

Winner of the 2016 Living History Essay Contest

An Interview from the Pacific: Documenting a Disappearing Generation

by Sarah Young

World War II was a global conflict that impacted the lives of millions. From 1939-1945 allied forces joined together to defeat Axis powers. The United States did not get involved until after Pearl Harbor. However, once attacked on December 7, 1941, American lives were changed forever.

Accounts from the Pacific: Robert Ray Pryor

Robert Ray Pryor (age 90) was born in Oklahoma in 1926. He came to Texas at an early age and enlisted in the army at the age of 17. Robert Ray Pryor was then inducted at Fort Bliss, Texas at the age of 18. He served in the United States Army with the 145th Infantry, 37th Division, Company E., from October 13, 1944 to November 27, 1946.

When asked why he joined before his eighteenth birthday, he said, "We were four brothers, plus a brother-in-law, and many friends that were already serving in the army and navy in the thick of the war. I was the youngest brother and it was my heart's desire to be right by their side. I did enlist at the age of 17, however I had to wait until my 18th birthday before they would accept me." Once he had been accepted, training started and he joined the fight on the Pacific front. He remembered "Following my induction at Fort Bliss, Texas I was sent to Camp Waters, Texas then onto Camp Stoneman, California where I was put on board the USS General John Pope. We zig zagged across the ocean to Australia dodging the submarines and aircraft all the way. For many days, we were stalked by an enemy submarine. Not fun." Mr. Pryor was then sent from Australia to New Guinea where he joined a campaign that began on January 24, 1943. After his time in New Guinea he went to serve at the Battle of Luzon. During his last year of service, Robert Pryor was assigned to observe war crime trials before being honorably discharged in November of 1946. The experiences and recollections about his role in the Pacific and after the war are hard to imagine. He is brave and his story is amazing.

New Guinea

In January 1943, before Robert Pryor was accepted into the Army, Japanese and Allied forces were fighting in Papua New Guinea. He explained "Allied operations in New Guinea were essential to the U.S. Navy's drive across the Central Pacific and to the U.S. Army's liberation of the Philippine Islands from Japanese occupation."

The campaign in New Guinea lasted until December 30, 1944, and Pryor was then sent to join the effort to free the Philippines from Japanese occupation. Mr. Pryor recalled his time in New Guinea saying, "As in many other places we had to sleep on the ground." Robert Pryor then described indigenous people who he said "would crawl into our camp and check the buttons on our uniforms while we were asleep. We knew not to blink an eye or breathe until they recognized the U.S. emblem on our shirt. If we checked out as a United States Soldier, they would not bother us. Then go on to the next one." He then explained what happened if the soldier could not be identified as a U.S. soldier. He said, "If they could not identify the person as being one of ours, they would blow a poison dart into their neck and go on about their business. Thank goodness they were on our side!" It seems like a story out of a horror movie to have people crawl on you while you are asleep, so I asked him if he was frightened. Mr. Pryor laughed and smiled "Yes, it was very scary, you just- just knew not to move."

The campaign in New Guinea was a hard one on GI's. According to General Gordon R. Sullivan, a former Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army, "It was the ordinary American soldier who endured the worst deprivations that the debilitating New Guinea climate and terrain could offer. It was the lowly GI who was the brains, the muscle, the blood, and the heart and soul of the great army that came of age in the Southwest Pacific Area in 1943 and 1944. It is thanks to men like Mr. Pryor that New Guinea was a success.

Luzon

Next Mr. Pryor was sent to Luzon where he joined with the 37th infantry division landing with the Sixth Army. According to the National Association of 6th Infantry Division, "Ten U.S. divisions and five independent regiments would see action on Luzon, making it the largest campaign of the Pacific war and involving more troops in any invasion than the United States had used in North Africa, Italy, or southern France." Mr. Pryor recalled his time in Luzon saying, "We fought the Japs full force in the mountains – we had to dig them out of caves where they stored ammunition, also the jungles, rice fields, and homes. They did not give up very easy." Now the largest

veteran's cemetery outside of Arlington National Cemetery is on Luzon were over 17,000 American soldiers died.

After the U.S. and Allied forces defeated Japan and troops were brought in from the battle fields, Mr. Pryor was still in Luzon. He was sent to be with the 50th, a battalion where he served as a military police in Manila. Here, he was "responsible for the security and enforcement of army regulations. Many Japs would not accept defeat. All of this was a big job in itself." After the war, there were trials held for war crimes. Mr. Pryor said "One of my duties was to set in on the military war crime trials. Which was quite an experience. War is such a sad thing: so many gave their lives for our country hoping it would be the war that ended all wars." After a short pause Mr. Pryor looked up and told me "One last note: I would do it again if need be."

The Years That Followed

All of Mr. Pryor's brothers made it back safely, and he is now living at a home with his wife of 65 years. She provided me with the following information. Robert Ray Pryor finished high school after the war and was honored in 2010 at the National Museum of the Pacific War in Fredericksburg, Texas. He received two bronze stars, the Asian Pacific Ribbon and the Philippine Liberation. He also received a Philippine Independence Ribbon, Combat Infantry Badge, Good Conduct, two Overseas Service Bars, and Metal Victory Ribbon. He is an American hero.