



## Gilbert Gia's Historic Bakersfield and Kern County

### A Military Life

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John H. Alexander was one of sixteen million Americans who served in World War II. I discovered him in 2002 when I found his 1936 diary in an antique shop. He'd written it when he was a teenager in the summer of 1936 and attended a Civilian Military Training Camp at Presidio Monterey. I found out much later that that he'd been through three historic battles of WWII, had served in the Korean Conflict the Berlin Crisis, and spent many years in the Navy Reserve. But first his diary.

From 1921 to 1940 the Army was in charge of Civilian Military Training Camps (CMTC) that were part of the Army's efforts to preserve readiness. On June 4, 1923 the *Bakersfield Californian* described the camps: "The boy from Kern County who goes to the camp will learn about the great outdoors, horses, radio, stables, messes, camps, how to shoot, how to live, how to break down narrow prejudice, how to make his will fit in with that of others, how to get results through team play, how to become a real leader, how to recognize and respect authority, and he will acquire patience, obedience and love of country... The army assures him a 'good time' with abundance of amusements, sports, and athletes. The war department pays all expenses, including transportation." Kern County's CMTC quota that year was fifteen. The description must have attracted much local interest because later in the month the *Californian* reminded readers that the Army did not want them to sign-up their 15 and 16 year-olds.

In the mid-1930s Alexander John was a high school student at Porterville High, was on the rifle team and in California Cadets, a high school military class sponsored by the State Militia. In the summer of 1936, seventeen year-old John Alexander was offered a month's course at the CMTC, Camp John P. Pryor, Presidio of Monterey. attended Porterville High School and was a member of the California

Cadets, which was a military program sponsored by the California State Militia. By this late date, CMTCs had been in existence for nearly two decades, and several well-known names were associated with the program: John J. Pershing, George C. Marshall, Harry Truman, Douglas MacArthur, and a man who became even more famous a few years later, Ronald Reagan. In 1941 the goal of CMTC was justified when several hundred thousand CMTC alumni were ready for military service.

Donald M. Kington noted in his book about the CMTCs that in the late 1920s more than 40,000 young men attended some fifty summer camps across the nation.<sup>1</sup> Kington, and others, estimated that during the lifetime of the CMTCs they trained between 400,000 and 500,000 men. He told me he'd interviewed ninety-three CMTC men for his book, but none mentioned they'd kept a diary about their training experiences. Following are selections from Alexander's diary:

"Monday, July 6 [1936]. Arrived at camp at six o'clock, got acquainted with tent mates... *Thurs*: Got up at 5 had physical exercise drilled, marched around in squads, cleaned guns-- afternoon played baseball-- at 4 o'clock, had a parade... *Friday*: Had drill instruction all morning, learned how to fix my pack also had first aid instruction, laid around all afternoon, had a review at 4:30. We won the camp ribbon, went to show in the evening... *Sunday, July 12*: Got up at 6:30 cleaned up the tent, sat around and read papers all afternoon, had roast corn, gravy, potatoes and salad for dinner, went to show afternoon, ate little supper. Stomach ache... *Monday, July 13*: Got up rather late today, castor oil worked, had instruction on shooting this morning, laid around 'til four o'clock, then we had a parade... *Thursday, July 16*: Had instruction on the different methods of firing a rifle and had a parade at 4:40. Laugh in ranks, get Pit detail tomorrow morning... *Friday*: Was in rifle pits all day, not work hardly at all, 4:40 saw a cavalry and artillery parade, ever since supper we had been clearing up the company street, field tent laid out for inspection, everything has to be perfect... *Saturday, July 18*: Had latrine duty today, passed inspection 100% also had a rifle inspect. Roy came over this afternoon but we couldn't leave, laid around and slept all afternoon... *Monday, July 20*: Went out on the range, waited until 3 o'clock to fire, was tired as the dickens. Hell is raising, guys are trying to wreck one

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<sup>1</sup> Donald M. Kington. *Forgotten Summers: The Story of the Citizens' Military Training Camps, 1921-1940*. 1995. ISBN 0-9645789-0-5

another's tents and bed, things are really going to pop tonight...  
*Friday, July 24:* Went on 11 mile hike today, wasn't so bad going out, coming in my feet got very tired... *Saturday, July 25:* New officer, field equipment inspection, laid around all afternoon, played corny joke on Tiny... *Friday, Jul 31:* Went on a hike bivouac, got rather tired, laid around all afternoon, 3:30 had a parade. I'm tired out this evening... *Saturday, Aug 1:* Visitors day, laid around all morning until 3:30 then had our last parade... *Sunday, Aug 2:* Got up at 6:30 fixed up tent, bought morning paper. Went to church, laid around and read all morning, in afternoon went down town, saw Japanese boat, missed supper... *Monday, Aug 3:* Got up this morning, monkeyed around until 4 o'clock then we went on a hike 5 miles, then in the afternoon we got on civvies, changed and handed in the clothing." <sup>2</sup>

Army noncoms grumbled about the "play camp" atmosphere at CMTCs, and that was probably justified coming from experienced soldiers. The young men learned about military life, but the experience was tempered by time for play and rest. Alexander's diary suggests that rest was exactly what this sixteen year-old needed. The *Bakersfield Californian's* 1923 description of the program was still accurate in 1936. Alexander took his CMTC experiences in stride and probably liked what he saw of army life. <sup>3</sup>

In June 1940 he enlisted in the Navy, was trained as a turret-gunner's mate and in October was assigned to the 600-foot armored cruiser<sup>4</sup> *USS Northampton*, affectionately called the *Nora* by her crew. Forty years went by before the Navy released information showing that the *Nora* had been working against the Japanese even before the US went to war. In July and August 1941 the *Nora* and the *Salt Lake City*

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<sup>2</sup> In an email to the author in Mar 2003, Kington wrote that the 30th Inf. Regt. , Presidio San Francisco, provided most of the CMTC training cadre at Monterey. According to Kington's informant Tom Conrow they were tough and demanding. Kington continued, " ...with as many as 50 camps being run each summer, standards and uniformity were likely to be spotty. About this time, also, reserve officers were often in charge and, even though I too was a reserve officer, I realize that there was a genuine unevenness in the quality of such officers -- particularly in those days when they received precious little training or experience opportunities."

<sup>3</sup> The author donated John Alexander's diary to the US Army Heritage Collection, Carlisle Barracks. The diary is indexed at <http://www.ahco.army.mil/site/index.jsp>. Enter the search phrase "John H. Alexander papers, 1936-2003."

<sup>4</sup> CA-26

escorted the Dutch Motorship *Jagersfonte* to China. It was transporting the Flying Tigers to fly against the Japanese.

The *Northampton* was at sea on December 7, 1941, but Alexander was not with the ship. That morning he and a crew were checking anchor chains at Honolulu, which is about fifteen miles southeast of Pearl Harbor. The men had 100 rounds in their machinegun, and they used them all.<sup>5</sup>

In April 1942 Alexander was part of a secret, payback air raid on Tokyo. Early that month the *Northampton* rendezvoused with Halsey's Task Force Sixteen and the aircraft carrier USS *Enterprise* to sortie with a new aircraft carrier<sup>6</sup> called the USS *Hornet*. The *Northampton's* job was to provide screen against torpedo attacks. This meant that she and the others in the protective shield would "take" any Japanese torpedoes launched against the carriers. But the weather in the Pacific was miserable; waves broke over the *Northampton's* gun turrets, and foam drenched the B-25 Mitchell bombers tied on the carrier decks.<sup>7</sup>

The Japanese sighted Task Force Sixteen on 18 April 1942. The ships were then 700 miles out of Tokyo and 200 miles short of the planned launch point. Halsey ordered his eighty airmen to their bombers. Joel Shepherd wrote, "Lt. Col. James H. Doolittle's own bomber was the first to rumble down *Hornet's* pitching flight deck. Between the forward velocity of the carrier, and the winds churned up by the stormy weather, he and the other pilots had the benefit of a 50-mph headwind. Still, with less than 500 feet of open flight deck to take off from, many of the planes nearly stalled on take-off and hung precariously over the high seas for hundreds of yards before finally gaining altitude."<sup>8</sup>

In July 1942 American reconnaissance aircraft spotted a Japanese airfield being built on Guadalcanal. On 7 August, the US 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division stormed the island, and for the next six months bloody hand-to-hand combat and deadly naval engagements took place as the Japanese

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<sup>5</sup> Author's correspondence with John Alexander's sister. Note: More than 2,400 Americans were killed in the Japanese attack. Lt. William G. Sylvester of the 97th Coast Artillery died when an aircraft strafed his jeep while it was racing across Hickam Field. Sylvester was the first Kern County serviceman to die in WWII. The minelayer *First Lieutenant William G. Sylvester* was christened in 1942.

<sup>6</sup> CV-8

<sup>7</sup> Author's interview with Mike Morico of Palmdale, CA, one of Alexander's shipmates.

struggled to reinforce their troops and regain control of the strategic island airfield. The battle gradually turned between 13 and 15 November when the Japanese lost two battleships, one cruiser, three destroyers and eleven troop transports. At the end of November the US Army relieved the Marines. It seemed like everything was over except the mopping-up action. But for the *USS Northampton*, and gunner's mate 3/C John Alexander, the action was just starting.

Around midnight on 30 November, Capt. W. A. Kitts and the *Northampton's* compliment of more than 1,100 men were part of a cruiser-destroyer group that was surreptitiously bearing down on a Japanese supply convoy. Protecting the Japanese transports were several new, first-line destroyers of the Imperial KAGERO class built in the late 1930s. Just two days earlier, Lt. Commander Higashi Hideo was placed in command of the *Oyashio*, a destroyer half the size of cruiser *Northampton*. Hideo was later decorated for what he did.

The task forces met the Japanese convey. Alexander's shipmate Darrell Blair of Oakland, CA wrote, "We knew something big was on. That day we pumped all of our aviation gasoline over the side.<sup>9</sup> Just before dark, we launched our spotting planes from the cruisers. At 2335 hours on November 30, we opened fire. All cruisers. God, what a sight-- shooting near point blank."

It took the startled Japanese seven minutes to return fire. In the next ten minutes, three American cruisers were hit. They burned as they retired from the battle, but the *Northampton*, *Honolulu* and six destroyers continued the fierce exchange. Blair said that for the next 25 minutes the *Northampton* scored many hits, but then, "all hell broke loose."

Captain Hideo of the *Oyashio* had launched a "Long Lance," which was a 24-inch diameter, 30-foot long oxygen-powered torpedo. The instant the 1,080-lb. TNT-Hexyl war head hit the *Nora*, her port-quarter bulkheads, decks and 107,000 HP engine room erupted in a deafening blast of steel and fuel oil. Alexander's shipmate Ted Anderson recalling that night more than 50 years ago made the moment real when he said, "I was on the signal bridge and it seemed like the whole ship jumped three feet in the air."

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.cv6.org/1942/doolittle/doolittle.htm>

<sup>9</sup> fire prevention measure

When the *Nora* took the hit, Alexander was in a bomb magazine two decks below the big gun turrets, and he and his shipmates were trapped. John wrote, "...The armored hatch jammed so we could not lift it... A while later the man on the flood control board called down the ammo hoist to see if we had gotten out yet... with his help we got the hatch open. As I stepped on the quarterdeck I stepped on something soft. I said to myself, Have I stepped on a wounded shipmate? I knelt down and to my surprise it was a life jacket."<sup>10</sup>

The *Nora* was already listing to port. Her starboard screws turned uselessly in the night sky. Said Anderson, "The skipper called for all hands that could to report to the quarter deck." Three hours passed. Then the upturned, 13,000-ton *Nora* exploded inside herself and sunk into the Gulf of Tassafaronga.

Blair remembered the water that night: "It was dark, except for the light coming from all the burning ships -- the flames on our ship were leaping 300 feet in the air. We hit the water around midnight, wearing Kapok life jackets. We'd tested those jackets, so we knew that some would float but others would go right to the bottom. As we hit the water we were quite relieved that they held us up. The water was warm like bath water, and there didn't seem to be any sharks. On a previous night, sharks got most of the sailors from another downed ship. We were about ten miles off shore, swimming towards Guadalcanal. There was anywhere from three to four hundred of us swimming in groups together, joking and hollering like a bunch of young kids do." In the water, too, was a nineteen year old radioman, and future actor, Jason Robards.

Alexander's memory was more sobering: "We kept swimming away from the ship. We stopped and treaded water to look back at the *Nora*, and she was afire amidships and sinking by the stern with a port list. When she did sink it seemed like forever when she stood on her stern and finally plunged below the surface. It had been my home for two years and three months. I knew I lost a real ship, and I started to cry."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *History of the USS Northampton (CA 26), 1930-1942: Her Crew and Their Descendants*. Compiled by Glenn C. Randolph and Frankie L. Randolph. Long Beach, Ca. 1993. (Lib of Congress 93083393)

<sup>11</sup> Alexander's eldest daughter Suzanne wrote the author in Nov 2006, "He kept two large banker file boxes in the rafters of the garage. Among them was a pair of shoes. I asked him why he had the shoes. He said they were the shoes, he wore when he was on the USS Northampton on the night of November 30, 1942 when she sank."

By 0300 destroyer *USS Fletcher Blair* and other ships were pulling sailors out of the tropical waters. Ted Anderson who now lives in Lakewood, California was in the water about 45 minutes. "I was picked up by destroyer *Dration*. The waters were warm that night, and the *Dration's* deck felt hot on my feet when they pulled me aboard." But some of the *Northhampton* crew were still treading water at dawn.<sup>12</sup>

The Marine Corp lost 1,242 men in Guadalcanal combat. The *Nora* also suffered losses. Fifty-eight of its shipmates died the night of the engagement.<sup>13</sup> The *Nora* was gone, but she boasted six battle stars for WWII service. Thanks to Providence, the rest of her crew were rescued. After a month of survivor leave at San Francisco, they were redeployed to other ships. John Alexander was part of the last crew that served on battleship *USS California* before she was decommissioned in 1946.

Japanese destroyer *Oyashio* had a short life. Five months later while convoying troop ships southwest of Rendova<sup>14</sup>, the *Oyashio* struck a mine and was soon attacked by aircraft. She and her crew of ninety-one went to the bottom.

When Alexander returned to civilian life he enlisted in the Navy Reserve, but he missed the military life. He enlisted in the US Army, and he served in the Korean Conflict. When Sergeant John Alexander was discharged in 1952, he promptly joined the Navy Reserve. During the 1961 Berlin Crisis, the Navy recalled forty-two year-old Alexander to active duty. When he returned to civilian life, he continued his reserve association with the Bakersfield Navy and Marine Corps Reserve Center. He was past sixty when he finally concluded his long military career.

John H. Alexander died in 1998. His obituary mentioned that when he wasn't attending reserve meetings he operated a gardening service in Porterville. There were brief references to his military service. As I gathered these bits of information about him, I eventually realized

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<sup>12</sup> Gunners mate Mike Morico laughed darkly when I asked him how warm the water was. After a thoughtful pause he said, "It was damn cold." Morico recalled that he felt better after the sky lightened and he saw a Duck appear overhead (amphibious Grumman JF-1/J2F).

<sup>13</sup> In a Jun 2003 correspondence with the author, Robert O'Malley said that 49 men were killed in action on the CA-26, and that they were mostly engineerroom and boiler room officers and crew.

<sup>14</sup> Lat 08-08S, Lon 156-55E

that there wasn't very much more I could learn about the man who'd written the diary.

Then a letter came mentioning that Alexander had been particularly proud that he was able to donate to the *Lone Sailor* memorial in Washington, DC. After I read about the statue I felt that I knew much more about John Alexander: To him the war was more than his own personal experience; it belonged to all his shipmates, too. A retired petty officer wrote this about the bluejacket statue, "You would want this guy at your battle station when it's not a drill. That statue looks like bronze, but there is plenty of salt, paint, sweat, fuel oil and courage stirred in."