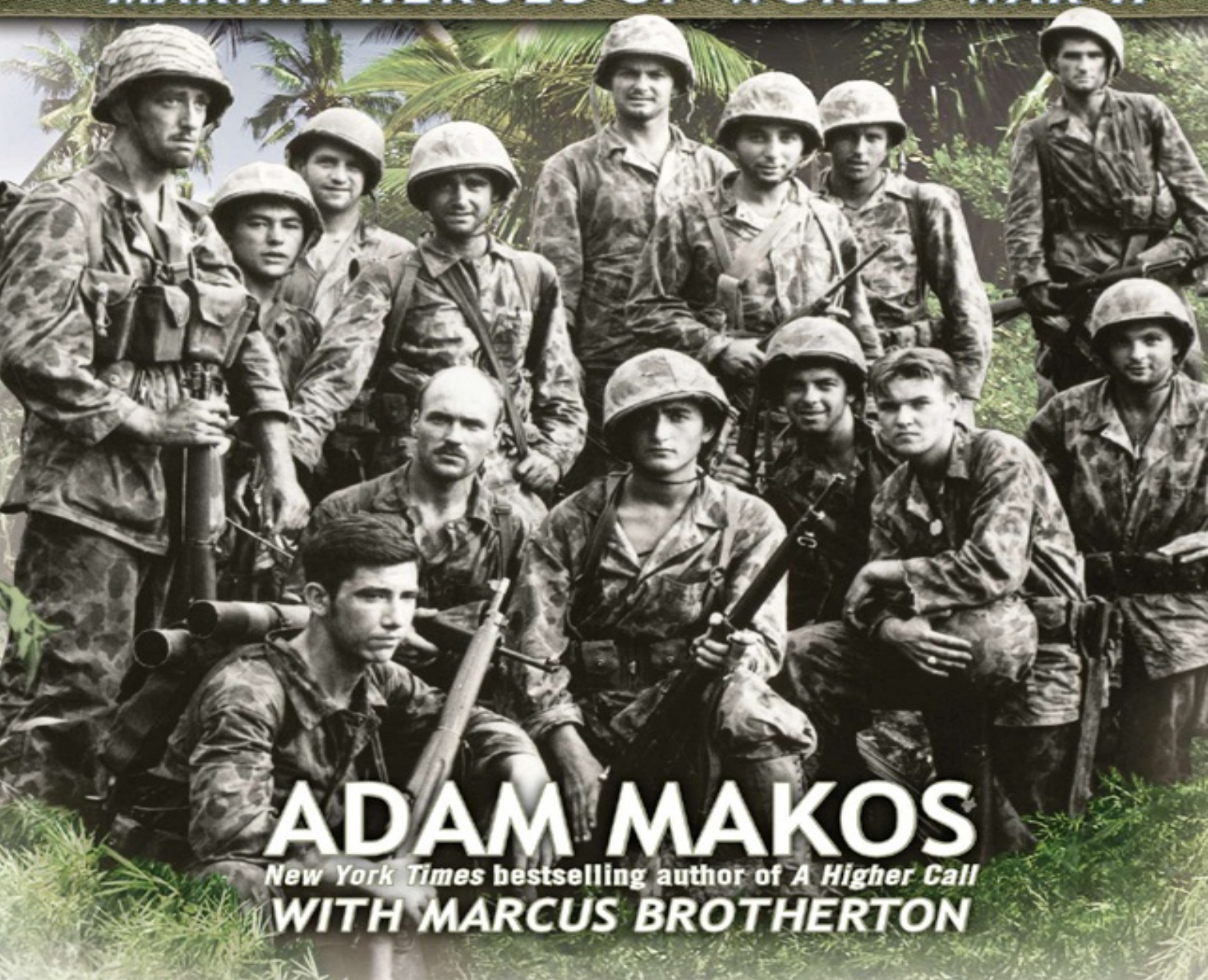


# VOICES OF THE PACIFIC

UNTOLD STORIES FROM THE  
MARINE HEROES OF WORLD WAR II



**ADAM MAKOS**

*New York Times* bestselling author of *A Higher Call*

**WITH MARCUS BROTHERTON**

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VOICES  
OF THE  
PACIFIC

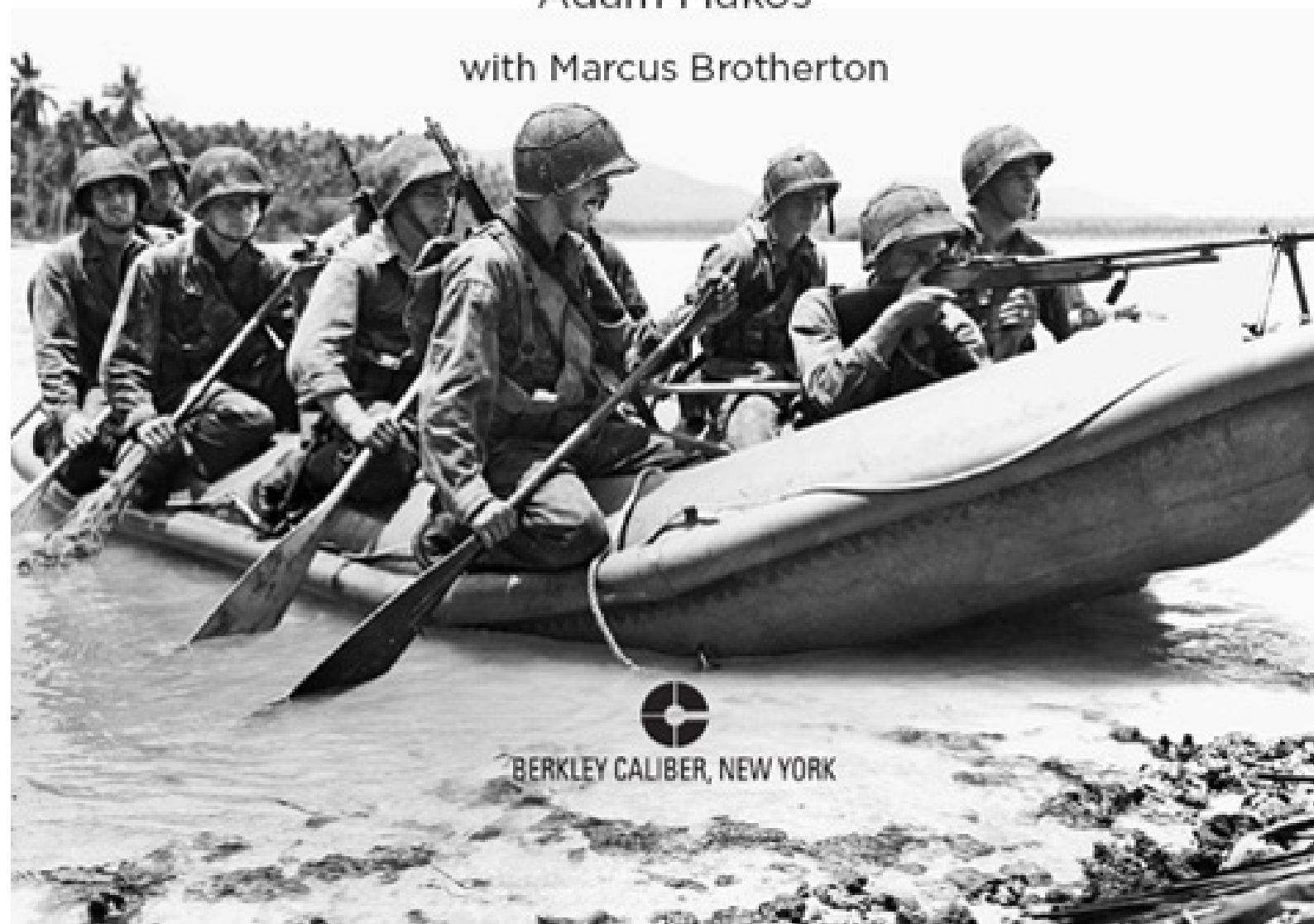
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Adam Makos

with Marcus Brotherton



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*Dedicated to the American and Allied servicemen  
and -women whose voices were forever silenced while  
fighting for freedom in the Pacific.*

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# FACES BEHIND THE VOICES

(IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)



SID PHILLIPS



JIM YOUNG



ROY GERLACH



ART PENDLETON



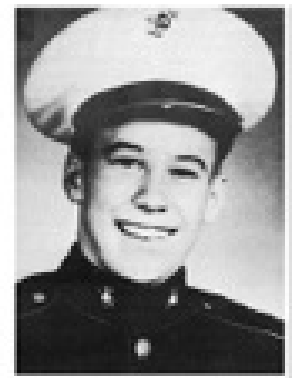
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CHUCK TATUM



CLINTON WATTERS



CLARENCE REA



DAN LAWLER



STERLING MACE



WAYBURN HALL



HARRY BENDER

# INTRODUCTION

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Meet the survivors.

The World War II veterans of this book endured unspeakable horrors, came home to America, and more than sixty-seven years later are still alive today. These men—Marines who fought in the Pacific—are national treasures.

This book could not be written ten years from now. Not five. Maybe not even two. All the book's contributors are in their golden years. Some are eighty-eight years old, others ninety. Richard Greer, our oldest contributor, is ninety-five. But the men shared their stories as if World War II happened yesterday.

In the following pages, these veterans will take you back in time. You'll experience the shock they felt as boys when Pearl Harbor was bombed. You'll feel the jolt of boot camp as civility is thrown out the window to turn boys into men. You'll sail with them to the island of Guadalcanal for their harrowing first battles as Marines as they square off against a seasoned and vicious foe. The journey does not stop there. They'll take you to Australia for a raucous R&R, then back to the sound of gunfire, to the rain forests of Cape Gloucester, the coral ridges of Peleliu, the black sands of Iwo Jima and the mud of Okinawa. In the end, they'll bring you home, as they once returned, triumphant, joyous, yet tormented by the loss of so many friends.

Today these men are fathers, grandfathers, and great-grandfathers in our communities, our neighbors, the guy at the grocery store, the man in church. Yet what they experienced was so graphic, so horrible, it seems astounding that they are among us. And normal. And so humble.

Many books exist about the Pacific War. What sets this book apart is its oral-history style. In this type of book, the author presents the "voices," then steps back into the shadows. This is a conversation between you—the reader—and the men. Imagine for a moment it's late at night and you've walked into the kitchen for a drink and you find your father or grandfather and his old war buddies around the kitchen table. They're swapping stories. You listen and what you hear you'll never forget. That is this book.



After Tom Hanks, Steven Spielberg, and Gary Goetzman produced their award-winning HBO miniseries, *Band of Brothers*, viewers wanted to know about the battles that took place on the other side of the world. This led to the production of the 2010 miniseries *The Pacific*.

*The Pacific* brought to life the names, places, and battles of the legendary 1st Marine Division. The unit fought in the first American offensives against Japan and was still in the theater of war when the shells stopped flying. The HBO series followed three principal veterans, the quirky Robert Leckie, the sensitive Eugene Sledge, and the larger-than-life John Basilone. These men deserved the spotlight they received. Basilone wore the Medal of Honor for good reason, and after the war, Leckie and Sledge documented their experiences in epic books for the world's education. Each appears as a character in *Voices of the Pacific*, but not as "voices," simply because none of the three are now living.

The power of this book comes from its freshness. We swing the spotlight over to living heroes who served alongside these icons. The "new voices" in this book are veterans with their own breed of heroics. Some are hometown heroes. Some, like Sid Phillips, R. V. Burgin, and Chuck Tatum are already known by their books or from the silver screen. And many of the men in this book are



speaking up for the first time. A reader need not have seen *The Pacific* to appreciate *Voices of the Pacific*. The heroism in these pages stands alone.

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For many years now I've worked closely with the Marines whose stories follow. I met Chuck Tatum a decade ago and edited his book *Red Blood, Black Sand* for him. I also had the privilege of working with Sid Phillips, on his lighthearted memoir, *You'll Be Sor-ree!*. Sid had more stories in him—dark, violent stories he did not put in his own book. I asked him why he was hesitant, and he said he didn't want his grandkids reading about the raw, rotten, savage side of World War II. So instead he focused on the humor and camaraderie that he found amid the horror.

There's a time and place for everything, and this book is about last words from living men. The veterans are not getting any younger. None of us are. So in this book, the gloves come off—for Sid Phillips and all our contributors. They agreed to participate because we made them a promise: *In this book, you can tell it as it was.*

What follows is not a sanitized version of the war. It's the last survivors talking to you, digging deep and pulling out painful memories, gut-busting humor, and rousing accounts of American bravery, sacrifice, and old-fashioned goodness. Here they give us one last tale, one last time.



So where did we find the men who loaned us their voices? Our recruiting efforts were like a snowball. One veteran agreed to participate then told us where to find his buddy, then his buddy told us how to find *his* buddy. Before we knew it, we had the fifteen heroes whose voices you will hear.

Time was of the essence, so I enlisted the help of journalist Marcus Brotherton, who had profiled the men of Easy Company for his bestselling oral history project, *We Who Are Alive & Remain*. Together we did countless hours of interviews, editing, and shuffling the parts of the book together like a jigsaw puzzle.

We got a little carried away. We interviewed World War II Marine pilots of Wildcat and Corsair fighters who had roamed the skies above the ground-pounders. We talked with Katharine Phillips-Singer, whom you may remember as the Southern lady who stole the show in Ken Burns's documentary *The War*. Katharine shared her colorful memories of the World War II home front. But in the end, we ran out of pages. That material is not lost. In fact, it's available to you on our website, [www.valorstudios.com](http://www.valorstudios.com).



One question puzzled me at the start of this book, but not at the end. *How did these men return to the world after what they saw, did, and suffered?* How does a man keep his sanity after sleeping in waterlogged foxholes so long his toenails rot away? How does a man tell a joke after having 970 battleship shells dropped around him, each blast sucking the air from his lungs? How does a man keep fighting after seeing his gut-shot buddy be carried away, screaming on a stretcher?

The answer, we invite you to discover, lies on the pages that follow. I'll let you come to your own conclusion, but I've come to mine: The Marines of this book are an extraordinary breed.

Adam Makos

Denver, November 2012

THE PACIFIC  
1941-1945

☆ = LOCATION IN THE BOOK



☆ PEKING

☆ OKINAWA

☆ IWO JIMA

☆ PELELIU

☆ NEW BRITAIN

☆ PAVUVU

☆ GUADALCANAL

☆ MELBOURNE

☆ CAMP TARAWA

PACIFIC OCEAN

# WE'RE IN IT NOW



## *Pearl Harbor*

On Sunday, December 7, 1941, the Japanese Navy launched an aerial sneak attack on the American military at Pearl Harbor and across the island of Oahu. On that day, the Japanese killed 2,400 American servicemen and fifty-seven civilians in an act of undeclared war.

## SID PHILLIPS

December 7, 1941, was a Sunday afternoon, and I didn't have anything to do. I went by the Albright drugstore in my hometown of Mobile, Alabama, where my friend W. O. Brown was the soda jerk (soda fountain attendant). I was sitting at the counter talking to W.O., and there were about twenty people in the drugstore. This lady burst through the side door and said, "Turn on the radio!" W.O. had a small radio and he turned it on. The news commentator didn't give any specific information other than we'd been attacked and the casualties were heavy. Evidently he'd been instructed to give only that amount of information and nothing else. We switched from station to station, and they were all talking about the attack on Pearl Harbor. There was no music. Nothing but news. We just sat there and listened, shocked.

Everyone was puzzled, asking where Pearl Harbor was. I was the only one in the drugstore who knew it was in Hawaii and told everyone this. Pearl Harbor wasn't a household name then. But my uncle Joe Tucker had been stationed there, and my mother had received letters from him.

After half an hour, I got on my bicycle and rode on out to my house on Monterrey Place. Everyone had heard about it by then. The news had traveled through the neighborhoods.

I went to enlist the day after Pearl Harbor. W.O. and I thought we'd be the early birds and get there before a crowd assembled. Our initial plan was to join the Navy. We got to the Federal Building about eight in the morning, and boy—the line for the Navy recruiting office was at least three hundred yards long.

I had to go to work, and W.O. needed to go to school, so we walked to the head of the line to see what was going on. I was seventeen but had graduated high school and landed a good job down at the U.S. Engineers office in downtown Mobile. My job was to carry maps over to the Federal Building, about two city blocks away, where the maps were duplicated and made into blueprints. It paid \$90 a month, which was far more than I ever made in the Marine Corps (when I joined, I made only \$21 a month in the Marines).

A Marine recruiter came up and started talking to me and W.O.

"Do you boys want to kill Japs?" he said.\*

"Yeah, that's the idea," we said. "But we're going to join the Navy."

"Nah," he said, "you don't want to do that. You can't get into the Navy if your parents are married. And anyway, all you'll do in the Navy is swab decks. But I guarantee that if you join the Marine Corps, we'll put you eyeball to eyeball with the Japs."

There wasn't any line at his office. So that's the big reason why we joined the Marines—because

the damn line for the Navy was too long. We were so stupid. We didn't know anything about the Marine Corps other than what was on the recruiter's posters. Years later, W.O. and I compared notes and we figured that just about everything that Marine recruiter told us was a lie—except meeting the Japs eyeball to eyeball.

What was our predominant motivation for enlisting? It was anger. Even more than duty, I'd say. The only information we had was that it was a sneak attack on Pearl Harbor. No warning at all. So the American people were really angry. It's something that almost can't be put into words—how infuriated we were as a country.

## JIM YOUNG

On Monday morning, December 8, 1941, the day after Pearl Harbor was attacked, I was at work at the shoe factory in Mount Joy, Pennsylvania. I was twenty years old. I shut down my machine. The boss said, "What the hell are you doing?" and I said, "I'm sorry, but I'm leaving to join up." It was then that I heard other machines being shut down and guys saying, "We're going, too."

I hitchhiked to Philadelphia and arrived at 1 P.M. at the recruiting offices. The sidewalks were lined up for blocks with guys wanting to enlist. I had decided to go in the Navy. After waiting in line for hours I finally got in the naval office, only to be turned down because some of my teeth needed to be filled. I had some cavities. When the war broke out, the military outfits had certain codes; you had to be in this and that shape. The war was so new they hadn't had time to lower their standards.

Across from the naval office was the U.S. Marines office. As I started to walk away, some guy in the Marine line said, "Hey, Mac, what's the matter?" I told him the Navy had turned me down. "Why don't you try the Marines?" he said. I told him the office would be closed by the time I went out and got in the Marine line. He told me to just keep talking to him and keep moving with the line and that no one would even notice. Then when we got to the door we would just pop in. Well, it worked, and I became a U.S. Marine! They never even said anything about my teeth. I was told I could leave the next day or wait until after Christmas. I chose the latter so I could say my good-byes to my mother and friends.

My mother was sad to see me go. She was my role model. I worked for her in her little mom-and-pop store—groceries, fruit, and produce. I peddled the fruit to other towns for her. My stepfather was a state policeman and he wasn't a good guy. He was very mean to my brother Phillip and me. I was kinda glad to be leaving.

## ROY GERLACH

My parents were both Mennonites, pacifists, and didn't approve of war. We lived on a farm in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and I had the choice of staying out of the service two ways, either by being conscientious objector because of my parents' religion, or by getting an agricultural deferment for working on a farm. But I didn't quite agree with my folks about being pacifists. I can't say I was right or not about it. I was twenty-one years old and it was my decision.

I went from work to Lancaster, and there was a big long line to join the Army. I didn't have time for that. I found another long line, and that was to join the Navy. I didn't have time for that neither. So I went down the hall and found the Marine Corps office. I went in there.

"What do I have to do to become a Marine?" I asked.

"Can you hear, talk, and see?" the sergeant said.

"Yes," I said.

"Okay, you're in."

So I became a Marine because they had the shortest line.

~~They had a group leaving the 29th of December. So I thought, "Good, that will give me Christmas home."~~ I didn't tell my parents I had signed up until I was set to go.

**Parris Island Boot Camp, December 31, 1941**

## SID PHILLIPS

We were so stupid, we'd never heard of Parris Island. I think that recruiting sergeant told us we'd have a short training program at a beautiful resort on the beach in South Carolina. When we arrived at the Marine Corps Recruiting Station at Parris Island, we soon realized it wasn't even an island. There's a causeway that connects it to the mainland. It's just a name—Parris Island. That boot camp was rugged. Before Pearl Harbor, it lasted twelve weeks. But after Pearl Harbor they shortened it to just six weeks. Everything was intensified and sped up. It was wintertime when we arrived, December 31, 1941. And it was cold.

As you arrived, there with civilian clothes and long hair, all the guys who were already there would holler, "You'll be sorry!" We were rapidly sorry within the first few hours that we were there. They had that pegged just right.

## JIM YOUNG

A big Marine sergeant started yelling at us to line up so he could take roll call. When he finally called "James F. Young!" no one said a word, not even me. One of the guys I'd met said, "Didn't you tell me that was your name?" I finally yelled, "Here, Sir!" The sergeant said, "Boy, we got us a real dumb ass here! Don't even know his own name." I was very embarrassed. My stepfather had always made me use his last name, which was Wolfe. No one had ever called me anything different, so my mind went blank when the sergeant called "James Young." Anyway, it was my first goof in the Marines and I hoped it was the last.

Parris Island was something to see. Marines were drilling, and we wondered if we would ever be able to march as well as they could. The first night was kind of scary. The base was near to the ocean and open to attack from the sea so everything was under "blackout." The drill sergeant made us take turns at guarding the area (with no guns). I guess we looked funny standing at the door of our Quonset hut wearing civilian clothes.

The following day we got our Marine clothes. When we got back to the barracks, there was a civilian with a Marine captain. The captain told us that the man wanted to purchase our civilian clothing. He said that we might as well sell because by the time the war is over, nothing would fit us anyway. Most of us sold everything we had. I think I got about \$3 for the works, which included a suit, topcoat, shoes, and everything else.

We moved into a two-story barracks on the top floor. There was a zigzag stairway to come down to the drill field. Each day we were up at 4 A.M. to drill all day until we got it right. In the morning the drill instructor would stand down there and yell "*Fall out!*" Then he would time us. If we didn't do it fast enough, he would make us do it again and again until it suited him. Well by the time we got it right, we were leaping over each other and over the stair rails. Those who were too slow ended up doing mess duty. We also got our rifles and were told that if we ever dropped ours then we would have to sleep with it.

## SID PHILLIPS

They never let you wear enough clothing to be warm. We wore khaki pants and a sweatshirt. You didn't complain about it being cold, because all that did was bring on more push-ups, more double-time jogging, and whatnot. So there wasn't anything you could do except endure it, and gripe under your breath. But Parris Island was rough, and still is, and should be. And I'm glad it was. It teaches discipline to young men, and you need that to survive. You learn not to do anything except take orders, take orders, take orders. Do what you're supposed to do.

## JIM YOUNG

One Sunday afternoon while sitting on the barracks steps, a Marine was walking by eating ice cream. I asked him where he got it. He told me to just go straight across the drill field to the PX (base store). After thanking him, I went over and got a pint of vanilla-and-chocolate ice cream. I returned and had no more than started eating it when my drill sergeant came out of the barracks. He said, "Private Young, that looks real good, can I have a bite?" I said, "Yes, sir" and handed him the ice cream. He opened the pint box. "Wow, that's really good," he said. He then told me to take my hat off, and when I did, he took the whole box and set it upside down on my head and told me not to move. He mashed my hat down real hard and told me not to move until all the ice cream was melted. By this time, all the guys in the barracks were laughing. The sergeant then told me that no one was allowed to go anywhere—even if it was a Sunday—and especially not to the PX.

On another day the drill sergeant was upset with one of the guys because he was always getting out of step. He called the guy out of ranks and told him to hold his rifle over his head and run around the drill field until he was told to stop. Well, the sergeant stopped him after the third lap. The Marine was just a kid, about seventeen years old, and looked like he was about to cry. The sergeant told him that now he will think twice to stay in step. The sergeant asked him if he was all right and feeling better and the Marine said, "Yes, sir, I do." The Sergeant then said, "Well that's just great. Now get that rifle up and give me a couple of more laps."

## SID PHILLIPS

After finishing boot camp at Parris Island, we went to Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, for more advanced training. It wasn't even named Camp Lejeune yet. It was still called "New River." Thousands of acres. All the buildings were just framed, brand-new. Nothing was paved. It was far from any town and just a giant mud hole when it rained. The 1st Marine Division was being assembled there on the East Coast while the 2nd Marine Division was being formed along the West Coast.

W.O. and I were assigned to the 1st Marine Division. They called our division "the Raggedy-Ashe Marines" because we were stationed out in the boondocks. We took pride in that name—it made us sound macho. The division had three regiments, the 1st Marines, 5th Marines, and 7th Marines. The regiments each had three battalions and each battalion had four companies—the company was what mattered. That was your home. Your friends. Who you identified with. A Company, B Company, C Company, and so forth. And, of course, there was a headquarters company of support people—clerks, cooks, messengers, and intelligence people.

They put W.O. and me in H Company of the 1st Marines. H Company was a heavy weapons company. Three platoons of .30-caliber machine guns. A platoon of 37mm anti-tank cannons. A platoon of .50-caliber machine guns (for anti-aircraft purposes), and a platoon of 81mm mortars. I wound up in the mortar platoon with W.O. and fellows like Jim Young and Roy Gerlach.

## JIM YOUNG

Initially we trained with sticks because we had not received any real weapons yet. Maybe this was because the war came so fast. Real weapons arrived soon, and we were separated into riflemen, mortar men, or machine gunners. There were about seventy-five of us in H-2-1's mortar platoon, all to service and defend four guns. "Hip pocket artillery" they called our mortars. We were all schooled on how the mortars were set up and fired. The sergeants told us they would see who could set up the gun the fastest and he would become the gunner and in line for promotion to corporal. Those with the second fastest time would be promoted to PFC. Well this was a big deal to all of us and also a lot of fun. Each man got three tries. The sergeants got a big kick out of watching us stumble over each other. As luck would have it, I was one of the four fastest guys.

A gun squad had six men. Being the gunner meant I carried the bipod, which weighed 46.5 pounds, and the gun sight. My sidearm was a .45-caliber automatic pistol, which was easier to carry than a rifle. The assistant gunner carried the mortar tube, weighing 44 pounds, and the third man carried the base plate that weighed 45 pounds. The others served as ammo case openers and carriers.

Battle training was now in high gear. We started to fire the real ammo and the noise was very loud and scary. To fire a mortar, a man added or subtracted bags of gunpowder (called increments) to the base of the shell, depending on how far he wanted the shell to go. Then, he dropped the seven-pound shell into the mortar's 81mm-wide mouth. The shell slid down the mortar tube until it hit a firing pin at the bottom that triggered a loud explosion and fired the shell up and out, like a bullet. A man's head was right alongside the tube after he dropped the shell. He would flinch. We always stuffed cotton in our ears, but it didn't help much. There was a scary thing we had to do called "Remedy Misfire." This took place if a round of ammo failed to go off and was still in the tube. You had to remove the mortar's tube and slide the "hot" shell out from the bottom. But we got it down.

When we weren't training, the nearest town was Jacksonville, and we were allowed to go to town every night unless we had duty watch. Jacksonville was a small town, but it did have a USO and pretty girls to dance with.

## ROY GERLACH

We got \$21 a month. Then the overseas pay was \$5 more per month. That's what all of us privates got anyway. But you didn't spend it on much except on cigarettes and gambling. They signed us up for life insurance, and that cost \$11 per month, a big chunk of our pay. But you didn't have a choice. You signed up whether you wanted to or not.

## SID PHILLIPS

People ask me how well I knew one of our machine gunners, Bob Leckie, who later wrote a famous book about our time in the islands. I explain that H Company was a large company. There were sixty-five men in our mortar platoon alone. Nobody ever called him Leckie, he was "Lucky." I'm not sure anyone even knew his real name. Back then, Bob was not a famous writer. He was just another PFC like anybody else. I saw him all the time at roll call, and we'd say hi to each other. But, since we weren't in the same squad, we didn't have a whole lot of close time together, like you did with the men in your own platoon.

## JIM YOUNG

One day the sergeants came to our Quonset huts and said, "This is it. We are moving out tomorrow.

All leaves are canceled, no phone calls, and everyone is confined to their barracks.” We were all excited. ~~No one had a clue as to where or how we were going. A lot of guys were upset because they could not contact their parents or girlfriends to say good-bye. We realized that many of us had seen our loved ones for the last time. Everything was frenzied, and no one got much sleep that night.~~

We were awakened about 4 A.M., ate chow, and marched a few miles to a railroad siding where a train waited for us. The train took us in Pullman cars from North Carolina and headed southwest. Someplace in the Midwest we stopped for coal and water. On the other side of the tracks was a large factory where a lot of girls waved at us and wished us luck. Soon a truck pulled alongside the train with box after box of sweet cider for the Marines on the train. The girls at the factory had all chipped in to buy us the cider. We all yelled our thanks to them, and they waved their hankies out the window at us as we pulled out of the station.

The train stopped in San Francisco. The sight of the Golden Gate Bridge was just awesome. While in San Francisco, I turned twenty-one years old on June 12, 1942. At the docks in San Francisco we boarded a ship called the *George F. Elliott*. It was a real old scow. The bunks were stacked five high. You could hardly move without hitting the bunk above you. We steamed out of San Francisco Bay.

While passing under the Golden Gate Bridge, I started to get seasick and so did many of the others. Guys were all along the rails of the ship throwing up. The wind from the ship’s forward motion would blow vomit over everyone in back of them. The forward decks were getting very slippery and it stank to high heaven. After we were out at sea, they finally told us where we were headed. Our destination was Wellington, New Zealand.

## SID PHILLIPS

Life on a troop ship is miserable. As privates, our accommodations were just fold-up spring beds stacked up five high like loaves of bread. You chose one, and that was your space. You put all your gear on that rack. Even today I marvel at the fact that we all found our way around that ship. Nothing was marked or had any signs. In the military, you just learn to make the best of a lot of bad situations. To me, much of the misery of war is not the fighting. It’s the living conditions. On board ship, we were in a confined area with hundreds of other men. You’re shoulder to shoulder with other men all the time. There were no fresh water showers, only salt water, so you’re sticky all the time. We did everything by the numbers, whenever our unit was told. We went on deck and stood in a line four hundred yards long to wait two hours or more to get to the galley for a meal. Then we went down into the galley, which was hot, and got a steel tray and went through the line. They gave us a very small amount of food, which we ate standing up. A sergeant checked you off, so you couldn’t go through the chow line again. It was so hot in the galley, we were relieved when we got back on deck.

They made me captain of the officer’s head, which meant I cleaned the officer’s latrine. It actually turned out to be pretty good duty. I had freshwater facilities, and could take a freshwater shower and wash my clothes in freshwater, so it turned out to be a good thing.

## JIM YOUNG

The trip was a nightmare for me because I was so seasick. To top it off, a Marine named Al Schmid (real pain in the ass) had the bunk below me and would keep kicking the bottom of mine. He thought it was funny. He was a bully and was always picking on guys. Well, one day he pushed “Indian” Johnny Rivers, a former Golden Gloves boxer, a little bit too far. I guess he was an American Indian. He was dark and scrappy. But someone said he used to drive an Indian-brand motorcycle, too. Johnny told the lieutenant that he had had enough of Al. The lieutenant told Johnny to put up a boxing ring on the



forward deck and to put an end to this bickering once and for all.

~~Al was pretty tough, but Johnny just cut him to pieces. Every time Al was knocked down, he would just get up again. Well, the lieutenant stopped the fight, and Al had a little better attitude after that, but not much.~~

After eighteen days at sea I started feeling a little better when we saw Wellington, New Zealand.

## SID PHILLIPS

When we got to New Zealand, we were put into work parties. All the ships had to be unloaded completely, and then reloaded, because they had not been combat loaded (where the most essential equipment goes on top) when we left San Francisco. Work duty went on twenty-four hours a day—four hours on, four hours off—around the clock. You never did get a good night's sleep. It was July, but that was New Zealand's winter. It was sleeting most of the time, or drizzling, and we didn't have any good winter clothing. So we were freezing and cussing and grumbling while loading mountains and mountains of ammunition and barbed wire and the like.

## JIM YOUNG

Once loaded, we were under way again, this time to practice beach landings in Fiji. The captain wanted to send me and six other Marines back to the States because of our seasickness. We all refused. He said, "Well, it's up to you boys if you want to stay." On Fiji we began landing exercises. Several guys fell off the nets and broke arms and legs. It seemed to me we needed lots more practice. Everything that could go wrong, did. Some of the landing craft broke loose from the lines and hit the water. We made a run for the beach. No one had thought about coral reefs, and many of the boats ran aground. Some had the bottoms ripped open. The general called it a disaster and called the whole thing off. We never did get ashore on Fiji.

We were supposed to go back and train at Wellington, New Zealand, for three or four more months but Washington got word that the Japanese were building an air base on one of the Solomon Islands. From there, it would be possible for them to bomb Australia. The island needed to be taken before the airstrip was completed. The island was named Guadalcanal, and we'd all soon get to know it really well.

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\* The Marines of WWII had grown up seeing a steady stream of newsreels and reports from China where the Japanese had brutalized the population—burying prisoners alive, beheading them, and even tossing babies in the air and catching them with bayonets. The image of a Japanese citizen—once thought to be someone who loved poetry, calligraphy, and gardening—changed into that of a brutal soldier with a penchant for sadism. The Japanese—both civilians and soldiers—became derisively known as "Japs" even before America entered the war.

# EYEBALL TO EYEBALL



## *Guadalcanal*

**On August 6, 1942, the Marines watched from the railings as the U.S.S. *George F. Elliott* steamed into the waters north of Guadalcanal. They had come to seize the island's semi-completed airfield from the Japanese before it became operational. With Guadalcanal's airfield, the Japanese could bomb the shipping lanes to Australia and choke the continent, putting Australia at risk for enemy invasion.**

## JIM YOUNG

We were awakened around three in the morning on August 7, 1942, the day we were to fight the Japs. Breakfast was at 5 A.M. The food was steak and eggs. After eating, which was hard to do, we went up on deck to watch the bombardment of Guadalcanal. It was unbelievable, and the noise was horrendous! Most of us were scared and bewildered. We couldn't even hear each other without yelling.

We received orders to go below and get everything ready to disembark. The sea was rough and dangerous. Due to the waves, boats were dropping six to ten feet, just as men were ready to get in them. Or if the boat didn't drop, it came roaring up. A man was crushed between the landing craft and the side of the ship. Lots of guys were hurt that way. One of the men from my gun crew, a Marine PFC, had made it into the landing craft and had his hand on the craft's rail when our wiremen started to lower metal coils of communication wire from the ship. A line broke and the heavy coil of wire hit his arm and snapped it. They hoisted him back aboard.



It was go time. The engines on the landing crafts were all roaring at full throttle. We were on our way in and everyone was nervous.

## SID PHILLIPS

There was a flag flying on the stern of every landing craft. I looked over the side at the flags, and my friend Carl Ransom was doing the same thing. You could see a whole line of them. It looked like they reached to the end of the world. I got a lump in my throat. Ransom did, too. As he wiped his eyes, he said, "That salt spray makes your eyes water, won't it?"

We had never had that happen before, never in training, and I never saw it happen again after that. They were too good a target. A big old red, white, and blue thing like that shouts, "Here I am! Here I am!" Our Colonel Cates was a very patriotic Marine. If there was an order given to fly a flag on every landing craft, I'm sure Cates gave that order.

I noticed that morning how everybody's cartridge belt was full and bulging. You could see the shiny brass cartridges here and there in the belt. You had two clips of five rounds in each of those pockets. When we had made practice landings in the Fiji Islands, they never issued any live ammunition. We made the landings with empty, flat, cartridge belts. They didn't want some idiot firing his rifle into someone. Things were different now. This was the real deal.

When we came ashore at Guadalcanal, we were in that landing craft where the front end would dro

down. Some of the riflemen were in old Higgins boats that didn't even have the front ramp. We had the front ramp because otherwise we couldn't get that mortar out of the boat. We were expecting a life-and-death struggle with hand-to-hand combat on the beach. When the ramp went down, we found our guys on the beach laughing at us and opening coconuts. We came out of the landing craft ready to fight and they just laughed. They had done the same thing a few minutes before. There were no Japs in our vicinity at all.

## ROY GERLACH

I didn't go in on the first wave. I was a mortar man assigned to the mortar platoon, but I spent a lot of time as a cook. In the Marine Corps, you were assigned to the job you were supposed to do, and then if you could do something else, you did that, too. Whenever there was action, I was on the mortars. But if they needed a cook, well, I did that, too.

The first week when I was aboard the ship, my name came up for mess duty. So I went down and did that for a week. After that was over, a fellow says, "How was it down there?" I said, "Oh, not too bad." He didn't want to be a mess man and wash dishes and so forth, so he says, "I'll give you five dollars if you'll take my week of mess duty." So I took his five dollars, and I took his week. At the end of that week, another man asked me the same thing. After two or three weeks of being down in the galley, the head cook said, "Well if you're going to be down here, you might as well cook." That's how I started cooking. There was maybe four hundred to five hundred guys I cooked for.

I don't remember much about coming in to the beach. There were no Japs there. They'd all taken off to the hills. Right away we found all these coconuts. They fell out of the trees. We took our bayonets, bored holes in the coconuts, and drank the milk. But it made the guys sick. Too much fresh milk, I guess.

## SID PHILLIPS

All the first day we struggled through the jungle to reach a hill called the Grassy Knoll, a mile inland. We had no good maps for Guadalcanal at all. They had some maps drawn up by some Australian people who had been on Guadalcanal. These crude maps were named by the Australians. They even had the names mixed up for the Tenaru and Ilu rivers.

So the game plan was to go to the Grassy Knoll and get the high ground. The thing that stands out clear in my memory was the heat, the incredible heat in the jungle, with no breeze. And we had just come from winter in New Zealand, so it was a severe climate change. We just griped and bitched. In that jungle, it's so hot, and you're carrying a sixty-pound pack when you come ashore. Extra ammunition, packs of food for four days, a change of clothing. You drop your bedding, and keep going. The heat was so oppressive.

We were issued one canteen then. We'd been taught water discipline. You were only supposed to take small sips of water and roll the water around in your mouth before you swallowed. You were never supposed to guzzle water. Everybody nearly died of thirst that first day. We ate crackers, cans of hash—there was no water in the food; it just dried you out more and made you more thirsty.\* At the end of the first day, we were exhausted, halfway up the Grassy Knoll. They told us to lie down where we were, dig a foxhole, shut up, and go to sleep. So we did.

## JIM YOUNG

When morning came, we were ordered back to the beach to set up defenses in an effort to repel any

Jap attempt to land. One of our lieutenants was bitten in the face by a scorpion during the night. He had swollen up so much that he was completely blind and had to be led by the hand on the long march back to the beach. As we approached the beach, about ten Japanese Torpedo bombers skimmed the water and headed for the convoy. They were so low we could see the faces of the pilots and the big red meatball on their wings. They did not care about us on the beach. They went straight for the convoy of ships. One plane headed directly for our ship, the *Elliott*. It crashed into the water first and bounced up and slammed into the ship.

## ROY GERLACH

We didn't have no galley [kitchen] for the first three or four weeks because our cooking equipment sunk with the *Elliott*. I wasn't on the ship then, but I saw it all. Most of the troops were on shore by then. But the unloading of the ship wasn't done yet. There was one shipman I knew on the *Elliott*, he always used to say, "I'm gonna be here when you go, and I'll be here when you get back." He wasn't.

## SID PHILLIPS

People ask me when we first contacted the enemy. We were strafed by enemy planes almost immediately on Guadalcanal. You dig a foxhole and try to dig it as deep as you can, just try to bury yourself with the earth. The strafing never ended on Guadalcanal. They were always coming in, bombarding us. We considered that contact with the enemy.

## JIM YOUNG

The Jap Zeroes would come swooping over us. I could actually see the pilots, the faces in those airplanes. You could see them turn their heads and look down at you. Sometimes they were grinning.

## SID PHILLIPS

The day after we landed, we captured the airfield. When I first saw the airfield, I was surprised that there weren't many buildings except for this pagoda-looking thing. That served as the tower. The runway wasn't very visible unless you were up in the air. There were no wrecked Japanese planes. The place was empty. We went over there and looked at the pagoda. We were some of the first Americans to walk into that building.

The first American planes we saw come in there were the B-17 Flying Fortresses. Sometimes two, sometimes three. They would stop, refuel, and leave. The Flying Fortresses came in before we had any Navy or Marine planes at all.

**On August 9, from their bivouac on a hilltop over the beach, H Company witnessed a violent naval battle between the U.S. and Japanese navies. This, the Battle of Savo Sea, produced so many sunken ships off the island's shore that the waters gained the name "Iron Bottom Bay."**

## SID PHILLIPS

The Savo Sea battle was like watching a summer storm from a beach. You would hear this rumble of naval gunfire and see what looked like flashes of lightning. You've seen distant lightning where the sky lights up? It was that sort of thing. You couldn't see any real details of the naval battle, but when

ship would blow up, we cheered. We assumed it was our boys doing the whipping. The next morning we saw ~~one American cruiser creep slowly by, right offshore, with part of its bow blown off.~~ Somebody said it was the *Chicago*.

We were then told about the disaster. We lost four cruisers that night. You could maybe see a ship smoking, three miles away. Our supply ships were still in the harbor, but they were pulling out. Leaving us. They hadn't even unloaded half our supplies. But they had to get the hell out of there.

At that moment we felt that we might be considered "expendable." It had occurred in the Philippines. It had occurred at Wake Island. It had occurred at Guam. It had occurred at every stage of the war in the Pacific up to Guadalcanal, so yes, we felt expendable.

## JIM YOUNG

Without our ships, we were alone on the island. There was no food except for what we had in our backpacks, K rations. After sending out search parties to look for food, we found stores of Japanese rice and oats which would hold us over until the Navy could return with more supplies. It took a strong stomach to eat this because the rice and oats were crawling with maggots and worms. We found that we dumped the rice and oats in water, then all the bugs would float to the top where we could skim them off.

We bivouacked at the end of a coconut plantation, near a meadow with a patch of trees. The trees were lime trees and we made limeade. We used warm water and we had no sugar. This stuff was terrible, but it was something different to drink. This meadow had the oddest plants I've ever seen. If you took a walk through them, it looked like a well-worn path, but twenty minutes later there was no trace of where you'd walked.

In the days that followed, we still hadn't seen the Japs up close, but the air raids continued. We had an old gunnery sergeant, fifty years old, real nice guy and a real Marine. We called him Gunny Dixon. Gunny told us to dig foxholes. When we were finished, he took one look at them and started to laugh. "Well, well," he said. "They don't look deep enough to me. I bet by the end of the week they will be deep enough to stand in." How right he was! Bombers flew over us, and we couldn't do a thing about it. We had no guns that could reach them and we had no airplanes. The bombs falling had a whistling sound as they came down.

One day the Jap bombers came from a different direction. They had always bombed the airstrip from the takeoff point to the liftoff point, but this day they came straight from the sea toward our tree grove. This time they were after us, and not the airstrip. I was watching them with field glasses, and I could see the pattern of bombs exploding and knew it would surely hit us. I yelled a warning, and we just made it to our foxholes in time. It was impossible to stand in the foxhole. The earth was shaking like an earthquake. Big chunks of earth filled the air and the smell of cordite was overpowering. It's hard to believe that no one was killed.

We found a Jap bunker near us that held about twenty of us. It was very dark inside, and while using it during an air raid one day, one of the guys let out a loud scream. It scared all of us and we scrambled for the exit, even though the air raid was still in progress. A six-foot-long lizard was up on the roof of the bunker, and its scaly tail had flopped down and touched the Marine's face. He thought it was the guy next to him so he reached up to brush it away. When he felt the tail, he went ape. We all got a kick out of it when it was over.

At night the Japs sent a lone bomber that kept flying around for hours before he decided to drop his bombs. They did this to keep us from getting any rest. We called him "Washing Machine Charley" because of the sound of his engine.

The bombing raids never ceased. After a while, we were shelled from Jap cruisers and subs as well

What made us mad is that we could see the Japs scurrying around their decks and manning the guns. But we had nothing that we could reach them with. All of our long-range guns were on the ships that took off when the naval battle took place.

## SID PHILLIPS

The rifle platoons, they had daily patrols. Fifteen to twenty men would go out with an officer, scouting, trying to find out if there were any Japs in a particular area. In the mortar platoon we seldom went on patrols.

But we did go out after a Marine patrol had been ambushed and the survivors came back to our lines. So they put together a three-hundred-man patrol to go back out there to recover our dead. They wanted one 81mm mortar to come along, so they came to the mortar platoon and said, "Number four gun is going." That was me. Lieutenant "Benny" Benson, he was the lieutenant for our gun, he went with us.

The riflemen were on the point, watching for the enemy. In the mortar squad we trudged along behind them with that damn heavy stuff. We went about five miles out, carrying that mortar the whole way. You either carry part of the mortar or the ammunition. If you were an ammunition carrier, you carried a cloverleaf of ammunition on your shoulder. It was a strenuous march in the tropics. There were no roads. To be on the ground in a dense jungle, you did not even need to see combat to have a miserable time. You might have hiked way out and way back, and had to ford several streams, and walked through water waist-deep where your clothes got soaked and your feet didn't dry out and your pants chafed your crotch. You just can't convey that misery in words.

When we reached the area where the ambush had occurred, the mortar platoon stopped 150 yards from the site and set up our mortar. If the Japs were gonna ambush this big patrol, we were gonna give our guys mortar support. You could just look where our guys were and we would have fired beyond them. But the Japs had vacated the area.

We never did get up to the actual site of the ambush, but this old Marine sergeant came walking back, and Benny knew him real well because Benny was an old Marine, too—thirty years old was ancient in our minds. Benny said, "What's the scoop up there?" and this sergeant said that all the Marines had been beheaded and had their genitals stuffed in their mouths. They brought our dead back on canvas stretchers, their bodies covered by ponchos.

Our hatred for the enemy burned from early on. We had heard about the Bataan Death March, where they bayoneted American prisoners who fell exhausted by the roadside. We had talked to the 90mm anti-aircraft battery that was near our bivouac—they were a defense battalion that had been at Pearl Harbor. Then there was the Goettge patrol. A few days after we landed on Guadalcanal, some Jap prisoner told Colonel Frank Goettge that the Jap's buddies wanted to surrender five miles west of our lines, where the Matanikau River met the sea. Goettge took a patrol of twenty-five men out to take their surrender. But it was an ambush. Goettge and his men were butchered. Only three of them escaped by swimming back to our lines.

Was he an idiot for thinking the Japs would surrender? No, we just didn't really understand the enemy yet. Surrender was out of the question for a Jap unless he was knocked unconscious. But even then, if you saw an unconscious Jap, you'd be very cautious, because he might be only pretending. He might try to kill you. Japan soon proved a brutal enemy. They ignored the Geneva Convention. They tortured prisoners of war then killed them. Hell, they would torture a body and mutilate it even after a guy was dead. A hatred between the Marines and the Japanese rapidly developed. We never took a prisoner, never in my battalion, that I know of.

*On August 20, bad news came to the Marines, word that the Japanese were landing fresh troops to retake the airfield. That same day a new armada of planes was heard in the sky.*

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## SID PHILLIPS

It was late in the afternoon, and we were at our mortar position when we heard airplanes circling the field. We ran for cover. They came in from the south over those ridges. The roar of all the airplanes was deafening. They were loud by themselves, but when you have the sky full of them—wow! Someone screamed that they were our planes. We just went wild. I looked up and saw a blue-gray SB dive bomber with the letters USMC painted on the underside of the wing. We flung our helmets way up in the air. We were beating on each other. Some of the guys were crying with joy they were so happy. We hadn't had any friendly planes except those two or three Flying Fortresses that came in. We had been strafed regularly by the Japanese Zeroes. Seeing our planes told us that Uncle Sam had decided we were going to fight for this miserable island.

**On August 21, 1942, the Marines and the Japanese Army would meet in the first major battle of Guadalcanal. The Japanese had landed nine hundred soldiers of the elite Ichiki Regiment, who marched west along the beach, toward the airfield. The Marines of H Company waited for the enemy along the west bank of a small river they called "Alligator Creek," or "the Tenaru."**

## JIM YOUNG

We took turns manning defense lines at night. It was scary. The jungle was thick in front of us and the nights were black. We heard all kinds of noises, and some of us would fire a few rounds in front of us just in case Japs were sneaking up on us. The trouble was that everyone got jumpy when someone fired, and the whole line would open up. You would think a hell of a battle was going on. Well, the general got fed up with all the shooting and nothing to show for it. He issued an order that if any more of that wild firing happened, he wanted to see dead Japs, or that unit would catch all the working parties. Let me tell you, the next night the whole island seemed to be deserted. It was so quiet. The only sound came from "Washing Machine Charley."

## SID PHILLIPS

The Battle of the Tenaru was the first real fight on the island. Our lines ran north and south from the ocean back to where the airfield began. We did not have a perimeter around the airfield. We didn't have that many men.

We were stretched out in these holes, every seven yards, two men with rifles, two men with rifles, then maybe six men with a machine gun, their position covered with logs and dirt, then two men with rifles, and two men with rifles, and so on. The jungle around you was so thick, you didn't know who was where, or what was where. You would lie there and listen to all those different damn jungle noises. One of those iguanas, three feet long, could be scurrying around, wrestling and making noise. You would wonder, *Is that a damn Jap or is that an iguana?* So you stayed awake. You didn't want to give a false alarm. After a while, you would get used to it, and you begin to take pride in the idea that you could tell a land crab from a creeping Jap, you know.

The mosquitoes were eating us alive. There was no repellent or anything. We just lay in those holes and fed those mosquitoes all night long. We'd been living on rice and nothing else for a long time there. Everybody was wore out, exhausted before long. Every two hours you were supposed to switch off on watch with the guy in your foxhole. We were always on edge.



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