

Robert Leckie, from New Jersey, saw action with the First Marines soon after he left his transport ship - the *George F. Elliott*. She was "an African slaver," Leckie tells us - and the men "hated her."

The ship was the least of their worries as the First Marines reached the shores of Guadalcanal, a Pacific island. The Allies needed to capture the place from the Japanese who were building an airfield on it.

The following are key segments of the clip, featuring historical footage of Robert Leckie:

1:56 - 3:12 - Leckie (who died in 2001 of Alzheimer's) describes what it was like to be a Marine on Guadalcanal, fighting the Battle of the Tenaru;

4:42 - 5:20 - Leckie describes his career as a writer; and

5:22 - End - Leckie's son describes his father's later years, before he died of Alzheimer's Disease.

Initially, the young Marines on Guadalcanal saw no action. They were surprised when no one resisted their landings. Days went by without serious fighting. As it happened, when the Marines first arrived, most of the Japanese on the island were construction workers.

Then ... the Japanese fighting troops arrived. Battle-hardened combat soldiers, they - unlike their Allied counterparts - had been through vicious battles before. They passionately believed in their cause. They were unafraid to use their bodies as weapons.

The Allied troops - although they didn't know it initially - would fight for Guadalcanal with limited supplies. In his book *Helmet for My Pillow*, Robert Leckie tells us why. Soon after the landing, the Japanese attacked Allied ships anchored off Guadalcanal. Using the language of his day, Leckie describes his experiences:

The Japs were hammering out one of their greatest naval victories. It was the Battle of Savo Island, what we learned to call more accurately the Battle of the Four Sitting Ducks. They were sinking three American cruisers - the Quincy, Vincennes and Astoria - and one Australian cruiser - the Canberra - as well as damaging one other American cruiser and a U.S. destroyer. (Leckie, *Helmet for My Pillow*, page 65.)

The ships left the Guadalcanal area - before all the supplies could be offloaded. In addition to everything else they would face, the Marines would have to deal with hunger.

As Allied troops waited for the fighting to begin, night after night in their fox holes, the wait became a terror unto itself. In the dark, when it was impossible to see reality, one's imagination began to see things not there. As Leckie noted in *Helmet for My Pillow*:

I know now why men light fires. (Leckie, page 73.)

Finally, the Marines received word that the Japanese were expected to engage the Allies on the banks of Guadalcanal's Tenaru River. Although called a river, the Tenaru was more like a creek:

The Tenaru River lay green and evil, like a serpent, across the palmy coastal plain. It was called a river, but it was not a river; like most of the streams of Oceania, it was a creek - not thirty yards wide. (Leckie, page 74.)

Finally, after so many hours of waiting, the fighting began:

It was upon us in an instant, and then we were firing. We were so disorganized we had not the sense to disperse, clustering around that open pit [for a machine gun] as though we were born of it. (Leckie, page 77.)

The Tenaru was close to Henderson airfield - the real reason for all the fighting on Guadalcanal. To the novice

Marines:

Here was cacophony; here was dissonance; here was wildness; here was the absence of rhythm, the loss of limit, for everyone fires what, when and where he chooses; here was booming, sounding, shrieking, wailing, hissing, crashing, shaking, gibbering noise. Here was hell. (Leckie, page 79.)

The Marines used various weapons, not all of them functioning well, each with their own unique sound:

The plop of the outgoing mortar with the crunch of its fall, the clatter of the machine guns and the lighter, faster rasp of the Browning Automatic Rifles, the hammering of fifty-caliber machine guns, the crash of seventy-five-millimeter howitzer shells, the crackling of rifle fire, the wham of thirty-seven millimeter anti-tank guns firing point-blank canister at the charging enemy - each of these conveys a definite message, and sometimes meaning, to the understanding ear, even though that ear be filled with the total wail of battle. (Leckie, page 79.)

Despite the firing of all these weapons, during the evening phase of this early battle, the Marines weren't really sure where the enemy was located:

...we never knew if there really was anyone there. We heard noises; we fired at them. We felt shells explode on our side and heard enemy bullets; but we could not be sure of their point of origin. (Leckie, page 81.)

The officer whom the men called "Lieutenant Ivy-League" later briefed the Marines on the results of their firing:

"They tried to come over the sandspit. There must have been a thousand of them. We had only that one strand of wire and the guns. You should see them stacked up in front of Bitenail's gun. Must be three deep. They were crazy. They didn't even fire their rifles." (Leckie, page 83.)

Then came the details of the really nasty side of war as "Lieutenant Ivy-League" continued his report:

Four or five of the dead were from our platoon. Two of them had been hacked to death. A Japanese scouting party had found them asleep in their hole on the river bank and sliced them into pieces. (Leckie, page 84.)

On the opposing side, men assessed the dead for weapons, clothing and more:

Our regiment had killed something like nine hundred of them. Most of them lay in clusters or heaps before the gun pits commanding the sandspit, as though they had not died singly but in groups. Moving among them were the souvenir hunters, picking their way delicately as though fearful of booby traps, while stripping the bodies of their possessions. (Leckie, page 84.)

One Marine was looking for no-longer-needed treasure inside the mouths of Japanese soldiers:

One of the marines went methodically among the dead armed with a pair of pliers. He had observed that the Japanese have a penchant for gold fillings in their teeth, often for solid gold teeth. He was looting their very mouths. He would kick their mouths agape, peer into the mouth with all of the solicitude of a Park Avenue dentist - careful, always careful not to contaminate himself by touch - and yank out all that glittered. He kept the gold teeth in an empty Bull Durham tobacco sack, which he wore around his neck in the manner of an amulet. (Leckie, pages 84-85.)

It took no time, whatsoever, for the tropical atmosphere of Guadalcanal to take over the bodies after men had breathed their last. It was, to all witnesses, a ghastly sight:

Dead bodies [of Japanese soldiers] were strewn about the grove. The tropics had got at them already, and they were beginning to spill open. I was horrified at the swarms of flies; black, circling funnels that seemed to emerge from every orifice: from the mouth, the eyes, the ears. The beating of their myriad tiny wings made a dreadful low hum. (Leckie, page 86.)

The reality of death by fighting in the Pacific began to sink in for all observers. It could, after all, be them:

The flies were in possession of the field; the tropics had won; her minions were everywhere, smacking their lips over this bounty of rotting flesh. All of my elation at the victory, all of my fanciful cockiness fled before the horror of what my eyes beheld. It could be my corrupting body the white maggots were moving over; perhaps one day it might be. (Leckie, page 86.)

The Battle of Tenaru has another name - Alligator Creek. Why is it called thus?

Earlier in the fighting, the dug-in Marines saw a strange sight in the river. It seemed as though there was a "V" there, but no one could figure out what it was:

Beneath a bright moon that night, the V reappeared in the river. The green lights gleamed malevolently. Someone shot at it. Rifle fire crackled along the line. The V vanished. We waited, tense. No one came. (Leckie, page 83.)

Only later, did the men discover the V's identity. It was another horrifying fact about the Battle of Tenaru:

That night the V reappeared in the river. Everyone whooped and hollered. No one fired. We knew what it was. It was the crocodile. Three smaller V's trailed afterward. They kept us awake, crunching. The smell kept us awake. Even though we lay with our heads swathed in a blanket - which was how we kept off the mosquitoes - the smell overpowered us.

Smell, the same sense which somehow seems a joke, is the one most susceptible to outrage. It will give you no rest. One can close one's eyes to ugliness or shield the ears from sound; but from a powerful smell there is no recourse but flight. And since we could not flee, we could not escape this smell; and we could not sleep. (Leckie, page 87.)

Despite the smell and the fear, which the reptiles generated, the Marines never fired a single shot at them:

We never shot at the crocs because we considered them a sort of "river patrol." Their appetite for flesh aroused, they seemed to promenade the Tenaru daily. No enemy, we thought, would dare to swim the river with them in it; nor would he succeed if he dared. (Leckie, page 87.)

Thus was born the other name for this early battle on Guadalcanal: Battle of Alligator Creek.

See, also:

Image: Vera Keller Leckie

Image and Brief Bio: Robert Leckie

Video: Biography of John Basilone

Video: Biography of Eugene ("Sledgehammer") Sledge

Video: 5-Part Video Bio of Eugene Sledge

Image and Brief Bio - Lena Riggi Basilone

Video: John Basilone Talks to the Press

Image: John and Lena Basilone - Wedding Photo

Video: Death of John Basilone - Move video to 4:56

Document: Death of Lena Basilone

Video: Guadalcanal - Battle of the Tenaru (Ilu River)

Video: Guadalcanal - Battle at Edson's Ridge Begins (move clip to 8:38)

Video: Guadalcanal - Battle at Edson's ("Bloody") Ridge

Video: Guadalcanal - John Basilone at Edson's ("Bloody") Ridge

Credits:

Brief biography of Robert Leckie, linked in the first line above.

Clip featuring historical interviews with Robert Leckie from HBO, online courtesy HBO's channel at YouTube. Copyright, HBO, all rights reserved. Clip provided here as fair use for educational purposes and to acquaint new viewers with the TV mini-series.

Quoted passages from *Helmet for my Pillow*, by Robert Leckie (reissued from 1957).

A few of the many books which Robert Leckie wrote are available, for online reading, at Google Books:

Strong Men Armed: The United States Marines Against Japan

Conflict: The History of the Korean War, 1950-53

Challenge for the Pacific: The Bloody Six-Month Battle of Guadalcanal

George Washington's War: The Saga of the American Revolution

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/The-Pacific-Robert-Leckie0>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/The-Pacific-Robert-Leckie0>