

WITH THE OLD BREED

At Peleliu and Okinawa

E. B. SLEDGE



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In memory of Capt. Andrew A. Haldane,
beloved company commander of K/3/5,
and to the Old Breed

*The deaths ye died I have watched beside,
and the lives ye led were mine.*

—RUDYARD KIPLING

"Our battalion is ordered to hit the beach on Ngesebus Island tomorrow," an officer told us.*

I shuddered as I recalled the beachhead we had made on 15 September. The battalion moved into an area near the northern peninsula and dug in for the night in a quiet area. It was sandy, open, and had some shattered, drooping palms. We didn't know what to expect on Ngesebus. I prayed the landing wouldn't be a repeat of the holocaust of D day.

Early in the morning of 28 September (D + 3) we squared away our gear and stood by to board the amtracs that would take us across the 500-700 yards of shallow reef to Ngesebus.

"We'll probably get another battle star for this beachhead," said a man enthusiastically.

"No we won't," answered another. "It's still just part of the Peleliu operation."

"The hell you say; it's still another beachhead," the first man responded.

"I don't make the regulation, ole buddy, but you check with the gunny, and I'll betcha I'm right." Several mumbled comments came out about how stingy the high command was in authorizing battle stars, which were little enough compensation for combat duty.

We boarded the tractors and tried to suppress our fear. Ships were firing on Ngesebus, and we saw Marine F4U Corsair fighter planes approaching from the Peleliu airfield to the south. "We gonna have lots of support for this one," an NCO said.

Our amtracs moved to the water's edge and waited for H hour as the thunderous prelanding naval gunfire bombardment covered the little island in smoke, flame, and dust. The Corsairs from Marine Fighter Squadron (VMF) 114 peeled off and began bombing and strafing the beach. The engines of the beautiful blue gull-winged planes roared, whined, and strained as they dove and pulled out. They plastered the beach with machine guns, bombs, and rockets. The effect was awesome as dirt, sand, and debris spewed into the air.†

Our Marine pilots outdid themselves, and we cheered, yelled, waved,

*Ngesebus had to be captured to silence the enemy fire coming into the 5th Marines' flank and to prevent its use as a landing place for Japanese reinforcements from the north. There was also an airfield on Ngesebus—a fighter strip—that was supposed to be useful for American planes.

†Ngesebus was one of the first American amphibious assaults where air support for the landing force came exclusively from Marine aircraft. In earlier landings, air support came from navy and sometimes army planes.

and raised our clenched fists to indicate our approval. Never during the war did I see fighter pilots take such risks by not pulling out of their dives until the very last instant. We were certain, more than once, that a pilot was pulling out too late and would crash. But, expert flyers that they were, they gave that beach a brutal pounding without mishap to plane or pilot. We talked about their spectacular flying even after the war ended.

Out to sea on our left, with a cruiser, destroyers, and other ships firing support, was a huge battleship. Someone said it was the USS *Mississippi*, but I never knew for sure. She ranked with the Corsairs in the mass of destruction she hurled at Ngesebus. The huge shells rumbled like freight cars—as the men always used to describe the sound of projectiles from full-sized battleships' 16-inch guns.

At H hour our tractor driver revved up his engine. We moved into the water and started the assault. My heart pounded in my throat. Would my luck hold out? "The Lord is my shepherd," I prayed quietly and squeezed my carbine stock.

To our relief we received no fire as we approached the island. When my amtrac lurched to a stop well up on the beach, the tailgate went down with a bump, and we scrambled out. With its usual din and thunder the bombardment moved inland ahead of us. Some Company K Marines on the beach were already firing into pillboxes and bunkers and dropping in grenades. With several other men, I headed inland a short distance. But as we got to the edge of the airstrip, we had to dive for cover. A Nambu (Japanese light machine gun) had cut loose on us.

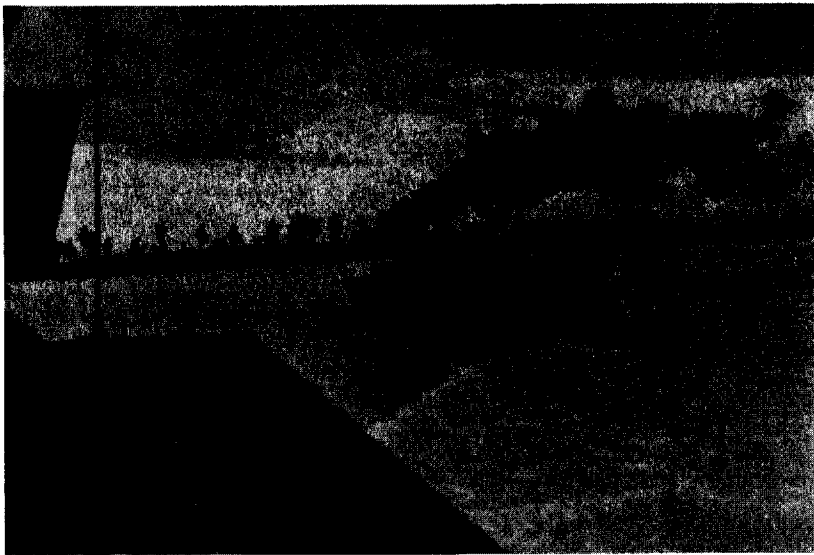
A buddy and I huddled behind a coral rock as the machine-gun slugs zipped viciously overhead. He was on my right. Because the rock was small, we pressed shoulder to shoulder, hugging it for protection. Suddenly there was a sickening crack like someone snapping a large stick.

My friend screamed, "Oh God, I'm hit!" and lurched over onto his right side. He grabbed his left elbow with his right hand, groaning and grimacing with pain as he thrashed around kicking up dust.

A bypassed sniper had seen us behind the rock and shot him. The bullet hit him in the left arm, which was pressed tightly against my right arm as we sought cover from the machine gun out front. The Nambu was firing a bit high, but there was no doubt the sniper had his sights right on us. We were between a rock and a hard place. I dragged him around the rock out of sight of the sniper as the Nambu bullets whizzed overhead.

I yelled, "Corpsman!" and Ken (Doc) Caswell,* the mortar section

*Habitually and affectionately, Marines call all U.S. Navy corpsmen who serve with them "Doc."



Assault on Ngesebus. View from amphibious amtrac while crossing in third wave from Peleliu. USMC photo.



Ngesebus: Assault troops (K/3/5) move inland. USMC photo.

corpsman, crawled over, opening his pouch to get at his first aid supplies as he came. Another man also came over to see if he could help. While I cut away the bloody dungaree sleeve from the injured arm with my kabar, Doc began to tend the wound. As he knelt over his patient, the other Marine placed his kabar under the injured man's pack strap and gave a violent upward jerk to cut away the shoulder pack. The razor-sharp blade sliced through the thick web pack strap as though it were a piece of string. But before the Marine could arrest its upward motion, the knife cut Doc in the face to the bone.

Doc recoiled in pain from the impact of the knife thrust. Blood flowed down his face from the nasty gash to the left of his nose. He regained his balance immediately and returned to his work on the smashed arm as though nothing had happened. The clumsy Marine cursed himself for his blunder as I asked Doc what I could do to help him. Despite considerable pain, Doc kept at his work. In a quiet, calm voice he told me to get a battle dressing out of his pouch and press it firmly against his face to stop the bleeding while he finished work on the wounded arm. Such was the selfless dedication of the navy hospital corpsmen who served in Marine infantry units. It was little wonder that we held them in such high esteem. (Doc later got his face tended and was back with the mortar section in a matter of a few hours.)

While I did as Doc directed, I yelled at two Marines coming our way and pointed toward the sniper. They took off quickly toward the beach and hailed a tank. By the time a stretcher team came up and took my wounded friend, the two men trotted by, waved, and one said, "We got the bastard; he ain't gonna shoot nobody else."

The Nambu had ceased firing, and an NCO signaled us forward. Before moving out, I looked toward the beach and saw the walking wounded wading back toward Peleliu.

After we moved farther inland, we received orders to set up the mortars on the inland side of a Japanese pillbox and prepare to fire on the enemy to our company's front. We asked Company K's gunnery sergeant, Gy. Sgt. W. R. Saunders, if he knew of any enemy troops in the bunker. It appeared undamaged. He said some of the men had thrown grenades through the ventilators, and he was sure there were no live enemy inside.

Snafu and I began to set up our mortar about five feet from the bunker. Number One mortar was about five yards to our left. Cpl. R. V. Burgin was getting the sound-powered phone hooked up to receive fire orders from Sgt. Johnny Marmet, who was observing.

I heard something behind me in the pillbox. Japanese were talking in low, excited voices. Metal rattled against an iron grating. I grabbed my carbine and yelled, "Burgin, there're Nips in that pillbox."

All the men readied their weapons as Burgin came over to have a look, kidding me with, "Shucks, Sledgehammer, you're crackin' up." He looked into the ventilator port directly behind me. It was rather small, approximately six inches by eight inches, and covered with iron bars about a half inch apart. What he saw brought forth a stream of curses in his best Texas style against all Nippon. He stuck his carbine muzzle through the bars, fired two quick shots, and yelled, "I got 'em right in the face."

The Japanese inside the pillbox began jabbering loudly. Burgin was gritting his teeth and calling the enemy SOBs while he fired more shots through the opening.

Every man in the mortar section was ready for trouble as soon as Burgin fired the first shot. It came in the form of a grenade tossed out of the end entrance to my left. It looked as big as a football to me. I yelled "Grenade!" and dove behind the sand breastwork protecting the entrance at the end of the pillbox. The sand bank was about four feet high and L-shaped to protect the entrance from fire from the front and flanks. The grenade exploded, but no one was hit.

The Japanese tossed out several more grenades without causing us injury, because we were hugging the deck. Most of the men crawled around to the front of the pillbox and crouched close to it between the firing ports, so the enemy inside couldn't fire at them. John Redifer and Vincent Santos jumped on top. Things got quiet.

I was nearest the door, and Burgin yelled to me, "Look in and see what's in there, Sledgehammer."

Being trained to take orders without question, I raised my head above the sand bank and peered into the door of the bunker. It nearly cost me my life. Not more than six feet from me crouched a Japanese machine gunner. His eyes were black dots in a tan, impassive face topped with the familiar mushroom helmet. The muzzle of his light machine gun stared at me like a gigantic third eye.

Fortunately for me, I reacted first. Not having time to get my carbine into firing position, I jerked my head down so fast my helmet almost flew off. A split second later he fired a burst of six or eight rounds. The bullets tore a furrow through the bank just above my head and showered sand on me. My ears rang from the muzzle blast and my heart seemed to be in my throat choking me. I knew damned well I had to be dead! He just couldn't have missed me at that range.

A million thoughts raced through my terrified mind: of how my folks had nearly lost their youngest, of what a stupid thing I had done to look directly into a pillbox full of Japanese without even having my carbine at the ready, and of just how much I hated the enemy anyway. Many a Marine

veteran had already lost his life on Peleliu for making less of a mistake than I had just made.

Burgin yelled and asked if I were all right. A hoarse squawk was all the answer I could muster, but his voice brought me to my senses. I crawled around to the front, then up on top of the bunker before the enemy machine gunner could have another try at me.

Redifer yelled, "They've got an automatic weapon in there." Snafu disagreed, and a spirited argument ensued. Redifer pointed out that there surely was an automatic weapon in there and that I should know, because it came close to blowing off my head. But Snafu was adamant. Like much of what I experienced in combat, this exchange was unreal. Here we were: twelve Marines with a bull by the tail in the form of a well-built concrete pillbox containing an unknown number of Japanese with no friendly troops near us and Snafu and Redifer—veterans—in a violent argument.

Burgin shouted, "Knock it off," and they shut up.

Redifer and I lay prone on top of the bunker, just above the door. We knew we had to get the Japanese while they were bottled up, or they would come out at us with knives and bayonets, a thought none of us relished. Redifer and I were close enough to the door to place grenades down the opening and move back before they exploded. But the Japanese invariably tossed them back at us before the explosion. I had an irrepressible urge to do just that. Brief as our face-to-face meeting had been, I had quickly developed a feeling of strong personal hate for that machine gunner who had nearly blasted my head off my shoulders. My terror subsided into a cold, homicidal rage and a vengeful desire to get even.

Redifer and I gingerly peeped down over the door. The machine gunner wasn't visible, but we looked at three long Arisaka rifle barrels with bayonets fixed. Those bayonets seemed ten feet long to me. Their owners were jabbering excitedly, apparently planning to rush out. Redifer acted quickly. He held his carbine by the barrel and used the butt to knock down the rifles. The Japanese jerked their weapons back into the bunker with much chattering.

Behind us, Santos yelled that he had located a ventilator pipe without a cover. He began dropping grenades into it. Each one exploded in the pillbox beneath us with a muffled *bam*. When he had used all of his, Redifer and I handed him our grenades while we kept watch at the door.

After Santos had dropped in several, we stood up and began to discuss with Burgin and the others the possibility that anyone could still be alive inside. (We didn't know at the time that the inside was subdivided by concrete baffles for extra protection.) We got our answer when two grenades were tossed out. Luckily for the men with Burgin, the grenades

were thrown out the back. Santos and I shouted a warning and hit the deck on the sand on top of the pillbox, but Redifer merely raised his arm over his face. He took several fragments in the forearm but wasn't wounded seriously.

Burgin yelled, "Let's get the hell outa here and get a tank to help us knock this damn thing out." He ordered us to pull back to some craters about forty yards from the pillbox. We sent a runner to the beach to bring up a flamethrower and an amtrac armed with a 75mm gun.

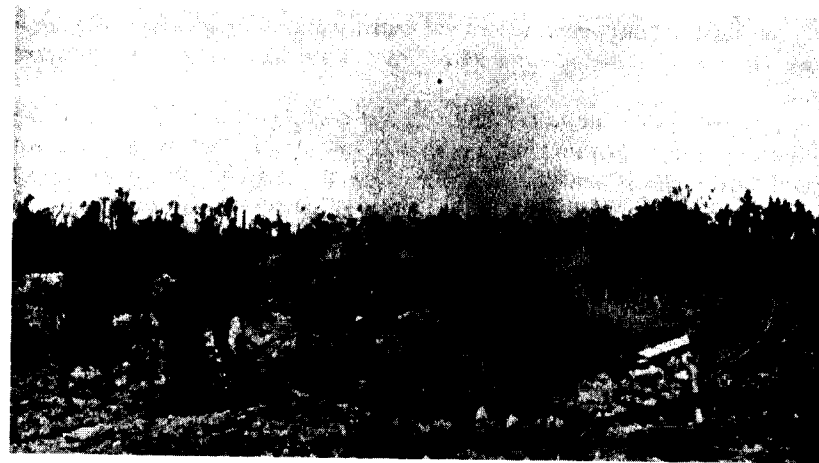
As we jumped into the crater, three Japanese soldiers ran out of the pillbox door past the sand bank and headed for a thicket. Each carried his bayoneted rifle in his right hand and held up his pants with his left hand. This action so amazed me that I stared in disbelief and didn't fire my carbine. I wasn't afraid, as I had been under shell fire, just filled with wild excitement. My buddies were more effective than I and cut down the enemy with a hail of bullets. They congratulated each other while I chided myself for being more curious about strange Japanese customs than with being combat effective.

The amtrac rattling toward us by this time was certainly a welcome sight. As it pulled into position, several more Japanese raced from the pillbox in a tight group. Some held their bayoneted rifles in both hands, but some of them carried their rifles in one hand and held up their pants with the other. I had overcome my initial surprise and joined the others and the amtrac machine gun in firing away at them. They tumbled onto the hot coral in a forlorn tangle of bare legs, falling rifles, and rolling helmets. We felt no pity for them but exulted over their fate. We had been shot at and shelled too much and had lost too many friends to have compassion for the enemy when we had him cornered.

The amtrac took up a position on a line even with us. Its commander, a sergeant, consulted Burgin. Then the turret gunner fired three armor-piercing 75mm shells at the side of the pillbox. Each time our ears rang with the familiar *wham—bam* as the report of the gun was followed quickly by the explosion of the shell on a target at close range. The third shell tore a hole entirely through the pillbox. Fragments kicked up dust around our abandoned packs and mortars on the other side. On the side nearest us, the hole was about four feet in diameter. Burgin yelled to the tankers to cease firing lest our equipment be damaged.

Someone remarked that if fragments hadn't killed those inside, the concussion surely had. But even before the dust settled, I saw a Japanese soldier appear at the blasted opening. He was grim determination personified as he drew back his arm to throw a grenade at us.

My carbine was already up. When he appeared, I lined up my sights on



Flamethrower gunner with supporting rifle fire team burns out enemy emplacement. Peleliu. USMC photo.

his chest and began squeezing off shots. As the first bullet hit him, his face contorted in agony. His knees buckled. The grenade slipped from his grasp. All the men near me, including the amtrac machine gunner, had seen him and began firing. The soldier collapsed in the fusillade, and the grenade went off at his feet.

Even in the midst of these fast-moving events, I looked down at my carbine with sober reflection. I had just killed a man at close range. That I had seen clearly the pain on his face when my bullets hit him came as a jolt. It suddenly made the war a very personal affair. The expression on that man's face filled me with shame and then disgust for the war and all the misery it was causing.

My combat experience thus far made me realize that such sentiments for an enemy soldier were the maudlin meditations of a fool. Look at me, a member of the 5th Marine Regiment—one of the oldest, finest, and toughest regiments in the Marine Corps—feeling ashamed because I had shot a damned foe before he could throw a grenade at me! I felt like a fool and was thankful my buddies couldn't read my thoughts.

Burgin's order to us to continue firing into the opening interrupted my musings. We kept up a steady fire into the pillbox to keep the Japanese pinned down while the flamethrower came up, carried by Corporal Womack from Mississippi. He was a brave, good-natured guy and popular

with the troops, but he was one of the fiercest looking Marines I ever saw. He was big and husky with a fiery red beard well powdered with white coral dust. He reminded me of some wild Viking. I was glad we were on the same side.

Stooped under the heavy tanks on his back, Womack approached the pillbox with his assistant just out of the line of our fire. When they got about fifteen yards from the target, we ceased firing. The assistant reached up and turned a valve on the flamethrower. Womack then aimed the nozzle at the opening made by the 75mm gun. He pressed the trigger. With a *whooooooooosh* the flame leaped at the opening. Some muffled screams, then all quiet.

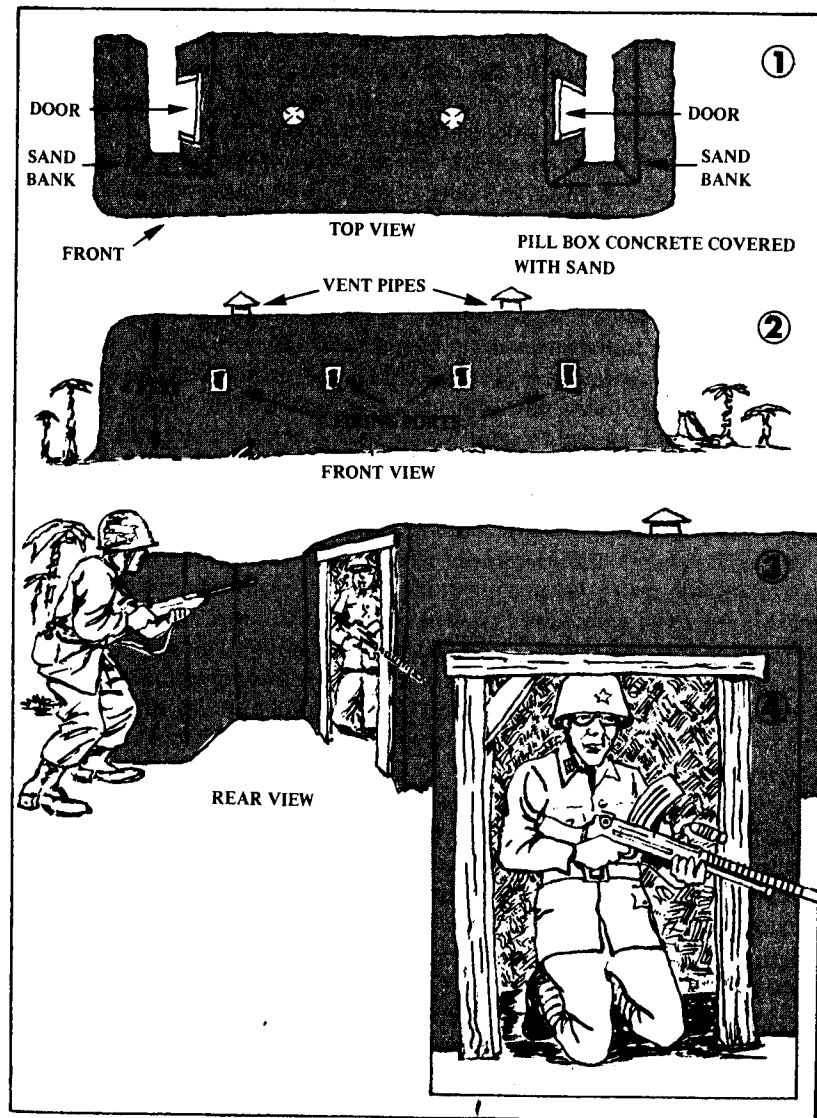
Even the stoic Japanese couldn't suppress the agony of death by fire and suffocation. But they were no more likely to surrender to us than we would have been to them had we ever been confronted with the possibility of surrender. In fighting the Japanese, surrender was not one of our options.

Amid our shouts of appreciation, Womack and his buddy started back to battalion headquarters to await the summons to break another deadlock somewhere on the battlefield—or lose their lives trying. The job of flamethrower gunner was probably the least desirable of any open to a Marine infantryman. Carrying tanks with about seventy pounds of flammable jellied gasoline through enemy fire over rugged terrain in hot weather to squirt flames into the mouth of a cave or pillbox was an assignment that few survived but all carried out with magnificent courage.

We left the craters and approached the pillbox cautiously. Burgin ordered some of the men to cover it while the rest of us looked over the fallen Japanese to be sure none was still alive; wounded Japanese invariably exploded grenades when approached, if possible, killing their enemies along with themselves. All of them were dead. The pillbox was out of action thanks to the flamethrower and the amtrac. There were seven enemy dead inside and ten outside. Our packs and mortars were only slightly damaged by the fire from the amtrac's 75mm gun.

Of the twelve Marine mortar men, our only casualties were Redifer and Leslie Porter, who had taken some grenade fragments. They weren't hurt seriously. Our luck in the whole affair had been incredible. If the enemy had surprised us and rushed us, we might have been in a bad fix.

During this lull the men stripped the packs and pockets of the enemy dead for souvenirs. This was a gruesome business, but Marines executed it in a most methodical manner. Helmet headbands were checked for flags, packs and pockets were emptied, and gold teeth were extracted. Sabers, pistols, and *hari-kari* knives were highly prized and carefully cared for until



they could be sent to the folks back home or sold to some pilot or sailor for a fat price. Rifles and other larger weapons usually were rendered useless and thrown aside. They were too heavy to carry in addition to our own equipment. They would be picked up later as fine souvenirs by the rear-echelon troops. The men in the rifle companies had a lot of fun joking about the hair-raising stories these people, who had never seen a live Japanese or been shot at, would probably tell after the war.

The men gloated over, compared, and often swapped their prizes. It was a brutal, ghastly ritual the likes of which have occurred since ancient times on battlefields where the antagonists have possessed a profound mutual hatred. It was uncivilized, as is all war, and was carried out with that particular savagery that characterized the struggle between the Marines and the Japanese. It wasn't simply souvenir hunting or looting the enemy dead; it was more like Indian warriors taking scalps.

While I was removing a bayonet and scabbard from a dead Japanese, I noticed a Marine near me. He wasn't in our mortar section but had happened by and wanted to get in on the spoils. He came up to me dragging what I assumed to be a corpse. But the Japanese wasn't dead. He had been wounded severely in the back and couldn't move his arms; otherwise he would have resisted to his last breath.

The Japanese's mouth glowed with huge gold-crowned teeth, and his captor wanted them. He put the point of his kabar on the base of a tooth and hit the handle with the palm of his hand. Because the Japanese was kicking his feet and thrashing about, the knife point glanced off the tooth and sank deeply into the victim's mouth. The Marine cursed him and with a slash cut his cheeks open to each ear. He put his foot on the sufferer's lower jaw and tried again. Blood poured out of the soldier's mouth. He made a gurgling noise and thrashed wildly. I shouted, "Put the man out of his misery." All I got for an answer was a cussing out. Another Marine ran up, put a bullet in the enemy soldier's brain, and ended his agony. The scavenger grumbled and continued extracting his prizes undisturbed.

Such was the incredible cruelty that decent men could commit when reduced to a brutish existence in their fight for survival amid the violent death, terror, tension, fatigue, and filth that was the infantryman's war. Our code of conduct toward the enemy differed drastically from that prevailing back at the division CP.

The struggle for survival went on day after weary day, night after terrifying night. One remembers vividly the landings and the beachheads and the details of the first two or three days and nights of a campaign; after that, time lost all meaning. A lull of hours or days seemed but a fleeting

instant of heaven-sent tranquility. Lying in a foxhole sweating out an enemy artillery or mortar barrage or waiting to dash across open ground under machine-gun or artillery fire defied any concept of time.

To the noncombatants and those on the periphery of action, the war meant only boredom or occasional excitement; but to those who entered the meat grinder itself, the war was a nether world of horror from which escape seemed less and less likely as casualties mounted and the fighting dragged on and on. Time had no meaning; life had no meaning. The fierce struggle for survival in the abyss of Peleliu eroded the veneer of civilization and made savages of us all. We existed in an environment totally incomprehensible to men behind the lines—service troops and civilians.

A trip inside the pillbox by Redifer and Burgin solved the mystery of how some of the occupants had survived the grenades and shell bursts. (Burgin shot a soldier inside who was feigning death.) Concrete walls partitioned the bunker into compartments connected by small openings. Three or four enemy soldiers occupied each compartment which had its own firing ports to the outside. Each would have had to be put out of action individually had we not had the help of Womack and his flamethrower.

When our gunny came by and saw the results of our encounter with the pillbox he had thought was empty, he looked sheepish. He gazed in amazement at the enemy dead scattered around. We really razzed him about it—or rather, we gave him the nearest thing approaching the razz that we Marine privates dared hand out to the austere personage of Gy. Sergeant Saunders. I have thought often that Burgin should have been decorated for the fine leadership he exhibited in coordinating and directing the knockout of the pillbox. I'm sure men have been decorated for less.

We set up our two mortars in a large crater near the now knocked-out pillbox and registered in the guns for the night. The ammo carriers dug into the softer coral around the edge of the crater. An amtrac brought up rations and a unit of fire for the company. The wind began to blow briskly, and it got cloudy and heavily overcast. As darkness settled, heavy clouds scudded across the sky. The scene reminded me of hurricane weather on the Gulf Coast back home.

Not far behind us, the heat of the fire burning in the pillbox exploded Japanese grenades and small-arms ammunition. All night occasional shifts of wind blew the nauseating smell of burning flesh our way. The rain fell in torrents, and the wind blew hard. Ships fired star shells to illuminate the battlefield for our battalion. But as soon as the parachute of a star shell opened, the wind swept it swiftly along like some invisible hand snatching

away a candle. In the few hundred yards they still held at the northern end of the island, the enemy was fairly quiet.

The next morning, again with the help of tanks and amtracs, our battalion took most of the remainder of Ngesebus. Our casualties were remarkably low for the number of Japanese we killed.* In midafternoon we learned that an army unit would relieve us shortly and complete the job on the northern end of Ngesebus.

Our mortar section halted to await orders and dispersed among some open bushes. In our midst was the wreckage of a Japanese heavy machine gun and the remains of the squad that had been wiped out by Company K. The squad members had been killed in the exact positions to be occupied by such a squad "according to the book."

At first glance the dead gunner appeared about to fire his deadly weapon. He still sat bolt upright in the proper firing position behind the breech of his machine gun. Even in death his eyes stared widely along the gun sights. Despite the vacant look of his dilated pupils, I couldn't believe he was dead. Cold chills ran along my spine. Gooseflesh tickled my back. It seemed as though he was looking through me into all eternity, that at any instant he would raise his hands—which rested in a relaxed manner on his thighs—grip the handles on the breech, and press the thumb trigger. The bright shiny brass slugs in the strip clip appeared as ready as the gunner, anxious to speed out, to kill, and to maim more of the "American devils." But he would rot, and they would corrode. Neither he nor his ammo could do any more for the emperor.

The crown of the gunner's skull had been blasted off, probably by one of our automatic weapons. His riddled steel helmet lay on the deck like a punctured tin can. The assistant gunner lay beside the gun. Apparently, he had just opened a small green wooden chest filled with strip clips of machine-gun cartridges when he was killed. Several other Japanese soldiers, ammo carriers, lay strung out at intervals behind the gun.

A Company K rifleman who had been in the fight that knocked out the machine-gun crew sat on his helmet nearby and told us the story. The action had taken place the day before while the mortar section was fighting at the pillbox. The rifleman said, "The thing that I just couldn't believe was the

*Official accounts vary somewhat as to the actual casualty figures for Ngesebus. However the Marines suffered about 15 killed and 33 wounded, while the Japanese lost 470 killed and captured. Company K suffered the largest portion of the casualties in 3/5 by losing 8 killed and 24 wounded. This undoubtedly resulted from the presence of a ridge and caves on Ngesebus in our sector.

way those Nip ammo carriers could chop chop around here on the double with those heavy boxes of ammo on their backs."

Each ammo box had two leather straps, and each ammo carrier had a heavy box on his back with the straps around his shoulders. I lifted one of the ammo chests. It weighed more than our mortar. What the Japanese lacked in height, they certainly compensated for in muscle.

"I'd sure hate to hafta lug that thing around, wouldn't you?" asked the Marine. "When they got hit," he continued, "they fell to the deck like a brick because of all that weight."

As we talked, I noticed a fellow mortarman sitting next to me. He held a handful of coral pebbles in his left hand. With his right hand he idly tossed them into the open skull of the Japanese machine gunner. Each time his pitch was true I heard a little splash of rainwater in the ghastly receptacle. My buddy tossed the coral chunks as casually as a boy casting pebbles into a puddle on some muddy road back home; there was nothing malicious in his action. The war had so brutalized us that it was beyond belief.

I noticed gold teeth glistening brightly between the lips of several of the dead Japanese lying around us. Harvesting gold teeth was one facet of stripping enemy dead that I hadn't practiced so far. But stopping beside a corpse with a particularly tempting number of shining crowns, I took out my kabar and bent over to make the extractions.

A hand grasped me by the shoulder, and I straightened up to see who it was. "What are you gonna do, Sledgehammer?" asked Doc Caswell. His expression was a mix of sadness and reproach as he looked intently at me.

"Just thought I'd collect some gold teeth," I replied.

"Don't do it."

"Why not, Doc?"

"You don't want to do that sort of thing. What would your folks think if they knew?"

"Well, my dad's a doctor, and I bet he'd think it was kinda interesting," I replied, bending down to resume my task.

"No! The germs, Sledgehammer! You might get germs from them."

I stopped and looked inquiringly at Doc and said, "Germs? Gosh, I never thought of that."

"Yeah, you got to be careful about germs around all these dead Nips, you know," he said vehemently.

"Well, then, I guess I'd better just cut off the insignia on his collar and leave his nasty teeth alone. You think that's safe, Doc?"

"I guess so," he replied with an approving nod.

Reflecting on the episode after the war, I realized that Doc Caswell

guns fired with admirable accuracy. Several of their tracer-like armor piercing shells hit the turrets of the tanks and ricocheted into the air. The tanks returned fire. In a few minutes, the Japanese guns were knocked out or ceased firing, and everything got quiet. The tanks sustained only minor damage. We went back onto the road and moved on south without further incident.

Until the island was secured on 21 June, we made a series of rapid moves southward, stopping only to fight groups of diehard Japanese in caves, pillboxes, and ruined villages. The fresh 8th Marines pushed south rapidly. "The Eighth Marines goin' like a bat outa hell," a man said as news drifted back to us.

We were fortunate in not suffering many casualties in the company. The Japanese were beaten, and the hope uppermost in every weary veteran's mind was that his luck would hold out a little longer, until the end of the battle.

We used loudspeakers, captured Japanese soldiers, and Okinawan civilians to persuade the remaining enemy to surrender. One sergeant and a Japanese lieutenant who had graduated from an Ivy League college and spoke perfect English gave themselves up in a road cut. Just after they came out and surrendered, a sniper opened fire on us. We eight or ten Marines took cover next to the embankment, but the Japanese officer and NCO stood in the middle of the road with the bullets kicking up dirt all around them. The sniper obviously was trying to kill them because they had surrendered.

We looked at the two Japanese standing calmly, and one of our NCOs said, "Get over here under cover, you dumb bastards."

The enemy officer grinned affably and spoke to his NCO. They walked calmly over and got down as ordered.

Some Company K men shot the gun crew of a 150mm howitzer emplaced in the mouth of a well-camouflaged cave. The Japanese defended their big artillery piece with their rifles and died to the last man. Farther on we tried to get a group of enemy in a burial vault to surrender, but they refused. Our lieutenant, Mac, jumped in front of the door and shouted in Japanese, "Do not be afraid. Come out. I will not harm you." Then he fired a complete twenty-round magazine from his submachine gun into the door. We all just shook our heads and moved on. About a half hour later, the five or six Japanese rushed out fighting. Some of our Marines behind us killed them.

Our battalion was one of the first American units to reach the end of the island. It was a beautiful sight even though there were still snipers around. We stood on a high hill overlooking the sea. Below to our left we

saw army infantry advancing toward us, flushing out and shooting down enemy soldiers singly and in small groups. Army 81mm mortar fire kept pace ahead of the troops, and some of our weapons joined in coordination. We got a bit edgy when the army mortar fire kept getting closer and closer to our positions even after the unit had been apprised of our location. One of our battalion officers became furious as the big shells came dangerously close. He ordered a radioman to tell the army officer in charge that if they didn't cease fire immediately, our 81s would open fire on his troops. The army mortars stopped shooting.

The night of 20 June we made a defensive line on the high ground overlooking the sea. My mortar was dug in near a coral road and was to illuminate or fire HE on the area. Other guns of the section covered the seaward part of the company's sector.

Earlier we had seen and heard some sort of strange-looking rocket fired by the Japanese from over in our army's sector. The projectiles were clearly visible as they went up with a terrible screaming sound. Most of them exploded in the 8th Marines area. The things sounded like bombs exploding. A call came for every available corpsman to help with casualties resulting from those explosions.

The Japanese on Okinawa had a 320mm-spigot-mortar unit equipped to fire a 675-pound shell. Americans first encountered this awesome weapon on Iwo Jima. I don't know whether what we saw fired several times during the last day or two on Okinawa was a spigot mortar, but whatever it was, it was a frightful-sounding weapon that caused great damage.

The night turned into a long series of shooting scrapes with Japanese who prowled all over the place. We heard someone coming along the road, the coral crunching beneath his feet. In the pitch dark, a new replacement fired his carbine twice in that direction and yelled for the password. Somebody laughed, and several enemy started firing in our direction as they ran past us along the road. A bullet zipped by me and hit the hydrogen cylinder of a flamethrower placed on the side of the adjacent foxhole. The punctured cylinder emitted a sharp hissing sound.

"Is that thing gonna blow up?" I asked anxiously.

"Naw, just hit the hydrogen tank. It won't ignite," the flamethrower gunner said.

We could hear the enemy soldiers' hobnailed shoes pounding on the road until a fatal burst of fire from some other Company K Marines sent them sprawling. As we fieldstripped them the next morning, I noted that each carried cooked rice in his double-boiler mess gear—all bullet-riddled then.

Other Japanese swam or walked along in the sea just offshore. We saw

them in the flarelight. A line of Marines behind a stone wall on the beach fired at them. One of our men ran up from the wall to get more carbine ammo.

"Come on Sledgehammer. It's just like Lexington and Concord."

"No thanks. I'm too comfortable in my hole."

He went back down to the wall, and they continued firing throughout the night.

Just before daylight, we heard a couple of enemy grenades explode. Japanese yelled and shouted wildly where one of our 37mm guns was dug in across the road, covering the valley out front. Shots rang out, then desperate shouts and cursing.

"Corpsman!"

Then silence. A new corpsman who had joined us recently started toward the call for help, but I said, "Hold it Doc. I'll go with you."

I wasn't being heroic. I was quite afraid. But knowing the enemy's propensity for treachery, I thought somebody should accompany him.

"As you were, Sledgehammer. Ya might be needed on the gun. Take off, Doc, and be careful," an NCO said. A few minutes later he said, "OK, Sledgehammer, take off if ya wanta."

I grabbed the Tommy and followed the corpsman. He was just finishing bandaging one of the wounded Marines of the 37mm gun crew when I got there. Other Marines were coming over to see if they could help. Several men had been wounded by the firing when two enemy officers crept up the steep slope, threw grenades into the gun emplacement, and jumped in swinging their samurai sabers. One Marine had parried a saber blow with his carbine. His buddy then had shot the Japanese officer who fell backwards a short distance down the slope. The saber blow had severed a finger and sliced through the mahogany carbine forestock to the metal barrel.

The second Japanese officer lay dead on his back next to the wheel of the 37mm gun. He was in full-dress uniform with white gloves, shiny leather leggings, Sam Browne belt, and campaign ribbons on his chest. Nothing remained of his head from the nose up—just a mass of crushed skull, brains, and bloody pulp. A grimy Marine with a dazed expression stood over the Japanese. With a foot planted firmly on the ground on each side of the enemy officer's body, the Marine held his rifle by the forestock with both hands and slowly and mechanically moved it up and down like a plunger. I winced each time it came down with a sickening sound into the gory mass. Brains and blood were splattered all over the Marine's rifle, boondockers, and canvas leggings, as well as the wheel of the 37mm gun.

The Marine was obviously in a complete state of shock. We gently took

him by the arms. One of his uninjured buddies set aside the gore-smeared rifle. "Let's get you outa here, Cobber."

The poor guy responded like a sleepwalker as he was led off with the wounded, who were by then on stretchers. The man who had lost the finger clutched the Japanese saber in his other hand. "I'm gonna keep this bastard for a souvenir."

We dragged the battered enemy officer to the edge of the gun emplacement and rolled him down the hill. Replete with violence, shock, blood, gore, and suffering, this was the type of incident that should be witnessed by anyone who has any delusions about the glory of war. It was as savage and as brutal as though the enemy and we were primitive barbarians rather than civilized men.

Later in the day of 21 June 1945, we learned the high command had declared the island secured. We each received two fresh oranges with the compliments of Admiral Nimitz. So I ate mine, smoked my pipe, and looked out over the beautiful blue sea. The sun danced on the water. After eighty-two days and nights, I couldn't believe Okinawa had finally ended. I was tempted to relax and think that we would board ship immediately for rest and rehabilitation in Hawaii.

"That's what the scuttlebutt is, you guys. Straight dope. We're headed for Waikiki," a grinning buddy said. But long conditioning by the hardships that were our everyday diet in a rifle company made me skeptical. My intuition was borne out shortly.

"Get your gear on; check your weapons. We're moving back north in skirmish line. You people will mop up the area for any Nips still holding out. You will bury all enemy dead. You will salvage U.S. and enemy equipment. All brass above .50 caliber in size will be collected and placed in neat piles. Stand by to move out."

A Final Chore

If this were a novel about war, or if I were a dramatic storyteller, I would find a romantic way to end this account while looking at that fine sunset off the cliffs at the southern end of Okinawa. But that wasn't the reality of what we faced. Company K had one more nasty job to do.

To the battle-weary troops, exhausted after an eighty-two-day campaign, mopping up was grim news. It was a nerve-racking business at best. The enemy we encountered were the toughest of the diehards, selling their lives as expensively as possible. Fugitives from the law of averages, we were nervous and jittery. A man could survive Gloucester, Peleliu, and Okinawa only to be shot by some fanatical, bypassed Japanese holed up in a

cave. It was hard for us to accept the order. But we did—grimly. Burying enemy dead and salvaging brass and equipment on the battlefield, however, was the last straw to our sagging morale.

“By lawd, why the hell we gotta bury them stinkin’ bastards after we killed ’em? Let them goddamn rear-echelon people git a whiff of ’em. They didn’t hafta fight ’em.”

“Jeez, picking up brass; that’s the most stupid, dumb jerk of a order I ever did hear of.”

Fighting was our duty, but burying enemy dead and cleaning up the battlefield wasn’t for infantry troops as we saw it. We complained and griped bitterly. It was the ultimate indignity to men who had fought so hard and so long and had won. We were infuriated and frustrated. For the first time, I saw several of my veteran comrades flatly refuse to obey an order. If some of us hadn’t prevailed on them to knock off arguing hotly with an NCO, they would have been severely punished for insubordination.

I’ll never forget cajoling, arguing with, and begging two veteran buddies to be quiet and follow orders as I unstrapped my entrenching shovel from my pack. We stood wearily in a trampled cane field beside a bloated Jap corpse. Both buddies were three-campaign men who were outstanding in combat but had reached the end of their ropes. They weren’t about to bury any stinking Japanese, no sirree. I prevailed, however, just as Hank Boyes came over grim-faced and yelling at them to turn to.

So we dragged ourselves back north in skirmish line. We cursed every dead enemy we had to bury. (We just spaded dirt over them with our entrenching shovels.) We cursed every cartridge case “above .50 caliber in size” we collected to “place in neat piles.” Never before were we more thankful to have the support of our tanks. The flame tanks were particularly effective in burning out troublesome Japanese in caves.* Fortunately, we had few casualties.

In a few days we assembled in an open field and fell out to await further orders. The weather was hot, so we all took off our packs, sat on our helmets, drank some water, and had a smoke. We were to be there for several hours, an NCO said, so we got the order to chow down.

A friend and I went over to a little wooded area near the field to eat our K rations in the shade. We walked into a completely untouched scene that resembled a natural park in a botanical garden: low graceful pines cast dense shade, and ferns and moss grew on the rocks and banks. It was cool,

*The total number of Japanese killed by the five American divisions during the mop up was 8,975, a large enough number of enemy to have waged intense guerrilla warfare if they hadn’t been annihilated.



At battle's end, three weary K Company mortarmen: L to R, John Redifer, Vincent Santos, Gene Farrar. Photo by Gene Farrar.

and the odor of fresh pine filled the air. Miraculously, it bore not a single sign of war.

"Boy, this is beautiful, isn't it, Sledgehammer?"

"It looks unreal," I said as I took off my pack and sat down on the soft green moss beside a clump of graceful ferns. We each started heating a canteen cup of water for our instant coffee. I took out the prized can of cured ham I had obtained by trade from a man in the company CP. (He had stolen it from an officer.) We settled back in the cool silence. The war, military discipline, and other unpleasant realities seemed a million miles away. For the first time in months, we began to relax.

"OK, you guys. Move out. Move! Move! Outa here," an NCO said with authority ringing out in every word.

"Is the company moving out already?" my friend asked in surprise.

"No, it isn't, but you guys are."

"Why?"

"Because this is off limits to enlisted men," the NCO said, turning and pointing to a group of officers munching their rations as they strolled into our new-found sanctuary.

"But we aren't in the way," I said.

"Move out and follow orders."

To his credit, the NCO appeared in sympathy with us and seemed to feel the burden of his distasteful task. We sullenly picked up our half-cooked rations and our gear, went back out into the hot sun, and flopped down in the dusty field.

"Some crap, eh?"

"Yeah," I said, "we weren't even near those officers. The fighting on this goddamn island is over. The officers have started getting chicken again and throwing the crap around. Yesterday while the shootin' was still goin' on, it was all buddy-buddy with the enlisted men."

Our grumblings were interrupted by the sound of a rifle shot. A Marine I knew very well reeled backward and fell to the ground. His buddy dropped his rifle and rushed to him, followed by several others. The boy was dead, shot in the head by his buddy. The other man had thought his rifle was unloaded when his young friend had stood over him and placed his thumb playfully over the muzzle.

"Pull the trigger. I bet it's not loaded."

He pulled the trigger. The loaded rifle fired and set a bullet tearing up through the head of his best friend. Both had violated the cardinal rule: "Don't point a weapon at anything you don't intend to shoot."

Shock and dismay showed on the man's face from that moment until he left the company a few weeks later. He went, we heard, to stand a general court-martial and a probable prison term. But his worst punishment was

living with the horror of having killed his best friend by playing with a loaded weapon.

While the company was still sitting in the field, five or six men and I were told to get our gear and follow an NCO to waiting trucks. We were to go north to a site where our division would make a tent camp after the mop-up in the south was completed. Our job was to unload and guard some company gear.

We were apprehensive about leaving the company, but it turned out to be good duty. During the long and dusty truck ride to the Motobu Peninsula, we rode past some areas we had fought through. By then we could barely recognize them—they were transformed with roads, tent camps, and supply dumps. The number of service troops and the amount of equipment was beyond our belief. Roads that had been muddy tracks or coral-covered paths were highways with vehicles going to and fro and MPs in neat khaki directing traffic. Tent camps, quonset huts, and huge parks of vehicles lay along our route.

We had come back to civilization. We had climbed up out of the abyss once more. It was exhilarating. We sang and whistled like little boys until our sides were sore. As we went north, the countryside became beautiful. Most of it seemed untouched by the war. Finally our truck turned off into a potato field not far from high rocky cliffs overlooking the sea and a small island which our driver said was Ie Shima.

The land around our future campsite was undamaged. We unloaded the company gear from the truck. The driver had picked up five-gallon cans of water for us. Plenty of K rations had been issued. We set up a bivouac. Corporal Vincent was in charge, and we were glad of it. He was a great guy and a Company K veteran.

Our little guard detail spent several quiet, carefree days basking in the sun by day and mounting one-sentry guard duty at night. We were like boys on a camp-out. The fear and terror were behind us.

Our battalion came north a few days later. All hands went to work in earnest to complete the tent camp. Pyramidal tents were set up, drainage ditches were dug, folding cots and bed rolls were brought to us, and a canvas-roofed messhall was built. Every day old friends returned from the hospitals, some hale and hearty but others showing the effects of only partial recovery from severe wounds. To our disgust, rumors of rehabilitation in Hawaii faded. But our relief that the long Okinawa ordeal was over at last was indescribable.

Very few familiar faces were left. Only twenty-six Peleliu veterans who had landed with the company on 1 April remained. And I doubt there were even ten of the old hands who had escaped being wounded at one time or another on Peleliu or Okinawa. Total American casualties were 7,613 killed

and missing and 31,807 wounded in action. Neuropsychiatric, "non-battle," casualties amounted to 26,221—probably higher than in any other previous Pacific Theater battle. This latter high figure is attributed to two causes: The Japanese poured onto U.S. troops the heaviest concentrations of artillery and mortar fire experienced in the Pacific, and the prolonged, close-in fighting with a fanatical enemy.

Marines and attached Naval medical personnel suffered total casualties of 20,020 killed, wounded and missing.

Japanese casualty figures are hazy. However, 107,539 enemy dead were counted on Okinawa. Approximately 10,000 enemy troops surrendered, and about 20,000 were either sealed in caves or buried by the Japanese themselves. Even lacking an exact accounting, in the final analysis the enemy garrison was, with rare exceptions, annihilated. Unfortunately, approximately 42,000 Okinawan civilians, caught between the two opposing armies, perished from artillery fire and bombing.

The 1st Marine Division suffered heavy casualties on Okinawa. Officially, it lost 7,665 men killed, wounded, and missing. There were also an undetermined number of casualties among the replacements whose names never got on a muster roll. Considering that most of the casualties were in the division's three infantry regiments (about 3,000 strength in each), it's obvious that the rifle companies took the bulk of the beating, just as they had on Peleliu. The division's losses of 6,526 on Peleliu and 7,665 on Okinawa total 14,191. Statistically, the infantry units had suffered over 150 percent losses through the two campaigns. The few men like me who never got hit can claim with justification that we survived the abyss of war as fugitives from the law of averages.*

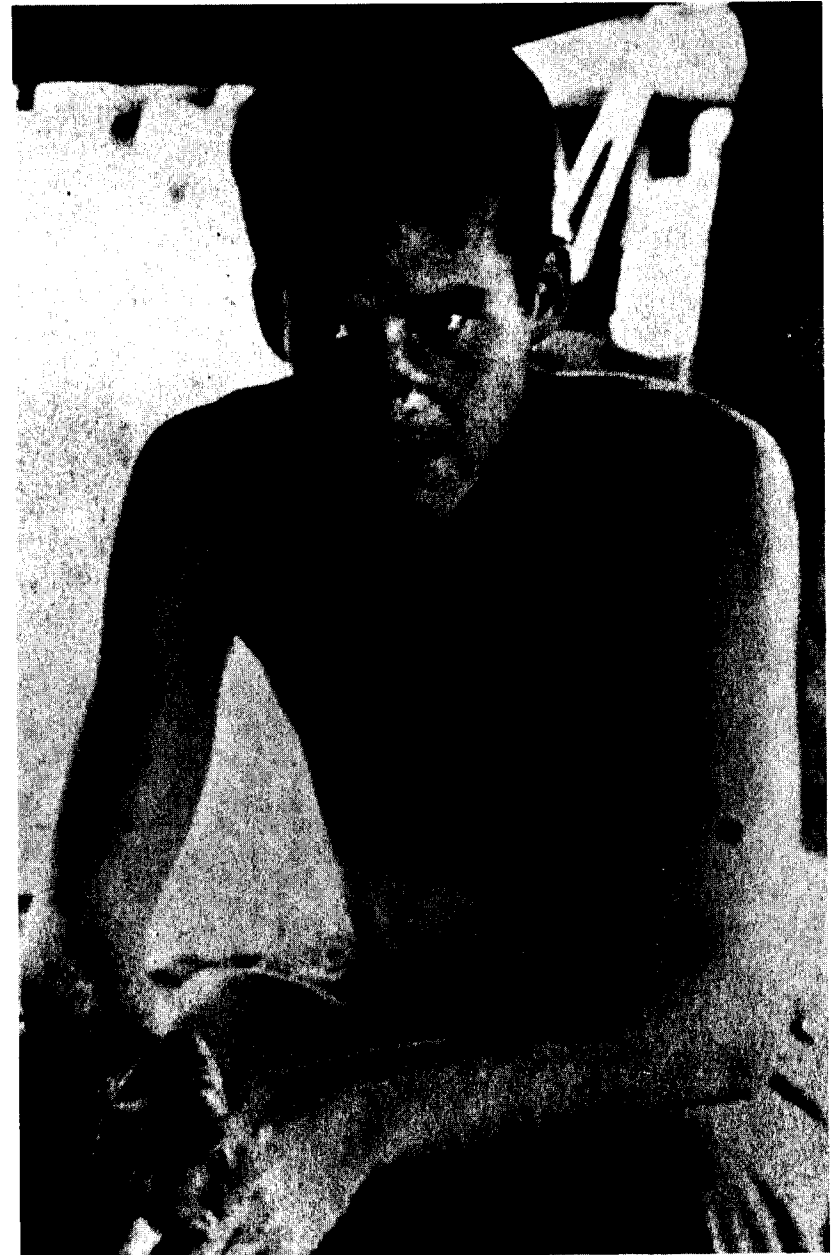
It Was Over

As we finished building our tent camp, we began trying to unwind from the grueling campaign. Some of the Cape Gloucester veterans rotated home almost immediately, and replacements arrived. Ugly rumors circulated that we would hit Japan next, with an expected casualty figure of one million Americans. No one wanted to talk about that.

On 8 August we heard that the first atomic bomb had been dropped on Japan. Reports abounded for a week about a possible surrender. Then on 15 August 1945 the war ended.

We received the news with quiet disbelief coupled with an indescribable

*The 1st Marine Division received the Presidential Units Citation for its part in the Okinawa campaign.



Author at the end of the campaign. Tent camp on Okinawa. Unknown photographer.

sense of relief. We thought the Japanese would never surrender. Many refused to believe it. Sitting in stunned silence, we remembered our dead. So many dead. So many maimed. So many bright futures consigned to the ashes of the past. So many dreams lost in the madness that had engulfed us. Except for a few widely scattered shouts of joy, the survivors of the abyss sat hollow-eyed and silent, trying to comprehend a world without war.

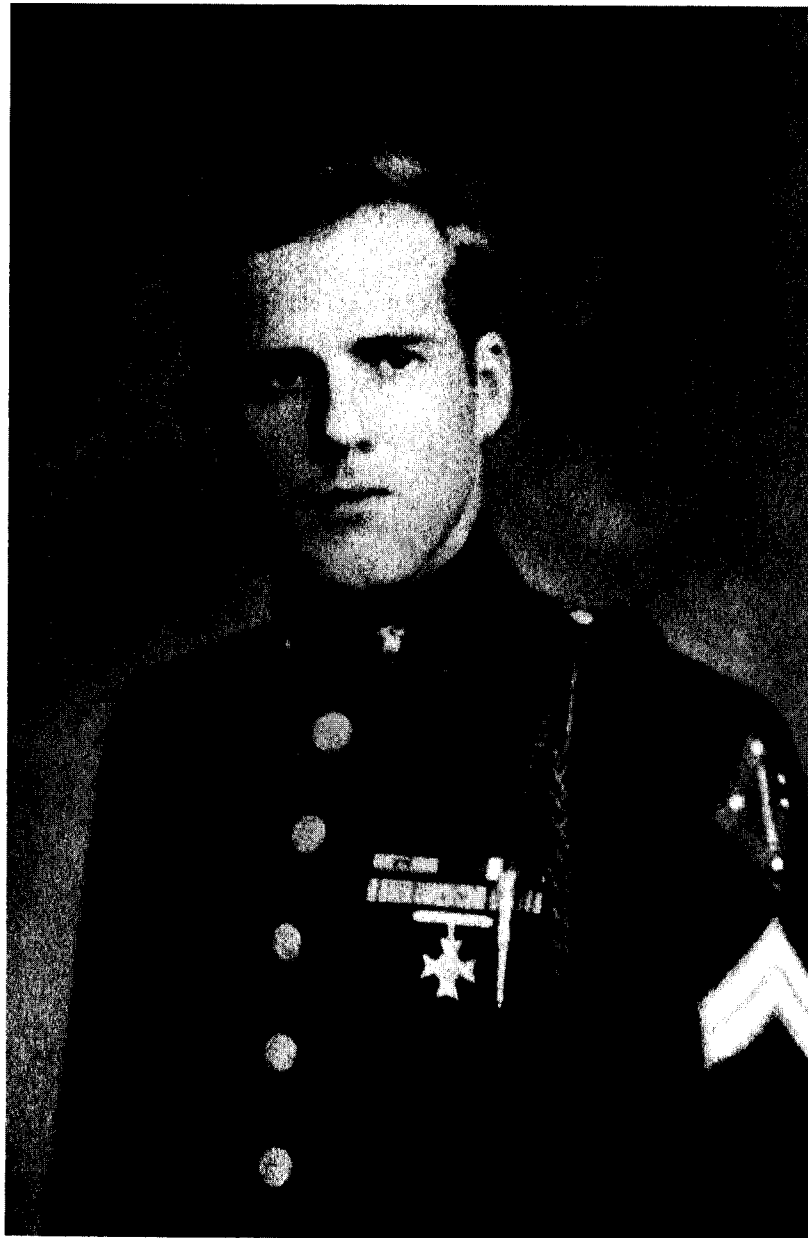
In September, the 1st Marine Division went to North China on occupation duty, the 5th Marines to the fascinating ancient city of Peking. After about four and a half months there, I rotated Stateside.

My happiness knew no bounds when I learned I was slated to ship home. It was time to say goodbye to old buddies in K/3/5. Severing the ties formed in two campaigns was painful. One of America's finest and most famous elite fighting divisions had been my home during a period of the most extreme adversity. Up there on the line, with nothing between us and the enemy but space (and precious little of that), we'd forged a bond that time would never erase. We were brothers. I left with a sense of loss and sadness, but K/3/5 will always be a part of me.

It's ironic that the record of our company was so outstanding but that so few individuals were decorated for bravery. Uncommon valor was displayed so often it went largely unnoticed. It was expected. But nearly every man in the company was awarded the Purple Heart. My good fortune in being one of the few exceptions continues to amaze me.

War is brutish, inglorious, and a terrible waste. Combat leaves an indelible mark on those who are forced to endure it. The only redeeming factors were my comrades' incredible bravery and their devotion to each other. Marine Corps training taught us to kill efficiently and to try to survive. But it also taught us loyalty to each other—and love. That esprit de corps sustained us.

Until the millenium arrives and countries cease trying to enslave others, it will be necessary to accept one's responsibilities and to be willing to make sacrifices for one's country—as my comrades did. As the troops used to say, "If the country is good enough to live in, it's good enough to fight for." With privilege goes responsibility.



Eugene B. Sledge after return from Peking in 1946.