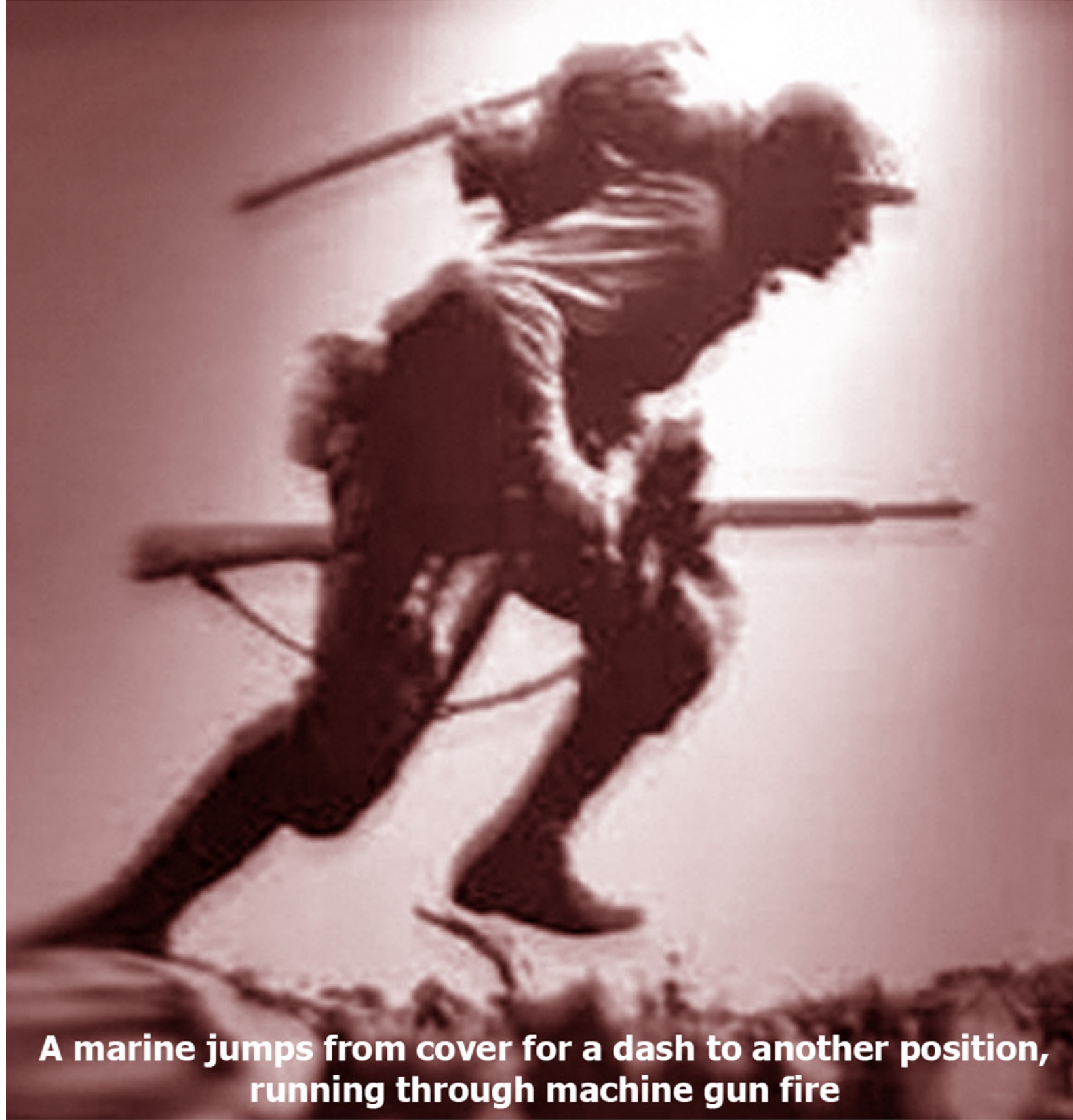


ORDEAL AT OKINAWA



A marine jumps from cover for a dash to another position, running through machine gun fire

At night the enemy comes out of his caves and pillboxes to prowl and infiltrate. And the soldiers and marines who sit up and stay awake to welcome him are always glad to see the first light of dawn.

By **EVAN WYLIE SPIG (PR) USCGR**
YANK Staff Correspondent

OKINAWA, RYUKYUS—The G-2 captain was leery about calling it a typical night on Okinawa. But on the other hand, it should not be considered particularly unusual.

However G-2 wanted to classify it, the night of May 15 had been another night in the battle for Okinawa. And to infantrymen of the Army and Marine divisions inching south toward Naha, Shuri, and Yonabaru each day and each night was pretty much like another. The pattern was well established—planes and artillery pounded the positions; foot soldiers fought their way up each hill, held it against counterattacks, and fought their way down the reverse slopes. There were a lot of hills and a lot of Japs. Progress was slow and costly. When night came the men who had fought all day stopped trying to advance and dug in, not so much to sleep as to hide. For it was then that the enemy who did his daylight fighting from caves, tombs and concealed pillboxes came out to counterattack and infiltrate, to probe and harass. When dawn came he was gone again, leaving only the dead behind. And the tired men counted bodies and wondered how many they had really been fighting.

On the left flank the 96th Division moved slowly down the east coast toward Yonabaru. The 382d Infantry was trying to take Dick Hill. At 0700 on the 15th they moved forward. The Japs on the rear slopes blanketed them with mortars. Machine guns hidden in caves pinned them down. Snipers hung on their flanks. Men fought forward but casualties were heavy. By late afternoon there were only three noncoms and one officer left in L Company. The second and third platoons were combined to make one unit. At dusk they were halfway up the forward slope of Dick Hill. Word was passed to dig in for the night. This turned out to be not so easy as it sounded. Underneath a thin surface of churned earth and patches of torn grass lay a substantial stratum of shale; pack shovels made little impression on it. Long after dark some of the company were still digging. Others had doubled up, two or three in a one-man foxhole.

Sgt. Bill House of Portland, Ore., had a command hole in the center of the slope. It was hardly big enough for one but he was sharing it with S/Sgt. Ludas and Pfc. Donald Nordgren. The hole was cramped and uncomfortable but they had to give up trying to enlarge it. Every movement of an arm, leg or shoulder caused another cave-in in the wall of loose dirt they had erected around them to make up for the foxhole's shallow depth.

It began to rain, a steady, cold drizzle that brought with it a thick, clinging ground mist. The men ate a supper of C-ration meat-and-vegetable stew and set a night guard—one man

OKINAWA

on watch while the other two tried to sleep. House had the first watch. He settled himself in the limited space, one leg folded under him, his M1 across his knees.

In his mind he reviewed his position. His men were spread out across the slope. Further over to the left was K Company. That made that flank pretty secure. On the right, however, things were not so good. After the line crossed the slope it dropped back, leaving the company's flank exposed. House was more worried about the enemy coming in through there than he was about any attack directly down the slope.

The nightly artillery duel was under way. Jap heavy stuff rushed across the valley. House could hear it landing far behind the lines. American



When GIs drove on Naha and Shuri in southern Okinawa they first had to take a hill known as the "Escarment," a network of caves and pillboxes covering the approaches to the two cities. Here men of a combat-engineer outfit carry satchel charges up the "Escarment" to blow out Jap cave entrances. They use ships' cargo nets to scale it.

artillery became interested in the slope of Dick Hill. Shells whistled overhead and began bursting in Jap positions. The enemy replied with mortars. The first few rounds dropped haphazardly until some Jap was satisfied he had the range he wanted. Then they began to work the slope over methodically. Bursts moved up and down and across the hill. Each one was a little nearer to the center. House wanted to get down further in the hole but he was afraid to stop watching. The barrage might be a cover for an attempt at infiltration. He slid down as far as he dared, peering out into the murk through the slit formed between the rim of his helmet and the ground. Raindrops splattered mud in his face. Nordgren and Ludas stirred beneath the poncho. "Mortars coming," House whispered. Both men muttered acknowledgment. They had not been asleep after all. Another round landed—about 40 feet away. The next would be either right on top of them or safely beyond. There was nothing to do but wait. House lay motionless, gritting his teeth. He knew the hole was not deep enough. Suddenly there was the quick whispering noise of shells coming. The men in the hole were fused together in a taut huddle of shrinking flesh. There were two blasts, very close, almost simultaneous. Dirt, mud and pieces of shale flew into the hole. They waited for the next round. It landed further down the slope. Then, abruptly, the mortars stopped. The men stirred cautiously. Whispers went from hole to hole: "You guys over there OK?" "Yeah, we're all right. But that last sonuvabitch landed damn close."

House wondered how the new men were taking it. They had arrived late in the afternoon, green as hell and scared to death. When he had pointed to a spot on the slope and said, "All right, you guys, dig in here," they had looked at him with wide-open eyes as full import of what lay ahead from now on dawned on them. They wouldn't sleep much tonight. The rain came down harder. Miniature streams ran down the slope and eroded their way into the hole. The hill stank with the musty odor of dank earth and burned powder.

Suddenly gunfire started in down on the right. It was followed by muffled blasts and bursting grenades. Now what the hell was happening?

OKINAWA

"Hope those guys can handle them." The firing subsided. The time dragged. A message finally came up the hill: "Jap patrol trying to come around the right flank. Stand by for an attack." House passed the word along. Men prodded others into wakefulness. Mortars started in again. On the slope House and his men gripped their weapons and waited.

Down at the right where the gunfire had come from, Platoon Sgt. Richard Stickley of Detroit, Mich., T-5 Gurch and Pfc. Kirby and Norman Shriner had ended the day in a foxhole on a knobby projection of ground close to the Jap lines. Somebody in the rear decided they should remain there as night outpost. Snipers had them pinned down, making any movement outside the hole impossible. Rations were tossed up to them. They ate them cold and settled down for the night. Jap artillery was falling short just in front of the hole. The four men ducked constantly as rocks and dirt, thrown up by explosions, rained down on them. Around 0230, Shriner nudged Stickley.

"There's something moving down there."

"Where?"

"Down there—coming uphill toward us. I've been watching him for about five minutes to make sure. Here he comes." A shadowy figure rose up and charged them. Shriner's carbine cracked five times. The figure screamed and rolled back downhill. The men lay and listened. Shriner said: "I think there was more than one of them." A noisy scuffle broke out further down the slope. Another Jap had jumped into a hole occupied by two men. Shriner's firing had alerted them and they were ready. One grabbed the Jap, the other battered him with the back of a shovel. Finally he stopped struggling. The men put two shots in the body and pushed it out of the hole. Nobody went back to sleep. When you get a couple like that it usually means there are more close by.

In the center of the island the 77th Division, closing in on the fortress of Shuri, had reached the forward slope of Chocolate Drop Hill. K Company, 307th Infantry, dug in for the night around its base. The rain that was bothering House was worrying them, too.

The Japs on the rear slope were altogether too active. Sgt. Thomas and Pfc. McCurdy and Major huddled together under their poncho listening to the machine gun firing sporadically off on the right. The Japs, they decided, must be trying to sneak through over there. They strained their eyes, trying to pierce the mist. Suddenly Major yelled "Japs" and started shooting. The enemy was right on top of them. The slope flamed into activity. Dark shapes raced among foxholes hurling grenades. One blew himself up just before he reached Thomas' position. Then, just as suddenly as it had begun, the firing ceased. There were no more targets. Had they killed them all, the men wondered, or just driven them off?

The right-flank riflemen of the 22d Regiment, 6th Marine Division, had reached the banks of the Asato River and were looking into the rubble-strewn streets of Naha. The 3d Battalion had established a CP in the shelter of the ridge about 500 yards behind the front lines. The row of tombs set in the side of the ridge had been unsealed and then obligingly abandoned by the retreating enemy. The marines lost no time in moving in. Besides offering an escape from the rain, the tombs were perfect protection against all manner of shells. Some of them could withstand even a direct hit. The men spread their blankets, stretched out and talked in low tones about K Company. At 0230 that morning K Company had begun moving up the slope of Sugar Loaf Hill. At 0300 they had sent back the message: "We are on top and intend to stay here." The enemy was determined they wouldn't. Knee mortars fell like hail. Grenades flew back and forth. Snipers crept around the base of the hill and ambushed the amtracks trying to evacuate the wounded. Daylight brought no relief.

Six times the enemy *banzaied* a way to the crest. Six times K Company threw them back. Not until almost noon did fighting subside long enough for another marine unit to relieve them. Seventy men had gone up the slope that morning; less than 30 came down. "Those guys had a lot of guts," someone said. It wasn't much of a remark but what the hell else could you say. Gradually conversations in the tombs died away. Except for the men on guard outside the CP, they slept. An hour or two passed. In one of the tombs Cpl. Paul Stewart of Waukesha, Wis., awoke with a start. A struggle was going on outside. He sat up, reaching for his carbine. Somebody tossed something inside the tomb. Instinctively Stewart rolled over against the wall. There was a deafening explosion as a grenade went off, killing the man next to him. Stewart was unhurt. He scrambled out of the tomb. Pfc. Spencer Klatt of Alton, Ill.,

OKINAWA

had the grenade thrower by the throat and was slowly strangling him. The Jap gasped and kicked and bit Klatt's arm but Klatt wasn't letting go. Stewart used his carbine. The Jap stopped struggling and died.

HE had not been alone. The whole CP area was swarming with Japs. Two tombs away a Lt. Brown of Denver, Colo., found himself face to face with a charging Nip. Brown killed him with his .45. Another jumped down from the top of the tomb with his hands full of grenades. Brown got him before he could pull the pins. In the midst of the confusion Pfc. Donald Houghtaling of Poughkeepsie, N. Y., was trying to help the wounded. Plasma and a doctor were needed. The medic station was on the other side of the open field. Lt. Buenos Young of Ellington, Conn., risked the crawl to the message center and got the medics on the phone. "We have some wounded over here who need help. There are Nips all over the place, I don't know whether you can get through." Word came back over the phone: "We will try it."

The doctor, Lt. John Tuthill, and Infantry Lt. Davis Curtis started across the open field. They did not dare crouch for fear the men in foxholes would mistake them for the enemy. "We are marines," they called. "Let us through." They had gone about halfway when two figures rose up out of the darkness. Curtis had his .45 ready; he fired three shots at close range. The two officers ran about 10 yards and stopped to see if they were being followed but the Japs had disappeared. Curtis was very happy about it—he had only one round left in the .45. Tuthill cursed; when the Nips appeared he had been so startled he had dropped most of the plasma.

They tried another dash and this time they made it to the wounded. Just as he had feared, Tuthill found he needed more plasma. Another call went over to the medics. Corpsman George Perrault of Evanston, Ill., and a chief pharmacist's mate volunteered to bring over another load. In the middle of the field the Japs jumped them. The medics threw the case of plasma in their faces and took off. A grenade exploded behind them. The chief, hit by fragments, dropped to the ground. Perrault made it.

A game of blindman's buff was going on around the CP. Groups of marines moved cautiously about, stalking down Japs in the dark. When they sighted something there was a quick challenge. If there was no answer whatever, it was well sprayed with lead. Gradually they got things under control. But firing had started in down on the beach. Whether enemy survivors had retreated down there or a larger force was on its way up, the marines did not know. They dug in around the tombs and waited to find out.

Late that afternoon five amtanks of Able Company, 1st Armored Amphibian Battalion, had crawled into the sea on the west coast a few miles behind the lines, churned across the estuary and taken up positions on the beach just north of the mouth of the Asato River. Mounting a 75-mm pack howitzer and a .50-caliber machine gun in an open turret, they were there to discourage any attempt at a night counterlanding by bargeloads of Japs sneaking up from Naha. The beach was protected by a six-foot seawall. The platoon commander, Lt. R. Leroy Robertson of Memphis, Tex., deployed his tanks tight up against it in column formation. Two men remained on watch in each turret.

The tide, rising slowly, crept in across the reef. It reached the seawall and rose around the amtanks, lapping softly against their steel hulls. In tank No. 15, Pfc. Junior Howell of Muncie, Ind., munched a handful of salted peanuts. They were damp and sticky, but helped him to stay awake. In No. 11, Cpl. Alex Worden of Roslyn, N. Y., yawned and watched a figure approach, walking casually down the seawall. "Some damn marine," he thought. "Hey you," he called. "You want to get your butt shot off?" Instead of replying the figure turned and sauntered off in the opposite direction. Howell had heard Worden challenge. He looked down the wall. Suddenly he realized there were not one but several figures. "Shoot those sonuvabitches," he shouted through a mouthful of peanuts. "They're Nips."

In a foxhole nearby, tank commander Floyd Harvey of Colfax, Wash., stuck his head up to look around and pulled it right back in again. Howell's tracers were zipping overhead. Three dark forms rushed by the hole, bullets flying around them. Harvey made a dash for the turret. He jumped in, grabbed the machine gun and opened up on two more coming down hill toward the seawall. Other Japs were running around out on the reef. Tracers flew out to meet them. A dripping figure rose from a pothole, brandishing

OKINAWA

a grenade. Somebody dropped him. Lt. Robertson was shouting, "Don't let them get close. They may have satchel charges."

On the radio he called the amtank liaison officer back at the regimental CP: "You better give us some flares quick if you expect us to be around in the morning." Offshore a destroyer's gun crew went into action. Flares began bursting up and down the reef. Japs trapped in their glare made beautiful targets. On the interphone, Cpl. Daniel Sullivan of Los Angeles, Calif., pleaded, "Shoot 'em high, they may have nice sabers." The 3d Battalion CP, which had been having its own troubles, called down on the radio: "We can hear you firing, do you need any help?" Cpl. Harvey had an answer ready: "Yeah, send us down a bulldozer to help cover up these Nips." The CP was unimpressed. "Brother, you're not telling us anything new. We got 'em all over up here too."

DAWN came slowly. There was no sunrise, only gradual, almost imperceptible transition from darkness to misty daylight. Rain fell fitfully. Flares continued to burn weakly overhead. Along the front on Okinawa shivering men stood up, stretched and looked cautiously around. On the slope of Dick Hill, the cooks brought breakfast to Sgt. House and his men. Cold spaghetti and meat balls and water. Off to the right, Stickley's group cursed. Someone had passed off a batch of Australian rations on them. They tried to eat the hash but it had a funny taste. They mixed the tea with cold water and drank it. Then they went down the hill to look at the Japs killed during the night. They noted they were in good shape—healthy, clean, wearing almost new uniforms. "If they're all like this," one GI observed gloomily, "the bastards aren't even close to being licked."

On the west coast the 3d Battalion CP was evacuating its wounded. When dawn came, they had found the chief pharmacist's mate still alive in the field he had tried to cross with the plasma. Unable to move, he had played dead all night.

Down on the beach the amtank men counted bodies in the shallows, scattered along the base of the seawall. Pvt. Sullivan had guessed right; some of them did have sabers. Damp wood sputtered and smoked. The marines were going to have bacon and coffee for breakfast. In the air there was suddenly a high, thick noise. It changed to a piercing whistle, ended in a tremendous crash a short distance down the beach. Before the men could make up their minds whether the shell was a freak more began to land around them. There was no doubt about it. Some Jap over in Naha had spotted them and was zeroing in. Lt. Robertson decided that this was too much. "Get your engines started," he shouted, "we're pulling out." The marines with their mess kits full of sizzling bacon hurdled the seawall and piled aboard. Engines roaring, five amtanks crunched painfully out across the reef in single file. If they could make deep water they would be fairly safe. Shells burst just behind the last one, throwing up geysers of mud and water. The crew ducked and thought about what perfect targets they must be making—"Like the line of beginners' targets in a shooting gallery," someone decided. The last tank bumped down in deep water. The Japs gave up. Platoon Sgt. John Spelce of Clearwater, Fla., looked back over his shoulders and shook his head. "What a helluva night that was," he said. "I thought it would never end."



As the infantry fought ahead on Okinawa, Jap machine-gun and sniper fire kept pinning them down. Here GIs are held up as a sniper works on them.

YANK