



SPOTLIGHT ON MARINE HEROES #1



"Let's get killed up on that high ground there," he said. "it ain't no good to get it down here." As the men stumbled out for him, he said, "That's the good lads."

The whole motley lot — a fighting outfit only in the minds of a few officers in the First Regiment and in the First Division — started up the hill. I have never understood why. They were the hard core — the men who couldn't or wouldn't quit. They would go up a thousand blazing hills and through a hundred blasted valleys, as long as their legs would carry them. They were Marine riflemen.

Marine at War by Russell Davis

The First Marine Division was one of the first two division-sized unit ever formed by the Corps. It was established in February 1941 aboard the USS Texas in Cuba around the nucleus of the pre-war First Marine Brigade. The Division's first commander was the amphibious warrior, [BrigGen Holland M. Smith](#). There was no record of an activation ceremony since the division was deep in the preparations for FLEX 7, the last of the pre-war fleet landing exercises. On completion of the exercises, the Old Breed redeployed to Marine Corps Base, Quantico. Due to shortages of barracks there, the Seventh Marines was billeted at Marine Corps Base, Parris Island. In June 1941, the entire First Marine Division moved into garrison at the newly established Marine base at New River, North Carolina. MajGen Phillip Torrey took command the same month and the Division continued the serious business of expansion and training.

When war came in December 1941, only 8,918 Marines were assigned to the Old Breed, far short of the authorized strength of almost 20,000. In March 1942, the Third Marine Brigade, organized around the Seventh Marines, sailed for Western Samoa. In May 1942, the rest of the Division sailed from Norfolk Naval Base bound for New Zealand. Arriving in June 1942, the Division was alerted for combat operations in the South Pacific.

On 7 August 1942 the First Marine Division landed at Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands under the command of [MajGen Alexander Vandegrift](#). So began Operation WATCHTOWER, the first major ground offensive of the war. This was a misnomer in reality, since the Division went into a defensive cordon around Henderson Field, an important

American airbase on the island. The fighting around Guadalcanal, called simply "the 'canal" by Marines, quickly evolved into a complex series of air, ground and sea actions.

The First Marine Division found itself short of food, fuel, water and ammunition. Forced to subsist on captured Japanese rations, the Marines were pummeled by long range enemy artillery, nicknamed "Pistol Pete." They also endured some of the heaviest naval gunfire barrages and air raids of the war. In one of the most desperate fights of the war, Marines on Edson's Ridge stood firm against wave after wave of suicidal Japanese attackers on Edson's Ridge during the night of 13-14 September 1942. Before the battle, [Col Merritt "Red Mike" Edson](#) told his Marines, "There it is. It is useless to ask ourselves why it is we who are here. We are here. There is only us between the airfield and the Japs. If we don't hold, we will lose Guadalcanal." They held.



Marines take a bath in the Lunga River while a machine gunner pulls security during the Guadalcanal campaign, 1942. *USMC Photo*

Ravaged by malaria and malnutrition, the Old Breed pulled off of the 'canal between December 1942 and February 1943. They went into garrison in Australia, first to Brisbane, and then to [Melbourne](#). The Marines fell in love with Australian, and the Aussies reciprocated the affection. Almost all of the young Americans would remember their stay down under as one of the happiest periods of their lives. Of course, they weren't there for a vacation. Instead, the Old Breed built its strength as it rested and refitted in preparation for future combat. While in Australia, the Division band adopted the song "[Waltzing Matilda](#)" as a favorite and it soon become the official song of the First Marine Division. [MajGen William Rupertus](#) assumed command of the Division in the summer of 1943.



Swanton Street in Melbourne during a divisional parade in 1943. *State Library of Victoria*

On 26 December 1943, the Division landed at Cape Gloucester on New Britain. As part of the campaign to secure New Guinea, the combat on New Britain took place in some of the most rugged terrain anywhere on earth. Clothing, paper, leather — it all quickly rotted or fell apart in the intense humidity and heavy rainfall. Weapons and ammunition corroded almost in front of men's eyes. Marines moved out from the beach head into the almost impenetrable jungle to locate and destroy the Japanese defenders. Securing Hill 150, Aogiri Ridge and Hill 660, the Division's infantry regiments secured a lodgment around the landing beaches at Borgen Bay.



A 75mm Howitzer Motor Carriage of the First Marine Division comes ashore off an LST at Cape Gloucester, December 1943. *USMC Photo*

During April 1944 the Old Breed deployed to its new home on Pavuvu in the Russell Islands. Pavuvu was a far cry from the bright lights of Melbourne and the Division's Marines were bitterly disappointed when they first set eyes on Pavuvu. It was a tropical hole infested with sand crabs and covered by coconut plantations. The first order of business was to erect a tent city and clear out the millions of rotting coconuts that covered the ground. Entire battalions turned to in working parties to lay crushed coral roads and trails without any mechanized support. It was backbreaking work, but at least Pavuvu was free of malaria. One of the most pleasant memories of that time for most of the Division's Marines was Bob Hope's USO show just before the next operation.



[Bob Hope](#) arrives on Pavuvu to visit the Old Breed. Late in his life, Hope told an interviewer that for him, the show for the 1st MarDiv was the most meaningful for him.
USMC Photo

On 15 September 1944, the First Marine Division assaulted Peleliu in the Palaus group. This campaign had only been expected to last for three days, but ultimately took over two months before the island was secured. By the time it was relieved by the Army's 81st Infantry Division on 16 October 1944, the Old Breed had been burned out by the deeply entrenched Japanese defenders. Only a few points off the equator, Peleliu was a brutally hot and humid place under the best of conditions. Air support stripped much of the vegetation from the island's ridges, leaving naked coral that blazed from the heat and offered little concealment. To add to all the other dangers on Peleliu, many Marines were killed or wounded by flying shards of broken coral, propelled at high speed from explosions.



Peleliu, 21 September 1943. LtGen Roy Geiger, CG of the IIIrd Amphibious Corps (left with back to camera) visits the command post of the 1st Marine Regiment only a few hundred yards from the main battle line on Bloody Nose ridge. Shaking his hand is Col Lewis B. Puller, CO of the 1st Marines. Behind Puller's right shoulder is Assistant Division Commander, BrigGen Oliver P. Smith. *USMC Photo*

The Division returned to Pavuvu in October 1944 and [MajGen Pedro DelValle](#) assumed command the following month. Once again, the Division rebuilt and prepared for another campaign. After Peleliu, some of the old timers from the Guadalcanal days said goodbye to their buddies and shoved off for assignments stateside. Replacements streamed in to fill the depleted ranks. Training was the order of the day and units marched around and around on the Shore Road around Pavuvu. Each Marine qualified with his individual weapon and practiced the old skills; shooting, maneuvering, communications.

Again, the Old Breed moved out, this time bound for Okinawa, a major island in the Ryukus only 350 miles from the southern Japanese home island of Kyushu. In the largest amphibious assault of World War II, Marine and Army units — among them the First Marine Division — landed on the Hagushi beaches on 1 April 1945. For most of April, the First was employed in a hard-driving campaign to secure the northern sections of Okinawa. On 30 April 1945, that all ended when the Old Breed went into the lines against the teeth of the Japanese defenses on the southern front.

The Division smashed up against the Shuri Line, and in a series of grinding attacks under incessant artillery fire, reduced one supporting position after another. As May wore on, heavy rains flooded the battlefield into a sea of mud, making life misery for all hands. meanwhile, Japanese *kamikaze* attackers exacted a fearsome toll from the supporting ships offshore. Finally, on 31 May 1945, Marines of the First completed the occupation of Shuri Castle, nothing more

than a pile of rubble after so many days of unrelenting combat.

Under the overall command of Tenth Army, the Division continued the push south against the newly established enemy positions around Kunishi Ridge. Marine tank-infantry teams adopted a technique called "processing" to destroy Japanese positions with [flame](#) and demolitions. Finally, organized resistance ended on 21 June when the last Japanese defenses were breached. By now, many of the Old Breed's battalions had been reduced to nothing more than small rifle companies.



In a classic combat photo, Pfc Paul Ison, 5th Marine Regiment, sprints across fire-swept ground in Death Valley, Okinawa, 1945. *USMC Photo*

Rumors swept through the ranks that the Division would ship out for Hawaii, even as units fanned out across the battlefield for the dirty job of mopping-up. But hopes were dashed when the Marines learned they wouldn't be sailing for an exotic post of call. Instead, they were ordered to remain establish camps on Okinawa. Every member of the Division was bitterly disappointed, but one Marine was reputed to have said, "Well, dammit, if they can dish it our, I can take it."

Events moved quickly in the summer of 1945. Expecting a protracted and brutal assault against the Japanese home islands, the Old Breed got a new lease on life with the end of the war in August 1945. On 30 September, the Division was ordered to Hopeh Province, China, for occupation duty. With its headquarters in Tientsin, the Old Breed remained in China until 1947.



A First Marine Division patrol guards a train in North China. Their machinegun is an [M1917A1](#). *USMC Photo*

Returning stateside for the first time in almost seven years, the Division was based at Camp Pendleton, Calif. In the future, the First Marine Division would again receive the call to duty in many climes and places; from the frozen hills of Korea to Vietnam's tropical jungles and the deserts of the Middle East. The World War II era members of the Division set a high standard of sacrifice and devotion to duty that were a beacon to every Marine and Sailor who would later serve with the Old Breed.



Pfc Chuck Natzel, USMC. Pfc Natzel served on Guadalcanal, Cape Gloucester & Peleliu with Battery F 2/11. In this picture, he proudly displays the Division patch, Presidential Unit Citation, and campaign ribbons on his dress green blouse. Chuck, who was from Michigan, passed away in early 2005. *Photo courtesy Pfc Natzel's son-in-law, Craig Gardiepy*

"There is nothing particularly glorious about sweaty fellows, laden with killing tools, going along to fight. And yet — such a column represent a great deal more than 28,000 individuals mustered into a division. All that is behind those men is in that column, too: the old battles, long forgotten, that secured our nation — traditions of things endured, and things accomplished such as regiments hand down forever..."

Fix Bayonets by Capt John W. Thomason Jr., USMC



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