

THE BATTLE FOR THE MATANIKAU RIVER, SEPTEMBER 27, 1942

As all of his children and most of his friends know, my father, Zach Davis Cox, Sr., saw action on the South Pacific island of Guadalcanal in World War II and was grievously wounded there. However, it was a fascinating turn of events that led him to a hill behind enemy lines on Guadalcanal on September 27, 1942. This tale involves both what is probably one of the greatest feat of applied mathematics in history and what is the luckiest five minutes in the history of the United States Navy.

In early 1942 the outcome of World War II, and with it the fate of democracy, was in doubt. The Axis armies of totalitarian Germany and Japan had enjoyed success after success. The only hope of the free world lay in the advice which Benjamin Franklin had given to his fellow revolutionaries in 1776, "We must all hang together or we shall most assuredly all hang separately." The importance of this strategy was well known to both the Allies and the Axis powers. In particular, Japan recognized that it could not hope to win a prolonged war of attrition with the Western industrial powers. Japan realized its only hope of retaining any of its newly acquired territories was to divide its enemies, defeat them in detail, and convince them individually to recognize its conquests.

The key to the Japanese strategy was to isolate and threaten Australia. Japan had already overrun much of the South Pacific and had cut off the western supply lines to Australia by capturing Singapore. But the eastern supply lines from the United States to Australia were still open. The only reason that Japan could pose a threat to Australia was that a significant portion of Australia's military forces were helping England fight the Nazis in Europe, Africa, and the Near East. If Japan could sever the lines of supply between the United States and Australia, then the Australia citizens would demand that their armies and navies return home. Disengaging the Australian forces from the war against the Nazis would pose an unacceptable risk to England. When faced with this possibility, England would be forced to sue for peace with Japan on Japan's terms in order to avoid destruction by the Nazis. If this happened, the United States would have to fight Japan alone.

In order to achieve this objective, Japan had a two part strategy. First, it had to eliminate the United States' offensive capabilities in the Pacific. Second, it had to cleave the lines of supply that connected Australia to United States. Elimination of the United States' offensive capabilities was a straightforward but difficult problem. Japan had to find and destroy the four aircraft carriers in the United States Pacific Fleet. It had hoped to do this in the Pearl Harbor attack on Sunday, December 7, 1941, but all the carriers were away either being refitted on the West Coast or delivering planes to Wake or Midway Islands. Severing the supply lines was similarly a straightforward problem--take and hold an island sitting astride the shipping lanes and use it as a naval and air base to interdict traffic between the United States and Australia.

However obvious this two-fold strategy is in retrospect, in times of war, military planners are not afforded the luxury of hindsight possessed by modern armchair historians. While the United States did not have a crystal ball to foretell the future, it had a device that was almost as powerful. It is well known that the Allies were successful in cracking the military codes of both Germany and Japan during World War II. The Allies success in breaking Germany's codes was greatly aided by brilliant Polish mathematicians who reverse engineered an early version of

German's cipher devices and smuggled this technology out of Poland in 1939. The United States was not nearly so fortunate in its efforts to crack the Japanese codes. Nevertheless, in an astonishing feat of applied mathematics the likes of which the world has seldom seen, United States cryptologists not only broke the Japanese diplomatic code (Purple) and several naval codes (most importantly JN-19, JN-25, and JN-25b), but actually reconstructed the Japanese cipher machines based on inferences they drew from the form of the encrypted messages. While the German cryptographic devices (and their American counterparts) were based on prewar commercial designs and used electrically wired rotors, the Japanese cipher machine was based on a series of stepping switches of the type used in telephone exchanges of the day.¹

With the aid of the cryptologists, the United States knew how Japan planned to implement its two-fold strategy to force England out of the war in the Pacific. First, lure the remaining U.S. aircraft carriers into an ambush at Midway Island.² Then with the carriers out of action, capture the island of Samoa. Samoa was ideally suited as a base of operations from which the Japanese could isolate Australia. In regard to the Midway ambush, the United States could only sit and wait for Japan to make its move. But with Samoa, the United States could preempt the Japanese plan.

In order to prevent the Japanese from taking Samoa, the United States had to occupy and fortify the island. Because the United States was fully committed to a strategy of winning the European War first, it had few military resources which it could send to Samoa. Therefore, the United States decided that it would substitute quality for quantity in the defense of Samoa. That quality took the form of the 7th Regiment of the 1st Marine Division, which was known as "The Old Breed." Because it was expected that the 7th Marines would see combat first and had the critical duty of holding Samoa against the entire Japanese Imperial Navy, the best and most experienced officers and NCOs in the entire Marine Corps were transferred to bring it up to full strength. Foremost among the officers on which the 7th Marines' reputation was built was Lieutenant Colonel Lewis B. "Chesty" Puller, the commanding officer of the 1st Battalion of the 7th Marines. One of Puller's junior officers was a 22 year-old captain named Zach Davis Cox. Filled with the best the Marine Corps had to offer, the 7th Marines sailed for Samoa from Norfolk, VA on April 10, 1942.³

¹ The remarkable ability of the U.S. cryptologists to duplicate the Japanese cipher machine was confirmed in May of 1945 when a device nearly identical to the one built by the United States was discovered in the smoldering ruins of the Japanese Embassy in Berlin. The only significant difference between the two devices was that the American version was more reliable and less likely to garble messages than the Japanese version.

² The breaking of the Japanese cipher also enabled the United States to intercept and turn back an invasion fleet in the Battle of the Coral Sea on May 8, 1942. The cost of this "victory" was the loss of the carrier *Lexington* and a severely damaged carrier *Yorktown*.

³ Zach Davis Cox and Mary Gwin Oliver were engaged to be married in June of 1942. Their wedding plans were well underway on Saturday, February 28, 1942, when Zach came to Mt. Olive from Camp Lejeune on a weekend pass and told his fiancée that they had to get married the following Friday, March 6, 1942. Mary Gwin told him that was impossible. And then in what was to become an all too common reversal of roles during World War II, the prospective groom told the prospective bride that they **had** to get married. Mary Gwin asked why and all Zach could say was, "I can't tell you." On the following Friday, March 6th, Zach was not scheduled to be released from duty for his weekend pass until 5:00 p.m. About 10:00 a.m. that morning Colonel Puller happened upon an obviously distracted Captain Cox and told him that he wasn't going to be worth anything to the Marine Corps that day and to leave early for his weekend pass. At 8:00 p.m. that evening, Zach and Mary Gwin were married. They

With Samoa in the capable hands of the 7th Marines, the United States Pacific Command could devote its full attention to countering Japan's thrust at Midway Island. In one of the true puzzles of World War II, despite the spectacular success which the Imperial Navy enjoyed at Pearl Harbor as a result of the incredible offensive punch possessed by a task force composed of six aircraft carriers, Japan never again assembled more than four aircraft carriers into a single unit. At Midway, the Japanese apparently believed that four carriers would be sufficient to deal with the two American carriers, the *Enterprise* and the *Hornet*, they expected to ambush. The Japanese believed the *Yorktown* was so badly damaged in the Battle of the Coral Sea that it would be unavailable for use at Midway. But once again, the Japanese underestimated the industrial prowess and ingenuity of Americans: the *Yorktown* was quickly repaired and all three carriers lay in wait for the Japanese in the waters northeast of Midway Island.

Not only did the Japanese underestimate the United States at Midway, but they also committed the inevitably fatal error of indecisiveness in the heat of battle. After launching an initial air strike on Midway on June 4, 1942, the Japanese had their decks full of planes equipped with torpedoes in anticipation of locating the American carriers. After initial reports of minimal damage on Midway by the first air strike, the Japanese planes were ordered reequipped with bombs for a second attack. Just as the switch to bombs was made, Japanese scout planes located the American carriers and the Japanese planes were ordered back to torpedoes. During this second switch, the Japanese carriers were attacked by American torpedo planes. The American planes, slow and obsolete even before the war started, were no match for the Japanese antiaircraft fire and the nimble Zeros flying defensive patrols. All fifteen torpedo planes were shot down without scoring a single hit on the Japanese carriers. However, while flying to attack the Japanese carriers, the torpedo planes had become separated from the American dive bombers and arrived first.

This lack of coordination between the torpedo planes and the dive bombers turned out to be one of the greatest strokes of luck ever enjoyed by any navy in the history of warfare. While the antiaircraft fire was focused on the torpedo planes and the Zeros dived down to attack them at sea level, the American dive bombers arrived unnoticed 11,000 feet above the decks of the Japanese carriers, which were full of fully fueled planes being reequipped from bombs to torpedoes. In the space of five minutes, the dive bombers inflicted fatal damage on three Japanese aircraft carriers and damaged the fourth, which was sunk the following day. The loss of men, material, and most importantly confidence that occurred during these five minutes was a crippling blow from which the Imperial Navy never recovered.⁴

drove to Charleston, SC for their honeymoon and on Monday morning Zach reported back to Camp Lejeune. Zach and Mary Gwin celebrated their 40th wedding anniversary at Walter Reed Hospital in Washington, D.C. where Mary Gwin was awaiting surgery on her carotid arteries. Mary Gwin died a week later.

⁴ Just to show that the excesses of the press are not a recent phenomenon, in the immediate aftermath of Midway, the *Chicago Tribune* published a story that all but revealed that the United States had cracked the Japanese navel code. However, post-war analyses revealed that Japan either didn't understand or never learned of the *Tribune* article or of Walter Winchell's written and radio denunciations of the *Tribune* article, which even more expressly revealed that the Japanese code had been broken.

With both aspects of the Japanese strategy for victory blunted, the United States could start thinking about taking the offensive in the Pacific. Because of the vast distances in the Pacific, air power was the key to control of any area. With Samoa now an unreachable objective, the Japanese still wanted a forward air base from which to launch attacks on the supply lines to Australia. The base the Japanese selected was an obscure jungle island in the Solomon Islands named for a town in southern Spain, Guadalcanal. Just as it had done at Samoa, the United States wished to deny Japan a base from which it could interdict shipping. With complete and absolute surprise, the 1st Marine Division, less the 7th Marines, attacked Guadalcanal, seized the partially completed Japanese airfield, and established a small perimeter around the airfield, all with minor opposition.

Far too slowly, the Japanese came to realize the attack on Guadalcanal was more than a reconnaissance in force. Increasing troop strength slowly and in a piecemeal fashion and never establishing a reliable supply line, the Japanese failed to counter the Marine invasion in a coherent manner. This lack of a coherent strategy in no diminished the ferocity of Japanese counter-attacks. These repeated assaults on the perimeter around the airfield and the debilitating effects of tropical diseases began to take their toll on the 1st Marine Division on Guadalcanal. The Commander of the 1st Marine Division, Alexander Archer Vandegrift,⁵ needed reinforcements and he knew exactly where to get them. With the threat to Samoa diminished by Japan focusing its attention on Guadalcanal, the 7th Marines were available to be redeployed.

Immediately upon arrival on Guadalcanal, the 7th Marines went into action, with Puller's battalion, the 1st of the 7th, in the lead. After successfully acquitting itself in several defensive actions and reconnaissance probes⁶, General Vandegrift realized that he finally had the offensive striking force that would allow him to take the battle to the Japanese.⁷ Five miles west of the airfield was the Matanikau River. The Japanese were accumulating in force west of the Matanikau River and were bringing in heavy artillery with enough range to shell Henderson Field.⁸ General Vandegrift decided that his first full scale offensive action would be to clear the

⁵ Lt. Gen. Vandegrift's nickname was "Sunny Jim" because of his upbeat disposition. This basic attitude of optimism served him well as the leader of the beleaguered Marines on Guadalcanal. His remarkable display of leadership with the First Marine Division earned him both the Medal of Honor and a promotion to Commandant of the Marine Corps.

⁶ The Marines of the 1st of the 7th were a little jumpy their first night on the perimeter. Upon hearing a shot ring out, Zach Cox sought out the man who fired it. Despite the man's pleas that he had seen something, Zach was convinced he had shot at a shadow. He realized that if the random shooting continued unabated, the Japanese soon would know the location of every defensive position. Zach demanded the bolt from the man's rifle and then ordered him to affix his bayonet, go outside the perimeter, and bring back whatever it was that he had shot. The Marine complied, but came back a few minutes later and admitted that he shot without clearly seeing his target. There was no more shooting at phantoms that night.

⁷ Every Marine knew of Napoleon's maxim that surrender is the logical conclusion of every defensive strategy.

⁸ Henderson Field was named in honor of Major Lofton Henderson, who had been killed the previous June during the Battle of Midway.

Japanese from west of the Matanikau and to expand the perimeter enough to put Henderson Field out of range of land based artillery.⁹

The offensive strategy employed a three pronged attack on the Japanese position west of the Matanikau. The 1st Raider Battalion and one company of the 1st of the 7th Marines were to attack across the Matanikau at a ford a little less than one mile from the coast. The 2nd Battalion of the 5th Marines were to attack across a sand bar at the mouth of the Matanikau River. After the two main prongs of the attack were across the Matanikau, three infantry companies of the 1st of the 7th Marines, were to be transported by landing craft to a point behind the enemy lines to cutoff the escape route. These three companies, commanded by Captains Charles W. Kelly, Regan Fuller, and a 23-year-old Zach Davis Cox, were under the overall command of Puller's executive officer Major Otho Rogers.¹⁰

Sunday, September 27, 1942 was selected as the day of attack. That morning, the 1st Raider Battalion under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Samuel B. Griffith attacked toward the ford across the Matanikau. Unfortunately, the combination of several weeks of hard fighting, debilitation by tropical diseases, and a well dug in Japanese company, the 12th of the 124th Infantry Regiment, prevented the Raiders from reaching the ford. Further complicating the situation, at the same time that Colonel Griffith sent a situation report back to division headquarters, a Japanese air raid occurred. The combination of a sketchy report prepared by a severely wounded Griffith and a further misinterpretation of that report in the midst of the air raid, resulted in a false impression at divisional headquarters that the 1st Marine Raider Battalion had taken the ford and crossed the Matanikau. The crossing of the Matanikau by the Raiders was the signal for the 2nd Battalion of the 5th Marines to cross the sandbar at the mouth of the Matanikau and for the three companies of the 1st of the 7th Marines to proceed by landing craft to cut off the Japanese retreat.

The 1st of the 7th Marines landed behind enemy lines without opposition and quickly moved to occupy the high ground from which they could bring mortar fire on any retreating Japanese. Only none were retreating. The 12th Company stopped the 1st Raiders cold at the ford. Similarly, the 9th Company of the 124th Infantry Regiment prevented the 2nd of the 5th Marines from crossing the sand bar. Realizing that he had a significant force of Marines trapped

⁹ No action by the Marines could put them out of range of the Japanese naval guns. However, on one memorable evening the Japanese Navy got its ammunition mixed up and this mix-up had a somewhat comical effect. That night, the Japanese shelled the Marines with armor piercing shells that, while very effective against ships, were wildly inappropriate for engaging land targets. The high trajectory armor piercing shells hit the ground at a nearly vertical angle and harmlessly buried themselves without exploding. The next morning, the Marines cautiously crept up on the symmetrical holes created by the armor piercing shells. Worried that the shell still might explode, they set a coconut on the edge of the hole, tapped it in with a long pole, and then ran and jumped into in a foxhole. Nothing happened. Once they realized that the shells wouldn't explode, American ingenuity took over. Within a day, the Marines had built latrines over the seemingly bottomless holes and legend has it that they never filled-up during the entire campaign. Later in the war, when my father received a briefing on the radar triggered proximity fuses that the United States had developed for artillery shells, he was extremely grateful that the Japanese did not possess that technology at Guadalcanal.

¹⁰ Major Rogers, a quiet but competent reservist, was a high ranking official in the United States Postal Service in Washington, D.C. before the war. Had he chosen, he could have spent the entire war engaged in the vital service of administering the delivery of mail.

unsupported behind his lines, Colonel Akinosuku Oka, commander of the 124th Infantry Regiment, ordered the 2nd Battalion of the 124th Infantry Regiment to attack the trapped Marines. Intent on destroying the Marines, Colonel Oka ordered portions of the 9th and 12th Companies to depart their positions at the ford and mouth of the Matanikau and attack the trapped Marines.

In a short time, the three companies of the 1st of the 7th Marines were surrounded and attacked from three directions by a force of Japanese five times their number. A Japanese mortar round landed between the legs of Major Rogers and literally blew him to pieces. Shrapnel from this same mortar round seriously wounded Zach Cox.¹¹ Zach's wounds, starting at his head and continuing down, were as follows. Shrapnel and the concussion from the exploding mortar cracked his skull and blew several shards of metal into his brain. Shrapnel tore open his left upper chest, caused multiple and compound fractures of his left shoulder and left arm, and deflated his left lung. The concussion broke his back in three places. The flash from the blast burned the entire left side of his body as well as all the hair from his head.¹²

Zach Cox's wounds were so severe that little could be done to help him. The expediency of war necessitated the creation of a medical strategy known as triage. In triage, the wounded are divided into three categories: those wounded so slightly that they will survive without immediate attention, those wounded so severely that they will not survive despite immediate attention, and those while severely wounded, will survive if given immediate attention. Under the triage strategy, those falling into the third category are the first treated. Zach's wounds were so severe that he was consigned to the second category, those who cannot be saved. Zach was given a shot of morphine and had his wounds bound, but was not otherwise tended to. While this lack of attention left Zach with diminished chances for survival, it also left him free to continue in the defense of the position.

This defense was entirely dependent on fending off Japanese attacks until help could arrive. Portable radios in the early days of World War II were heavy and notoriously ineffective.¹³ The Marine signalman attached to the three companies, Sgt. Robert D. Raysbrook, had not brought the radio because he believed both that it would not work and that it might be a hindrance in a fight. Therefore, these three companies found themselves completely surrounded by a force five times their number without the means of summoning help. However, the decisive and timely actions of two persons intervened on their behalf and averted disaster.

General Vandegrift had forbidden the battalion commander, Lewis Puller, from accompanying his three companies behind enemy lines because his expertise was needed at the operations center in the divisional headquarters. It didn't take Puller long to realize that neither

¹¹ On Sunday morning, September 27, 1942, nearly 20 hours later due to the international date line, Zach's mother, Winnie McWhorter Cox was so overcome by feelings of dread that she had to leave church in the middle of services.

¹² Fifty-six years later, Zach Cox still had shrapnel from that Japanese mortar shell working its way out of his body. The presence of shrapnel trapped in his brain by his healed skull required Zach to take anti-seizure medicine for the rest of his life.

¹³ Cornelius Ryan's book, "A Bridge Too Far" spends a portion of its narrative to describing the foibles and failures of portable radios during World War II. The truth of these foibles and failures were still all too apparent to me during my time as a Morse code operator in the Army thirty years later in the 1970's.

the 1st Raiders nor the 2nd of the 5th Marines had crossed or were going to cross the Matanikau. Puller knew that his three companies were in mortal danger.¹⁴ Puller's fears were confirmed by Lt. Dale Leslie. While flying over the cutoff Marines in an observation plane, Lieutenant Leslie saw that the Marines had spelled out "HELP" on the ground with their white t-shirts in order to attract his attention.

Based on his own intuition and Lt. Leslie's report, Colonel Puller boarded the destroyer *Monssen* and proceeded to the relief of his men with 24 landing craft.¹⁵ Realizing the severity of his wounds, Zach had turned over command of his company to his executive officer. However, unwilling to disengage completely from the battle, Zach tracked down Sgt. Raysbrook, who had left the radio behind. When the *Monssen* appeared off the coast, Captain Cox directed Sgt. Raysbrook to stand up on an exposed stump and communicate with Puller the *Monssen*. With Japanese bullets whizzing by him, Sgt. Raysbrook repeatedly stood his ground and sent messages via semaphore signals and received messages from Puller via a signal blinker.¹⁶ Puller ordered his men to the coast. The reply was that they were too heavily engaged to reach the coast. Puller responded that the coast was their only hope. Once convinced that Puller's order was their only option, a barrage of shells from the 5-inch guns on the *Monssen* rolled up to the Marines' position. As the barrage retreated back to the beach, the Marines advanced to the coast.¹⁷

As the Marines fought their way to the coast, Platoon Sergeant Anthony P. "Ski" Malanowski, Jr., grabbed a Browning Automatic Rifle, ordered his platoon to continue on while he remained behind to delay the pursuing Japanese. This delay allowed the Marines to reach the beach, but Sergeant Malanowski didn't. He was posthumously awarded the Navy Cross. While fighting their way to the beach, the Marines had drifted to the east of the position where they had landed. This meant that the landing craft didn't know where to pick them up. Once again, the Marines' guardian angel in the air, Lt. Leslie, intervened. Seeing that the landing craft were headed to the wrong position, Lt. Leslie got their attention and led them to where the Marines would reach the coast.¹⁸

¹⁴ Colonel Puller's intuitive understanding of the danger faced by his men was an example of the extraordinary military judgment he possessed. This judgment saw him end his career in the Marine Corps as a Lieutenant General and the most decorated Marine in history, including an unprecedented five Navy Crosses. Puller's open contempt for incompetence, regardless of its rank, and his love for his men combined to prevent him from being promoted to Commandant of the Marine Corps.

¹⁵ As an example of the fog of war, there is widespread disagreement in later prepared accounts of the battle as to whether it was the destroyer *Monssen* or the seaplane tender *Ballard* that supported the withdrawal. However, entries made on September 27th in the war diary of the *Monssen* indicates that it supported the withdrawal. This contemporaneously prepared document will be given precedence in this narrative.

¹⁶ Sgt. Robert D. Raysbrook received the Navy Cross for the heroism he displayed in repeatedly exposing himself to the full force of the Japanese fire to communicate with LTC Puller on the *Monessen*. Sgt. Raysbrook had originally learned semaphore signals and Morse Code in the Boy Scouts.

¹⁷ Marines never retreat.

¹⁸ Lt. Leslie also repeatedly strafed Japanese positions while supporting the Marines withdrawal. Lt. Leslie was awarded the Navy Cross for his prompt and effective actions in support of his fellow Marines.

Zach Cox was helped from the high ground back to the beach by the youngest man in the 1st of the 7th Marines. This man had lied about his age in order to enlist. By the time his ruse was discovered, he was old enough to join and had proved his fitness, so the Marines decided to overlook the circumstances of his enlistment. As they got close to the beach, Zach's strength failed him, and this young Marine had to carry him on his back. Zach Cox still bears the scars on both sides of his right calf where the Japanese machine gun bullets passed through his leg and killed the young Marine who had saved his life.

Once at the beach, the Marines boarded the landing craft under heavy fire. With one landing craft still ashore, there was only one man left alive on the beach, Captain Zach Cox. He was so debilitated by his wounds and the exertion of getting to the beach, that he was crawling to get to the landing craft. The men in this last craft were Marines from the company that Zach had trained in Cuba and Samoa. He had drilled them mercilessly, marching them mile after mile, training them at night, and exercising them under the blazing tropical sun. He trained his men so hard that they nicknamed him "Rawhide." The training was so intense that his First Sergeant warned him that if he didn't ease up, he was going to be the first person shot once they got into combat.

But he wasn't. Two men sprang from the landing craft and were quickly cut down by the Japanese fire.¹⁹ Two more men dashed forward, reached Zach, pulled him to his feet, and got him aboard the boat.²⁰ Seeing the plight of this last landing craft, another boat piloted by Coast Guard Petty Officer Douglas A. Munro interposed itself between this landing craft and the area from which the greatest concentration of Japanese fire was coming. Petty Officer Munro was killed while directing the fire from the two machine guns on his boat at the Japanese position. Petty Officer Munro was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor.²¹

¹⁹ One of these men, a slight native of New York City, was the son of immigrants from Eastern Europe. Zach said he remembers two things about this man's mother. She was nearly hysterical with fear when her son shipped off to the South Pacific from Norfolk. And that he thought that she was the type woman who gladly would have hidden her son in the attic for the duration of the war just to keep him from harm.

²⁰ Early in the Guadalcanal engagement the Marines learned that wounded Japanese would attempt to kill anyone who tried to help them after a fight was concluded. After the end of WWII, the rumors that Japanese soldiers occasionally used live prisoners for bayonet practice was proved beyond any reasonable doubt. Because of the Japanese attitude toward surrender, Marines never left any of their wounded behind to be taken prisoner.

²¹ The USCGC *Munro* is a 384 high endurance cutter still proudly protecting America from its enemies. The official citation of Douglas A. Munro's gallantry is as follows: The President of the United States takes pleasure in presenting the Medal of Honor posthumously to Douglas Albert Munro Signalman First Class United States Coast Guard for service as set forth in the following citation: For extraordinary heroism and conspicuous gallantry in action above and beyond the call of duty as Officer in Charge of a group of twenty-four Higgins boats engaged in the evacuation of a battalion of Marines trapped by enemy Japanese forces at Point Cruz, Guadalcanal, on September 27, 1942. After making preliminary plans for the evacuation of nearly five hundred beleaguered Marines, Munro, under constant strafing by enemy machine guns on the island and at great risk of his life, daringly led five of his small craft toward the shore. As he closed the beach, he signaled the others to land and then in order to draw the enemy's fire and protect the heavily loaded boats, he valiantly placed his craft, with its two small guns, as a shield between the beachhead and the Japanese. When the perilous task of evacuation was nearly completed, Munro was instantly killed by enemy fire, but his crew, two of whom were wounded, carried on until the last boat had loaded and cleared the beach. By his outstanding leadership, expert planning, and dauntless devotion to duty, he and his courageous comrades undoubtedly saved the lives of many who otherwise would have perished. He gallantly

With a loss of eighteen men killed and twenty-five wounded, the 1st of the 7th Marines had successfully fought their way through an enemy force at least five times their number and evacuated the beach. The official report of the 1st Marine Division attributed the successful withdrawal of the 1st of the 7th Marines to “its fighting qualities, brilliant improvisation on the part of those responsible for its movement and to the great good fortune which attended it.”

Even after being transported back within the perimeter surrounding Henderson Field, the vital but merciless rule of triage again dictated that the severity of Zach’s wounds were beyond treatment. Still bound in his field dressings and unconscious from shock, he was consigned to a tent reserved for the dead. Eventually Zach regained consciousness, started moaning, and terrified a passing Navy corpsman. Upon confirmed this Marine’s will to live was undaunted, the Navy doctors and corpsmen treated Zach and directed his immediate evacuation from Guadalcanal.²²

After a brief stop at the nearest field hospital, on Espiritu Santo Island, Zach was sent to New Zealand for treatment beyond what was available at the front. But the only transport immediately available was a cargo ship. Because of the danger from submarines, the ship’s captain refused to allow anyone on board who was unable to care for himself. The test for self-sufficiency the ship’s captain employed was that all persons boarding the ship had to walk up the gangway. Knowing that Zach was in such bad shape that he had to be evacuated, the Navy doctors pumped him full of enough morphine to stun an ox and then pointed toward the gangway.²³ Zach staggered onboard and once out of sight of the captain was quickly rushed to the ship’s galley that was serving as a makeshift hospital ward. Unfortunately, the disaster the ship’s captain had foreseen came true and the ship was torpedoed. Zach was helped to the main deck, but he lay down there because he knew he would never be able to clamber down a cargo net to the life boats below. He said he remembered that while he laying flat on his back, he looked up and for the first time since he had been in the South Pacific, he saw the Southern Cross. Years later Zach described laying on the deck of the sinking cargo ship on a cool, calm, cloudless night as perhaps the single most peaceful moment in his entire life. He said he distinctly remembered thinking that it wouldn’t be a bad way to die. But, a corpsman soon returned for him and requested that he at least try to get into a lifeboat. With the corpsman’s help, Zach arose, but he remained sure that once he got to the railing the futility of his trying to board a life boat would be obvious. However, by this time the ship was so low in the water that he was able to step directly from the main deck to a lifeboat. After spending several hours adrift

gave up his life in defense of his country.
/s/Franklin Roosevelt

²² After discovering that Zach was alive, the first Navy corpsman assigned to change his field dressing was unable to do so, because of the ghastliness of the injuries. An older and more experienced corpsman was then detailed to the task--which he accomplished--but not before he had rounded up a mirror so that he could show Zach the extent of his wounds. Something similar to “Oh man, you’ve got to see this!” was supposedly said.

²³ Because of the amount of morphine he received in World War II, Zach developed an intolerance for opium-based narcotics. When Zach had a quadruple coronary by-pass operation in 1977, the order that he not be given opium-based pain-killers was misunderstood by those attending him and he was given no pain-killers of any sort in the aftermath of his operation.

and beating off sharks attracted by the blood from the wounded, Zach and the others in his boat were picked up by another ship and his journey to New Zealand continued.

His recovery proceeded in three phases: New Zealand, San Francisco, and Norfolk. In New Zealand, in addition to having his wounds cared for, he was also treated for filariasis malaria and blackwater fever, both contracted while on Guadalcanal. Zach's blackwater fever was diagnosed by a Navy physician who, by sheer chance, had read about this usually fatal complication of chronic malaria just a few days before.²⁴ After recovering sufficiently, he was transported to the Naval Hospital in San Francisco. There he was joined by his bride of less than a year, Mary Gwin Oliver Cox. As soon as possible, Zach was given married housing with his wife. However, he still had to report to the hospital on a daily basis for treatment.²⁵ After treatment in San Francisco, Zach was promoted to Major and was assigned to Norfolk Naval Ship Yard until his injuries fully healed. Once healed, Zach returned to the South Pacific and participated in the campaigns for the Marshall and Northern Mariana Islands.²⁶

When the atomic bombs were dropped on Japan to end World War II, Zach was at Camp Lejeune training for an attack on a fortified coastal cliff on the southernmost Japanese home island of Kyushu. After the end of the war, Zach went with the 1st Marine Division to China,

²⁴ Toward the end of his stay in New Zealand, Zach was offered an afternoon pass to go into town. Unwilling to forfeit a chance to get out of the hospital, Zach wobbled out in a body cast with his left arm in a platform cast and his lower right leg in a cast. At the front gate, he hailed a cab. After considerable maneuvering and with the help of the cab driver, he managed to get in. Eyeing the immobile Marine in his rearview mirror, the driver tried to make conversation by saying, "So, those Japs must be pretty tough customers?" Zach replied, "Yeah, they're a bunch of bastards." The driver responded, "I say mate, don't call them that. There's many a poor chap who's a bastard and can't 'elp it. I'm one meself."

²⁵ Shortly after arriving in San Francisco, Mary Gwin decided to treat Zach to a home cooked meal with real beef, rather than the tough bear meat issued by the Navy. She had been saving her money and collecting red points for weeks before she came to San Francisco. After finishing at the hospital for the day, Mary Gwin steered Zach to a local butcher shop and told him to pick out the piece of beef that he wanted for supper. By coincidence, the story of the action on the Matanikau River had just been cleared by the censors for release to the public. The butcher had that very day read a newspaper article in which Zach's role in the battle was reported in a very complimentary manner. Upon realizing that the man standing in front of him was the very same Captain Cox who had been in the paper, the butcher snatched the paltry cut of beef from Mary Gwin's hand and replaced it with the largest roast in his shop. The butcher proclaimed, "No Marine is going to spend his red points in my shop!" When Zach and Mary Gwin protested that they couldn't eat that much meat, the butcher told them to invite their friends over for supper. Mary Gwin cooked the roast and invited all the neighboring wounded Marines, Sailors, and their wives for dinner. While a grand time was had that night, the next morning Zach woke up with a terrific stomach ache. Mary Gwin decided this was more than just indigestion from a rich meal and decided to take him to the hospital immediately. While walking to the bus, Mary Gwin told Zach in no uncertain terms that once on the bus he was to sit down and was not to give his seat up to anyone. Zach and Mary Gwin got on the bus, Zach sat down, and the bus quickly filled up. At the next stop a pregnant woman boarded. Of course, Zach (in a body cast from the waist up) arose and gave her his seat. Mary Gwin gritted her teeth and said nothing. Once at the hospital, Zach was diagnosed with acute appendicitis and underwent emergency surgery. Afterwards, the surgeon stated that if Zach had not stood up on the bus it was likely that his appendix would have burst and he might have died.

²⁶ Zach was also at Iwo Jima with the shipboard reserves, but the reserves were never committed and he never got ashore. However, he did get to see the original still photos of the reenactment of the flag raising on Mt Suribachi. He said it was immediately obvious to everyone who saw them that the photographer had captured lightning in a bottle.

where it oversaw the disengagement of the Japanese Army from mainland Asia. After successful completion of that task, Zach returned to the United States to face a fitness report. While his service record was testament to his fitness, Zach was caught in a massive demobilization. The severe wounds he received on Guadalcanal made him a prime candidate for retirement on medical disability.

Despite his pleas and calling in every favor he had accumulated during the war, there were just too many officers and too few slots. Even Lewis Puller was forced into the reserves. After accepting the inevitability of his retirement, Zach served out the remainder of his service in Norfolk defending Marines and Sailors being court-martialed for petty offenses by overzealous officers seeking to restore pre-war order to the military. After retirement, Zach and Mary Gwin returned to their hometown, Mt. Olive, NC. He built a home next to his father's house and went to work with his uncle in the wholesale grocery business.²⁷ Zach and Mary Gwin, neither of whom were college graduates, had seven children and so instilled the importance of education in them that all seven graduated from college.²⁸

Zach Cox was not a hero of World War II. He was just an ordinary soldier doing his duty like millions of other young American men.²⁹ Each of those men was willing to give his life to defeat one of the most monstrous combinations of evil to have ever walked the face of the Earth. Each of the Axis powers was founded on the lie of racial superiority and believed that abomination justified its atrocities against mankind. The efforts of Zach Cox and others like him conclusively refuted the lie of racial superiority and forever demonstrated that those who practice evil will be held accountable for their misdeeds by the people of the world.

Until the day he died, Zach Cox would wake up in the middle of the night shouting orders to men long dead, while in the embrace of nightmares about now obscure South Pacific islands.

²⁷ When the Korean War broke out, Zach, over the vehement protests of his wife, drove down to Camp Lejeune and presented himself as ready for duty. A bored Second Lieutenant looked up from his desk and said, "I haven't heard anything about the retreads being call up yet." A chastised Zach Cox slunk back to Mt. Olive and resumed his job as a salesman for his uncle.

²⁸ Zach's greataunt, Ellen Inman, once exclaimed, "Seven children and nary a simpleton in the bunch!"

²⁹ I am sure Zach would have agreed with a sentiment expressed by a member of the 101st Airborne to Stephen E. Ambrose. This veteran of Normandy, Operation Market-Garden, and the Battle of the Bulge was asked by his young grandson if he had been a hero during World War II. The paratrooper replied, "No I wasn't, but I was in a company that was full of heroes."