--Plus  
Pearl Harbor - December 7, 1941 -- and More  
MEMOIRS OF PRENTICE RODGER WHITMAN,  
SARGEANT U.S. MARINE CORP

As told to: Betty Brooks Whitman

I, as millions of people, was going about the day doing my job, and feeling proud that I had a great job and a prestigious one at that. I was working with the department of Justice in Washington, D.C., at the young age of twenty. Of course, we (workers) were stymied about what had just happened to our military base in Hawaii.

The base in Hawaii was readying itself for a usual busy day, when suddenly, it appeared the world was coming to it's end. The Japanese had made several bombing raids on the base, unexpected, quick, devastating, and had caught the base totally off guard. Many people were killed, several ships sank to the depths of the Pacific, and planes were destroyed.

December 7, 1941, a day that was to be a regular day--work for some and others were to do whatever one would do on a beautiful day, on a beautiful island, in the beautiful South Pacific--would go down in history.

We were not sure of just what, why, or anything that happened, happened. We just knew that it did and to all of us, and we had to do whatever it took to help.

Our country was just getting some sight after the great depression, was now to face the war of wars. So what was expected turned out to be the great unexpected-----

This terrible thing had effected each of us in different ways, but with the same results. None of us actually knew what we would have to accept, but we knew that we had to do something and we had to do it right then. Many of us resigned our jobs right then and there. Most of us had to have our parents sign for us to join in any of the branches of service because of our age. However there were some who passed for older and was accepted by lying. I knew that the recruiters took them knowing they were too young, but the whole country was in panic.

I went by train and met my sister in Evansville, Indiana. We went on to Oakland City, Indiana (our home town) to be with our mother. Two days later I told my mother that I had to go back to Evansville to enlist in the United States Marine Corps. She was not as enthused as I was, I told her that I had to do it. We took off to Evansville in her 1935 Ford. I enlisted for four years.



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My mom had to sign for me as I had not reached my twenty first birthday. When I arrived in Evansville, I learned that there was a weight requirement for the marines. It was higher than my weight was, but I trudged on. When I weighed in, I clocked in at one hundred and ten pounds. I was upset that I didn't have the qualified pounds. I then learned that the number had just been lowered to, you guessed it---one hundred and ten pounds. So, I guess you could say that I was relieved with strong anticipation.

Three days were given to me before five of us were heading to Paris Island, South Carolina. We were transported by train from Louisville, Kentucky, in a cattle car to train for sixteen weeks. We left there for Cherry Point, North Carolina. There was only one mess hall and one barracks. Five days stay in New Bern, North Carolina, gave way to our being whisked off to San Diego, California. We were picked up and sent across country by train. We were given bunk in airplane hangers on North Island in stacks of three high for about two weeks. We, then boarded ship for an unknown location. We did not know how many were on the ship, nor did we know how long we would be on board. We were at sea for thirteen days when we were told to depart onto landing crafts known as Higgins boats. This is when we realized that we were on Guadalcanal, South Pacific. This was to be a part of the Solomon Islands that we were yet to face.

The Higgins boats were the "safest landing crafts" and the way to get closer to the land. Still we had to wade in the water to beach ourselves. These boats were allotted to the ships and as soon as they were let down into the dark water, we boarded rapidly. Safe? Well these crafts were open, flat, and easy targets.

Many were thinking fear, but I was thinking what a Hell of a way to spend my twenty first birthday, August 6, 1942, plus the fear. Yes, we were all frightened. but already we were showing our toughness. There was between one hundred fifty to two hundred guys who made that first landing together, most of us were still "wet behind the ears".

We didn't see the Japanese, but we learned as soon as dark fell, that they were definitely there. They began firing on us. They preferred to fire on us at night so we could not see them coming.

The majority of the guys were only eighteen or nineteen, but we had some who were only sixteen, I felt like an old man at twenty one. It wasn't long before the youngest felt like old men as well.



Our clothing consisted of dungaree jackets and pants, tee shirts, heavy boots, socks, and undies. The jackets were not too important, because it was so hot there in the jungle. Some times the air seemed too thick to take it in. Our standard gear was a 1903 rifle, a bayonet, a bandoleer of ammo, four or five grenades, and a hard helmet. The weight of all this probably was the same as my own body weight. We all thought that we never be capable of carrying our gear, but when you are afraid for your life, it's surprising how much strength you can muster.

Frightened and so young--swept upon a strange shore with vigor and animosity, we were facing the unknown, knowingly.

There was some food and equipment on a small scale that the Japanese left behind upon sighting the U.S. Marines 1st. division coming on land. We were afraid to eat or drink what they had left fearing that it could be poisoned. However, most of it was abandoned too fast for that.

We confiscated everything, among our findings were a brass bed and a bathtub out there in the deep dark jungles.

Deeper into the jungle, it was very hard to see what was invisible and there was no time for recreation. We had too much to do and it needed to have been done yesterday. We made use of the few items, the Japanese left, but we needed so much more. Scared and not knowing where the Japanese were hiding, we, by the grace of God excelled in our endeavor.

We were taxi drivers, grocery clerks, high school athletes, and others from all walks of life, out there in defense ---each loss made the remainder stronger and more aggressive, more determined, and more brave. Much of our action was reaction! One of our biggest battles, these young guys went in, but those who came out were U.S. Marines. The toughest! It only took one major battle to age a man many years before his time.

The Japanese knew the best hiding places, caves, tree tops, thick brush, and etc.

One of our great fears was that we learned that the Japanese were very close to San Francisco. This made us even more aggressive.

A very sad note was to know that the big bulldozers were brought in to bury the dead in vast numbers. To see the dirt and brush pushed onto the dead made us rise up with more anxiety to do our job. It was very tough to go out in the dark and not being capable of knowing what you may step into. The good that came from these debilitating experiences, only made you a stronger person.



Major Hugh Brewster commanded the original Marine Air Base Squadron-One (M.A.B.S.1), February 1, 1943, which was organized on Guadalcanal by authority of Headquarters Marine Corps secret dispatch and assigned duty with the First Marine Aircraft Wing. During this time I was considered to be in the Marine Air Force. We had to set up an air field. Having taken Henderson Field, for the Allied pilots and to keep it going, was a job that had to be done. However, whoever was running the war had left the Marines there without any supplies to speak of, and barely enough to get by day-to-day. Our only hope of survival was to raid the army camp close by and this was how "Brewsters Raiders" got our name.

Two Guys from the unit were assigned to Major Brewster's domain. They kept his quarters clean and neat. They were inseparable and soon acquired the names of Alice and Mary.

One evening we were watching the first movie that I had seen in more than two years, I was suddenly having my first own personal battle with a deadly scorpion. It stung me six times between my knee and hip. It had crawled up my pant leg and I immediately came out of my pants. Fortunately for me, my buddy, sixteen year old Harold Walton, came to my rescue by cutting each stung place with his trench knife. This let the poison out of my leg, and the medic praised the young marine for his quick thinking and said, he had saved my life. This was the only battle scars that I obtained other than the scars etched in my brain. My bout with the scorpion gave way to all military having to wear their pant legs in their socks and boots. The insects bombarded us as badly as the Japanese.

August- 1942-, the Japanese sent us messages that, "We are prepared to die for our country." Of course we returned our answers, that we would do all we could to help, because we are prepared to see that you do.

In pitch black darkness, while standing in line for chow, we soon learned to somehow find a way to touch the helmets in front and back of us, and sometimes on either side to learn if the helmets were smooth. If it was, we knew that the wearer was a Japanese soldier. They would even learn English and try to mingle with us.

We knew that the Japanese were in hollering distance, and we would antagonize them by yelling in their direction, "Tojo eats Sh\_\_!" Of course they would retaliate something similar.

On Guadalcanal, we were a bunch of kids trying to do something that couldn't be done. Only thing--no one told us that, so this bunch of kids whose diplomas were probably still containing wet ink, got out there and did it anyway. I remember our "control tower" was four logs stuck in the mud with a platform and a mosquito net. We got the job done, though.

The Japanese did every thing they knew to do to destroy Henderson Field. They bombed it many times causing heavy damage.



It was a very hard chapter in our young lives but we never gave up. I remember we had just been air bombed and ground raided at the same time. This, too, was a near miss for many of us, but a direct hit for some. As I dove into a fox hole, shared by others, I couldn't help but wish for the cradle of my mother's arms about me and assuring me that things would be all right, and for a moment I was in another safe world. The sudden silence was deafening. All of sudden the flares brought me back to reality and I picked up that world and put it on my shoulders and set out to protect it. It was amazing how we came out of it---well---for those of us, who did.

So many times we would miss someone, and it was heartfelt that we could not go look for them, even more so when we could.

We were the forgotten ones by who had sent us over and were we very hungry. When there was a battle won, we would take whatever they had to eat, which was almost always rice. I ate nothing but rice for such a time that I swore that if I made it out of this hell, that I would never eat rice again. I didn't for nearly sixty years, then it had to be camouflaged.

Christmas was like the other holidays, or yet like any holiday, in fact it was like every other day. We had no time for celebrations or the means for them. Even though we couldn't have a special meal or any of the festive events, we each held a special place in our hearts and in our minds; especially knowing that we were standing up for our beliefs.

One of my buddies, Elmer Von Hoff, and I were talking one day about when we would be back in the states and how we would have to have reunions. This was not because of the Solomons to be remembered in as much as it would be for the group to be together. We really had become close to our buddies (like a big family), and wanted to keep our closeness forever. One day when we had a break, Elmer and I took a dollar bill and actually split it long ways. We each kept a side of the bill and promised to bring it to the reunions. The one who did not bring it would have to buy the other a dinner.

So many things, I cannot tell here because they are too disturbing, but believe me this had to be the war of wars.

We thought of European detachments and how they had it bad as well. The main difference was that while we were suffering the hot and very humid temperatures, they were freezing in wet and devastating mud and winds. Fighting the elements was no picnic. Our love for country, families, and a free world almost equally matched our hate for the war; and all of those needless battles made you wonder just what kind of leaders the world had.



Our jobs were back breaking labor under scorching, broiling hot sun. The nights were of long bombing raids, and we knew that the next dead could be either of us.

At no time were our rifles out of reach and most of the time, they had to be used. Some of us had self battles in just trying to hold them up and firing them. Through the grace of God, we did things that we didn't think could be done. It's strange how the flow of adrenalin can give such strength when you are afraid, but knowing you have to do the job. When times were upon us to the point that we thought that we couldn't go any farther, we only had to think of our fallen buddies, families, country, and self. These thoughts would get us back in the groove of why and what our jobs were. We were Marines and we were trained to accept <sup>what</sup> we had to do, and went into it without any fear-----RIGHT! What we did, we had no choice but to do it. We were young, but aged quickly. We were tough, but were trained to be. We were loyal, because of our upbringing. We did our jobs, and with gusto.

One of my most dreaded experiences was to go out and check on the bodies of our troops. By checking. I mean to find out if they were wounded or dead. One time, I was caught face down in a ditch when we were attacked. I could only see the flares that were being tossed about from the bombing raid. When I got back to my tent there was a large piece of shrapnel that carted a piece of tangled metal, about two inches wide and close to four inches long, on my bunk. Had I been there, I would have been a 'used to be'. Once again, the good Lord was right there with me. I never ventured anywhere without Him.

The food (what little there was of it) was both good and bad...Bad, because it was not too palatable, but it kept us going...Good because it kept us alive. We lived with "wild rumors", but soon learned to pick the ones that we wanted to believe. We had scanty beer issues and sometimes fudge. We wrote our letters by candle light. Mail calls were very disappointing, but each letter was cherished. Some were shared to boost morale. Nearly every movie was broken up by the bombings and other attacks. We had a few amateur theatricals. However, the eighteen hour duty and the cumbersome gas trucks were all integral parts of camp that we will never forget.

Many times I would think: 'Here I am in a deep infested jungle of very high temperatures, filled with bombardment of insects, no food (most of the time), Japanese all around wanting to end my life and my buddies', and I thought that I had just about seen it all, being so young and having the kind of life I had before this-----. I was from a small town, born and raised and schooled, landed a great job in the U.S. Department of Justice in Washington, D.C., and here I am. I got up and leaped right back into my job to help straighten this mess out. If we make it, or if we don't, maybe it will be considered that we prevented or tried to prevent others like us from all this hell on earth.

Actually, landing on Guadalcanal, had a two-fold meaning. One, we were so glad to be back on land after thirteen days at sea, and two, we were out to prove that we were not little boys anymore but grownup Marines of ages fourteen thru early twenties. Our hearts were in our throats, but



we knew that we not playing childhood games anymore. Games are usually fun, but we found no fun in our fearful trek. The look on these young faces, expelled a fear that they had never encountered before, mine as well. At night you could not see your hand in front of you, especially on moonless nights

Our having no warning devices, led us to depend on keen hearings. Most of the time, we knew of coming attacks when we either heard them or saw them. There were so many times we had to literally give a flying leap into a fox hole, behind a log, or in heavy brush to save our lives. Sometimes we would be only in our skivies, because the night could be almost as hot as the days.

October 13, 1942, "Operation Red", a strong attack at 1:00am, we were caught with only a fox hole for protection. We were fortunate that only a few didn't make it---It could have been a total wipeout. Army P-38's would blow the Japanese right out of the sky by ground forces shining spot lights up on the planes. Until all of this, I had never fired anything but a 22 rifle, but very quickly, I became qualified as a sharpshooter expert.

My second assignment was Munda in 1943. It was a great relief compared to to what had taken place on the 'canal', but the Japanese were swarming in from Bouganville in effort to take back 'their' airfield.

Then there was New Georgia. Not much happened there. We had already whipped, captured, or conquered the Japanese.

After the Solomon Islands quieted down, the war continued over in a big way in the Philippines. This was in 1944. The American forces got in an eventful way and took back all of the islands.

1943-44----Bouganville

When I was sent home for thirty days, I learned that I was the only Marine from my hometown. I also learned that a bulletin board had been erected for the fallen military, and a special star was placed by their names. My name was there. My Mom straightened them out. I was alive and well. However, there were many names on that board, most of them were victims in Europe.

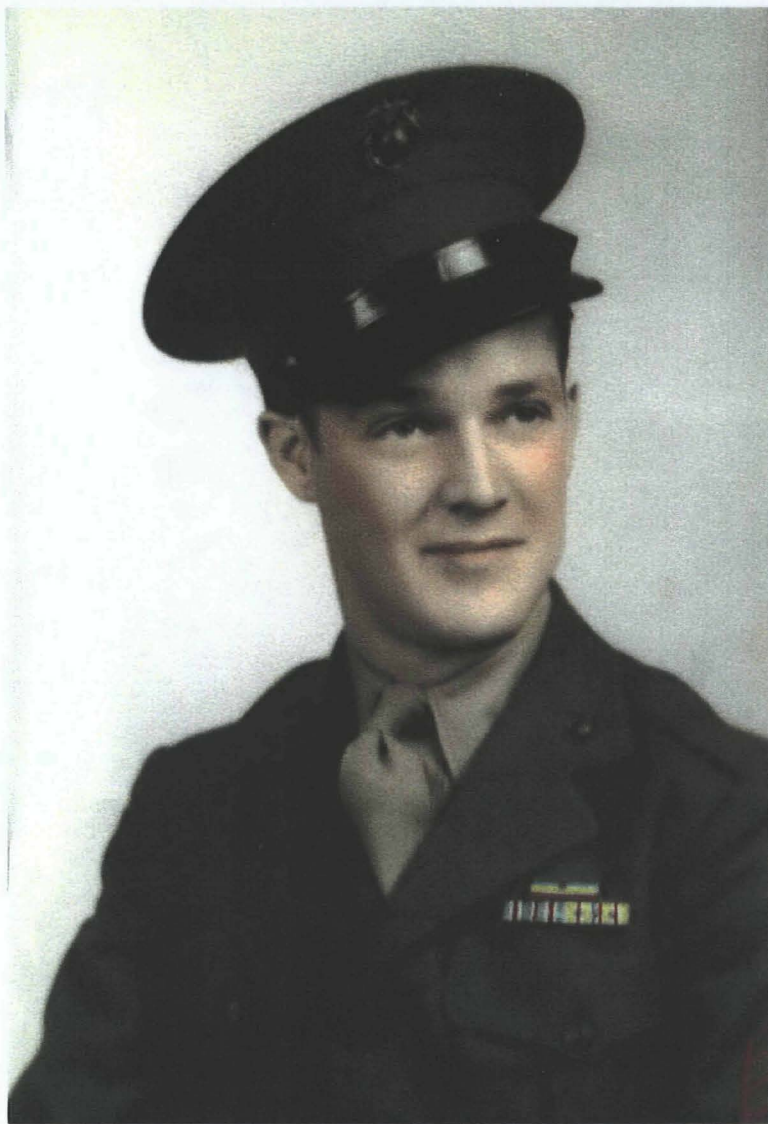
I went to the soda shop where we (the young people) hung out. Of course, I was in full dress uniform. I proudly paraded down the street with my mom and my two sisters like a peacock in full form. Who would have ever known what I had been through and came home a very happy sargeant of the United States Marine Corps.

I went back to Washington, D.C., to a new job in the National Security Agency at Fort Meade and the Pentagon. I retired after thirty seven years and settle for my retirement years in Wilson, North Carolina. My first wife, Shirley Shirley A. Bass passed away. I then married Betty J. Brooks.

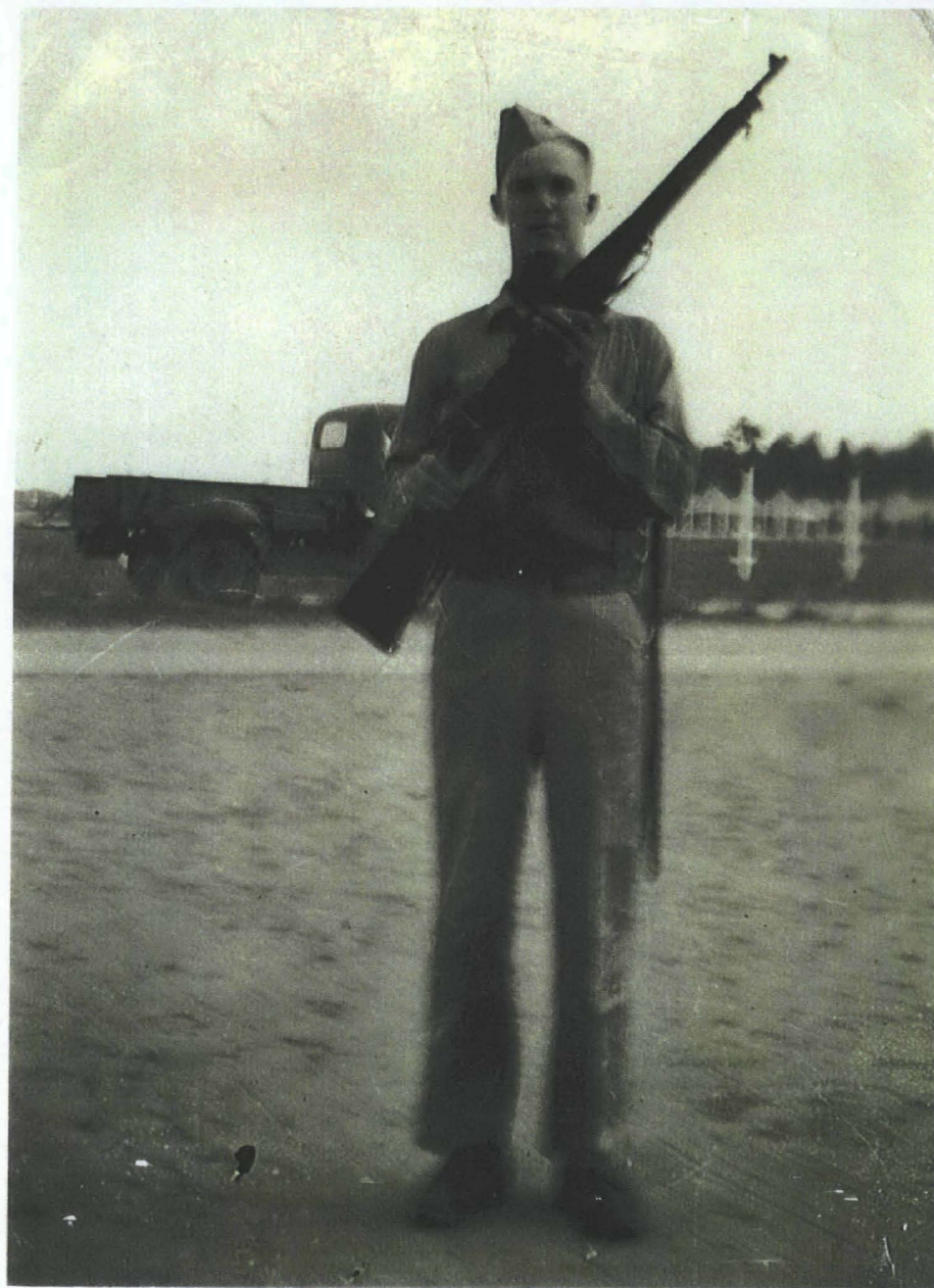
Semper Fi

ONCE A MARINE ALWAYS A MARINE



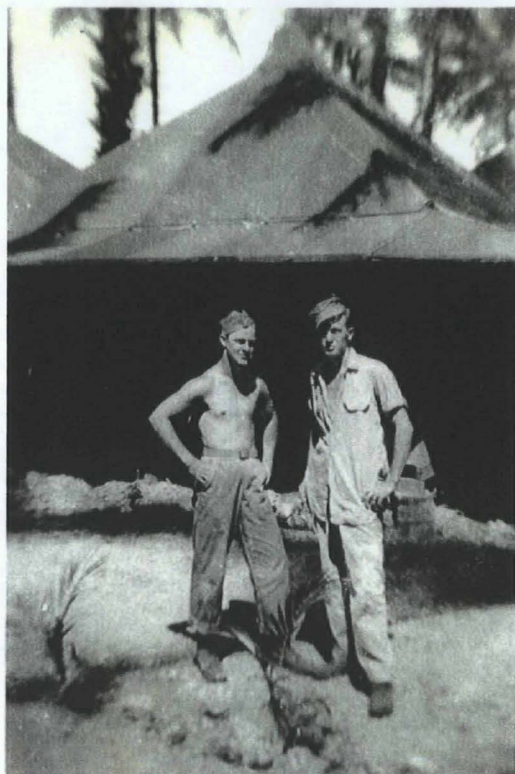


Sgt. Prentice R. "Whit" Whitman



Whit-  
Parris Island  
1940-41



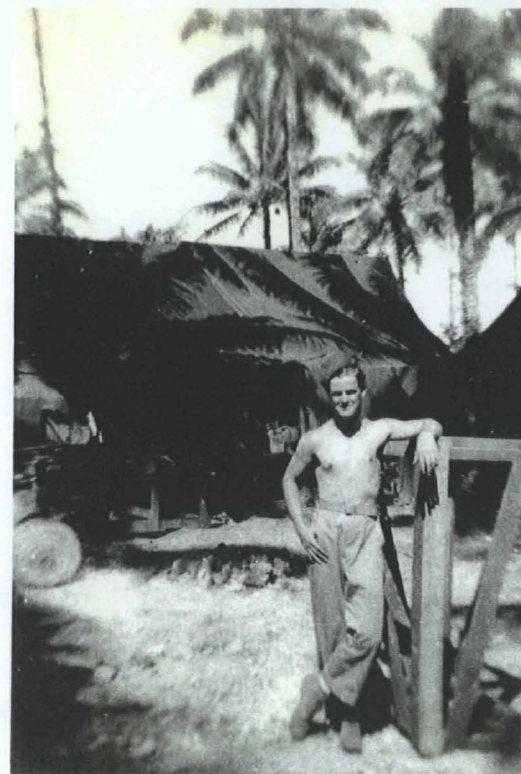


Prentice Rodger Whitman  
on left "Whit"

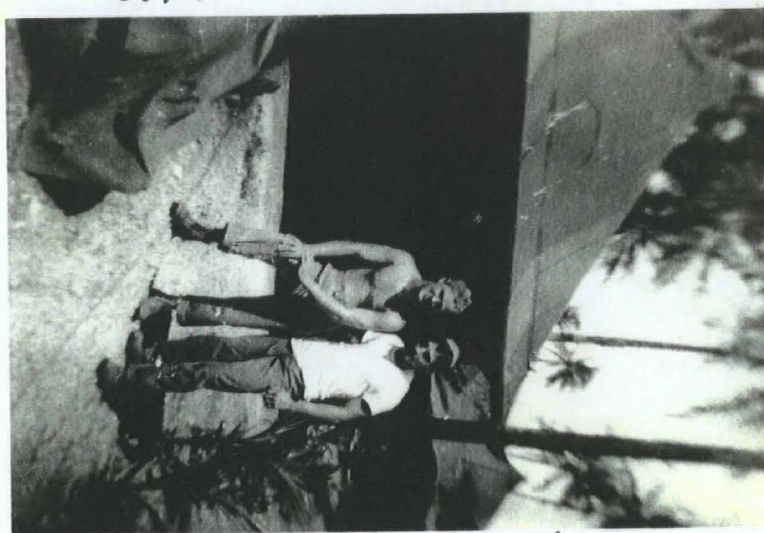
These were  
made on  
Guadal canal  
South Pacific  
1940's



Prentice R. Whitman  
center "Whit"



Sgt. "Whit" Whitman



Prentice R. Whitman  
"Whit"