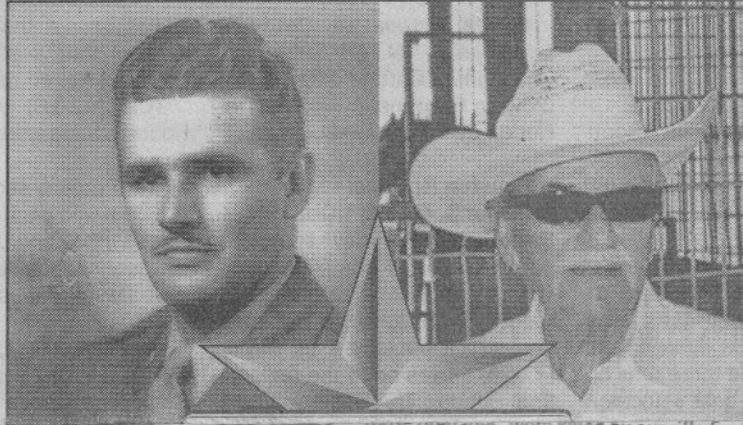


Brazos Valley Heroes

One in a series of tributes to members of "The Greatest Generation" who served our country during World War II



Music men, were killed by our rifle fire.

By Bill Youngkin
Special to The Eagle

Part One

A lot of combat veterans have memories, both good and bad, that surface from time to time. Howard Caillouet of the Whitehall Community of Grimes County has had a constant reminder for almost sixty-six years. That reminder is a right hand that is limited in its use because of wounds suffered on Okinawa in 1945.

Life for Caillouet began on July 28, 1922 in Milton, Louisiana. According to Caillouet, "My father was a boilermaker who worked on oil refinery boilers, and that was a central location for his work in Louisiana and Texas. I graduated from Milton High and enrolled at nearby Southwestern Louisiana Institute, now McNeese State University in nearby Lake Charles.

"When the war broke out I felt I needed to do my part. I wanted to be a pilot so I enrolled in the Army Flight Program. I took all the tests and did really well. They sent in all my paperwork and after about six weeks I was told to come back for more tests, which went well until my eye exam.

"I could see perfectly but when they started asking colors I was giving them the wrong answer. They said I was colorblind. I thought no way because I could see green and red. I asked that I have someone else verify the test. I asked my girlfriend who would become my wife to take the test because I knew girls very seldom had color blindness. She confirmed their analysis. I was colorblind.

"That was the end of my dream of being a pilot but I still wanted to serve. They indicated they would get back with me soon about further orders. I got a temporary job at a geophysical company serving the oil industry. That job was helping survey for seismic lines. I soon was running the survey crew and then helping quantify the data.

"Some time had gone by and I had not heard from the Army. One day my boss let me know he had requested a deferment because of the work we were doing and wanted to request another deferment. I felt I needed to serve and asked him not to apply. In 1944 I received my draft notice and was sent to basic training at Camp Joe T. Robinson at Little Rock, Arkansas. They wanted me to apply for OCS in engineering but I wanted to remain with the guys I had trained with. The commander said if I remained it would be as an infantryman. I said that is what I wanted to be.

"We were shipped to the Pacific as replacements. I was assigned to the 77th Infantry Division in time to be involved with Leyte in the Philippines and on some

of the little islands that are part of the Philippines. We were camped on a beach and began to prepare for the invasion of Okinawa.

"As part of the training, I became part of several combat teams that would land ahead of the invasion. Our job was to take out and destroy suicide boat bases that were located along the shores of Okinawa. Our intelligence was able to determine that the Japanese had dug caves in the shorelines and had installed twin-screw boats that would be loaded with explosives. Those boats would be driven at a high rate of speed in zigzag fashion, making them very difficult to hit. The Japanese pilots of those boats were to ram them into our ships and possibly kill thousands.

"The Army knew they had to be taken out before our troop ships came into the harbor. Aboard ship we were given exact locations of the caves. Each combat team was assigned a suicide boat. It was anticipated that each cave would contain at least a squad of Japanese troops safeguarding the boats and the pilot of the boat.

"We had eleven men to each team. We had two demolitions guys who were to blow up the boats and the cave. The rest of the team was all riflemen. We were dropped off as quietly as we could on the beach at about three in the morning. We were about a mile away."

"We ran as fast as we could to our assigned caves. Our orders were to go in and 'kill everything that lives and do it fast.' That is exactly what we did. The demolition guys placed their charges and after setting them to explode, we ran as fast as we could to an assembly point about two miles away on the beach. Thankfully a landing craft came into the beach on our signal. We boarded and were soon aboard ship without the loss of a single man. Our raid was conducted on March 26, 1945. The invasion of Okinawa occurred on April 1, 1945, April Fools' Day."

Okinawa would prove to be the bloodiest battle with the Japanese in WWII. The U.S. would suffer 62,000 casualties with over 12,000 killed. The Japanese would have over 107,000 combatants killed and 7,400 captured. But, the largest losses were suffered by the civilian population with over 142,000 casualties. The worst fighting is yet to come for Howard Caillouet and that part of his story will be presented next week.

If you want to have a name added to the Veterans Memorial, for more information, to make a contribution, or if you know a World War II veteran whose story needs to be told, contact the BVVM at www.bvvm.org or Bill Youngkin at 979-776-1325.

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Part 2

Howard Caillouet of the Whitehall Community of Grimes County was a member of several teams that went ashore on Okinawa five days before the invasion began. Their goal was to destroy several suicide or Kamikaze boat bases that would be used by the Japanese in attempts to blow up and sink American ships when they attacked Okinawa. They were successful in destroying these suicide boat bases.

The next phase of involvement by Caillouet and his fellow soldiers of the 77th Infantry Division was clearing the islands that surrounded Okinawa. According to Caillouet, "One of the strategic islands that needed to be cleared was 'le Shima' which had an airfield. The island also had a geologic feature that was different. It had a 'mini mountain' six hundred to seven hundred feet tall and in the shape of a cone. It had a lot of vegetation up the sides. On one side was the ocean and on the other side was an airstrip.

"We were dropped on the beach and attacked up the 'mini mountain' to try to knock out their gun emplacements. The Japanese had dug caves and had their big guns mounted on tracks in those caves. When our ships bombarded them, they rolled the guns back into the caves. When our bombardment lifted, the Japs rolled their guns out and started firing on our ships. We had to take them out. We began the attack but were able to progress only two hundred feet up that slope that first day.

"That night we got a big surprise. The Japanese counter attacked and almost wiped us out. The counter attack was so fierce we had to fall back to where we started. The next day Navy planes bombarded all day and that night the naval ship guns bombarded all night. At night the sky was full of tracers. This bombardment lasted almost three days.

"On April 29, 1945, we started back up and this time we took it. After taking the high ground, we then took the airfield. One thing of significance was the Pulitzer Prize journalist, Ernie Pyle, had joined us and was with the 506th Regiment. I was in the 505th. The morning we took the airfield, Ernie Pyle was killed. He had gone through all the battles in Africa, Italy and France but did not survive Okinawa. I didn't think I would either.

"We began the clearing process on all the islands around Okinawa. Some didn't require a large force, sometimes a battalion would be enough. Every night we would form a defensive circle and dig in. You never knew what direction the Japanese would come from

but almost every night, they came.

"I remember one night so clearly. We were in a battalion defensive circle with our circle being between five hundred and one thousand feet in diameter. In the middle was the command post where the battalion command and staff were located. We were attacked that night by maybe only five or six Japanese soldiers but they carried satchel charges to blow up the command post. They brought with them and hid behind and among local women and children."

As Caillouet began to relate his memory, tears formed in his eyes. "This memory still bothers all of us but, we had no choice. They made the women and children cry out so that we would know that women and children were with them. We just had no choice but shoot all of those human forms that came out of the dark. That night after the firing stopped, we heard the cry of a baby.

"After several minutes of this crying, the guy in the foxhole next to me, Sabo Sabotino from New York City, said he was going to find that baby. I told him not to go because he probably would be shot by our guys. He said he was going because he couldn't stand it any longer. He left, found the baby, where it was tied cut it loose from the back of his dead mother and brought it back to our line. We fed him some of the jelly we had in our rations and that quieted him. The next morning we found some local women and gave the baby to them. I have often wondered what happened to that baby boy.

"We continued island hopping until we were delivered to the main island of Okinawa where we joined with the Army's 27th Infantry Division and the First Marine Division. It was a different type of fighting. Every night the Japanese attacked, in force. Around eleven each night the fighting would start and we fought like hell. Sometimes we would have a whole box of grenades in each foxhole.

"When the Japanese came, they came in bunches and you couldn't stop all of them with rifles. You pulled grenade pins and threw, pulled grenade pins and threw. Then, the Japanese that did make it past those grenades, were killed by our rifle fire."

Next week the conclusion of Howard Caillouet's story. If you want to have a name added to the Veterans Memorial, for more information, to make a contribution, or if you know a World War II veteran whose story needs to be told, contact the BVVM at www.bvvm.org or Bill Youngkin at 979-776-1325.

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Part 3

Howard Caillouet, soon to be eighty-eight years old, remembers vividly when he was an infantryman with the 77th Infantry Division and the role they played in the battle for Okinawa. Okinawa was the last line of defense for Japan. The Japanese knew that if and when it fell, Japan would be next. The greatest losses in the war occurred on Okinawa.

As recalled by Caillouet, "What ground we gained each day, the Japs tried to re-take that night. One thing that was critical for us were the flares that were shot above us each night so we could see them when they came. One night I dug a two-man foxhole with a buddy named Johnny from Staten Island, New York. That night a Jap shell hit right in front of our foxhole. I was standing up while Johnny was sleeping in the bottom. I don't know how I avoided being killed. I guess I heard air breaking and ducked at the last second.

"Johnny was screaming, 'get this dirt off of me!' The dirt was me. I dug us out but my ears were ringing and my eyesight was affected to the point I couldn't see to the sides. My greatest concern was how I was going to make it through the night if I couldn't see or hear them coming. That night, it was the flares that saved me. I was sitting in the foxhole trying to hear and see in the dark when a flare went off. Not more than three feet in front of me was a Japanese soldier. He lunged at me but, I turned just enough to avoid his bayonet which stuck in the dirt in the back of my foxhole. I hit him as hard as I could several times in the back of his head until he stopped moving.

"The next morning we tossed his body out of the foxhole. He had a little bag made of strings and in it he had Lucky Strike and Chesterfield cigarettes along with a big roll of bloody American money he had taken off dead GIs. I didn't take any of it but the other guys had no problem keeping all of it. I did take his automatic pistol which I used later on. There were so many nights like that.

"We had a sergeant named Charlie Bilskie who was much older than us. He was about thirty-five years old while we were all teenagers or in our early twenties. He was the best soldier I ever met. He instinctively seemed to know what direction to take and what to do when he got there. We followed him without hesitation. One day we came to a location that he said was a perfect place for a machine gun so we should be careful. It was then that the machine gun started shooting and Bilski was hit. He died with us holding him with none of us wanting to believe what had happened.

"That was Charlie's last battle and it would be mine also. We all wanted to take out that machine gun. Eight or nine of us started up the back side of a ridge to get behind the machine gun nest. When we did, there was another machine gun nest we hadn't seen. We were now exposed. I was hit in the back and had considerable bleeding.

"I told the guys to go back and I would cover them. The machine gun nest was above me and I shot whenever a head popped up. I knew I couldn't stay there so I decided to try a

grenade. They were about a hundred feet above me and sixty feet away. The first grenade landed short and rolled back toward me. Fortunately, it detonated before reaching my position. The next grenade went in the nest and exploded. Shortly thereafter, I was hit in the right arm and in the right hand, by the other machine gun. I was losing quite a bit of blood and had trouble loading my rifle because of my right arm and hand being hit."

"It was now about 5 p.m., and I knew my guys had probably gotten out and I needed to also. It was that or stay there and bleed to death or be killed by the Japanese. I hadn't seen any movement in the machine gun nest above me. I tried to stand but fell backwards. As I lay on my back, a Japanese soldier stood up in the machine gun nest and took aim at me. I thought that the last thing I would see was the man who would kill me.

"About then, a tank from below me fired and that guy disappeared. I didn't know they were there but my guys had brought them as far as the tank could go. They told me they could see me and the Japanese guy above me but were afraid to shoot thinking they might hit me. When I fell back and he stood and took aim, they had no choice."

"My guys came up and carried me down to the tank. They put me and another of my buddies who came back for me despite being wounded himself on the tank and took us to a field hospital. That was the last thing I remembered for quite a while. My next memory was being placed aboard a plane when I was flown to a hospital on Guam. While there, General A.D. Bruce, my commanding General came to visit me. He was a Texas Aggie but more important to me he was a great General. When I was in Temple, Mrs. Bruce saw my 77th arm patch and she too visited with me. I told her I and the General were doing fine.

"I now had to learn to write and use my left hand and arm because I had lost that ability with my right hand except to use it to hold something down. I returned to school and finished my degree at Louisiana Lafayette. I decided I wanted to be in the oil & gas business so I moved to Houston with my wife and children, attended the University of Houston and received my Masters in geophysics. While in school, I became an employee of Standard Oil of Texas and stayed with them and later Standard of California until I took early retirement. I then worked for Louie Kung, Madame Chiang Kai-shek's nephew, who owned Westland Oil. It was a good financial deal for me and my family."

For actions taken by Caillouet while engaging a superior enemy force, he was awarded the Purple Heart and the Bronze Star for valor. When asked what his service to his country meant to him, he responded, "It took many of us to do the job that needed to be done. Because of that, my children and grandchildren have opportunities and the potential to be whatever they set their mind to be. Doing something like that for my country gives me a great deal of satisfaction."

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