

1st Battalion 27th Marines in WW II



By John A. Butler III '34

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The 1st Battalion 27th Marines was one of nine infantry Battalions of the 5th Marine Division which was activated in early January 1944 at Camp Pendleton, CA. Salted with disbanded raiders, Para Marines, and other combat veterans from earlier Pacific battles, the battalion was destined for a crucial role in the battle of Iwo Jima.

Among the veterans NCOs' reporting to 1/27 was Seargent John Basilone, the Guadalcanal national hero, who requested relief from a national bond tour so he could get back in the war. The quality of training and battle leadership provided by the presence of these veterans was invaluable.

Assigned to command the battalion was Lieutenant Colonel John A. Butler, a native of New Orleans and a career Marine, who graduated from the Naval Academy in 1934. Butler had early Sea Duty in the Caribbean, where his linguistic skills led him to work in Naval Intelligence and as an attaché in the Dominican Republic. He also had previous duty with the 1st Bn 5th Marines from 1938-40 before being posted to the Dominican Republic. Fresh out of Staff and Command School, though not yet experiencing Pacific combat, this seasoned Marine officer was eager and prepared for command.

From 29 January 1944, when he took command, Butler prepared 1/27 for battle. The battalion, as did the entire division, trained for serious amphibious assault combat and selected "The Spearhead" as their nickname and Division shoulder patch.

Two days out of Pearl aboard APA HANSFORD, Butler announced on the loud speaker the battalion was destined for Iwo Jima, a Japanese island objective closer to Japan than any other to date. He also told his men they were a designated assault team for the D-Day landing. A sober silence fell over the battalion.

After stopping at Eniwetok for some swimming and mail, the Hansford proceeded to Saipan, where a final rehearsal was held, and the assault elements of the Bn transferred to three LST's carrying the amtracs assigned to transport 1/27 to Red Beach 2.

On D-day, 19 February 1945, the assault elements of 1/27 in waves 2, 3, & 4, on the heels of the 1st wave armored amtracs with their 75's, began coming ashore at 0902. Landing on their left was 2/27 on Red 1, and on their right, 1/23 from the 4th Marine Division on Yellow 1.

1/27, the right flank battalion of the 5th Marine Division, was tasked with securing the southern end of Motoyama Airfield just inland from Red Beach 2 and advancing on order to the 0-1 Line drawn on a map representing the final D-Day objective. The secondary mission was to maintain contact with the 4th Marine division. The 28th Marines, landing on Green Beach, were tasked with cutting off the head of Iwo Jima, Mount Suribachi. On the extreme right, landing on Blue Beach, the 25th Marines of the 4th Marine division were assigned to secure the high ground overlooking the landing beaches. Enfilade fire from the high ground on the right and plunging fire from Mount Suribachi on the left pummeled the landing

beaches and follow-on reserve units as the assault battalions struggled up the sand studded terraces to reach their objectives.

On Red 2 Butler, who had landed in the 4th wave with the assault elements, established his initial CP on a sand covered block house that still housed enemy troops, some of whom were attempting to escape from the on rushing assault.

Initially, resistance was light but that soon changed as Kuribayashi's gunners unleashed mortars and artillery. B company on the right landed out of position and soon became disorganized and casualty ridden. Gy/Sgt John Basilone, the machine gun platoon leader of C Company wasted no time. He took control of a lost machine gun squad from B Company and directed them in reducing a blockhouse that was causing serious trouble. PFC Chuck Tatum described that action in *Red Blood, Black Sand*. This was the first of several heroic actions Basilone performed in those first hours ashore as the Battalion fought to gain their objective. Two hours after landing, Basilone, one of the Marine Corps legendary fighters of WW2, laid bleeding and dying from multiple fragment wounds when he was hit by mortars. For his heroics on D-day John Basilone was awarded a posthumous Navy Cross.

Butler, accompanied by his radio operator, moved up to the top of the air strip for better observation. From this exposed position he could clearly see that B Company was disorganized, so he directed A company to replace them on the right.

Returning across the fire swept area under observation of snipers in wrecked aircraft; he led A company forward on a sweep that, along with C Company's advance on the left, gained the southern end of Motoyama #1 airstrip by mid afternoon. Butler's action on D-day and his up-front leadership throughout were cited in the posthumous award of a Navy Cross.

Though the battalion was far short of its D-day objective, the 0-1 Line, 1/27 was the only Marine unit to secure any part of Motoyama airfield #1 by the end of D-day. D-day night was uneventful except for some infiltration attempts and intermittent enemy mortar fire. The enemy shifted their main fire to the now crowded landing beaches which soon became a junk yard of wrecked landing craft tanks and vehicles. D-Day was costly, and on the morning of D+1 1/27 was ordered into regimental reserve; however, they did not rest but followed 3/27 in trace, mopping up by-passed positions as the drive for the 0-1 line continued. Despite its reserve position 1/27 continued to suffer casualties from enemy mortar fire, snipers, and firefights at by-passed positions

Despite sizeable gains by 3/27 and the 4th division securing a good portion of the airstrip, the O-1 line was still not reached by day's end. On D+1 night the battalion established a defensive position in depth behind 3/27

On D+2 the 27th Marines went into Division Reserve as the 26th Marines made a passage of lines and continued the drive toward the 0-1 Line just north of the airstrip, while the 28th Marines remained fully occupied with Mt Suribachi. However, by mid afternoon, a gap between the 5th and 4th Marine Division developed which 1/27 was directed to fill. Moving into this gap the battalion prepared hasty defensive positions before darkness set in. That night Japanese aircraft, including kamikazes, launched an air raid against the fleet off shore. The attack sank the escort carrier BISMARCK SEA and heavily damaged the SARATOGA, taking her out of the war. Several other vessels were hit and badly damaged. This was followed by a ground counterattack just about midnight which concentrated against 1/27. The attack was stopped cold by the battalion's 81 mm mortar platoon, interlocked machine guns, and on-call artillery

from the 13th Marines. This was one of very few Japanese counterattacks during the entire campaign and one can speculate it was planned to take advantage of the gap in the lines or the distraction of the offshore air raids.

D-Day+3

Daybreak of D+3 found 1/27 dug in across open ground. A cold rain added to the general misery of three days of combat. Once again the 26th Marines affected a passage of lines and 1/27 reverted to division reserve and moved to an assembly area just northwest of Motoyoma #1, where it rested and replenished. For the first time in days the exhausted 1/27 Marines changed socks, ate hot 10-1 rations, and wrote letters. They slept on the ground under ponchos or blankets. It was not an R&R center as the war thundered around them and patrols went out to hunt snipers and secure by-passed positions. No place on Iwo Jima was secure and comfortable, but for the 1/27 Marines this was a break from the front lines.

On D+ 8 the 27th Marines were released from division reserve. 1/27 went into the assault along with 2/27 on the left and 3/27 on the right. The objective was Hill 362A and the ridge complex extending to the western beaches. These heavily fortified positions were the western anchor of Kuribayashi's main defense line and chewed up 1/27 and its sister battalions. Two days of brutal combat gained a foothold but did not secure the objective. Fighting in this area was some of the most vicious of the Pacific war. Before the complex finally fell to the 28th Marines, who had rejoined the fight after resting from the capture of Suribachi, much Marine blood was shed.

2/28, commanded by Chandler Johnson, relieved 1/27 and passed through their lines to continue the attack on 362A and the adjoining ridges. In the next few days 2/28 lost three of the six flag raisers and the battalion commander. 1/27 licked their wounds in Division Reserve but not for long. On D+ 13, 4 March, 1/27 was attached to the 26th Marines and back in the attack on the right flank adjacent to the 3rd Division zone of action just northeast of unfinished Motoyama #3 airstrip. The battalion advanced in a column of companies along a narrow front lead by C Company, which soon became casualty ridden. Butler replaced C with B Company which managed to gain a difficult additional 100 yard against stiff resistance.

D+14, 5 March was a day of no offensive operations for the entire Amphibious Force. The battalion was detached from the 26th Marines and directed to rejoin its parent Regiment. As 1/27 moved to an assembly area just north of RJ 338, Butler asked for his jeep and driver so he could visit the Regimental supply dump and the 27th Marines Command Post. As the jeep passed through RJ 338 it was hit by a Japanese 47 mm round that targeted the area. Butler was killed instantly and the runner and radio operator with him were wounded.

Word of Butler's death swept through the battalion and was felt deeply by the men, who appreciated Butler's up-front leadership style and his honest personal care and respect for them, a sentiment often expressed in letters to his wife. In his last hastily penned letter from "Tojo's Cave" on 2 March after the bloody fighting on 362A, he wrote of the men's splendid courage. Butler, who had trained the battalion from the beginning, was highly respected and well liked by his men. His loss was a blow.

Replacing Butler was Lieutenant Colonel Justin Duryea, the 27th Marines operations officer (R-3) who had been the interim commander at Pendleton in 44 January before Butler arrived. On Butler's arrival, Duryea, then a major and a veteran Para Marine, became the R-3 for the 27th Marines.

The day of rest ended and the battalion, after a few more days in reserve, was soon back in front line action. On D+18, with Charlie Company in the lead, Platoon Sergeant Joseph Julian became a one man

wrecking crew. Julian destroyed a number of Japanese positions in a series of furious assaults before he was mortally wounded. He was awarded a posthumous Medal of Honor.

That afternoon Duryea was severely wounded when his runner detonated a mine. The battalion command passed to Major William Tumbelston, the original battalion Executive Officer. With Tumbelston in command, the battalion continued in the attack for five days of hard gained yards in the jumbled rock terrain of northwest Iwo Jima until he also was badly wounded and evacuated on D+23. Command of the battalion then passed to Major William Kennedy, who had been the operation officer for 3/27.

Killed in action on D+23 was Lt. William Van Beest who had taken command of C Company when the original company commander, Captain John Casey, was shot in the foot on D+1. Van Beest, who had been fighting since D-Day, was a diligent and heroic company commander. He was awarded a posthumous Navy Cross.

On D+24, 1/27 advanced 350 yards to the top of a ridge from which they could see Iwo's northern shore. The end was in sight. This was the last day of fighting for the shot up battalion that had lost three battalion commanders and the majority of its original officers and NCOs. The ranks were now mainly replacements and a few very exhausted originals who had somehow survived.

On D+31, A Company was released from the composite battalion and rejoined the battalion. After saying farewell to their buddies at rest in the large 5th Marine Division cemetery, the remnants of 1/27 boarded a troop transport and departed Iwo Jima.

In 29 days of combat, including A Company's 6 days with the composite battalion, 1/27 lost 233 KIA or DOW and 557 WIA for a total of 790 casualties. This was one of the highest for the 24 battalions which fought on Iwo Jima. Only 1/26 with a total of 1025 and 2/25 with 804 had higher casualties. Among the officers, no battalion suffered more than 1/27, which lost 11 officers KIA or DOW and another 27 WIA. Among the entire BN staff, including the two surgeons, only the S-2 and the Communications Officer were unscathed. Only one of the three original line company commanders, Captain John Hogan in A Company, was not a casualty. C company had no original officers left after the loss of Lieutenant Van Beest on D+23. Among the 34 officers & NCOs listed as boat team leaders for each of the amtracs with the 1/27 assault element, 31 were killed or wounded.

1/27 lost the cream of its officers, NCOs, and experienced men, yet continued to fight and carry out its mission until the bitter end. Like all the units of the 3rd, 4th, and 5th Marine Divisions that fought on Iwo Jima, 1/27 established forever the legacy of Marine courage and "Uncommon Valor," which is represented by the Marine Corps Memorial. Its short and valiant history belongs alongside other storied Marine battalions which have so nobly served our Corps and nation.

Submitted by John A. Butler III '61

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Other sources:

1/27 Op Plan 2-44 dtd 12-31-1944

Personal and Military records of the late Lt Col John A Butler

Letters from Col Butler to his wife

News paper clippings and commentary on L/Col Butler from men who served with him on Iwo Jima

L/Col Butler's personal field map found and returned to the Butler family by PFC Bill Weber

***Conversations with various members of 1/27 and others in the 27th Marines over the years

*Rain was the S-2 for 1/27. He wrote this memoir several years before his death.

** Mark Flowers has a web site: www.ww2gyrene.org, dedicated to the WW2 Marine, which regularly publishes unit histories and personal vignettes from WW 2 Marines

***. Over the years, I encountered and communicated with men who had served in the 1st Bn 27th Marines. A number of the officers who survived wrote to my mother immediately after the war and in later years, and were the source for much of what I learned about my father and the leadership of 1/27.

Photos:

(1) LCol John A Butler

(2) Basilone & mg platoon relaxing at Pendleton

(3) Sgt Rea' 1st Platoon C-1-27 with mg section from Basilone's platoon

(4) LCol Butler
Tarawa December

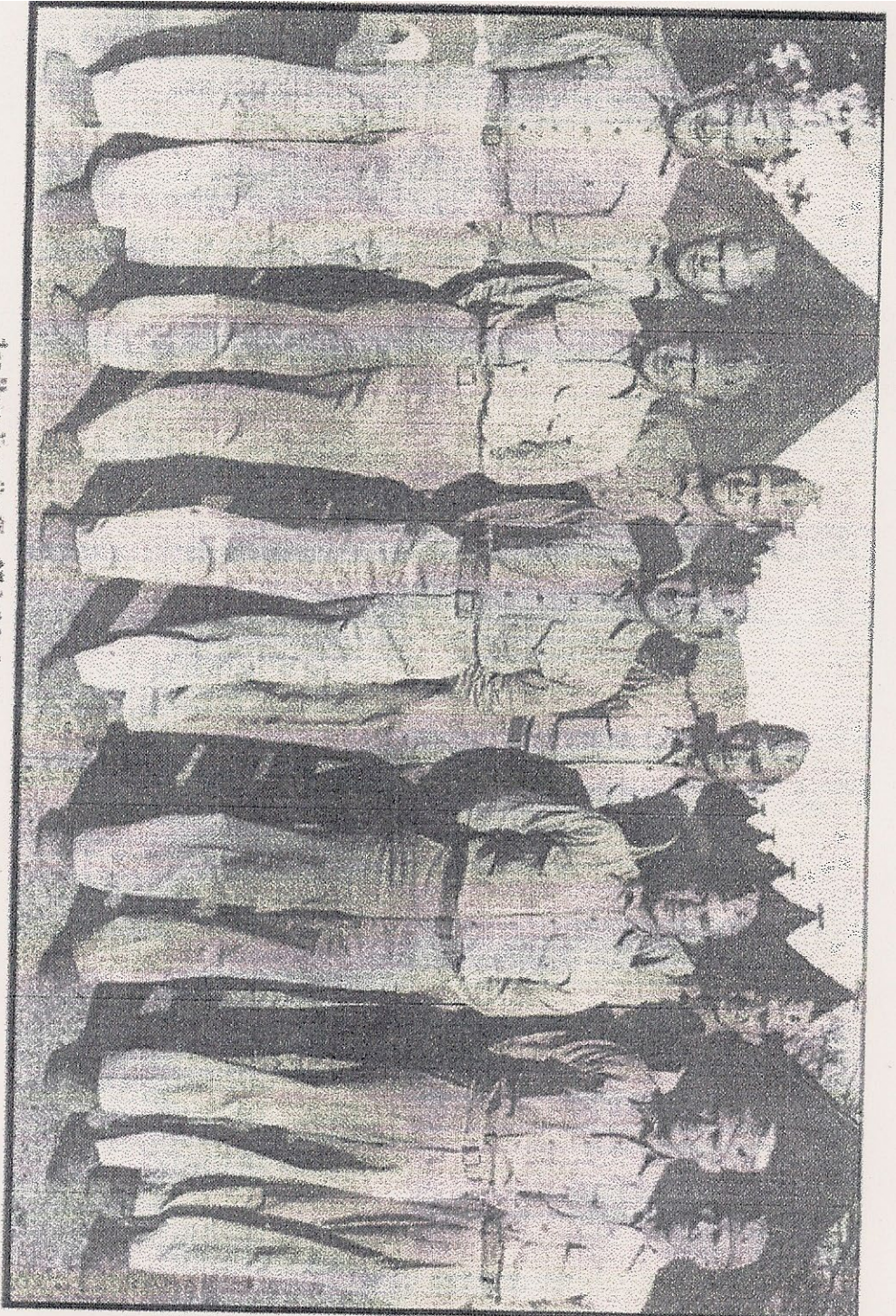
(5) John & Clint
Beach 2

2005



& Staff, Camp
1944
Butler at Red
Blockhouse March





1st Battalion, Staff - 27th Marines

1st Lt. Dick O'Dick, Dr. (name unknown), 1st Lt. Ed O'Brien, Capt. Ivan Shepherd, 1st William Macken, 1st Col. John Butler, 1st James E. Rain, Maj. William Tumbelson, Quartermaster Hanson, Doctor Doer, Col. Butler was killed. All the remaining were seriously wounded with the exception of 1st Rain and 1st Macken.

