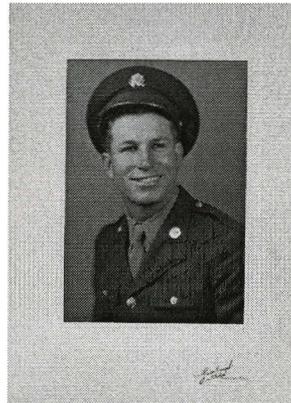


Escondido's Voices
A Joint Oral History Project
Of the Escondido History Center
And the Pioneer Room of the Escondido Public Library



John Quincy Gorbet

A conversation about his military service

Mr. Gorbet was interviewed in his home by Rick Appleton on January 28, 2008. Rick is a volunteer with the Escondido History Center. This interview was recorded on cassette audio tape which is now archived in the Escondido History Center Library and in the Pioneer Room of the Escondido Public Library.

The interview was transcribed by Violet Hutka
and edited by Rick Appleton
in February 2008.

The Escondido History Center would like to thank John Gorbet for his participation in *Escondido's Voices* as well as to thank him for the valuable and interesting information discussed.

John Gorbet
Staff Sergeant, United States Army Air Corps
World War II, Pacific Theater
7th Fighter Squadron, 49th Fighter Group, 5th Army Air Force
Interviewed by Rick Appleton
in Mr. Gorbet's home in Escondido, California
on January 28, 2008



John Gorbet poses for this portrait while in training at Castle Army Air Corps Base in Merced, California, in the summer of 1942.

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A Conversation with John Q. Gorbet

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Appleton: This interview is a conversation between John Gorbet and myself. I'm Rick Appleton, the interviewer, and today is Monday, January 28, 2008. This interview is taking place in Mr. Gorbet's home in Escondido, California. Why don't you just start out, John, by telling us your name and where you were born and raised, and we'll just go from there.

Gorbet: All right. Well, I was born in Delta County, Colorado in 1922, and my folks had a farm there. But in 1928 we moved we moved to California, and they worked in construction work until the Depression came along. And at that time they were unable to find work, and I remember my father saying to my brother, "We're spending fifty cents a day lookin' for a job. If we can make fifty cents a day I think we better get into some kind of business."

Appleton: Your brother was older than you?

Gorbet: Yes. So they had a little money saved up, and they bought a service station business. They rented the property, of course, but that's where they started it. At that time I went to school in Redondo Beach, California.

Appleton: How old were you when your parents bought the service station?

Gorbet: We came to California when I was about six years old, and we lived in Redondo Beach for a couple of years before we moved over Well, actually what we did . . . the landlord let us build a house on the property behind the service station.

Appleton: Okay.

Gorbet: So our family got together and built us a house there, and I have a picture of that here. I went to school there at Orange Street Elementary School. That was almost in the same block. The high school was only across the highway, Pacific Coast Highway, about three blocks away.

Appleton: Was that the Los Angeles schools or Long Beach schools?

Gorbet: I'm not sure.

Appleton: It might have been.

Gorbet: Well, I don't know about that part of it. Anyway, I attended Narbonne High School, and I grew up pretty much working around the service station garage.

Appleton: Did you have any formal training in mechanics and engines, or did you . . . ?

Gorbet: We had a repair shop behind the service station, and behind that is where we built the house. It was on a dead end street. We made an agreement with the landlord

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that when we quit the business, he would have an option to buy the house that we built. If we didn't come to an agreement, we had the option to move it. So, over the years there were two lots across the street that were sold for taxes, and my folks acquired those. So after my father passed away, we talked to the landlord about buying the house; and he said it wasn't worth anything to him. He only came down once a month to collect the rent. In the meantime my brother worked for a salvage company, and they had the equipment. They moved the house across the street. (Laughing)

Appleton: How nice. So that's how you got your house.

Gorbet: Yeah. I think it's still there. My sister said it was still there.

Appleton: How big a house was it?

Gorbet: Oh, it was just two bedrooms. It wasn't a very big house.

Appleton: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

Gorbet: Well, there were only four of us at that time. I had eight brothers, but there were only four of us left at home.

Appleton: What was it like in the Depression? Was it a really tough time for your family? Did the farm fail? Is that why they came out to California?

Gorbet: No. My sister talked 'em into coming to California. She had a chicken ranch, and she sold eggs to the supermarkets there in Redondo Beach. But when we got here, my father decided he didn't want to be in the chicken business. So he went to work in construction, but as far as having it rough, I don't know how we made a living necessarily, outside of the service station. But we always had plenty.

Appleton: People had to buy gas.

Gorbet: Yeah, so we had that, and then we were able to help other people. I remember when they had tent camps. Some of the people in these tent camps were survivors of the 1933 Earthquake centered in nearby Long Beach. Anyway, my folks had a huge, big pressure cooker. They cooked that full of beans, and they'd take it down to the camp and deliver things.

Appleton: Those were people who didn't have anything.

Gorbet: . . . who lost their homes and everything.

Appleton: They were homeless.

Gorbet: Yeah. In the early days I worked in the service station. I was probably a teenager by then, and I used to grease cars and fix flat tires and things like that. I told my

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dad when I greased a car, I'd like to have ten or fifteen cents out of that to call my own money so I could spend it the way I wanted to. And he said, "What are you talking about? You've got a whole pocketful of money!" (Laughing) We carried the change in our pocket. I said, "Well, that's not my money. I want some to call my own!"

Appleton: Did he ever agree?

Gorbet: No. He never did (Laughing).

Appleton: Oh, that's wonderful. Well then, you were then a teenager through most of the 30's . . . the latter part of the 30's . . . were you aware of what was going on around the country and how people faced the problems of the Depression?

Gorbet: We probably realized some of that, but we didn't feel like . . . I didn't realize it was a Depression.

Appleton: It wasn't that big a deal for your family. But you knew about the tent camps for the homeless.

Gorbet: Yeah. I remember the price of things. Sometime during the summer I'd be working the service station, and my father would go back to our house to eat lunch. And then I'd go back, and my mom would fix lunch. I'd have lunch, and when I'd come back to the service station and if my father felt like we didn't get a fair meal, he'd give me a quarter, and he'd say, "Go over to the grocery store and get us a half a pound of baloney and a loaf of bread." (Laughing) And so he'd make a sandwich in the service station.

Appleton: Supplement your lunch. (Laughing)

Gorbet: Yeah, right. There's a lot of things you can hardly believe.

Appleton: Now, did your mother work outside the home? Or she kept the house and she kept everything together? Did she participate at all in the business, as far as keeping the books and that kind of thing?

Gorbet: No, not necessarily. But they did sleep in the service station. They had a roll-away bed for some time. I don't know if it was for the whole time, but they would make the bed down at night and sleep in the service station. I guess that was because we only had the two bedrooms in the house

Appleton: Yeah. You made do.

Gorbet: Yeah. It seemed like it.

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Appleton: Yeah. Everybody did that. Were you at all aware of what was going on in Europe and Asia when you were in high school towards the end of the 30's? In your study of history in high school, were you aware of what was going on in Europe?

Gorbet: Not a whole lot. But I do remember that people were complaining about the Japanese buying scrap metal. And we could see it. A lot of the wrecking yards would be dismantling pretty near all of their cars and sending them . . . because the price of scrap metal was pretty high, and people would say, "Well, that's going to Japan." Of course I didn't know too much.



John Gorbet took a job collecting metal desks from the Los Angeles Schools. The scrap metal was then sold to Japan to be used in their war preparations against the United States two years later. John is shown on the right in the above photo.

Appleton: Nobody probably thought so much about that at that time. Then, when war was declared in Europe . . . well, when Hitler was invading different countries in Europe . . . that was 1938-'39 and '40. Do you recall whether that made much of an impression on you or your family?

Gorbet: Well, we were aware of it, but I don't think we were too awfully much concerned about it.

Appleton: That's way over there.

Gorbet: Yeah. Even Pearl Harbor was a surprise. We weren't expecting that at all.

Appleton: Well, let's talk about when you heard about Pearl Harbor. What were you doing that day? It was a Sunday, I think.

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Gorbet: Well, I can't remember that. It was a shock, of course, and we realized it was a disaster. I don't remember exactly what I was doing at the time.

Appleton: Did anything change right away in your community or for your gas station? Or for your family?

Gorbet: Not that I can recall.

Appleton: Were there any blackouts that started that you were involved in?

Gorbet: No.

Appleton: Or was that right at the coast?

Gorbet: Actually, the last year before I went in the military, I worked for the post office as a rural route carrier. And I had quite a few Japanese friends because I delivered packages to their houses, and sometimes they'd have to sign for it. One of the kids would talk to me. He said, "You know, they took our Japanese-talkin' radio away." But they still had the other ones. And another time, there was a valley there where they used to raise a lot of crops . . . produce, and one time I saw a limousine drive up there with three or four officers in it. To me they looked like Japanese uniforms, and they were, you know, visually looking over this land. And I thought, well, those suckers are gonna have paratroops land in there or somethin', you know.

Appleton: But this was before Pearl Harbor?

Gorbet: I don't know if it was before or right after. I can't remember.

Appleton: But they weren't American military?

Gorbet: I'm sure they weren't that, no. But a lot of people think they mistreated the Japanese, and a lot of them were mistreated because a lot of them were harmless. But I think there were some that were actually . . .

Appleton: Might have been spies.

Gorbet: . . . been spies and stuff and were really collaboratin' with the Japanese.

Appleton: In you area around Lomita, were there a lot of the Japanese truck gardens . . . or the Japanese garden farmers that had small produce fields?

Gorbet: Uh-hmm. Yeah, yeah. A lot of celery and stuff. Strawberries.

Appleton: Were you there when they had to give up their farm and go to these relocation centers?

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Gorbet: Yeah. They had like yard sales and stuff. They were sellin' off some of their stuff. In fact, I had a set of chainfalls that I bought . . . half-ton chainfalls that were used for picking up heavy load equipment and different things. There was a lot of stuff for sale.

Appleton: Did your family talk about it very much that this was the right thing, or the wrong thing, to do?

Gorbet: No. Pretty much . . . people thought it was the right thing to do, but I remember that somebody was talking about Terminal Island. A lot of Japanese worked on Terminal Island, and there was just conversations going around (saying), "Well, we got one island back without even firin' a shot."

Appleton: (Laughing) Were there actual farms on Terminal Island?

Gorbet: No. But there were fishermen and other kinds of working kind of people, but probably most of them were good Americans.

Appleton: Oh, sure. Yeah. Definitely, there was no question about that. That's interesting . . . the story was they got one island back without firing a shot. (Laughing)

Gorbet: But anyway, that was kind of the attitude people had, I thought.

Appleton: Yeah, right. Different people had different experiences. Did you then consider joining the military right away?

Gorbet: I was hired to do the mail, rural route for the post office, and I was doing that. Actually I didn't join the military until I got my draft notice.

Appleton: Okay, so you were just waiting.

Gorbet: Yeah.

Appleton: Now you had graduated from high school by then.

Gorbet: Well, I finished 11th grade. My father passed away, and so then I worked the service station until I got to working for the post office. Then my younger brother and my mother ran the service station for a year or so there.

Appleton: When did you get your draft notice?

Gorbet: Well, I forget, but I enlisted on October the 1st, 1942.

John wrote journal entries alongside photographs which he kept in an album during his deployment in the Pacific starting in 1942. Beginning with his enlistment, his first entries indicate dates and places as shown at the right.

1942
OCT 1ST ENLISTED IN
LOS ANGELES
OCT 3RD REPORTED FOR DUTY
FORT McARTHUR
OCT 4TH SAW MOTHER AT LOS ANG.
DEPOT ENROUTE MERCED AAB
OCT 5TH ARRIVED MERCED 4:30AM
ASSIGNED 90TH AIR BASE SQ BASIC-
TRAINING, THREE WEEKS.
OCT 27TH ASSIGNED 301ST TRAIN-
ING SQ, MAIL CLERK. LATER
STARTED LINK TRAINER SCHOOL
752ND T.S. ABOUT 10 WEEK LATER
TRANSFERRED TO CADET MESS
MAY 9TH 1943 - HOME FOR MOTHER'S
DAY, LEAVING FOR ORTC TOMORROW.
MAY 10TH LEFT MERCED AAB
FOR KEARNS FIELD, UTAH 10:00AM
MAY 13TH ARRIVED AT KEARNS
THREE WEEKS OVERSEAS TRAIN-
ING NEAR SALT LAKE CITY.
TOO COLD HERE LEAVING FOR
CALIFORNIA TOMORROW.
MAY 27TH LEFT KEARNS
MAY 28TH ARRIVED CAMP
STONEMAN, CALIF. PROCESSED
FOR SHIPMENT OVERSEAS
JUNE 3RD - MARCHED THROUGH
PITTSBURG

Appleton: So it must have been some time along about the fall of the year, end of the summer . . . September, October, right.

Gorbet: So I enlisted at Fort MacArthur, and I thought I'd really rather . . . I had a little experience growin' up in the service station . . . with automobiles and mechanics and stuff, and so I thought, "Well, the best thing I can do is if I can get in the Air Force, maybe they can train me to be an airplane mechanic." I never realized that, but that was my thought.

Appleton: But you liked the idea of the Air Force?

Gorbet: Yeah.

Appleton: Why the Air Force rather than the Army or the Navy?

Gorbet: Well, I could be an airplane mechanic.

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Gorbet: We went back to Camp Stoneman (San Francisco). I was just scheduled from then on to go overseas after I left Merced.

Appleton: Did you know that it was to the Pacific?

Gorbet: No, no. They gave us winter clothes, heavy overcoats and all kinds of . . . we didn't know where we were headed for at all.

Appleton: So then what did you do with your winter clothes when you were sent out to the South Pacific? (Laughing)

Gorbet: Well, when we got to Australia, then I turned them all in, and then we started progressing up into New Guinea, but we got rid of our heavy clothes and everything.

Appleton: Now, did they give you any special training in engine mechanics?

Gorbet: No. I didn't have that.

Appleton: They just took your civilian experience and used it?

Gorbet: Uh-hm.

Appleton: That's interesting. When were you finally attached to your unit that you stayed with the most of the war then? Was it in the United States or when you got over to Australia?

Gorbet. I was assigned to the 49th Fighter Group when I was stationed at Kearns's, Utah.

Appleton: You've written it here that you actually met up with your unit in New Guinea, 7th Fighter Squadron, 49th Fighter Group.



Insignia patches from the 49th Fighter Group (right) and the 5th Army Air Force (left)

Gorbet: Yes, it probably was six months after I went into my military time.

Appleton: Into 1943?

Gorbet: I think it was June 1943 when I actually departed.

Appleton: June '43. Can you describe your trip over to Australia. What was that like?

Gorbet: Well, we got on to a President liner . . . *President Taft* . . . that was built in 1914, and it was refitted to be a troop transport. It had a big high-powered engine in it. A lot of the times we'd just hear rumors, but the rumor was that it was so much faster than the other ships in the convoy that they sent us out ahead. And they had escorts for a day or two, and then we'd change courses about every ten minutes. That was to elude the submarines. So every ten minutes we'd change courses. We'd be zig-zagging, and it took us twenty-one days to get to Australia.

Appleton: Was it a rough crossing or pretty smooth?

Gorbet: The ship was loaded lightly. I mean, even though it had 6,000 people on it, it wasn't a heavy load. And it was ridin' pretty high in the water, and the propeller was pretty close to the surface. One place in the Pacific . . . I never dreamed of such a thing . . . but the swells were so tremendous it was like hills and valleys. Even a luxury liner, a ship of that size would be down in the lower part of that, and it was just water. Everywhere you looked it was just water. And then it would come up on top, and it would set up on the crest. The propeller would come out of the water, apparently because it would change. It would go from "rrrrrr rrrrr rrrrr," and then go "wheerrr wheerrr wheerrr wheerrr wheerrr wheerrr." And then (the ship would) go down the other side, and it would go "rrrrrr rrrrr rrrrr" (laughing).

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Appleton: What kind of a sailor were you? Did you get sick?

Gorbet: I didn't get sick. But the deck of the ship . . . most of the time . . . was just little groups of people all over the deck, playing cards or gambling or something like that.

Appleton: Looking for things to do.

Gorbet: The weather was fine.

Appleton: Were they all Air Force or were they Army or Navy?

Gorbet: I don't know. I don't know where they all went. There might have been some Army. I don't remember that part of it.

Appleton: You only knew your little group playing cards.

Gorbet: I didn't play cards as much at that time, but I did have a hobby. We would take a coin, like a half a dollar, and hit it with a spoon, until it knurled itself over; and then when we'd get some place we could drill it out, we'd make a ring out of it. It would have the writing of the half a dollar on the inside of it. So that was one hobby that we did. But when you have 6,000 people on a ship it's not too convenient.



John made this ring out of an Australian coin by hitting it repeatedly with a spoon in his abundant spare time. "George VI" is almost visible on the upper, inside of the ring.

Appleton: Not exactly a pleasure cruise. (Laughing)

Gorbet: So anyway, when we crossed the Equator, they had a celebration, and King Neptune was there. They put a little . . . like a swimming pool on top of the deck. Anyway, they announced that we were gonna have a turkey dinner for that special occasion. Well, they found out that the turkeys had all spoiled, so they threw it overboard. There was a bulletin board in the passageway . . . a chalk board . . . and some guy was an artist. He put this picture of a shark throwing one of the turkeys back up on the ship. (Laughing)

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Appleton: The shark didn't want spoiled turkey. (Laughing)

Gorbet: Anyway, we got to Brisbane, Australia in the late afternoon. We were led to believe that the submarine net that was pulled across the bay . . . the mouth of the river . . . so we couldn't go up the river, the *Brisbane River*. So we were just churning around off the shore there.

Appleton: Could it have been a Japanese submarine?

Gorbet: It was a submarine net to keep the Japanese from going up the river.

Appleton: Oh, yes. Okay.

Gorbet: Where I slept on that ship was F Deck, Hatch 9, and that's right down in the bottom where the propeller shaft goes out through the bottom of the ship. So I was down there, and there was another little compartment off to the side that the crew members of the ship had a little movie going on in there. So I sneaked in there, and I was watching this movie. While I was in there a sailor came, and he said there was a submarine alert on. He said, "We're not gonna sound GQ . . . general quarters . . . but just pass the word." So I thought, "My goodness! My life jacket's way up on the bow of the ship, and I better get up there and get my life jacket." So as I was going through the ship they were cranking these bulkheads all closed to seal off all the compartments. So I got up on the deck and put on my life jacket. And I no longer got up on the deck the wind started blowing. And the ocean got so choppy. It was just a squall, I guess you'd call it, and I looked out and all around the ship it looked like what were whales, coming up and down. Everywhere you looked were these whales. I guess they were whales. I couldn't identify them, but they were some kind of big . . . it must have been some kind of whale. Anyway, the wind was blowing, and the sea was rough. I was talking to one of the sailors, and he said, "Well, we're pretty safe as long as the weather stays like this." It wasn't too long until it calmed down, and the weather got decent again. We're just killing a little time there. I looked out and here comes a rowboat. I guess it was the pilot that got on our ship to take us up the river.

Appleton: This was in Brisbane.

Gorbet: Yeah, right. Before we left to go up the river, there was an explosion, maybe a half a mile or so out . . . maybe a mile . . . out in the sea; and the rumor was that . . . later on we heard that the Japs had torpedoed a hospital ship. I'm not sure. A lot of things in the service you hear, but you can't document it. So we went up a couple of miles up the river, and then that's where we got off and unloaded.

Appleton: And then you made your way, after a period of time, up towards New Guinea?

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Gorbet: Yeah. I don't think we were there much more than a week, at Brisbane. There was an interesting narrow gauge train that took us up the coast, up towards the northern part of New Guinea.

Appleton: New Guinea or northern Australia?

Gorbet: Northern part of Australia. That's right. A lot of times we would stop in a little town, and everybody would jump off. They'd buy all the pastries and everything in the whole town . . . (laughing) . . . while they were takin' on water or something. Sometimes for our meals we would stop out in the country some place, and we'd all walk across the pasture over to somebody's house. There was maybe a big screened-in porch or something, and we'd all go through there and get our meal.

Appleton: Were they expecting you?

Gorbet: I guess it was part of a contract to take care of us, feed the troops when they came through. So we did that a few times. But we were only on the train maybe three days . . . something like that. We went through Townsville and then up to Cairns. At Cairns we had our army cots with us and our barracks bags, and we slept in an airplane hangar. Then about 2:30 or 3:00 o'clock in the morning they'd wake us up, and we'd go down and load up on the planes. We'd sit there for a while, and then they'd say, "Well, the weather's not right." So we'd take our stuff back to the airplane hangar.

Appleton: You would have been ready then to fly up there.

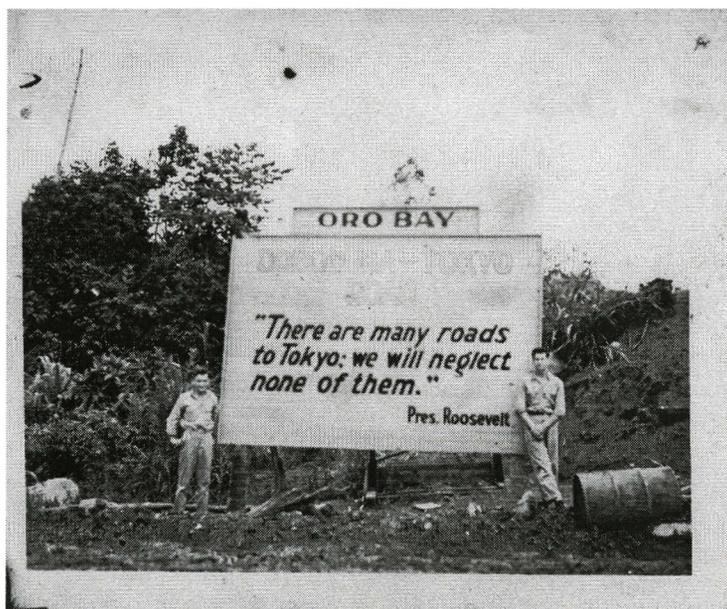
Gorbet: Yeah, up to New Guinea. So we did that for about three days. We finally took off.

Appleton: What kind of airplanes did you have?

Gorbet: C-47s, and then we went just about a hundred feet over the water, from Australia up to New Guinea. We were just hedge-hopping along. I guess that was to stay below the radar and stuff . . . whatever. We landed at Port Moresby.

Appleton: Now Port Moresby is southern New Guinea?

Gorbet: Yeah. But our destination was on the other side of the island. Oro Bay was on the coast. We flew over to the other side of the island to Dobadura. That was inland from Oro Bay. That's where I joined up with the outfit.



In 1943 the "Dobadura—Tokyo Road" billboard was erected near the Dobadura base camp in New Guinea. President Roosevelt's quotation provides the backdrop for this photo of John Gorbet (right) and a fellow airman.

Appleton: That was your Air Force outfit?

Gorbet: That's when I joined the 49th Fighter Group. What had happened is the 49th had gone over really early in the war. They went over soon after the Flying Tigers were dismantled. So that was almost a year-and-a-half before I joined the outfit. So what they did at that particular time . . . they took half of the 49th Fighter Group and they started a new outfit called the 475th. They left half of the old guys in the original 49th Fighter Group, and then they filled in with new guys to make two Fighter Groups. So they had the 49th and the 475th. I never have heard much about the 475th . . . what happened to it.

Appleton: What kind of airplanes did your Fighter Group use?

Gorbet: We had P-40s. That's what we had there, but eventually we got P-38s and P-47s, and then in Japan we had P-51s.

Appleton: Okay. Now, at this time it was clear that you were assigned to supervise a motor pool?

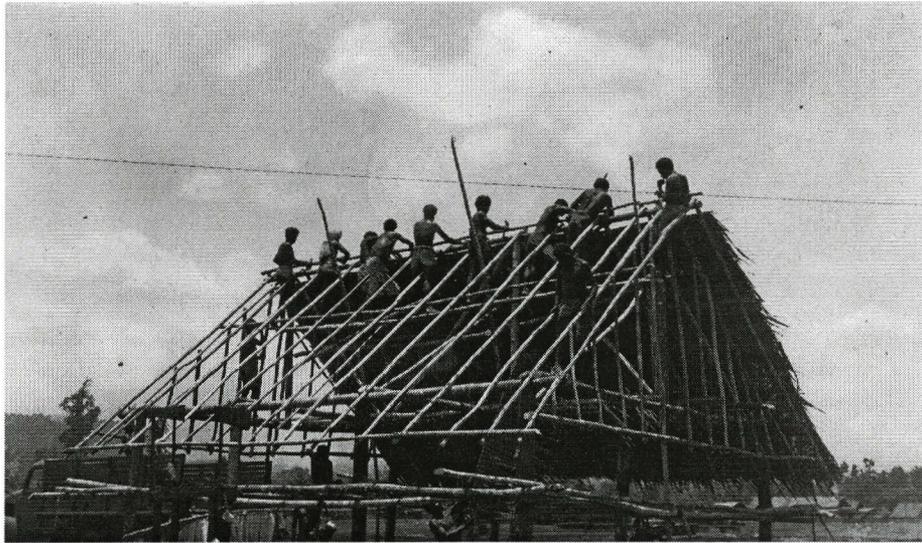
*Escondido's Voices
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In 1943 about one quarter mile from one of his camp's in New Guinea, John (center) attends a native "sing-sing" which featured native dancing and singing.



Another view of native dancing at the "sing-sing."



The natives in New Guinea built this bamboo and thatch shelter especially for the "sing-sing" which followed.

Gorbet: No. I was just a flunky. I was just one of the mechanics. As time went on they started sending home the original people in the 49th. Some of them were rotated back to the states. Some of them had close to over two years, and maybe some of them going on three years before they were rotated back to the states. But as they got rid of all the older guys, then I was promoted up to be motor pool sergeant.



*While in the motor pool buddies posed for this group photo:
(back row, l to r) Maland Combs, Kever. John, Ort, Buckholtz, Philipps
(front, l to r) Tracey and Tracey, nicknamed Rojo.
Men were usually called by their last names.*

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Appleton: Okay. So you finally got to be what . . . the supervisor of the motor pool or were you one of several?

Gorbet: No, they just had one. I wasn't it the whole time, but primarily I was. So then from that Dobadura area we moved over to the Ramu Valley, and Gusap was in the interior of New Guinea.



*The motor pool's primary job was to keep the jeeps and trailers in operating condition at this New Guinea inland base camp, probably at Gusap.
(l to r) John, Sgt. Keever and Sgt. Sink*

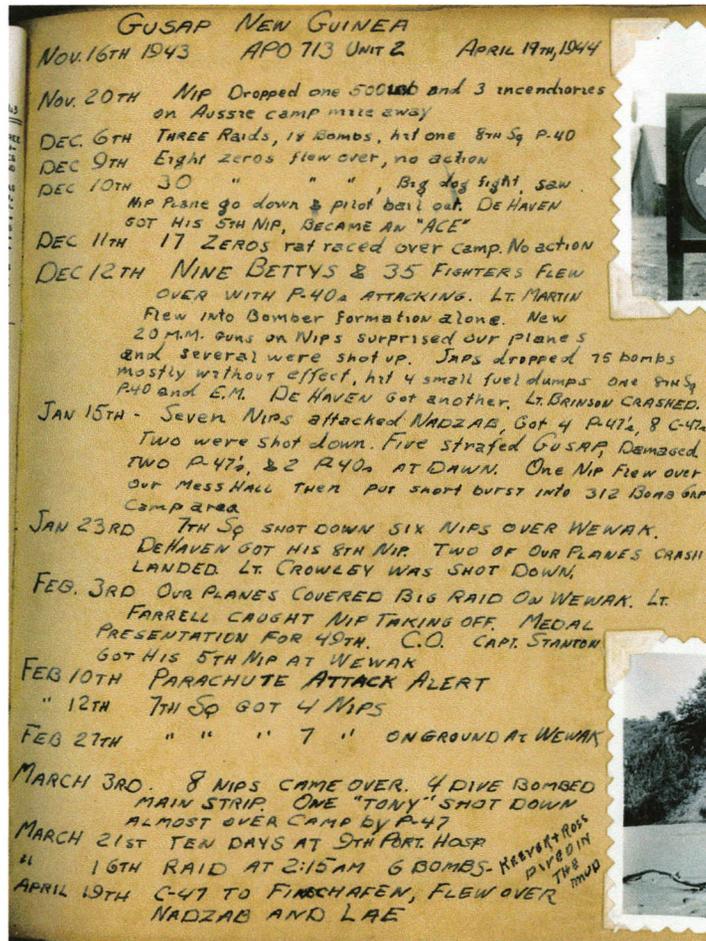
Appleton: No. Ramu Valley and Gusap. Okay. Was your Fighter Unit . . . were they involved in combat missions from those bases all the time?

Gorbet: Oh, yeah. Primarily what they did there was a lot of flying, escort for bombers, bombing and strafing shipping. They also hunted down Japanese planes and destroyed over 600 of them during the war.

Appleton: Now, your particular responsibility though was in keeping your motor pool vehicles in running order. As a fighter group, what were those vehicles used for, for supplies?

Gorbet: For transportation because the motor pool, quite often was located near the camp area. And all the activity, all the work was going on with the airplanes down at the runways, so they had vehicles for the pilots to use. They used three vehicles. And then the ordnance people took care of the ammunition and the fueling and then the maintenance on the airplanes . . . they had a vehicle.

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John's journal entries in Gusap—November 1943 to April 1944



At the Ramu Valley Airdrome, New Guinea, fuel is unloaded in 55 gallon drums flown in by cargo planes

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Appleton: How many vehicles then would you normally have?

Gorbet: Well, it varied a lot. We were authorized 49 jeeps and trailers, but it varied. Sometimes they would take some of the jeeps away and give us some other weapons' carriers, or even sometimes there would be a truck we would just take apart and put on the airplane. We were considered to be an airborne fighter squadron, so we could move by air.

Appleton: So you had to be able to take the stuff apart and put it on an airplane.
(Laughing) Wow! That is interesting.

Gorbet: At this point I could tell you about a funny story that happened. One day the first sergeant came up to the motor pool, and he said, "We got a new guy on today, and he's been to jeep mechanic school. I know you're short a couple of guys short, so I'm gonna send him up. You can have a talk with him." I said, "Okay, that's fine." In a little while this guy came walking in, and I introduced myself. We talked for a little while. After I talked to him, I said, "Well, why don't you go back down in the first sergeant's tent and get that jeep, and we'll do a monthly . . . what we call a PM on it . . . a monthly service. It's due for that so just tell the first sergeant that we need to have it." And he said, "Who are you gonna send with me?" (Laughing) And I said, "Well, I don't know. I wasn't planning on sending anybody with you. What's the problem?" He said, "Well, I don't know how to drive." I said, "Well, the first sergeant told me you'd been to jeep mechanic school!" He said, "Well, yeah, I did. I went on the third floor of a building down in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania so they never did teach us how to drive."
(Laughing)

Appleton: So he could fix jeeps, but he didn't know how to drive!

Gorbet: Yeah. He turned out to be a good mechanic. We had a little dispatch office set up over there, and a guy by the name of Philips was standing in the door. I said, "Philips, come over here. I want to introduce you to one of our new mechanics." And so he did. And I said, "Well, you go ahead down there and get the first sergeant's jeep, and I don't want to see either one of you guys again until he knows how to drive!" (Laughing) So he came back drivin' later on in the day. (Laughing) That was one of the humorous incidents . . .

Appleton: Well, they probably had a lot of farm boys that came into the service and they didn't have cars then.

Gorbet: Yeah. I was driving when I was 14 years old. It was kind of a shock to me, especially in a big jeep mechanic school.

Appleton: Well the Depression was a tough time for some families, and they just didn't have . . .

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A Conversation with John Q. Gorbet

Gorbet: Yeah, but anyway, people who were raised in the city a lot of times . . .
Appleton: People raised in the city, they didn't need to have a car.

Gorbet: Well, anyway, that was just a funny thing that happened. Then they took that base in Hollandia . . . it was really at Santeni . . . and the way I understand it, there was a heavy overcast. Intelligence discovered that the planes could go underneath it, and they just wiped out most all the Japanese planes at Santeni. Then the Infantry and the Marines took over. They had some cement runways which we weren't used to, and so the planes and the crew chiefs and the important people were moved up there to operate. So they advanced that much.

Appleton: So how close were you then in the Ramu Valley and Gusap . . . how close were you to the Japanese and the action . . . the military fighting going on?

Gorbet: It was within earshot. You could hear the fighting. And there was a little place that we could see from . . . it might have been a mile away . . . and it was called Shaggy Ridge. The Japanese had caves in Shaggy Ridge. Well, if our planes come in to bomb over one side, they go over to the other side of the ridge and get protection; and if the planes would come in the other way, they'd come over the other way. So they worked it out with some Australians to come in from both sides. That's the way they softened up that Shaggy Ridge.

Appleton: Amazing. Well, the Japanese were great cave diggers.

Gorbet: Oh, yeah. They had tremendous caves at Biak Island. They said there were caves up there that could hold fifteen hundred people. Yeah, and I think some of them were natural caves.

Appleton: Right. So you stayed there at Santeni for a period of time, or did you just take it over?

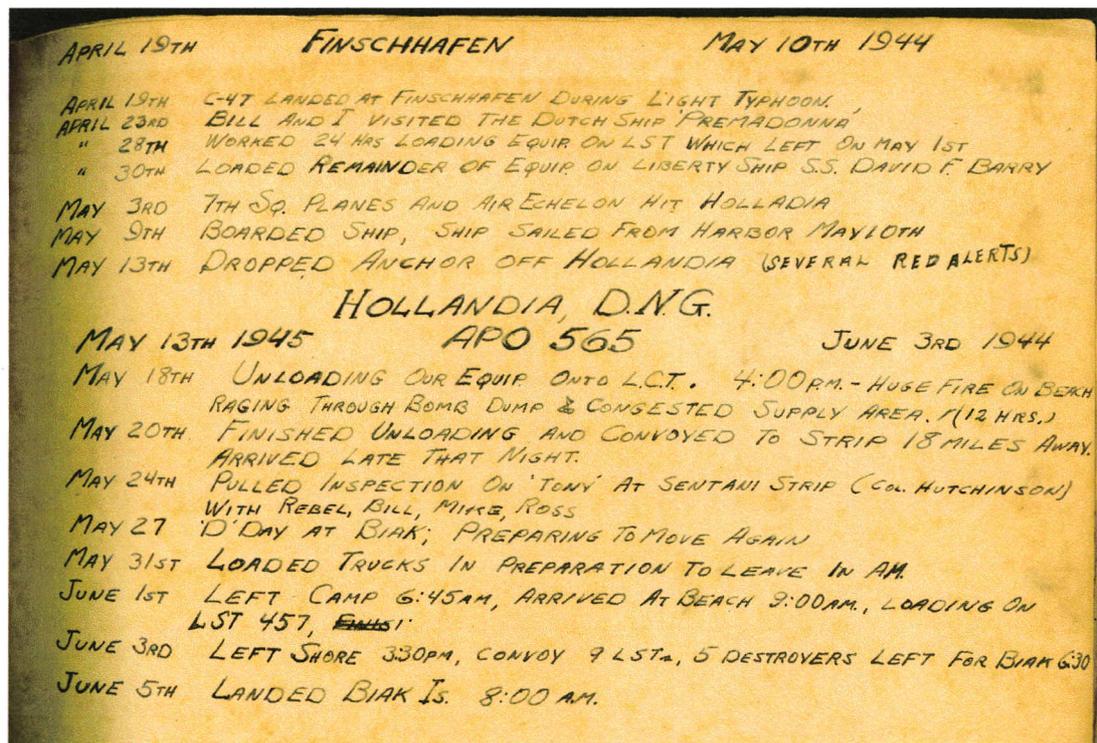
Gorbet: No, the planes and support people were flown to Santeni. The rest of us were flown to Finschhafen. We moved our equipment to Finschhafen on a Merchant Marine ship. All of our equipment was down in the hold of this Merchant Marine ship, but we were confined to the deck. So we just put our Army cots around wherever we could. There were about forty or fifty of us. I don't remember how many were on the ship. They didn't have any facilities for feeding us. We had what we called J Rations. It was just a can of corned beef hash or soup or somethin' like that and then a can of crackers. They allowed the cooks to bring up a field kitchen, and they put it up there. Then we would all open up our cans and dump it in there, and then they would steam it. Then we'd go back and get some. Well, we were living that way for at least six weeks.

Appleton: Oh, my!

Gorbet: So we were on the ship, and we couldn't get off because of the congestion on the beach, and an interesting thing happened there too because the guys were just

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frustrated being on the ship, and we couldn't get off. And so a bunch of them crawled down the anchor chain and got into the ocean, swimming. And they were swimming in the beautiful crystal clear water. I was standing right by the division between where the superstructure was, where the officers were, and there were two officers fishing there. They got ahold of some fishing equipment, and they were fishing. They'd start catchin' some big fish, about two feet long, like tunas, and they'd give the cooks a couple of them. They were starting to cook them. Well, they got one of these fish up about six feet above the water, and it had a backlash on their line, and the fish started bleeding. Some of that blood just discolored the water, and it must have been a shark came up, just came out of the water and snapped the fish off and left the head hanging there. By that time the water was all churned up and frothy, and something came up and jerked the head off.



Journal entries in Finschhafen—April and May of 1944

Appleton: And what did the swimmers do?

Gorbet: They looked like a string of ants going up that anchor chain, all the guys scrambling up the anchor chain! (Laughing)

Appleton: I could imagine that.

Gorbet: Well, we went through that.

Appleton: Now, you didn't go down and swim?

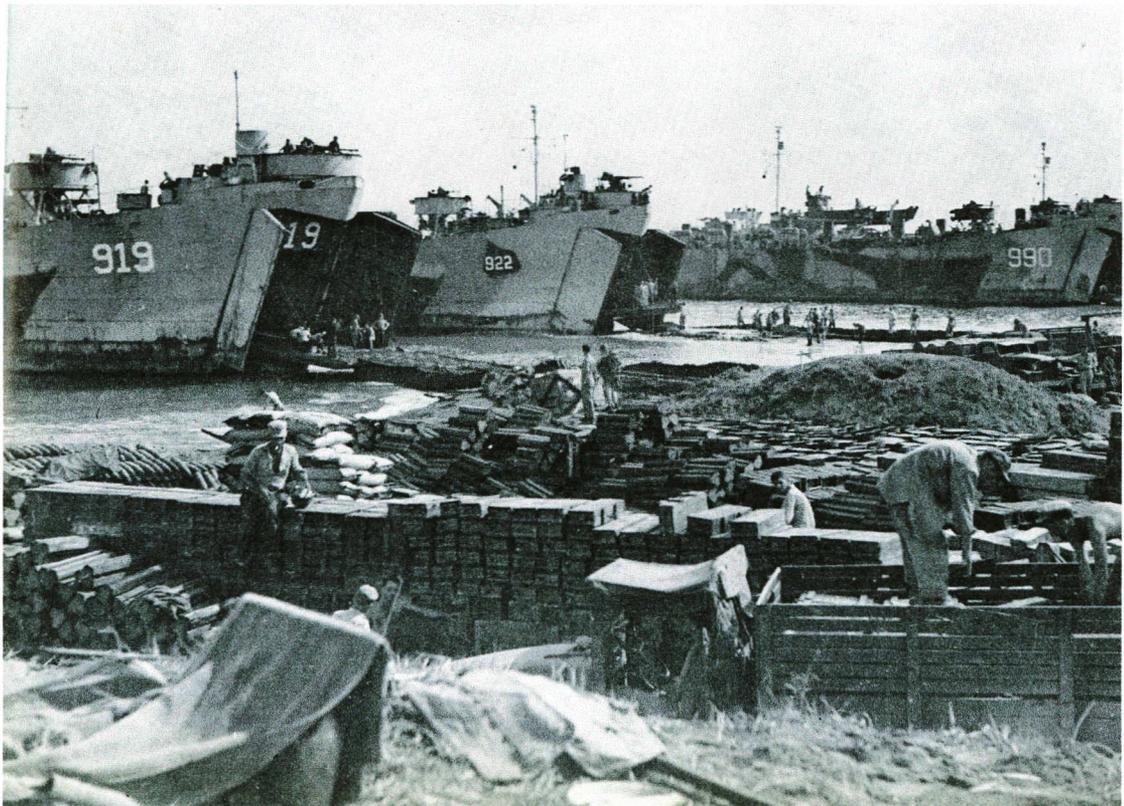
Escondido's Voices
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Gorbet: No. I'm not a swimmer.
Appleton: You're not a swimmer. You were watching.

Gorbet: I was watching the fishermen. At this point we had two officers who stayed up with the ship's crew, and they came by and said, "We're gonna go over to the beach. We understand they have a bakery set up. We're gonna see if we can get some bread, some fresh bread." So they took off in the rowboat. While they were over there, a fire got started, and some of the guys that were on docks detail . . .

Appleton: On your ship or on a different ship?

Gorbet: No. It was unloading the ships on the beach. They got out of there and got on our rowboat and came back to our ship. And they said, "This is gonna be awful! We've unloaded eleven LST loads of equipment and supplies and fuel and everything there; and the beach was so crowded, you could see that it was just a jungle." And they said, "We didn't have any room for fire breaks or anything." And then when you talk about a horrible . . . that must have been about 4 o'clock in the afternoon, and it burned until 4 o'clock the next morning.



LSTs unloading on to a crowded beach, a typical scene on many South Pacific islands during World War II (photo courtesy of The Australia Story Trust in Displaying New Guinea to the Philippines, 1945)

Appleton: Really? Were there people killed?

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Gorbet: I don't know of any casualties. But it would just rock our ships . . . the explosions . . . just flames and fuel . . .

Appleton: How far away were you?

Gorbet: Oh, I would say half a mile, maybe.

Appleton: Really?

Gorbet: Something like that. We were out in that bay . . . in Hollandia Bay . . . but I'd say maybe a half a mile, or maybe not quite that far.

Appleton: It would still rock your ship. Oh my.

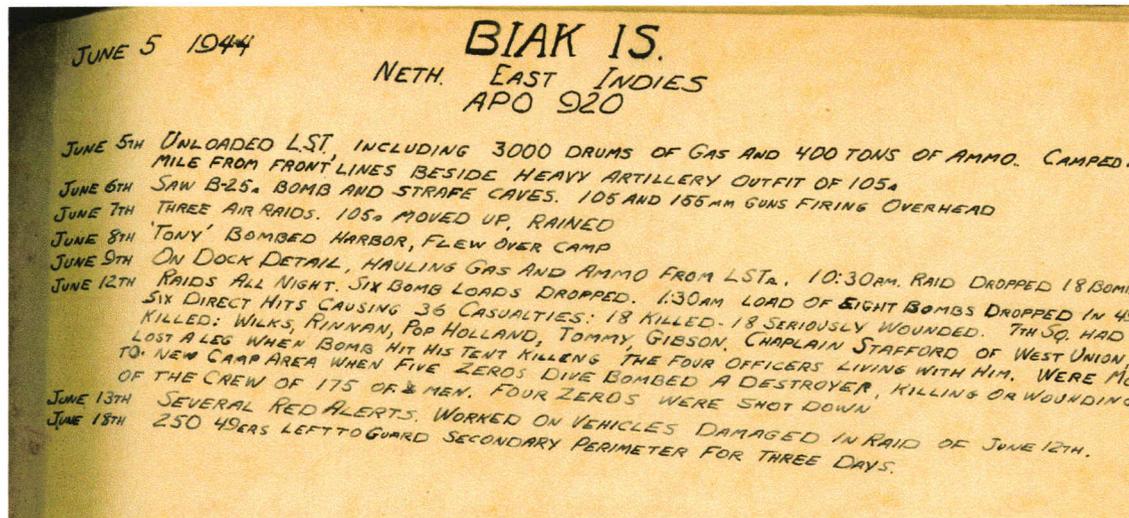
Gorbet: Yeah. Well, when we moved by LST, we'd generally take 3,000, 4,000 drums of gasoline, and then we'd take maybe 300 tons of ammunition . . . bombs and stuff like that. So if they had loaded eleven LST loads with that kind of equipment, it was a huge thing. And dynamite! They said they had enough dynamite to build that road . . . just a little trail that we went on . . . clear to Santeni . . . it was 20 miles.

Appleton: And that all blew up in 24 hours?

Gorbet: Yeah.

Appleton: Did you stay there at Hollandia Bay for a while then?

Gorbet: A week. We were considered the rear echelon on that move. Well, we got over to Santeni, and we started to put up a motor pool. We just cut tree limbs. We had two big tarps that we used for a motor pool. We started to set it up, and our captain came by and he said, "Don't dig in too deep here. We're only gonna be here a week." So we just built a grease rack, and we greased all the vehicles and did what we could. Then within a week we moved over back to the beach, and we loaded on LSTs. We were on the seventh day of the invasion at Biak.



Journal entries while at Biak Island—June 1944

Appleton: Oh, my!

Gorbet: And on that move we were the advanced echelon, what we called an advanced station. There were planes and the pilots, and crew chiefs stayed back at Santeni and continued their missions.

Appleton: Did you have enough supplies to service vehicles most of the time, grease and oil, and that sort of thing? And parts?

Gorbet: Pretty much. Pretty much, but not always.

Appleton: You were O.K. on grease and oil, but parts were hard to get.

Gorbet: Yeah. Sometimes we had difficulty getting parts. And some things . . . we were able to get stuff. Well, in Okinawa . . . they were building up Okinawa for that invasion of Japan, and we could get some stuff there too.

Appleton: Yeah, they had a lot of stuff there. But before we get to Okinawa, you were in the advanced echelon at Biak Island, was that a combat situation? Or had it pretty much finished by the time you got there?

Gorbet: At Biak . . . we were there on the seventh day of the invasion, and they had to land about seven miles from where the airstrip was gonna be.

Appleton: (Looking at a map.) Now this is Biak here. There's Hollandia on the map. Biak is over here.



Map of New Guinea showing the various places on the north coast from Finschhafen to Biak Island where John Gorbet was stationed.

Gorbet: You can't see it on there, but there was a beach where we could land the LSTs, and then it was about seven miles . . . mostly along the ocean front was a bluff . . . maybe fifteen feet or so high, of rock . . . and we got there early in the morning. It was . . . not a mess, necessarily . . . but they gave us the word that the high tide would be at noon. They said, "We're not staying here past noon! (Laughing) So whatever you don't get off here by noon is gonna go with us!" That we're gonna leave here! That was what the instructions were.

So this LST had an elevator that you could bring the equipment to the upper deck. Some of them had a ramp that you could put down, but this one had an elevator. So we were able to start unloading. They had some equipment there already. They built a ramp out to the LST so we didn't have to go through the water. Then the quarter master people sent us a lot of help too, to help us get unloaded. These oil drums were on each side of the tank deck and stacked two high, and you could back up to the stack. They could just roll off eight or ten barrels and you could take off. And then the lower rack . . . the lower stack of oil drums, you could roll those on to the elevator, and then they'd raise it up just to the level of the truck bed. Then they'd roll them on to the truck bed. Then we'd go up a little ways, away from the dock there, where we landed, and there's a canyon. They would just drive up the side of this canyon, back down, put on the brakes and then unload, and just go back and get another load.

Appleton: So you just rolled the barrels down into a canyon and retrieved them later?

Gorbet: Yeah. We had like 300 tons of ammunition and 30 days supply of rations, and we got it all off of there by noon. I think they got everything off. All the vehicles were stacked on the top deck and on the lower deck and drove them off, of course.

Appleton: So you stayed then at Biak for some time?

Gorbet: Well, Biak was a fiasco. I don't know if everybody knows about it or not, but there was a bluff down by the ocean . . . and then there was a kind of a level area, going up towards where we were gonna have the runway. And then behind that were these mountains . . . a ridge of mountains . . . and I guess intelligence hadn't found out about it, but the Japs had caves up there. So when the Infantry and maybe the Marines, too, were moving up to secure this area where we were gonna have the runway, why they were blasted with guns from these caves. So the people that survived, they went down over these cliffs by the ocean, and amphibious tanks came around and rescued a lot of them. But there were a lot of casualties, and it was terrible. It was just a lot more outfits moving in, and it was kind of congested, you know.

Appleton: Now, were you involved in any actual combat?

Gorbet: Just at one point, the Air Force guys were put in foxholes at night to relieve the Army or the Marines to advance. And we were just put there to stop any intruders. We were scared to death . . . because, to me, there could have been a wild pig or something moving in the bushes (laughing) . . .

Appleton: Or a snake or whatever . . .

Gorbet: We weren't used to that, but anyway, I felt sorry for the military that was fighting that. But then we got shoved up farther and farther and more outfits movin' in, and at one place we moved to, we didn't have room to . . . we just had our trucks parked just bumper to bumper practically, in this area. One night it happened that the Japanese dropped bombs off down that way . . . and it damaged some of our trucks, and we lost 23 guys. They targeted some of the tents.

Appleton: In your unit?

Gorbet: Uh-hmm.

Appleton: Wow!

Gorbet: And so it was . . . this is instrumental . . . I was going out . . . we had to change some tires on some of the trucks, so they could use the trucks to go down and take some of the wounded guys down to the hospital. But that was the worst casualties we had . . . in that respect. Then they brought in artillery, and they would blast these caves

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with artillery. Then our planes came with napalm bombs, and they were bombing these caves with napalm.

Appleton: Was this all within your view?

Gorbet: Oh, yeah. We could see it going on. We could stand behind the artillery and see the projectiles moving through the air. And then they brought in a ship, a rocket launching ship . . . whooo! whooo! whoooo! and just blasted those caves.

Appleton: Did the Japanese actually surrender?

Gorbet: Uh-uh. I don't think so. They might have . . . I don't know . . . we don't know. I don't know what happened to the Japanese, but they finally got the area cleared out so we could go up there, so we could move up. Then we'd set up a camp there and put up our tents and everything and whoever was responsible made a runway. It was mostly coral, and they could just grade off a couple of feet of dirt or so. It was just a beautiful long runway. Then after a month or six weeks on Biak, our planes were able to come up there. Then we operated there for maybe a month or two . . . I don't know. But, during that time, I got relieved to go to Australia for rest and . . . what do you call it?

Appleton: R & R.

Gorbet: R & R, so I was gone. I had ten days in Australia.

Appleton: Now, this would have been still in 1943 or had it gone into 1944 by then?

Gorbet: Let's see. It would probably was in the middle of 1944. We spent a couple of weeks at Dobadura, and then we spent two or three months at Gusap, and then we moved to Hollandia. I was only there a week at Hollandia, and then I went to . . .

Appleton: Then you went to Biak.

Gorbet: Yeah, June 5 to October 13, 1944.

Appleton: . . . middle of 1944. So then your fighter group saw continuous action then in that time period?

Gorbet: They were always on the front line.

Appleton: Yes. Right. Then, when did you move to go to the Philippines? Was that your next stop after Biak?

Gorbet: Uh-hmm. We went back to the harbor there . . . at Hollandia Harbor . . . and that's where we joined up with a convoy headed for the Philippines. That was a huge convoy! You hear so many things as rumors, you know . . . but they said the planes took 20 minutes to fly from one end of the convoy to the other.



The 49th Fighter Group went from Biak back to Hollandia Bay, New Guinea in the summer of 1944, to join a 600 ship convoy, destination Leyte in the Philippines.

Appleton: Really? Uh-huh!

Gorbet: Anyway, we landed on Leyte on the third day of the invasion.

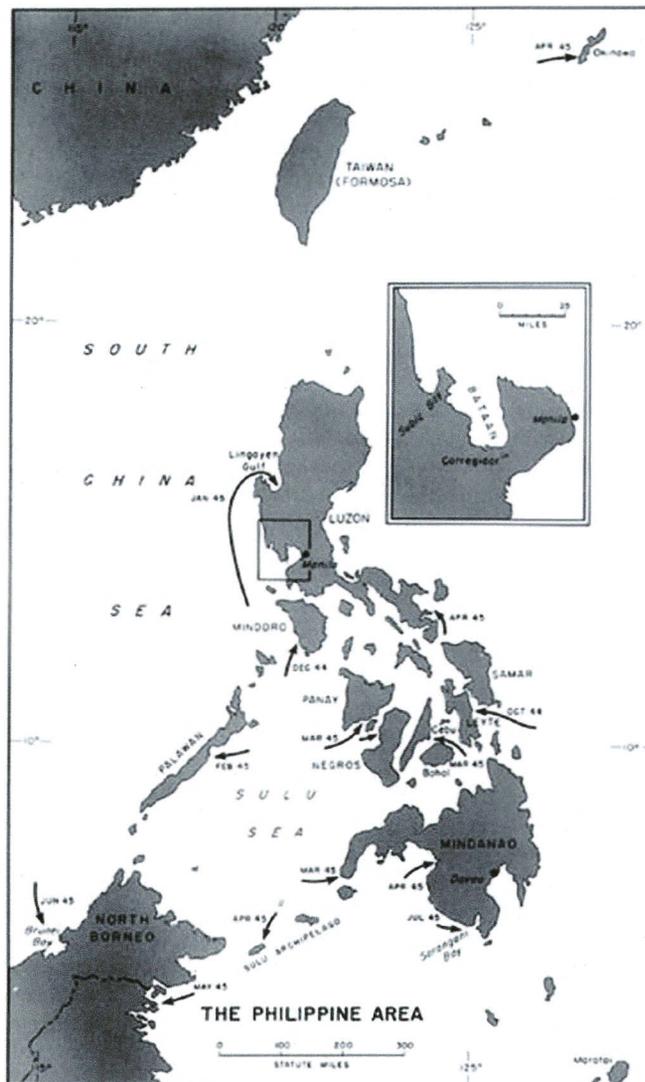
Appleton: Okay. Now, was this after MacArthur actually went ashore? Or was it before? Do you remember? I don't have the date. I should have the date MacArthur went ashore, but it was in '44. I think it was in October of 1944.

Gorbet: Yes, October 23, 1944. Some of the units were sayin', "We're the units that *dug out* Doug!" (Laughing) But I don't know if he was there before us, but he probably was there about the same time.

Appleton: About that period of time, right.

Gorbet: Our experience at Leyte was not the best, because they told us . . . I mean, some more of these rumors goin' around . . . they said, "You're gonna be at Leyte for six months. We know you've been movin', movin', movin'. We're gonna give you six months; so when you get there, build a decent camp and plan on being there." That's what we heard. Now, I don't know if that was official or rumors that got started. But when we got there, our first camp was down across . . . on the other side of the island near a town called Tacloban . . . and the first camp they gave us was not too far from town. The roads were fine. We didn't have any problems with the roads at that time.

Appleton: It was not too far from Tacloban?



The arrow (center right) indicates Leyte, then to Mindoro (center), and finally passing Manila to Lingayen Gulf. All arrows generally trace the northwesterly path which John's unit took as it advanced through the Philippines.

Gorbet: Yeah. But anyway, it was just a couple of miles to the airstrip, it seemed like. But, anyway, we weren't there very long in that camp until they asked us to move to another campsite. For some reason . . . they were havin' some kind of problems. So we moved to another campsite; and while we were there, they had a typhoon. They had a typhoon, and they said it was 90 miles an hour winds and heavy rain. So we would have got swamped in with rain. Because of the heavy rain and all that, and the heavy equipment . . . the roads went out. The roads were falling apart. But, anyway, we were getting' by one way or another. We were only there, not too long, until we were directed

to go to our . . . where it was supposed to be our permanent camp. We got to Leyte on October 23rd, I think it was, and it was getting close to December we got into our regular camp. They had bulldozed a lot of coconut trees down to make a road into where our campsite was gonna be, and it was, oh, maybe a mile . . . a half a mile or so from the runway . . . from the airstrip. Anyway we thought, "Well, we're gonna be here for another three months. . ." So, I had some ingenuous guys in the motor pool, and they said, "Let's build a two story motor pool. We'll have an upstairs . . . they're uncrating a lot of trucks down the road, we can get the lumber." And so, I said, "Well, it'll be okay, I guess." So we went ahead, and we heisted some of the trees that were down. We latched them onto the trees that were standing. And we had three stalls . . . and then we got lumber from uncrating these trucks, and we put a floor in it. And then we had the Filipinos put a roof of bamboo to support the our tarps.



*The two story motor pool on Leyte
Provided work space down below
with living quarters in the cool
tropical breezes up above. John
Gorbet's unit expected to be here
for three months but moved to
Mindoro only two weeks after
Completing this structure in
December of 1944.*

Appleton: A thatched roof?

Gorbet: No. We had the tents. We had two tents. They were about 12 x 40 foot tents, huge tents. So we had those tents put on . . . one on each side of that new roof . . . a beautiful roof . . . it worked out fine. We had stairs going up to it because everything had been so flooded all over the place that you couldn't believe it, you know. The roads were falling apart, and it came to the place where you couldn't get from the highway . . . it was about maybe a couple of hundred yards up to the motor pool . . . the roads were so bad. We just left some vehicles down there by the highway . . . not the highway, but the main road . . . and then the people who used the vehicles could get them there go to the

runways. Well, it didn't take long 'til the roads got so bad that they couldn't get from the motor pool parking lot to the runway. So, then, we would take the guys down towards the town, and to a place down the road where we could get down to the beach, and they would take a barge, then they'd take them around to the air base.

Appleton: By boat or barge?

Gorbet: . . . over to the runway. It was a mess, you know. And they would go down there at daylight . . . and we'd take them down to meet the boat, and they'd go down to the runway and do their thing. Then, in the middle of the morning, the cooks would bring generally a thermos of pancakes. Two of them would be carrying a big thermos of pancakes, taken out to the guys for lunch. So it was a pretty tremendous situation.

Appleton: Yeah. Uhm, how was the food generally?

Gorbet: Oh, we had pretty good cooks that were able to . . . once in a while they would get fresh meat, and frozen, and we had quite a lot of dehydrated potatoes. Well, at different times . . . I don't think the meals probably were all that great, but we got by okay. And a lot of outfits complained about getting too much Spam. We had a situation there in Gusap where the MPs were . . . they didn't have any use for, any mission for the MPs up there, but they were there. So they'd put them on detail unloading the cargo planes that came in . . . the supplies. So, our guys always tried to make some jungle juice, so they traded some jungle juice to these Marines for a case of Spam! We were cooking this Spam in the motor pool and some of our pilots came by (laughing) . . . and so they went to our commanding officer and said, "How come the guys in the motor pool are getting Spam, and we don't ever get any!" (Laughing)

Appleton: (Laughing) You guys were the entrepreneurs. You were trading. You were mentioning earlier before I started the tape recorder, that Charles Lindbergh came over. Was that when you were in New Guinea? Or was it in the Philippines?

Gorbet: It was in New Guinea.

Appleton: New Guinea. And what was the story about Charles Lindbergh?

Gorbet: Well, he agreed to teach our pilots how to save fuel 'cause sometimes they were flying over into China. Some of them thought, well, that young punk didn't know nothin'. So, anyway they finally realized that he could save them fuel, and they had respect for him after it was all over.

Appleton: Yeah. And then you mentioned that he went out on a mission one time?

Gorbet: Yeah. One of the missions that they flew he was flying with them, and he shot down a Jap plane. They claimed he was the only civilian that had a Jap kill.



Charles Lindbergh in flight gear returning from his mission as a civilian pilot when he reportedly shot down a Japanese plane while flying with the 7th Fighter Squadron, 49th Fighter Group

Appleton: That shot down . . . that is an unusual story. Now you also were mentioning that you had several aces . . . pilots called aces . . .

Gorbet: Oh, yeah, yeah. All together we had over 600 Japanese planes shot down. A lot of our pilots were aces. A lot of 'em had five planes. And I think Colonel Johnson had twenty something, and Bong had forty-something. They had a lot of well, you know, aces. Our pilots were aces.

Appleton: When you say six hundred planes, your fighter group had credit for shooting down six hundred planes?

Gorbet: Actually 667 over all. Uh-hmm.

Appleton: In various missions, all the way up through . . .

Gorbet: That was the 49th. That's the whole group. Three squadrons.

Appleton: That's pretty amazing.

Gorbet: Yeah. They did their part.

Appleton: Colonel Bong was one you said had had forty?

Gorbet: Yeah, I think so.

Appleton: And Colonel Johnson had twenty something?

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Gorbet: Uh-huh.

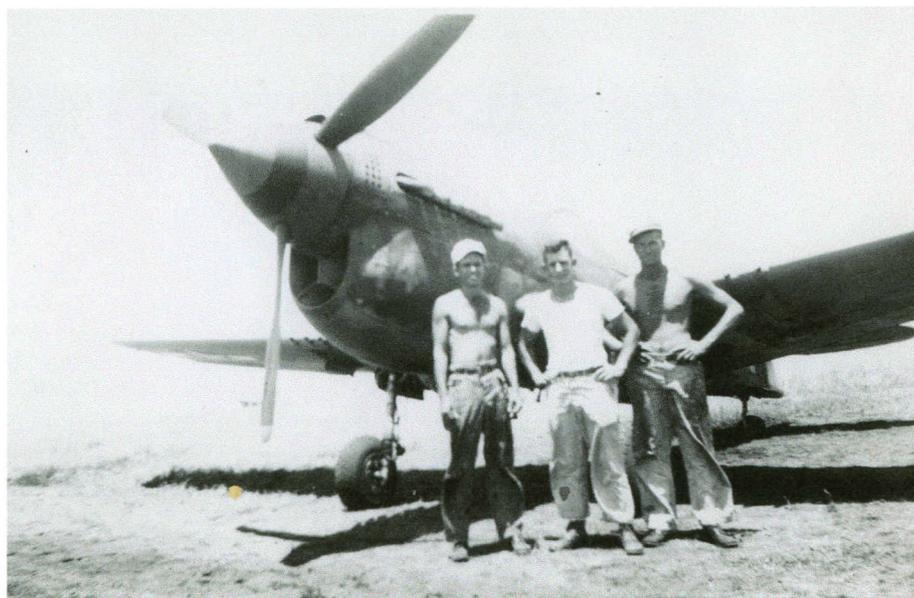
Appleton: Good piloting skill.

Gorbet: Yeah, they were a bunch of good pilots, a bunch of good people.

Appleton: How was the relationship between your enlisted men . . . motor pool group . . . and the pilots? Was it pretty good?

Gorbet: Uh, yeah. We didn't have any trouble with them. Not that I can ever recall. The pilots were a good bunch of people, I thought.

Appleton: And how about the aircraft mechanic folks.



John and fellow airmen are standing in front of a P-40, one of the fighter planes which his motor pool supported.

Gorbet: They were in charge of servicing the airplanes. It was said by Captain Aschenbrenner, 7th Squadron C. O., that they were the best in the business. There was a story going around that the crew chiefs told one of the pilots that, "If you plan on giving us a bad time, you're gonna find an army blanket in there where your parachute ought to be." (Laughing) And another one time, and I can't verify this, but we had a new pilot come in. The crew chief didn't salute him when he got him ready to go, and he complained about it to the commanding officer. And the commanding officer said, "Well, how many Jap planes have you shot down, sir?" He said, "Well, I haven't got any yet." And the commanding officer said, "Well, you're lucky the guys even speak to you." (Laughing) Now, that's just a story now. I can't verify that.

Appleton: It's a story that went around. Well, there was probably some truth in it. Show your skills first, then you get saluted. How about recreation? Did you have time . . . down time when you weren't having to work on your vehicles?

Gorbet: Yeah. We had quite a bit. As I look back on it, I thought, "I wonder why we weren't a bit more involved than we were." A lot of the times . . . in the motor pool . . . we kept getting a certain number of vehicles to do the monthly check, and the rest of them would be all out on the airstrip or in service someplace else. So maybe by noon we'd be finished with checkin' our . . . changing the oil, grease job, and all that we wanted to do, and it was more or less free time in the afternoon. A lot of days were like that.

Appleton: So what did you do? Play basketball or volley ball? Or play cards and chess?

Gorbet: I don't remember. Sometimes the guys would take nap in the afternoon, but I didn't do that, for the most part. I'd generally find some kind of a hobby. I'd make jewelry. We had one guy that repaired watches. And I know for a while I was taking Plexiglas and making crystals for watches. It was a tedious little job, but he'd fix these watches. He couldn't get crystals for them. So I made crystals, you know, in my spare time and made some jewelry, rings and stuff.

Appleton: Did you have USO entertainment groups just come by at times? You mentioned something about Bing Crosby.

Gorbet: Yeah. They did have outdoor movies once in a while in places where we were, but I don't think I ever went to an outdoor movie. I picked up some USO ladies one time, took them to where they was gonna have a show. They wanted me to drive them there. And the lady who was sitting next to me in the jeep, and I had the four wheel drive thing there. I bumped her knee with my hand, and she said, "Oh, I think this has free feeling." (Laughing) It was just crazy stuff like that.

Appleton: You didn't have any intent in that area.

Gorbet: I didn't even remember going to the USO show where they were performing. I just picked them up at the airport and took two or three people to the show where they were gonna perform. I guess I could have gone, maybe.

Appleton: Did Bing Crosby ever come to where you were? Or did you just hear about it?

Gorbet: Uh, he came with our pilots, but I think I recognized that he was there. They hung out together . . . the pilots.

Appleton: More with the pilots than with the enlisted men.

Gorbet: I don't remember seeing him actually.

Appleton: Now, the airplanes had one or two pilots?

Gorbet: Just one.

Appleton: One pilot, and then one person to a plane?

Gorbet: Yeah.

Appleton: It wasn't like the big B-17s and B-24s that had a whole crew of ten or eleven.

Gorbet: No, no. They could take . . . like I mentioned a while ago . . . they could take the radio equipment out, and a person could ride behind the pilot in that situation. I think that's what Bing Crosby did. This was in New Guinea. The paper *Guinea Gold* headline read, "Bing 'Bong' Goes on Bombing Mission."

Appleton: Yes.

Gorbet: That's what they said.

Appleton: They took him up for a ride. That is interesting. So, then you went on to Leyte. You stayed there a number of months then, as long as you expected? Or did they send you out?

Gorbet: No. We built this tree house, and I've got a picture of it. The tents were in a straight line for once, and they had lattice around . . . the Filipinos put lattice around and even bamboo floors and stuff like that.



At the more permanent base camp on Leyte in December 1944, tents were placed in orderly rows with lattice siding and split bamboo floors provided by Filipino craftsmen.

They had it really nicer than we normally had it. Well, anyway, it was gettin' towards the end of the year, and we'd been there two months altogether. That was our third camp that we'd set up, and our officer came by. He said, "Could you guys get ready to leave here in a week?" And I said, "Well, if you say 'leave here', we'll leave, but we won't be ready, I'll tell you that." 'Cause our vehicles had been grinding through that mud and everything, and everything was packed with mud and needed repair . . . and we couldn't keep up. We had a whole one-ton trailer filled with flat tires and stuff that we couldn't seem to get around to.

But anyway, I might have mentioned this Filipino guy. He came a month or so before we left the Philippines, and I think it was after we moved up to the third camp. He said he was a mechanic, and he said he was a member of the guerillas fightin' the Japanese. He said, "They told me that if I went back to being a guerilla, they would take it out on my family." He had a wife and a couple of kids.



Fabio Labanan, formerly a Filipino guerilla fighter, informally became a motor pool mechanic while the 49th Fighter Group was based on Leyte Island. He moved with John's unit all the way to Luzon where this photo was taken.

Appleton: The Japanese would take it out on his family.

Gorbet: They would harm his family. So he said, "I'm not going back." He didn't go back, but he said, "I can work in the motor pool and help as much as I can to defeat the Japanese." So I thought, "Well, that's okay 'cause a lot of us hired a tent boy, anyway . . . to clean up around the tent and make the beds and do other things." So he was a lot of help. He would go around . . . he could speak different dialects (Filipino languages).

Appleton: He was a translator.

Gorbet: Yeah. He'd get eggs for us from the community and different things. One time he got a little pig, and they cooked that. The cooks cooked it for us.

Appleton: Did you cook it in the Filipino style, where you run it through with a bamboo pole and roast it over a fire?

Gorbet: No, it was just a little pig. The cooks had a big pan they put in the oven. It was about this big and about this deep . . . he fit in that. I got a picture of us having a picnic.



The small roasted suckling pig fit into the cooking pan.

Appleton: A roast pig, huh?

Gorbet: The cooks cooked it, and then they brought a couple of loaves of bread over to the motor pool. We had a picnic over there . . . just for the cooks and us . . . the motor pool. (Laughing)

Appleton: Right.

Gorbet: But, anyway, he was a good guy.

Appleton: That's a real Filipino delicacy . . . roast suckling pigs.

Gorbet: Yeah, I've seen quite a few of those in weddings . . . where they had weddings and stuff along the way, different ones.

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Appleton: Right. Well, so this Filipino helper . . . I think I read in your story he was Fabio? Did you call him that or did you have a nickname for him.

Gorbet: Fabio. I think we called him Fabio.

Appleton: Fabio, yeah.

Gorbet: And he always called me "Sir Johnny." (Laughing)

Appleton: Fabio and "Sir Johnny."

Gorbet: Anyway, when we left that motor pool to get on the LST, we pulled out onto the driveway, of what would be the driveway down to the road, and the truck got just sucked down in the mud.

Appleton: Oh, my.

Gorbet: We had a two-and-a-half-ton truck at that time. We had all of our motor pool equipment on that, so we got a bulldozer to pull us out. He gave a big jerk on the thing, and the generator . . . fell off the back of the truck and went in the mud. It went completely out of sight. So I just said, "Keep going! Keep going! Don't stop. We're not gonna even look for it." (Laughing) Anyway, we got out of there. They got us down to the main road, and somehow we got on the LST. And we left our motor pool tent . . . camp, tents and all. On the next island we would have all new equipment.

Appleton: Did another unit take over your tents?

Gorbet: I don't know. I imagine they did.

Appleton: That, or else the local Filipinos did. (Laughing) Did Fabio go with you?

Gorbet: Oh, yeah.

Appleton: Oh, he did?

Gorbet: Yeah. I said, "Fabio, we're gonna leave here. We're going up to Mindoro Island." He said, "Oh, I've got some relatives up there. I know that dialect. I'd like to go up there." By that time he had a carbine and a helmet and army clothes. I don't know where he got them, but he got on the LST. And I don't know why our officers never realized that he was . . .

Appleton: . . . a Filipino.

Gorbet: Yeah. I don't know . . . it never was mentioned.

Appleton: Never questioned it?

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Gorbet: Never mentioned it. I never heard one . . . the only time I ever mentioned it was when we were up in Luzon, and I said, "We're gonna go to Okinawa." "Oh," he said, "I'm don't want to go to Okinawa!" (Laughing) And he said, "I want to go back to Leyte to see my family."

Appleton: Right.

Gorbet: I said, "Fabio, I don't know how you're gonna get back there. You don't have any papers. You're not in the Army." I said, "I'll talk to my transportation officer."

Appleton: Yeah, that's some distance because looking on this map, that's a couple of hundred miles or more.

Gorbet: Yeah. He said, "Oh, I'll put his name on the manifest . . ." That's what they called it in those days. He said, "Next plane that goes to Leyte will take him."

Appleton: So he got back then.

Gorbet: I guess. I should have kept track of him. I feel so bad that I never kept track of him.

Appleton: Well, did others bring along their helpers with them? No . . . Fabio was something special.

Gorbet: Yeah. That was the difference.

Appleton: He wasn't just an ordinary . . . he wasn't just a houseboy. He was a regular

Gorbet: He was one of the gang.

Appleton: You went by LST . . . how large is an LST? Would it be more than a couple of hundred feet long 'cause it would carry trucks and tanks?

Gorbet: Oh, yeah. It had two decks and there's a picture here. I guess they were about 200 feet, more or less.

Appleton: You had one out that you showed me earlier. Here, here it is.

Gorbet: Yeah. Well, yeah. That's an LST. There's other pictures, but anyway, they're pretty good size . . .

Appleton: . . . mostly for moving vehicles and cargo?

Gorbet: Yeah.

Appleton: And it had the advantage of going right up to the beach.

Gorbet: Quite often, oh, two or three hundred feet, before they were gonna land, they would let down an anchor in the back, and then that would help them to put off the beach. They could pull that anchor down and pick up the slack and pull itself off of the beach.

Appleton: And they'd go up at high tide, I suppose.

Gorbet: Yeah. In a high tide. If they couldn't get off the beach, why they would draw on that anchor to haul them back off.

Appleton: You described in your written story that while you were going from Leyte to Mindoro, you came under attack by Japanese planes?

Gorbet: Yeah.

Appleton: What was that like?

Gorbet: Well, it was soon after we left Leyte, and it was kind of a little bit of a mystery because that's where our planes were still operating from . . . Leyte . . . but we didn't have any fighter cover. The Army Air Force wasn't present. But I later found out that at that particular time, three separate convoys were approaching, from different areas, to retake Leyte from the American Army. So I imagine our planes were occupied.

Appleton: The Japanese forces were still on the island of Leyte when you were there?

Gorbet: There might have been some back in the remote areas or the hills or something. I don't know for sure if it was completely secured. But what I heard from "Victory at Sea" (the movie) that at that particular time, there were three convoys coming from different areas, because I think the Japanese were surprised . . . when we took Leyte . . . you know, in that landing at Leyte. It was the first official landing, so they took a little time to recover . . . to take it back. But that was what we understand.

So, in the meantime, I don't know how the Japanese knew about it, we were sitting ducks out there because we didn't have any fighter cover. For about three days we got just ripped up and down with kamikazes. A lot of ships were damaged so bad that at night I asked some of the sailors, "How come every night they're having a big explosion behind the convoy? What is that all about?" He said, "Well, they're sinking ships back there that were damaged too bad to save." At one point they had a burial at sea for a crew that was near enough to us that we could see it. Yeah, there was just ack-ack. Just terrible. The air was just full of it.

Appleton: Were you given any role or responsibility in manning weapons or anything like that in the convoy ?

Gorbet: Some of our people were detailed to bring up ammunition from down below, up to the gunners. The problem that was the most nearest to us was . . . most of the Japanese kamikazes would come diving down. We could see them diving down, diving down . . . and a lot of times the Navy could out-maneuver them. They would just seem like they would give it full throttle and full rudder and just . . . and the Japanese planes couldn't compensate fast enough in the air as they could in the water. And quite a lot of them missed their targets.

But the ones that came to attack us came just horizontal to it . . . maybe 50 feet above the water . . . just came in on that angle and they were approaching our LST on the starboard side, next to the bow. We had an African American, I guess you'd say . . . that was the gunner had 20 mm guns, and you could see the tracer bullets just going right into the cockpit of that plane. And you could even see the pilot, you know, sitting in the plane . . . it was that close. And finally the pilot just bent over, and the plane just went down. That one landed about 30 feet from our LST. Well, we thought that was pretty close. But it wasn't long until another one came in at the same angle . . . same approach . . . and the gunners . . . well, primarily it was only one gunner that was shooting at it . . . and was coming in from his location on the ship and low . . . and he had the only vantage to shoot at it. He shot the pilot in that one, I'm sure, because the bullet . . . you could see the tracer bullets going right into the cockpit. Well, he came closer to us because when he dived into the ocean, he went right underneath our LST. I looked over the side, and they had a green marker dye that helps them locate downed planes. That was boiling up underneath the ship, along the side of the ship, and it was just amazing. You couldn't believe it because the pilot's goggles was floating just alongside of the ship! That's how close it came to getting us.

Appleton: But it didn't touch the ship.

Gorbet: No. Then there was another ship in their convoy . . . next to us . . . looked to be a . . . we thought it was a Merchant Marine ship or freighter of some kind . . . but it was next in line across from us. And the next alert we got was that there was Japanese coming in from our stern. So everybody was gettin' . . . and there was a lot of ack-ack shooting at that plane, coming in from our stern. Before he got to where we were, he took it banked to the right; and he went over and he hit and landed in that Merchant Marine ship. There was a little smoke, and we didn't see any fire or anything. So we thought maybe there wasn't going to be anything. So then the next report we got on this PA system was that there was two or three more Japanese planes approaching. We turned our attention to looking to see if we could spot them. And then all at once . . . this was an ammunition ship that blew up. Just like one big bomb just KOOOOHHH, and then there was just a cloud of smoke . . . you couldn't see anything except the cloud of smoke over there . . . clear down to the ocean.

Appleton: And the ship disappeared.

Gorbet: We just kept lookin' and lookin', and as the smoke cleared away, there was just a blank place over there.

Appleton: So you just saw a cloud of smoke and no more ship?

Gorbet: Yeah. But the concussion of it rocked our LST severely. We had a tent up on deck for shade . . . it wasn't probably secured too well . . . but it came down. The Filipino I mentioned, he happened to be under there, and he come scrambling out from underneath. (Laughing) He said, "This is it Sir Johnny. This is it!" Anyway, on the opposite side of the ship we had some guys down there that were on detail bringing up ammunition, and somebody from the ship's crew came down and wanted to know if anybody was hurt down there. And they said, "No," but the ship started taking in water in that compartment. But we don't know what caused it because it was on the opposite side of our LST from where the explosion . . . so we don't know what happened. But they had a pump continually running until we got to Mindoro. It was only two or three more days.

Appleton: And then did you ever get air cover at all?

Gorbet: Yeah. About the end of the third day they told the gunners to cease fire because we got air cover. Before the air cover arrived, a bomber came in . . . it was getting towards late in the day . . . and just coming like when you hear the noise coming out of the sun . . . it was just coming right from our port side and coming towards our ship, and all of a sudden the gunners all started blasting away at that one. (Laughing) It was just like in the movies 'cause pretty soon one of the engines caught on fire, and then part of the wing blew off, and everything just started come tumbling down. Shortly after that our P-38s arrived. By that time we had P-38s. Earlier in the war we had P-40s, but by then we had P-38s.

Appleton: So then you went to Mindoro for a length of time?

Gorbet: Yeah, we got up there, and we were there for probably not more than two months or maybe just six weeks. I don't know now. But when we got up there, because our vehicles had been through all that mud and neglect at Leyte, the LST that we was on had a ramp, and it didn't have an elevator like the other we had talked about. It had a ramp going down and a lot of our vehicles wouldn't start. So sometimes some of them coasted down the ramp, and got it going. It was terrible. I think every vehicle that would run was towing one that wouldn't run. I thought that if the Japanese saw that, they would take heart, but anyway we made it up to where the camp was supposed to be. The road going up to the camp was right along beside a canal, and the canal was maybe 12-15 feet wide. The camp was on one side of the road, and then the canal, so we just parked a lot of our vehicles along the side of that road. They said, "Well, your motor pool is gonna be on the other side of this canal. It'll be a few days before we can get a bridge put across there." So we said, "Well, okay." I forget if it was five jeeps or six jeeps . . . we just put them up on their side and pulled the wheels off and got the mud out and cleaned them

out, and cleaned out underneath, and put on whatever parts we could scrounge. Some parts we traded with other outfits.

Appleton: So you did the servicing just by tipping your vehicles back and forth.



Under difficult and muddy conditions on Mindoro Island before the motor pool was ready, the jeeps had to be tipped up on their sides for normal maintenance.

Gorbet: Yeah. And then we'd turn them over on the other side and got the other side. By the time we had those five or six jeeps back in service, they had the bridge built. When we got across and set up a lean-to motor pool on the other side of the creek. So that was one of the fiascos.

Appleton: Now, the fighter group then . . . were they involved in missions up towards Manila by that time?

Gorbet: Our planes were there, too, flying missions every day. I don't know what there targets were.

Appleton: Yeah, your planes, right.

Gorbet: I don't know where their targets were. They could have been anywhere, Japanese bases or supporting ground troops.

Appleton: Well, I guess Manila was about the last to fall. It could have been later in 1944 or maybe even '45 by this time. So you were in Mindoro then for a number of months?

Gorbet: Well, it wasn't more than two months I think. Then we left all of our tents and everything there. We flew us up to Lingayen (north of Manila on the island of Luzon). In Lingayen we moved into a school campus. It was right near the ocean. We

had our motor pool underneath the bleachers of this school . . . in the back, behind the bleachers there. It was pretty good.



At the Lingayen base camp the motor pool was conveniently housed under the school bleachers which provided ready shelter from the elements.

Appleton: Your motor pool . . . did you all have then . . . what? Sets of tools and things that you had to have and keep?

Gorbet: I don't know. I don't remember if we had a screwdriver or not.
(Laughing)

Appleton: You must have had a few wrenches though. (Laughing) I think of an auto mechanic nowadays. You know he's got his toolbox and drawers and wrenches and all kinds of things. Did you have Army issued tools?

Gorbet: Oh, we must have had . . . that's something that slips my mind. I can't tell you.

Appleton: You just did the best you could, even with what few tools you had.

Gorbet: Yeah. We did more work on them then normally was required. In the motor pool we were supposed to do first and second echelon work, and that was just brakes and lubrication and minor repairs.

Appleton: You didn't rebuild engines and stuff like that.

Gorbet: No. We weren't supposed to. But anyway, there was a lot of crazy things that happened along the way. When we were down at Leyte, there were a lot of ships comin' in there with supplies. One thing was . . . at that time . . . there was a stack of mail bags as big as a gymnasium . . . just out in the weather.

Appleton: Oh, my.

Gorbet: They didn't have anybody to take care of it. They passed the word around that if we had extra help, they could come down and sort through the mail bags and see if there was mail for everybody. Well, we were driving around looking the situation over, and there was another place where they had unloaded a lot of Army motor parts . . . supplies . . . and there was all kinds of stuff. There were no MPs around there to keep people from stealing things or whatever, so we just there decided we might as well take what we needed. So we stocked up on some headlights and generators, starters, and whatever we found. We even took a couple of jeep engines that were crated. Well, when we got up to Lingayen, one of the pilots was assigned to be the transportation officer, and he found a Japanese torpedo boat that wasn't in too bad a shape. Some of the parts of the engine were missing, so he wanted to know if we had an engine. (Laughing) So he took one of the engines and put it in the PT boat, and patched it up. He let the guys in the motor pool use it too. We'd take it out on the bay there. We were camped right on the beach, and we'd tool around. They needed it to rescue a pilot if one was downed at sea.

Appleton: If the gear was set right, you'd get pretty good . . .

Gorbet: We had left the transmission on; and if you'd run it in second gear, you could almost pull a guy on skis. (Laughing)

Appleton: That's right. (Laughing)

Gorbet: But, anyway, that was just crazy. A lot of crazy stuff happened that people wouldn't believe.

Appleton: Did you have much . . . other than Fabio and a few houseboys . . . did you have much other contact with Filipinos?

Gorbet: Not a whole lot.

Appleton: Did they come by wanting to sell stuff to you?

Gorbet: Sometimes . . . we went to some parties like weddings, you know. They'd invite us to go to the wedding or reception, or something like that. I remember one place we went . . . I don't know too much about it, but there were several of us there. Of course, the few of us from California or Texas, they knew all about it, because they'd seen it in a movie.

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Appleton: (Laughing) That's right.

Gorbet: But they had a piano, and these girls were actually shocked that none of us guys could play the piano. They thought all of us should be able to play it. Just from what they'd seen in the movies, I guess. I remember they were so shocked that we couldn't play it.

Appleton: Well, then, from Lingayen . . . you were there for a short while before you had to move on to Okinawa? Did you ever get down to Manila?

Gorbet: Oh, yeah. I got some pictures that we took down around the bay down there.

Appleton: But your base was always in Lingayen?

Gorbet: We didn't camp anywhere else. We were probably there maybe a couple of months. Oh, that was a hard time for me. When we got to Lingayen, the 5th Army had a supply depot there for vehicles, and they said, "Well, if you can do all the first and second echelon work on your vehicles and have all the parts that are missing backordered and turn it in, we'll give you a new jeep." So all of our jeeps had been all through Australia for a year, and all those places in New Guinea and all and in the Philippines . . . they were just a bunch of wrecks. So we got busy, and we got 12 new jeeps. We could get parts pretty regularly. So we had all of our vehicles, and it looked we were getting in pretty good shape, you know, for once. Well, there was an outfit that came from the Marshall Islands, and they camped right across the road from us. After they'd been there two or three weeks, they got orders to go to China. They got a Triple-A priority to take any equipment or supplies from any other outfit . . .

Appleton: Oh, oh! (Laughing)

Gorbet: . . . so they just looked our outfit over, and they said, "Well, we'll just take all of your vehicles, and you could have all of ours." Man! We thought, "GOLLY! After all the work we did all those blasted weeks to get a decent fleet . . . !" And we got stuck with them.

Appleton: Now, were most of your vehicles jeeps or were they also trucks?

Gorbet: Oh, we had a couple of ambulances and jeeps, and then some of them were weapons' carriers. They were a little bit bigger than a jeep. They used them for the ordnance people. But, boy, that was a hard blow to take for us. I guess we should have just figured it was part of the job, but it felt kind of hurtful at the time.

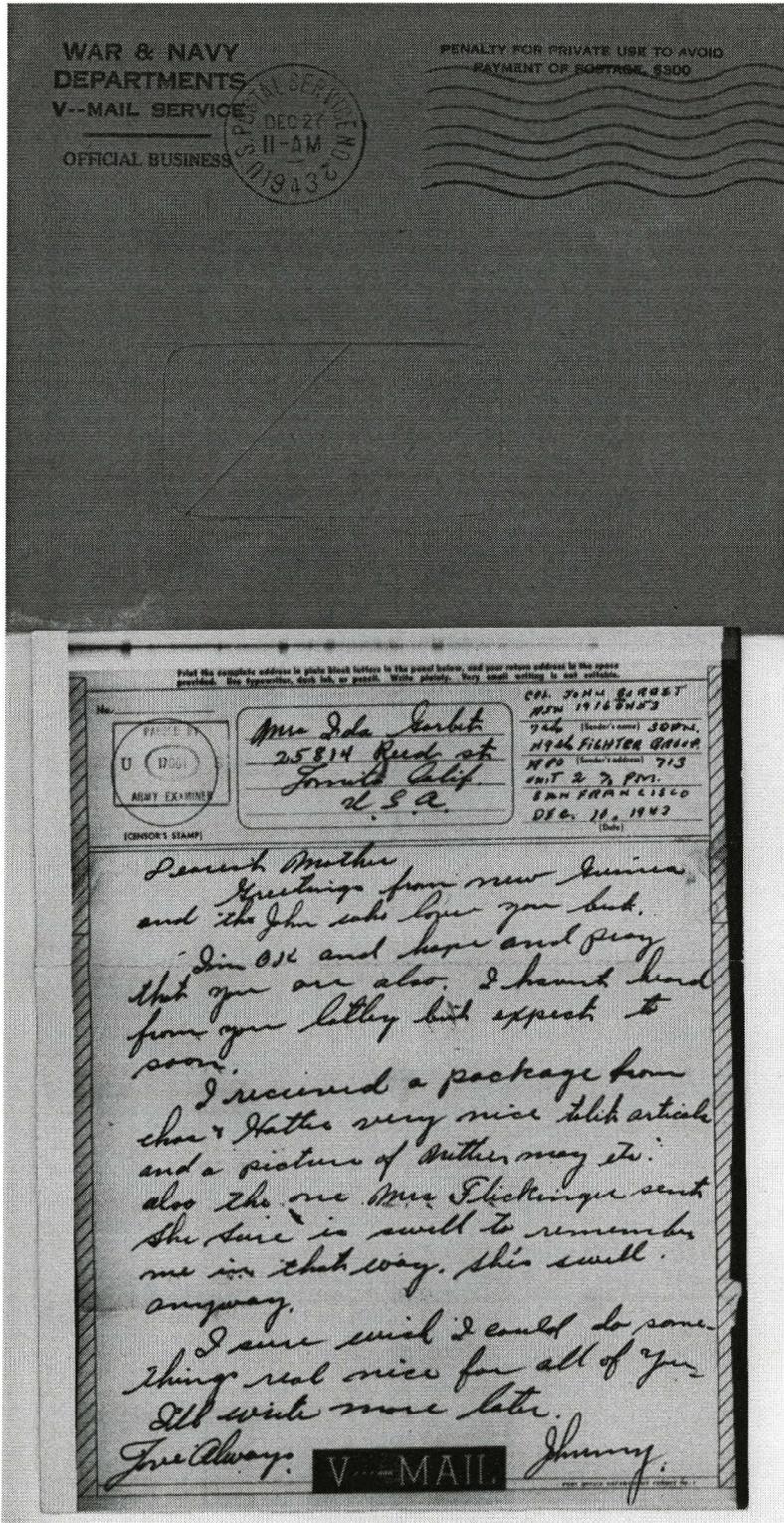
Appleton: Disheratening . . . I can imagine! Did you have much contact with home, mothers, you know . . . ?

Gorbet: Pretty good. We had quite a bit of mail.

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- Appleton: It didn't get stuck in the mountain of mailbags out in the rain?
- Gorbet: No. I guess they finally got that straightened out. I got one package in the . . . it was there at Lingayen. One thing we got quite a bit over there was Vienna sausages, canned Vienna sausages, and fruit cocktail was a mainstay. An old girlfriend I had back in the States, that's what she sent me for Christmas. (Laughing) Another package of Vienna sausages and a record, "Don't Fence Me In," and I gave it to the social service guys. They played it over the loudspeaker about a hundred times. (Laughing)
- Appleton: Until it wore out. (Laughing)
- Gorbet: Yeah, we got mail.
- Appleton: Was your mail censored? Or were you told not to describe certain things?
- Gorbet: The mail we sent out was.
- Appleton: But the mail coming in . . . ?
- Gorbet: I don't remember that it was censored.
- Appleton: It didn't look like it.
- Gorbet: I got a lot of V-mails. Those V-mails were pretty popular.
- Appleton: Did the V-mails come to you or you sent them?
- Gorbet: I think we got them, too.
- Appleton: You got them. V-mails went both ways.
- Gorbet: It seemed like it.
- Appleton: Those were the paper that was folded together into an envelope, right? Is that what the V-mail was?
- Gorbet: It was just a photocopy, a photostatic copy.
- Appleton: Oh, I see. Yes. Okay. So the letter had been written, and then they made a photostat and sent it to you.
- Gorbet: I think that's what it was.

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One of John Gorbet's many V-mail letters home

Appleton: Oh, that's interesting. Did you save any of those?

Gorbet: Yeah. I think I do. I have them some place.

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Appleton: If you find one of those we can make a copy of one or two, if they're not too personal, and we can put it into the interview transcript.

Gorbet: I had a bunch of those. I'll have to see if I can find them.

Appleton: Oh, that would be interesting, show people what they looked like. So, from Lingayen then you were ordered to move on again, to . . . ?

Gorbet: Okinawa.

Appleton: . . . Okinawa.

Gorbet: And I don't remember when the war ended . . . when we were finally on our way to Okinawa, or after we got to Okinawa . . . but we went to Okinawa to stage for the invasion of Japan. When we got there, why, I could see that they had a lot of equipment in place to prepare for the invasion 'cause whatever things you wanted we could just about get in Okinawa. But then we got the order to go on up to Japan for occupation.

Appleton: So that would have been in the summer of '45?

Gorbet: Uh-huh.

Appleton: The war ended in August . . . in September . . . when they surrendered in September.

Gorbet: I forget just when we got there, but we got there very early on in the occupation. We were some of the first . . .

Appleton: So you didn't stay long in Okinawa. Then you went on to Japan.

Gorbet: We missed the typhoon. I don't know how we missed it exactly. They had a typhoon there about that time that sunk some ships. In fact, some of our guys either went after us or ahead of us, now I don't know which. They flew in like a C-47, and they got into the weather. They decided to land on a little island where they had a radio station, a radio transmitter, and it had a cement block building on it. They landed there. They tied the airplane to two 6 x 6 trucks, one on each wing tip, and then they stayed in this blockhouse over the night. When they got up the next morning, the plane was upside down; and one of the trucks was up on top of the plane. I had a picture of that, and I can't find it. My cousin wanted it. But it might show up yet. But that's how severe that typhoon was . . . the wind.

Appleton: Well they were lucky they were in the blockhouse.

Gorbet: Yeah, right. We went by LST, but I don't remember that we encountered the typhoon. Maybe we got out of there before it hit. I don't know. When we got into the bay, going into Yokohama Bay, there were beautiful big ships there. Of course, the *Missouri* was there . . . where they signed the peace treaty.

Appleton: So you got there at about the time the peace treaty was signed, or about that time.

Gorbet: Yeah, because we went past the *Missouri* and past *King George V*, that was the flagship from England . . . and a lot of other ships that I didn't recognize. We worked our way through the harbor. There were a lot of ships in the harbor. Then we landed at Yokohama and convoyed up to Atsugi (Naval Air Facility). It probably wasn't the same day we arrived, but I visited the guard shack at the entrance to Atsugi. It was just stacked full of shotguns. I picked out a nice one and took it along with me. They must have used those for guard duty or something.

Appleton: Yes. Did you see Japanese people then?

Gorbet: Yeah, quite a few.

Appleton: What was their reaction to those first days of occupation?

Gorbet: When Hirohito . . . their emperor. . . who said the war was over . . . they accepted it. I didn't hear a shot. After we landed, you know, they could have, but I didn't see any problems of any kind that we had with the civilian people.

Appleton: Yeah. That is truly amazing. But, you're right. When the emperor said that it was over, they were stunned, and then it was over.

Gorbet: Yeah. It seemed like that's the way it was.

Appleton: Was there much talk about . . . when you found out the atomic bomb had been dropped . . . in your group, and among your buddies . . . was there much talk about that?

Gorbet: No, it was kind of a rumor for us. We heard earlier on that they had developed a special but heavy bomb.

Appleton: Did you know that it was called an atomic bomb, or was it just a big bomb?

Gorbet: We just heard little bits of rumors about it.

Appleton: Was there some discussion among your group then that this was why the war was ended?

Gorbet: We probably didn't understand the magnitude of the blast, actually. We probably heard that it caused the war to end, but we probably didn't understand the magnitude of it. That's the way I feel about it. I don't remember having much discussion about it.

Appleton: There's been a lot of discussion since then.

Gorbet: Yeah, that's for sure. That was a hard decision to make to do that, but it saved a lot of lives. But it cost a lot of lives, too.

Appleton: Well, war is a tragedy, of course and that was a big tragedy in the war. You stayed at Atsugi . . .

Gorbet: In my understanding, that was a kamikaze training camp.

Appleton: Okay. Was there anything left over from the Japanese military . . . air military that had been at that base before?

Gorbet: There were a lot of airplanes, and a lot of them looked like experimental planes that were partly disassembled. The reason I thought it was Colonel Johnson that was our commanding officer, we were told that our commanding officer was given the responsibility of cleaning up the base. There was a little canyon along one side of the base, and whoever was responsible for it, it would be like the character of Colonel Johnson. But I guess it was somebody else. They were bulldozing all those planes down in that canyon and burned them.



Upon arrival at the Atsugi Naval Air Facility on Japan in the summer of 1945, the 49th Fighter Group found Japanese Zeroes parked outside base hangars.

Appleton: Oh, really, the Japanese planes that were still there?

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Gorbet: Yeah. And we went through the maintenance shops, and there were a few supplies left there. There was a beautiful welding torch in a box, all the equipment. . .

Appleton: But the base hadn't been destroyed from any of the bombings?

Gorbet: No. There were some . . . oh, like some . . . I got some of those little toggle switches . . . in Japanese . . . off and on . . . and stuff like that. There was a place where they had the flying suits, lined with rabbit fur, and I brought (out) a pair of gloves that had an electrical attachment that would attach to the flying suit, and that suit could be plugged into the airplane . . . like an electric blanket.

Appleton: A heated suit.

Gorbet: Heated, yeah. I gave those gloves to one of my grandsons; but if I still had them, I'd put them in the museum that you're talking about down there.

Appleton: Yeah, that would be interesting.

Gorbet: But I don't know if I could get them back. Anyway, there was also a mock-up of a B-29. I have a photo of it here.



At the Atsugi Naval Air Facility, the 49th Fighter Group found this mock-up B-29 constructed of wood and sheet metal, no doubt considered to be a disheartening diversion to Allied aerial reconnaissance.

Gorbet: We were housed in a condominium where they had quarters for the trainees. Another thing they had there that was kind of interesting was they had a tall pole . . . it must have been, I would say, at least 150 feet high . . . something like that . . .

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and it had a cable clear down . . . anchored down, and they had a little airplane that you could get in and ride that cable down. You could get the feeling of controlling an airplane. That was part of the training equipment they had there.

Appleton: Then didn't have to use any fuel. (Laughing)

Gorbet: Yeah, that was probably one thing.

Appleton: How long did you stay then in Japan at that base?

Gorbet: In don't know. Probably not more than six weeks. I don't know. We were letting all the vehicles out because the war was over; and so if anybody wanted to use the vehicles, you know, we'd let them out. Some of 'em were getting' stuck, I guess. It was raining quite a bit. So, anyway, that's what brought it to an end.

Appleton: You were on the point system?

Gorbet: Yeah.

Appleton: Did you have enough points to get out? You were in for a long time, weren't you?

Gorbet: That was part of the problem. The first sergeant said he wanted me to ground all the vehicles. He said, "Don't even let the pilots have them. We've got to put a stop to this. Don't let any vehicles out." So I said, "Okay." The next day a couple of guys came to the motor pool, and I don't even know them now . . . who they were . . . guys that I'm not familiar with. They said they wanted to get a jeep, and I said, "Well, the sergeant said I had to ground all the vehicles. What do you need a jeep for anyway?" He said, "Well, we're going down to MacArthur's headquarters and see why these other outfits are sending home people with 70, 80 points. Most of us have 130 points or more!" (Laughing) I said, "Well, just take any one that looks good to you." I was sticking my neck out then, of course. I said, "Well, I don't care at this stage. I've had enough."

Appleton: You wanted to go home.

Gorbet: Yeah. So, some of this is hearsay, but not all of it, I'm sure, but the next morning people from the adjutant and the general came with a couple of guys. They wanted to know why we weren't sending some of these people home. They said, "Well, their medical records are all fouled up, and we're trying to get them straightened out." Well, they said, "Well, there's a ship down there at Yokohama. It's gonna leave here in three days, and some of these guys better be on it." So that's what I was told.

Appleton: Now, how many were in your group?

Gorbet: One hundred, more or less.

Appleton: How many went home then?

Gorbet: Oh, there were probably twenty-five, something like that.

Appleton: These were just your maintenance people or pilots too?

Gorbet: No. I don't think it was the pilots 'cause the pilots . . . I think they rotated them more frequently than they did the ordinary mechanics and so forth. Those people . . . they took us out and gave us seven shots a piece, and that's how we got our medical records straightened out. (Laughing)

Appleton: (Laughing) Whether they were needed or not.

Gorbet: So I thought, well, they're gonna take my staff sergeant's stripes off when I get there. But I talked to the first sergeant, and he said, "Well, if you'd like to stay over . . . stay over . . . I'll get you another stripe." But I said, "No thanks. I've had enough. I've had enough." (Laughing)

Appleton: So then you got back to the U.S. I assume that it didn't take twenty days.

Gorbet: No. They treated us pretty mean in a way. I don't know if it was intentionally, but they moved us over to another camp, a few miles away. It was near the railroad tracks, and we stayed there for a day or two. Then we packed all our bags up, and they put us alongside the railroad track. They said, "Well, a train's gonna come by, and it'll take you down to Yokohama." But we sat out there prit'near all night in the rain because we didn't want to take a chance on missing the train. We finally got on the train, and we got down to Yokohama. I don't remember anything more about that, except on the way back . . . it was a beautiful ship . . . it was a luxury liner that was in construction, and they made it into a troop transport. But it was a brand new, big beautiful ship. We went around by the Aleutian Islands, and it was going through like a speedboat. It took us nine days to go back from Japan to San Francisco.

Appleton: That's pretty fast. And you went into San Francisco. That must have been a good feeling.

Gorbet: Yeah, that was . . . underneath the Golden Gate Bridge.

Appleton: Oh, is that right?

Gorbet: Well, that was pretty exciting.

Appleton: Were there people that were watching the ships coming in?

Gorbet: No. It was pretty uneventful, really.

Appleton: No brass bands?

Gorbet: No. We got off the ship and got onto a harbor boat, and they took us up to Camp Stoneman.

Appleton: And you were discharged then right away?

Gorbet: Yeah. Well, my brother-in-law was in the same outfit. Of course, he wasn't my brother-in-law then.

Appleton: Right.

Gorbet: But he was a chaplain's assistant. I knew him somewhat because the chaplain was in the headquarters . . . in the 49th headquarters . . . and we were in one of the squadrons. There was seldom that much interaction between us, you know. They were here and we over there. But I'd see him a couple of times. When he came into Seattle about the same time I came to San Francisco . . . maybe a little later . . . but we both had to go to Fort MacArthur to get discharged. So I was getting some dental work done because it had been two-and-a-half years since I had any dental work done. So he came in and we met in the area there. He said, "You were in the 49th Fighter Group." I said, "Yeah, I know you. You're the chaplain's assistant." (Laughing) He said, "Yeah, that's me. We could get off at night. I just live there in Lomita, near San Pedro." I don't know if I had a car. I might have had access to a car, but I said, "Well, come out and stay the night with me, and we'll come back in the morning. You can meet my Mom and my sister."

Appleton: How was it when you got home then? Was that a big homecoming when you walked through the door? Or did they meet you at the train station?

Gorbet: No. I don't remember. I don't remember that. I don't know how that happened.

Appleton: At least you got home again, and then your friend was with you?

Gorbet: Yeah. He said, "When I get out, I want you to come down to Escondido and meet my family."

Appleton: Oh, okay.

Gorbet: So, it wasn't too long that I got a letter and a map showing me how to get up to his place up there, behind Lake Wohlford. So I went up there, and then I met his sister. That's where I got my wife.

Appleton: And the rest is history. (Laughing)

Gorbet: Yeah, right.

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Appleton: Isn't that interesting. So you were discharged then in the fall of 1945?

Gorbet: Yeah. I got the date here. Let's see . . . I thought I had it here. Yeah, here it is. Let's see . . . date of arrival . . . date of destination . . . date of departure.

Appleton: You arrived on November 5th, I guess. You arrived in the United States on November 5.

Gorbet: Yeah, that's probably it.

Appleton: So you were discharged somewhat after that.

Gorbet: Yeah. It was still in December when I got discharged.

Appleton: That was a long time to be away from home, from June of '43 to December of '45. That was a long haul.

Gorbet: It was 27 or 28 months.

Appleton: Now, did you keep up with military groups and all, or any of the organizations?

Gorbet: No. That's one of my big failures. I had good friends in there. One guy, he came out to see me a couple of times from Ohio. But he passed away before now. He passed away a long time ago.

Appleton: So, your military career then was over, and, of course, you weren't injured, but you got the Bronze Star for the action . . . ?

Gorbet: I guess that was from the kamikazes.

Appleton: And that was probably what? Loading ammunition up from the lower decks and up to the gunners so that they could . . . ?

Gorbet: I really didn't have any part of it. I was just a spectator.

Appleton: But you were given the award anyway.

Gorbet: Somehow they passed that on to me.

Appleton: That's a prestigious award so there must have been something going on during that incident?

Gorbet: I don't know how they figured it.

Appleton: Was your military experience more or less a positive one, or was it just a kind of interruption in your life?

Gorbet: Oh, I think it was positive. I enjoyed seeing some of the world, and, like you said, not get injured particularly. I met a lot of interesting people. I don't have any ill-feelings or regret from being in the military.

Appleton: Of course, with your military contacts, then you met your wife.



John and Virginia Gorbet in 1958 or 1959

Gorbet: Yeah. So it turned out good.

Appleton: That turned out good. And you were married to your wife until she passed away not too long ago. So you were married how long?

Gorbet: Fifty-six years. We were married in '46, and she died in '04.

Appleton: Fifty-six years! Well, so, in a way, the military did affect your life greatly.

Gorbet: Yeah. There was one episode that we by-passed. I don't know if it's necessary to bring it up at this time, but when we landed at Leyte, a whole lot of LSTs were lined up on the beach. That was an area between the beach, and it had been embedded with chicken wire. The Japanese had apparently used that for an emergency landing strip. Well, at that time . . . that was the third day of the invasion . . . they hadn't taken any other airstrips on the island that were capable of handling any of our aircraft. Well, as we were unloading our LST, Navy planes started landing right in front of us . . . on that emergency beach there . . . and since we had fuel tankers and ammunition and all the equipment to service our plane, they asked us to see what we could deal with those Navy planes. A lot of them were able to be refueled and put ammunition in, and they took off again.

Appleton: Oh, really?

Gorbet: Yeah. I don't know if anybody ever documented that or not.

Appleton: Well, that's interesting. They came in and landed. Were they carrier-based planes?

Gorbet: Yeah, but the carrier had been sunk. I tried to find out the name of that carrier, but I'm not sure I ever did. There was a carrier sunk that day, and apparently that was the one they were from. They didn't have a place to land, so they came in there.

Appleton: They went back to the action, and I suppose they had to come back again.

Gorbet: If they had a crack-up or lost a wheel or something, they'd drag them off to the side and let them take another one. But if they were okay, then they would fuel them up and ammunitions. . .

Appleton: Well, that's the can-do spirit, where you just make-do with what you've got. Oh, that is an interesting story. Well, I think we've probably covered most of the waterfront here, and what I'd like to do afterwards is just to take a look at the photos and. We can decide which ones we want to include. But I think that it would be a nice story to keep in the History Center Museum and the Library of Congress, and probably the Veterans Museum in San Diego, as well. I think that's probably all the questions that I have, so I want to thank you for this conversation.

Gorbet: Well, thank you. Thank you.

Appleton: The transcript and then the photos that go with it will be part of the collection at the Library . . . the Escondido Public Library and the Escondido History Center, and a copy of it then will also go to the Veterans History Project and the Library of Congress. And, of course, you will get a copy. You can share it with your family and friends, your grandchildren, whoever has the gloves. That's part of the story. So again, I want to thank you, and this will conclude this conversation and this interview.

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Gorbet: Well, feel free to take any of the pictures that you want.

Appleton: Thank you.

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