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T/Sgt. Rudolph O. Roberts of the 658th Tactical Hospital at Kadena AB, Okinawa, visits White Beach, the same beach he landed on 18 years ago as a Seabee during the invasion of Okinawa. (S&S Photo)

SHELL BURSTS AND KAMIKAZES

Okinawa Invasion—Longest Day fo

By S/Sgt.

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WHITE BEACH, Okinawa — T/Sgt. Rudolph O. Roberts stood silently on the sand and looked out at the peaceful turquoise waters of Buckner Bay thinking of the hell of kamikaze planes and bursting shells at the same spot 18 years ago Monday.

It was invasion day, the beginning of the last big island battle of World War II, and Roberts, then an 18-year-old Seabee, was on one of the 500 American ships taking part.

White Beach, called Brown Beach during the invasion, was on the "back" side of the island, the opposite side of the major troop landings, and therefore re-

latively quiet, he recalled.

But the kamakaze pilots picked the fleet of ships there as targets for desperate attacks which took terrible tolls of ships and men.

Roberts, 37, noncommissioned officer-in-charge of preventive medicine in the 658th U.S. Air Force Tactical Hospital at Kadena AB, remembered how he and his buddies in the 20th Seabees helped unload supplies from his ship virtually without opposition.

He and others moved to the beaches to continue the stockpiling of the vast amount of invasion supplies which backed up the landings.

"Then, all hell broke loose," he said. "Suddenly the sky

was filled with kamikaze aircraft. The bright blue skies turned to gray as the white clouds were replaced by bursting shells.

"And, that was only the beginning. We had something like 64 air raids that month by Japan-based aircraft and those based on Okinawa."

The gigantic battle, which started April 1—Easter Sunday that year — saw more than 50,000 American casualties, 12,281 of them deaths.

The furious Japanese attacks against American ships sank 36 and damaged 368. Records show 763 American planes also were lost at that time.

For the Japanese, the tolls

were much higher. Altogether, 110,071 Japanese were killed and more than 7,400 captured. Sixteen Japanese ships were sunk, including the world's largest ship, the battleship Yamato, and four were damaged.

In the air the Japanese lost 7,830 planes.

"Never have I felt so alone," Roberts said. "I was 18 years old, thousands of miles away from home and scared.

"When the air raids came, I just sat in the damp clay hole and hoped each raid would be the last. I was too scared to think about anything else."

After the first day, the Seabees lived in tents about 10 miles from the beach, he said. They continued to work at the beach unloading and storing supplies.

"We spent more time in fox-holes than we did at work, it seems," he said. "Even when our shifts secured at night, we weren't too secure.

"I will always remember the name of my ship, the Joseph Suelling and especially the moments of anguish when one

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