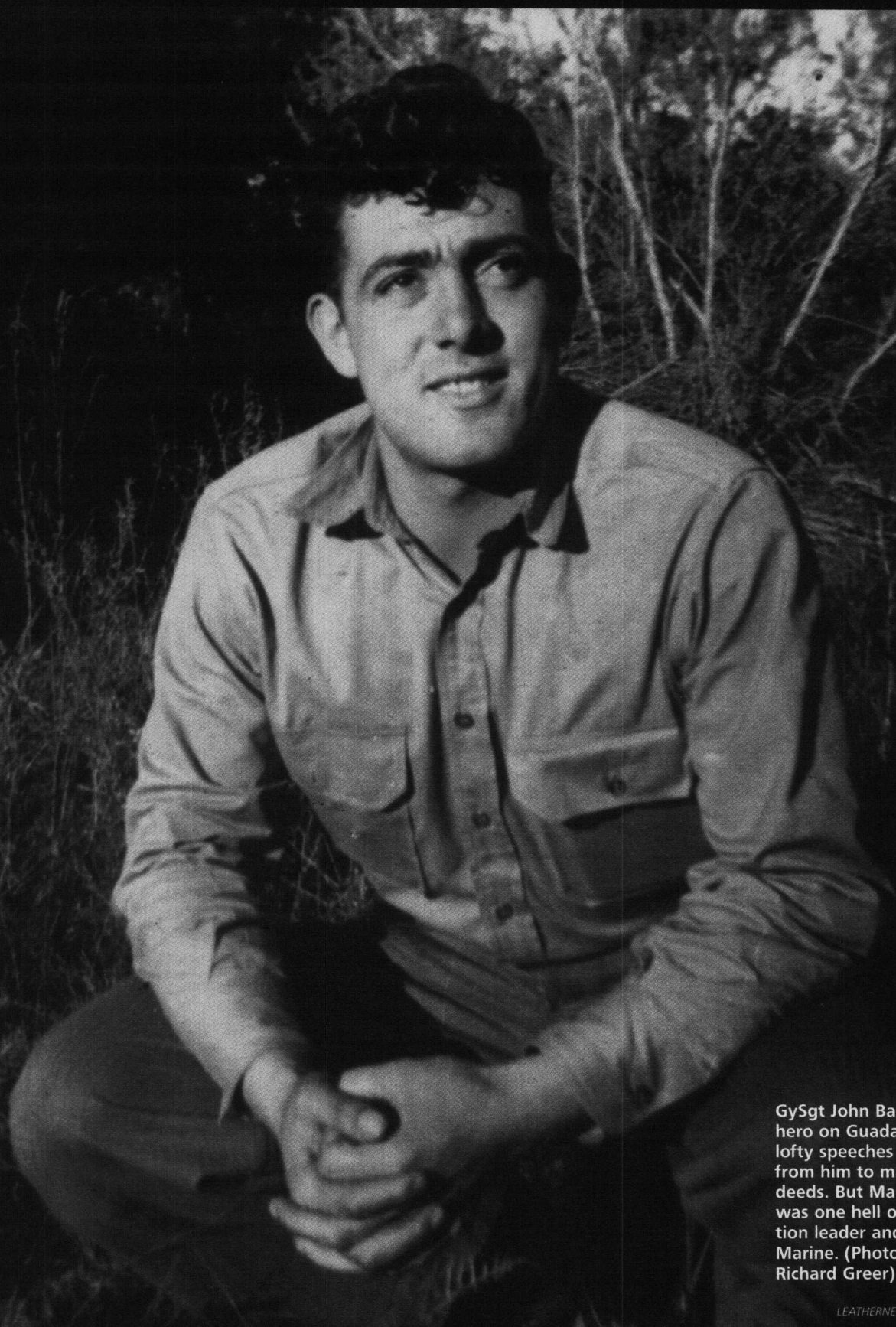


The Life and Death of "Manila John"



GySgt John Basilone was a hero on Guadalcanal. No lofty speeches ever came from him to match his deeds. But Manila John was one hell of a good section leader and fighting Marine. (Photo courtesy of Richard Greer)

If my only purpose were to resurrect a hero, to glorify him for posterity, I would start by saying that John Basilone had a sense of destiny. But this would be silly. He had no feeling of destiny. He was all here and now. No lofty speeches ever came from him to match his deeds, because he spoke directly in the “dem’s” and “dose’s” of a grade-school education romped through in New Jersey. He was a good boy, became a better man and eventually achieved greatness.

I first met Basilone after the balance of our war in the Pacific had shifted. A victorious Marine Corps (Guadalcanal, New Georgia, Bougainville, Tarawa) was adjusting to offensive tactics, which meant weapons like the .30-caliber machine gun. In 1944, after two years overseas with Carlson’s Raiders, I was assigned to the newly formed Fifth Marine Division at Camp Pendleton, Calif., and it was there I learned that “Manila John” Basilone, Medal of Honor winner, would be our “gunny.” By then, Basilone was already a legend to all Americans. It’s a matter of record that a surprised first sergeant logged me in three days under my 30-day furlough—and it was worth every day.

I suppose I’d formed some mental image of Basilone. I can’t clearly recall now, but there was a sense of brute strength and determination that went with that famous name. Certainly his citation suggested this. Everyone in America knew the story of that fantastic night on Guadalcanal.

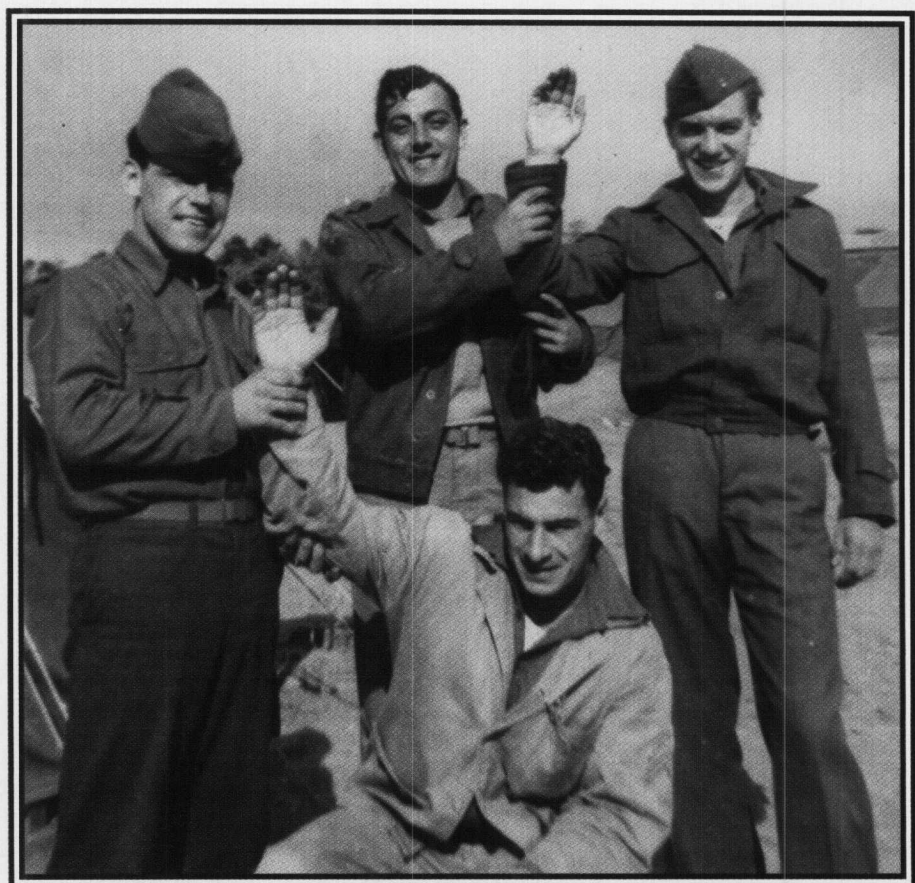
It had begun on Edson’s Ridge in the final hours of daylight on 24 Oct. 1942. The daily rain had ended, and having just completed a check of his guns, Basilone sat in his foxhole kicking off his shoes and socks because his feet were soaked and itched like hell. Suddenly the field phone hissed. Someone at battalion was blowing in the mouthpiece to attract attention. Basilone picked it up.

“Yeah?”

“Basilone? There’s a large Jap force massing in front of your position. They outnumber you about a hundred to one. You’ve got to hold until we can reinforce.”

“Sure,” said Basilone. As he hung up, the men around him raised their heads to catch the drift. Basilone slapped one on the helmet. “See ya in the funnies,” he said, and without putting his shoes back on, he slipped out through the mud to pass the word.

The night was eerily quiet as Basilone rechecked his machine-gun section. All was shipshape. “Basilone’s boys” knew



Basilone (standing, center) and several of “Basilone’s boys” from Weapons Company, including (left to right) Lester J. Price, Gerard J. Golden and Edward J. Daughtey, worked hard and partied hard.

how to use their ponchos. The trick wasn’t to stay comfortable, but to stay alive. The gunners were soaked, but their guns and ammo were dry. On the ‘Canal an M1917A1 heavy machine gun with a cyclic rate of 400 to 600 rounds per minute was a boy’s best friend. It was Mom and Dad, and it beat the girl next door by a country mile, even if she baked the best apple pie in Raritan, N.J.

Behind Edson’s Ridge lay Henderson Field, about which the enemy had grown very touchy. For months, ever since the Yanks had pinned an “Under New Management” sign on it, the Japanese had kept livening up nights around the area. The night of the 24th promised to be even livelier than usual.

As darkness covered the jungle like a blanket, Basilone’s gunners squatted in their muddy holes. Civilians influenced by the media invariably pictured the “steaming jungles of Guadalcanal,” but many who served there still recall the cold discomfort of their dungarees plastered to their bodies by chilly rain and the icy metal of their weapons as they lay in slimy mud waiting for the enemy to move.

Japanese tactics weren’t varied, but they were spooky as hell. They’d start by tooting horns and whistles and shouting parroted threats like “Marine, you die!” Next they’d lay down a pattern of mortar and artillery fire, and when that lifted, you knew they were ready to banzai.

Basilone recalled that night for me later: ponchos off, machine-gun water hoses checked and tightened, new rounds chambered. And as the fires lifted, the Japanese broke cover, charging uphill in a full-scale frontal assault.

“Awright,” Basilone yelled. “Give it to ‘em!”

Leatherneck machine guns thundered along the line, lighting their muzzles with tongues of fire. In the darkness below, the muzzle-blasts of Hotchkiss and *Nambu* replied, while from the slopes and ravines *Arasakis* flashed like fireflies.

After what seemed like hours of savage fighting, a runner stumbled in with bad news: Basilone’s extreme flank was crumbling. Both guns were jammed. Only two riflemen remained alive. Yelling for his gunners to “keep shooting!” Basilone wrapped several belts of ammo about his neck and shoulders, grabbed a reserve



America needed heroes, and the Marines on Guadalcanal gave them bonafide valor in the form of (left to right) Major General Alexander A. "Sunny Jim" Vandegrift, Col Merritt A. "Red Mike" Edson, Platoon Sergeant Mitchell Paige and Sgt Manila John Basilone, who received their Medals of Honor on 23 May 1943 in Balcombe, Australia.

machine gun and yelled, "You other guys, come with me!"

Trotting down a trail dodging small-arms fire and grenade blasts, Basilone ran into an enemy patrol. Almost without pause, he chopped them down and kept going.

Reaching the flank, Basilone set up his gun and began a one-man fight that would last all night. Covered by his team, he repaired his guns under repeated attacks. When the Japanese broke through he used his pistol. Firing one machine gun, Basilone would stop a charge, roll over to the next gun and stop another. When the water keeping the guns cool ran out, Basilone and his men filled the gun jackets with urine. By midnight he was again down to only two riflemen, but he kept firing until 0330 when his ammo ran out. "You guys hold here!" he yelled.

Shoeless and shirtless, Basilone drew his pistol and started up the Japanese-infiltrated ridge to his battalion (1st Bn, Seventh Marine Regiment, 1stMarDiv) command post. Pelted by rain, covered with mud and amid mortar and small-arms fire, he returned carrying nearly 100 pounds of ammo. "That lousy last 100 yards!" he used to say. "I thought it would never end!"

Rejoining his men, Basilone found that reinforcements had arrived. But the over-used guns had fired so long that the barrels were burning out. "Keep firing!" Basilone ordered as the Japanese launched a last, desperate attack. The machine guns glowed cherry-hot, but he kept firing, punching holes in the charging ranks. Finally it was too much for the Japanese.

As a faint light filled the slope of Ed-

son's Ridge, evidence of the incredible battle began to appear. The field was piled with enemy dead and discarded equipment. Around Basilone's guns lay 38 bodies, killed point-blank. It was later estimated that some 3,000 Japanese had thrown themselves at the Marine defenses, trying to plow their way into Henderson Field. Not since the Edson's Raiders' battle of 12-13 Sept. 1942 on that very same ridge had anything like it been seen. A Japanese regiment had been all but annihilated.

The following June, Mr. and Mrs. Salvatore Basilone of Raritan received one of those rare letters from their Marine son. It was characteristically short: "Dear Mom, I am very happy, for the other day I received the Congressional Medal. ..."

The Basilones, from their son's incidental comments, weren't likely to grasp the significance of his award. Above and beyond its merit, the fact was that Staff Sergeant John Basilone, USMC had received the nation's highest decoration. He was what America needed: a live hero from the ranks of those Spartan leather-necks still fighting on Guadalcanal. Newspapers waxed poetic. Sob sisters described John as "tall, dark and very handsome." His smile and "pixie" quality charmed mothers. As for the men, all they had to do was read his citation to know he wasn't just "handsome," like some spineless movie star. Not since Charles Augustus Lindbergh had there been such a perfect hero. He couldn't have been better had he been born in a log cabin.

Actually, John Basilone was born in a frame house in Buffalo, N.Y., but the

family soon relocated to Raritan, N.J. Mr. Basilone had come from Italy to be a tailor and raise an American family. Meanwhile, Mrs. Basilone, a motherly Catholic lady, had not neglected the spiritual upbringing of her children. John and his nine brothers and sisters were taught to love God, work hard and honor their country.

Many of Raritan's residents (at that time, population: 5,000) remembered the prankish, happy little kid who made friends with everyone. John's mother wanted him to go to high school, but at 15 he quit to drive a truck and caddy at the Raritan Golf Club. At 18, he joined the Army. It was 1934, and after recruit training he was posted to the Philippines, where he won a light-heavyweight, inter-service boxing championship, fell in love with Manila and got himself a nickname.

After three years, Sergeant Basilone was discharged from the Army. He returned home to work in a chemical plant. But by 1940 he was too restless to wait for the war he saw coming. He joined the Marines as a private.

Johnny was smart, full of confident leadership and knew his weapons. But the big Browning machine gun, .30-cal., Model 1917A1—that splendid, water-cooled, defensive gun—was his meat. By the time the Japanese hit Pearl Harbor, Platoon Sergeant Basilone and his machine-gun section were ready. Then came Guadalcanal, 24 Oct. 1942, and "The Medal."

Basilone returned to Raritan amid all the pomp and glory a hero-hungry na-



Basilone demonstrated a modicum of modesty when he wrote to his mother, Mrs. Salvatore Basilone: "Dear Mom, I am very happy, for the other day I received the Congressional Medal. ..."

tion could provide. Major Burns W. Lee recalled how, as a young lieutenant, he was assigned to escort the reluctant Basilone on a war bond tour. "John didn't like it," he said, chuckling. "I asked if he owned a set of dress blues and he said, 'What d'ya think I am, Lieutenant? A Navy Yard Marine?'"

The Basilone home was decked out with flags, the streets with streamers declaring: "Welcome Sgt J. Basilone!" It was "Basilone Day" and John's picture hung beside General Douglas MacArthur's. More than 30,000 people crowded the streets for a glimpse of their hero. When they had finished cheering, the government presented him with a \$5,000 war bond, and he sold them a staggering \$1,400,000 in pledges for the Third War Loan Drive. Movie queens buzzed him, politicians vied to shake his hand, and people rushed him, wanting to touch the medal around his neck. There was no denying it: Sgt Basilone, USMC was the biggest draw in the war bond business.

There was only one cloud in the Treasury Department's sky: Basilone was very unhappy. Maj Lee recalled: "John said, 'I'm becoming a museum piece. What if some Marines should land on Dewey Boulevard and Manila John ain't with them?'"

He was offered a commission. *TIME* magazine quoted his reply: "I'm a plain soldier. I want to stay one." He was sick of being "glamorous." He kept asking for line duty. Headquarters' idea of "line duty" was to transfer Basilone to the Washington, D.C., Navy Yard, where he continued to chafe. Finally, he put it bluntly to his new commanding officer: "Sir, I'm a soldier. I belong with the fleet." Luckily, Basilone had found a sympathetic ear. By the next day he was packing his seabag.

According to Maj Walter Bandyk, USMC (Ret): "I was personnel sergeant major, 27th Marines, 5thMarDiv, when John reported for duty. Recognizing his Medal of Honor ribbon, I ushered him to the adjutant's office. I informed Captain Fultz that John had requested the machine-gun company. The adjutant said, 'Give him anything he wants.' John was constantly receiving orders from Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, Washington, D.C., to appear at fund drives to sell U.S. bonds. He came to my office to ask if I would write headquarters for authority to reject the requests so he could train with his company preparing for combat. He was losing too much time away from his troops. I wrote the request, and John received permission to accept or decline. He never again left his company."

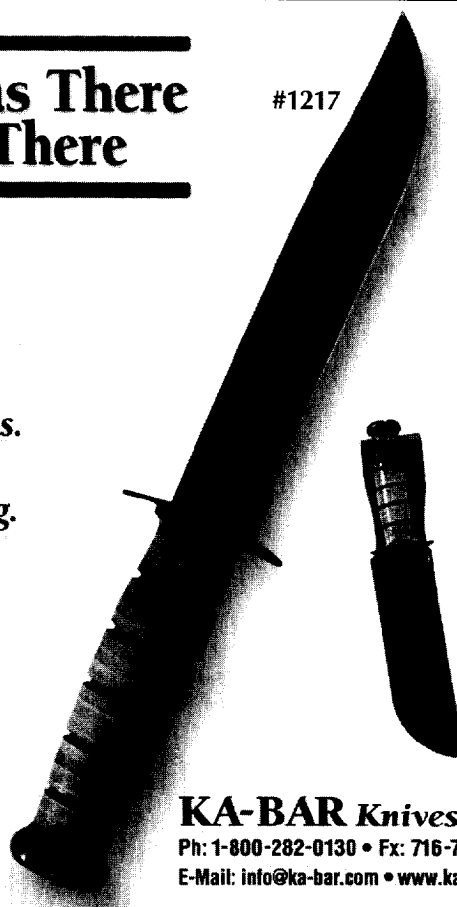
For better or worse, Gunnery Sergeant

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John Basilone was a member of 1st Bn, 27th Marines, 5thMarDiv, the last post he would ever hold. And it was then that our parallel paths crossed.

In 1944, Camp Pendleton could boast of numerous well-stocked slop chutes. It was in one of these that I noticed a jugged young gunny who wore his cap sideways, drank beer with the gusto of a millionaire guzzling champagne and laughed so infectiously that one couldn't help liking him on sight. There was no cascade of decorations on his chest. He looked like no colossus who could dash about loaded with ammo belts, spitting death from machine guns cradled in his "brawny arms."

The next day I saw him in front of the barracks, holding machine-gun drill. His cap was on straight, and he greeted me with the ease of an old friend: "You're the new corporal, eh? It's time to secure the butts. Wanna make a run to the slop chute?" I admitted the notion had crossed my mind.

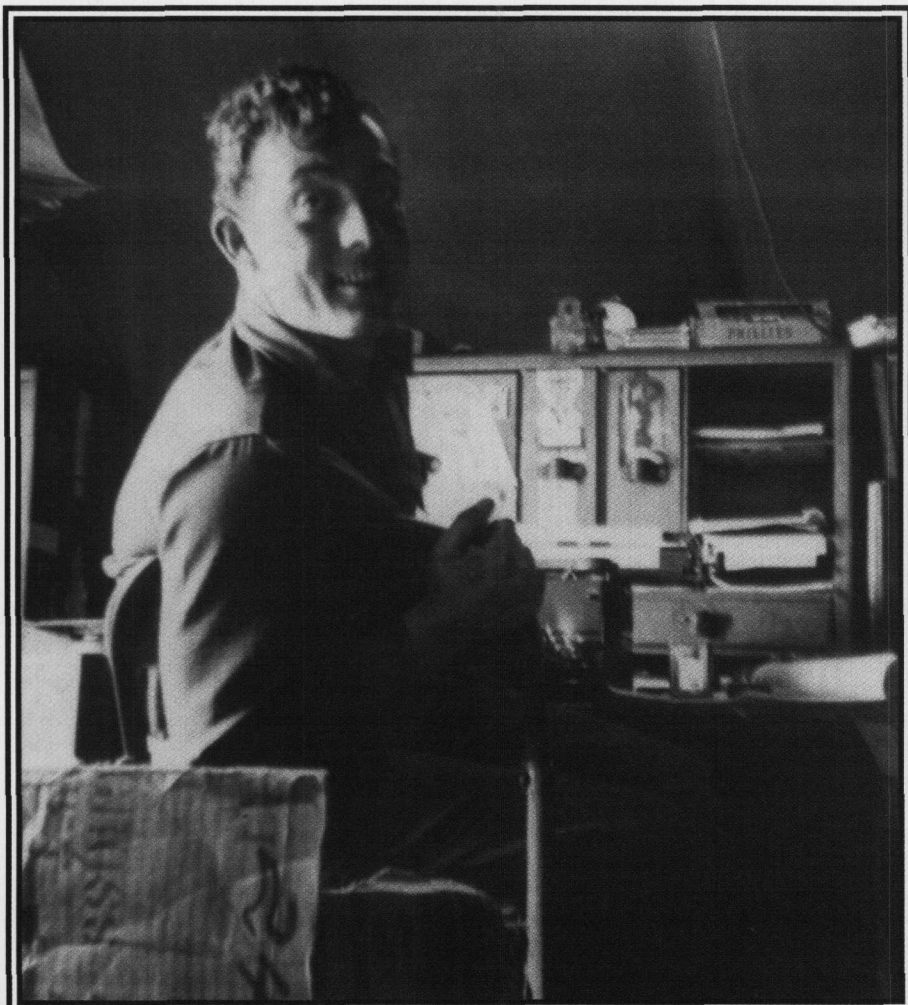
Basilone's service record book described him as pretty average: "ruddy, medium build, height: 5 feet 8½ inches, weight: 158 pounds," which certainly matched the guy I'd just met. Yet I had no doubt that this happy warrior was the "muscular giant" gloriously depicted in oils on a recent cover of *Collier's* maga-

zine. The tiny blue ribbon spangled with white stars hung above the ribbons for his Presidential Unit Citation, American Defense Service Medal and Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Medal. Our meeting launched a friendship I will always value.

Roy Elsner of Odessa, Texas, had a different take on Basilone: "I was a headquarters cook, and every day I'd see Basilone drilling you guys next to the barracks, but I never dared talk to John. I was only a private, and he was a big hero."

Basilone did more than drill us. He taught our recruits the meaning of esprit de corps, and in those of us who had fought, he rekindled a desire to fight again. His simplicity, his cheerfulness, his grasp of human nature—the charm and easy grace with which he carried his honors—gave us not only confidence, but pride. We were "Basilone's boys" and envied for it.

Despite John's reluctance to play the hero, he'd picked up some useful lessons. When one of his boys was tossed in the brig, or lodged in the San Diego calaboose, Basilone would pick up a phone: "This is Gunnery Sergeant John Basilone," he'd announce. "I understand ya got one of my kids. I'd appreciate your turnin' him loose. I got a special mission for him." No general, provost marshal or



COURTESY OF RICHARD GREER

There was a lot of training to be done for future battles in the Pacific, and even a field Marine like Basilone (shown here in Samoa) could not escape the associated desk work that went with it.

police chief could resist the old Basilone charm—or The Medal.

Early that summer of 1944 it suddenly ended. We'd been alerted. Between 22 July and 12 Aug., the division began leaving San Diego by regiments for Hawaii.

Camp Tarawa—a pile of tents in the middle of the Parker Ranch in Kamuela—had been built to house a shattered 2dMarDiv returning from a bloody speck of coral (Tarawa) it had bought with thousands of lives and torn bodies. That should have signaled our own fate, but we were veterans or boys eager to be veterans and the lessons of Tarawa held no terrors, for we Marines worshipped our traditions. Camp Tarawa would be our staging area, and we knew it.

Some time in December 1944 word came that we had been attached to V Amphibious Corps and would soon see action. We'd long expected that. Shortly after, we began practicing landings on "Island X," and it was clear that weekends in Hilo guzzling 5-Island Rum and chasing the girls of Kamuela were things of the past.

Some time back, I'd been promoted to

sergeant and transferred to regimental headquarters as an intelligence noncommissioned officer, so I was no longer one of Basilone's boys and I missed that.

I visited Basilone in January 1945, only days before we were to ship out. I wanted to say goodbye to him and the guys, for we wouldn't be sailing together.

As I approached their tent area I could see the whole goofy crew engaged in giving each other haircuts with the company tools. John, his arms covered with hair, stood back surveying a perfectly grotesque job he'd just performed on another guy.

"Not bad," he said. "Mohawk style—oughta scare hell outta some poor Jap."

"It scares me," I said, pulling off Basilone's famous sideways cap. The handsome John was clipped bald as a brass ball.

He grinned. "What d'ya think?" Then, growing serious, "It'll be cleaner. There's no barbershops on Iwo Jima."

The words echoed in my ears long after I'd left him. Iwo Jima. So that was "Island X." Then I couldn't help thinking: ten days before leaving Pendleton,

John had married Sgt Lena Riggi, a pretty female Marine. So why wasn't he back in Pendleton? His answer had always been, "I'm staying with my boys. They need me." Perhaps it was the only answer that mattered.

I wanted to stay longer, but I felt like an intruder. "Charlie" Co was a different world, and I was no longer of it. They were assault troops. They could laugh and joke knowing theirs was a horrendous mission that they would somehow accomplish with grace and courage. I envied their humor, their fatalism and their easy acceptance of an uneasy future. What they had to do they would do.

Since John and I would land in different waves, I wanted to wish him luck, but luck's not a word one uses. In such moments, banality's the only refuge, so I said something banal and went back to my own area, feeling sad and wondering where Iwo Jima was.

On the morning of 19 Feb. 1945, we hit Red Beach on Iwo and started climbing its black sides under a storm of enemy mortars and artillery. Basilone had landed one wave earlier and apparently moved in. He didn't know how to stand still. "Let's go in and set up them guns for firing!" a correspondent later quoted him.

Whose guns the correspondent was talking about is hard to imagine. From the moment we landed it was total confusion: platoons and companies mixed up and in the wrong places; men and equipment sinking into the black sand while officers and NCOs drifted about, looking for their men. All this as Lieutenant General Tadamichi Kuribayashi's presighted weapons tore our battalions to pieces.

In the midst of the hellish noise and confusion, two Marines were seen moving among the stalled troops shouting, cursing and moving them out. One was Colonel Louis C. Plain, the regimental executive officer of 27th Marines, who would soon be wounded and evacuated; the other was John Basilone.

Having cleared a path for the troops on the beach, Basilone gathered several more Marines, set up a base of fire and ordered them to hold while he went back for more men and weapons.

On his way, Basilone spotted three M4 Sherman tanks, their water-cooled V-8s grinding like hell as they struggled up the beach under heavy fire. Knowing their value for knocking out bunkers, Basilone immediately took over.

Sgt Adolph Brusa, a mortar squad leader, remembered he suddenly looked up and there was this lone Marine with those tanks, "And I said to myself, 'That's

John Basilone! What the hell is he doing, standing up when everybody else is hugging the ground?"

What Basilone was doing was guiding the tanks through a minefield and pointing out targets while completely exposed to the fire aimed at the Shermans. Brusa later recalled the lead tank had a painting of a crowned snake, and its name was King Cobra. The two following it were the Rattler and the Python—all members of the Snake Platoon on Lieutenant Colonel William R. "Ripper" Collins' 5th Tank Bn.

Leaving the tanks on high ground, Basilone returned to round up more troops for the assault team he had started building near the edge of Motoyama Airfield #1. To do this he'd have to re-cross the steep volcanic beach where he had met the tanks and where many Marines were still pinned down by Kuribayashi's relentless shelling and well-camouflaged pillboxes.

Among those trying to reorganize their scattered units was Major (later Col) Justin G. Duryea of the 1st Bn, 27th Marines. Duryea, who would lose an arm in an enemy mine explosion on D+18, was so impressed by Basilone's heroism that he later recommended him for a second Medal of Honor.

Basilone had landed with the fourth wave at approximately 0930. It was now almost noon and throughout the battle he

had risked his life repeatedly, disregarding every danger, to restore momentum to the stalled attack. It seemed nothing could touch him, yet by ignoring fires that would eventually kill or wound thousands of men, Basilone had finally pushed his luck beyond its limits.

Many men have said they saw John Basilone fall on the beach, which he did not. One said Basilone's legs were blown off by a mine. Several claim they heard Basilone's final words, and one said Basilone begged to be put out of his misery with his own pistol.

Perhaps the most credible eyewitness is Roy Elsner—the headquarters cook who had watched our machine-gun drills back in Pendleton and who was now on Iwo. He said that when he and some buddies were hunting for their headquarters: "A few hundred yards from Motoyama Field #1 we heard an explosion, which caused us to look a bit to our right [toward the field]. We saw Basilone and the three guys who were with him fall. We reached them almost immediately."

Author's note: Sometime after noon I came across a group of blackened bodies on the edge of Motoyama Airfield #1. Co C was advancing half a mile ahead, sweeping the flat field clean, when one of the dead caught my eye. He was a thin, pallid kid. His helmet was half off, and he lay face up, arched over his combat

pack, with his jacket torn back and his mouth open. I vaguely recognized someone I had known in that lean, lifeless face beneath its dusty stubble of hair.

"That's John Basilone," said one of the men standing around. "He just got it."

"That's b---s---. I know Basilone. We were in the same company."

Someone else said, "That's Basilone."

I walked around and asked, "Is this Basilone?"

A guy I knew said, "Yeah. He was briefing his guys when a mortar scored a direct hit. It killed them all."

I went and studied the dead man closely, but I didn't touch him. The shell had landed at his feet, sending shrapnel into his groin, neck and left arm. He looked incredibly thin like an undernourished kid, with his hands near his stomach as though it hurt. This was the hero of Guadalcanal, the joy of a nation, the pride of the Marines and my friend, Manila John Basilone.

Editor's note: As a Marine sergeant with Carlson's Raiders, Bill Lansford acquired 18 awards and decorations and a lifelong interest in guerrilla warfare. His first book, "Pancho Villa," was made into a major motion picture by Paramount Studios. Since then, Lansford has authored many stories and articles. The Marines are still his favorite subject.



SGT LOU LOWERY

On Iwo Jima, units were scattered everywhere and under relentless Japanese fire. It was at a site not so different than this, and while briefing his NCOs similarly to those leathernecks at the top of this photo, that Manila John and three fellow leathernecks were killed.