

## Reminiscences: Aden Returns from the War

Aden Meinel

As Aden's military service ends, a fruitful career begins.

Last month, we published the first of two parts of the reminiscences of Aden Meinel, OSA's president in 1972. In the June column, Aden described his wartime experiences as a naval officer in World War II. Meinel had been assigned to Patton's 3<sup>rd</sup> army for the crossing of the Rhine. He led a convoy of trucks carrying optical equipment—including two captured Soviet periscopes—from Jena to Dover. He also helped physicists and engineers from Zeiss and Schott to escape to the West.

Here, he shares the details of his return from the war and how he launched his career in optics. Meinel went on to become an Adolph Lomb medalist, the founding director of the Optical Sciences Center at the University of Arizona and an Ives medalist. He also served as the associate director of the Yerkes Observatory, as part of the site survey team for the National Astronomical Observatory, and as the first director of the Kitt Peak National Observatory.

– John N. Howard

fter returning from Jena, my luck continued to hold. I eventually returned to Paris and stayed in the same hotel as the "Operation Alsos" team, a group of Allies who were investigating German nuclear capabilities. The astronomers Gerard Kuiper and Peter Van de Kamp were members of Alsos. Kuiper was under the impression that I already had a Ph.D., like most of the Navy NAVTECMISEU team (Naval Technical Mission Europe). When I told him I didn't, he invited me to do my graduate work at Yerkes. (He didn't realize that I still had to complete my junior and senior years as an undergraduate!)

Although I was tempted, my wife Marjorie had told me in her letters that she wanted to return to Berkeley, where she was about to take a final semester exam. I told Kuiper that I still had to complete my undergrad degree but that, after I received it, I sure would like to come to Yerkes. And so I did. And from there, I moved on to Kitt Peak and Tucson.

After I returned to Caltech, the war had ended. I discovered that my classmates, who were now seniors, were still in the V-12 program and hadn't been commissioned yet as naval officers—and here I was, a hardened naval officer with battle ribbons to wear. My intelligence work had kept me at the front lines with Patton's troops, so I earned those ribbons. A few times I almost got behind German lines.

However, I would like to set the record straight about my battle ribbons. Although I did wear both the ribbons for service under fire with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Army and for the European Area, I never actually received either medal for a technical reason: Officially, I had never been in Europe!

When I got back to the Navy Department, I discovered that, the entire time I was in Europe, I had been listed as officially stationed in the Navy Department in Washington, D.C. I had never been formally assigned to duty with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Army or with any naval facility in Europe. Instead, I was just a "temporary visitor."

But the bullets were real. I slept in bombed-out buildings out in the open just like any GI. And I ate canned GI rations, including cold Spam (ugh), just like any GI. Only a visitor indeed! I hadn't asked for these adventures, but fate's a marvelous upsetter of plans.

However, what I did receive was more tangible than a medal. When I was ready to board the train to Pasadena, I was handed a check for several thousand dollars. I had been in Europe on TAD, Temporary Additional Duty, as were all of the NAVTECMISEU team. That

check was my allowance for each day that I was away from Washington.

The check presumably covered the expenses I would have incurred from sleeping in a hotel or buying meals. Some hotel and meals! But I had gladly slept in those bombed-out buildings and ate that cold chow; it was better than the mud and snow that many GIs had had to endure under intense active fire, as during the Battle of the Bulge, which had ended just before I arrived in Europe.

Back when I was at Boot Camp, us sailors-to-be were so happy that we'd have clean and warm sleeping facilities and access to a shower aboard the U.S.S. *Indianapolis*. Little did I know that I'd soon be reassigned and that that ship would later sink after having been torpedoed by a Japanese submarine. Instead, here I was, still alive, and at most times I almost enjoyed the adrenaline excitement of real warfare—and of coming home again.

Arriving at the Pasadena Santa Fe train station, I was greeted by Marjorie, my parents and her parents. I handed the check to Marjorie. That was a great homecoming from the war in Europe. With that check, Marjorie and I bought our first car, and we had enough money left over for a vacation in Arizona to celebrate our reunion.

Then we had another surprise. I expected to be ordered back to Caltech. Instead I was assigned to the Naval Ordnance Test Station at China Lake. Marjorie resigned her position at Caltech. But this assignment was great because my officer rank and foreign duty qualified us for a house on the base. It was our first home. And the desert wild flowers were spectacular that spring, right up to our doorstep. (At the end of her life, Marjorie was happy that the desert, which had been our first home, would also be our last.)

Later, when I told the Commanding Officer at China Lake that I had been accepted as a student at the University of California, wheels started to turn for me. As the civilian that I would soon be, I was offered a very fancy salary, an office, a larger home and rapid advancement to become the head of a division as a physicist—even though I hadn't yet finished my B.S. degree! Marjorie and I had our dream of my becoming an astronomer and her becoming a housewife and the mother of our children. So it was to be.

Then it was time for Marjorie and me to head for Berkeley and the University of California. We soon embarked upon unexpected adventures around the world that were beyond our wildest dreams. Finally, here I am in Henderson, Nev., and Marjorie's ashes are scattered in the desert as she had wished.

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