

Wartime memories on the 19th floor

By Keith Chapman

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

SAN FRANCISCO — When I moved to San Francisco in 2013, my grandfather, a World War II veteran, suggested I check out a place here that held special memories for him: the Top of the Mark.

He remembered the bar vividly and for good reason. There, he downed the drink he thought might be his last.

During the war, San Francisco — the largest port on the West Coast — served as the gateway to and from the Pacific Theater. Hundreds of thousands of servicemen passed through the city and through a watering hole on the 19th floor of the famous and extravagant Mark Hopkins Hotel. With picturesque views from atop Nob Hill, Top of the Mark became a touchstone for US troops heading to or returning from the war in the Pacific. While the number of World War II veterans has dwindled, the Top of the Mark remains a meaningful, reflective stopping point for them.

This summer marked the 70th anniversary of the Allied victories in Europe and Japan.

“At that time, everyone was either going to Japan for the expected big battle, or they had just come back from a big battle like Iwo Jima or Okinawa,” my grandfather tells me. “You were either drinking to celebrate that you hadn’t been killed, or you were drinking to forget that you might.”

T. J. Chapman, 19 and a Navy ensign, was a part of the latter group.

Like so many other soldiers, he had arrived in July 1945 in San Francisco to await passage to the Pacific. He spent eight days in the city, and on one of his final nights, he joined countless other servicemen for an evening at the Top of the Mark. As many as 30,000 ser-voce members passed through the bar every month, according to a 1944 article in Time magazine. “It was just packed. It was standing-room-only,” says my grandfather, 89 and living in Austin, Texas. On weekends, the line to get in often extended all the way downstairs into the hotel lobby, where servicemen waited hours to take an elevator up. When my grandfather finally made it up to the lounge in the sky, he bellied up to the bar and ordered a drink the Mark was known for, a “stinger” — crème de menthe and brandy — and took in the stunning view, one that was especially breath-taking for a young man from rural Texas. He had never seen the Pacific Ocean. He talked with many of his comrades in arms, from all branches of the military. He could tell by their mood whether they were coming or going, he says. “It was hard drinking both ways.”

Soldiers bought specially designated bottles that were served only to their squadron. The serviceman who consumed the last of it bought the refill for the squadron. The bar became



KEITH CHAPMAN FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

The Intercontinental Mark Hopkins San Francisco has a history special to World War II vets.

so iconic that many servicemen named their tents and Quonset huts after it, according to Time.

Even the wives and girlfriends of the soldiers staked out their claims to the bar. One tradition, according to the hotel (now the InterContinental Mark Hopkins San Francisco),

was for the servicemen’s significant others to watch the Navy ships leave San Francisco Bay for the Pacific Theater. The northwest corner of the Top of the Mark became known as “Weepers’ Corner” because wives and girlfriends gathered there for a last glimpse of their loved ones’ ships as they slipped over the horizon.

In 2015, the spectacular view looks much the way it did in 1945. The sights and sounds of San Francisco remain: the

light blue Ferry Building, the cable cars that climb California Street, and the orange Golden Gate Bridge, of course, silhouetted by sunsets over the water. It’s easy to see why Top of the Mark became a place for soldiers to contemplate life, death, and war. Weighing heavily was the fierce fighting they were bound for, against a hell-bent enemy. If it were going to be your last drink, you at least had a hell of a view for it. And if it were your first drink after surviving the battles overseas, you couldn’t find a better view to toast.

Some things about the view have changed. The massive artillery guns surrounding the West Coast’s most important harbor — some capable of firing 25 miles out into the ocean — have been dismantled or designated historic sites. Cruisers that docked along the Embarcadero have been replaced with ferries, which shuttle commuters around the bay, to and from places such as the quaint seaside communities of Tiburon and Sausalito. To the East, sparkling high rises and cranes building new ones — the product of the technology boom — litter the Financial District’s skyline. Ships heading west and crossing the horizon are no longer battleships, but industrial barges on the trade routes to Asia.

My grandfather left San Francisco and crossed that horizon in summer 1945. When he was halfway across the Pacific aboard the USS Vicksburg, preparing for the highly anticipated invasion of Japan, the shocking news came: The United States had dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Within days, Japan sur-

rendered. He never made it to Japan. That fall, the Vicksburg arrived back in San Francisco. My grandfather, celebrating the end of his tour of duty, returned to the Top of the Mark for another stinger. The clientele was still mostly servicemen, though “no one was afraid anymore.”

Today, the Top of the Mark serves businesspeople in suits and pencil skirts, many in town for conferences and staying at the hotel. The decor is wooden and stately, but has an airy feel thanks to the floor-to-ceiling and 360-degree windows. The lounge’s history with the military is still prominent. In the lobby hangs a framed Life magazine article from the bar’s heyday during World War II. Tucked in one corner of the bar lobby is a glass cabinet full of the squadron bottles, where soldiers can still take a drink from their designated handle. Also in the locked cabinet are logbooks filled with memories and photographs from veterans and their relatives.

Sebastian Sagasti, who works at the bar, says they still serve many veterans of all ages — many who are dressed in full uniform and come to reminisce. “They all have fascinating, fascinating stories,” he says. Children of deceased veterans often visit for the first time, having heard their fathers talk about the bar.

“My dad often said, ‘I’ll meet you at the Top of the Mark,’” one unsigned and undated entry reads. “Only recently did I realize that the greeting held the hope of returning from war in the Pacific.”

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In the cold, deep Montana snow, these dogs go all out

By Janet Mendelsohn

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

GALLATIN NATIONAL FOREST, Mont. — One by one, Chris lifted 20 dogs from crates stacked two high in the bed of his truck. Overnight, eight inches of fresh powder had fallen on the mountains, topping a snow base several feet deep. It was 10 a.m. and the temperature hovered about 10 degrees above zero. Good conditions for dog sledding, Chris told us. The two-lane road we drove in on is closed to vehicles beyond this point in winter. From here, it’s the trail through a forest of towering lodge pole pines, along Mill Creek just below the ridge. While Chris attached 10 dogs’ harnesses to each tow line fronting two wooden sleds, I nudged my husband. “That icy creek’s flowing fast.” Bob had noticed.

Alaskan huskies are perfect sled dogs. They’re lean, muscular, and smaller than I expected. They look like wolf pups, to whom they are related. Chris, our guide, works for Absaroka Dogsled Treks in Pray, Mont., 30 miles north of Yellowstone National Park. As a professional musher, he knows some dogs like to run beside their parent or sibling, others won’t. Some are born leaders. All know the routine but as soon as they took their positions two-by-two in line, they began howling, barking, leaping high in the air or bumping each other’s rumps like 5-year-old boys on a playground. Their message was clear: “Hurry up. What are you waiting for?”

I wanted to scratch their necks, say “Be patient,” but Chris said, “Don’t.”

Sled dogs are athletes — marathon runners, to be exact. And like any professional athlete before an event they need to focus. Pet them after their work day is done, he told me. Don’t distract them now.

We got two minutes of instruction. For the first five miles, Bob was the musher, I’d sit in the sled, then we’d switch. Bob stood on the sled’s two long wooden runners where they extend behind the seat and held onto its high back. He practiced using his body weight to press down on the sawtooth metal brake between the runners to make it grip the snow. Tapping the brake would tell the team to slow down. Musers (from the French “marcher,” to march) don’t say “Mush,” except in the movies. They yell, “Let’s Go!”



JANET MENDELSON FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

“Whoa!” (stop), “Gee,” and “Haw” (right and left).

“But if I get confused, it sounds like the dogs know what to do,” said Bob. “Right,” said Chris, who would mush on the lead sled with two other first-timers. Then he warned us, “When I unleash them, you don’t want to be caught off-guard.”

The team was in a frenzy now, barking loudly, tugging the tow line. Their eyes begged us to let them run. Suddenly, they stopped, alert in formation. They heard Chris before we did and saw the lead team take off. Bob slowly released the brake, shouting, “OK! Let’s go!”

In a flash we were whooshing across a winter landscape where the only sound was our dogs’ steady panting breaths. Mountains, pine trees, and boulders cast blue shadows across pristine snow undisturbed by tracks. If deer or moose were watching, they were out of sight.

“I love this!” I shouted to Bob. He answered, “Me, too!” I marveled at the dogs’ precision, their strength and the beauty of the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness. The ride was exhilarating yet peaceful.

In a flash we were whooshing across a winter landscape.

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Meanwhile, Chris’s team was doing the hard work, breaking trail through deepening snow. We followed in their tracks, at a distance, and didn’t see them take a sharp curve ahead. Our team leaders, Rival and Storm, must have noticed but maintained their pace. Our sled tilted crazily, one runner rising high on a snow ridge, then swinging out toward the creek.

“Lean hard left!” Bob commanded me. We tilted our bodies away from the creek to steer the sled. Then Bob remembered, tap the brake. Storm and Rival instantly slowed the team to a fast walk. We laughed with relief. A mile later, the other team reappeared. Stopped cold on the trail.

“Whooooooaa,” Bob shouted, stomping hard on the brake. The dogs responded, but their protests were plain. Over the racket, Chris hollered, pointing to his team. “I need to let these guys rest.” Starts and stops were more frequent after that.

Company co-owners and breeders Mat Stimpson and Hannah Vogel later told us Alaskan huskies weigh an average of 50 pounds, can pull twice their weight, and are happiest trotting at 10 to 15 miles per hour. “They can store as much word association as Labs,” said Stimpson. “They communicate with each other vocally. Excited puppy voices mean one thing, low voices another, so we’ve adapted that for commands. But, in truth, we don’t command them to do anything. We give them permission to do what they want.”

The following day, I chanced to meet Jim Peddie, a veterinarian from Ventura, Calif., who runs a renowned exotic animal training program and once cared for sled dogs during the Iditarod. I asked him if pulling heavy sleds in freezing weather was hard on Huskies.

“These animals want desperately to do this,” Peddie told me. “They live for this. It’s their reason for being. Sled dogs are selected for their intelligence and stamina. They are adored by their owners who depend on their performance. They’re treated well.” Alaskan huskies especially love to run when it’s 10 to 20 below zero. They can handle temperatures to 40 below, and Siberian huskies even colder, he added. Professional mushers know each one as well as you know your own child.

High on the trail during a rest stop, apparently Storm heard her counterparts on the other sled complain breaking this trail was too hard. She decided to turn around, taking the whole team back with her. The line jack-knifed. Caught in the middle of the tangle, Bob and I desperately commanded, “Whoa! Whoooooaaa!” Storm ignored us. Chris came running. He grabbed her by the collar and pressed the side of her face

briefly into the snow. Message received, she accepted a new spot mid-line while Chris sorted out the mess, promoting Roxie to top job.

Around noon, we stopped for a picnic lunch while the dogs rested quietly. They knew what came next.

My turn as musher was five miles, downhill, on the same trail without a single stop. But easier doesn’t mean effortless. My thighs ached as I leaned hard on one runner or the other to steer the sled, but the pace was smooth. It felt great, a thrill ride through fresh fallen snow except when we encountered humans on the trail. A hardy young couple on mountain bikes cheered us on. Dog walkers’ pets tried and failed to sideline our team.

Too soon we were done. Five hours and 10 miles round trip.

“These guys would love to be petted now,” Chris said smiling. We helped Storm, Rival, Roxie,

Lamar, Koln, Sweet Pea, Rebel, Warrior, Alice, and Panda, an Iditarod veteran, out of their harnesses and thanked each one for an awesome ride.

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