

# MY DAZE

in The *93rd*  
Seabees

Diary and Letters from WWII

of ROBERT W.  
CONNER

EDITED BY SUSANNAH CONNER

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## Introduction

I grew up in the shadow of The Bomb and in the vortex of The Sixties. I proudly believed that my father had been, if not a conscientious objector in WWII, at least the next thing to it: a Seabee.<sup>1</sup> He lavished us with tough, if not aesthetic, play equipment constructed from khaki tarps, duffelbags, etc. A grass skirt, wooden shoes with an Asian village carved in the heel, and various other exotica ornamented our house. Finally, there were photos of him with the monkey that ate his shaving cream, surrounded by scantily clad islanders and lounging at “Hollywood and Vine,”<sup>2</sup> and of various contraptions such as the washing machine prominently featuring a plumber’s friend. I imagined him crooning “Some Enchanted Evening” in the makeshift jungle shower and joking with the WAVES as they jogged by.

As to the exact location of his sojourn, he said if South Pacific had been true, he would have been in it.<sup>3</sup> He did not add that had it been true, most of those other people (especially the WOMEN) would not have been in it.

He never told me he aspired to be a crack shot with a carbine. He never referred to the plane crashes, the funerals of his friends, or the unimaginable loneliness and helplessness of his Island cloister. Mom, too, showed us only the pictures of herself having a grand time beachcombing at Duke or skiing at Smith.

In time, I gravitated to the desert island of a Carmelite monastery in Southern Maryland. One evening around 1997, Bettie and Melvin Clark<sup>4</sup> were visiting her sister, Sr. Mary Anne. Mel pulled out a photo of himself as a dashing young Marine pilot at “Hollywood and Vine.” I ran out and returned with a photo of my father at the same intersection! Obviously, they had been on the same island. When I told Dad about Mel’s photo, he told me about the background of the set.

On his next visit, Dad shyly pushed three little black notebooks over to me and suggested I might like to have them. They were his WWII diary.<sup>5</sup> I really didn’t know what to do with them until my brother’s wedding when it dawned on me to transcribe some portions of the diary for him. I also threw in Web pages of the training camps, ships, and islands, as well as excerpts from Mel’s Marine album. I added portions at Christmas and birthdays.

Then I read about the movements to collect war letters and oral histories. I also found Web sites with people pleading for information about Seabees and service in the South Pacific. I wrote my folks anxiously begging for Dad’s war letters which were about to be discarded and

began in earnest to complete the Diary. As I became immersed in it, I realized that it did convey some sense of what many fellows experienced and might be of interest to other people.

It was through the internet that I encountered Rick Thomas' queries and rejoiced to learn he lived in nearby Winston Salem. Rick reunited Dad with his Battalion after 53 years and Dad regaled Rick with his Tales of the South Pacific.

As I write this, a third world-wide war is rumbling all around us. Emotions are running high and the heroes of the moment are those who put their lives on the line and lost them in a dramatic calamity. Within this fever, my father's Diary again seemed mundane. But it is the real story of war. It is months and years of separation from families, friends, jobs, hobbies. It is missing the most important events of life: births, deaths. It is hoping that spouses left behind with far more temptations will not yield to them as did so many SeaBee wives in WWII. It is living on rumor and submitting to the questionable judgment of superiors. A fireman's comment caught my eye: "Our life is 99% boredom and 1% sheer terror."

I would like to have omitted derogatory references to the Filipinos and even to the Japanese. They are embarrassing. The Monastic community I live in includes nuns who are natives of Japan and the Philippines. They are my friends and even superiors. A network of Filipino-Americans supplies many of my weekly grocery "Gimmes." To be honest, the war contained in these pages has never existed for me. I can't help but wonder if it does my parents a disservice to remember these times. In war, they did their civic duty. In peace, however, they achieved a higher victory. And so now, yes, we can look back on their sacrifices, embraced the more willingly because they longed not to hate, not to disparage. Thanks, Mom and Dad; I was so "carefully taught."

There is a diary entry for every day of Bob's sojourn. A # sign at the end of an entry indicates a letter for that day. Superscript numbers and asterisks refer to footnotes which follow the letters, and some of which refer to illustrations (ilus.)

\* \* \*

Robert William Conner was born Sept. 9, 1914 in Wilkes-Barre, PA to Helen and Floyd Conner. Floyd was a fireman on the Lackawanna Railroad; he was killed in an accident when Bob was 16. Elizabeth Hatcher Conner is the daughter of Pearl and Edgar A. Hatcher, Jr. of High Point, NC. They met in a hiking club at Duke University where Lib was studying zoology and Bob engineering. They were married August 24, 1940 in Duke Chapel. Lib taught at Duke and Smith while Bob was in the Seabees. Inspired by Moede, Bob returned to N.C. State to study architecture after the war. Then they settled in High Point where Bob opened his office and Lib taught at several area colleges. I was born in 1948, my brother Bill (William Hatcher) in 1951, and Chris (Christine Roberta) in 1954. Bill is married to Susan Inglis and they live in Chapel Hill. Chris, her husband Steve Levin, and their three boys, Daniel, Samuel, and Matthew live in Philadelphia. Bob and Lib have continued their lifelong love and advocacy for the environment into "retirement," organizing a statewide network of supporters for the State Parks. As for Bob, Lib has now had him longer than the Navy did. He still likes things "shipshape" but reverts to old train lingo for chowtime.

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Information about the Diary and Letters and the footnoted illustrations  
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Susannah Conner, 5678 Mt. Carmel Road, La Plata, MD 20646



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