

# Orville Holtan, Anti-Tank & Band

By Kathy Holtan Wilner & Lt Col Tim Holtan

GUADALCANAL 1942-1943



The story of Orville Holtan's military service begins in 1941. He was drafted into the Army because of the war in Europe. His date of entry into active service was May 6, 1941 and the place of entry was Fort Snelling, MN. He went to Camp Claiborne, LA, for basic training. Soon after his arrival he was named company bugler. Orville started playing his cornet as a 5<sup>th</sup> grader and played all of his life. He received the rating of Private First Class in July. He wrote of the heat in Louisiana in the summer, everything was sticky and there were many mosquitoes.

He was still at Camp Claiborne when the Japanese Navy, as directed by Emperor Hirohito, launched a surprise attack against Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. As he and his fellow Soldiers expected, they left for California the very next day. They remained in San Francisco for a few days and on Dec 27, instead of boarding ships, they headed north to Ellensburg, WA, where they guarded railroad bridges, dams and other installations. Orville was assigned to the anti tank company and spent time clerking for some of the officers. He mentioned in a letter that he had access to a typewriter and as a result, some of his letters home were typewritten.

In March of 1942 the call came for duty in the south Pacific. The 164<sup>th</sup> traveled to Fort Ord, CA before shipping out to Melbourne, Australia. During this transition time, they rarely knew where they were headed and just went where they were told. It took them 21 days at sea to reach Australia. They stayed there for a few days before their equipment was loaded onto three small Dutch ships bound for New Caledonia, a French Island in the South Pacific. Duties there included training and guarding the beaches. It was there that the Regiment became a part of a brand new Division. Since it was formed with American Forces on New Caledonia, it was called the Americal Division, the Army's only non-numbered division.

In July of 1942, Orville was still serving with the tank destroyer company and filling the roll of bugler when the 164<sup>th</sup> Regimental Bandmaster heard him play. Orville remembered being told to come with the Bandmaster right then, where he was immediately transferred to the band.

The Band, under the leadership of Chief Warrant Officer Gerald E. Wright, was busy with their usual routine duties of furnishing entertainment for personnel within the Regiment and for nearby hospital personnel and patients. On the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> of October they received several lectures concerning battle dressings and first aid. It came as quite a surprise on the 7<sup>th</sup> of October when orders arrived. All personnel were ordered to their company areas to pack and get ready to leave. Thirty-six hours later they were aboard ship and ready for their final inspection by the Commander, South Pacific Area, Vice Admiral Ghormley.



New Caledonia & Fiji Money



Undated Photo. Orville is back row, 3<sup>rd</sup> from Right.

Orville's regiment sailed from New Caledonia to the island of Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands. According to accounts by Lt. Col. Samuel Baglien they left Noumea Harbor and were at sea October 10 to October 12, 1942. He wrote that the weather was clear and the sea calm. He went on to mention that the men showed no signs of nervousness and welcomed the opportunity to get into combat. Rear Admiral Turner, Commander of the Amphibious Force, got quite a kick out of the trip, stating; "Imagine taking a bunch of the Army up to reinforce the Marines." To this group the trip was an honor as it meant that they would be the first Army Infantry troops in battle since the fall of Bataan. Orville would later recount that they were the first Army unit to go into offensive action in World War II.

One humorous moment Orville recalled while enroute to Guadalcanal included a visit from an Admiral he thought to be "Bull" Halsey. When walking by the band, he asked what unit they were. When told they were the band, they were asked if they brought their instruments. When the Admiral heard that they had not, he responded, "Good, you won't be needing them."

On October 12, the Bandsmen were divided up and assigned to one of the four Battalion Aid Stations where they would do special duty as Litter Bearers and First Aid Men. Orville was assigned to the Second Battalion Aid Station. The next day at dawn found this group landing on Guadalcanal at Kukum and Lunga Beaches. Orville remembered the heat, mosquitoes and the dense jungle. It was hot, dirty, noisy work. As the first reinforcements to the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division, they brought much needed food and supplies to the nearly starved Marines. There were stories of eating shoe leather and anything else imaginable, so the Army was a sight for sore eyes. Orville remembered one Marine gobbling down an entire can of peaches but soon lost them all due to his compromised system.



Orville mentioned that the Japanese had control of the seas surrounding Guadalcanal at that time. At noon of that first day the Japanese bombers passed over the area and bombed them for a half hour. That same night the Japanese Navy shelled them. The Bandsmen soon reported to their respective Battalions where they were further assigned to line companies and their platoons as Litter Bearers and First Aid Men. Later that same day the Japanese opened up on them with artillery; the Marines of the 1<sup>st</sup> Division told them that it was the first time that the Japanese had opened up with the heavy stuff. As the Soldiers moved inland toward Henderson Field, trying to get to their assigned stations, it was important to find shelter wherever they could during the intermittent attacks. Eventually they found themselves in direct combat action, as they defended Henderson Field. This was the second major battle for the airfield and lasted from October 25<sup>th</sup> through the 27<sup>th</sup>, 1942.

The work of the Litter Bearers was treacherous at best. Many of these men distinguished themselves by carrying the wounded while under heavy Japanese fire. Someone stated that it was a bloody, sweaty, Hell on Earth. Orville called himself a medic during his service on Guadalcanal. While out on patrol Orville found himself all alone one night. They had all bedded down in tall grass and the rest of his group moved out without him. He woke up to find himself all alone. He was pretty scared but kept himself out of the sight of the Japanese and made his way back to his unit.

He talked of patching people up and sometimes there was nothing he could do. It was very difficult at times. As the Japanese dead piled up, the gruesome task of burying began. Souvenir hunters were becoming a nuisance so orders were issued to control this situation. Almost every Soldier and Marine on the island had a souvenir of some sort. Orville came home with two Japanese flags that had fallen from the helmet of a dead Japanese soldier. The flags bore the soldier's name, hometown, well-wishes from friends and family, and a record of his war campaigns. Lt. Col. Tim Holtan, son of Orville, has attempted to return the flags to family members. He has not been successful yet but intends to try again. (See story page 41)



Above:  
Orville & Beverly's  
wedding, 9 Sep 45

At Right: Holtan  
Family circa 1999:  
Tim & Bruce,  
Barb Heist,  
Beverly & Orville,  
Kathy Wilner.



In November of 1941, Orville recalled watching the Naval Battle of Guadalcanal. It provided spectacular night images in the bay. The Naval victory interrupted support to the Japanese ground forces, which solidified the American hold on Henderson Field. At that point, the Japanese decided that Guadalcanal was no longer worth fighting for. The 164<sup>th</sup> received the Navy Presidential Unit Citation for their valorous action on Guadalcanal in the defense of Henderson Field.

On January 4, 1943, the Band was finally reunited with their instruments. They began rehearsing again under the direction of Lt. Ray Ellerman. On January 15, 1943, the Band delivered it's one and only concert in Guadalcanal.



2nd Island Command Band, Fiji - late '43

In January Orville contracted yellow fever and malaria (for the second time) and was evacuated January 22<sup>nd</sup>, by air, to New Hebrides for a couple weeks and then by hospital ship to Fiji for hospitalization for about 6 weeks. During the time of his hospitalization the 164<sup>th</sup> came to Fiji and he rejoined the band in March or April of 1943. In January of 1944 the band became the 294<sup>th</sup> Army Band and was attached to 2<sup>nd</sup> Island Command. The band performed often on Fiji (also played a lot of golf and ping pong) until late 1944 when they went back to New Caledonia.

The time in Fiji was busy with music but combat had ended for Orville. He wrote of the rainy season there, mosquitoes, and also sandy beaches. It sounds like a paradise but time moved slowly as they waited to see what was next for them. Orville wrote about his pleasure in getting the local newspaper, candy and cookies that the family sent

along, which he shared with his friends. Another expensive commodity was cigarettes and he appreciated getting those in the mail. One more thing that was expensive was golf balls so his family and friends sent some of them as well.

According to his discharge papers, Orville's occupation was listed as Bandsman, Trumpet. Military Qualification was Combat Infantryman and he earned Expert Rifle Badge. His decorations on his separation papers included the Navy Presidential Unit Citation with Star, Good Conduct Medal, Asiatic-Pacific Theater Service Medal, American Defense Service Medal, Five (5) Overseas Service Bars, Lapel Button issued, four (4) discharge Emblems, and "No Time Lost Under AW 107". In the early 1960's the Army also authorized the award of the Bronze Star Medal. Through the efforts of his son, Tim, he was honored at a ceremony at Fort Monroe Virginia. Standing in front of a band formation, a Major General pinned the Bronze Star Medal on him almost 50 years to the day after he landed on Guadalcanal.

Orville returned to the United States in March of 1945. He had three weeks leave in March and April and went home to Washburn, ND. He became engaged to Beverly Nordquist during that leave. He traveled to Arkansas for some R&R and then reported to Camp Lee in Virginia. He was in Fort Leonard Wood, MO in July and reported to Camp McCoy, WI for discharge. He returned to Washburn, ND and two weeks later was married to Beverly. He lived much of his life in Washburn, working in the family mercantile store. Orville had two brothers who also served in the Armed Forces in WWII. Orville was the father of four children. Daughter Kathy Wilner, a retired day care provider lives with her husband, a retired farmer, in Bowdon, ND. Daughter Barb and her husband own a landscaping business in Colorado. Son Bruce served in the ND National Guard as a member of the 188<sup>th</sup> Army National Guard Band (a "descendant" of the 164<sup>th</sup>), and was also the Battalion Honor graduate at basic training at Fort Leonard Wood, MO. Son Tim is currently serving in the Army as an Army Bands Officer. Orville has 9 grandchildren and 3 great-grandchildren. He passed away in 2003. His wife, Beverly, lives in Bismarck.

Source for some information was Franklin A. Schoeffler, 164<sup>th</sup> Infantry.



L-R: Laurie & then-1LT Tim Holtan, Kathy Wilner, Beverly, Maj Gen Hank Hagwood, & Orville on the day he received his Bronze Star Medal.

# Flags: Voices of the Past

by Lt .Col. Timothy J. Holtan, son of Orville Holtan 164<sup>th</sup>/294<sup>th</sup> Band



*Lt. Col. (P) Timothy Holtan is the current Commandant of the US Army School of Music in Virginia. His previous assignment was as the Commander of the US Military Academy Band at West Point. His personal quest has been to research the flags his father acquired at Guadalcanal and return them to the soldier's families, if possible.*

The flags were obtained on Guadalcanal, I assume in the fall of 1942. My father discovered them near the remains of a deceased Japanese soldier where they had fallen from the soldier's helmet. In 2003, I had the flags partially interpreted and made an unsuccessful attempt to return them to the family of the soldier(s). I found out that in 2002, Japan had received more than 260 requests for return of WWII material. Most requests take up to a year to resolve and achieve a success rate of about 50%.

I had asked the wife of a fellow Army bandsman to interpret the writing. She was surprised and a bit spooked to find that the soldier was from her home town of Niigata City. In many cases, the families never had the remains of the soldiers returned to them, so receiving these flags would be akin to having a part of their loved ones returned to them. Personnel at US Army Command-Japan also helped interpret the writings.

It appears that the flag was owned by Toshio Hasegawa and it is thought that it was given to him by friends and well wishers who signed it (a common practice). Two company names, "Kouwa Mutual Car Stock Company" and "Bandai Car Factory", no longer exist and couldn't be traced. Kouwa is equivalent to "Ace" or "Acme".

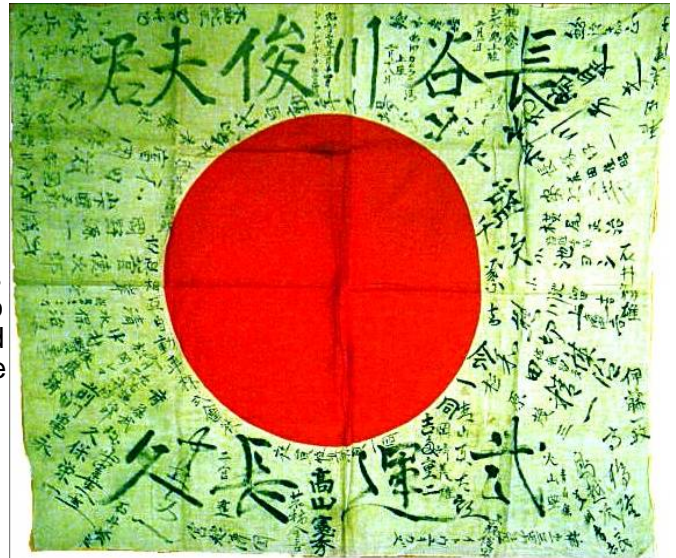
There are 3 dates on the flag, which match events:

"Landed at Cam Ranh Bay, 18 February"

"Landed at Java Island, 1 March"

"14 March Showa 17, Jogjakarta Security"

Japanese forces moved through Vichy French Indochina before advancing on Malaya and Netherlands East Indies. Hasegawa apparently went through Vietnam in February 1942 on his way to Java. Japanese forces began their attack on Java in mid-Feb 1942, landing troops and tanks in force at Erentenwatan in northern Java on the night of 28 Feb. He (or elements of his unit) may have been in that landing since his flag is annotated with that date and the word for "landing". Dutch and British forces surrendered on 9 March 1942. Jogjakarta is a city and sultanate in southern Java, so his unit probably arrived as a garrison/security force on 14 March as indicated on the flag.



are often terry cloth but the advertising ones or the pre-war ones tend to be tough durable cotton-like fabric.

This one has the name "Kaneyasu Toshikazu" written on it – the presumed owner.

Here's what is written on the right hand edge: "Celebrating 30 years from establishment of the Niigata Power Company". The center devices: lightning symbol suggestive of electric power. The red (now faded to orange) circle-in-a-circle device is the company mark of the Hitachi company, makers of electrical appliances. The blue device with a stylized stork and a stylized turtle - the turtle is actually the character for "electricity" and presumed to be the mark of the Niigata Power Company. A stork in Japan is a good luck symbol along with the turtle so the bird depicted on the tenugui is probably a non-specific bird mark for a stork or crane.

Left hand edge: printed name of distributor of this tenugui from right to left: "authorized distributor for Hitachi Seisakusho" (fancy name for the Hitachi Co). Ishii Denkou-sha is still an operating distributor.

Additional hand writing: "Oda Unit" "Toubu 23, Takayama Platoon" "Kaneyasu Toshikazu." For Operational Security purposes, all Japanese units were known by their commander's names. Toshikazu belonged to the platoon commanded by Takayama which further belonged to a unit commanded by Oda.

I anticipate one last assignment back to the Washington, DC, area, and intend to try again to return the flags to Mr. Hasegawa's family through diplomatic channels.