

Curtiss Atomic Marines

**Robert W. Mackenzie**

Operations: Castle, Surfboard, Wigwam

March 2005

The Mackenzie family moved from California to Las Vegas, Nevada in 1936. In 1946 my brother Roy came home from WWII after serving five years in the US Marine Corps. The same year I went into Las Vegas high school as a freshman and started working after school at the Clark Market located at 15<sup>th</sup> & Fremont. I later worked at the Safeway store on 2<sup>nd</sup> street, which became the front door for the Golden Nugget Casino. My brother had joined the Las Vegas Police Department now known as 'Metro'.

1950 and Korea changed everyone's lives. All my friends were signing up or being drafted into the military. I was younger, that gave me another year or so as a civilian. I joined the Marine Corps just as my Brother did and went through Boot Camp in San Diego, California. Combat training at Camp Pendleton and then, 'it was going to be Korea'. There were only two men in my company that didn't ship out for Korea and I was one of those two!

I was assigned to Sea School at MCRD in San Diego. Sea School was the oldest school in the Corps. It was considered an honor to be chosen. Sea going Marine's were not only stationed aboard the Navy's Capital ships, they were stationed at American Embassies all over the world. They represented America and the Marine Corps worldwide. It's all security, business, and spit and polish.

Ten months later we boarded the USS Curtiss AV-4 in December of 1953 after working as members of the Movie Platoon. The Movie Platoon was made up of the top Marines from each graduating class at Sea School. We took 6 months filming time to make three training films for the Corps and also for the United Nations. Knowing the Corps, they had to be perfect no matter how many takes it took! The Movie Platoon went aboard the USS Curtiss although not as a complete detachment. We were saddened to have to leave behind many of our fellow Movie Platoon and Silent Drill team buddies, and we did not know why!

After we were at sea we found out we had been cleared for the nation's highest security clearance. Now we knew why some of our buddies had to stay on the beach, the FBI or State Department couldn't clear them. We thought the special clearance was for Embassy duty! We did remember being interviewed by civilian's, one-on-one, during our filming days at MCRD. We signed our disclosure agreements and that was that, no big deal. I was asked questions like "Are you going to talk about anything you might see in the future?" I responded "no" Then I was told 'you can sit here and read this stack of papers or you can just sign here'. 'I must tell you that before you sign, that you are signing away all of your rights,' 'Do you understand?' I responded "yes", signed, then asked the next Marine in line to go in after I left. We just wanted to hit the beach on liberty.

No one told us where our destination was or what our mission was (standard security procedure). We knew we had "hot" cargo" due to the extremely tight security on the Curtiss and also around the Curtiss during loading. We even had small 'two man boats' patrolling next to and around the Curtiss for extra security. Marines were also standing posts on the Curtiss, docks and on land beyond the docks. We had a tight security wall all around the ship.

We were told nothing about our mission so the rumor mill was hot and heavy. There were several Marines on board from the 'IVY' Operation. Those men had survived the 'MIKE' shot at 10.5mt. They all held higher rank than we did and for some reason didn't enlighten us.

We could care less about all this 'Top-Secret' I spy stuff, we were all just hoping for another night on the town before we shipped out. - We got our night on the town, some 5 months later after the 'CASTLE' Operation.

Every Marine has many interesting stories from the time we went aboard the Curtiss until our last operation. I was aboard her for a total of 18 months, through Operation 'CASTLE' and Americas largest H-Bomb test, the 'Bravo' shot - 1000 times more powerful than Hiroshima, and then on Operation 'WIGWAM". During that time I was an honored to be assigned as orderly for three different Admirals, two ships Captains and the XO.Curtiss Marines were also on board for the Red Wing Operation in 1956 and Deep Freeze II in 1957.

I was discharged as a SGT. in 1955 after being offered Embassy duty or CIA. I choose to return to my previous employer in San Diego, California in the retail grocery business. Married twice, 4 children and now six grandchildren plus one great grandson, six months old. My daughter Kari is very involved with the Curtiss Atomic Marines.

My family never knew what I really did while I was in the Marines. In 1997 I had asked my daughter Kari, and granddaughter Jena, to look on the Internet and see if they could find any information about the USS Curtiss AV4 / Sea School Marines and/or the Marine Security Detachment. They posted messages then one day they found a message posted by a Curtiss Greenhouse Marine asking for all those who were on the Curtiss to get in contact with them.

I started to get phone calls from some of my old shipmates in the late nineties. We had our first reunion (the never too late reunion) in San Diego going back to our Marine roots. We have been having a great time ever since, meeting at least once a year. The Curtiss Atomic Marines had their second reunion in Las Vegas in 1999 and went on a tour of the Nevada Test Site. Roxanne Dey (DOE) was so helpful as were all of the (DOE) family at the test site. The tour turned out to be the highlight of this reunion. They really know how to make an old Marine feel special.

Senator Trent Lott, then the majority leader, said it best with his letter to the Curtiss Marines during our 1999 reunion in Las Vegas. The United States called upon it's finest to perform some of the most dangerous missions in military history. Your commitment to America in accepting this tremendous responsibility is evidence of your uncommon patriotism. I am pleased to join many other Americans who, with gratitude and respect, recognize your great service to our country.

Fast forward to 2005 - The Curtiss Atomic Marines are very proud to a part America's Nuclear testing history. We are honored to have a spot on the NTS history walk. This means more to this old Marine from Las Vegas than I could put into words.

My 1950 senior class logo was painted on the front sidewalk of Las Vegas High School and it is being fully restored. I have completed the circle from the Las Vegas High School sidewalk to the US Marine Corps to the 'Pacific Nuclear Weapons Tests' and back again to Las Vegas with my personal sidewalk brick in the "NTS" history walk, a gift from my daughters children, two of my grandchildren. It was quite an exciting fifty-five year journey from sidewalk to sidewalk.