

Fire---Run for Your Life

Our only entertainment was going to the movies when we would get a film in for showing; which wasn't too often. Our theater was located at the bottom of a ravine just north of our base. This ravine was in between two of the many, what I will call the footers, running out from big old Mt. Isorog that loomed up over our encampment just to the north, as previously described. Up the eastern slope of this ravine each of us had dug back into the dirt a space large enough to put in an empty ammo box with two of it's sides removed and this is what constituted our seat at the movies. As always there were those who made a better mouse trap than others, so some of the seats were highly modified above the plain old ammo box, but the interesting thing to me was that it was your ammo box and no one else used it. It was some sort of a code of the hills type thing that I thought was pretty nice. Anyhow, the movie screen was placed near the bottom of this ravine (there was a small stream that flowed in the very bottom of the ravine) and thus we were well situated in our ammo box seats up the side of the ravine looking down on the screen much as you would be in the new styled "Stadium Seating" theaters. This one night we were enjoying the movie when someone yelled out "Gasoline". Suddenly there was a big flash down at the screen. I did not know what it was but I was not staying around to find out. I turned around and started running up the slope of the hill. I stumbled over the ammo box seats in the rows above me and started hitting slow movers. I still weighed nearly 200 pounds at the time and won all of the encounters. After having knocked over about six people and having advanced up about six rows of seats, I calmed down enough to turn my head and look back. At precisely that time another huge explosion went off, lighting up the whole area and sending a heat wave up my back side, which only further propelled me up the hill and my continuance of bowling people over. I considered stopping again but another explosion went off, but of a smaller magnitude. I continued upward anyhow. When I stopped I was at the top of that ridge. I was not alone but there were more of those who got overrun than those that made it to the top. Morgan was slower than I, in this instance at least, because he only had stood up after the first explosion and that was as far as he got. He was knocked over the back of his seat by some fast mover from a row of seats below him, and he was never able to get up again until it was all over. I WAS NOT PROUD OF MYSELF, BECAUSE I PURELY PANICKED. In my later flying experiences I encountered many cases where I could have panicked and I didn't, in which

case I was proud of myself, but in this case I did panic and I am still ashamed of myself.----- What had caused the explosions was just one of those stupid things that happen as is the case in so many accidents. Our forces had been around Hollandia long enough and expected to be there long enough, I guess, that it justified the idea of putting in a big aviation fuel tank up on the lower slope of Mt Isorog and then they were going to run pipe from there for about a mile down to the flight line. This was a good idea for two reasons; first it would keep the big fuel supply away from the airplanes in case of a Japanese air raid and second, it would make available a gas supply under pressure (by gravity) which would facilitate fueling the fuel trucks down at the flight line. The problem was that before initiating this service they had pumped water into the big tank to flush it out . They then opened up a drain at the bottom of the tank and started draining out the water as they started putting in the aviation gas at the top, to fill the tank. This was all well and good because the water and the gas were not going to mix, but someone forgot to shut off the drain when all of the water had drained out. So when that happened, pure aviation gas started coming out of the drain, which then went right on down the hill. Our misfortune was that our outdoor theater was located just south of the tank and the gasoline selected our little ravine as it's path to freedom. There were wide spots in the ravine that hindered a continuous flow, i.e. the wide spot would have to fill before the fuel would continue on down the ravine to the next wide spot which would then fill up and so on down the hill. Thus a number of pools of fuel, so to speak. were formed before reaching the area where our screen was located. This open valve leak apparently had just started about the time our movie started. As usual there are always those that like to sit right down next to the screen and also of course there are smokers. That was the perfect combination; a stream of gasoline and a smoker. The first flash was when the fuel right in front of the screen went off. As the fire traveled back up the ravine to the next pool of fuel, another big explosion went off, and so on. With each of these explosions I accelerated my body further up the slope. Luckily the tank did not explode or I would not be here writing this story. Unfortunately some guys down next to the screen were killed and many others were badly burned.