

My earliest memories of the Waldorf Astoria hotel happened on May 7, 1945. The whole city of New York was in a frenzy, because VE Day had just been announced, the end of World War II in Europe. I was on liberty from duty at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, awaiting assignment to a new ship after service on a troop ship during the retaking campaign of the Philippines the previous October.

As most of the news photos and films show, there were a million people in Times Square, all shouting, dancing and kissing to celebrate the occasion. Not many in the crowd, except for GIs and sailors, thought about the hard fighting ahead to reach VJ Day, victory over the Empire of Japan. The battle of Iwo Jima just a few months past had been one of the most brutal in the war, and the invasion of Okinawa was just weeks away. However, it was a triumphant moment and, after four years of war, the American people needed to celebrate.

I joined the crowd for awhile, and if you look closely at the photos, you may see this 19-year-old sailor in the middle of it all. Then, along with five shipmates, I wandered away from the crowds and noise of Times Square along 49th Street until we reached Park Avenue. Then, as now, it was the most luxurious area of Manhattan, and not too many sailors had the money or social connections to patronize the pricey shops, cafes and hotels there.

As we stood on the avenue and craning our necks to look up at the art deco magnificence of the 47-story Waldorf Astoria Hotel, a group of young women emerged from the hotel, and walked past two uniformed doormen who looked like admirals in full dress uniform. Although it was only early afternoon, we could tell by their laughter, horseplay and screams that they had been drinking, something not unusual throughout New York City on VJ Day.

When they saw us, the girls (some a bit older than girls) came rushing over. As had happened happily on Times Square earlier with other girls, they hugged and kissed us. They insisted we join them for the tea party that was in progress on the hotel's Cocktail Terrace. Tea party? At first we were reluctant until one of the girls produced a silver hip flask of scotch. We enjoyed the tea party very much, then later were honored guests at the hotel's Bull and Bear Steakhouse. And even later well, that's a whole different story.

When in Manhattan, be sure to visit the Waldorf at 301 Park Avenue, between 49th and 50th Streets. Its lobby is one of the most regally beautiful in any hotel in the world, and everything else is as luxurious as ever. If you have the \$500 a night to stay in one of the posh rooms, or if you're on an expense account and can hide the cost, it is well worth it.

If you can come up with \$1,500 a night, you may be able to sleep in a suite that once was occupied by such historical figures as Generals Douglas MacArthur and Dwight D. Eisenhower, as well as Presidents Herbert Hoover, Franklin D. Roosevelt and Harry Truman. And if you can put on your old uniform and stand outside, you may get lucky as we did in May, 1945, and be invited to a Waldorf party by some very nice, although now slightly older, ladies.

