

TO THERE AND BACK

“I stood under these same three trees the night before I left home in 1943, and wondered if I would ever see them again,” related eighty-five year old Bill Kirkman.



BILL KIRKMAN & HIS FAVORITE TREE -- 2010

Kirkman still lives on that land he left in 1943, rural Guilford County land his family has owned for generations. “I dropped out of Alamance High School in the tenth grade and joined the Marines, we had a war going on, I couldn’t stand being on the sidelines.”

Recruit training didn’t deter Kirkman. An admonishing Parris Island officer told him, “Private, you’ll never make it off this island!” To which a confident Kirkman replied, “Sir, if anybody makes it off this island, I will!”

At six foot, three inches and 135 pounds, only a handful of meal tickets supplied by a dotting recruiting sergeant -- and a three-day eating binge -- had gotten Kirkman to Parris Island in the first place. He was not to be denied.

After Boot Camp, Kirkman was assigned to Camp Lejeune, “A buddy and I ran the ropes course.”

“We were supposed to jury-rig the ropes ever so often to make sure a few fell in the muddy quagmire. Unfortunately, we jury-rigged the major in charge of filling replacement drafts for Saipan!”

“After dunking the major, we were on the next train to Camp Pendleton, CA.”

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Kirkman briefly taught hand-to-hand combat on the west coast, but was soon overseas-bound. “I hurt my back on Saipan and they put me in the supply department – my main job was begging leftover supplies from Navy ships!”

Next came Tinian, then Okinawa. “We tried to lower the Japanese resistance on Okinawa by making fake landings to confuse them.”

After Okinawa, Kirkman’s outfit returned to Saipan for intensive combat readiness training. “While boarding a troopship to attack the Japan mainland, we received a somber briefing, your division will probably be annihilated, but the division behind you should be able to gain a foothold.”

“I was the happiest guy in the world when the atomic bomb dropped, but my attitude changed when I went in to Nagasaki to gauge resistance – it was the biggest mess I ever saw!”

“We passed a Ford factory in Moji. Bomb craters and burned out hulks of businesses were everywhere, but a huge Ford logo was left unscathed. We figured our bombers missed it intentionally.”

Kirkman shared another oddity. “We deactivated Japanese depth charges and dumped them into the ocean. One exploded, killing twelve Japanese workers and one Marine.”

“We think an American spy had set a booby-trap. Ironically, the Marine who died had survived the bloodiest battles of the war.”



CPL BILL KIRKMAN, WW II MARINE

After three combat campaigns and occupation duty in Japan, Kirkman came home. “These three trees off Alamance Road were -- and still are -- the most beautiful trees in the world!”

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Kirkman, an only child, was raised by his grandmother on the family homeplace. "My dad was a hotel manager -- in Statesville, Goldsboro, Kinston, Sanford, Burlington, and other places, but I got in trouble every time I went to live in the hotel with my parents!"

The sanitized version of behavior that kept Kirkman close to the old homeplace included allowing his dog to chase policemen, roller-skating through the courthouse, and beating kids up with his heavy-duty lunch pail.

That Bill Kirkman's family would be more functional than that of his parents was assured when he married Virginia Oliver, a young beauty he had known from Alamance High School.

Sixty-two years later the Kirkmans have four children, ten grand-children, and six great-grands. All live in the Greensboro area – that's why a huge room in the Kirkman home remains set with four long tables with chairs – family ready.



**VIRGINIA AND BILL KIRKMAN SEATED IN FOREGROUND
2010 MEMORIAL DAY FLAG-RAISING**

Kirkman still enjoys sitting under his three favorite trees and watching the world go by. An interesting part of his world nowadays includes 100 head of registered Horned Herfords, but they are another story.

Semper Fi, Bill Kirkman – thank you for your service.

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