

## William Garbo, Sr.

by Martin J. Pociask

Historical interview by Martin J. Pociask with William Garbo, formerly 26th Quartermaster War Dog Platoon, 124th Infantry Regiment; and 112th Cavalry Regiment, on his experiences in the Philippines during World War II, including one of the first helicopter medical evacuations in history.

After returning home, William Garbo painted from memory this watercolor of the helicopter picking him up.



William Garbo, Sr.

### Background

The 6th ARUF was the USS Brig. Gen. Alfred J. Lyon, which utilized Sikorsky R-4 and R-6 helicopters. The 6th ARUF was based in the Philippines in early 1945; and later that year docked at Yokohama, Japan, following the Japanese surrender.

The 6th ARUF pilots, First Lt. James H. Brown, Second Lt. John R. Noll, and Flight Officer, Edward W. Ciccolella were each awarded an Air Medal for meritorious achievement in what may have been one of the earliest uses of helicopters to evacuate wounded soldiers — flying behind enemy lines on Luzon. They successfully evacuated 34 casualties from the front lines.

The following interview was conducted with William Garbo, one of the 70 surviving U.S. soldiers who were medically evacuated by helicopter during battles in the Philippines.



Ready for guard duty

**ROTOR:** Bill, many thanks for talking with us and sharing this little known chapter involving one of the first uses of the helicopter for medical evacuation. It is an opportunity to set the record straight, since the general public today is under the impression that Korea is where helicopter EMS evacuations began. To begin, tell us a little about yourself. Where do you live and what you are doing today?

**Garbo:** Well, I live in Ridgeland, Mississippi, and I practice landscape architecture on a limited basis; it keeps me alive and well!

**ROTOR:** Great, glad to hear that! Now, how did you enter the war?

**Garbo:** On my 18th birthday, in January 1943, I received my draft notice that read: "William Garbo A-1." At first I wanted to be a P-38 pilot but, although I was found to be physically fit, I was color blind and nearsighted. So I was one of 36 draftees at the Greyhound bus station off to join the army at Camp Shelby — and in July 1944 I was attached to the 124th Infantry Regiment. We were only in Camp Shelby for a few days before we packed up and climbed aboard trucks that took us to the downtown train station in Hattiesburg to catch a troop train to Camp Lee at Petersburg in Virginia.

**ROTOR:** That was where you met someone rather famous.



The young soldier

PHOTO COURTESY OF BASS STUDIO IN LAUREL, MISSISSIPPI, FEBRUARY 1944



Pilot, 1st Lt. James H. Brown in the cockpit of an R-4B Sikorsky helicopter.

U.S. ARMY PHOTO

**Garbo:** You could say that! A buddy and I were in the boxing club. From time to time celebrities came to camp to entertain the troops, and we were told that "The Brown Bomber," Joe Louis was coming. When the "Heavyweight Champion of the World" arrived, we all went to the gym. When Joe Louis stepped in the ring, he received a huge ovation from all of us. The announcer said Joe would give an exhibition fight with two recruits from the boxing club and the crowd roared. I was chosen with Erwin Forrest, a native American Indian, to get in the ring with Louis; we shook hands with the Champ, and then Erwin and I were blindfolded. When the bell rang we were to go out and find Louis and hit him if we could. You can imagine how noisy the crowd was. Louis would reach out with

one hand and hold one of us at a time while we swung wildly though thin air! This went on for several minutes;



William Garbo was guest of the base commander at the Air Force Air Museum at Ft. Rucker, Alabama. Here he is pictured sitting in an R-4B Sikorsky helicopter, 2004.

PHOTO COURTESY OF WILLIAM GARBO

while Erwin and I were never hit we did put on a good show. This made us quite popular with our fellow recruits.

**ROTOR:** That's quite a story to tell! So, eventually you were shipped off.

**Garbo:** One morning at muster, after completing my basic training, the Top Sergeant made an announcement that the K-9 Corp needed volunteers for training dogs; I jumped at the chance and raised my hand thinking of my dog "Fella" back home. We trained the canines for scout, rescue, guard, and messenger service at the War Dog Training Center in San Carlos, California.

**ROTOR:** Bill, how well did the dogs work?

**Garbo:** Very well, I'll tell you. A War Dog Platoon had 60 dogs — two per man. You couldn't be surprised if you had a scout dog with you on patrol. The dog moved with the point man and was trained to give an alert signal. The dogs would stop and freeze, and look in the direction of the movement, then the point man would give the 'palm down' signal, and the patrol would hunker down and wait.

**ROTOR:** You shipped out to New Guinea. What was it like there?

**Garbo:** Terrible! I thought I was in a place in the world where no other

living person from my part of the country had ever been. Later I met some of the boys in the 124th from my hometown of Laurel, Mississippi. I was later reassigned to the 112th Cavalry because they lost a lot of people and needed replacements. I ended up in G-Troop, and at first was assigned as an ammunition bearer. My first real combat experience was at the battle of the Driniumor River. That battle took place during June, July, and August of 1944.

**ROTOR:** It was in the Philippines that you came to be wounded and eventually evacuated in one of the first helicopter medical evacuations.

**Garbo:** At Leyte in the Philippines, we were assigned several Filipino soldiers to be our interpreters and to guide us. We were spread out in a grove; all of us were squatting down, resting when a Filipino soldier came over and shoved me several feet away from where I was



William Garbo pictured with his dog Smokey training wardogs.

PHOTO COURTESY OF WILLIAM GARBO

squatting. I could hear him shouting while he pointed to a small snake like a coral snake beneath where I was squatting. He killed the snake and I couldn't thank him enough. Then we invaded Luzon and freed the prisoners in the POW camp in Manila. After leaving Marongko, a village northwest of Manila, sometime in May 1945, we went by truck to Antipolo, southeast of Luzon where we were dropped off at the end of a dirt road. Our mission was to go to a place called 'Horseshoe Hill' to relieve the 42nd Division.

**ROTOR:** What happened at 'Horseshoe Hill'?

**Garbo:** We were to go up into the Santa Maria Mountains. It was decided to send the troops out on combat patrol. At this point we came under attack and were cut off from each other by heavy fire. The patrol was pinned down and could not move without risk of being shot.

**ROTOR:** At great personal risk, you carried a wounded sergeant on your back over a hundred yards to safety.

**Garbo:** Let me just say that any one of us would have done the same, it was how we did things then. Sergeant

R 4-B preparing for another rescue flight.



U.S. ARMY PHOTO

Anderson was injured and I carried him out of there to a medical unit for treatment.

**ROTOR:** If we could talk a little about helicopters. Bill, it was not long after that you yourself were injured. This led to your medical evacuation by helicopter — one of the first ever. Tell us what happened.

**Garbo:** We spent the night on a ridge in a foxhole. Every fifteen minutes or so artillery shells were exploding in the valley off to our side. I was asleep in one machine gun position with a soldier named Thomas C. Carroll and another soldier named James Krump, who was on the midnight watch, when an artillery shell exploded above our position and got all three of us. My machine gun was destroyed along with all my gear. The three of us were in shock, but somehow managed to crawl back to a large rock where the medic had set up to care for the wounded.

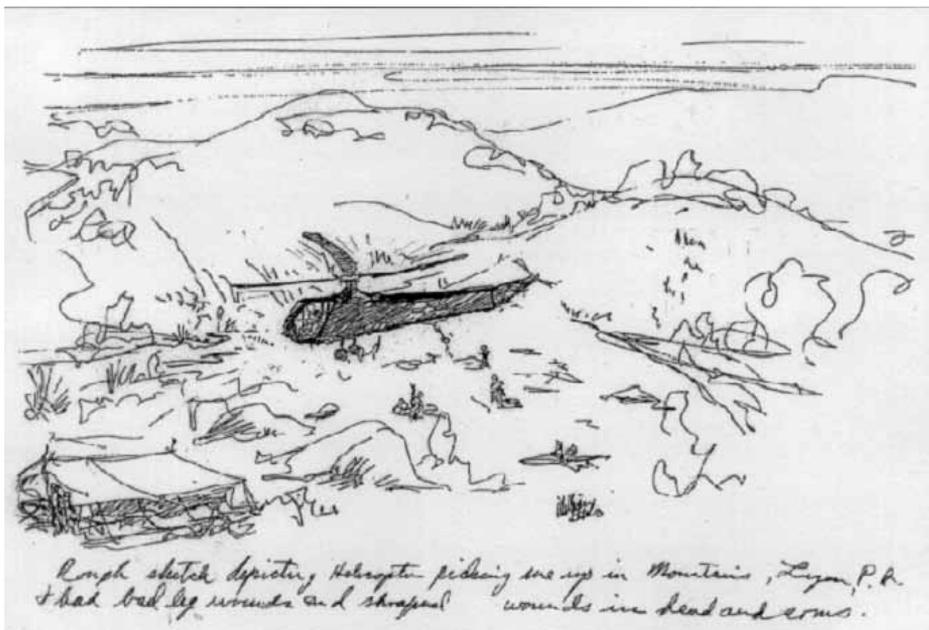


Lt. James H. Brown

**ROTOR:** That must have been a very long night for the three of you. In the morning of June 27, the doctor who cared for you asked if you would mind flying out in a helicopter. Since that was a very new option, what was your answer?

**Garbo:** Without hesitation my answer was yes!

**ROTOR:** When the helicopter landed, the pilot kept his engine running and



SKETCH COURTESY OF WILLIAM GARBO

William Garbo's sketch from memory of the helicopter picking him up from the mountaintop. Garbo suffered wounds to his leg, head, and arms.

did not get out of the aircraft. You were placed to the left of the pilot, along with a bag of supplies on your lap, to be dropped off as you passed one of the outposts across the river.

**Garbo:** Yes, I dropped that sack. Several years later Edwin Boger told me he retrieved the sack from the hillside and that he had a picture to prove it. The pilot though had a difficult time trying to lift off due to a lack of air movement. When we did take off, we received fire from the river bed.

**ROTOR:** Did the helicopter receive any hits?

**Garbo:** I understand the helicopter did get hit and lost oil pressure, which forced it to set down some distance from the pickup. At least two helicopters crashed on the way out. Through radio contact, a combat patrol came out and they too were fired on as they made their way out. Another helicopter was sent out and repairs made; both helicopters made it back to the ship.

**ROTOR:** What can you remember about the pilot and the ride?

**Garbo:** I remember him smiling and telling me not to worry. The helicopter doors had been removed. I think it was

a weight factor. Two of my buddies lifted me in the left seat and strapped me in; Frank Hughes from Mississippi and John Vine from Montana. Anyway, we finally lifted off after two or three tries and the helicopter arrived at the Field Hospital. The medics came running out with a stretcher and got me to the operating tent. Col. Grant said it only took about 18 minutes to reach the hospital from the mountain Command Post; it seemed longer at the time.

**ROTOR:** Did you know that helicopters were being used in the war effort and had been used in the field of operations you were in?

**Garbo:** I had not seen any of the helicopters, but some of the troopers who came on patrol to our outpost told us about seeing them and that one of the pilots had once brought some fresh beef out to us from the Liberty ship.

**ROTOR:** You said that you thought perhaps it was John Noll who was the helicopter pilot who rescued you. Is that right?

**Garbo:** Yes, at first I thought it was. I later learned from Fred Duncan's research that Lt. James H. Brown was the pilot who actually rescued me. I believe Fred Duncan found



**Flight Section**

Left to right standing: C. Williams, Heuer, Crowder, Prokryn. Sitting: Noll, Baker, Brown

the confirmation in the Archives at Langley AFB in Montgomery, Alabama. I'm not sure about his source but maybe it was from the ship's Log or the Air Force record or diary. Lt. Brown died in Florida.

**ROTOR:** Two of the 70 wounded who were evacuated were D.O.A. Before we talked, you had a conversation with Louis A. Carle, a helicopter pilot with the 5th ARUF. Can you tell us about it?

**Garbo:** I talked twice with Louis Carle just a few weeks before he died. He was glad to talk with one of the men who had been rescued. As I recall, he was not well, but seemed to perk up when I talked to him.

**ROTOR:** After you recovered, how did you spend the rest of the war?

**Garbo:** I was in Tokyo Bay on 2nd of September 1945, and witnessed the surrender. Following the signing of the Peace Agreement, the air was filled with hundreds of American aircraft, of all types flying low enough for us to see and wave to the pilots and crew; there were B-29s, P-52 mustangs, B-15s, P-38s, Torpedo bombers, naval aircraft of all kinds, and aircraft we couldn't recognize. On the 3rd of September we landed at the Naval Air Station at Tatayama on Tokyo Bay. I was the Sergeant in charge of a village south of Tatayama. It was wonderful. There was no combat; we

carried loaded weapons, but there was no shooting, the Japanese people were friendly and brought us food. We spent our spare time taking pictures and saying goodbye to our buddies. Almost every day when we would fall out for inspection and exercise, the commanding officer would call out



PHOTO COURTESY OF WILLIAM GARBO

William and Patricia, Christmas 1946, Redwood City, California.

the names of those who were selected to return to the States. Selection was determined by the number of points each of us had earned while overseas. I left Japan in December 1945 aboard the troop ship, Admiral Koontz. We landed two weeks later in Seattle, Washington, on Christmas Eve. I can still see the large flakes of snow falling and Bing Crosby singing "White Christmas" over the P.A. system.

**ROTOR:** You received a number of awards and medals; in addition to your Purple Heart Medal you also received

the Winged S award from Sikorski. What other medals or awards did you receive?

**Garbo:** I received the Bronze Star Medal with two bronze stars on the ribbon. I also received two Combat Infantryman Badges, a Good Conduct Medal, Freedom Medal for WW II, Army of Occupation Medal (Japan), Philippine Liberation Medal, Asiatic Pacific Campaign Medal, Expert Rifleman's Badge, and Texas Service Medal, U. S. Armed Forces.

**ROTOR:** What did you do when you got back to the States?

**Garbo:** Well, I married Patricia Griffin on March 9th, 1947, a year after I got home from the war. I carried a picture of her in my wallet while I was overseas.

**ROTOR:** Bill, you documented your travels and developed quite a memorabilia collection of your experiences during the war through your letters, sketches, paintings, and photographs. Those have been helpful in telling your story.

**Garbo:** During the war we were allowed to have Brownie cameras. We were asked not to take pictures in combat. We broke that rule, and I'm so glad I did. I took many pictures. I also wrote many letters home, and in some of them I drew sketches. Some of them made it through the censors and my mother saved every one of them. I had boxes full of black and white pictures, and I decided to preserve them. I scanned more than 1,000 pages of old letters, sketches, envelopes, and stamps dating from 1943 to 1946.

**ROTOR:** I would like to thank you Bill for sharing your amazing story with us. Your testimony documenting the earliest use of helicopters for medical evacuation while under fire is an important historical footnote to aviation history — preceding similar medical rescues in Korea by six years. **R**

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