

Death on a Beach



In mourning, Raritan remembers its homecomings for Sgt. John Basilone

The first Marine waves that stormed ashore on Iwo Jima included a stalwart young sergeant who stood out as a leader even in that picked group. Handsome, dark-haired, and purposeful, he strode through the surf, seemingly oblivious to the enemy's artillery fire. His eyes focused inland on a spot suitable for his machine-gun platoon. "All right, you guys," he called. "Let's go on in there and set up these guns for firing."

Suddenly a Jap shell screamed. The sergeant fell. John Basilone, first enlisted Marine in this war to win the Congressional Medal of Honor, was dead.

Portrait of a Hero: News of the 28-year-old hero's death on Iwo's D Day came last week in a wire from Lt. Gen. Alexander A. Vandegrift, Marine Corps commandant. In the modest frame house in Raritan, N. J., where his father, a tailor, and his mother had raised John and his nine brothers and sisters, grief over one son merged with anxiety over two others: George, a Marine private, also at Iwo, and Alphonse, an Army private in Germany.

Raritan mourned with the Basilone family. Town pride had never flared so high as the day in 1943 when the nation's highest honor was bestowed on the bashful kid who used to drive a laundry truck. The story of his great exploit would never dim: how, for two grim days in October 1942, he and two machine-gun sections on Guadalcanal held off thousands of Japs intent on retaking Henderson Field; how, when all but two riflemen with him were killed, Basilone repaired a gun and personally manned it, piling up a mound of 38 dead Japs; how the Presidential citation had credited him with "contributing in a large measure to the virtual annihilation of a Japanese regiment."

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Sgt. John Basilone

Wistfully Raritan thought back on the home-coming celebration it had given its local boy on "Basilone Day"—the mass at St. Ann's Church, the big luncheon, the parade, his pictures next to General MacArthur's in the store windows, the visiting dignitaries and the plain people (20,000 of them), the \$5,000 War Bond the community had given him—and best of all, the \$1,400,000 in bond pledges which his heroism had inspired.

Manila John's Choice: John Basilone's fame had been farflung. He had been star attraction of the Treasury's Third War Loan Drive throughout the East; he had become part of a comic-book series on war heroes as "Manila John" (a nickname his Marine buddies had given him because of his three years with the peacetime Army in the Philippines).

He could have stayed, safe, in the United States. But Manila John would not have it that way. Asking for re-assignment to combat duty, he left the girl he married last July—a sergeant in the Marine Corps Women's Reserve—and went back to the Pacific. He explained: "I'm just an ordinary soldier. I want to get back to my boys. And, most of all, I want to be one of the first guys ashore at Manila." Fate denied him that wish, but elsewhere John Basilone went down in the best tradition of the fighting Marines.