Voices of Connecticut Veterans: Don Moss and an Artist's View of War

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“Right after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, my buddy and I headed down to the post office to enlist.” With these words, Corporal Donald F. Moss, USMC (ret.) explained his decision to join in the defense of the United States during World War II. What would make a young man of twenty-two decide to abandon a promising art career and leave his comfortable family home to board a rickety, bumpy train for a ride to Marine Corps basic training at Parris Island, South Carolina? Why would someone give up a secure job working as a draftsman and an art school scholarship for the hardships of military service?

The answer to these kinds of questions is not an easy one. Moss, like many in his generation, felt a sense of duty and responsibility. The value he placed on doing his share transcended personal goals. He shared the outrage of his fellow citizens at the attack on Pearl Harbor and this spirit of patriotism drove his firm resolve to be part of the fight. Thus this Massachusetts native, who later settled with his family for a long life in Connecticut, exemplified the characteristics what Tom Brokaw has called the Greatest Generation.

Mr. Moss shared his memories during a recent interview as part of the Veteran’s History Project of the Library of Congress. This project is supported by the efforts of the Center for Public Policy and Social Research at Central Connecticut State University, an official partner in the project.

Although his less than perfect vision kept Moss from his original choice of the Army Air Corps, his decision to join the Marine Corps was based on a desire to “be part of the best and to learn about the famed spirit of Semper Fidelis.” As it turned out, his journey in the U.S. Marines brought him full circle to the place he started. His skill with a pencil and brush provided a valuable service to the United States war effort, both before and after the war. His skills were used in creating battle maps during the war and after the war his art became part of the recovery efforts. The images that Moss created (and continues to create) provide a lasting legacy to what a generation of Americans endured.

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Moss's military service started with his training at Parris Island in South Carolina. This featured daily, long marches in the hot sun. Long drills with Springfield 03 rifles and Colt 45 caliber semi-automatics helped the Marines become expert at maintaining and caring for their weapons. Frequent practice and a good eye earned Moss a sharpshooter badge. His mantra during training, “If he [the drill instructor] can do it, so can I,” helped him stay focused and make it through the intense training.\(^3\) This also created a sense of respect and loyalty with the drill instructor, Captain Rockmore, that served Moss well as they traveled with the rest of their unit across the country to California, where they boarded the George F. Elliott, a Liberty ship.

This initial assignment sent Moss with the First Division of the Marine Corp into the Pacific, to the beautiful island of Guadalcanal. The volcanic island, 90 miles long and about 25 miles wide, features a tough terrain of mountains and dormant volcanoes as high as 8,000 feet, along with deep ravines and a relatively smooth coastline without natural harbors. Its location in the Pacific near Australia and New Zealand allowed US forces access to the fighting there. The Allies were pursuing an island hopping strategy to cut off Japanese access to supplies and gain control of the Pacific islands that the Japanese had overtaken. The strategy also drew away some of the Japanese forces fighting in Australia and New Zealand. Since the Japanese had already established an air base on Guadalcanal, it was a prize target in the Allied strategy.

The rigors of basic training, the 25-mile marches in full gear, crawling under barbed wire and practicing with live ammunition prepared Moss well for the Battle of the Tenaru River in the first days of the Guadalcanal campaign. Moss was part of the initial landing crew, reaching the Japanese-occupied island on August 7, 1942. The resistance and fighting was fierce, although Moss does recall casualty rates of 9 – 1 in the U.S.’s favor. There were deadly battles and close to 100 lives were lost in the initial month of fighting.

The Japanese resistance was ferocious, with air attacks by low flying Japanese “Zeros.” One of the Japanese planes struck the George F. Elliott on the second day of the fighting, causing it sink. Moss and many of his fellow Marines lost their personal belongings, which were still on board the ship. During the months that followed their initial landing, many of the Marines suffered from malaria and other diseases, which made fighting even more of a challenge. In fact, the battles caused less deaths than the high disease-related deaths.\(^4\)

The Marines and their Army comrades persevered for five long months and won control of the island and with that the ability to take over and rebuild the Japanese airfield, which they named Henderson Field, after Major Lofton Henderson, who was killed at the Battle of Midway. Moss remarked that the horrors of battle contrasted with a beautiful Pacific Island created a surreal environment.

After the battle of Tenaru, Moss created a unique poster that captured the events of those difficult days. His lively caricatures and cartoons were very popular with his fellow Marines, who wanted copies of “The Battle of The Tenaru.” Thus Moss arranged for his family to copy and distribute the drawings to the families of his
HELL POINT BATTLE ON MID-NORTHERN COAST OF GUADALCANAL

A key point for the Allied forces during the battle, Hell Point was vital for both sides. The Japanese held the point until the Allies managed to capture it. The battle started at dawn on August 27, 1942, and saw intense fighting.

BATTLE OF AUGUST 27TH, 1942

Fought by the 2nd BN. 8TH FIN. 1ST MARINES against veteran Japanese troops, the battle resulted in 400 casualties and 160 in the Japanese. The known dead: 1400.

SCALE 1:3600
fellow Marines. His mother sent out over 500 posters, for which the Marines paid $10 each. The monies raised covered the costs of printing and shipping, with the extra going to help with the comfort and support of the Marines. Moss’s artistic talents also supported the efforts of the troops in the war. After a month or so on Guadalcanal, Moss shifted from infantry to patrol duty and making maps. His ability to capture details and the skills he gained during his draftsman training proved invaluable in creating maps for the platoon. They indicated the size and location of enemy positions.

(1944: “To the Victor,” 1st Marines, Cape Gloucester, South Pacific, WW II)

He described the five months as a dichotomy of beautiful sunrises and sunsets, with bombing and strafing that tore up the once peaceful island and the men who were there. In December, they left Guadalcanal for some well-deserved rest and recovery in nearby New Britain, in the South Pacific. After 28 months overseas, he returned to the States for a respite and then went to Paris for additional training. Moss was then posted to Guam, where he stayed for the remaining year of the war. On Guam, he did illustrations for training manuals as part of the Marine Engineers and Marine Intelligence. He also worked on battle maps. In his free time, he painted scenes of the island or Marine life. The artwork that he did on Guam earned him a first place prize of $100 in an island-wide art contest. His winnings were presented to him by Lieutenant Tyrone Powers, who was also stationed on Guam. This work paved the way for his future career as a successful commercial artist. His commander in Guam, Gene Davis, from New York, also happened to be an artist and provided Moss with the contacts and references to jumpstart his career.

After the war was over, Moss worked many years for Sports Illustrated, painting golf courses and ski resorts around the world, many of which were featured in the magazine and on the cover. He settled in Chappaqua, New York with his wife Sally and their three children. They remained there until the mid-1970s when the family
moved to Ridgefield, Connecticut, where they lived until 1999 when Don and Sally moved to Farmington to be closer to their grandchildren.

In addition to his work with *Sports Illustrated*, Mr. Moss also was a significant contributor to the United States Air Force Art Program. This unique program continues to send artists around the world to paint Air Force life. The program’s purpose was to document Air Force life, equipment, and weapons. The program was established in 1950 by the Society of Illustrators, a prestigious group of artists, which Mr. Moss has been a member of since the late 1940s. Mr. Moss’ contribution to the Air Force Art Program went well beyond the over two dozen paintings he created. He eventually served as chairman of the program. Moss currently has twenty-one works of art catalogued in the USAFAP. For more information on this program, visit their website at http://www.afapo.hq.af.mil/Presentation/main/Index.cfm. Moss’ art can be found when searching by artist.

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As was mentioned earlier, Moss was interviewed as part of the Veteran’s History Project of the Library of Congress. The project provided the honor of meeting a veteran who has had an amazing life: being part of the battle of the Tenaru; experiencing battle on New Britain and in Guam; developing relationships and skills while in the Marines that helped open doors to a successful life as a renowned illustrator and painter; having work exhibited in the Smithsonian and in the Pentagon, or gracing the cover of one of America’s best sports magazines; and being a devoted husband, father and grandfather. The lesson learned from Mr. Moss is that no matter how much one achieves in life, the humility and grace with which he recalls his experiences brings to light a deep understanding of why so many refer to him and his peers as the “greatest generation.”

AUTHOR’S NOTE: Interviewing Mr. Moss for the VHP was an invaluable experience for me, a non-traditional college student at CCSU, studying to become a history teacher. The practical value of using the research and analytical skills of a historian combined with the more emotional value of preserving part of the nation’s history make this project an excellent learning tool. The lessons learned from meeting a veteran like Mr. Moss as part of the Veteran’s History Project go far beyond
what can be achieved in the classroom, and can be shared by others with a passion for history, as well as providing the opportunity to be good listener and a willingness to spend several hours interviewing and cataloguing the results of the interview. For further information on the Veteran's History Project at CCSU, please visit the Veteran's History Project website at http://www.loc.gov/vets/ or the Center for Public Policy and Social Research website at http://www.ccsu.edu/cppsr/. Teachers interested in having students participate in the project can find a list of participating organizations and get additional information about this very important work.

NOTES

1 Donald F. Moss, interview by author, November 3, 2005. Videotape recording, Farmington, CT.
2 Donald F. Moss. What was it like in the olden days, Dad?: An Illustrator's Autobiography. (Farmington, CT: Self-published, 2002), 18.
3 Ibid., 20.
5 Ibid., 33.
6 Moss., 25.