

# LOOKING FOR VAN

By Chuck Tatum

As you drive down the Grapevine Pass into the flatlands of the great San Joaquin Valley toward Bakersfield, California one of the first road signs you will see is the one that reads *Taft-Maricopa*. I have seen that sign a hundred times or more on my trips from Los Angeles to my hometown of Stockton.

Every time I have seen the Taft-Maricopa sign my thoughts have been about a Marine that I served with in World War II, PFC George Robert Van Conkelberg. We served together in Company B, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 27<sup>th</sup> Marine Regiment, 5<sup>th</sup> Marine Division. Many times I have been tempted to turn off Interstate 5 and drive over to look up my old comrade in arms.

Like a lot of buddies in the Marine Corps we had vowed to keep in touch after the war. Time has a way of eroding the best of intentions. The best I could do was to call him on the phone, forty years later, on the fortieth anniversary of the battle for Iwo Jima. We spent about an hour and a half on the phone bringing each other up to date about the last forty years. We vowed, again, to keep in touch and to get together in the near future.

On a recent trip back from Los Angeles the Taft-Maricopa sign got my attention again. My car suddenly seemed to have a mind of its own, and before I knew it I had turned off and was on my way to Taft, California. Oh heck, Taft can only be a few miles away, right? Wrong! The first sign told

me I had farther to go than I thought. It read *Taft-Maricopa 32 miles*. Oh what the heck, I did say I would stop by someday. Now was as good a time as any.

The road to Taft runs 32 miles straight as a strong across the flatlands of the San Joaquin Valley. Looking out my car window I see fields of cotton and what appears to be the principal crop: black gold. Oil pumping stations dot the landscape. Entering the city limits of Taft I see that all of the signs say that this is an oil industry town. A drilling company sign here; an oil well supply company sign on my left. There's no mistaking what the main activity in Taft, California is. This is an oil well town.

The city limits sign reads *Population 6,232*. George had told me that he owned and operated the only card room in Taft, so it shouldn't take long to find it. Just drive up and down a few of the streets and look for a sign that says *Card Room*. When cruising the streets of downtown Taft didn't work, I turned into a 7-11 convenience store to try the phone book. No Van Conkelberg listed. I began to think my trip had been in vain. I had almost given up when a local citizen drove up to use the phone. I took the liberty of asking if he knew a George Van Conkelberg.

"Why, for sure," he said. "Everyone in Taft knows George. He's owned the Oasis Lounge for years." He pointed out that I was just half a block away. I just had to go to the corner, turn right and the Oasis Lounge was in the middle of the block on the right hand side of the street.

It was Saturday afternoon and the Oasis Lounge didn't look like it was open, but I stopped anyway and went inside. The darkness was the dark you experience when you come in out of bright sunlight. It took a few minutes for my eyes to become adjusted to the darkness. When I could see again, I noticed a card room at the back of the lounge.

There was a solitary figure sitting at a card table, slowly dealing out cards to imaginary players. He picked up the cards off the green felt and dealt them out again, passing time until the rest of the players showed up and the nightly card games began. He didn't notice me standing near him.

A man entered the room in the back and asked what I wanted. I told him I was looking for George Van Conkelberg. The man said he was gone. "Gone where?" I asked. He said George was dead. I asked when it happened and he replied that it had been about two years earlier. He wanted to know who I was and why I wanted to know. People from out of town with a suit and tie on asking questions won't find out much in the Oasis Lounge.

The shock of learning my former comrade as dead left me speechless. I had waited too long to take the turnoff to Taft to look up my old friend. I told the old man that I had served with George in the Marine Corps in World War II, and that he and I had been together in the fight against the Japanese on Iwo Jima. I explained that I had been with him the day he was wounded on Hill 362A.

He warmed up considerably then. He said his name was Ernie Teal. Ernie told me that he was George's lifelong friend and that he missed him very much. Our common friendship with George had broken the ice and soon he introduced me to Merle, the new owner of the Oasis Lounge. I met some of the other regulars as well.

The Oasis Lounge has the club atmosphere of an English pub. Merle had served in the Army and had taken part in the TET offensive in Viet Nam. Someone bought me a drink and soon I was swapping war stories with Merle and Ernie. Ernie Teal had served in the army during World War II in the European theater of war.

I asked if anyone had a recent picture of George. When I asked about pictures, Merle decided that he must have pictures of World War II and Viet Nam and he called his son to bring a camera so we could record this meeting of the veterans of two of America's wars. After we took pictures in front of the giant oil well wheel that's the center point of the décor of the Oasis, Ernie called a friend of his and George's.

This friend told us he had a recent picture of George, so Ernie and I drove a few blocks to his home. He was also a lifelong friend and we spent about a half hour talking about George and old times in Taft. We thanked him for the pictures and his hospitality and returned to the Oasis.

The Saturday night crowd had arrived and the place was in full swing. Merle introduced me to his wife who was co-owner of the lounge. I was also introduced to a mysterious man named Billy Smith who operated a card

room in Bakersfield. There was another friend of George's, a western singer. He was pretty good and my request to play Marty Robbins' *El Paso* seemed to be a popular one. Everyone joined in the sing-along.

The drinks were flowing pretty freely and before I realized it, it was ten o'clock, and time to say goodbye. My new friends and the hospitality of the Oasis Lounge will not be forgotten. The long trip back across the back roads from Taft to Highway 99 gave me time to recall the year and a half I had known PFC George Van Conkelberg.

George joined the Marine Corps in 1942, trained at the Marine Base in San Diego, California. Then he put in for the Marine Paratroopers and trained at Camp Gillespie near El Cajon, California. Camp Gillespie was the headquarters for the Marine Corps Paratroopers replacement battalion. The Marine Corps disbanded the paratroopers and the raider battalions to form the nucleus of the Fifth Marine Division.

I met George at Camp Pendleton. We trained together there and at Camp Tarawa in Hawaii. I really liked George. He was like an older brother. In fact, I knew him better than I did my own younger brother, John. John was only thirteen when I joined the Marines.

George and I shared the same tent for a year, along with the rest of our machine gun squad. The team consisted of our leader, Corporal William Whaley, age 20, from Middleton, Tennessee, First Machine Gunner PFC George Robert Van Conkelberg, age 22 from Taft, California and me, PFC Charles William Tatum, assistant machine gunner from Stockton, California,

age 18. The fact that George and I were from the same state gave us an additional bond.

The ammunition carriers were PFC Cliff B. Evanson, age 18 from Washington state, PFC Ernest (Tex) Thompson, age 21 from Kentucky, around Lindsayville, I believe. At least that's where he said he was born. Tex? Oh, well . . . Another ammunition carrier was Pvt. Lloyd G. Hurd. Hurd was married and lived in Sartell, Minnesota. He was 25 or 26. The rest of the ammo carriers were Pvt. Theron Oriel, age 18 or 19, and PFC Charles William Whitcomb who came to the Marine Corps from Chattanooga, Tennessee. At 28 he was the oldest of us.

The 5<sup>th</sup> Marine Division was slated to invade the Japanese held island of Iwo Jima. We had left the island of Saipan on an LST (Landing Ship Tank). One the second or third day at sea, PFC George Van Conkelberg was in deep pain from a severely impacted tooth. LST's don't have a dentist so George had to be transferred from the LST to an APA (Assault Personnel Amphibious) via a Navy boatswain's chair. I kidded Van about the fact that some people would do anything to avoid going to Iwo Jima. We waved goodbye to him as he was transferred to the larger ship. It turned out that we hadn't seen the last of PFC George Van Conkelberg.

George missed the landing on D-Day at Iwo Jima, but he didn't consider himself lucky. He wanted to be with his squad, the men he had trained with, his team, because a machine gun squad is like a team. The team has a squad leader, Cpl. Whaley was ours. PFC George Van Conkelberg was our machine gunner, and how we were to miss him!

In the hell on earth that was the beach at Iwo Jima, we lost Cpl. Whaley. In George's absence I took over the squad leader's position. Cliff took over the machine gunner's position. What we didn't know was that Cliff Evanston and I would become separated from our ammo carriers.

We joined up with Gunnery Sergeant John Basilone, Medal of Honor winner from Guadalcanal, and he led us on a charge up the beach that took us to the first airstrip. This was about 10 o'clock in the morning. Well, Company B hadn't seen the last of George, and neither had the Japanese. About the time we had made it to the center of a hill called Tbaru Zaka (to the Japanese; Hill 362A to we Marines) George showed up. It was 8 o'clock in the morning and he was wearing a set of dungarees that had the name "Tom Piper" stenciled on them. Tom was a fellow Stocktonian and a personal friend. We had known each other before we had joined the Marine Corps. I asked where he got Tom's dungarees and he replied, "From the dead man's pile." When a Marine is killed in battle his gear is saved to re-supply other troops. So, Tom was dead.

George's rejoining us came at a good time as the team had suffered severe losses. Cpl. Whaley and PFC Thompson were killed in action on the beach. Since I was now the acting section leader in charge of two machine gun squads, George took over the gunner's duties from Cliff. George took part in the heaviest fighting on Iwo Jima as we clawed our way along the left flank of the island.

On the all-out push to take Hill 362B, we encountered heavy enemy machine gun fire and mortar bombardment. The Japanese had our platoon

pinned down. Sgt. Wendel, our platoon leader, gave me a signal to go into action against an enemy position located in the sandstone bluffs about a hundred yards ahead.

I pointed the target out to George and gave the signal to go into action against that target. As George ran forward to place the gun, Cliff followed him. A burst of Japanese machine gun fire from a concealed cave in the bluffs ripped into George's back just as he went to place the tripod on the ground. The same burst of fire hit Cliff in the stomach as he ran up to put the gun on the tripod. I had seen a lot of Iwo already, but I wasn't prepared for that.

I must have lost my mind then. All the anger I had stored up against the Japanese came boiling out of me. They told me that in my rage I picked up the machine gun where Cliff had dropped it and, holding it by the Basilone handle, opened fire, shooting from the hip at the cave where the bullets had come from that got my buddies. They also told me that my machine gun fire silenced the enemy position and that the Navy Medical corpsmen were able to get to George and Cliff and rendered first aid. Cliff wasn't as lucky as George. His wounds proved to be fatal.

I was with the squad almost to the end. They evacuated me on D Day plus 19. After 22 days on Iwo Jima, I finally fell victim to fatigue, dysentery and a small, superficial wound. For me it was all over.

I mentioned earlier I met up with George in Honolulu at the Aiea Heights Naval Hospital. We spent a few days together before I was shipped



back to the states. George went back to the team. Somewhere along the years, promises to keep in touch fell by the wayside. If you have an old friend, or a new one, someone who was once close to you or someone you would like to be with, drop them a line now and then, or pick up the phone and give them a call. Better yet, get in your car and look for the road to Taft before it's too late.

George . . . we all miss you.