

War Era Story Project 2012

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September 2, 1945 -- Bob Was There

World War II was finally over. Jubilation filled the air in every corner of our land. The price of victory had been tremendous, but our United States had been united then as it had never been before. A whole nation of young men and women willingly served their country to bring that victory home, while those at home worked diligently and prayed for their return.

This is Bob's story. My husband, Robert N. Hergenrather, of the United States Marines, was a witness to the most photographed event at the close of that war: the signing of the peace terms with Japan on September 2, 1945, aboard the *U.S.S. Missouri*. In July 2000, Bob was diagnosed with cancer. I realized the many memories he had of that day should be documented before they became forgotten by his sickness. As he spoke to me, I wrote these words so we can remember what he saw, leading up to and including that eventful day.

The ship had been in battles at Iwo Jima, Okinawa and Guam, shelling the islands with its big guns. They encountered many kamikaze planes. One hit the ship, killing the pilot, but little damage was done. The fire was easily extinguished. The pilot was given a military funeral, wrapped in a Japanese flag and buried at sea. Another plane came down very close, but missed the ship. When it hit the water, a 500-pound bomb exploded. They believe the pilot was dead before he could release it over the ship. Had he done so, it would have caused much damage with many injuries and loss of lives.

Admiral Halsey came aboard at Guam. The *Missouri* then became the flag ship and it moved into the center of the fleet, away from the outer perimeter. All the ships then proceeded to an area off the Japanese coast and began shelling the island with 16" guns. The following words are exactly as Bob spoke them.

"The first day of August 1945, the whole fleet received word to go back 400 miles. We didn't know why. Then on the 6th, we heard an atomic bomb was dropped. We didn't know what an atomic bomb was. Then on the 9th, another was dropped on another city. We didn't know what cities. On the 14th, we heard that Japan had surrendered. On September 2nd, the formal surrender signing took place on our ship. Several other locations had been suggested, even the Japanese Imperial Palace, but President Truman held out for the *U.S.S. Missouri*. All the ships were now in Tokoyo Bay – more than 200 of them. It was a sight to behold. I was assigned picket duty on a motor boat, along with a Naval Officer and two seamen. We were looking for mines or swimmers because it wasn't known if Japan could be trusted even at that point in time.

“On the day of the 2nd, at 9:00 a.m., dignitaries from all the Allied Nations were assembled on the 0-1 level, where a table from the mess hall had been brought in. It was covered with a green cloth. The Japanese delegation came up the gangway right in front of us, the Marines. I think I could have reached out and touched one man, he came that close to me. There were 11 of them. Three were in top hats and tails, six were in full military dress, and the others were in civilian suits. We did not salute them and we did not wear our dress uniforms. They were still the enemy. They came aboard and took their places in front of the table.

“Only two chairs were there, one on each side of the table. The Japanese men stood for a couple of minutes before General Douglas MacArthur, Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers, approached the table and faced them. He made a few remarks without the microphone, then asked them to place their signatures on the official surrender documents. Standing by General MacArthur was General Jonathon Wainwright and British General A.E. Percival, who were heroes of the Battan march on Corrigidor. As General MacArthur signed his name for the Allied Powers, he used five pens. The first one he gave to General Wainwright and the second to General Percival. Both men had been prisoners of Japan until the surrender on August 14th.

“When the signing was completed, General MacArthur gave the Japanese delegation their copy of the document. He told them it would be his purpose to see to it the terms of the surrender were carried out, then told them the ceremonies were complete. The Japanese delegation then turned and went down the gangway onto a destroyer that would return them to shore. General MacArthur then made a few remarks into a microphone in order for the men who could not actually see the happenings to at least hear his voice as he related to them what had just taken place. There were men hanging from every possible spot all over the ship to watch or catch a glimpse of that event, and I had the privilege of standing close enough to see and hear the entire proceedings. What a gift I had been given. Then General MacArthur asked the ship’s Chaplain to close in prayer.”

This is the prayer I copied from one of the Missourian papers that Bob had kept. These were the words of Chaplain Roland W.Faulk, US Navy.

“Eternal God, Father of all living, we offer our sincere prayer of thanksgiving to Thee on this day which we now dedicate in peace among the nations, remembering another Sabbath Day that was desecrated by the beginning of this brutal war. We are thankful that those who have loved peace have been rewarded with victory over those who have loved war. May it ever be so!

“On this day of deliverance we pray for those who through long years have been imprisoned, destitute, sick and forsaken. Heal their bodies and their spirits, O God, for their wounds are grievous and deep. May the scars which they bear remind us that victory is not without cost and peace is not without price. May we never forget those who have paid the cost of our victory and peace.

“On this day of surrender, we turn hopefully from war to peace, from destroying to building, from killing to saving. But peace without justice we know is hopeless, and justice without mercy Thou will surely despise. Help us, therefore, O God, to do justice and love mercy and to walk humbly before Thee.

“We pray for Thy servant, the President of the United States, and for the leaders of all lands that they may be endowed with wisdom sufficient for their great tasks. Grant unto all the peoples of the earth knowledge of Thee, with courage and faith to abide within the shelter of Thy sovereign law. Amen.”

When the prayer was ended, General MacArthur simply said, “these proceedings are over.” Within the next few minutes, Bob said, the sky was filled with our planes flying overhead.

Bob knew he had seen and been a part of history that would forever be remembered. Years later, he became a member of the *U.S.S. Missouri* Association and attended several of the conventions. We also were at the dedication of the ship when it was made a national memorial in Hawaii in 1998. For many years, he would go to schools and speak about his first-hand experience of the war and especially on September 2nd, 1945. He always gave each student a copy of the closing prayer, and a copy of the card everyone on board had received to show they had been a witness to the happenings of that day.

Our children now have his mementos and his memories to read and pass on to the next generation. May they understand a little of what everyone endured during those World War II years, and I pray they will have the peace we all so earnestly desire.