

'Gooney Island' book recalls time in Pacific

S. Russell vet spent war days on tiny island

By JOAN DEMIRJIAN

Six months ago, South Russell resident William F. Cody said, his wife Joie began prodding him to write a book about his service in World War II as a teenager.

Mrs. Cody felt he had valuable experiences to share with more recent generations. The book, "Journey to Gooney Island," is filled with photographs, news reports and letters kept in a scrapbook by his father.

It was written in conjunction with family friend Sally Terrell, of Bentleyville. Mrs. Terrell provided inspiration and motivation in her role as editor, graphic arts designer and layout director, he said.

In 1944, when he was 17, Mr. Cody, now 84, joined the U.S. Coast Guard while in his senior year at Shaker Heights High School.

If he finished the first half of his senior year and boot camp, the principal agreed to give him his diploma. He was one of eight boys who joined various branches of the military. His parents Jane and Louis Cody thought it was a good move, he said.

Through training, "We grew stronger, tougher and matured into a well-disciplined fighting unit," he said.

After boot camp, he chose radio communications school and then was assigned to the remote East Island or Gooney Bird Island in the French Frigate Shoals, 600 miles northwest of the Hawaiian Islands. "It was 1,400 feet long and 200 feet wide and no more than 5 feet above sea level. It was a sandbar in a coral reef area," Mr. Cody



Photo by Joan Demirjian

Sally Terrell and William Cody look over the scrapbook that provided photos and letters for his book on his World War II service.

said.

"There were no trees on the island," he said. Seven Quonset huts sheltered 14 men and one commanding officer. "I was the only radio man and I kept in touch with the Coast Guard base in Honolulu."

For amusement, they made up games, raced Jeeps, used tracers to write their names in the sky and did some target shooting, he said.

On April 1, 1946, he said, they awoke to find water was rising to the steps of the buildings. "The whole island was under water," he said.

"We got life preservers and supplies

and got ready for whatever it was," Mr. Cody said. "It was a tsunami," he said. The wave was 20 feet high and they clung to cables and the wave went over them and the water started to recede. It then began to rise again, and the wave hit again, Mr. Cody said. It receded and the island was a 30-foot mound of sand and stone.

He used a walkie-talkie he had kept out of the water to talk to a plane that flew over. They dropped some clothes, rations and medical supplies. They later discovered Hawaii had a tsunami with waves greater than 100 feet and hundreds of people died, Mr. Cody said.

Back home, because communications had been shut off, their families thought they had been swept away. He was able to finally get word to his family that he was alive and safe, he said. His father kept newspaper articles of the tsunami in his scrapbook.

Eventually, after restoring the island, the servicemen left for Honolulu. His trip home included a weeklong trip on the Freedom Train, many stops along the way.

Mr. Cody was discharged in Detroit. Gooney Bird Island is now a bird sanctuary owned by the United States.

After graduating from the University of Virginia, studying business and commerce, Mr. Cody worked for a resort and hotel management firm.

The Codys moved to South Russell 17 years ago after living in Pepper Pike and were one of the first to build in the Alderwood subdivision off Bell Road.

Looking back, Mr. Cody said, that period was a unique time in the nation's history. "Serving our country was a privilege and an American citizenship was never taken for granted," he said.

Now, he is fighting a more personal battle. He is dealing with liver and pancreatic cancer.

But he is a strong man, his wife said. "He is a descendant of Buffalo Bill Cody," Mrs. Cody said. Buffalo Bill was a first cousin, four generations removed.

Mrs. Terrell said, in retrospect, that time on the island offered Mr. Cody, at 17, an opportunity for growth and maturity and to put life in perspective. "I wrote the book for his family and friends, and it has helped him a great deal with what he is going through now," she said.

The book was printed by Windjammer, owned by Ron Humphrey of Chagrin Falls. It is available by calling Mr. Cody at 440-338-4060.