

A tale of two Marines

When he was eight years old Campbell Jackson met and enjoyed the company of American Marine Johnny Poniske. In a remarkable “quirk of fate” it was 60 years later to the Month that he heard from John Poniske.

This time it was John Junior, the original Marine’s son, from Aliquippa, P.A. He had been looking through boxes of memorabilia after his Father’s death and found his father’s diaries and an old photo album full of faded black and white images.

“He told us that his father had often spoken with great affection of the days that he and a fellow marine spent with us on our family farm”. Campbell explained.

John and his wife Jenny decided that they would try to find us and come out to New Zealand to visit the places his Father had talked and written about.

“As with a large number of farming families in the Hawke’s Bay, we were asked in 1943 to host American Marines for a few weeks to give them rest and recuperation.’ My Parents, Harry and Jean Jackson of “Cragieburn”, Mangatahi took in two young marines: Jack (Abie) S. Frishman and Johnny B. Poniske. Jack was ill with Malaria, and Johnny had been wounded in action at Guadalcanal.

“I remember Johnny well. He was a great cook and took over the duties from my Mother Jean. He wore a tall white chef’s hat and Dinner was a delightful formal affair. After dinner the Boys would teach my sister Judith and I card tricks, which I can still remember! Judith was 13 and I was 8 and we were both highly impressed by these dashing 21 year old marines.”

Campbell recalls trips to Hastings in his father’s 1936 Chevrolet as a very special occasion –the highlight of which was always lunch at the H.B. Farmer’s Tearooms – Johnny and Jack resplendent in their full dress uniform and the Jackson’s in their Sunday Best.

“The boys helped my father on the farm, and I particularly recall the day when Johnny dug a strainer hole for an Awatoto concrete strainer – one of the very first they produced.’

“When, all too soon, it was time for them to leave, Jack and Johnny signed an American dollar bill and dated it March 1943. That dollar bill was framed and given pride of place on the Jackson’s mantelpiece ever since.”

We can only imagine Campbell’s surprise when a letter arrived on March 24, 2003, Which started: “I hope you are who I think you are? Is your first name Campbell? Do you have a sister named Judith?.....

John Poniske junior and his wife Jenny had gone on-line to try and find references to “Cragieburn” and the Jackson’s in Hawke’s bay. (The task was not made any easier by the fact that Campbell’s first name is actually Graeme!) In the end they contacted several Real Estate agents in the area and Tony Bailey from Harcourt’s remembered Campbell and realised that “Cragieburn” had become “Casa Lavanda” – Campbell had sold the Family farm in 1992 and moved to Havelock North. Mary and Greg Shaw of Casa Lavanda were able to provide Campbell’s address and the contact was made.

John and Jenny Poniske arranged to come out to New Zealand as a 25th Wedding Anniversary trip, so Campbell and his partner Dale went up to Auckland to meet them. Lunch with his sister Judith and Doug French at Hamilton was a “reunion’ full of poignant memories and a lot of “catching up” of family histories.

“My mother had stayed in contact with the two Marines for some time, we heard that Jack Frishman had been killed during the landing at Saipan, but she lost contact with Johnny soon after this.

After the War, Johnny returned to U.S.A. and raised a family, he died in 1983. John Junior followed in his father's footsteps and became a Marine from 1973-77, serving in Vietnam. Jenny and John's son also called John D. carries on the family tradition and is a Marine currently based in Okinawa.

The Poniske's have a Timeshare Apartment in Mexico and were able to swap for a week at a Timeshare in Turangi, "It was a little embarrassing really" Campbell laughs "They had been told that Turangi was the Centre of the North Island and an hour from anywhere! Still, they were both huge "Lord of the Rings" fans and loved the Terrain. We took a Limousine trip through to Rotorua and John bought his Wife a gold "One ring" as an anniversary present"

A trip to the war Memorial Museum at Waiouru was another highlight where an American Marine's uniform like his Father wore, was on display.

They took a long southward loop and visited the museum at Ohakea where other links were discovered. Jenny Poniske had been an instructor pilot in the US Air force and her Unit and John Junior's Marine battalion both had plaques on the wall of the Museum.

Eventually their tour took them back to "Cragieburn" now "Casa Lavanda" at Mangatahi, where the story began 60 years ago. "We found the concrete strainer that John's father had helped my Father put in", said Campbell. Sixty years later, it is still there, solid as ever."

Just as with his father before him, all too soon the visit was over and the Poniske's were off back to America. Judith and Doug took them back to Kinloch then on to Auckland and the Poniske's were winging their way back to America. This time however, there is a whole new web of inter-linked histories and friendships. And the world is much smaller now than it was in 1943!

"Our children may well visit each other, and John and Jenny have invited Dale and I back to their place to return my Parents' hospitality. Who knows said Campbell - "we might just go!"

Campbell Jackson.