

POHANG, SOUTH KOREA - 1959
OPERATION SEA TURTLE
Aboard the USS Cavalier APA 37

We went to Korea in March of 1959 aboard the USS Cavalier, APA 37 for an amphibious landing North of Pusan at Pohang. It was a week of training with the Marine forces of the Republic of Korea (ROK). The landing of approximately 10,000 troops from both Nations was witnessed by 100 high ranking military and civilian officials including Korean President Syngman Rhee, Major General Roberts and Marine Brigadier General Lewis C. Hudson, Commanding General of the 3rd Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF). Large scale aerial and surface missions were carried out against our “enemy” composed of both ROK and U.S. Army forces stationed in Korea.

I recently learned the Cavalier had been to that exact location before! On June 28, 1950, North Korean Communist Forces invaded the Republic of South Korea. The Cavalier departed Yokosuka, Japan on July 15 with other units of Transport Division Twelve, to take part in the first amphibious operations of the Korean War. On July 18, 1950, the Cavalier landed troops of the 1st Cavalry Division in an assault at Pohang.

Now I know why there were still trenches, equipment and human remains in the area. I remember one guy putting a skull on top of his pack until someone told him to get rid of it.

1. Me in the shadows on deck of the USS Cavalier, APA 37 somewhere in the East China Sea on our way to Korea. APA's (Amphibious Assault) were tactical warships designed to move troops to a landing point. The Cavalier was very heavily armed and had a stack of ribbons from her role in W.W.II and Korea. Be sure to check out all the photos and history on the Cavalier website!
2. Two North Korean MIG's flew directly over us, and that day changed my perception of our hosts from “Swabby” to Sailor! When the siren went off I heard “General Quarters, this is NOT a drill” and the Navy really did their thing. Guns were being uncovered all over that ship. You can see one battery just beyond the life raft in this photo. A new friend of mine, Terry Burnes, was then a radar operator on the Cavalier and has told me they were “buzzed” this way a lot.
3. My friend Herman T. Mercier, AKA “Herman Trevor” on the Cavalier. Herman was from Warehouse Point, CT. Nothing bothered Herman. He would be fun to find, but there is no longer any listing for him in Connecticut. Too bad.
4. More friends on the Cavalier. From the left: Mick Putterbaugh, Leroy Ghekiere and Steve Niebur. There is more about Mick and Steve, my two best friends in the USMC, on my Bishagawa and Friends pages. I wish I still had my field jacket but I think we turned them in with 782 gear!
5. Climbing down the nets to an LCVP Higgins Boat. These landing craft were nicknamed “Peter boats” and were designated PA which I guess stood for “Personnel Assault”. In heavy seas the asynchronous movement of the large APA and the smaller LCVP could make the climb touchy. The differential swelling could be 10 or 15 feet as you were

trying to board the “Peter boat” from a net. I used to think the nets had been especially designed with our safety in mind. It was only years later I realized they were just cargo nets thrown over the side. See Al Loreth’s experience in his “Sea Stories” section on my Friends page.

6. Before you went on deck you were already briefed where you were going. The ship’s public address system would then continue announcing all the color-coded net locations. Like India Company, 1st Platoon, Red 2. India Company Weapons Platoon, Green 10.

Once on deck your NCO would lead the way to your net location. The ship was also hailing the “Peter boats” telling them where to go, like PA-16, Red 2. There were a lot of “Peter boats” circling, moving in for their pick up and then going back and circling again, waiting to form a wave for the assault. As a kid it never occurred to me how much coordination and cooperation was involved with the Navy. We really were their Marine forces!

I must say it was exciting! Getting the command “Saddle up”, all the announcements, hundreds of Marine’s moving up ladders and down nets. The crisp morning air, the noise, the smell of diesel from landing craft, the salt smell from the ocean, all the orders being shouted out, going over the side and down the nets into the small boats – I’m glad I did it and now I miss it all!

7. The “Peter boats” would then circle until a “Wave” was assembled and started its run to the beach. Every one has heard the expression “being in the first wave”. A view of PA37-16, one of the other landing craft. I wonder what my boat number was.
8. Moving at full speed toward the beach. I remember looking around at the Coxswain at his station, and recalling what I had seen on “Victory at Sea” about the heroism of these guys as they repeatedly approached hostile fire in these fairly defenseless boats. I also remember the cold salt spray as the square nosed little LCVP thump, thump, thumped through the water.
9. Hitting the beach at Pohang. Anyone who has ever made an amphibious landing knows how hard it is running through that deep sand loaded down with all that equipment. It seems like all the beaches the USMC used were 100’s of yards deep. I can remember thinking if I can just get to some solid ground, trouble was when I did it was straight up!
10. A view of the town of Pohang and the following waves of landing craft. We were in one of the initial waves, with the objective to take the high ground to the right. And it was high!
11. A look back at the landing beach. When the ramp dropped, it was a long charge through deep sand, and then hundreds of yards inland and a long climb over rough terrain to the top of our objective. I can only imagine how hard the real thing must have been, right there, only a few years earlier.

12. Me breathless at the top of the first objective. Looking back to the LZ I think you can see why I looked so haggard. It must have been nearly 800 feet to the top. All those years in the field and this is my only solo "John Wayne" Pix!
13. A day or two later, from the left: Sgt. Thilking, Sgt. Varnado, Me (with chinstrap now buckled I might add) and Cpl. Al Loreth, my 3.5 rocket section leader.
14. Another photo of Loreth second from the right. On his left is Private Waters and his right is one of our guys peeking through a couple of ROK Marines and a Korean officer of some type.
15. Moving out through the hills. The terrain in Korea is impossibly rugged. This was one of the main shocks to the U.S. Forces when they got there in 1950. The mountainous topography of Korea was vastly different from the hedgerows of Europe or the islands of the Pacific.
16. Our platoon moving across the Korean terrain. It got very cold at night and we slept under our ponchos in the foxholes we dug.
17. Moving out on the roads. Even when there was a road there was no pavement and this did not change the rugged mountainous terrain. I always liked seeing helicopters after days of this!
18. Most of our movements on this exercise were by helicopter, a presaging of their extensive use in Vietnam.
19. A chopper leaving for our inland objectives. This was my first time in a helicopter. I had a lot of subsequent rides but you always remember the first one. Also, years later I spent ten years in the aviation industry and had a lot to do with helicopters – but this was the first!
20. Looking out the chopper door. It was a fairly long flight. At that point I did not know we were going to march back later that week. Being picked up and moved was a lot more convenient than hiking around by foot. We got to do enough of that in the Northern Training Area (NTA) on Okinawa.

On the march back there was no water except what we had in our canteens that morning. It had been cold but not this day. In a cloud of dust the Army blasted between our ranks riding in their 6-by's and we were all "barking" at them as much as to say "Dog Face". One hollered back "Bark like 'em, you live like 'em". USMC quarters were Spartan by Army and especially Air Force standards. By mid afternoon I did something that got me a disciplinary assignment back on the Cavalier. I had to write 100 times "I will not fill my canteen in a rice paddy".

Any way, I don't think the Marine Corps uses this amphibious approach as much anymore. By the time we got to Pendleton, we were already making most of our assaults off carriers with helicopters putting us down inland in a vertical envelopment rather than landing on beaches. In one very large First Marine Division live fire exercise we initiated a night assault off the helicopter carrier Thetis Bay. See my Camp Pendleton page.

I remember being on the Pohang beach waiting for the "Peter boats" to come for the return trip to Okinawa. We were all glad to get back to a hot shower and the chow on that ship. The Navy did a great job and I always enjoyed their food! In fact I still have my Cavalier Ration Pass in my scrapbook. On the back were net instructions Green 10, 2-6, Port Side Aft. I was only aboard ship a total of about two months during my tour and I have nothing but good memories of my sea duty.

One of the most exciting things I ever experienced was on the deck of the Anderson in a fairly major typhoon north of Midway on the crossing to Yokohama. Before we were forced to go below I watched the bow of that 623-foot ship going completely under with significant over spray drenching the stern. I say more about this on my Bishagawa page.

In fact, my first love was the Navy and I have the photographic proof. See the very first picture in My Life section, and later shots on Cape Cod in the early 1950's. My father had wanted to be a Marine during W.W.II but he was 4-F. I still have his copy of Semper Fidelis, The U. S. Marines in the Pacific 1942 – 1945, First Printing 1947. I had read this book in High School, and in 1956 a group of my friends went in the USMC. If not for these influences I probably would have gone to Great Lakes!

I am proud to be a Marine, but I also know my homepage shield says, **Department of the Navy!** My fist love was the Navy, and I especially salute you guys on your camaraderie.

Anchors Aweigh my boys...