

**WITH THE  
OLD BREED**  
AT PELELIU AND OKINAWA

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## STAY OF EXECUTION

“The landing is unopposed!”  
 We looked with amazement at the Marine on the amtrac  
 with which our Higgins boat had just hooked up.  
 “The hell you say,” one of my buddies shot back.  
 “It’s straight dope. I just saw a couple of mortar shells fallin’ in the water; that’s all.  
 The guys went in standin’ up. It beats anything I ever saw.”

Images of the maelstrom at Peleliu had been flashing through my mind, but on Okinawa there was practically no opposition to the landing. When we overcame our astonishment, everybody started laughing and joking. The release of tension was unforgettable. We sat on the edge of the amtrac’s troop compartment singing and commenting on the vast fleet surrounding us. No need to crouch low to avoid the deadly shrapnel and bullets. It was—and still is—the most pleasant surprise of the war.

It suddenly dawned on me, though, that it wasn’t at all like the Japanese to let us walk ashore unopposed on an island only 350 miles from their homeland. They were obviously pulling some trick, and I began to wonder what they were up to.

“Hey, Sledgehammer, what’s the matter? Why don’t you sing like everybody else?”

I grinned and took up a chorus of the “Little Brown Jug.”

“That’s more like it!”

As our wave moved closer to the island, we got a good view of the

hundreds of landing boats and amtracs approaching the beach. Directly ahead of us, we could see the men of our regiment moving about in dispersed combat formations like tiny toy soldiers on the rising landscape. They appeared unhurried and nonchalant, as if on maneuvers. There were no enemy shells bursting among them. The island sloped up gently from the beach, and the many small garden and farm plots of the Okinawans gave it the appearance of a patchwork quilt. It was beautiful, except where the ground cover and vegetation had been blasted by shells. I was overcome with the contrast to D day on Peleliu.

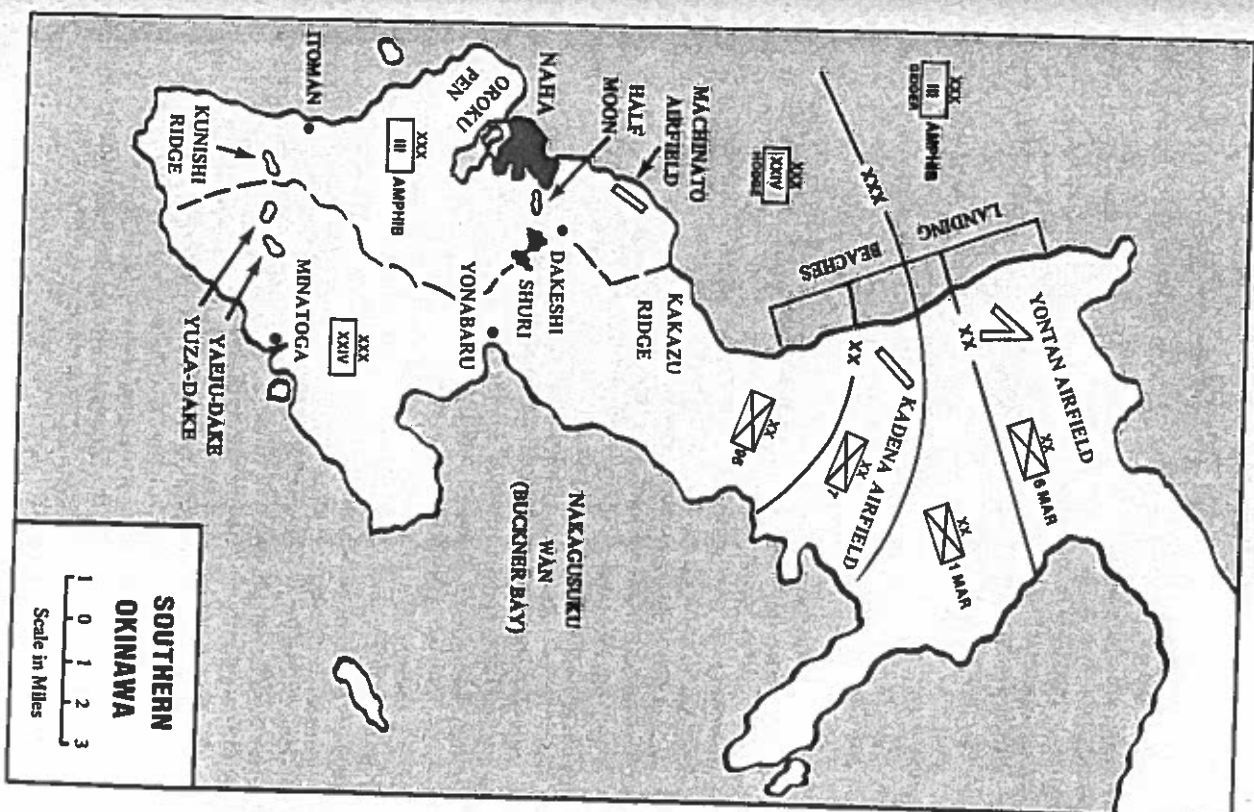
When our wave was about fifty yards from the beach, I saw two enemy mortar shells explode a considerable distance to our left. They spewed up small geysers of water but caused no damage to the amtracs in that area. That was the only enemy fire I saw during the landing on Okinawa. It made the April Fool's Day aspect even more sinister, because all those thousands of first-rate Japanese troops on that island had to be somewhere spoiling for a fight.

We continued to look at the panorama around our amtrac with no thought of immediate danger as we came up out of the water. The tailgate banged down. We calmly picked up our gear and walked onto the beach.

A short distance down the beach on our right, the mouth of Bishi Gawa emptied into the sea. This small river formed the boundary between the army divisions of the XXIV Corps, to the south, and the III Amphibious Corps, to the north of the river. On our side of the mouth of the river, on a promontory jutting out into the sea, I saw the remains of the emplacement containing the big Japanese gun that had concerned us in our briefings. The seawall in our area had been blasted down into a terracelike rise a few feet high over which we moved with ease.

We advanced inland, and I neither heard nor saw any Japanese fire directed against us. As we moved across the small fields and gardens onto higher elevations, I could see troops of the 6th Marine Division heading toward the big Yontan Airfield on our left. Jubilation over the lack of opposition to the landing prevailed, particularly among the Peleliu veterans. Our new replacements began making remarks about amphibious landings being easy.

*Lt. Gen. Simon Bolivar Buckner, Jr., USA commanded the Tenth Army in the assault against Okinawa. Left (north) of the American landing was the III Marine Amphibious Corps led by Maj. Gen. Roy S. Geiger, which consisted of the 1st and 6th Marine divisions with the latter on the left. To the right (south) landed the army's XXIV Corps commanded by Maj. Gen. John R. Hodge and made up of the 7th and 96th Infantry divi-*





sions with the latter on the far right. Backing up the XXIV Corps was the 77th Infantry Division with the 27th Infantry Division affoot in reserve. Across the island stood the 2d Marine Division which had conducted an elaborate, full-scale feint at the southeastern beaches. Altogether, Lt. Gen. Buckner had 541,866 men at his disposal.

*Of the 50,000 troops ashore on D day, the four assault divisions lost only 28 killed, 104 wounded, and 27 missing.*

*The plan of attack called for the four divisions to cross the island, cutting it in two. The Marines would then turn left and move north to secure the upper two-thirds of the island while the army forces wheeled right into line and proceeded south.*

By late afternoon on D day we were ordered to dig in for the night. My squad set up in a small field of recently harvested grain. The clay/loam soil was just right for digging in, so we made a good gun pit. Our company's other two mortars were positioned nearby. We registered in on likely target areas to our front with a couple of rounds of HE, then squared away our ammo for the night. Everybody was expecting a big counterattack with tanks because of the open nature of the countryside.

Once set up, several of us went over to the edge of the field and cautiously explored a neat, clean Okinawan farmhouse. It was a likely hiding place for snipers, but we found it empty.

As we were leaving the house to return to our positions, Jim Dandridge, one of our replacements, stepped on what appeared to be a wooden cover over an underground rainwater cistern at the corner of the house. Jim was a big man, and the wooden planks were rotten. He fell through, sinking in above his waist. The hole wasn't a cistern but a cesspool for the sewage from the house. Jim scrambled out bellowing like a mad bull and smelling worse. We all knew it might be weeks before we could get a change of dungarees, so it was no laughing matter to Jim. But we started kidding him unmercifully about his odd taste in swimming holes. Jim was good-natured, but he quickly had enough and chased a couple of the men back across the field to our positions. They laughed but kept out of his reach.

No sooner had we gotten back to our foxholes than we heard the unmistakable drone of a Japanese aircraft engine. We looked up and saw a Zero coming directly over us. The fighter was high, and the pilot apparently had bigger game than us in mind. He headed out over the beach toward our fleet offshore. Several ships began firing furiously as he circled lazily and then dove. The plane's engine began to whine with increasing intensity as the kamikaze pilot headed straight down toward a transport. We saw the smoke where he hit the ship, but it was so far away we couldn't determine what

damage had been done. The troops had debarked earlier, but the ship's crew probably had a rough time of it. It was the first kamikaze I had seen crash into a ship, but it wasn't the last.

In the gathering dusk we turned our attention to our immediate surroundings and squared away for the night. We each had been issued a small bottle containing a few ounces of brandy to ward off the chill of D day night. Knowing my limited taste, appreciation, and capacity for booze, my buddies began trying to talk me out of my brandy ration. But I was cold after sundown, and thought the brandy might warm me up a bit. I tried a sip, concluding immediately that Indians must have had brandy in mind when they supposedly spoke of "firewater." I traded my brandy for a can of peaches, then broke out my wool-lined field jacket and put it on. It felt good.

We waited in the clear, chilly night for the expected Japanese attack. But all was quiet, with no artillery fire nearby and rarely any rifle or machine-gun fire—stark contrast to the rumbling, crashing chaos of D day night on Peleliu.

When Snafu woke me about midnight for my turn on watch, he handed me our "Tommy" (submachine) gun. (I don't remember how, where, or when we got the Tommy gun, but Snafu and I took turns carrying it and the mortar throughout Peleliu and Okinawa. A pistol was fine but limited at close range, so we valued our Tommy greatly.)

After a few minutes on watch, I noticed what appeared to be a man crouching near me at the edge of a line of shadows cast by some trees. I strained my eyes, averted my vision, and looked in all directions, but I couldn't be sure the dark object was a man. The harder I looked the more convinced I was. I thought I could make out a Japanese fatigue cap. It wasn't a Marine, because none of our people was placed where the figure was. It was probably an enemy infiltrator waiting for his comrades to get in place before acting.

I couldn't be sure in the pale light. Should I fire or take a chance? My teeth began to chatter from the chill and the jitters.

I raised the Tommy slowly, set it on full automatic, flipped off the safety, and took careful aim at the lower part of the figure (I mustn't fire over his head when the Tommy recoiled). I squeezed the trigger for a short burst of several rounds. Flame spurted out of the muzzle, and the rapid explosions of the cartridges shattered the calm. I peered confidently over my sights, expecting to see a Japanese knocked over by the impact of the big .45 caliber slugs. Nothing happened. The enemy didn't move.

Everyone around us began whispering, "What's the dope? What did you see?"

I answered that I thought I had seen a Japanese crouching near the shadows.

There were enemy in the area, for just then we heard shouts in Japanese, a high-pitched yell: "Nippon banzai," then incoherent babbling followed by a burst of firing from one of our machine guns. Quiet fell.

When dawn broke, the first dim light revealed my infiltrator to be a low stack of straw. My buddies kidded me for hours about a Peleliu veteran firing at a straw Japanese.

## Race Across the Island

On 2 April (D + 1) the 1st Marine Division continued its attack across the island. We moved out with our planes overhead but without artillery fire, because no organized body of Japanese had been located ahead of us. Everyone was asking the same question: "Where the hell are the Nips?" Some scattered small groups were encountered and put up a fight, but the main Japanese army had vanished.

During the morning I saw a couple of dead enemy soldiers who apparently had been acting as observers in a large leafless tree when some of the prelanding bombardment killed them. One still hung over a limb. His intestines were strung out among the branches like garland decorations on a Christmas tree. The other man lay beneath the tree. He had lost a leg which rested on the other side of the tree with the leggings and trouser leg still wrapped neatly around it. In addition to their ghastly condition, I noted that both soldiers wore high-top leather hobnail shoes. That was the first time I had seen that type of Japanese footwear. All the enemy I had seen on Peleliu had worn the rubber-soled canvas split-toed *tabi*.

We encountered some Okinawans—mostly old men, women, and children. The Japanese had conscripted all the young men as laborers and a few as troops, so we saw few of them. We sent the civilians to the rear where they were put into internment camps so they couldn't aid the enemy.

These people were the first civilians I had seen in a combat area. They were pathetic. The most pitiful things about the Okinawan civilians were that they were totally bewildered by the shock of our invasion, and they were scared to death of us. Countless times they passed us on the way to the rear with fear, dismay, and confusion on their faces.

The children were nearly all cute and bright-faced. They had round faces and dark eyes. The little boys usually had close-cropped hair, and the little girls had their shiny jet-black locks bobbed in the Japanese children's style of the period. The children won our hearts. Nearly all of us gave them

all the candy and rations we could spare. They were quicker to lose their fear of us than the older people, and we had some good laughs with them.

One of the funnier episodes I witnessed involved two Okinawan women and their small children. We had been ordered to halt and "take ten" (a ten-minute rest) before resuming our rapid advance across the island. My squad stopped near a typical Okinawan well constructed of stone and forming a basin about two feet deep and about four feet by six feet on the sides. Water bubbled out of a rocky hillside. We watched two women and their children getting a drink. They seemed a bit nervous and afraid of us, of course. But life had its demands with children about, so one woman sat on a rock, nonchalantly opened her kimono top, and began breast-feeding her small baby.

While the baby nursed, and we watched, the second child (about four years old) played with his mother's sandals. The little fellow quickly tired of this and kept pestering his mother for attention. The second woman had her hands full with a small child of her own, so she wasn't any help. The mother spoke sharply to her bored child, but he started climbing all over the baby and interfering with the nursing. As we looked on with keen interest, the exasperated mother removed her breast from the mouth of the nursing baby and pointed it at the face of the fractious brother. She squeezed her breast just as you would milk a cow and squirted a jet of milk into the child's face. The startled boy began bawling at the top of his lungs while rubbing the milk out of his eyes.

We all roared with laughter, rolling around on the deck and holding our sides. The women looked up, not realizing why we were laughing, but began to grin because the tension was broken. The little recipient of the milk in the eyes stopped crying and started grinning, too.

"Get your gear on; we're moving out," came the word down the column. As we shouldered our weapons and ammo and moved out amid continued laughter, the story traveled along to the amusement of all. We passed the two smiling mothers and the grinning toddler, his cute face still wet with his mother's milk.

Moving rapidly toward the eastern shore, we crossed terrain often extremely rugged with high, steep ridges and deep gullies. In one area a side and down the other of each ridge, we were tired but glad the Japanese had abandoned the area. It was ideal for defense.

During another halt, we spent our entire break rescuing an Okinawan horse. The animal had become trapped in a narrow flooded drainage ditch about four feet deep. He couldn't climb out or move forward or backward. When we first approached the animal, he plunged up and down in the water

rolling his eyes in terror. We calmed him, slipped a couple of empty cartridge belts beneath his belly, and heaved him up out of the ditch.

We had plenty of help, because Texans and horse lovers gravitated to the scene from all over our battalion, which ranged in columns along the valley and surrounding ridges. The city men looked on and gave useless advice. When we got the little horse out of the ditch, he stood on wobbly legs as the water dripped off him, shook himself, and headed for a patch of grass.

No sooner had we washed the mud off the cartridge belts than the word came to move out. We didn't get any rest during that break, and we were tired, but we had the satisfaction of knowing that little horse wouldn't starve to death bogged down in the ditch.

The clear cool weather compensated for our rapid advance over the broken terrain. Those of us with experience in the tropics felt as though we had been delivered from a steam room. The hills and ridges on Okinawa were mostly clay, but it was dry, and we didn't slip or slide with our heavy loads. Pine trees grew everywhere. I had forgotten what a delicious odor the needles gave off. We also saw Easter lilies blooming.

Completing the initial assignment of the 1st Marine Division to cut the island in two, we reached the east coast in an area of marshes and what appeared to be large freshwater reservoirs. Offshore was a bay called Chimu Wan.

We arrived on the afternoon of 4 April, some eight to thirteen days ahead of schedule. Our rapid movement had been possible, of course, only because of the widely scattered opposition. These first four days had been too easy for us. We were confused as to what the Japanese were doing. We knew they weren't about to give up the island without a fierce, drawn-out fight.

And we didn't have to wait long to find out where the enemy was. Later that day rumors began that the army divisions were meeting increasingly stiff opposition as they tried to move south. We knew that sooner or later we'd be down there with them in the thick of it.

We also learned that our namesake company in the 7th Marines had been ambushed to the north of us near the village of Hizaonna and had suffered losses of three killed and twenty-seven wounded. Thus, despite the relative ease with which our division had moved across the center of the island, the Japanese were still there and still hurting the Marines.

*The 1st Marine Division spent the remainder of April mopping up the central portion of Okinawa. Elements of the division, including the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, conducted a shore-to-shore amphibious operation*

*toward the end of the month to secure the Eastern Islands which lay on the outer edge of Chimu Wan Bay. The purpose was to deny them to the Japanese as an operating base in the rear of the American forces, much the same reason 3/5 had assaulted Ngesebu during the fight for Peleliu.*

*The 6th Marine Division moved north during April and captured the entire upper part of the island. The task wasn't easy. It involved a rough, costly seven-day mountain campaign against strongly fortified Japanese positions in the heights of Motobu Peninsula.*

*Meanwhile three army divisions were coming up short against fierce Japanese resistance in the Kakazu-Nishibaru ridgeline, the first of three main enemy defense lines in the southern portion of the island. Stretched from left to right across Okinawa, the 7th, 96th, and 27th Infantry divisions were getting more than they could handle and were making little progress in their attacks.*

## Patrols

Hardly had we arrived on the shore of Chimu Wan Bay than we received orders to move out. We headed inland and north into an area of small valleys and steep ridges, where we settled into a comfortable bivouac area and erected our two-man pup tents. It was more like maneuvers than combat; we didn't even dig foxholes. We could see Yontan Airfield in the distance to the west. Rain fell for the first time since we had landed five days earlier.

The next day our company began patrolling through the general area around our bivouac site. We didn't need the mortars because of the scattered nature of the enemy opposition. Stowing them out of the weather in our tents, those of us in the mortar section served as riflemen on the patrols.

Mac, our new mortar section leader, led the first patrol I made. Our mission was to check out our assigned area for signs of enemy activity. Burgh was our patrol sergeant. I felt a lot more comfortable with him than with Mac.

On a clear, chilly morning, with the temperature at about 60 degrees, we moved out through open country on a good, rock-surfaced road. The scenery was picturesque and beautiful. I saw little sign of war. We had strict orders not to fire our weapons unless we saw a Japanese soldier or Okinawans who were certain were hostile. No shooting at chickens and no target practice.

"Mac, where we headed?" someone had asked before we left.



"Hizaonna," the lieutenant answered without batting an eye.

"Jesus Christ! That's where K Company, 7th got ambushed the other night," one of the new replacements said.

"Do you mean us few guys are supposed to patrol that place?"

"Yeah, that's right, Hood," Burgin answered. (We had nicknamed a big square-jawed man from Chicago "Hoodlum" because of the notorious gangs of John Dillinger and others in that city during the days of Prohibition.)

My reaction on hearing our destination had been to thrust my Tommy gun toward another new man who wasn't assigned to the patrol and say, "Take this; don't you wanna go in my place?"

"Hell, no!" he replied.

So, off we went with Mac striding along like he was still in OCS back in Quantico, Virginia. The veterans among us looked worried. The new men, like Mac, seemed unconcerned. Because of the strange absence of anything but scattered opposition, some of the new men were beginning to think war wasn't as bad as they had been told it was. Some of them actually chided us about giving them an exaggerated account of the horrors and hardships of Peleliu. Okinawa in April was so easy for the 1st Marine Division that the new men were lulled into a false sense of well-being. We warned them, "When the stuff hits the fan, it's hell," but they grew more and more sure that we veterans were "snowing" them.

Mac didn't help matters either by his loud pronouncements of how he would take his kabari in his teeth and his .45 in hand and charge the Japanese as soon as one of our guys got hit. The April stay of execution tended to lull even the veterans into a state of wishful thinking and false security, although we knew better.

Soon, however, our idyllic stroll on that perfect April morning was broken by an element of the horrid reality of the war that I knew lurked in wait for us somewhere on that beautiful island. Beside a little stream below the road, like a hideous trademark of battle, lay a Japanese corpse in full combat gear.

From our view above, the corpse looked like a gingerbread man in a helmet with his legs still in the flexed position of running. He didn't appear to have been dead many days then, but we passed that same stream many times throughout April and watched the putrid remains decompose gradually into the soil of Okinawa. I was thankful the windswept road with the sweet, fresh smell of pine needles filling our nostrils was too high for us to sense his presence in any way but visually.

As we patrolled in the vicinity of Hizaonna, we moved through some of the area where Company K, 7th Marines had been ambushed a few nights

before. The grim evidence of a hard fight lay everywhere. We found numerous dead Japanese where they had fallen. Bloody battle dressings, discarded articles of bloody clothing, and bloodstains on the ground indicated where Marines had been hit. Empty cartridge cases were piled where various Marine weapons had been.

I remember vividly an Okinawan footpath across a low hillock where the Marine column apparently had been attacked from both sides. On the path were empty machine-gun ammo boxes, ammo clips for M1 rifles, and carbine shell cases; discarded dungaree jackets, leggings, and battle dressings; and several large bloodstains, by then dark spots on the soil. Scattered a short distance on both sides of the path were about a score of enemy dead.

The scene was like reading a paragraph from a page of a history book. The Marines had suffered losses, but they had inflicted worse on the attacking Japanese. We saw no Marine dead; all had been removed when the attack-troops had come in and aided K/3/7 to withdraw from the ambush.

As I looked at the flotsam of battle scattered along that little path, I was struck with the utter incongruity of it all. There the Okinawans had tilled their soil with ancient and crude farming methods; but the war had come, bringing with it the latest and most refined technology for killing. It seemed so insane, and I realized that the war was like some sort of disease afflicting man. From my experience at Peleliu I had unconsciously come to associate combat with stifling hot, fire-swept beaches, steaming mangrove-choked swamps, and harsh, jagged coral ridges. But there on Okinawa the disease was disrupting a place as pretty as a pastoral painting. I understood then what my grandmother had really meant when she told me as a boy that a blight descended on the land when the South was invaded during the Civil War.

While a buddy and I were looking over the area, Burgin told us to check out a section of sunken roadway nearby. The sunken portion was about thirty yards long and about ten feet deep; the banks were steep and sloping. Heavy bushes grew along their edges at ground level so all we could see was the sky overhead and the sloping road in front and behind us. When we were about halfway along the sunken road, carbine shots rang out from where we had left Burgin and Mac.

"Ambush!" startled my buddy, a veteran with combat experience stretching back to Cape Gloucester.

We went into a low crouch instinctively, and I put my finger on the safety catch of the Tommy. Hurrying over to the bank toward the sound of the shots, we scrambled up and peered cautiously through the bushes. We both knew we wouldn't have a chance if we got pinned down in that ditch-

like road where we could be shot from above. My heart pounded, and I felt awfully lonely as I looked out. There, where we had left him, stood Mac in the farmyard, calmly pointing his carbine straight down toward the ground by his feet at some object we couldn't see. My comrade and I looked at each other in amazement. "What the hell?" my buddy whispered. We climbed out of the sunken road and went toward Mac as he fired his carbine at the ground again. Other members of the patrol were converging cautiously on the area. They looked apprehensive, thinking we were being ambushed.

Burgin stood a short distance behind Mac, shaking his head slowly in disgust. As we came up, I asked Mac what he had fired at. He pointed to the ground and showed us his target: the lower jaw of some long-dead animal. Mac said he just wanted to see if he could shoot any of the teeth loose from the jawbone.

We stared at him in disbelief. There we were, a patrol of about a dozen Marines, miles from our outfit, with orders not to fire unless at the enemy, in an area with dead Japanese scattered all over the place, and our lieutenant was plinking away with his carbine like a kid with a BB gun. If Mac had been a private, the whole patrol would probably have stuck his head in a nearby well. But our discipline was strict, and we just gritted our teeth.

Burgin made some tactful remark to remind Mac he was the officer in charge of a patrol and that the enemy might jump us at any time. Thereupon Mac began spouting off, quoting some training manual about the proper way for troops to conduct themselves on patrol.

Mac wasn't stupid or incompetent. He just didn't seem to realize there was a deadly war going on and that we weren't involved in some sort of college game. Strange as it seemed, he wasn't mature yet. He had enough ability to complete Marine Corps OCS—a no simple task—but occasionally he could do some of the strangest things, things only a teenage boy would be expected to do.

Once on another patrol, I saw him taking great pains and effort to position himself and his carbine near a Japanese corpse. After getting just the right angle, Mac took careful aim and squeezed off a couple of rounds. The dead Japanese lay on his back with his trousers pulled down to his knees. Mac was trying very carefully to blast off the head of the corpse's penis. He succeeded. As he exulted over his aim, I turned away in disgust.

Mac was a decent, clean-cut man but one of those who apparently felt no restraints under the brutalizing influence of war—although he had hardly been in combat at that time. He had one ghoulish, obscene tendency that revolted even the most hardened and callous men I knew. When most men felt the urge to urinate, they simply went over to a bush or stopped wherever they happened to be and relieved themselves without ritual or

fanfare. Not Mac. If he could, that "gentleman by the act of Congress" would locate a Japanese corpse, stand over it, and urinate in its mouth. It was the most repulsive thing I ever saw an American do in the war. I was ashamed that he was a Marine officer.

During the early part of that beautiful April in our happy little valley—while we veterans talked endlessly in disbelief about the lack of fighting—a few of us had a close view of a Japanese Zero fighter plane. One clear morning after a leisurely breakfast of K rations, several of us sauntered up a ridge bordering our valley to watch an air raid on Yontan Airfield. None of us was scheduled for patrols that day, and none of us was armed. We had violated a fundamental principle of infantrymen: "Carry your weapon on your person at all times."

As we watched the raid, we heard an airplane engine to our right. We turned, looked down a big valley below our ridge, and saw a plane approaching. It was a Zero flying up the valley toward us, parallel to and level with the crest of our ridge. It was moving so slowly it seemed unreal. Unarmed, we gawked like spectators at a passing parade as the plane came across our front. It couldn't have been more than thirty or forty yards away. We could see every detail of the plane and of the pilot seated in the cockpit inside the canopy. He turned his head and looked keenly at our little group watching him. He wore a leather flight helmet, goggles pushed up on his forehead, a jacket, and a scarf around his neck.

The instant the Zero pilot saw us, his face broke into the most fiendish grin I ever saw. He looked like the classic cartoon Japanese portrayed in American newspapers of the war years, with buck teeth, slanted eyes, and a fighter pilot's straining dream, enemy infantry in the open with no anti-aircraft guns and no planes to protect us.

One of my buddies muttered in surprise as the plane went on by to our left, "Did you see that bastard grin at us—that slant-eyed sonofabitch. Where the hell's my rifle?"

It happened so fast, and we were all so astonished at the sight of a plane cruising by at eye level, we almost forgot the war. The Japanese pilot hadn't. He banked, climbed to gain altitude, and headed around another ridge out of sight. It was obvious he was coming back to rake us over. It would be difficult to avoid getting hit. No savior was in sight for us.

As we started to spin around and rush back down the ridge seeking safety, we again heard a plane. This time it wasn't the throb of a cruising engine, but the roar of a plane at full throttle. The Zero streaked past us, going down the valley in the opposite direction from which he had first appeared. He was still flying at eye level and he was in a big hurry, as if the



devil were after him. His devil was our savior, a beautiful blue Marine Corsair. That incredible Corsair pilot bore in right behind the Japanese as they roared out of sight over the ridge tops. The planes were moving too fast to see either pilot's face, but I'm confident the emperor's pilot had lost his grin when he saw that Corsair.

On our patrols during April, we investigated many Okinawan villages and farms. We learned a lot about the people's customs and ways of life. Particularly appealing to me were the little Okinawan horses, really shaggy oversized ponies.

The Okinawans used a type of halter on those horses that I had never seen before. It consisted of two pieces of wood held in place by ropes. The wooden pieces on either side of the horse's head were shaped like the letter F. They were carved out of fine-grained brown wood and were about as big around as a man's thumb. A short piece of rope or cord held the pieces together across the front, and a rope across the top of the animal's head held the pieces in place on each side of the head just above the opening of the mouth. Two short ropes at the back of the wooden pieces merged into a single rope. When pull was exerted on this single rope, the wooden pieces clamped with gentle pressure against the sides of the animal's face above the mouth, and the animal stopped moving. This apparatus combined the qualities of a halter and a bridle without the need for a bit in the horse's mouth.

I was so intrigued by the Okinawan halter that I took one of a horse we kept with us for several days and replaced it with a rope halter. My intention was to send the wooden halter home—I remember that a bright piece of red cord held the front ends together—so I put it into my pack. After 1 May, however, it seemed increasingly doubtful that I would ever get home myself, and my equipment seemed to get heavier as the mud got deeper. Regretfully, I threw away the halter.

We grew quite attached to the horse our squad had adopted, and he didn't seem to mind when we slung a couple of bags of mortar ammo across his back.

When the time came at the end of April for us to leave our little horse, I removed the rope halter and gave him a lump of ration sugar. I stroked his soft muzzle as he switched flies with his tail. He turned, ambled across a grassy green meadow, and began grazing. He looked up and back at me once. My eyes grew moist. However reluctant I was to leave him, it was for the best. He would be peaceful and safe on the slopes of that green, sunlit hill. Being civilized men, we were duly bound to return soon to the chaotic nether world of shells and bullets and suffering and death.

Ugly rumors began to increase about the difficulties the army troops

were having down on southern Okinawa. From high ground on clear nights I could see lights flickering and glowing on the southern skyline. A distant rumble was barely audible sometimes. No one said much about it. I tried unsuccessfully to convince myself it was thunderstorms, but I knew better. It was the flash and the growl of guns.

## A Happy Landing

On 13 April (12 April back in the States) we learned of the death of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Not the least bit interested in politics while we were fighting for our lives, we were saddened nonetheless by the loss of our president. We were also curious and a bit apprehensive about the loss of FDR's successor, Harry S. Truman, would handle the war. We surely didn't want someone in the White House who would prolong it one day longer than necessary.

Not long after hearing of Roosevelt's death, we were told to prepare to move out. Apprehension grew in the ranks. We thought the order meant to inevitable move into the inferno down south. On the contrary, it was to be a shore-to-shore amphibious operation against one of the Eastern Islands. We learned that Company K was to land on Takabanare Island, and that there might not be any Japanese there. We were highly skeptical. But so far Okinawa had been a strange "battle" for us; anything could happen.

Our battalion boarded trucks and headed for the east coast. We went aboard amtracs and set out into Chimu Wan to make the short voyage to Takabanare. The other companies of our battalion went after other islands of the group.

We landed with no opposition on a narrow, clean, sandy beach with a large rock mass high on our left. The rock hill looked forboding. It was a vantage point from which flanking fire could have raked the beach. But all went well, and we pushed rapidly over the entire island without seeing a single enemy soldier.

After we moved across the island and found nothing but a few civilians, we recrossed the island to the beach where we set up defensive positions. My squad was situated part way up the slope of the steep rocky hill overlooking the beach. Our mortar was well emplaced among some rocks, so that we could fire on the beach or its approaches in the bay. A small destroyer escort was anchored offshore at the base of the hill. It had been standing by during our landing and remained with us during the several days we stayed on Takabanare. We felt important, as though we had our own private navy. The weather was pleasant, so sleeping in the open was comfortable. We had few duties other than standing by to prevent a possible enemy move to

occupy the island. I wrote letters, read, and explored the area around our positions. Some of the Marines swam the short distance to the ship and went aboard, where the navy people welcomed them and treated them to hot chow and all the hot coffee they wanted. I was content to laze in the sun and the cool air and eat K rations.

We left Takabanare after several days and returned to our bivouac on Okinawa. There we resumed patrolling in the central area of the island. As April wore on, rumors and bad news increased about the situation the army was facing down south. Scuttlebutt ran rampant about our future employment down there. Our fear increased daily, and we finally got the word that we'd be moving south on 1 May to replace the 27th Infantry Division on the right flank of the Tenth Army.

*About mid-April the 11th Marines, the 1st Marine Division's artillery regiment, had moved south to add the weight of its firepower to the army's offensive. On 19 April the 27th Infantry Division launched a disastrous tank-infantry attack against Kakezu Ridge. Thirty army tanks became separated from their infantry support. The Japanese knocked out twenty-two of them in the ensuing fight. The 1st Marine Division's tank battalion offered the closest replacements for the tanks lost by the army.*

*Lt. Gen. Simon B. Buckner, Tenth Army commander, ordered Maj. Gen. Roy S. Geiger, III Amphibious Corps commander, to send the 1st Tank Battalion south to join the 27th Infantry Division. Geiger objected to the piecemeal employment of his Marines, so Buckner changed his orders and sent the entire 1st Marine Division south to relieve the 27th Infantry Division on the extreme right of the line just north of Machinato Airfield.*

During the last days of April, some of our officers and NCOs made a trip down south to examine the positions on the line that we were to move into. They briefed us thoroughly on what they saw, and it didn't sound promising.

"The stuff has hit the fan down there, boys. The Nips are pouring on the artillery and mortars and everything they've got," said a veteran sergeant. "Boys, they're firing knee mortars as thick and fast as we fire M1s."

We were given instructions, issued ammo and rations, and told to square away our gear. We rolled up our shelter halves (I wished I could crawl into mine and hibernate) and packed our gear to be left behind with the battalion quartermaster.

The first of May dawned cloudy and chilly. A few of us mortarmen built a small fire next to a niche in the side of the ridge to warm ourselves.

The dismal weather and our impending move south made us gloomy. We stood around the fire eating our last chow before heading south. The fire crackled cheerily, and the coffee smelled good. I was nervous and hated to leave our little valley. We tossed our last ration cartons and wrappers onto the fire—the area must be left cleaner than when we arrived—and a few of the men drifted away to pick up their gear.

"Grenade!" yelled Mac as we heard the pop of a grenade primer cap. I saw him toss a fragmentation grenade over the fire into the niche. The grenade exploded with a weak bang. Fragments zipped out past my legs, scattering sparks and sticks from the fire. We all looked astonished, Mac not the least so. No one was hit. I narrowly missed the million-dollar wound (it would have been a blessing in view of what lay ahead of us). The men who had just moved away from the fire undoubtedly would have been hit if they hadn't moved, because they had been standing directly in front of the niche.

All eyes turned on our intrepid lieutenant. He blushed and mumbled awkwardly about making a mistake. Before we moved to board the trucks, Mac had thought it would be funny to play a practical joke on us. So he staged the well-known trick of pouring out the explosive charge from a fragmentation grenade, screwing the detonation mechanism back on the empty "pineapple," and pitching it into the middle of a group of people. When the primer cap went "pop," the perpetrator of the joke could watch with sadistic delight as everyone scrambled for cover expecting the fuse to burn down and the grenade to explode.

By his own admission, however, Mac had been careless. Most of the explosive charge remained in the grenade; he had poured out only part of it. Consequently, the grenade exploded with considerable force and threw out its fragments. Luckily, Mac threw the grenade into the niche in the ridge. If he had thrown it into the open, most of the Company K mortar section would have been put out of action by its own lieutenant before we ever got down south. Fortunately for Mac, the company commander didn't see his foolish joke. We regretted he hadn't.

What a way to start our next fight!