

WAR IN THE PACIFIC V.1

Hudson Falls, NY High School
Memorial Day Weekend – 2002

Host

Matt Rozell

Guest Veterans

Robert Addison

James Butterfield

Walter Hammer

Dan Lawler

Art McClure(sp?)

MR: Good Morning. My name is Matthew Rozell and I am a Hudson Falls High School history teacher. We are here on Memorial Day weekend to celebrate the sacrifices made by the generations of Americans that have passed and those that are here with us today. This is part of our Living WW-II History project and today our theme is the Pacific War, specifically the combat Marines and the things these gentlemen went through fighting the Japanese. I will be giving some background on the Pacific theater but first let me introduce our guests. Starting on my left we have Mr. Robert Addison, Mr. Art McClure, Mr. Dan Lawler, Mr. Walt Hammer, and Mr. James Butterfield. As you may have noted, Mr. Butterfield was seriously wounded 57 years ago during the battle for Okinawa and has been blind since that terrible day in 1945. All of these men suffered a lot, be it physical or mental, so that you and I can enjoy the freedom that we have today.

What is presented here today will be preserved on our website as part of our Living History Project. This project is dedicated to those who served, beginning with a 17-year old Hudson Falls native, Randy Holmes, who had joined the Navy in 1941 and was killed in action in December 7th at Pearl Harbor.

These five gentlemen here today are the lucky ones because they did come home. They are here to tell their stories. Today we are going to talk about the combat Marines. Chronologically we started with Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands, where our forces first went up against Japanese forces on land. That began in August, 1942. It took until February, 1943 to secure the island, with a death toll of 1,769 Americans and 25,600 Japanese, including naval losses.

Special mobile combat units, such as the 1st Marine Raider Battalion, helped to turn the tide at Guadalcanal and the Solomon Islands. 24 men of this battalion fought with such valor that they had Navy ships named after them and some were awarded the Medal of Honor.

The Americans' first objective on Guadalcanal was an airstrip. The 1st Marine Division took the Japanese garrison by surprise, over running the airstrip which they named Henderson Field. Being outnumbered 3 to 1 they had to defend the airstrip from Japanese counter attacks. The Marines withstood a series of determined attacks on a ridge just one mile from the field. After reinforcements arrived they began the process of slugging it out for possession of the rest of the island.

Bob (Addison), would you like to tell a little about what happened there? First, tell them when you were born.

(Robert Addison)

RA: I was born on December 7th, 1922. One month after my 19th birthday I enlisted and seven months later we landed on Tulagi and Guadalcanal. The 1st Marine Division had gone to Australia and they were not prepared to enter combat. We were attached to them but our fellows had been training in Samoa for a couple of months so they were in pretty good shape.

Across the channel from Guadalcanal was the island of Tulagi. That is where the governor of the Solomon Islands lived and where the Japanese had set up their headquarters. There were Japanese Imperial Marines there. We had thought of the Japanese as little people but these guys were all six-footers. They had no idea we were coming. We took the island after several days. At Tulagi we had the distinction of being the first offensive ground troops to engage the Japanese in WW-II. We had landed at 8:00 am and the rest of the 1st Marines had landed on Guadalcanal at 9:00 am. They had little trouble taking the airstrip because there were very few fighting men over there. They had Korean workers there building the airstrip. So they set up that defensive perimeter around the airstrip and that was all we had of Guadalcanal for about six months. The Japanese could land troops and supplies on the island anywhere they wanted and they did.

There was a battle near the Tenaru River east of the airstrip where the Japanese attempted to re-take the airstrip with 1,000 men. The Marines sucked them into a trap and annihilated them. After we had secured Tulagi we came over to Guadalcanal. There was a gap in the defense perimeter at a place called Bloody Ridge. Our commander, Colonel Edson, talked them into us defending that area. They knew that the Japanese had been landing at a place called Tadhimboko about 40 miles down the coast. We went down there to pull a raid, and it was a good thing that we did. The Japanese had pulled most of their troops back into the jungle to attack our defenses. They had four artillery pieces there that we destroyed. We blew up an ammunition dump and destroyed a lot of food.

Two days after we landed there had been a big sea battle off Guadalcanal where we lost four cruisers. After that happened the whole fleet sailed away and left us, taking our supplies with them. All we had left were a few APD's, old WW-I destroyers, that were assigned to our battalion. They were what took us over from Tulagi to Guadalcanal. My group was on the USS Calhoun and shortly after we landed there was an air raid and that ship was sunk.

After we came back from Tadhimboko we were on the ridge. Our CO had served in China against the Japanese and knew how they fought. Though not its real name, that ridge came to be known as Bloody Ridge. That was because 3,500 Japanese repeatedly attacked 700 of us. For two or three days they just kept coming and coming. When they finally left that ridge they left 1,400 behind. Our outfit's fighting ended at that point.

If they had gotten through us they would have taken the airstrip and the war would have lasted a lot longer. So we were credited with saving Guadalcanal.

MR: What was Colonel Edson like?

RA: He was a fellow who just had to lead. When we were training he would hike with us every morning with a full pack and come back for lunch. Throughout the hike he would stop and watch every man go by, and he would get on the walkie-talkie and tell them to hold up. Then he would double-time up to the front and take off again. When we came back in he would be standing there and he would make a comment to every man about how good they were doing. At the Battle of Bloody Ridge I was within earshot of him all night long and I could hear him talking to the forward observer for artillery. He had bullet creases in his helmet and bullet holes through his dungarees. He was always up front leading. Everybody had total respect for him. From day one he told us that we were the best of the best. His philosophy was "show us something that cannot be done and we will do it".

On New Georgia we spent four days going through swamps and jungle to get behind the Japanese. It was something they never thought we would do.

MR: What was it like going through the swamps?

RA: We were wet and covered with mud so you couldn't even see the color of our dungarees.

MR: So you think your advantage was your training?

RA: It was training and leadership. And to take it one step further I would say the leadership Edson developed in each one of us because after the war many of us took leadership roles in our careers.

MR: You had said previously that 2,600 men went through the Raider Battalion?

RA: Yes, the Battalion consisted of a little less than 900 men. Over a two year period 2,600 men went through our Battalion.

MR: Why was that?

RA: We had to replace guys. Of the original 900 members, after Guadalcanal and New Georgia there were 200 of us left.

MR: What was your job?

RA: I was a 60mm mortar man. I was an assistant gunner on Guadalcanal and later on New Georgia I was a squad leader in charge of the mortar battery.

MR: So your job was to use the mortar.

RA: Yes, and we used it on the ridge. There was open ground below us down a slope and then heavy jungle, from which they were firing at us with mortars, machine guns, sniper fire, etc. So we just pattern-fired, expending about 100 rounds and just cleared the whole place out. That was where I had a close call when a mortar round landed right beside me, rolled down the hill away from me, and never went off.

MR: You were a Phys. Ed. Teacher at ACC, correct?

RA: Yes, I started there in 1962 and retired in 1990 as a full professor.

MR: On September 15th, 1944 the 1st Marine Division and Army units invaded the island of Peleliu after 3 days of heavy bombardment by Navy ships. The island had a Japanese airfield that was deemed a major threat to the U.S. advance on the Philippines. The island was heavily defended with the Japanese having numerous pillboxes and around 500 coral caves to hide in. The conquest of the island took over a month at a cost of 1,529 American lives. There were over 10,000 Japanese killed. With us today are Dan Lawler and James Butterfield who were there.

(Dan Lawler)

DL: The picture on the screen was printed in Life Magazine in 1944. The temperature on the island was around a 115 to 125 degrees. We were supposed to take the island in three days and take the airfield the first night. I was in the first assault wave and we got as far as the airfield. The next day we were going across the airfield. I got about half way across when an artillery shell hit behind me. When I woke up I was laying face-down. I had three broken fingers on one hand, shrapnel in my back and cuts on the top of my head. So they took me back off the island.

(James Butterfield)

JB: I was with G Company, 2nd Battalion, 1st Regiment. On September 15th we hit Peleliu. Peleliu was one of the bloodiest battles the U.S. Marine Corps ever fought. Our CO was Chesty Puller and he was a Marine's Marine. He would go anywhere and do anything he was asked. Our task was to take the airstrip, secure it and defend it. We took it the first day. We lost almost 500 men at the beach. At the airport we had to take the ridges that overlooked the airport. Otherwise the planes coming in would have gotten all shot up. We took Hill 310 and it took us three days. We started out with 900 men and ended up with a little over 400. The first 200 hours on Peleliu my regiment lost 1,600 people, killed and wounded. I was up there 75 days and lost a lot of friends. 90 percent of the guys in our outfit were 19 years old or younger.

MR: I think Dan wants to say something else.

DL: When I was your age I was cross-eyed when I went down to enlist in the Marine Corps. And they turned me down. I went to the Navy and they turned me down. I went to the Army and they said I would be classified 4F. My Mother said I should have the operation on my eyes, so I did. After the operation I went through the Navy and got into the Marine Corps, which I wanted badly. I had a brother in the Marine Corps. He was at Parris Island and came home with a bad heart. He died at 24 years old when I was on Okinawa.

When we went into Peleliu we each had about a half gallon of water. By noon everybody was out of water. That's how bad it was.

MR: Did they carry water in to you?

DL: They brought the water to us in 55-gallon drums that had been used for kerosene, so we drank the water and everybody got sick.

MR: How do you feel about the Japanese today?

DL: That is a tough one to answer. The war is all in the past, but when I see a Japanese American today it is hard for me to be around them.

JB: I don't like them.

RA: I had a brother in the Army in the Pacific. He stayed in after the war and was part of the occupation forces in Japan. He met and married a Japanese woman. Our family came to accept her and like her. They had two children who live on Long Island today.

AM: I ran into a Jap (I still call them that) who had fought against us on Iwo Jima. We talked about the war and how we had both done what we thought was our duty, did the best we could, and there were no hard feelings.