ACCOUNT OF MARINES ON GUADALCANAL

In February, 1943, the same month the fighting stopped on Guadalcanal, a small book appeared in the United States titled Into the Valley. The author was a young magazine journalist named John Hersey. For two weeks during the previous October, he had been with the Marines on Guadalcanal; he had marched with them, swatted mosquitoes and dodged enemy fire with them. His description of jungle combat had an immediate impact back home. But what left the most lasting impression was a little quote about blueberry pie.

... these men looked like the sort you would pick for bodyguard on a dark night. This was especially true if you looked, not at their faces, but at their gear and physique.

The only element of uniformity was their battle dress. “Utilities,” as they are called, are of tough green cloth, which will neither tear nor show in the jungle. The shirt has an open collar, loose sleeves, and, over the heart, a patch pocket with the Marine Corps insignia, a globe symbolizing the Marines’ ubiquitousness (they are proud of it: “From the halls of Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli ... “). The pants are generous, like overalls. Most of Company H had their pants tucked into their socks, or tied snug around their ankles; many of them tied, as I did, with pieces of captured Japanese straw rope.

But aside from their utilities, they were as various and vicious looking as a bunch of pirates. No two packs were of the same size. Each man brought just what he thought he would want and need. The minimum was a poncho, a canteen, rations and a spoon. More provident men had slipped in a few symbols, at least, of comfort: cigarettes in little water-tight cans, salt tablets to compensate for sweat, small first aid packages.

Every man had sneaked along something he thought no one else had – something he had wheedled from the quartermaster or swiped from a store-tent. Before our departure from camp a young captain had taken me into his tent and slipped me two extra bars of Ration D, the chocolate ration, which he said he had gotten never mind where. “In the Marines it’s every man for himself as far as equipment goes,” he said.

Captain Rigaud’s men were certainly armed in this spirit. Each man was weaponed to his own taste and heart’s content. Captain Rigaud himself carried one of the handiest of Marine weapons, a Browning automatic rifle. The company’s proper weapons, heavy machine guns, were carried dismantled, one man carrying the barrel assembly, another the tripod, and a whole squad the ammunition, in heavy metal boxes. But even some of the men assigned to machine guns carried personal arms. Some of the company had old 1903 bolt-action Springfields. Almost all carried knives, slung from their belts, fastened to their packs, or strapped to their legs. Several had field shovels, which they knew how to swing nastily. Some carried .45 calibre automatic pistols. Pockets bulged with grenades. Some were not satisfied with one bayonet, but carried two. There were even a couple of Japanese bayonets. The greatest refinement was an ugly weapon I spotted in the tunic pocket of a corporal – a twelve-inch screwdriver.

I asked him how he had ever gotten along with that.

“Oh,” he said, “just found it on my person.”

“When do you expect to use it?”

“Never can tell, might lose my bayonet with some Japs in the neighborhood.”
But the faces of Captain Rigaud’s men were not the faces of bullies. When you looked into the eyes of those boys, you did not feel sorry for the Japs: you felt sorry for the boys. The uniforms, the bravado, the air of wearing a knife in the teeth – these were just camouflage. The truth was all over those faces . . .

The men stood in a tight little knot right in the trail, where they had discussed the runner’s news. . . Although the conversation might have taken place on any of several fronts, and any military men, from colonel to messboy, might have been the speakers. It would not be fair to identify specific men. . .

Captain Rigaud started it, by whispering to me, in comment on the confusion:
“It’s the same as always. They never tell us enough.”

“Not only about what we’re doing,” another said. “We never get anything but the damnedest scuttlebutt about what’s going on in the world. We don’t even know who’s winning.”

“Yeah,” said a third. “Tell us what’s going on.” I was their most recent connection with the outside world, and they started pouring out questions.

“Are the Russians holding on?”
I said they had done much better than anyone had thought possible.

“Why the hell isn’t Dugout Doug doing anything?”
I said that MacArthur had not been sent any supplies, except for the merest replacements, and no general could do anything with nothing – as he himself had said.

“Well why haven’t they sent him anything?”
By this time I realized that they didn’t really want answers to their questions. They just wanted to throw out their questions, as if they were merely waving their arms in angry gestures of protest.

“Are we going to be left holding the bag here, like those poor suckers in the Phillipines?”

“Why the bejeezus hasn’t the Navy had some PT boats in here sooner to stop that godawful shelling at night?”

“They always told us that marines were supposed to take some place, and then the Army would come along right away so as the marines could take something else. Where the hell’s all the Army? . . .”

“Can’t they do something about the divided command out here? You’d think we were two allies, instead of the most powerful single nation on earth.”

“Where’s all the power, anyhow? Where’s that world-beating P-47 we’ve heard so much about? Where’s that famous new Navy fighter, what is it the F4U? Where’s all that great production?”

The questions became formulas:
“. . . strikes . . .?”
“. . . politics . . . ?”
“. . . propaganda . . . ?”

This was my chance. Now was the time to ask these men what they were fighting for.

These men were not especial malcontents. I had heard questions like these asked by too many men to think this an outstanding group of complainants. But here they were, perhaps about to give their lives for their country, and yet exercising, until it nearly
collapsed from being exercised, the right of free speech. How could men harboring such doubts and such protests fight with enthusiasm? What was there in it for them?

And so I said: “I wonder if I could ask you fellows one question. It’s something I’ve been wondering about quite a bit here on this island. What would you say you were fighting for? Today, here in this valley, what are you fighting for?”

The excited flush, which had come into their faces as they asked their questions, went out again. Their faces became pale. Their eyes wandered. They looked like men bothered by a memory. They did not answer for what seemed a very long time.

Then one of them spoke, but not to me. He spoke to the others, and for a second I thought he was changing the subject or making fun of me, but of course he was not. He was answering my question very specifically.

He whispered: “Jesus, what I’d give for piece of blueberry pie.”

Another whispered: “Personally I prefer mince.”

A third whispered: “Make mine apple with a few raisins in it and lots of cinnamon: you know, Southern style.”

Fighting for pie. Of course that is not exactly what they meant. Here, in a place where they had lived for several weeks mostly on captured Japanese rice, then finally had gone on to such delicacies as canned corn beef and Navy beans, where they were usually hungry and never given a treat – here pie was their symbol of home.

In other places there are other symbols. For some men, in places where there is plenty of good food but no liquor, it is a good bottle of scotch whiskey. In other places, where there’s drink but no dames, they say they’d give their left arm for a blonde. For certain men, books are the thing; for others, music; for others, movies. But for all of them, these things are just badges of home. When they say they are fighting for these things, they mean that they are fighting for home – “to get the goddam thing over and get home.”