From Detroit to Tokyo Bay:
A World War II Marine Witnesses
The Japanese Surrender
On Sept. 2, 1945, the final day of World War II, very few Marines were present in the crowd that gathered on the quarterdeck of the battleship USS *Missouri* (BB-63) when the official Japanese instrument of surrender was signed in Tokyo Bay. One of those lucky few was my grandfather, Corporal Eugene E. Parker Jr. of Detroit, Mich. who was serving as orderly to Admiral William F. Halsey Jr., commander of the U.S. Third Fleet.

Parker, then 25 years old and a near-four-year veteran of the Marine Corps, appeared in many official and unofficial photographs of the surrender ceremony helping to cement in history the role of Marines serving aboard Navy warships during World War II and the presence of Marines during the conflict’s final chapter.

Though my grandfather died before I was born, I grew up hearing stories about his service in the Pacific and his presence at the Japanese surrender. Tales of his combat experiences were peppered with...
the names of places such as Midway, Guadalcanal, Leyte, and Okinawa, all of which quickly became immortalized in my memory. My mother had held onto her father’s olive green wool service uniform, adorned with five service ribbons and 11 battle stars. My family kept a box of my grandfather’s war memorabilia that included autographed portraits of legendary naval commanders and correspondence from Admiral William “Bill” Halsey himself.

Coming from a Marine Corps family deeply proud of its heritage, my grandfather’s role in such a significant chapter in history was a big deal indeed. When I began training as a military historian a decade ago, his story was never far from my mind. Eugene Parker was a wartime enlistee. He had volunteered to serve only for the duration of hostilities, enlisting five weeks after Pearl Harbor and accepting an honorable discharge nine weeks after the Japanese surrender. How was it that a young man from Depression-era Detroit with little formal education and no prior military experience found himself at the center of what is today remembered as one of the most monumental moments of the 20th century?

Entering the Pacific War
Eugene E. Parker Jr. was born on Oct. 24, 1919, in Detroit, the sixth of 11 children raised in a poor family of Irish and English Americans. He came of age during the difficult Depression years, which instilled in him a great deal of independence and a strong sense of pride. By the age of 16, he had left school and secured a full-time job as a grocery store clerk at Fox Creek Market on the east side of Detroit.

On Dec. 7, 1941, 22-year-old Parker was working at Fox Creek Market when he learned that the Japanese Imperial Navy had attacked the U.S. Pacific Fleet at Pearl
Harbor, and his country was going to war. He made up his mind almost immediately that he was going to join the Marine Corps—the only branch of service he and his buddies considered worth its salt.

Within five weeks of the U.S. declaration of war, he was in uniform. After completing recruit training in San Diego, Parker was selected to attend a specialized sea school program to become a seagoing Marine, fulfilling the oldest and most traditional role of the Corps. While many of his contemporaries would go on to serve as assault troops during the island-hopping campaigns of the Pacific, Parker was trained as an antiaircraft gunner aboard ship and sent to Pearl Harbor in April 1942 to join the U.S. Pacific Fleet.

Parker served at Pearl while awaiting orders to join a Marine ship detachment. When Vice Admiral Bill Halsey’s Task Force 16, which included the aircraft carriers USS Enterprise (CV-6) and USS Hornet (CV-8) and their escorts, returned to Hawaii after launching the famed Doolittle Raid over Tokyo, USS Hornet requested four enlisted leathernecks to augment its Marine detachment. Parker was issued the coveted assignment, reporting aboard the renowned flattop on May 27 and joining the Marine gun crew of one of the vessel’s 1.1-inch antiaircraft cannons.

The next day, Task Force 16 pulled out of Pearl Harbor to ambush the Japanese fleet at Midway. During the ensuing battle, airplanes of the U.S. carriers USS Yorktown (CV-5), USS Enterprise and USS Hornet sank four enemy flattops and a cruiser at the cost of just Yorktown and a destroyer. Though Hornet itself was not attacked by Japanese aircraft during the battle, an incident of accidental friendly fire on the carrier’s flight deck killed several Marines in Parker’s detachment and nearly made him a casualty, too.

The Battle of Midway proved a significant U.S. victory in the Pacific War with Japan. With less than two weeks’ experience aboard ship, Parker had become a combat veteran of one of the most famous battles of World War II.

Tales From the South Pacific

The summer of 1942 saw the Allies go on the offensive in the Pacific. In August, the 1st Marine Division landed at Guadalcanal and Tulagi in the Solomon Islands, kicking off a string of island assaults in the South Pacific. The Guadalcanal campaign would be remembered as one of the bitterest campaigns in American military history—and USS Hornet was to play a major role.

Between August and October, Hornet operated in the Lower Solomons alongside USS Saratoga (CV-3), USS Wasp (CV-7), and Enterprise carrier groups, supporting the Marines on Guadalcanal and engaging elements of the Japanese fleet wherever they appeared. Hornet frequently sailed alone through the dangerous area of the Solomons known as “The Slot,” especially as the Japanese scored hit after hit on the other U.S. carriers and disabled or sank them one by one. It was a draining campaign as even Hornet met its tragic end during the October 1942 Battle of the...
Santa Cruz Islands. Parker and his crewmates were subjected to the horror of successive all-out Japanese aerial strikes during which *Hornet* was struck by three bombs, two torpedoes and two suicide planes. Everywhere throughout the ship, there was chaos—fires raged, compartments flooded, men lay dead and wounded and planes and munitions exploded. The carrier’s 85-man Marine detachment suffered 14 killed and 28 wounded, a shocking 49 percent casualty rate.

Miraculously, Parker survived with only minor injuries. When *Hornet* was ordered abandoned, he went over the side and into the Solomon Sea, avoiding circling sharks and enemy bombs alike for roughly an hour before being rescued by the escorting destroyer USS *Mustin* (DDG-89).

*Hornet* may have sunk beneath the waves at Santa Cruz, but the Marine from Detroit was still very much alive, which meant his war was far from over. The surviving Marines of *Hornet* returned to San Diego in December to serve as guards and be retrained as infantrymen to participate in upcoming island assaults at Tarawa, Bougainville or New Britain.

In the fall of 1943, Parker, now a trained antitank gunner, redeployed to the South Pacific as an individual infantry replacement. When *Hornet* returned to San Diego in December to serve as guards and be retrained as infantrymen to participate in upcoming island assaults at Tarawa, Bougainville or New Britain. In the fall of 1943, Parker, now a trained antitank gunner, redeployed to the South Pacific as an individual infantry replacement.

When Parker arrived at New Caledonia, Noumea, to be assigned to an active infantry regiment, fate intervened. ADM Halsey, commanding the theater, was in search of several additional Marines to join his headquarters. By little more than luck alone, Parker and 11 other men were singled out from their battalion of more than 1,800 and ordered to remain at Noumea while their fellow Marines joined infantry outfits bound for battle.

Parker joined Halsey’s South Pacific headquarters at Noumea in October 1943. He would not separate from the admiral’s command for more than two years. After the Allies neutralized the Japanese bastion at Rabaul on New Britain, achieving the chief objective of the Solomon Islands campaign, new questions arose: with the war moving out of the South Pacific, what was to be done with ADM Halsey, and what would become of the men serving under him?

**Western Pacific Drive**

The answer soon became clear. In June 1944, Halsey was given command of the U.S. Third Fleet, the predominant striking force of the U.S. Pacific Fleet. He would alternate command with Admiral Raymond A. Spruance, under whom the fleet was called the U.S. Fifth Fleet. When amassing his flag allowance, 14 enlisted leathernecks from his existing 114-man Marine detachment in the South Pacific were requested to serve as orderlies aboard the flagship. Incredibly, Parker was among those selected, and so he bid farewell to Noumea and prepared to return to sea for the first time in nearly two years.

Halsey and his flag allowance boarded their new flagship, the battleship USS *New Jersey* (BB-62), at Pearl Harbor in August 1944 and met the enormous Third Fleet near the Admiralty Islands in the Bismarck Sea. Parker, now a corporal, set to work serving as orderly to Halsey, Chief of Staff Rear Admiral Robert B. “Mick” Carney, and other ranking staff officers.

The Third Fleet’s first order of business was to support General Douglas MacArthur’s campaign to invade and liberate the Philippines. In October 1944, Allied troops landed at Leyte, kicking off the biggest and bloodiest campaign in the Southwest Pacific. Though U.S. leaders did not believe the enemy would contest the landings, the Japanese Imperial Navy decided to risk battle at Leyte Gulf, setting

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Above left: Cpl Parker, right, and Sgt Willie Phillips on duty aboard USS *New Jersey* (BB-62) in late 1944. (Photo courtesy of Christopher N. Blaker)

Above right: Parker and his fellow Marine orderlies on board USS *Missouri* (BB-63) during their second tour at sea in the summer of 1945. Parker is in the first row, second from the left.
the stage for the largest naval contest of World War II.

The October 1944 Battle of Leyte Gulf saw the Japanese navy gamble its remaining ships against the U.S. Third and Seventh Fleets in Philippine waters. The enemy employed several clever surprises, deceiving Halsey into leading his entire Third Fleet north after a decoy carrier force and catching an unaware Seventh Fleet U.S. escort carrier-destroyer group defending the landing area off Samar, risking the success of the entire Allied invasion.

Parker was on New Jersey’s flag bridge when the now-famous dispatch from Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, commanding the U.S. Pacific Fleet, was delivered to Halsey: “Where is Task Force 34? The World Wonders.” The last phrase had been added to confuse enemy decoders but had not been removed on New Jersey, and Halsey saw it as a rebuke from his boss. Enraged, he threw his hat onto the deck and began swearing and storming about the bridge, stopping only when Carney intervened and demanded that he pull himself together.

Fortunately, Allied naval forces managed to turn back the Japanese fleet, and MacArthur’s campaign to liberate the Philippines continued in earnest. But while the Battle of Leyte Gulf ended in
The Japanese delegation arrives on the quarterdeck of USS Missouri (BB-63), in Tokyo Bay to sign the official instrument of surrender in September 1945. Parker is in the back row, left side, as he later indicated on his copy of the photograph by placing the small “x” above his head.

American and British ships in Sagami Wan, Aug. 28, 1945, preparing for the formal Japanese surrender which took place a few days later. Mount Fuji is visible in the background. The nearest ship, USS Missouri (BB-63), is flying ADM Halsey’s four-star flag. The British battleship HMS Duke of York is just beyond her with HMS King George V further in. USS Colorado (BB-45) is in the far center distance.
Third Fleet’s new flagship, the battleship USS Missouri (BB-63). Halsey took command of the fleet from Spruance during the final stages of the Okinawa campaign, the naval battle that had become the most costly sea operation of the entire war. After the Third Fleet fought off Japanese kamikazes for several weeks and rode out another tropical storm, Okinawa was finally declared secure in June. The Allies then turned their attention to the one target left of the Pacific War—the Japanese home islands themselves.

The campaign to invade Japan, code-named Operation Downfall, was expected to be the bloodiest of World War II, with projected Allied casualties of more than a million. To soften the islands up for assault, the Third Fleet conducted countless airstrikes and naval bombardments on Japan that summer. It was abundantly clear by mid-1945 that the Japanese could not hope to defeat the Allies and win the war, but they were prepared to die trying, and they were determined to take as many Allied lives with them as they could.

To the great relief of Parker and every other soldier, Sailor, airman and Marine, the invasion of Japan never materialized. After two atomic bombs were dropped on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the Soviet Union entered the Pacific War in early August, the Japanese finally offered their unconditional surrender. Three years, eight months, and 20 days after the Imperial Japanese Navy attacked the U.S. Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor and drew the United States into World War II, the Third Fleet entered Tokyo Bay to formally accept the surrender of Japan.

The surrender ceremony took place on the quarterdeck of Missouri on the morning of Sept. 2, 1945. Sailors, Marines, newspaper reporters and photographers crowded the upper decks to get a good look at the many famous Allied military commanders invited aboard the battleship as guests of honor. Senior U.S. officers of all services also gathered on the quarterdeck to observe the proceedings. In their ranks were fewer than two dozen Marines who had received the honor of attending the event. Parker was among them, standing several rows behind Halsey and armed with a pistol in case the Japanese tried anything treacherous.

Fortunately, the ceremony proceeded without incident, and Parker observed a peaceful transition from a time of war to a time of peace. After Allied and Japanese representatives signed the instrument of surrender, it was finished. World War II, for which Parker had given almost four years of his life and during which he had nearly been killed numerous times, was finally over.

**Anchoring in Tokyo Bay**

That period of rest passed quickly. After visiting Detroit on furlough, Parker returned to sea in May 1945 onboard the

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an overwhelming victory for the Allies, Halsey’s reputation as an infallible naval commander was dampened considerably, and the mighty USS New Jersey, on which Parker and the rest of the Third Fleet’s flag allowance sailed, had not fired a single shot.

The Japanese had been defeated at Leyte Gulf, but the Third Fleet wasn’t out of the woods. During the following weeks, the fleet was subjected to two new dangers—Japanese kamikaze planes aiming to sink Allied ships one by one and a tropical typhoon that proved more menacing than any enemy surface action could. When ADM Halsey turned over command of the fleet to Spruance in January 1945, Parker and the rest of the Third Fleet flag allowance were elated to return to the United States for a well-deserved period of rest and recuperation.

When the U.S. military began demobilizing, Parker was honorably discharged from the Marine Corps in November 1945, and he returned to Detroit with plans to begin a career and start a family. He worked as a security patrolman at the Chrysler Corporation for 34 years and lived in metropolitan Detroit for much of the rest of his life, passing away on Aug. 12, 1981.

Looking back on my grandfather’s service record and exploits during the Pacific War, it is impressive to imagine that one Marine could have seen and experienced so much in just four short years. What is even more remarkable is that Eugene Parker was not a special exception. He was just one of the 16 million Americans who answered their country’s call to duty during World War II and helped protect it in its hour of need.

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For the safety and health of all our guests and employees, masks and social distancing will be required at this event. Any mask with a face valve will not be permitted as they allow exhaled air and droplets to escape and do not block transmission of COVID-19.