

K Company at Guadalcanal

Discovering a father's war

My father never spoke much about Guadalcanal, the island that was the scene of one of the World War II's pivotal battles. I, along with my brother and sister, knew he was a second lieutenant rifle platoon commander in the Pacific, but his experience remained a mystery.

On occasion, he mentioned still being quite sad that Capt. Joe Terzi and Phil Wilheit were killed later in the war, after Guadalcanal, at Cape Gloucester, New Britain, where the two men were in charge of K

Company and on the first day of the invasion hit a pillbox with a heavy machine gun.

Terzi was killed first. Wilheit assumed control of K Company but was killed several minutes later. Both were posthumously awarded the Navy Cross for leading the attack, which eventually destroyed the pillbox and wiped out the Japanese in that area. Terzi was from an Italian Catholic family. How grief stricken they must have been to receive news of his death, which occurred on Dec. 26, 1943, just one day after Christmas.

But the memory of my father's 3rd Platoon at Guadalcanal and Cape Gloucester would fade away. Like so many paths the Marines had walked along in the South Pacific, it was dust on the wheels of history.

Then in the September 1997 edition of the Marine Corps Gazette, an award-winning article by historian William Bartsch, "Crucial Battle Ignored," was published. It chronicled the actions of K Company in their fight against 550 crack troops from the Japanese Kuma Battalion led by Maj. Eiji Mizuno at the eastern sector of Guadalcanal.

In early 2008, I started my own research.

◆ ◆ ◆
On Sept. 2, 1942, the 3rd Battalion, commanded by Lt. Col. Bill "Spike" McKelvy, took up a position that snaked through the jungle for 3,400 yards. K Company guarded a 750-yard area that was directly opposite a large



2nd Lt. Herman Abady, the author's father.

kunai grass field. The Marine line was only one man deep and had no reinforcements.

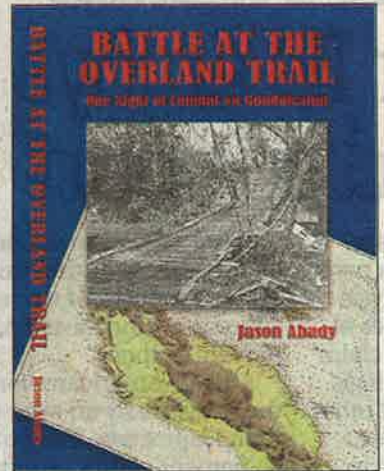
Directly behind K Company's 3rd Platoon was the Overland Trail, which led directly back to an airstrip. Because of its strategic location, Guadalcanal was an island of pivotal importance for either side to prosecute the war in their favor. It is for this reason that the Battle of Overland Trail was important — it prevented the Japanese from seizing the much coveted Henderson Airfield.

The 1st Marine Division was fighting with mostly World War I-vintage equipment. Second Lt. Bill Sager recalls the jungle heat and humidity rotted the clothes right off the backs of his men. Most were infected with malaria. Making matters worse, the Navy had withdrawn due to a severe defeat they suffered, taking with them 50 per-

cent of scheduled equipment. Even Gen. Douglas MacArthur felt the Marines would not be able to hold on.

◆ ◆ ◆
In researching the book, I came across many letters, diaries and photographs that had never been released to the public. Trips were taken to the National Archives in College Park, Md., and the Marine Corps Research Library at Quantico. Bill Bartsch sent me more than 700 pages of information, which I spread out on a table and began to study.

The task was daunting. Within these documents and the National Archives were memories from Guadalcanal to Peleliu. The muster lists and combat reports gradually revealed an image of the Battle at Overland Trail. There was a photograph of Pvt. Hugh Harwood who manned one of the Browning light ma-



"Battle at the Overland Trail" by Jason Abady details a critical part of the Guadalcanal Campaign.

chine guns on the left side of the trail.

Leo McDermott's diary detailed the members of the Terzi listening post that ran into the Kuma Battalion before they hit K Company. Lee Williams, who was in a 60mm mortar squad, recalled his feelings before the battle. He prayed like never before, reciting Psalm 23 and the Lords Prayer.

Just after midnight on Sept. 13, 1942, the Marines heard Japanese cutting through the barbed-wire line. Captain Putnam ordered flares to be sent up. In the eerie cast of the light, K Company saw the heavily camouflaged Kuma Battalion soldiers coming across the field. The noise was earsplitting as machine gun squads cut bright lines across the kunai grass with their tracer ammunition.

At dawn, the Japanese made several charges with fixed bayonets but could not break the K Company line. The Overland Trail, the airfield and therefore victory in the South Pacific would remain just beyond Japan's grasp. My book is perhaps small compensation for these Marines. But at least their actions will not be forgotten.

Author Jason Abady was always intrigued by his father's experience at Guadalcanal. His book, "Battle at the Overland Trail," is available on Amazon. Abady graduated from Brown University in 1989 with a bachelor's degree in history and is a student of traditional as well as alternative interpretations of history. He is a proud member of Seal Team PT and belongs to the Richmond JCC. Contact him at jabaady55@verizon.net.