

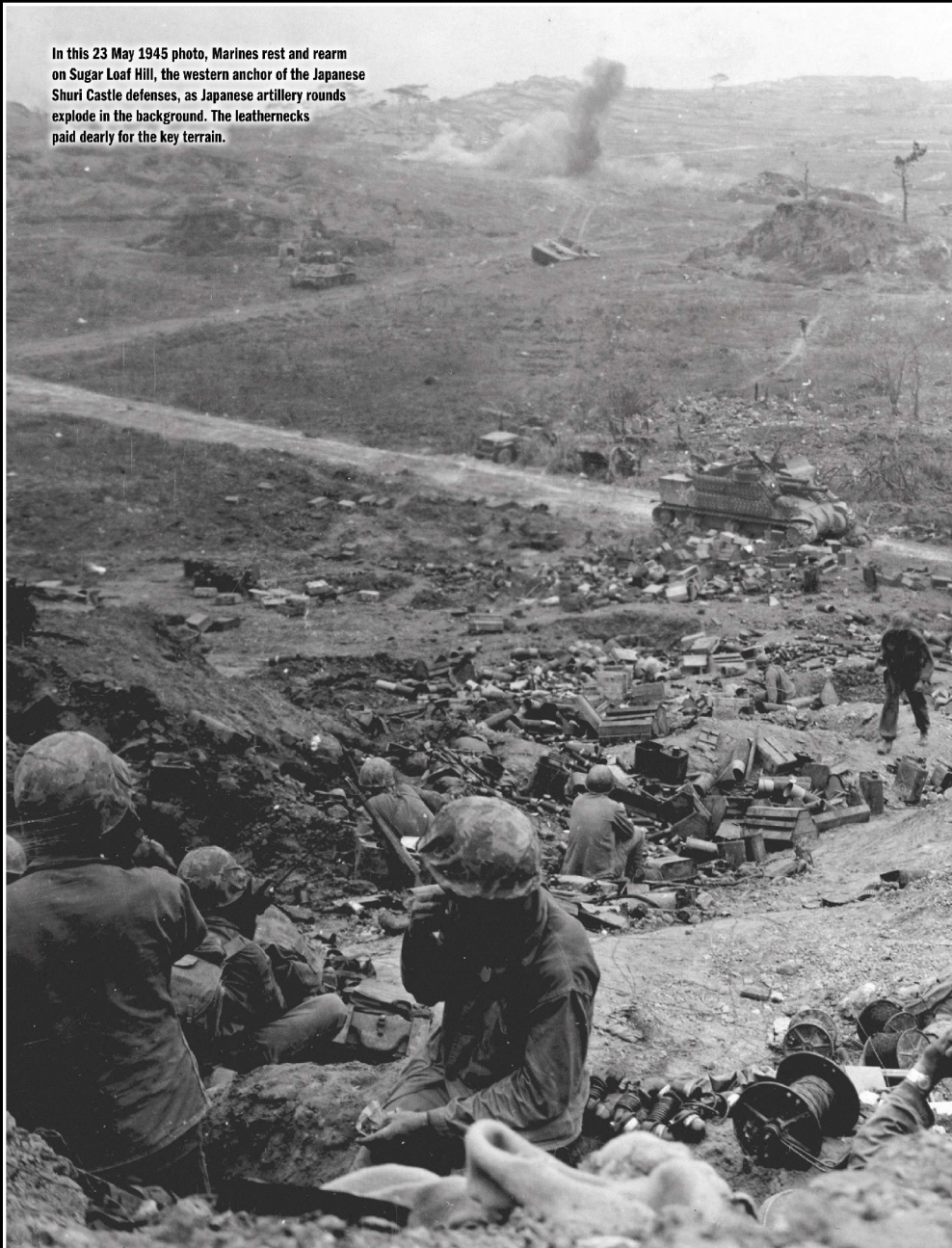
## SUGAR LOAF HILL

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pg. 36

In this 23 May 1945 photo, Marines rest and rearm on Sugar Loaf Hill, the western anchor of the Japanese Shuri Castle defenses, as Japanese artillery rounds explode in the background. The leathernecks paid dearly for the key terrain.



Okinawa, May 1945

# SUGAR LOAF HILL

By Maj Allan C. Bevilacqua, USMC (Ret)



These Sixth Marine Division leathernecks smoke out Japanese soldiers dug in behind Okinawa's jagged coral boulders.

*"America has never quite produced a generation like those Marines who went up Sugar Loaf Hill. I pray to God that we still might see the likes of such giants again. And so perhaps we shall."*

—Victor Davis Hanson  
senior fellow, The Hoover Institution

If you go to Okinawa, Japan, looking for Sugar Loaf Hill, you may not find what you expect to see. The hill Marines called Sugar Loaf has been swallowed up by the spreading sprawl of greater urban Naha. There is nothing that immediately meets the eye to tell that this inconsequential bump in the ground marks the spot where two entire regiments of

the Sixth Marine Division were shot to tatters in one blood-soaked week of fighting in May 1945.

Close by the Omoromachi Station on the Okinawa Monorail (What Marine who fought for Sugar Loaf could have imagined such a thing as a monorail?), much of the hill has been carved away to make room for a major shopping center. Where once men battled savagely, there are theaters and upscale shops carrying such names as Louis Vuitton, Fendi, Bulgari and Fabergé. At Sugar Loaf's crest, a large white water tower stands on the spot that Marines reached and were forced to yield so many times before finally claiming possession. Not far from the water tower,

a simple bronze tablet written in English and Japanese testifies that this is indeed Sugar Loaf Hill.

It was different in May 1945. Then, Sugar Loaf served as the western anchor of the Shuri defenses planned by Lieutenant General Mitsuru Ushijima, the commander of the 120,000-strong Imperial Japanese 32d Army that defended Okinawa. Known as a humane man who always cared for the welfare of his soldiers and possessed unflinching bravery under fire, Ushijima was an experienced commander, an excellent tactician with an exceptional ability to utilize terrain.

LTG Ushijima also was a realist who knew that the troops he had were all he was going to have, while his opponent could and would receive reinforcements and replacements from the sea. He had no expectation of stopping an amphibious assault at the beach and did not plan to do so. Nor did he expect that in the long run he could successfully hold Okinawa. What he knew he could do and upon which he planned his defense of the island was a skillfully sited series of positions designed to bleed the attacking forces white. His opponent would, in all probability, take the island, but at a staggering cost that would stun far-off Washington, D.C.

At first glance Sugar Loaf was an unlikely anchor for one flank of an entire defensive line. On a tactical map, the hill's elevation showed as 235 feet, but that was Sugar Loaf's elevation above sea level. Its relationship to the surrounding terrain was another matter. Measuring only 300 yards in length, the east-west-oriented hill rose to a height of little more than 50

**Sugar Loaf was actually one great reinforced bunker, impervious even to direct hits and studded with almost undetectable firing ports.**

feet, barely enough to show on a map as a hill at all.

Had Sugar Loaf stood alone, it would not have been a major obstacle. That, however, was not the case. Sugar Loaf was supported by two other low hills, Half Moon to the southeast and the Horseshoe to the south; all three hills commanded the open terrain all about them. Today, almost 70 years later, the Sixth Marine Division's Special Action Report best describes the tactical problems presented by Sugar Loaf and its neighbors.

"Any attempt to capture Sugar Loaf by

flanking action from east or west is immediately exposed to flat trajectory fire from both of the supporting terrain features. Likewise, an attempt to reduce either the Horseshoe or the Half Moon would be exposed to destructive, well-aimed fire from Sugar Loaf itself. In addition, the three localities are connected by a network of tunnels and galleries, facilitating covered

movement of reserves.

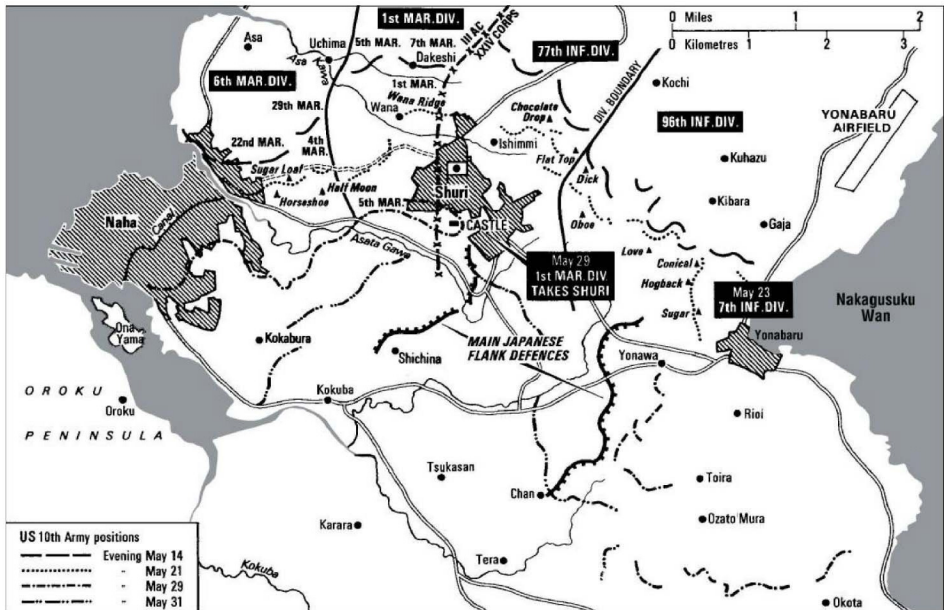
"As a final factor in the strength of the position, it will be seen that all sides of Sugar Loaf Hill are precipitous, and there are no evident avenues of approach into the hill mass. For strategic location and tactical strength, it is hard to conceive of a more powerful position than the Sugar Loaf terrain afforded. Added to the foregoing was the bitter fact that troops assaulting this position presented a clear target to enemy machine guns, mortars and artillery emplaced on the Shuri heights to their left and left rear."

Even worse, the Japanese defenders of Colonel Seiko Mita's 15th Independent Mixed Regiment were not *on* Sugar Loaf, they were *in* it, occupying an interconnected system of passageways and underground firing positions that left not an inch of dead space in front. Sugar Loaf was actually one great reinforced bunker, impervious even to direct hits and studded

**Marines prepare for yet another attack on Sugar Loaf Hill. (USMC photo)**



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THE FINAL CAMPAIGN: MARINES IN THE VICTORY ON OKINAWA

with almost undetectable firing ports. Outside, the ground in every direction had been surveyed and registered for supporting mortar and artillery fires. Sugar Loaf was indeed the western anchor of LTG Ushijima's Shuri Line, and the flat terrain around it was carefully selected to be a killing zone.

A killing zone was what Captain Owen T. Stebbins' Company G, 2d Battalion, 22d Marine Regiment walked into on the afternoon of Saturday, 12 May. Accompanied by 11 M4 tanks, the initial advance across the open ground in front of Sugar Loaf seemed almost too easy.

It was easy, but only because the Japanese were waiting until the greatest number of advancing Marines was within range. When they were, the Japanese opened fire with every available weapon, engulfing the ranks of "George" Co in a firestorm. Small-arms and machine-gun fire from Sugar Loaf, mortars firing from Half Moon and the Horseshoe, long-range machine guns, heavy mortars and artillery to the left at Shuri, all of them accurate, ripped into the Marine ranks.

LTG Ushijima had chosen his killing ground well. Casualties in the ranks of

Co G were immediate and crippling, with two of Capt Stebbins' platoons decimated and reduced to little more than squad strength. Gathering up the remnants of what had been a full-strength company only minutes before, Capt Stebbins, accompanied by his remaining platoon leader, First Lieutenant Dale W. Bair, threw them in a lung-straining, heart-pounding dash for the base of Sugar Loaf. Before the charge had covered the last 100 yards,

another 28 Marines were down, killed or wounded, and Capt Stebbins was out of action, shot through both legs.

First Lt Bair assumed command, only to have his left arm ripped by machine-gun fire. With his wounded arm hanging useless, Bair picked up a Browning M1919A4 light-machine gun, tripod and all, with his sole functioning hand and led a bare handful of Marines through a blizzard of machine-gun and mortar fire, accom-



Amtracs, mounted with 75 mm howitzers and .50-caliber machine guns, helped press the attack on Sugar Loaf. They also resupplied the leather-necks and evacuated the wounded.

USMC



CPA/ALBERT J. GROSS

The 60 mm mortar section of George Co, 2/22 takes a short rest after a hard fight near Naha, 29 May 1945.

panied by a shower of grenades to the top of Sugar Loaf.

The 6-foot-2-inch, 225-pound Bair stood there upright with the machine gun cradled over his left arm, returning fire for fire. Hit twice more by machine-gun fire while standing totally exposed, the big lieutenant refused to fall. "It was impossible to be afraid when you saw him standing there," remembered one Marine later. Squad leader Sergeant Edmund M. DeMar thought Bair looked like a character straight out of a Hollywood movie. DeMar then went down with blood spurting from a jagged wound in his right thigh.

For his inspiring leadership and total disregard for his own safety, Dale Bair, who already had the Silver Star for bravery on Eniwetok, would be awarded the Navy Cross. With leadership like that of Bair setting the standard, three additional attempts were made at Sugar Loaf that day. Sadly, each one was the same story. Thirty men might reach the summit only to be raked by deadly direct fire from Half Moon and the Horseshoe and cut down by murderously accurate mortar and artillery fire. Perhaps 10, all who were left, would crawl painfully back down, dragging their wounded with them, while friendly artillery fire did its best to shield their withdrawal.

Of the 230 members of Co G who went into the attack that day, only 70 were present for duty when the sun went down.

The next day, Sunday, brought more of the same. Despite furious Japanese resistance, elements of Lieutenant Colonel Horatio C. Woodhouse's 2/22, many of

them freshly arrived replacements, fought their way to the top of Sugar Loaf several times. Each time, deadly enfilade fire from Shuri cut them down in windrows, reducing the able bodied to mere handfulls, far too few to hold against the counterattacks that came boiling up from the Japanese reverse slope defenses.

Despite continual close air support, the efforts of the 6thMarDiv's entire artillery assets and the fires of one battleship, four cruisers and three destroyers, the hill could be taken, but it could not be held. By the time an attack reached the summit, there were not enough able-bodied Marines left to stay there.



USMC

A leatherneck of 29th Marine Regiment prepares to advance over open terrain under deadly Japanese Nambu machine-gun fire.

To make a bad situation worse, a steady drenching rain began to fall on Monday, 14 May. Almost immediately, the flat open ground in front of Sugar Loaf became a foot-sucking bog. It seemed like the attacks against Sugar Loaf were carried out in slow motion with men wrenching one foot at a time from the clinging mud underfoot, all the while being lashed mercilessly by Japanese fire.

Late in the afternoon, Major Henry A. Courtney, the executive officer of 2/22, was successful in leading a handful of men through the clinging muck and the unrelenting Japanese fire to a foothold halfway up the north slope of Sugar Loaf. Furious defensive fires halted Maj Courtney's group there, forcing them to seek what scant cover there was until darkness brought some respite.

As Maj Courtney saw it, that respite was only temporary. The position he and his men held was untenable. A Japanese counterattack that came down over the summit would roll over them like an avalanche. To stay where they were was impossible. The sole remaining place to go was up. Henry Courtney made a decision. "I'm going to the top of Sugar Loaf. Who wants to come along?" Not one man remained behind as Henry Courtney left the shell hole in which he had been hunkered and made for the crest of Sugar Loaf.

Henry Courtney earned the Medal of Honor there atop Sugar Loaf, scrambling from position to position to organize a defense that could hold that blood-soaked ground. Determined and courageous in the midst of a horrific concentration of Japanese fire that Browning Automatic Rifleman Lester Brandt described as "the worst hell I experienced in combat," Maj Courtney died in a near direct hit by a mortar round.

Nearly two-thirds of Courtney's small group were killed or wounded in less than a half hour as the Japanese blanketed Sugar Loaf with grenades and mortar fire and raked it with machine guns. One who was not killed or wounded or, miraculously, even scratched was Corporal John "Jack" Castignola, who raised the technique of grenade throwing to an art form. Working like a machine, Castignola would pull the pin from a grenade and send it rolling down the hill at the Japanese below, while at the same time reaching for another grenade.

Slowly, painfully, Jack Castignola was forced to join the other remaining members of the Courtney group stumbling back down the fire-blackened hill, taking their wounded with them. One of those wounded was South Dakota farm-boy Lester Brandt, his spleen and one kidney shredded when a Japanese machine-gun round struck one

of the magazines in his cartridge belt and exploded its contents. Lester Brandt would live to remember Sugar Loaf.

Nineteen-year-old Cpl James L. "Jim" Day, a machine-gun squad leader, would live as well. For three days, Jim Day and his small squad sheltered in a shell hole on the front face of Sugar Loaf, fighting off every Japanese attempt to overrun them. Reduced by casualties until only Jim Day and Private First Class Dale Bertoli, who was shaking with the ravages of dengue fever, were left, there they stayed, refusing to yield so much as an inch. When they were finally relieved, the bodies of 142 Japanese were counted around their makeshift position.

Fifty-three years later, Major General James L. Day, USMC (Ret) would be awarded the Medal of Honor from the President of the United States for his "conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty." Jim Day is believed to be the only Marine to have been both wounded and decorated for bravery in three wars: World War II, Korea and Vietnam.

The unrelenting rain continued to fall, turning the ground all about Sugar Loaf, already a mire, into liquid mud, a festering swamp littered with the wreckage of attack after attack after attack. Knocked-out tanks and amphibian tractors (amtracs) slowly rusted and sank deeper and deeper into the ooze; discarded helmets, weapons

and equipment littered the nightmare terrain. And something else was there also, something hardly ever seen—the decomposing bodies and fragments of bodies of scores of dead Marines.

Marines pride themselves on never leaving fallen comrades on the battlefield, but to attempt to retrieve the dead who dotted the glue-like landscape about Sugar Loaf would have been a death sentence for

**Sharp-eyed Japanese forward observers at Shuri missed nothing. Any movement, even the showing of a head, brought an instant rain of deadly accurate fire.**

would-be rescuers. Sharp-eyed Japanese forward observers at Shuri missed nothing. Any movement, even the showing of a head, brought an instant rain of deadly accurate fire. Fire like that killed Maj Thomas L. Myers, the commanding officer of 1/22, when his command post was spotted and immediately taken under fire. LtCol Jean W. Moreau, who commanded 1/29, was wounded seriously in the same fashion.

After three days of near constant combat, 22d Marines suffered 60 percent casualties. The 29th Marines would have to shoulder the main load. One of the first of the regiment to make it to the top of Sugar

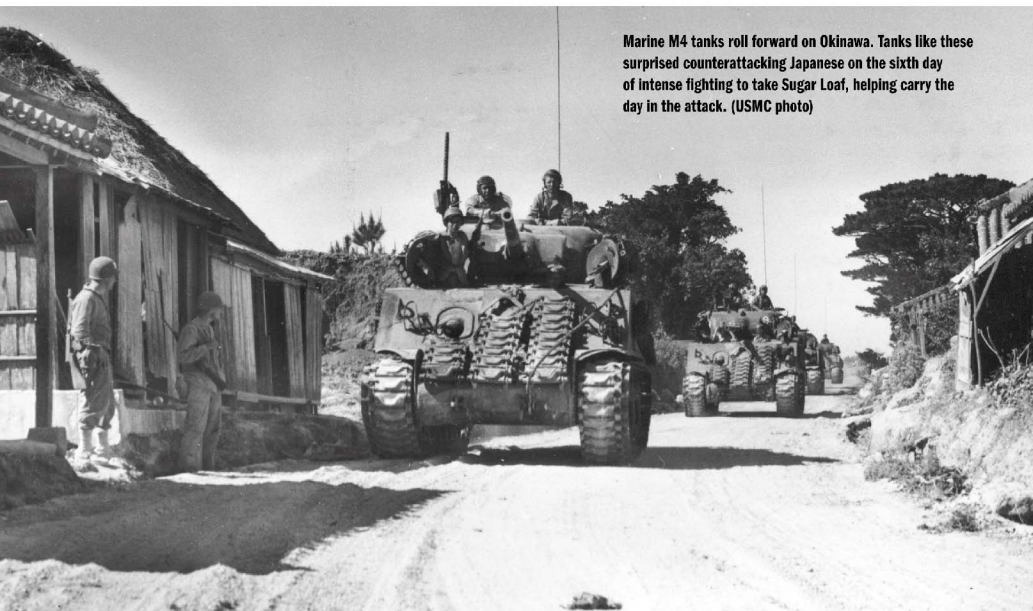
Loaf was 1stLt George Murphy, a platoon leader in Capt Howard L. Mabie's Co D, who led his depleted platoon to the crest in a bayonet charge. They were engaged immediately in a grenade battle that in minutes exhausted the entire supply of 350 grenades they had taken with them.

Whittled down by mounting casualties, those of the platoon still on their feet gave ground one foot at a time, with 1stLt Murphy covering the withdrawal. Firing with one hand and helping a wounded Marine toward safety with the other, Murphy absorbed the full force of a mortar round that landed squarely in front of him. "Irish George" Murphy, college football All-American and captain of the 1942 Notre Dame "Fighting Irish" football team, died instantly.

The attacks went on, and so, too, did the casualties.

For every three Marines to reach the summit of Sugar Loaf, two didn't return. One of those was Cpl Victor "Vic" Hanson, a fire-team leader in Co F, 2d Bn, 29th Marines. Treasured by superiors as a man who could be depended upon, admired by squad mates for never, under any circumstances, wavering in the face of danger, Vic Hanson, a huge bear of a man, caught a burst from a Japanese *Nambu* in his right thigh. The stream of bullets ripped the sub-femoral artery. He bled to death before a corpsman could reach him. Howling unintelligibly, his closest friend, Peter Madigan, went berserk, charged wildly

**Marine M4 tanks roll forward on Okinawa. Tanks like these surprised counterattacking Japanese on the sixth day of intense fighting to take Sugar Loaf, helping carry the day in the attack. (USMC photo)**





**Leathernecks with 2/22 raise the American flag on the southernmost end of Okinawa in honor of their battalion commander, LtCol Horatio C. Woodhouse, who was killed on 30 May 1945.**

toward the Japanese and died in a fusillade of rifle fire.

Second Lieutenant Charles E. “Charlie” Behan, another member of F/2/29, wounded in the mouth and spitting blood and bits of teeth, refused medical treatment and made that same attack. Hit again, still refusing treatment and unable to talk, he continued to lead, using hand signals. A burst from a machine gun caught him full in the chest. PFC Bill Iulek saw “the bullets come right out of his back, and you could see his jacket raised—plink, plink, plink.” The citation for Charlie Behan’s posthumous Navy Cross would attest to “his courageous and unflinching devotion to duty.”

All of the blood that was shed on Sugar Loaf wasn’t Marine blood. Day after day of constant combat was taking its toll on the Japanese as well. Slowly, steadily, that defense was weakening. On Friday, 18 May it broke. A three-pronged simultaneous attack against Sugar Loaf, Half Moon and the Horseshoe by the 29th Marines caught the Japanese completely off guard. The last 200 members of the 15th Independent Mixed Regiment died fighting.

Coupled with the successful Army attacks on Conical Hill to the east, the Shuri Line was breached. There would be two more months of fighting on Okinawa, but from that point on, the Japanese situation was hopeless. Bringing that about had cost the 6thMarDiv 2,662 in dead and wounded and nearly 2,000 more nonbattle casualties, men completely worn out and used up.

### Sixty-Eight Years On

Medal of Honor Marine Maj Henry A. Courtney was buried in the Sixth Marine Division Cemetery on Okinawa. Following the war, when the American dead were repatriated, his remains were disinterred for reburial in the Courtney family plot in Calvary Cemetery, Duluth, Minn. But Henry Courtney never really left Okinawa, where today Camp Courtney houses the headquarters of the 3dMarDiv and III Marine Expeditionary Force.

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Jack Castignola, who went up Sugar Loaf with Henry Courtney, came back down under his own power. In 1946, he returned to college to complete his education. He became one of the most successful high-school football coaches in Michigan history, winning 231 games and a succession of conference and state championships during his career. “Coach Jack,” a beloved coach, teacher, counselor and father figure, died of cancer in 1986. At the entrance to the Trenton, Mich., high-school football stadium, a granite monument memorializes his life dedicated to guiding and inspiring the lives of young people.

Vic Hanson, orphaned by the death of

his mother, was raised by his uncle who treated him as his own son; the cousin with whom he grew up was more like a brother. Did Vic Hanson, somewhere in that place Marines hope to go, know that the cousin he knew as a brother and who flew B-29s during the war, would name his own son for him and that Victor Davis Hanson would become a renowned historian, author and political analyst? Maybe he did.

Owen Stebbins made it his duty to see that the Marines with whom he fought received proper recognition for what they did on that terrible hill. It was primarily through his efforts that the lost recommendation for Jim Day’s Medal of Honor finally was located and the award made. Owen Stebbins died in 1996.

MajGen James L. “Jim” Day, USMC (Ret), Medal of Honor winner, died in 1998. He rests today in San Diego’s Fort Rosecrans National Cemetery overlooking the blue waters of the Pacific.

In 1956, Master Sergeant Edmund M. DeMar was stationed at Marine Barracks, 8th and I streets S.E., Washington, D.C., where he occupied one of the Marine Corps’ most visible billets, drum major of the United States Marine Band. He was many miles and a few years from Sugar Loaf Hill.

LTG Mitsuru Ushijima, true to the code of the samurai, ended his own life by ritual suicide, *seppuku*, rather than surrender.

He denied his operations officer, Col Hiromichi Yahara, permission to do the same, telling him in a written directive: “If you die, there will be no one left to tell that we did our duty and fought honorably here. You must bear the temporary shame of surrender, but endure it. This is an order from your army commander.”

Hiromichi Yahara’s book “Okinawa Kessen” (“Battle for Okinawa”) is the sole account of the Okinawa campaign as it was experienced by the Japanese who defended the island. Hiromichi Yahara died in 1981.

Sugar Loaf Hill today is a bustling center of commerce, but we never should forget it wasn’t always that way.

*Editor’s note: Maj Bevilacqua, a Leatherneck contributing editor, is a former enlisted Marine who served in the Korean and Vietnam wars. Later in his career, he was an instructor at Amphibious Warfare School and Command and Staff College, Quantico, Va.*

