

Lam

JOHN HERSEY WIRE

From San Francisco, Calif. to David Hulburd -- October 18, 1942 (rec'd 10/19/42)

If used, this material must be submitted to censorship in Washington.

The Marines on Guadalcanal have not passed out medals for every dash through gunfire of every plane shot down. They have been anything but flowery in their communique. But on Guadal perhaps as much as in any Allied show so far in this war the men have been thoroughly selfless. Equipment this time has been too little and too early, but the men have spent themselves as if they were as worthless as the Jap occupation currency they found in the beachhead. It is impossible to say who deserves most credit. Certainly the command has been alert and tough. It has anticipated every Jap stroke, including the present push. General Vandergrift, who can be seen in the evenings stretched out meditatively in a canvas deck chair in front of his heavily fly-sprayed cabin, has been cool, soft-spoken, crafty, hard and wonderfully cheerful. The Air Commander, General Geiger, not a young man, wears his cigar and chooses his tactics with a jaunty air. They say he is too old to fly, but one night during a particularly heavy shelling, he took off at the controls of an SBD to get up where the air was less bombby.

The colonels who command Marine regiments and battalions -- men like Edson, Whaling, Sims, Fuller, Hannegan, Hunt -- go out on patrols, lie in the coral-crusty mud with their men, dodge the soprano-chattering Jap twenty-fives, altogether live as humbly and firecely as Russian officers. But there are also heroes on Guadal who are not and never will be colonels. I think of a slight lad named Leon J. Stevens, PFC of Flint, Mich., a so-called wirestringer, who during the last four-day push carried a heavy steel spool of telephone wire eight miles up & down sixty-degree slopes, and in his spare time helped evacuate wounded men on stretchers. Carrying wounded men in such terrain after a tropical downpour is brutal work. I know, because I helped a couple of times. And so the Navy Medical Corpsmen and Marine Bandsmen, who go into the heaviest fire to carry out hurt men, cannot be praised enough.

Take the case of PFC Clinton Logan Prater, a clarinetist in a regimental band: he went under deadly mortar fire along the Mataniblan River and had to find his burdened way out of the

Jungle by traveling hand over hand on a field telephone wire.

There are great squads of anonymous heroes; the Mecks, who work with flashlights under blackout ponchos in the open fields, from time to time crawling into their fox-holes as the single nightly bomber known as Washing-machine Charley flies over; the cooks who have developed a wonderful virtuosity with corned willy; the so-called cubs, of the Construction Unit Battalion, who are the beavers of Guadal.

Every man thinks his unit is the best damn thing of its kind in the war.

Major Michael J. Davidovitch, whose two ambitions are to be the cribbage champion of Guadal and the Mayor of N.Y., believes that his Jap prison camp is surpassingly humane, and he is pleased at the prisoners' eager response when he rewards them for a hard day's work of burying dead Japs with "porgy-bait rice" -- canned rice with shrimps or raisins.

Major Jim Murray (Murray!), a college classmate of mine, is rightfully proud of one of his many cares -- the Marine cemetery, a beautiful cut in the coconut groves, with little green crosses, a huge palm leaf on every mound, and mess-can tops nailed to the crosses with inscriptions like this: "Pvt. Robert E. (chicken) Hajdaz, died Sept. 9, 1942, a swell kid & buddy."

Naval AV(S) men, working on air intelligence and maintenance, are Yale, Harvard, and Virginia graduates who have left lucrative jobs and easy lives for mud, mosquitoes, sarap-nel, and a twenty-hour working day; among them are Roger Kent, Sam Savage, Ben Grosserp, (note difference in spelling of Grosserp from Sept. 9 mailer from Hersey -- spelling Grosscup. DH), Dewitt Peterkin, Bill Sheldon.

Gunners are all pouter-proud. Old Lou Diamond, a roaring grey-bearded ancient, famous throughout the Marine Corps, is too old now to negotiate cargo mats in landings, but not too old to bellow at and about his mortar battery with apocalyptic pride. The first day I reached Guadal three Zeros tried to strafe the field: two were shot down, whereupon every crowing AA battery in the beachhead claimed both.

Incidentally, our former editor, Ed Carf, is with an artillery unit over on Tulagi.

But of all the great men on Guadal the fliers are perhaps the greatest. The Marine fighters, using the stubby, tough but slow-climbing naval F4F, have made a record equal to

page 3 -- John Hersey, Oct. 18, 1942

anything aerial anywhere. Young Major John L. Smith, a modest Nebraskan with a straight neck and two little slits of weariness over his cheek-bones, has made what is probably a world's record by shooting down 21 enemy planes in less than two months.

Al Wright and I, it turned out, had plenty of time to talk things over, for he has been helping ~~an~~ a naval scout-bomber squadron become the most experienced fliers in the Navy, with two and three hazardous missions a day. The squadron is very tired and must be relieved soon. When I first saw Al, the day I arrived, he was reading Freud's *Psychoanalysis*, and he remarked drily: "Might need some of this soon." The great Naval Squadron torpedo eight, all but one of whose carrier-borne pilots was lost at Midway, carries on magnificently with pilots who had stayed behind to break in the new torpedo plane, Grumman's TBF (Avenger).

In the air as on the ground, there are little men who do plenty. For instance, a magnificent record has been made in getting shot down pilots back to Guadal from surrounding islands and waters. Great work has been done by youngsters like Lt. Leon Sparrow, flying "ducks", the ancient and unwieldy amphibious JAF. I went on one rescue mission with Sparrow, which affords an example of the rescuers' hazards. Part way, but only part way, we had fighter protection. I had had one lesson in machine gunnery. We had two ducks. The one I was not in developed engine trouble at our destination and the one I was in capsized and sank on landing. Getting out of an upside-down cockpit eight feet under water when strapped down with a parachute and a safety-belt is an experience I will not eagerly repeat. We got the other duck started, loaded our survivor, who had been in the sea for three days, flew back to the beachhead, skidded off the runway and piled that duck up in the mud. I can boast only a couple of cracked ribs. Sparrow is still flying his mercy errands.

Home is what they talk about on Guadal. Women are almost never discussed; with bread, ^{white?} still a luxury food, is dreamt about, the home-cooked kind. Within a few minutes every conversation swings around to home. For instance, Lt. Douglas S. Canning, rather than boast about the valuable work he and his friends have done strafing and dive-bombing in insufficiently souped P 39's, will talk about how he used to drive with girls and boys in

page 4 -- John Hersey, Oct. 18, 1942

his gradually painted 1926 Chevy from Nebraskan town to town for the fabulous ~~xxxx~~ three-day jaunts of summertime. Capt. Robert P. Neuffer of the incredible raiders, who have been in every tough spot and have killed five for one, talks quickly about beer at the German-American Rathskeller at Third Ave. and 17th St. in Manhattan, and about how nice it was to work for Lehn and Fink.

All these men are tired. If they work by day, they're kept up by bombing or shelling at night; if at night, there's always a midday raid. They risk sickness, and some have succumbed despite synthetic medicines like the anti-infectious sulfa-medicines and anti-malarial atabune. And yet they are cheerful and complain much less than men in relatively luxurious spots like the Fiji Islands. They call buildings left behind by the Japs "The Pagoda" and "Hotel de Gink;" They joke about dugout Doug MacArthur; they smile grimly when there is talk of dead Japs. They are not hooligans; they are quiet, generous, noisy, husky average American boys. They have one great sadness. Everywhere -- in the jungle under fire, in mess tents, under mosquito nets, deep in fox holes, you will hear these boys, most of whom have been in the front line two months now, saying, "Gee, wouldn't it be wonderful to be home for Christmas?" But in their hearts they know they haven't a chance of being.