

The Battle of Okinawa Through One Marine's Eyes

By Jonathan Vanhoose

In early July 1945, Second Lieutenant Sid Garland of Company A, 1st Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, sat down on a coral outcropping in southern Okinawa and started writing a letter to his parents. After months of intense fighting and witnessing untold horrors, he finally had time to write them and reflect on what he had just been through.

"Dear Folks,

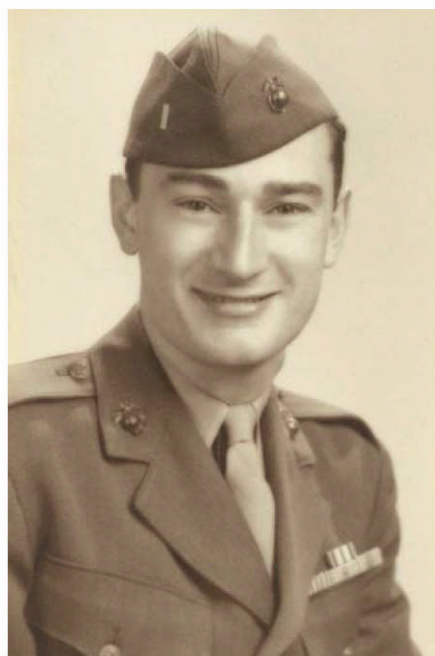
Well, I'm finally writing at last. This sure was a rugged affair over here. Anyway, who got through without being hit can consider themselves extremely lucky ... the old timers in the company say the fighting on this island compares with the worst they had ever been in. Some of the 2nd Division said Saipan was a breeze compared to this ... "

The letter went on to describe some of the fighting he had taken part in and a little of what he had seen.

On June 5, 1942, just a few months after the Japanese attacked the American naval base at Pearl Harbor, Sidney Blythe Garland joined the United States Marine Corps. Born on Sept. 7, 1922, in Howard County, Iowa, the son of a traveling Methodist minister, the young man had lived in Townsend, Tenn.; Fairview, Ill.; Spokane, Wash.; and Harlan County, Ky. by the time he was 14 years old. In 1936, his father was hired as the minister at the First Methodist Church in Paintsville, Johnson County, Ky. There, Sid completed his first two years of high school. As a sophomore at Paintsville High, Sid was a member of the Current Events Club and was the sports writer for his high school newspaper. Moving once again in 1938, his family returned to Iowa, settling in Geneva, where he finished high school and was a local basketball star. In 1940, he began his college career at Cornell College in Mount Vernon, Iowa, but was interrupted by the outbreak of World War II.

Due to his two years of college education, he was selected as a potential officer candidate and sent for additional training. From July to December 1943, he was assigned to the Marine detachment as part of the Navy's V-12 unit at Oberlin College in Ohio. The V-12 program was a college program designed to give officer can-

didates the requisite and minimum education necessary for more specialized training as military officers on an accelerated schedule. After finishing the requirements, Private Garland was assigned to Officer Candidate School at Quantico, Va. Completing his training there, he was commissioned and sent to the Infantry Training Regiment at Camp Lejeune, N.C., where Garland received a crash course on leading assault troops in



2ndLt Sidney B. Garland

combat. Finally, with officer training complete, Garland was ordered to Camp Pendleton in December 1944 and from there was given orders to report for duty in the Pacific.

The 1st Marine Division had suffered tremendous casualties fighting on the island of Peleliu. Many Marines of the Division had been fighting since Guadalcanal, and by the fall of 1944, many were sent back to the United States for rehabilitation. To bring the Division up to strength, it was necessary to absorb more than 8,000 replacements, including Lt Garland, who had been assigned to the unit as part of the 29th Replacement Draft. Arriving in the Russell Islands, he and many other replacements began intense training.

Basic training, small unit problems and specialized schools were held for the new men on the island of Pavuvu in the Russell Islands. A special emphasis was placed on the type of warfare Marines were to face in a large scale operation on a large island. It was during training that Garland was assigned to his new unit—Company A, 1st Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment.

On April 1, 1945, the United States 10th Army, a force that consisted of the 7th, 27th, 77th and 96th Army Infantry Divisions and the 1st, 2nd and 6th Marine Divisions—encompassing nearly 200,000 combat troops—began landing on the island of Okinawa as part of Operation Iceberg. The island was targeted by Allied forces because of its distance to the Japanese home islands, just 350 miles away. Allied airfields built on Okinawa would be able to strike almost every major Japanese city, bringing a new level of destruction to Japan. Anticipating the same fanaticism the Allies had faced elsewhere in the Pacific, the invasion force could hardly believe their luck. The first waves of men landing on the beach found little to no opposition. Moving quickly, the American troops reached the east coast of Okinawa on April 5, cutting the island in two.

For the remainder of the month, the 1stMarDiv did not spend much time in front-line action against the Japanese. They had been ordered to patrol areas of the island under American control, seal caves suspected of harboring Japanese troops and handle the rush of civilians who were escaping the fighting. This time off of the front lines had given them time to bring in replacements, unload all of their equipment and supplies and ensure the Marines were prepared.

At the end of April, 5th Marines were ordered into the fighting. On May 1, the regiment relieved the 105th and 106th Infantry Regiments, two units of the 27th Army Division that had been on the front lines since the opening of the battle. Executing this movement, the regiment came under mortar and machine-gun fire that caused some casualties. Now on the front, the 1stMarDiv was given their initial objective—moving to and

capturing the north bank of the Asa River. Unfortunately, between the Division and the objective were "a series of hills and ridges the Japanese had prepared [with] defensive positions in depth ..." This was the outer perimeter of the Shuri Castle defensive line. It was in these hills, ridges and valleys, some later known by the names of "Shuri Ridge," "Wana Ridge," "Wilson's Ridge" and "Death Valley" that 1stMarDiv would meet the Japanese in bitter fighting.

On May 3, the three companies making up 1/5 (Companies A, B and C) attacked Japanese positions but were held up by the intense fire coming from enemy machine-gun positions and pillboxes. The next morning, 20 tanks and six large flame-thrower tanks supported the battalion in another assault. With the help of the tanks, which destroyed numerous enemy positions, 1st Bn was able to advance and occupy high ground. It was a costly two days for Co A. Their first taste of heavy fighting on Okinawa had cost them four killed and 46 wounded. Among those wounded were three of the junior officers in the company. Garland, writing home to his family, discussed the situation: "The last I wrote to you I told you I had a machine-gun platoon. Well, after being on the lines about 10 minutes, one of the rifle platoon leaders got hit and I took over."

For the next few days, 1/5 consolidated their lines, making sure to clear "the numerous caves, pillboxes and installa-

tions" that were in the area of Japanese troops. Co A, having been hit hard with casualties from the previous days, received another group of 13 replacements on May 5. As the men of the company were recovering from their baptism of fire on Okinawa, plans were being made for another attack. This time, the assault would be on a 110-foot mass facing the regiment. Later known as Wilson's Ridge, it was covered with caves and pillboxes

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on both sides, giving the Japanese the ability to fire in all directions and hinder any American advance.

On May 10, orders came for the 2nd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment to attack the northern and eastern sections of Wilson's Ridge. The 1st Bn, including Sid Garland and the men of Co A, were ordered to advance across an open area of ground to the west of the ridge, known as "Death Valley," and strike at the western portion of Wilson's Ridge. Co A advanced first across the open terrain,

followed closely by Co C. Co B provided supporting fire during the attack. Due to poor road conditions in the area, the men were forced to assault the ridge without the support of armor.

Garland and the Marines of Co A moved across "Death Valley" quickly, despite suffering casualties as the Japanese hit the advancing men with heavy machine gun and mortar fire. They were able to reach the slope of Wilson's Ridge but were pinned down by the terrific amount of fire coming from enemy positions where it became difficult and dangerous to evacuate wounded Marines. Hours later, Co A and two platoons of Co C which had also reached the ridge managed to fall back under the cover of smoke, carrying their casualties out by hand. Co A again suffered tremendous casualties in the assault on Wilson's Ridge. Company muster rolls show that four troops were killed and 23 were wounded, including Captain Julian Dusenbery, commander of the company. Four of the wounded Marines later died.

Sid Garland distinguished himself in the assault while leading his platoon. According to official reports of the action, he "repeatedly exposed himself to the hostile fire to lead his men forward Observing that the leader of an adjacent platoon was wounded, he immediately took charge, skillfully organizing and directing the men to advantageous positions from which they could fire upon the Japanese.

Marine armored amphibious tractors form on line as they head toward the beaches of Okinawa in the early days of the last major battle of World War II. (USMC photo)





Marines from Co A, 2nd Bn, 5th Marines battle for a ridge 2 miles north of Naha, the capital of Okinawa in May 1945. (USMC photo)

Shortly afterward, while pinned down by a heavy enemy artillery and mortar barrage, he supervised the withdrawal of both units and constantly braved the hostile fire to assist in the evacuation of numerous casualties.” Because of his actions on the ridge, 2ndLt Garland was later awarded the Silver Star for valor in combat.

On May 11, Co A and Co C were again ordered to assault Wilson’s Ridge, this time successfully capturing the hill and forcing the Japanese to retreat. Co A lost another Marine and five more were wounded in this second day of action. Because of the hard fighting over two days, 1/5 was placed in reserve and given the mission of mopping up the area it had just captured. The unit had a few days to rest and replace its casualties.

Their rest would be brief. Receiving orders to the front, 1/5 moved forward in the early morning hours of May 15, relieving 1/1. Now faced with enemy positions on the Wana Draw, the plan was to attack the Japanese with all available firepower. Fierce fighting took place for the next five days, mostly by 2/5, as American tanks, escorted by infantry,

attacked Japanese held positions on Hill 55. Methodically moving among the honeycombed hills, the Americans threw everything they could at the enemy—artillery, tanks, self-propelled guns, engineers with demolition charges, flame-throwers and even American ships

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offshore—added to the amazing amount of fire targeted on the Japanese. Finally, the hill fell on the evening of May 20, bringing the Americans one step closer to Shuri Ridge, the high, natural barrier protecting Shuri Castle.

Shuri Castle, built at some point during the Sanzan Period (1322-1429), was the administrative center and main palace of the Ryukyu Kingdom. American Commodore Matthew Perry came to the island twice, once each in 1853 and 1854 during his expedition to Japan. In 1879, the king-

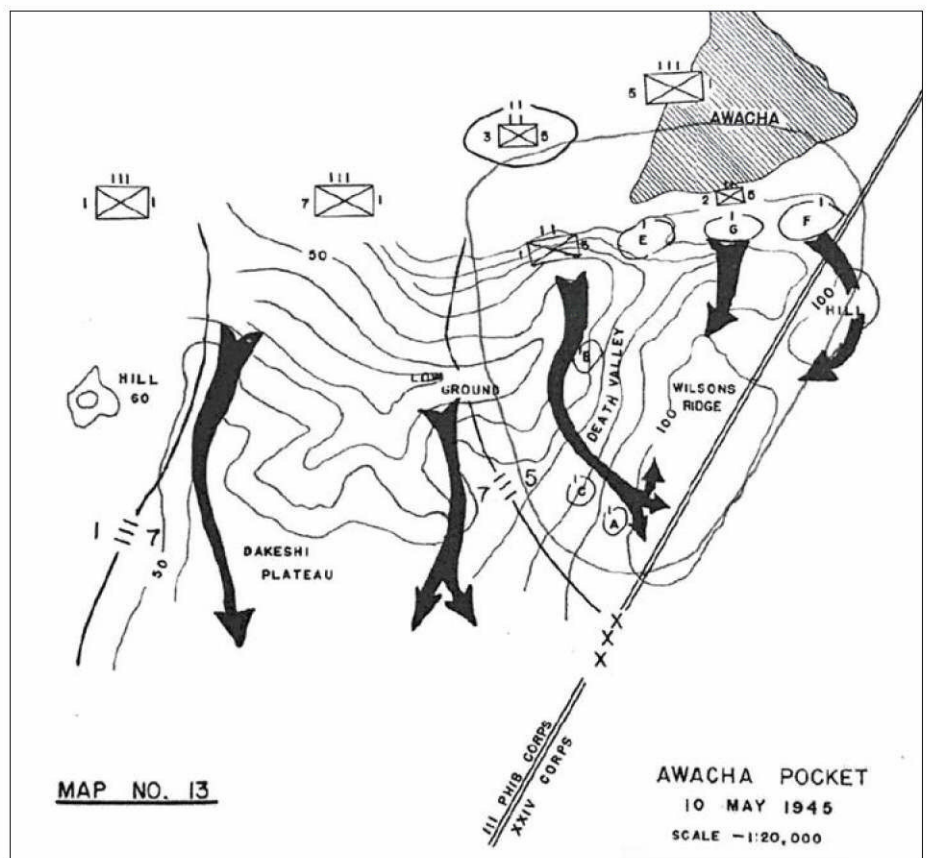
dom fell and Okinawa was annexed by Japan. The old castle was then put to use as a barracks by the Imperial Japanese Army, which built a series of tunnels and caverns below it. Falling into a state of disrepair, the castle was not used again until the outbreak of World War II. Anticipating an American invasion, the Japanese military set up a headquarters in the tunnels under the castle and began to create a very complex series of defensive positions on Okinawa, centered on the ancient castle.

By May 21, American troops found themselves in front of the complex Shuri fortifications. Patrolling the area to their front, the Marines discovered that the steep escarpment, on which the Shuri defenses were built, did not have a place suitable to move tanks and other armor against the Japanese. The U.S. Army’s 77th and 96th Divisions had advanced to the Shuri line as well, but no one could move forward until the castle was taken. Orders to attack the defenses on May 22 had to be scrapped. Heavy rain and wind had transformed the ground into deep and heavy mud. The rain continued for days, making life miserable for the already tired troops.

One account recalled that “living conditions of front-line troops were indescribably bad. Foxholes dug into the clay slopes caved in from the constant soaking, and, even when the sides held, the holes had to be bailed out repeatedly. Clothes and equipment and the men’s bodies were wet for days. The bodies of Japanese killed at night lay outside the foxholes, decomposing under swarms of flies. Sanitation measures broke down. The troops were often hungry. Sleep was almost impossible. The strain began to take a mounting toll of men.” To make matters even worse, the Japanese were constantly shelling the American troops with mortar and artillery fire, especially at night. The Marines in front of Shuri were left to undertake “aggressive patrolling” to keep the Japanese pinned in their defenses.

Early on the morning of May 29, Co B and Co C of 1/5 moved toward the Shuri defenses. A patrol the previous day had discovered a possible weak point in the Japanese lines and the men of the two companies were sent forward and occupied the high ground. Approximately 800 yards away, the Marines could see Shuri Castle and unbelievably, it looked undefended. Many of the Americans fighting in front of Shuri believed that the Japanese would fight to the death there and were surprised at the lack of resistance from that “stinking hole of death” as they advanced. Lieutenant Colonel Charles Shelburne, the battalion commander, immediately requested permission to move a group forward to capture the castle. He had to ask permission because the fortification lay in the area reserved for the 77th Army Division. Crossing into their area and capturing this significant military obstacle without previous discussion would more than likely anger the Army.

After discussion among the top brass, the request was approved, and at about 9 a.m., Co A of 1/5, which had been in reserve, was ordered forward through the heavy mud and muck. Cautiously approaching the castle, the Marines were surprised that there was not much resistance coming from the Japanese. They didn’t realize that they were entering an area through a gap in the enemy defenses when the Japanese 3rd Battalion, 15th Independent Mixed Regiment began their withdrawal from the Shuri lines. All other enemy units were still in their positions. The Marines just happened to be advancing in the right place at the right time. Moving into the castle, the men of Co A encountered approximately 50 Japanese soldiers who were quickly killed. Garland was right in the thick of the advance on Shuri. In fact, when he wrote after the battle, he told



his family, “My platoon was the assault that day and we took it and you know who was the first one there.”

Once inside the castle, Co A deployed into what has been described as “a hasty defensive line within the castle’s rubble.” Expecting the Japanese to attack at any moment, the men settled into their positions in the shattered masonry. The men were exhausted, and there wasn’t much time to reflect on what they had just accomplished. Corporal Irvin Stone recalled, “I was too damn tired, soaking wet and hungry to think much about it.” They wanted to rest. But there was no time for the men to let down their guard.

Exploring the tunnels and caverns under Shuri Castle the Marines discovered “a wrecked Japanese command car surrounded by trucks, a baby Japanese tank and several extinct Japanese soldiers who came out [of] their caves at the wrong time.” They also discovered a cave that was equipped as a hospital. Many Japanese soldiers lay dead within the tunnel leading to the hospital and medical and surgical equipment was found strewn all about.

Co A was relieved in Shuri by members of the 1st Marine Regiment and moved back into their original position as the 1st Battalion reserve. That night and early into the next morning the three companies of the 1st Battalion fought off many groups and individual Japanese soldiers they discovered trying to infiltrate the Marine lines. Garland remembered that

his men fought against “a big counter-attack that first night.”

Without much rest, the 1/5 Marines then sent out patrols to find and determine the exact strength of the enemy in the area. After advancing about 500 yards, the patrols were hit with heavy machine-gun and rifle fire from the Japanese and forced back to American lines. On June 1, advancing in force, the men of the 5th Marine Regiment reached the hills north of the Naha-Yonabaru Highway where they “could see the roads to the south littered with vehicles and equipment” from the retreating enemy. The Marines continued to advance in order to maintain contact with the Japanese.

Additional patrols determined that enemy troops in the area appeared to be entrenched on a large hill, shown on the map as Hill 69. On June 3, the 1st and 3rd Battalions, 5th Marine Regiment, made an assault on Hill 69 in which they described resistance as “spotty.” By that evening, Hill 69 had been captured “without too much difficulty,” and the Japanese retreat continued.

The 5th Marine Regiment was placed in a reserve role until June 15, when they relieved 2/1 on Kunishi Ridge. After their brief rest, fierce fighting continued for Sid Garland and the men of Co A. For four days, the men slugged it out over the control of two more small knolls, Hills 79 and 81. Honeycombed with caves and spider holes, the Japanese fought off

American attempts to break their lines with machine guns, grenades, small arms and anti-tank guns.

On June 20, a few men of Co A reached the crest of Hill 79, "but there were so few men left, they could not hold their ground and were driven back." The next day, with the assistance of tanks, all three companies of 1/5 fought their way through the Japanese defenses and up Hill 79. Finally securing the crest, the battalion began "mopping up," or blasting the entrances to caves with flame-throwers and demolition charges. It was a costly few days for Co A, which suffered 13 killed and 37 wounded in the fighting around Hills 79 and 81.

The U.S. Tenth Army announced the end of organized fighting on Okinawa on June 22. However, many individuals and small groups of fanatical Japanese soldiers remained scattered and hidden across the island. Before the American occupation forces could begin restoring and building airfields and bases on the island, Okinawa would have to be cleared of the remainder of the enemy. The III

Amphibious Corps issued Operation Order Number (24-25), stating that the "1st and 6th Marine Divisions would conduct a coordinated mopping up operation from south to north within certain assigned boundaries." Eugene Sledge, serving with K/3/5, recalled the orders, "We're moving back north ... You people

"You just do what you're trained to do. You don't worry about getting hit or killed."

will mop up the area for any enemy still holding out. You will bury all enemy dead. You will salvage U. S. and enemy equipment. All brass above .50-caliber in size will be collected and placed in neat piles" The battle was not yet over for the 5th Marine Regiment.

For the next week, the men of the 1stMarDiv occupied themselves with the burning out of caves, pillboxes and "sniper-infested brush and cane fields." The soldiers they encountered here "were

the toughest of the diehards, selling their lives as expensively as possible." The Marines encountered the enemy in "small disorganized groups and individual soldiers who moved around in the darkness trying to find other comrades or a new place of hiding for the next day" Okinawa was still a dangerous place and Co A had three men who were wounded in this mopping up operation.

Finally, on June 30, Garland and the 1stMarDiv had completed their mission. According to one account, "the total number of Japanese killed during the mop up was 8,975, a large enough number of enemy to have waged intense guerrilla warfare if they hadn't been annihilated." The island was now considered secure and Garland could finally take a moment to write a letter to his parents, letting them know he was safe. A few days later, the tired and exhausted Marines were moved to the northern part of the island where they went into camp on the Motobu Peninsula. Their battle was over.

Casualties from the Battle of Okinawa were staggering. In three and a half

Marines pinned down by Japanese fire on Cemetery Ridge during the battle of Okinawa. The Marines secured the island after 82 days but their victory came at a huge cost. More than 12,000 Americans were killed during the battle with another 38,000 wounded. (USMC photo)





A Marine rifleman signals to his fellow Marines to hold their fire as a Japanese soldier emerges from a cave during the battle of Okinawa.

PFC FRANK ROGERS, USMC

months, approximately 12,500 American servicemembers had been killed and another 33,000 were wounded. Over 100,000 Japanese fighting troops were killed during the battle. Garland's Co A had suffered tremendous casualties as well. The company commander, Capt Julian Dusenbury, called his company "the best outfit in the Marine Corps ... Those boys never gave up." He pleaded for credit for his men who had survived the battle, stating, "We started out with 228 officers and men and we got 75 replacements before we were through, but at one time we were down to two eight-man rifle squads, a total of 16 men in all." Amazingly, 2ndLt Sidney B. Garland was one of the lucky ones who made it through the "typhoon of steel" without being killed or wounded. In the letter to his parents after the battle, he recalled, "I started out with 60 men [in the platoon] and got down to 1, then replacements put me back up to 40, then [due to casualties] down to 10. I believe we had about 90 percent casualties in the company. We have seven officers in a regular company. We lost 13 ... Who got through without being hit can consider themselves extremely lucky."

For their bravery, the entire 1stMarDiv, including 2ndLt Sidney B. Garland, was awarded the Presidential Unit Citation that stated, "For extraordinary heroism in action against enemy Japanese forces during the invasion and capture of Okinawa, Ryukyu Islands, from April 1 to June 21, 1945. Securing its assigned area in the north of Okinawa by a series of lightning advances against stiffening resistance, the 1st Marine Division, Reinforced, turned southward to drive

steadily forward through a formidable system of natural and man-made defenses protecting the main enemy bastion at Shuri Castle. Laying bitter siege to the enemy until the defending garrison was reduced and the elaborate fortifications at Shuri destroyed, these intrepid Marines continued to wage fierce battle as they advanced relentlessly, cutting off the Japanese on Orokuni Peninsula and smashing through a series of heavily fortified, mutually supporting ridges extending to the southernmost tip of the island to split the remaining hostile force into two pockets where they annihilated the ...



Sid and Jan Garland in 1995.

COURTESY OF JONATHAN VANHOOSE

enemy. By their valor and tenacity, the officers and men of the 1st Marine Division, Reinforced, contributed materially to the conquest of Okinawa, and their gallantry in overcoming a fanatic enemy in the face of extraordinary danger and difficulty adds new luster to Marine Corps History and to the traditions of the United States Naval Service."

Garland remained on Okinawa until September 1945, when 1/5, was sent to China to help protect the Chinese countryside from aggression during the civil war then sweeping the country.

After being sent back to the United States and being honorably discharged from the Marine Corps, Sid returned to school, graduating from Cornell College in Iowa in 1947. He met Jan Hyde while he was finishing college and married her in 1948. He stayed active in the Marine Corps Reserve and returned to active duty during the Korean War, serving at Camp Pendleton, Calif. He retired from the Marine Corps Reserve with the rank of colonel after 30 years of service.

Sid and his wife Jan moved to Paintsville in 1953, becoming pillars in the community. Together they raised four sons. Sid was active in the Methodist church, was a Paul Harris Fellow in the Paintsville Rotary with "perfect attendance for 37 years," helped establish Little League baseball in Paintsville and also was a Boy Scout leader. He was described as a man who "lived his life by the Marine Corps motto, *Semper Paratus*"—always faithful, always loyal.

Sidney Blythe Garland passed away on Nov. 24, 2010, in Oak Ridge, Tenn. He was buried at Arlington National Cemetery. Years after the battle, when Sid was asked to talk about being awarded the Silver Star and his experiences on Okinawa, he just simply said, "You just do what you're trained to do. You don't worry about getting hit or killed. When you run into a bunch of Japanese shooting at you, you just do it." These are simple words from a humble man of the Greatest Generation.

Author's bio: Jonathan Vanhoose is a former basketball player who was named Kentucky Mr. Basketball in 1998 as a high school All-American. After playing college basketball at Marshall University, he spent time in the NBA Developmental League. He has taught history for the last 16 years, at Johnson Central High School in Paintsville.

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