

## **Oscar W. Toby**

### **USMC, Retired -- Senior Executive Chef, Retired**

The only son of a widowed mother with six growing children, Oscar Toby was a man inspired to dream while helping out at home with various jobs. He loved helping his grandmother in the kitchen, and he worked as a paper boy and delivered ice from the wagon – whatever it took to help his mother put food on the table. “My grandmother, I called her Mon, was instrumental in the beginning of my life's journey,” says Toby, but he could not have known at the time that fond kitchen memories and a talent for food preparation would lead to a culinary career filled with accolades.

Sixteen year old Oscar W. Toby enlisted in the United States Marine Corps on February 2, 1951. “Living in a house filled with women was just too much!” recalls Toby. “I needed to leave home to discover myself and become a man.” Not until year's later did this budding chef realize he would find a new home in someone else's kitchen. Toby found a home with the Marines for thirty-three years, “and eighteen days,” adds Toby, proud of his long-time service that included numerous posts and duty stations, both here and abroad,

The Marine Corp is always looking for a few good men, but when Toby entered he was a boy. They asked him what he liked to. “I really didn't have an answer,” recalls Toby. “I only knew that I was good with food,”

Within two years, Toby was an 18-year-old sergeant and chief cook in Korea, with older men under his command, many of whom had been in service for more than 15 years.

This globe trotting Chef, compliments the Corp for his quest for discovery. Toby “vacationed” and explored the world cuisines in search of local fare, finding each culture more fascinating than the next. “I was always in search of the new and different in each country I visited. I was raised on gray, biscuits and smoked meats from the big backyard smoke house-little did I know that wasn't the normal breakfast food for everyone. Without refrigeration, we pickled and smoked everything! That's how our family survived.”

Toby has always been “good” with food. In 1965he found himself entered at the Advanced Food Service School where he received advanced training; he made instructor. Then in '67 he was sent off to Viet Nam.” Toby did two tours of duty in Viet Nam. While on one tour, he was stranded for 12 days. Luckily, he found refuge with a group of nuns, where he prepared food (what little of it here was) for orphaned children and homeless refugees. It was a traumatic experience, forcing him to come to terms with death and dying as never before. Luckily he survived!

With years of combat experience under his belt—cooks were also combat soldiers—two service periods come to mind as his most memorable. As a food service instructor at Camp Le Juene in North Carolina, Toby prepared young recruits headed to Viet Nam. He was able to equip them not only with basic food service skills, but also a few jungle survival tactics. The second experience, and the one most cherished, was being selected as one member of an eight-man crew aboard the Commandant of the Marine Corps' aircraft. (The Commandant is the Corps highest ranking official and, like the President, he has his own aircraft.) This memorable journey last nearly fourteen years, serving under four Commandants; a choice

duty bestowed largely due to accolades from the US Ambassador to Viet Nam, a man he had worked for in '67 and '68.

During his trips to the Far East and elsewhere, Toby explored every fish you could imagine, smoked, salted, and pickled. “In some places, I couldn't eat at all because of poor sanitation. I don't eat whale meat, or anything too chewy, but I did try squid, which is now quite common place. I tried snake too, it was good, but certainly not my favorite...I'm terrified of snakes! In Africa, antelope was the meat of choice; it tastes a lot like beef. The most unusual thing I tried was roasted cockroaches...tasted like pecans, crispy and crunchy. Toby's motto: “If it was fresh, or smoked, I usually liked it.”

Toby restricted himself to only iced fish and shell fish, to be on the safe side. “I remember hauling crew members back to the aircraft after trying various local un-refrigerated delicacies, they were sick; I was always fine!” He always did his very best to serve great food to the crew and the guest dignitaries. What was Toby's advantage? – “I'd stock huge coolers with everything I thought I'd need for the trip, and pack perishables with lots of dry ice.”

Preparing every meal from scratch was a challenge. “I have 'walked' from D.C. to Japan, and 'tracked' more miles globe trotting with the crew,” Toby laughs, recalling how many hours he would be on his feet, even while in the air. “When you're headed out on a trip and you're chasing the sun, I'd serve regular meals-breakfast, dinner and snacks...always snacks. Heading home, we'd cross the international dateline, passing the equator, so I'd serve breakfast meals for what seemed like days!”

As a boy in his grandmother's kitchen Toby never imagined a military career traveling the globe, meeting interesting people, and exploring the world's cuisines with an adult palate. After serving 33 years, he retired as Master Gunnery Sergeant on March 1, 1984.

A year after retirement, and much needed R&R at home, Toby considered numerous careers in food service, finally landing a position teaching Commercial Food and Culinary Arts for the Duval County school system. “Sometimes dealing with those kids reminded me of combat, they were strong willed and very opinionated But, I hung in there for 13 years.” Toby was certified by the American Culinary Federation as Certified Executive Chef and Certified Culinary Educator in 1986. In 2002, he retired, and was honored as Senior Executive Chef.

Toby has met and cooked for U.S. Presidents, including Eisenhower, Ford and Nixon, and hundreds of Senators including the Kennedy brothers, Bobby and Ted. He served four Commandants, created and prepared menus for thousands of foreign dignitaries, including various Kings and Queens, and even got a thumbs-up from five-star General Omar Bradley.

Still no recognition speaks as loudly as the love of his family. His wife, Dora, has been there for him for thirty-three years. Together, they miss his son who died over ten years ago, but relish their trips to California to visit his grand children. They spend as much time as possible with their grandchildren, and their only daughter, who also lives in California.

Toby smiles, and says very understatedly, “I think my life as a poor boy from rural Georgia was a bit remarkable; I'm glad to say I survived the trip!”