



*Pvt Russell Werts*



# The Ghosts of Iwo

by Russell Werts

*For this young farm boy and his foxhole buddies, the initiation into combat on Iwo Jima was a swift and brutal shock.*

**T**he 28th Replacement Draft went aboard the troopship *Rochambeau* on 12 November 1944. There were mixed feelings of excitement and wonder, but not an inkling of what lay ahead.

Most of us had not found a home in the Marine Corps as yet. We had survived the rigors of boot camp, the confusion of the staging area at Ocean-side, Calif., the remote tent camps, and finally Camp Pendleton. In all of this we never became a part of a permanent unit. It seemed like the alphabet determined who we became acquainted

with. The name "boot" still clung to us.

Our troopship finally reached its destination, the island of Guam. We learned that the 3d Marine Division was stationed here. I was looking forward to being assigned to a rifle squad and finally settling down. It never happened. Apparently the division was at full strength, and we had little contact with its members. They had a separate camp for us. Toward the end of January 1945, the training became harder. We went on long hikes nearly every day and were required to double time the last two miles back to camp.

One day we were told to be ready to line up with full field packs. This turned out to be not just another field problem but a troop movement. We bivouaced in two-man tents in what looked like a staging area. Thousands of Marines kept streaming in and setting up camp. Small campfires dotted the area. Voices, some singing, and a mouth-organ could be heard. Although we were not a part of the fighting forces, I felt a kindred spirit with them and longed to be one of them. No one told us anything, but it was obvious that something big was coming up and we had the feeling we weren't going back to the main camp.

Sure enough, the next morning we found ourselves aboard a troopship. No one seemed to know where we were headed. A few days later maps were taken out, and we saw a strange looking island called Iwo Jima.

The 3d Marine Division was in reserve and would not take part in the initial landing. It soon became clear, however, that the 4th and 5th Marine Divisions would need help. The invasion began 19 February 1945 and between 21-25 February, the 21st and 9th Regiments of the 3d Division went ashore (3d Marine Regiment was never committed).

Our 28th replacement battalion was left behind to unload the ship. I remember bumping into a guy named Wilson as we were loading a barge. A heated argument resulted, and we said some pretty nasty things to each other. Finally some sergeant yelled at us, "Okay, you two idiots, knock it off. Save your damn fighting for the Japs."

The next day they asked for volunteers to go ashore. Nearly everyone followed the rule, "Don't volunteer for anything," but this time several volunteered, including myself. I think I just wanted to see what was going on.

It was now about the first of March and we were assigned to guard an ammunition dump. By the next day or so, the rest of the battalion came ashore. For three days we carried food and water to the frontline troops. One of the scenes that impressed me the most was a wounded Marine walking back to a first-aid station. He had been shot through the chest and blood could be seen, front and back. He seemed no more concerned than if he had been stung by a bee. I saw three bloated Marines with legs and parts of their bodies blown off. I wanted to ask, "Why doesn't someone carry them back and bury them?"

On 5 March I was assigned to a fire team of 2d Squad, 1st Platoon, Company A, 1st Battalion, 21st Marines. Company A proved to be manned mostly by vets from Company B. My unasked question was, "What happened to Company A?" (I later learned there were seven survivors includ-

ing the acting company commander, T. Pat Brekke, a platoon sergeant. Of these seven survivors, four remained at the end.) My squad leader was a Company B veteran called "Frenchy." The other 12 men in my squad were all replacements from the 28th. Once again the alphabet played a part in our lives as men were lopped off and assigned here and there according to the alphabet. As well as I can remember they were Wede, Wegman, Wenzel, Westmoreland, and White. The rest of the squad I had never met. They were Starr, Sutton, E. Watson, and D. Watson. The other two I can't recall. So we were about to enter combat with a squad, half of whom had never met the other half until now. The 2d squad would be my home for the rest of the war, but I never thought home would be anything like this. I can only imagine Frenchy's feelings about leading a ragtag squad of unknown abilities. Darrell Watson, a BAR man, kept calling him Squad Leader. Finally Frenchy retorted, "If you call me squad leader on the line, I'll call you Lieutenant." I learned on Iwo that all the parade ground polish disappears in combat. No "Yes sirs" are heard, no bars and stripes are visible. Outside of Frenchy we didn't know who was whom.

As we dug in for the night, we were all working hard on our foxholes. Sand was flying everywhere, when suddenly up the line someone struck a landmine or an unexploded shell. Anyway, it blew up and three guys looked to be in bad shape. The rest of us decided our holes were big enough. Company A had three casualties and we hadn't moved to the front yet. That night a Marine walked up to me, stuck out his hand and said, "You're my friend, right, Werts?" It was Wilson, the man I had argued with on the barge. We shook hands and I saw him making peace with others, too.

My baptism of fire came on 6 March. Early in the morning, we started moving toward the front. For the new men of Company A, it was the beginning of a 19-day walk through the "valley of deep shadow." Over half of us would not finish the walk. Prior to this day, we were fairly certain that when we went to bed at night we would be alive in the morning, or when we ate breakfast we would be around for the noon meal. But everything we had taken for granted, all the security of the moment, would be taken away and be replaced with a constant danger that we must now react to individually. We moved across sulphur fields where volcanic steam rose from cracks in the ground. We came under shell fire and as we dove into craters and depressions, some guys received burns from the steam. The rising steam gave the place an eerie feeling, especially at night. As we took up frontline positions, we again came under shell fire. We



*"We moved across sulphur fields where volcanic steam rose from cracks in the ground."*

had been told that all the Japanese had left were a few knee mortars. The unasked question: "Where's all the shell fire coming from?"

About 10 feet from my hole, Wenzel and Westmoreland's hole was hit with shrapnel. Wenzel had some hand and arm wounds and was evacuated without ever firing a shot. Later Everitt Watson came by our hole and asked, "Have you guys seen Westmoreland?" I replied, "No, I haven't." Watson said, "You don't want to see him, either." My curiosity aroused, I went to his hole and looked down. His face was chalk white. He clutched his stomach in agony. Blood soaked bandages were packed on his wound as closely as hair curlers. I started to speak to him when a machinegun suddenly opened up on me. As I ducked down, I couldn't help but wonder how the Japanese gunmen had missed me. Someone now yelled at me "Get your \_\_\_\_ away from that hole." It seemed cruel to let Westmoreland die alone, but I had no choice. In the morning, White, from Jackson, Miss., said "I said a prayer for Westmoreland's folks last night." I thought, what a fine thing for him to do. Although I was crushed by Westmoreland's death, I never thought of prayer. Somehow, to me, this didn't seem a proper place for prayer. Westmoreland's name was right after mine, and we were always together in pay lines, etc. He seemed to have a premonition of death. While we were on Guam, I often heard him say that we were going to get our \_\_\_\_ shot off. Others may have thought it, but no one said it.

The next morning, a guy named Wheeler and I were told to carry back a dead lieutenant. As we moved to get a stretcher, the cross-eyed machinegunner that missed me the first time opened up again and missed us both. Wheeler and I dove headlong into a pile of stretchers. A sergeant belatedly, "Get your \_\_\_\_ out of there and get this

job done." We were taught to obey, so out we came. Strangely, we were not fired on as we scrambled out. My unasked question was "Why was a Japanese machinegunner allowed that close to our night camp?" Later I knew what a dumb question that would have been. I soon learned there was no frontline as such. Even though we might take a hunk of territory, the Japanese didn't always agree that it was ours. They would move back into areas previously cleared. They could move underground through tunnels and could be on either side of us or in back of us. Often behind our line, hidden Japanese snipers would set up fields of fire we called "hot spots." If you ran by his field, he held his fire. He waited for some unwary person to walk by. The Japs were headhunters; more often than not they aimed for the head. It was almost comical to see a column of Marines move forward, and as they approached the hot spot, each in turn crouched low and ran like blazes for 10 yards, then straightened up and walked normally again. Why wasn't the sniper killed? No one could find his location.

I spent the night with Frenchy, our squad leader. I sat on one side of our hole watching him read his prayer book. As the shelling became heavier and closer he said, "I guess I'll have to secure this," and put his prayer book in his pocket. Soon we were both hugging the bottom of our hole as the ground around us trembled. The explosions were deafening and rocks and sand sprayed over us. As it let up some, Frenchy looked at me and said, "Are you scared?" "Some," I replied. Looking at me intently he said, "You'll be all right. Keep your head down. You don't want to get it in the face." A comforting thought to go to sleep on.

As we moved to the attack the following morning, I saw a Marine working his way along a narrow ledge, grenade in hand. Another Marine was running and firing his rifle from his hip. I thought—well, this is it, the real thing.

Company A moved to a sort of crest and the terrain dropped sharply. A long ridge lay along the right side. We were told to throw grenades over the ledge and then jump over. Then they said, "No grenades, just jump!" My heart was pounding; we were about to jump into the unknown. The drop was about 10 feet. The whole company came under fire from the ridge. I found myself alongside of White. We had little protection and were on higher ground with most of the company spread out to the right. Japanese riflemen had spotted us and bullets began singing over our backs. The sound of passing bullets became familiar in the coming days. I craned my neck to look at the ridge expecting to see helmeted figures

with rifles protruding here and there. I saw nothing, absolutely nothing, except a jumble of rocks. The Japs used a smokeless powder and no telltale wisps of smoke could be seen.

This proved to be the most frustrating thing about Iwo. You rarely saw the enemy, who played a dangerous game of hide-and-seek in which we were always "it" and had to move in the open. White said, "Man, they're getting closer." We both tried to burrow deeper, but the ground was too hard. Finally, White said, "I'm *not* staying here!" He got up and ran to his right. I followed him. Wegman yelled as I passed him, "Werts, get down you \_\_\_\_ fool." We found protection behind rocks that had tumbled from the ledge. In the meantime, the rest of the company was engaged in a savage firefight with the Japanese holed up on the high ridge. We were suffering casualties, and the company was trying to withdraw. White and I tried to give them covering fire, but we couldn't spot anything to really shoot at. Artillery began shelling the ridge. Fighter planes bombed it. The fire support allowed Company A to withdraw. We lost 10, maybe 15, Marines. Frenchy came by me holding his right arm with his left hand. Blood was cozing between his fingers and running down his dungarees. He was whitefaced and breathing hard. "I've been hit, do what you can," he said. Darrell Watson, who we also knew as "Tex," had a bullet in his spine and was paralyzed. He later died.

The Japanese had recovered by now and a Marine (I've forgotten his name. Wickert, I think) was caught out in the open. He grabbed a rock a little bigger than his head and was inching his way backward on his stomach holding the rock in front of him. The Japanese were bouncing bullets off the rock. The Marine was about 10 feet in front of me and evidently the Japanese couldn't see me. I stood straight up and started shooting at the ridge, although I could see no one. Someone on the ledge yells at me, "What the \_\_\_\_ are you shooting at? There's no Japs up there." The Marine in front of me hears him too and yells at me in a panicky voice, "Keep firing! Keep firing!" So my answer to the man on the ledge was to fire eight more rounds at the ridge. Finally, the man who yelled at me walked to the edge to look over and received a burst of machinegun fire. I heard him say, "By God, there are Japs in there." I just grinned and kept firing. I must have fired over 50 rounds by the time the Marine behind the rock scrambled to safety. We all withdrew to the ledge where we had started that day. Wickert came up to me and said, "I looked that bugger right in the eye. Thanks." I was glad I could be of some help. He went on to

survive the campaign.

After three days of battle, our squad had been hit hard. Gone were Wenzel, Westmoreland, D. Watson, and Frenchy. Two dead and two wounded. With Frenchy gone, we had to learn about combat on our own. Various people would yell at us and that was about it.

Back on the plateau-like ledge we dug in for the night. I saw Wegman cleaning up an old rusty rifle. I asked, "Where's your rifle?" He waved his arm and said, "I left it down there." I knew where he had spent the day, so I told White to cover me and I'd go get it. As I approached the spot a Japanese rifleman had me in his sights. Again I heard the sound of passing bullets and again the Japanese missed his mark. I grabbed Wegman's rifle and cartridge belt and hightailed it out of there. As I returned his gear, Wegman said, "Thanks, Werts." I didn't tell him I got shot at. I was a little surprised at myself for volunteering and for taking a chance, but it seemed like the thing to do.

Without Frenchy, I was wondering who I would hole up with. I noticed another Marine, also alone, enlarging a shellhole. I squatted at the edge of the hole and asked, "Need some help?" As he turned toward me, I saw it was Everitt Watson from Illinois. He said, "Sure, dig away." As it turned out, we fought the rest of the campaign together. As we enlarged our hole, we found an unexploded shell in the bottom. We discussed what to do. It was getting late and we were too tired to dig another hole. Finally Watson said,



*The author (right) in 1979 at a reunion with Everitt Watson, his foxhole buddy.*

*"We spent the next day burning out caves and sealing up holes."*



"Hell, let's sleep on it." I knew I was going to like Watson.

During the lonely night watch, I meditated on the things that had happened to me so far. For two nights in a row, I had been under heavy shell fire. I had been machinegunned twice and under small arms fire all day. In all of this I had been frightened and a little confused but did not panic. I had already seen some who were immobilized by fear. They were literally paralyzed and lay in the bottom of their holes and never looked up. I don't know what others did, but I had to face up to the possibility of my own death. I realized it could come from anywhere at any time, day or night. I found I could accept death, but somehow didn't believe I would die and was determined to do everything I could do to prevent it. As I loved chocolate, I now decided to eat my "dinner K-ration" with its bitersweet chocolate bar for breakfast, figuring I might die before noon and someone else would eat my chocolate bar. Anyway, they didn't exactly ring the dinner bell at noon. We ate when and where we could and didn't have much of an appetite anyhow.

In the coming days, survival was to be the name of the game. I would learn to be alert to anything that would afford me protection should the situation explode around me. I would learn to distinguish sounds—our rifle, theirs, our BAR and machinegun and their Nambu and heavy machinegun, our grenade and theirs. I would take chances, but not foolish chances.

I think most Marines fell into this category. There were the extremes, the brave and almost foolhardy, who thought they couldn't be killed. Some acted as if they didn't know the meaning of the word fear, or maybe this was their way of coping with it. Sometimes their bravery brought about their own death. The other extreme were those who could not accept death. I had pity for those. They were no good to us. They couldn't be counted on and really became a burden for the rest.

As I finished cleaning my rifle the next morning, I noticed what looked like a Marine approaching our position from what was supposed to be Japanese territory. I moved out to meet him along with a couple of other Marines. The man acted uncertain and confused. About 30 feet away he crouched behind a rock, pointed his rifle at me and called out, "Are you Marines?" I was amazed by the question and said, "Sure, who else?" He looked somewhat relieved, and as he walked toward us he said, "I'll tell you who else, a bunch of Japs wearing Marine uniforms and helmets waved for me to come in, and when I did they started shooting at me. I replied, "You're kidding me, how did you get stuck out there?" He said, "I was wounded and they left me for dead." He was shorter than I was, and as I put my arm around him he said, "How am I?" Looking down I saw two holes in his helmet, and dried blood matted his hair. I said, "I don't know how you are, but you look awful." After getting directions to the first-aid station, we watched him walk away and someone said what we were all thinking, "Well, what do you know? Japs in Marine uniforms!"

We were told to choose a new squad leader to replace Frenchy. What any of us knew about being a squad leader you could stick in your eye. After limited discussion, we asked Starr if he would do it. Starr didn't seem elated by the idea, but said he would. He was older, about 22 or 23 years old, and had our confidence.

Our artillery had been pounding the ridge for nearly an hour. Now came the familiar command, "Okay, saddle up. Let's move out." We jumped the ledge again, half expecting the same treatment as yesterday. Nothing happened—not a sound. We advanced slowly, 10 yards, 20 yards, 40 yards, then all hell tore loose as the Japanese on the ridge bore down on us with machinegun and rifle fire. Little spouts of sand began kicking up all around me. I headed for a shell crater and in a hail of bullets, dove headlong into it. Three others piled in on top of me. The hole wasn't made for four,

yet here we were—Wede, Wegman, Watson, and Werts. Immobilizing everyone on the ridge, the fire came like an icy sleet driven by a powerful wind. Watson kept sticking items above the hole from time to time, and each time they got blown away. I saw we weren't going anywhere so I settled back for a snooze. Wegman says, "Look at that Werts; they fire at him and he goes to sleep." We were cut off from the rest of our unit, and no commands reached us. They either didn't know where we were or they couldn't get to us. Had any of us decided to leave the hole, his life expectancy would have been about five seconds. Toward evening, we were able to withdraw and set up on the ledge again. After gaining no ground in two days, we withdrew.

The next day the ridge took a terrible pounding from artillery, rocket, and naval fire. It was covered with smoke. Company A again received the command to jump the ledge. Looking back at it, one would think it would take the courage of a mountain lion to jump that ledge the third time. Yet it had to be done, and I guess that's why we didn't think about it. We jumped. Again we met little resistance and this time were able to advance some 100 yards and consolidate our positions. During the day, remnants of 2d Platoon joined our 1st Platoon. My unasked question—"What happened to the 2d Platoon? Were they caught in the open the day before?" I spotted a guy I knew and asked him. He shrugged his shoulders and said, "I don't know." I believed him.

By now I had learned that even though it was a huge operation involving three Marine divisions, some 60,000 men, for Watson and me it was a very private war. We didn't have the faintest idea how the rest of the battle was going. We didn't know much about Company A. We only knew about the 1st Platoon and mostly about 2d Squad. For us, most of our war was a 15-foot circle around our position.

By now it had dawned on us that the army we were fighting was not really in front of us, or behind us, or on either side of us, but was actually underneath us. If anyone had told us that prior to the battle, none of us would have dreamed that it was true.

That's the only thing that explained their jack-in-the-box appearances, their peek-a-boo, now you see us, now you don't tactics. It explained how easy it was to infiltrate our positions and how they were able to move in and out of the ridge that we had finally taken. There had been sporadic sniper fire from the ridge during the day, but for the most part the Japanese seemed to have vacated the area. Not very many of us really believed it.

If any of us had thought the nights were to be a

time of rest and security, we were sadly mistaken. The Japanese infiltrated our positions at night and inflicted almost as many casualties on us as during the day. If a situation became confused during the day, it became doubly so at night. Two men to a foxhole with no communication with anyone else was the rule. Any action taken or decisions were theirs alone. Sometimes these decisions were misunderstood by other Marines because not everyone saw things the same. We had to react the best way we knew how. There were times when we couldn't explain our actions to others, we just let it go.

At night, as we dug in, there would be a definite frontline—not straight, but wavy, jagged with sharp curves. In general, it would follow the existing terrain. Our mortars would shoot flares over our lines. The Navy had offshore ships shooting even brighter flares. These flares would float on small parachutes and pretty well light up the area, but they had a habit of winking out at the most inappropriate time. Our artillery fired regularly and we became familiar with the two-toned rustle as they passed overhead. All the shelling created smoke and dust that hung in the air and had blasted rock formations into twisted weird-looking shapes. Each two-man foxhole had one man on guard two hours while the other slept. As I stared out there with the smoke, dust, rocks, floating flare light, and moving shadows, there were times that it appeared like the entire Japanese army was on the move.

This particular night, around midnight, I picked up a movement. It kept creeping closer, wearing something white. I assumed this to be a bandage of some sort. The figure seemed to be headed straight for my hole, moving closer, stopping, moving, stopping. At times it was difficult to pick it up because flare lights changed from dark to dim to bright, depending on time intervals, position in the sky, and the type of flare. The creeping object was some 25 yards away when the last flare winked out. I whispered, "Come on, flare." A bright Navy flare popped open right overhead. I spotted my object, took careful aim and fired. There was a wild scream, and a white cat jumped up and ran off. The whole episode took about an hour, and I sat back, emotionally drained.

The next morning (Friday, 9 March) our lieutenant started walking in front of Company A asking for volunteers for a patrol. I saw some saying yes, others just looked down and didn't answer. It was obvious the patrol wasn't going on a picnic and it called for a personal decision. I thought—you could stay here and get blown to bits or hit by a sniper, so if they're going to get me they'll have to hit a moving target. So, I volun-

teered. My decision was also influenced by Watson. I figured he would be crazy enough to go too, and again it seemed like the thing to do. I was right. Watson did go, as did Starr and Sutton. In all, a 28-man patrol volunteered from Company A.

Things went well at first as we advanced toward the ocean, but it didn't last. A large concrete pillbox with supporting caves and tunnels commanded the approach to the sea and soon opened up on us. As we tried to return fire, Sutton found a protected approach to the pillbox and started to move toward it. I yelled at him, "Sutton, don't go up there." He had to hear me, but he paid no attention and kept moving, until he was able to fire directly at the opening in the pillbox from a distance of about 15 feet. He had a BAR and would raise up, let all 20 rounds go, duck down, jam in another 20-round clip, raise up and fire again. He made the mistake of raising up in the same place. About the fourth time they were waiting for him and shot him in the head. He pitched heavily forward, out of sight. I felt the urge to go pull him out of there but was convinced he was dead. Later on, I would have obeyed that urge, but I was still too new and too timid to make that decision. We brought up a bazooka but couldn't knock out the pillbox. In an attempt to rescue Sutton, Watson and the lieutenant got caught in a crossfire and were pinned down in a shell crater. The rest of us were behind an embankment and came under heavy fire. I found myself beside a guy with a walkie talkie, and he was reporting back to headquarters—"Patrol to Able Company, we are under fire, bullets are flying all around us, we have casualties. . . ." Finally it let up a little, and one of the guys tied a note to a rock and threw it toward Watson's hole. It fell short and one of them fished it in with a bayonet. The note said, "We are going to lay down a curtain of fire. When we do, run out of there." On command we all raised up and started firing. We succeeded in closing the pillbox down, and out came Watson and the lieutenant on the dead run.

Part of our patrol finally did make its way to the ocean, and for the first time, the Japanese forces had been cut in two. They brought back a canteen of salt water. We started to withdraw, picking up our casualties, (eight in all) including Sutton, who was dead. There were now only six of us left in the 2d squad. You had to believe you wouldn't make it. Eventually the remaining members of the patrol withdrew to their original positions. Back in our hole, Watson said, "Did I look scared?" I grinned, replying, "You were as white as snow."

Our patrol had found the strengths and weaknesses of the Japanese forces. In the morning, a tank with a mounted flame thrower moved



*"A dog and his trainer joined Watson and me in our hole."*

up and began firing at the pillbox and surrounding positions. Several Japanese soldiers ran out, their clothes burning. Marines of Company A fired at them. As they fell under our fire, I thought, "We're doing them a favor." In such situations, with so many firing, no one really knows who kills whom. At least my mind rationalized it that way.

At any rate, the Japanese were cleared out for the time being. Company A had now consolidated its positions all the way to the sea. As we began to inch our way northward, 1st Platoon stayed mostly to the high ground.

That night we dug in on a high ridge. They brought up war dogs for the first time. A dog and his trainer joined Watson and me in our hole. We thought that with an extra man and a dog, we would get more sleep. We never slept a wink that night. Some 30 Japanese infiltrated our company area. The dog's trainer proved to be new and seemed to want to stay pretty close to the bottom of the hole. Watson looked at me and we both knew that we not only had the Japanese to worry about, but a new man as well. A firefight was going on, but we seemed to be on the outskirts of it. We were frustrated as to how to help.

Unknown to us, a cave underneath us had been burned out by flame throwers. Stored ammunition had been smoldering away and now blew up! Rocks, dirt, and sand exploded high in the air and proceeded to fall on us. One guy was standing, rifle in hand, when a rock struck his rifle and broke the wooden stock right off. Watson and I brushed off the dust and dirt and tried to settle down. The firefight continued. We heard calls for corpsmen, indicating wounded. About this time I heard a thud in our hole. I shouted, "Grenade!" and we all three dove out of the hole. I fully expected to be shot by fellow Marines. I could just feel the bullets tearing into my flesh. It was an unwritten law that

---

“ I decided to vacate the hole for awhile and clambered down the side until I thought I was out of the sniper’s range. . . . and proceeded to do what all infantry men learn to do—sleep with one eye open. ”

---

no one left his hole at night for any reason. Generally, anything that moved got shot. Everyone must have been too occupied to notice us. No one shot at us. The grenade never went off. We all crawled back in the hole, with the new man complaining about exposing our position. In the morning I found our grenade. It was the bottom piece of a floating flare. The one who slept through all this was the dog, whose purpose was to smell out danger and sound the warning.

We spent the next day burning out caves and sealing up holes with satchel charges, trying to hold down the night war. Toward evening we took over a hole from two other guys. Standing close to the front side of the hole was a rock slab that looked like a column and stood about six feet high. They told us, “Be careful, you guys, they’ve been bouncing bullets off this rock all day.” Watson and I looked at each other; it was like exchanging places with ducks in a shooting gallery. Evidently, a sniper was using the area for target practice. It wasn’t long before the sniper sent us his first greeting card that whined off the rock about a foot above our heads. We tried to locate him. “See him?” Watson asked. “Do you ever?” I replied. “It’s coming from behind the line, though.” Watson said, “Nice. Tell you what. I’m going down below for supplies.” I decided to vacate the hole for awhile and clambered down the side until I thought I was out of the sniper’s range. I propped myself up against a rock and proceeded to do what all infantry men learn to do—sleep with one eye open. I became aware of a group of Marines moving through our lines to set up night positions.

The guy nearest to me stood out from all the rest. He was clean! He was wide-eyed, ducking and jerking with every sound. One of our machineguns opened up, and he hit the deck about 25 feet away. He looked around wildly and spotted me leaning against the rock. I grinned and winked at him. His whole expression changed, and he seemed relieved and relaxed a little. As he walked by me he said, “Hell of a place, ain’t it?” I grinned and replied, “You’ll get used to it.” “I doubt that,” he said moving along. I found myself thinking, “Was that one 12 days ago?—I’ll bet he thinks I’m a grizzled old vet of about three campaigns.” A fellow can really grow up in 12 days.

Our hole was the highest spot on our section of the line and was a rather exposed position. I didn’t like it. The line strung out on our right all the way to the ocean and then to our left it veered sharply almost behind us. In the moonlight, we could see the ocean with shadowy outlines of Navy warships visible. One ship was firing flares. Watson and I were bone tired, and I took the first watch. During his watch, Watson shook me gently and whispered, “Werts!” I was immediately awake, “Yeah?” Watson said, “Two Japs just crawled into our line!” I got up for a look. The line was relatively quiet. I spotted the 2 Japanese about 75 feet to our right and downhill from our position. The Japanese were down on their haunches and looked to be about six feet from Wede and Wegman’s hole. Unknown to us, they had a guy named Burns with them, and he was on guard. He was facing the front and was unaware of the Japanese behind him. Evidently the Japanese had not seen Burns either. Watson said, “What are we going to do?” I took another look. The place was a bunch of moving shadows. I replied, “We can’t shoot down there, it’s too close to Wede and Wegman’s hole.” Watson was not one for lengthy arguments. He grabbed a flare grenade and hurled it into the area. He then took aim with his BAR. I decided to join him and took aim with my M-1 rifle. Watson let all 20 rounds go from the BAR and I got off all 8 rounds from the M-1.

The line to our right saw all that sudden commotion and collectively decided that Watson and I were the enemy. We hugged the bottom of our hole for 15 minutes while hot lead screamed around our hole and ricocheted off the rock slab. When it finally let up, Watson said, “What the hell is going on?” “Beats me” was the only answer I could come up with. At the time, I thought it might be a Japanese counterattack. It was a long time before I realized what had happened. I guess the modern term for it is “friendly fire.” It was anything but friendly. Watson, now having second thoughts, asked “I wonder how Wede and Wegman are?” I answered, “I don’t know.” Watson asked, “Did you shoot?” I replied, “Yeah.” Watson said, “Good, then we’ll never know who killed them.” We got up for a look. A smoky haze drifted in flare light. It looked like someone was

still on guard in Wegman's hole. The two Japanese lay sprawled out behind them and were not moving.

Watson now got sick and couldn't take his turn on guard. In the last 44 hours we had about 2 hours of sleep. It was about 0100, four hours until daylight. I tried my best to stay awake but things were quiet now with nothing going on. Daylight found me draped over Watson, out cold. I felt bad about that.

The next morning Watson went down to investigate Wede and Wegman. They had survived. Wede was very upset at whoever opened up with that BAR. White was also upset with Watson. His hole was only a few feet from ours, and he took just as much fire from the line as we did. White said, "You dumb bastard, you almost got us all killed. Man, I laid in the bottom of my hole and shivered and shook. I thought we were all goners." Watson didn't try to explain, and neither did I. The two dead Japanese had a grenade in each hand, so to us the decision Watson made to open fire seemed right, and Wede, Wegman, and Burns were alive to prove it.

The casualties were now being carried out, as they were every morning. Guys were kidding them. "Goodby you lucky \_\_\_\_." "Hey, you guys got million dollar wounds—it's stateside for you—kiss all the girls for us." The casualties all responded with grins, waving a bandaged hand at us. They were going, and we were staying to face another day. Through all the kidding, we knew our ranks were getting thinner and our chances growing slimmer with each day and each casualty.

For some two weeks now, we had no opportunity to wash or shave or change our clothes. Actually, we didn't have anything to clean up with or clothes to change into. It was necessary to move fast, and we had stripped to the bare essentials. Watson had thrown away his entire pack and kept only the heavy cartridge belt with the loaded magazines for his BAR. He had found a carbine and had that strapped to his back. I wore a small pack with a blanket roll that came in handy for Iwo's cool nights. I had dumped everything out of my pack, and the only thing I carried was our food supplies for the day. We both carried extra bandoliers of ammunition, grenades and smokebombs.

We slept an average of six hours a night and some nights less than that or not at all. We had no hot meals, only C- and K-rations, with warm water to drink. Sometimes we warmed up our C-rations by burying them in the hot volcanic sand.

At some time during each day, it seemed we escaped death by mere inches. So the thought always lurked in the back of the mind, "Who's

next?" Though I knew some of us would become casualties today, tonight, and tomorrow, I still didn't think I would be one of them. Even so, living or dying was not much of an issue anymore.

Our company commander now was a sergeant we hadn't seen before. It was to him that Watson said, "Hey, Sarge, Wede's real sick." The sergeant looked back at him and said, "He's still walking, ain't he?" I looked at Wede too, and he was walking but just barely. Several now had dysentery, including me, due to the unsanitary conditions. We had to eliminate waste when and where we could. At night we used grenade cans and threw them outside. Decaying Japanese bodies lay around with flies all over them. The stench of those decaying bodies, along with the sulphur smell of the island, plus the sweet smell of blood mixed with burnt flesh and powder, gave off an odor like you would find nowhere else on earth. The smell matched the terrain, which resembled some other planet.

Most of us had reached the point where we became completely indifferent to the events surrounding us. Though our bodies went through the motions of battle, our minds and hearts were numb and insensible toward the Japanese we destroyed. We couldn't respond to the death of fellow Marines anymore. The eyes of a dead Marine had the same look as those still alive. We were badly in need of relief, but it wasn't to come for six more days.

Along with my dysentery, I began passing quite a lot of blood, which I assumed was a hemorrhoid problem. I told Watson about it. He said, "Why don't you check in at the first-aid station? They might send you to the rear." I thought about that for a moment and said, "Naw, I'll stick it out with you guys." Watson asked, "You mean to tell me, you got a chance to get out of here and you won't take it?" I just grinned. He said, "You gotta be crazy, Werts—you volunteered to come ashore in the first place, didn't you?" I grinned again replying, "Yeah." Watson shrugged his shoulders and said, "You're nuts, Werts, you know that?" Later I thought about that conversation. Here I was painfully sick, barely able to walk, and yet refusing medical attention. Why? I had no answer, but I had won the respect and admiration of Watson, and that seemed reward enough in itself. Looking back at it, my statement that I'd "stick it out with you guys," meant I just couldn't leave them. I couldn't let them down, no matter what. As insensitive as I was outwardly, there still remained an inner sense of love and loyalty to the men of 2d Squad.

Nightfall found Watson and me in another unusual spot. We were in the center hole, and the

---

**“ I recalled my drill instructor telling us we had to memorize our rifle's serial number. He said, 'You're going to eat with that rifle, sleep with that rifle, it's going to be your best friend.' ”**

---

line swept both ways in sort of a “V” shape, with us sitting at the bottom of the “V.” We were actually sitting on top of a cliff with a sharp drop-off to one side of us. We figured our position was pretty secure. We decided to roll a grenade down the cliff once in awhile, to discourage any visitors.

Starr, our elected squad leader, was holed up next to us. Starr had quite a sense of humor. He had collected some branches, twigs, leaves, and grass. He began tucking this stuff in his camouflaged helmet liner. While we were relaxing in the prone position, Starr's head and shoulders appeared above us. Starr said “Ah-sooo!” My heart sank to my shoes. He looked more like a Japanese than a Japanese. I heard Watson breathe, “My God.” I told him to take that damn stuff off his helmet before somebody killed him. He removed it.

Later we received our first mail in over a month. I had the 10 to 12 watch and was trying to read my mail by flarelight. We felt so secure in our position that Watson left his carbine that he always slept with leaning against the side of the hole. In fact, all three of our rifles were lined up on one side of the hole about four feet away. I sat facing the rear while everyone else faced the front. As a bright Navy flare popped open, I started to read a letter from my Mother. After bits of news from home she wrote “We are hearing bad reports about a place called Iwo Jima. It sounds like the Marines are having it hard again. May God bless them. We are all hoping you won't have to go there.”

An incredible thing now happened. Over the top of the letter I picked up a movement. An apparition emerged from the shadows wearing a blanket over its head held under the chin. It was walking behind our line and toward our hole. The blanket hid the uniform, so my first thought was, it's a Marine sleepwalking. Since we had nearly killed Wede and Wegman, I had a moment of indecision. I had to do something, or he would walk right into our hole. Still, I had to know if he was a Marine or not. He was 25 feet away when I yelled, “Halt!” There was a system of passwords involving names of American cars that changed each night. I had long since forgotten the password. Anyway, as I yelled “Halt!” he froze in his tracks and started to run to his left with the blanket fluttering behind him. At the word “Halt!” everyone was alerted. Watson woke up and said, “Shoot the \_\_\_\_.” I now realized I was still holding the let-

ter. I grabbed the carbine and shot at the fleeing figure. He lurched sideways but kept going until someone cut him down with a BAR. Watson said, “Did you get him?” I said, “I hit him but somebody else got him.” We would never again make the mistake of feeling secure.

I recalled my drill instructor in boot camp telling us we had to memorize our rifle's serial number. He said, “You're going to eat with that rifle, sleep with that rifle, it's going to be your best friend.” I thought he should have added “You're going to read your mail with that rifle.” The next morning I took some good-natured ribbing for saying “Halt!” “Werts tells them to halt before he shoots.” To me it was a natural, logical thing to do but impossible to explain.

The following morning, after the usual shelling of Japanese positions, we again moved to the attack. As Starr led our squad up, we began to be pinched out by other attacking groups, so we had to wait until things cleared up. They now brought a Japanese prisoner out, the first one we had seen. They moved him past our squad and platoon. Starr just glared at him and so did the rest of us. He was walking as though each step would be his last. The interpreter leading him looked worried, too. He didn't say anything, he just looked at us. Finally someone grinned at the prisoner. The Japanese responded with a broad smile. Then we all joined with smiles and laughter. The Japanese acted like he was the happiest man on earth. The interpreter looked relieved. I had a chilling thought. Is the 1st Platoon now capable of murdering a Japanese prisoner? Given the slightest provocation, I believed that they not only could, but would.

Rumors were flying that we were going to be relieved. Starr said, “If I thought that were true, I'd stay awake all night.” The next morning, Starr nearly got killed. We were all cleaning our rifles and Starr, like all of us, was wearing a combat jacket that had a small strap joined at the shoulder and buttoned at the collar. Someone, after cleaning his rifle, propped it up against a rock. It went off and took the button off Starr's jacket. He looked a little shaken by it. As we moved to the attack, we heard a Japanese say loud and clear, “Bagoy, Bagoy, Bagoy.” To this Starr yelled back, “Bagoy, Bagoy, Bagoy yourself, you \_\_\_\_.” We all got a good laugh out of that. Starr had recovered his sense of humor. Humor was the one



*"We fought our way to a high ledge at the front of the cave."*

thing that helped us keep our sanity.

The 1st Platoon now took some of the higher ground, but a large cave held up the advance. We located the back entrance to the cave. A tank was brought up and began firing shells into the cave through the back entrance. We fought our way to a high ledge at the front of the cave. For the first time, the game of hide and seek was completely reversed. Now they were "it" and had to move in the open while we hid. I'm afraid the 1st Platoon had blood in its eye and vengeance in its heart. Things were intolerable inside the cave. Japanese started to commit suicide. Others began running out of the cave entrance, sometimes throwing a grenade ahead of them. The 1st Platoon gunned them all down. Between the 1st Platoon and the tank, close to 100 Japanese perished. They were stacked high on the outside of the cave. One of them on the stack raised his head and looked straight at me. I fired and he grimaced and turned away. That face has haunted me ever since. As we moved away from the ledge, we saw the rest of Company A in a firefight down below. Our new sergeant, directing the attack, took a bullet in the head, and we watched them carry him out.

We spent what was to be our last night on the line. At daylight we were ordered out. We had lost all track of time. I didn't know what day of the week or the month it was. Someone said, "it's March 26th." A Cpl Pierce led what was left of the company to the rear. Company A must have started with about 200 men. I doubt if more than 60 survived. As I followed Watson out, I thought about all the situations we had shot our way out of, all the close calls we had, and all the nights in which we literally placed our lives in each other's hands. We were a good team. He made me braver

than I would normally have been. I was a steady influence on him, and he was not as wild and reckless as he would have been.

We didn't talk much. We never mentioned home, family, or friends. There wasn't much time for reminiscing. Much of our conversation was unspoken. A look, a grin, a laugh, or a shrug spoke volumes. Yet we probably came to know each other as no one has ever known us before, or since. Although we didn't talk about it, we trusted each other completely, and if the situation had called for it, we would have given our lives for each other. It was strange that in the midst of this fiery, gut-wrenching experience there should at the same time be born the purest love known to man.

We finally reached our destination and were looking forward to cleaning up for the first time in three weeks. Instead, they were asking for a patrol from Company A. Japanese were reported in the area. Starr, White, Watson, and I were chosen as part of the patrol. As might be expected, we resented being used without a chance to relax. Still, I was proud to have been chosen to walk with them. I was the anchor man and the rest of the patrol was strung out to my right at five-yard intervals. The patrol looked relaxed, but they reminded me of coiled rattlesnakes, who could react in split seconds to any situation. No matter what happened, they would know exactly what to do. A far cry from the men who jumped a ledge in the teeth of enemy fire almost three weeks ago. Back there we were timid, scared, and confused. We were now killers, who had become sullen, insolent, and a trifle insubordinate.

During the patrol, I was approached by Seabee and Army troops. They greeted me, "Hello, Marine," "Good morning, Marine," and then asked what I thought were dumb questions about what it was like at the front, or if there were Japanese out there. I just grunted my answers. As we passed a Marine camp, the commanding officer came up and said, "Hello, Marine, that's a fine looking patrol out there." Somehow I had earned the name Marine. No longer would the hated term "boot" be applied to us. From now on, we would be treated with the dignity and respect that goes with the name. For me, the words of The Marines' Hymn had finally come true. I was, "Proud to claim the title of United States Marine."

I finally had a chance to clean up. It's hard to believe the change that takes place when three weeks of crud is removed. Guys would say, "Where's so and so?" "Here I am." "That's you?" As I looked at them, I saw they had changed in other ways. They seemed older. One guy had hair now sprinkled with gray. There were a few who had lost the war of nerves. They still shook and were

chain smokers. Two guys, who were quite the jokesters, now were strangely quiet. Most of the changes seemed to be in the eyes. They were eyes that had stared too many long hours in flickering flarelight. Eyes that had seen too much blood, death, and violence. Eyes that had stared too long over a rifle barrel that grew hot in their hands. I was not aware of any changes in me. Not until later back on Guam, where individual pictures were taken. I was shocked by the man that looked back at me. I could hardly believe it was me. Instead of soft brown eyes, they were cold and had a piercing look. I thought about not sending the picture home. I remember writing and saying, "Here is my picture, but there's something wrong with my eyes."

So the war had left me with a mark that I would carry the rest of my life. The innocent Iowa farm boy had died and was not coming home. I later wrote a verse about a combat Marine:

A Marine always dies,  
Wounds are in his soul,  
That only he can know,  
And the scars that do not show,  
Are showing in his eyes.

The next day we had a chance to write letters, then another patrol, and that afternoon we were allowed to visit the 3d Marine Division Cemetery. Still carrying our rifles, we knelt beside the crosses of those we knew. I was shocked to see Slaymaker's grave, a guy from Iowa who had told us in boot camp that we would make it. He didn't make it. I copied 15 names of those I knew. Then I saw Williams' grave. My drill instructor in boot camp told me to try to talk Williams into taking his boot leave. I thought, "If he hadn't taken it, would he be with another outfit?" He could very well be, and I found it best not to think about it. I visited Sutton, the one I should have tried to rescue, and Westmoreland, my friend who died alone. All of these Ghosts of Iwo still follow me 40 years later.

Another day, another patrol, not much happening. That night they had a movie for us. Some 200 of us from different outfits attended. On the way back in the moonlight, the unexpected happened. Right in front of me a machinegun opened up, firing an overhead burst with tracers. I recognized it to be one of our 30-caliber machineguns. The question was, who was firing it and why? The Marines in front of me disappeared in a cloud of dust as they hit the deck and crawled to their left into the teeth of the machinegun. The rest of us ran to our left and found protection behind an embankment. The situation was electric and dangerous. Americans were about to kill Americans. Half of the guys carried rifles. We were uncertain

as to what we should do when some Marine appointed himself as our spokesman. I think most of us felt it was Army personnel firing the machinegun. Our spokesman evidently felt the same way. He said, "Okay, you doggie \_\_\_\_\_, we're going to walk out of here, and if you fire that \_\_\_\_\_ machinegun one more time, we're gonna wrap that \_\_\_\_\_ machinegun around your \_\_\_\_\_ neck!" We all got up and walked out. There was no answer and no more machinegun burst. I thought, "Will this murderous little island never cease to surprise me?"

The next day brought a pleasant surprise—we were leaving the island. We walked by the 3 Marine cemeteries containing over 6,000 Marines who were not leaving the island. There were over 15,000 wounded that were carried out to hospital ships and over 20,000 Japanese soldiers who were not leaving the island either. In the 8 square miles of Iwo, only a little larger than an Iowa township, 80,000 men had been locked in a life and death struggle, and when it was over 5 weeks later, the sands of Iwo had soaked up the blood of over 40,000 men. It was hard to believe.

As we went aboard ship, I once again looked back at those thousands of crosses. My final unasked question—"Why are they dead and we live on to fight again?" It sure wasn't because we were better than they were. Some of the finest young men I ever knew lay beneath those crosses. There are those who believe that fate decides who lives and who dies. It's hard for me to accept that some strange power, over which we have no control, drew all these young men from all parts of the country, from all walks of life, and decreed that they should all die in this strange place.

The *Bible*, in Ecclesiastes 9:11, says that the swift do not always win the race, nor do the strong always win the battle, but time and chance happens to them all. This seems to be more in harmony with the facts. We all happened to be of draft age when world events culminated in a war. As I observed it, death in battle depended on the action an individual took, or perhaps a mistake he made. It depended on the accuracy of a Japanese rifleman. It depended on where you happened to be at any given time. Time and chance do not fully explain everything, but to me they make more sense than anything else.

Our troopship started to pull away from Iwo and head for Guam. As I stood by the rail and watched the little island fade in the distance, a feeling of loneliness came over me. It was as if a part of me was left behind, as if an Iowa farm boy was waving goodbye. We would never meet again. Somewhere in that jagged jumble of rocks, he forever walks with the Ghosts of Iwo.

USMC