

# Fort Wingate: Reveille or taps?

By Phillip Marquez, edited by Bernadette Marquez



Courtesy photo  
Abenicio M. Chacon entered the Navy Sept. 29, 1943. A sticker attached to the photo reads "May God see that he returns after performing his duty."

Abenicio and Beatrice Chacon were dressed to a tee Nov. 11, 2008. They boarded a freshly washed white van that was to transport them on the parade route that began on West Aztec and threaded through downtown Gallup.

Abenicio Chacon had been chosen by the Veterans Committee members to be the focal point of the Veterans Day celebration on that clear November day. The sky was an azure blue, of which only the Southwestern United States can produce, and he had been declared a true-blue American hero by the American Legion Post No. 8.

The celebration culminated at the Veterans Park in front of the McKinley County Courthouse where his name had been enshrined in one of the huge pillars that epitomize our nation's ideals. The Grants U.S.M.C., Junior R.O.T.C. posted the colors with precise military precision.

Abenicio and Beatrice Chacon sat in quiet dignity while Dave Dallago, one of the McKinley County commissioners, related that he had been to Tinian Island on vacation a few years previous.

## Tour of duty

The Construction Battalions, or Seabees, built the largest airport in the world during Chacon's tour of duty there in 1944. Dallago described the 39-square mile island as largely overgrown with thick tropical jungle, but parts of the 2-mile long air strip are still intact. Chacon remembers that parts of the air strip consisted of 2-inch thick iron plates. The nearly one thousand B-29 Superfortress bombers were extremely heavy and needed a very long, solid strip from which to fly their bombing missions on Japan. These missions were very long because Tokyo is about 1,500 miles southeast of Tinian. Day missions bombed war factories, night missions fire bombed Tokyo and other cities with napalm.

Both B-29 bombers that dropped atomic bombs on two Japanese cities were launched from Tinian.

On Aug. 6, 1945, a United States Army plane called the Enola Gay dropped a single atomic bomb on the center of Hiroshima. Three days later, another B-29 called Bock's Car dropped another atomic bomb on the city of Nagasaki effectively breaking the back of the Japanese military and effecting their surrender to the allies Sept. 2, 1945, in Tokyo Bay aboard the battleship U.S.S. Missouri.

Tinian is part of the Mariana group of 15 small islands in the western Pacific Ocean. The interior is flat, and that is why it was so desirable to the Allied forces fighting their way to mainland Japan to overthrow Emperor Hirohito's imperial empire.

The Spanish who discovered the island in 1521, and used it as a game preserve, would not have imagined the slaughter that occurred when the United States Seabees and Marines came ashore during the bloody beach landings. More than 9,000 crack Japanese soldiers and sailors were killed in the vicious fighting.

The Seabees were instrumental in these dangerous landings. They cleared land mines, built temporary docks, and later on Tinian would dig mass graves to bury the multitudes of dead Japanese before they spread diseases.

The Construction Battalions were often ahead of even the Marines on these perilous operations when Chacon was assigned to Island X, as Tinian was known to them, it was one of the most dangerous places on earth. It was infested with fanatical snipers who would pop up out of nowhere and kill as many of our troops as possible before either committing hari-kiri or being shot or burned to death with flame throwers. Under the Bushido Code, life meant nothing to them.

Chacon relates that the Seabees main job was building and maintaining the airstrip. They were also multifaceted in all aspects of construction including building, wiring, and plumbing structures of all sorts. They were also cooks and did K.P. duty. In other words, the other service branches could not possibly function without them.

About 5 o'clock every evening, the Japanese Air Force would drop in for dinner. They would serve up Napalm and machine gun bullets by the score, sending our troops diving for their fox holes and anti-aircraft guns, while the Air Force conducted deadly dogfights with Zero fighters overhead. The main attacks were in the evening, but it was a frontline assignment that saw combat 24 hours a day.

Slealthy Japanese submarines were a constant threat to ships like the U.S.S. Indianapolis, which delivered the first atomic bomb to Tinian. On its return trip there was a miscommunication as to the time it was expected to reach its home port. The ship was following all appropriate evasive maneuvers. A Japanese submarine had been tracking them and sunk the Indianapolis at night in a matter of minutes killing and wounding many, leaving hundreds of oil-soaked men abandoned in shark-infested waters for six long days and nights. Many fell prey to dehydration and the hungry denizens of the deep.

The emaciated men were finally rescued from certain death when a Navy seaplane spotted them, as dramatically portrayed in the cabin scene in the movie "Jaws," when Captain T.S. Quint was relating to his two shipmates the memory of the "violent sinking of the Indianapolis in 1944. The Japanese characteristic fanaticism and single-minded duty to their emperor was further intensified, because each soldier and airman knew that Tinian was their last sustainable stand — it was make or break for themselves — their families and their imperialistic way of life. Centuries of warfare and absolute complete dedication to their demigod emperors had produced a finely honed army. They would gladly sacrifice themselves and their families for the defense of their godlike emperor.

Before World War I, Japanese scientists had discovered methamphetamine which would later prove to be one of the worst scourges ever unleashed on mankind. The sake that kamikaze pilots drank before they took off on their one-way suicide missions was laced with methamphetamine. They had enough fuel in their explosive-laden Zero fighters and bombers to reach their targets. Returning to their Nipponese home territory was physically impossible, coupled with the centuries of brainwashing and a last methamphetamine-laced cocktail spelled hell on earth for Chacon and all of his hard fighting fellow soldiers.

At this point in the war, the Japanese had capitalized on the jet fighter technology of their German Axis Allies. They emulated the German Zoner Rammung Campaign against allied bombers by Stuka dive bombers and the recently invented jet fighters. The Japanese Divine Thunder God Corps used jet fighters with iron reinforced nose cones to penetrate the hulls of allied battleships.

The methamphetamine crazed pilot was strapped into the jet fighter which was attached to the bottom of a bomber. At the precise moment, the jet was released and at "mach" speed would plunge into the hull of an American ship at water level for maximum damage. It was nearly impossible for our gunners to shoot the jets down because of the "supersonic" speed at which these missiles of death rammed into the ships. It was kill or be killed. The slaughter would have continued into the millions if the planned landings would have been carried out to mainland Japan. The fanaticism, if imaginable, would have been stepped up even more and our troops would have faced an even more determined foe.

Our scientists, engineers, both Presidents Franklin Roosevelt and Truman, coupled with our troops like the Seabees, stopped these mad dogs in their tracks with the dropping of the two atomic bombs.

## Going home

Chacon relates that when the Japanese surrender was announced on Tinian, all the ships around the war-torn island blew their whistles. Absolute delirious pandemonium broke out! They were going home from the Hades they had survived. An uninitiated person could not imagine the pure joy they felt. They were alive and headed back to chile y frijoles (in English, chile and beans) and the good old U.S. of A!

Alfred Forkel was a German prisoner of war that my dad Thomas S. Marquez helped guard in Las Animas, Colorado, during the war. Alfred was to be released in France in early 1945 after the German surrender in Europe. The German POWs were transported by train to the port in San Francisco. After his release, in a letter to my parents, Alfred described the port city as "bella como una fabula" which translates to "beautiful as a fable."

Hundreds of American troops were crowded into transport ships headed for Hawaii. Chacon would earn the mandatory 15 points for service time there, then we would be transported on the U.S.S. Saratoga to San Francisco. His description of the beautiful Golden Gate Bridge and San Francisco where he was honorably discharged was similar to Alfred Forkel's impression. The difference being they had been triumphantly victorious and were welcomed with

open arms by the citizens of the United States of America. Chacon had won the Bronze Star, however, there were no parades and everyone was just happy that the nightmare was over.

A train headed for Texas dropped Chacon off in Belen. The welcome there was even more sedate. There was no welcome home party and no one he knew was around. A visit to one of the local pubs proved to be more interesting. No one knew how the fight started but everyone knew how it ended, with the Seabees victorious again!

Jobs were scarce. A few of the things Chacon did to earn a living was working at disassembling war planes in Kingman, Arizona. Possibly, ironically, there may have been planes that were on Tinian island. He worked with a man named Shorty Martinez, in Gallup, that manufactured all manner of tools, bolts, and nuts. Also he was a hostler firefighter out of the Grants base. Through the G.I. Bill he was able to learn to make furniture, which he used in his future house in Gallup.

Chacon was living with his older brother Joe who had served in the Navy and his wife Leonor on the north side of Gallup. He was working as a dishwasher at the Fred Harvey Hotel for 75 cents an hour. A friend of his told him of a deck job in San Diego, California, but he opted for a job as a security guard at the Fort Wingate Army Depot.

## The stage was set

The stage was set. The beautiful Beatrice Candelaria attended a dance at the Knights of Columbus Hall, escorted by her older sister Dora. This was the magic moment for the soon to be Mr. and Mrs. Abenicio Chacon, he was able to steal one dance from her, then she was whisked away like Cinderella to Sunny Side and Sunny Dale, Utah, with Dora to visit her Aunt Beatrice and her husband Manuel Rivas.

A person had to work very hard back then.

Beatrice got a job as a cook and dishwasher at a boarding house run by a real nice older couple. Her tasks included washing out lunch buckets and fixing sandwiches for the miners. After a few months, she returned to Gallup where she attended St. Mary's Catholic School from first to third grade, then she attended public school to the seventh grade. She returned to Catholic school in eighth grade at the McKinley County Courthouse.

However, her family's financial situation forced her to gradually quit school. She helped support the family by working in a restaurant on Main Street run by some Mexicans. Later, she got on as a dishwasher at Gordo's Restaurant where a friend of hers, Lola Diaz worked.

Abenicio Chacon tried his best to track down the apple of his eye by going



Independent file photo  
In this Nov. 10, 2008, file photo, Abenicio Chacon, a U.S. Navy Seabee, salutes during the retiring of the colors at the McKinley County Courthouse Plaza. The Veterans Day ceremonies singled out Chacon for his service during wartime.

on safari to Chihuahua. He learned from a local man named Manuel Sanchez where she lived. Mrs. Chacon's family raised rabbits, and she was very good at preparing delicious rabbit dishes. Abenicio Chacon was at Senor Fidel and Senora Julianita's house so often that Fidel, her dad, was finally prompted to ask him, "¿Cuando te vas a casar con ella?" (In English, "When are you going to marry her?")

Abenicio Chacon popped the question and they became Mr. and Mrs. Abenicio Chacon. They were married in the Cathedral Church in 1951. The church was located where the west Lowe's store stands today. It was a small wedding and her dress was purchased by Abenicio Chacon for \$50 with his first pay check from Fort Wingate. Their padrinos were Tia Pilar and her husband Salomon Diaz, also Emilio and Bennie Serra.

They set up a household in a two-room house on Seventh and Green streets on the south side of Gallup. Coal was their heating fuel, so little Virgie, their first child, would have her little faced stained by the perpetual coal dust. Life was very difficult and everyone worked very hard all the time. The family bought an old adobe house at 703 West Mesa. The house had a very long porch in the front and had been built with a sunken floor, so it was susceptible to the frequent flooding in Gallup. The living room Beatrice Chacon used a wet gunny sack hung in an open window shaded by trees as an improvised refrigerator.

Eventually they ordered a pre-built house shell from Albuquerque. Beatrice Chacon remembers she had fallen sick and was in the hospital when the house was delivered on a low-boy semi-trailer. Abenicio and Beatrice and young Virgie would work in the morning and evenings at finishing the interior of the house. The other children were very young but still helped as much as they could.

Virginia had been born in 1952. The household grew to include Ramona in 1953, Linda in 1955, Fidel in 1957, Helen in 1959, Abenicio, Jr., in 1962, and my wife and soul-mate MaryAnn in 1964. There were also two miscarriages, one between Linda and Fidel and one after MaryAnn. Fidel passed away and is now playing his guitar for God in his home in heaven.

The house was filled with joy and the furniture Abenicio Chacon had made and stored in his home town of Belen. As children filled the house, two east rooms were added and the house became more accommodating and spacious.

There were many challenges along the way, including health problems such as Fidel's brain tumor, Beatrice Chacon's stomach operations, Abenicio Chacon's many painful operations and the optic nerve tumors that Michelle, a granddaughter that lived with them, developed at age 5. The tumors metastasized behind her eyes, they left her blind for life. Michelle epitomizes the Chacon family spirit. At a very young age she attended the School for the Blind in Alamogordo. She had to fight off bullies and endure the loneliness of being away from her family. The experience galvanized her. Michelle has earned her masters degree in teaching blind children. She owns her own house in Denver, where she lives with her girls and grandchildren.

Abenicio Chacon became an orphan when his mother passed away. Part of his childhood was spent at St. Joseph's Orphanage in Albuquerque. Conditions there were so horrible, and he was so desperate for nutrition that he used to eat dirt for the minerals contained in it. His father remarried and his stepmother nursed him back to health from near death. He lived to marry a wonderful woman named Beatrice. Their philosophy of life is to live it one day at a time and to never give up.

Sadly, a few years ago Abenicio and Beatrice Chacon passed away in their home here in Gallup within 2 1/2 months of each other.

## Fort Wingate stories

While sitting on the back porch of their house, Abenicio Chacon relayed several stories to me about his tenure as a guard at Fort Wingate. These quiet Spanish-American patriotic endured brutal lives and faced many obstacles. They have come to symbolize the tenacity and perseverance of all the people of every race that passed through and occupied the Wingate Valley for millennia. Then later there are many poignant stories of the soldiers that served at the fort and depot.

It is the intention of the authors of the Plateau Writers Guild to breathe life back into these people and speak for them. They would unanimously yell at the top of their voices that we cannot allow this integral part of our American history to fall victim to the BIA wrecking ball.

## The other photos:

Below, Beatrice Chacon poses in this post-war photo.

Center, the plaque given to Abenicio Chacon on Veterans day, 2008.

Bottom, the Seabee emblem cut out of wood was purchased at a Gallup store before Chacon's death.

Photos courtesy the Chacon family

