

Australia Gave Marine Respite From War, Love of His Life

By Joan Rial

Jim and Betty Wagner of Beechwood Drive celebrated their 65th anniversary this past summer. Since their family is spread all over the world they could not have just one celebration. So they started in July when their son Jay, his wife Carol, and their boys Micah and Toby flew in for three weeks from Australia. Their son Joel, who was working in Canada, and daughter Robin from Connecticut also flew in. Daughter Joan, her husband Dick, and granddaughter Christina drove in from Oklahoma, and grandson Kevin drove in from Texas. A niece



came in from Virginia. It was the first time all the siblings and all the grandchildren were together in about 10 years.

In August they celebrated the actual anniversary. Jay and family could not be there for this part, but others were. Betty's sister Johnnie and husband Peter Smith, and niece Heather and husband Geoff Litchfield, came over from Australia. Several nieces and nephews from Virginia, daughters Joan and Robin and their husbands, Dick Rial and Fred Dressler respectively, and two granddogs, all came to Pine Knoll Shores for a big party at the Country Club of the Crystal Coast. Also in attendance were about 40 friends and neighbors. It was a very happy occasion with some dancing and toasting, hugs and warm memories.

Anyone who has ever met Betty Bernard Wagner would surely remember her lovely Australian accent and stunning good looks. Even after 65 years as a U.S. citizen, the accent comes through in her speech. She was born in Sydney, Australia, in 1920 and had four siblings. Her father was an engineer architect and the general contractor for many well-

known buildings in Sydney. His job moved the family to Melbourne in 1939, where he was responsible for the building and maintenance of the Royal Melbourne

Hospital. Betty was always an avid reader, excellent tennis player, and "beach bum" living so close to the ocean. Betty attended and graduated from Scott's Business College in Melbourne. She first worked for the Colonial Mutual Insurance Company and later the Tasmania Visitor's Bureau.

James Arthur Wagner was the youngest of 10 children. He was

born in 1918 to a farming family living just outside of Richmond, Virginia. He grew up to be quite handsome and accomplished in sports and debating during high school. He even became the Public Speaking Champion of Virginia one year. He went on to attend the University of Richmond, where he was involved in the choral club, a four-letter athlete in track and a member of ΠΚΑ fraternity. He graduated from the University of Richmond in May, 1941.

Jim and one of his buddies were the only two graduates accepted into the Marine Corps Officers Training School at Quantico. The 7th Reserve Officer Class was one of several designed specifically to expedite qualification for the personnel demands of the impending war. They were in a class of 300, which actually began before the attack on Pearl Harbor and the U.S. entry into World War II. The first weekend of liberty for them was kicked off by a sergeant reprimanding them for being the "saddest bunch of no-goods ever to try to get into the Marines." They left the base on liberty and the next day the Pearl Harbor attack occurred. They

were, of course, called back to base where they were greeted with the words from the sergeant: "You are the best the Marine Corps ever produced, soldiers ready for front line duty." That officers' class training was intensified and shortened so that they could join our forces in the Pacific in May of 1942. His first assignment was a 2nd lieutenant platoon leader out of Camp Lejeune, North Carolina.

The first battle Jim was involved in was the battle of Guadalcanal. Following this horrendous five-month experience his battalion was given R&R at the cricket grounds in Melbourne, Australia. By then most had some degree of malaria and needed time to recover, Jim among them.

While in Sydney, Jim's best friend went on a date with some local girls. The next day Jim was recruited to be the third man on a follow-up date. As it turned out, Betty was recruited after some real cajoling to be the third lady taking the place of one who could not attend from the night before. Of the three Aussie ladies, one was a redhead, one was a blonde, and Betty was a "black-haired beauty." Jim said he liked black hair so that is why he picked her, plus they seemed to get along well. The next day they were going to get together again but Betty could not as she had plans to go on a picnic with other friends. When she returned home, her mother complained, "Some Yankee has been calling here all afternoon, waking the baby (Betty's sister)."

Six months later, on August 21, they

were married in Sydney. They had a quick honeymoon in Tasmania due to Betty having an "in" via her job. Jim was ordered back into action in September and Betty stayed in Australia.

Jim participated in the battles of New Britain, New Gloucester and Peleliu before being informed he was getting to go home. Betty traveled to the U.S. by herself in September, 1944, expecting Jim to meet her there about the same time. She took a cargo ship from Sydney to Victoria, Canada, where she found out his orders had been rescinded. She called home and her father said, "Keep going, I don't have the money to bring you back!" She continued traveling to Richmond, Virginia and was met there by her new mother-in-law and eight new sisters-in-law, a scary situation for anyone. As it turned

out she was accepted into his family immediately and found she did not have "in-laws" but eight new sisters! Jim did not get home for another five months.

Naturally, 65 years of marriage affords many experiences and memories. Jim and Betty have filled those years with building and maintaining close ties with family here and in Australia and friends the world over.

They both have been very proficient in golf, tennis, bowling, the card game of bridge, and dancing where they are the ones everyone clears the floor to watch. They are first to come to the aid and care of friends. They are as close to their daughter-in-law and sons-in-law as they are to their own children. What is apparent to all is that what they treasure most in this life is each other.

