With the Old Breed

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF E.B. SLEDGE

After growing up in Mobile, Alabama, Eugene Sledge attended a military college but soon volunteered to enter the Marine Corps in December 1942. As a Marine infantryman, he took part in the battle of Peleliu in September 1944 and the battle of Okinawa in April 1945. These experiences marked him for life. Although he survived the war without a single wound, it took him years to recover from the psychological trauma of combat. Following the Japanese surrender in August 1945, Sledge served for four months in Beijing, China, as part of the American occupation force. Sledge was then honorably discharged from the Marine Corps in 1946 with the rank of corporal, but struggled to readjust to civilian life. He ultimately decided to transform a lifelong passion for bird-watching into a profession, graduating from the University of Florida with a doctorate in zoology. He then became a professor at Alabama College, where he taught biology. Sledge is best known for his literary memoirs recounting his experience during World War II: *With the Old Breed* (published forty years after the war, in 1981) and *China Marine: An Infantryman's Life After World War II* (2002), which relates his post-combat return to civilian life.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

World War II (1939-1945) was a global war, fought on various geographic theaters, which opposed two military blocs: the Allies (whose main leaders were the U.S., the Soviet Union, the U.K., and China) and the Axis powers (Nazi Germany, Japan, and Italy). The U.S.'s involvement in the war began on December 7, 1941, after Japan launched a surprise military air strike against the naval base of Pearl Harbor. The U.S. then declared war on Japan and became involved in various operations. In continental Europe, the U.S. took part in operations such as the invasion of Italy, which caused the country to surrender, and the Battle of Normandy, which successfully forced German forces to retreat from France. The Allied forces ultimately prevailed in Europe. After the Allied invasion of Germany in early 1945—which concluded with the capture of Berlin by Soviet and Polish forces and the suicide of Adolph Hitler—Nazi Germany finally surrendered on May 8, 1945. In the meantime, in the Pacific theater, the Allies launched major offensives such as the battles of Guadalcanal and Tarawa. The U.S. fought to regain control over the Philippines, which the Japanese had invaded in 1942, defeating General MacArthur's American and Filipino forces. The battle of Peleliu, fought between the U.S. and Japan, was meant to prepare MacArthur's return to the Philippines, but became controversial because of its unclear strategic gains and its extremely high casualty rate. However, General MacArthur was able to regain control the Philippines from October 1944. The U.S. then launched the Battle of Okinawa and was able to secure the island on June 22, 1945, in what proved to be the costliest single campaign in the Pacific. Despite such Allied successes, it is only after the U.S. dropped two atomic bombs on Hiroshima (August 6) and Nagasaki (August 9), while threatening to invade the Japanese mainland, that Japan finally surrendered on August 15, 1945, putting an end to the war. War crime trials were later conducted against the Germans and the Japanese.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Eugene Sledge's memoir belongs to a long history of narratives of war, whether in novel form or as memoirs, written by those who experienced it firsthand. Written from two separate national perspectives, two classics, English soldier Siegfried Sassoon's *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* and German writer Erich Maria Remarque's novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* both relate the impact of World War I on youthful innocence and optimism. This period of history proved inspirational to Eugene Sledge, who mentions reading English poet and World War I veteran Wilfred Owen's poetry. Other works written during the twentieth century relate the complex effects of war on the human mind. War correspondent Martha Gellhorn's account of twentieth-century conflicts, *The Face of War*, written over a fifty-year period, adopts a similar yet geographically broader perspective as Eugene Sledge, as it comments on the horrific brutality of war while accepting that war is sometimes necessary. More recently, novels such as Kevin Powers's *The Yellow Birds* have focused on the physical and psychological trauma of war veterans—a topic Sledge mentions in *With the Old Breed* but investigates with greater depth in his memoir *China Marine*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** With the Old Breed: At Peleliu and Okinawa
- **When Written:** 1944-1981
- **Where Written:** E. B. Sledge started writing his memoir in 1944, immediately after the battle of Peleliu, and continued writing after his return to the U.S.
- **When Published:** 1981
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Memoir
- **Setting:** Various Pacific islands during World War II
- **Climax:** The death of Company K's beloved captain "Ack Ack"

Haldane

- **Antagonist:** The Japanese enemy
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

The Bible. Sledge often mentions praying during the most trying times on Peleliu and Okinawa, but the small New Testament he carried with him everywhere in combat also had another purpose: it served as a notebook, where he took clandestine notes about the war. These notes later proved crucial in allowing him to compose his memoir *With the Old Breed*.

Adaptations. *With the Old Breed* inspired various movie adaptations, such as Ken Burns's World War II documentary *The War* (2007) and the HBO miniseries *The Pacific* (2010).

PLOT SUMMARY

In his memoir *With the Old Breed*, Eugene B. Sledge recalls his service with the U.S. Marines during World War II. In December 1942, at the age of nineteen, Sledge, a young man from Mobile, Alabama, decides to enroll in the Marine Corps. Proud of his country and anxious to defend it as best he can, Sledge feels that he must take part in the war, which the U.S. entered after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941.

Following his family's advice, Sledge initially joins officer training. However, when he realizes that such training involves taking classes on a peaceful university campus for two years, Sledge decides to enlist immediately as an infantryman, in order to participate directly in the war. Sledge reaches boot camp full of naïve enthusiasm but is soon faced with severe discipline and the icy personality of his drill instructor, Corporal Doherty. Sledge initially hates Doherty and the other officers for the harassment they subject recruits to. However, he later realizes that these officers' strategy is to prepare recruits to the harsh reality of war, where fighters are not allowed much sleep, peace, or rest. Reflecting back on his training experience, Sledge thus concludes that boot camp and scrupulous training play a crucial role in preparing Marines for combat—where they will always be more likely to survive if they learn to follow the rules.

In February 1944, after months of training, Sledge and other new Marines finally board a ship to the Pacific. After weeks at sea and further training in New Caledonia, on June 2nd they reach the island of Pavuvu, home of the 1st Marine division. There, Sledge sees veteran Marines who fought in the famous battles of Guadalcanal and Gloucester. He is awed by their unassuming attitude as well as their distant, detached look—the natural emotional consequence of weeks spent in harrowing battle. When Sledge learns that he is going to join Company K in the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines, 1st Marine Division (also known as K/3/5), he feels honored to be joining the 1st Marine Division, an elite group with an illustrious fighting history since World War I. He is ecstatic to join this long line of distinguished fighters, known as the "old breed."

On September 14, after taking part in amphibious-landing exercises, Company K finally embarks for Peleliu, where they will fight the Japanese. On the ship, Sledge chats with a friend, Robert Oswalt, who plans to be a neurosurgeon after the war. Sledge notes that Oswalt was later killed on Peleliu, and concludes gloomily that war has the capacity to destroy the most promising members of society. During his conversation with Oswalt, Sledge becomes conscious that he might not survive the next day, a thought that fills him with absolute fear. He wonders whether he will prove courageous or cowardly in battle, and if he will actually be able to kill the enemy.

On the morning of D Day, September 15, 1944, Sledge prepares to enter his first battle. He decides to follow Snafu around, a Gloucester veteran whose knowledge and experience make Sledge feel more secure. When Sledge enters the amtrac, an amphibious tank, he experiences utter panic, becoming so nervous that he feels his heart pound in his chest and his knees buckle. As they advance toward the beach, Sledge is overwhelmed by the sight, sound, and commotion of Japanese shells falling all around them, attempting to destroy the American amtracs. The shells create a hellish atmosphere that Sledge describes as like being in the heart of an exploding volcano.

Sledge and his companions then exit the amtrac, running on the beach as fast as they can to avoid the shells and bullets. Sledge survives this ordeal but suffers from a feeling of helplessness when he sees amtracs explode and fellow Marines fall dead on the beach. He is overwhelmed by the injustice and absurdity of war, which destroys so many young lives. However, he is also proud to capture this enemy territory and to help his country win the war. Sledge then sees his first enemy corpse and is horrified by this sight, although when he notices his veteran comrades' nonchalant attitude, he realizes that he will probably soon become desensitized to such visions himself.

Although Sledge and his companions were initially told that the battle on Peleliu would last barely three or four days, Peleliu proves to be infinitely more vicious and protracted than anyone had expected because of a change in Japanese strategy. Before Peleliu, the Japanese usually launched *banzai* suicide attacks against the enemy. On Peleliu, however, the Japanese begin using a network of mutually supporting positions, a much more effective defensive technique that forces the Americans to destroy each individual Japanese hide-out in a prolonged war of attrition, in order to win the battle.

In addition to these new techniques, Sledge notes that the Japanese are known as fanatics. They regularly launch suicide

infiltrations at nighttime to surprise Marines in their foxholes. On Peleliu, Sledge also decries Japanese soldiers' seemingly gratuitous cruelty. He sees three American corpses that some Japanese soldiers have mutilated horribly, cutting off various body parts—and, in one case, stuffing a man's penis in his mouth. Sledge is shocked by such displays of brutality, which he does not believe his fellow Marines would be capable of. At the same time, Sledge also describes a typical behavior among the Marines: collecting souvenirs from Japanese corpses. This includes removing the Japanese's **gold teeth** with a knife. Although Sledge is initially repulsed by this practice, over time he becomes inured to such brutality himself. It is only thanks to his friend, the corpsman Ken "Doc" Caswell, that he does not take part in this practice as well and thus keeps himself from turning into a callous, unfeeling fighter.

In general, Peleliu proves to be a horribly vicious environment, marked by ferocious battles in which Marines are exposed to close-range shell fire, an experience Sledge considers capable of driving even the toughest combat veteran to utter panic. As Sledge becomes accustomed to living in an environment marked by constant stress, exhaustion, and filth, he realizes that this is a world that non-combatants could never imagine—a universe of constant brutality, fear, and death, completely severed from the standards of the civilized world.

What helps Sledge survive on Peleliu is the atmosphere in Company K, which he grows to love as a family. Some of his officers impress him with their courage, compassion, and intelligence. One evening, Sledge chats with one such officer, Lt. Edward Jones, nicknamed "Hillbilly." The two of them share stories about being from the South and Sledge confesses to Hillbilly that he is often overwhelmed by a deep, debilitating fear of combat. Hillbilly replies that this is a normal reaction to war, and that everyone, including himself, experiences fear. The most important thing, however, Hillbilly notes, is to keep on performing one's duty anyway. This conversation makes Sledge feel understood and reassured. Later, on Okinawa, he is able to pay this kindness forward and comfort a terrified companion in the same way Hillbilly once did. Such moments of comradeship convince Sledge that friendship and solidarity are crucial to the experience of war in the Marine Corps, as they are the only things that make war tolerable.

Capt. Andrew "Ack Ack" Haldane, whom Sledge describes as the most beloved, most distinguished officer in the Marine Corps, also plays a crucial role in driving Company K's strong morale and motivation. Known for his extraordinary leadership capacities, Haldane shows a deep interest in his men and proves dedicated to protecting both their lives and their emotional well-being. Toward the end of the battle of Peleliu, however, Haldane is killed in action. This event devastates the entire company, causing Sledge to experience the most acute grief he ever felt during the war.

After a month and a half of fighting on Peleliu—longer than anyone had expected— the island is finally secured and Company K is able to return to Pavuvu. Sergeant Haney, a respected veteran who has been fighting since World War I, describes Peleliu as the most terrible combat experience he has ever been through, convincing Sledge that his own horror at what he has witnessed is justified. However, Sledge explains that historians have since agreed that, despite its ferocity and intense human toll, the battle of Peleliu was probably unnecessary in the greater historical context of World War II, as it did not bring any clear strategic gains. This idea depresses Sledge and his comrades, who have lost so many friends during the battle.

After months of resting and training on Pavuvu and Guadalcanal, Company K is once again sent to battle, this time on the Japanese island of Okinawa—Japan's last defense before the Japanese mainland. There, despite the usual fear of dying or being wounded, Sledge discovers that his previous combat experience keeps him from panicking in the same way he did on Peleliu. He still experiences fear, anger, and grief, but knows that he is capable of being a strong fighter and a reliable companion.

Fighting on Okinawa proves long, frustrating, and debilitating. In addition to the usual stress of combat and Japanese night-time infiltrations, the Marines are forced to advance in knee-deep mud and constant rain, which sometimes drives them to states of uncontrollable rage. Sledge describes the horrific living conditions on the island, in which the men must suffer from intense close-range shelling as well as routine horrific circumstances—such as the sight and smell of rotting bodies, maggots, and human excrement. Because of these harrowing conditions, the cases of "combat fatigue" and mental collapse increase exponentially. Sledge soon realizes that his own mind is affected by this harrowing environment. The life of a Marine on Okinawa sometimes proves so unbearable that he convinces himself he is lost in the middle of a nightmare and will soon wake up. To keep from "cracking up," he makes a pledge to himself to retain his sanity on Okinawa—a promise that gives him the strength necessary to keep on going in the most trying times.

In the meantime, the company's new mortar section leader, Mac, fresh out of officer training, proves arrogant, incompetent, and cruel. He demonstrates gratuitous brutality toward Japanese corpses, taking part in actions that make his subordinates feel revolted and outraged. By contrast, other officers, such as Cpl. Burgin and Lt. Duke, serve as redeeming forces, men Sledge looks up to and who make him feel more secure in combat. Members of Sledge's company, such as John Redifer, also play an important role in maintain company morale, as they prove capable of extraordinary acts of courage and self-sacrifice.

While Marines are immersed in harrowing conditions on Okinawa, the international political scene undergoes new

developments, influencing the course of the war. On May 8, the Marines learn that Nazi Germany has surrendered—a piece of news they receive with indifference, as the month of May on Okinawa proves deadlier and more horrendous than any other before. After weeks of harrowing battle, the island of Okinawa is finally secured on June 21. Then, a few months later, after atomic bombs are dropped on Japan on August 6 and 9, World War II ends on August 15, 1945.

After being sent to rest on Pavuvu, Sledge spends four months on occupation duty in China before returning home. Despite his relief at going home after so long, Sledge knows that he will probably struggle to reintegrate into civilian life. He is also forced to undergo a process of grieving, as he must leave his Company K family, which has brought so many warm, supportive friendships, and has become home to him.

Sledge concludes his narrative by remarking on the savage, wasteful nature of war. Although he insists on how cruel war is, he also notes that certain redeeming factors, such as his companions' courage and camaraderie, helped make war tolerable. He also notes that, in a world in which other countries will always try to dominate one another, he believes that defending and sacrificing oneself for one's country is a sacred responsibility, which his fellow Marines accepted so courageously.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Eugene "Sledgehammer" Sledge – The narrator and protagonist of *With the Old Breed*, Sledge undergoes a personal transformation over the course of the years and his combat experience. Sledge's innocence and enthusiasm for the war as a nineteen-year-old recruit is soon replaced by a hands-on understanding of the strict discipline, physical exertion, and emotional trauma that fighting entails. However, despite his initial fears about how he might react in combat, Sledge (nicknamed "Sledgehammer" by his comrades) soon proves a deeply reliable combatant, devoted to helping his companions and performing his duty to the best of his ability. He is transformed by the friendship and solidarity he experiences in Company K, in the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines (K/3/5), and proves capable of showing deep kindness toward his comrades. Sledge is also characterized by sincere patriotism, a belief in his individual responsibility to defend the country he loves. In addition, he is attached to his identity as a Southerner, which he embraces with pride. As a narrator, Sledge proves compassionate, thorough, and honest, unafraid to address even the most disturbing, inglorious aspects of war in order to paint a sincere picture of his experience in World War II.

Cpl. Merriell "Snafu" Shelton – A veteran of the famous battle of Cape Gloucester, Snafu is one of Sledge's fellow 60 mm mortarmen in Company K. Thanks to his knowledge and experience as a veteran fighter, as well as his obvious commitment to performing his duty as expertly as possible, Snafu becomes a figure characterized by trust and respect, capable of making Sledge feel more secure. The two of them become "buddies" and often share a gun hole throughout the war. Snafu proves reliable and helpful, as he gives Sledge advice at the beginning of Peleliu to keep him from harm. Although Snafu is loved and respected by his companions, he is also capable of challenging his companions' actions or opinions, once mistakenly accusing Sledge of failing to fire his mortar and thus causing an action to fail. This defiant attitude occasionally leads to insubordination, as he is unafraid to behave pugnaciously and criticize his superiors' orders. He is one of the twenty-six members of Company K to survive the battles of Peleliu and Okinawa.

Capt. Andrew "Ack Ack" Haldane – A veteran of the illustrious battles of Guadalcanal and Gloucester, Company K's commanding officer on Peleliu is deeply beloved. Sledge describes Haldane as "the finest and most popular officer [he] ever knew," capable of inspiring deep trust in his subordinates as well as his superiors. Characterized by a mix of intelligence, courage, and compassion, Haldane is an extraordinary leader, committed to his men's physical safety as well as their emotional well-being. He makes Company K feel like a family and a home to all of its members, showing a sincere interest in his men's lives. He dies in action on Peleliu, three days before Company K leaves the island. His death causes profound grief not only in Sledge but in all the members of Company K, who have grown to see Haldane as a parental figure, capable of keeping them safe and happy.

1st Lt. Edward "Hillbilly" Jones – Company K's machine-gun platoon leader, whose outstanding behavior on Guadalcanal allowed him to become an officer, is the second most popular officer after Haldane. Similar to Haldane in competence, intelligence and integrity, Hillbilly also impresses Sledge with his humility and honesty. He shares an intimate moment with Sledge in which he tells the young infantryman that everyone experiences fear in combat, but that what ultimately matters is doing one's duty. In his ability to listen to Sledge, Hillbilly brings the young man comfort, thus demonstrating qualities of generosity and compassion. Like Haldane, he proves just as committed to his men's emotional well-being as to the strategic advancement of the war. Hillbilly is later killed in battle.

John Redifer – Although Sledge does not describe his personal relationship with veteran infantryman Redifer, he considers him one of the most reliable, courageous companions in Company K. On various occasions, Redifer demonstrates his capacity to reason on his own and to take bold action to protect his companions. On one occasion, he exposes himself to enemy fire to protect his comrades as they transport ammunition across a dangerous clearing. Although his companions admire

him for this deed, the despised officer "Shadow" berates him, thus demonstrating that officials are not always able to recognize bravery in combat. Redifer is one of the twenty-six members of Company K to survive the battles of Peleliu and Okinawa.

Mac – Company K's mortar section leader on Okinawa is a young man who has recently graduated from an Ivy League college and officer training. Although Sledge recognizes this as evidence of Mac's intelligence, Mac ultimately proves arrogant and incompetent in actual combat. Behaving with no apparent understanding of the life-and-death gravity of war, he often puts his own fighters in danger through his own mistakes and reckless deeds. In addition, he takes part in disgusting acts of gratuitous cruelty, as he insists on peeing in the mouth of any dead Japanese soldier he encounters—which strikes Sledge as the most revolting action he ever sees a Marine perform during the war. Because of Mac's behavior, the men in Company K despise him and feel ashamed to have them as a leader, as they believe that he does not represent the dignified attitude of the Marine Corps.

Cpl. R. V. Burgin – A Gloucester veteran, Burgin is Sledge's patrol sergeant on Peleliu and Okinawa, and Sledge respects him immensely for his competence and courage. Burgin is wounded on Okinawa but returns to the war after three weeks of convalescence. He proves to be a reliable, intelligent leader, taking part in various acts of bravery. On one occasion, he successfully coordinates an attack against a pillbox—an action for which Sledge is convinced Burgin should have received an official decoration. Burgin is also confident and capable of asserting his opinion against incompetent officers such as Mac in order to protect the men's lives.

Ken "Doc" Caswell – A Navy corpsman, Doc distinguishes himself through his generosity, bravery, and self-sacrifice. He plays a crucial role in helping Sledge retain his sanity when he tells him not to collect a dead Japanese soldier's **gold tooth**, knowing that Sledge would degrade himself through such insensitive behavior. In battle, Doc proves capable of self-sacrifice, ignoring his own wounds in order to tend to others, thus revealing the seriousness with which he understands his commitment as a corpsman. Although he is later severely wounded in Okinawa, he survives and is sent back to his native Texas, where he remains one of Sledge's closest friends from the war.

Gunnery Sgt. Elmo Haney – A member of the "Old Corps," part of the Marines since World War I in France, Sergeant Haney is an inspirational model to young Marines such as Sledge. Although characterized by idiosyncrasies such as cleaning his rifle three times per day, talking to himself, and spending most of his time on his own instead of having a buddy, Haney is a stern, deeply experienced officer, committed to respecting the rules. On Pavuvu and Peleliu, during training as well as in battle, he ensures strict discipline, encouraging everyone to respect safety regulations. Although young Marines joke about Haney having gone "Asiatic," they love and admire him deeply, respecting his authority as an esteemed fighter.

Gunnery Sgt. Henry "Hank" Boyes – Company K's gunnery sergeant and the senior NCO in Sledge's combat patrol on Peleliu, Boyes is a fighter formidably devoted to the war and his companions in Company K. He distinguishes himself through multiple acts of bravery and a refusal to give up the fight even when he is wounded. He wins a Silver Star on Peleliu as a squad leader. He plays an important role in bolstering the company's morale even in the most trying of times, impressing Sledge with his calm and patient behavior, as well as his stern attitude when it comes to obeying orders and the military hierarchy.

Cpl. Doherty – Sledge's drill officer (DI) in boot camp is a cold, mean man whom Sledge initially hates. He behaves condescendingly toward the recruits in his platoon, humiliating them publicly when they make a mistake and forcing them to take part in exhausting drills. However, Sledge later understands that Doherty's unforgiving discipline and harsh attitude played a crucial role in preparing him for battle, as he insisted on the importance of following safety rules and respecting military discipline. Sledge later respects Doherty for this, understanding that discipline can make the difference between life and death in combat.

Lt. Duke – Sledge's section leader on Peleliu and 81 mm mortar platoon leader on Okinawa, Duke is a kind, fair, and generous man. He reassures Sledge when he sees him crying out of despair on Peleliu, thus proving both compassionate and intelligent in his capacity to help a soldier overcome traumatic emotions. On Okinawa, he demonstrates his ability to understand military logic beyond abstract rules, allowing Sledge to build a foxhole a few feet away from a dead Japanese corpse, instead of forcing him to dig at the exact spot planned by superiors. In addition, Duke is dedicated to showing respect to his men when he goes out of his way to explain the strategic importance of the fight of Shuri, Okinawa. This reveals his intellectual generosity and humility, as he shares information with them that is usually concealed from mere infantrymen.

Jay de l'Eau – Although Sledge calls Jay one of his closest friends in the war, this fellow infantryman is only mentioned by name a few times during Sledge's narrative. Despite being a Gloucester veteran, Jay proves extremely clumsy and irresponsible during the first days of fighting on Peleliu, when he leaves his foxhole at night without giving Sledge the password—thus risking being shot by his own friend. Apart from this episode, Jay is described as good-natured and friendly.

Robert Oswalt – Before the assault on Peleliu, Sledge chats with fellow Marine Oswalt about life after the war. Oswalt plans to be a neurosurgeon, because of his fascination with the human brain. However, he dies on Peleliu before having the opportunity to realize his dream. Sledge uses this story as an

example of the terrible waste that war entails, as it destroys a nation's most promising lives.

Capt. Paul Douglas – This fifty-three-year-old enlisted Marine helps Sledge and other members of Company K carry supplies across the beach on Peleliu. The young Marines watch him in disbelief, unable to understand why an old man would submit himself to the horror of war. A professor at the University of Chicago and future Senator of Illinois, Paul Douglas becomes a legend in the 1st Marine Division.

Bill – A beloved Company K Marine, Bill is killed one night when a Japanese soldier infiltrates the foxhole he shares with Sam. When Bill runs out of his foxhole to escape the Japanese infiltrator, a Marine—believing that Bill *is* the Japanese infiltrator—hits him violently with his rifle. Another Marine later kills Bill to put him out of his agony. In the morning, Sledge discovers that the man they mistook for a Japanese infiltrator was none other than their friend Bill. This story illustrates the way in which war can lead to tragic consequences by a mix of pure accident and incompetence—which Bill's buddy Sam illustrates.

Sam – Bill's foxhole buddy proves negligent when he falls asleep while on watch duty. This keeps him from seeing the Japanese infiltrator who is about to enter his foxhole—and from realizing that his buddy Bill has, in the meantime, left the hole. When Bill later dies as an unfortunate consequence of this series of events, the men in Company K consider Sam responsible for Bill's death because Sam failed to fulfill his most crucial task as a Marine: protecting the life of his buddy.

Howard Nease – A modest, playful, yet deeply experienced Gloucester veteran, Howard steals turkey from chow on New Year's Eve on Pavuvu so that he can share an intimate celebration with his companions. Beloved by his companions in Company K, Howard is later killed in the early days of Okinawa, but Sledge remembers Howard's act of celebration and generosity as one of the most heartwarming of his life.

"Shadow" – Sledge never names this first lieutenant, whom the Marines in Company K hate and despise. The Marines look down on this officer for being both careless with his appearance and irascible, often throwing a tantrum when he is dissatisfied with his men's behavior. Shadow demonstrates lack of judgment and further alienates himself from his subordinates when he berates Redifer for an action that all of Redifer's companions recognize as impressive bravery.

"Kathy" – A machine-gunner who joins Company K as a replacement after Peleliu, this Marine is nicknamed "Kathy" because, despite apparently being in love with his wife, he had an affair with a girl called Kathy before the war and has since become obsessed with her. Sledge shares a peaceful, amusing conversation with "Kathy" in the midst of utter destruction and death in Okinawa. This scene becomes an episode Sledge recalls for its surreal nature. It also allows Sledge to realize that he does not fully believe in a world beyond war anymore—and must therefore work hard to retain his own sanity.

Gen. Douglas MacArthur – Mentioned in *With the Old Breed* as the most prominent military actor in the Pacific theater in World War II, General MacArthur is in charge of re-entering the Philippines after Japanese invasion in 1941-1942. The battle of Peleliu is supposed to facilitate MacArthur's invasion of the Philippines, but it ultimately has little impact on the outcome of the war.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Sgt. Johnny Marmet – A sergeant who leads Sledge's amtrac on Peleliu. Although usually straightforward and confident, Marmet appears utterly crushed on the day of Capt. Haldane's death, which he is forced to announce to Sledge and other members of Company K.

George Sarrett – A fellow 60 mm mortarman, Sarrett often shares a foxhole with Sledge on Peleliu and Okinawa. He is one of the twenty-six members of Company K to survive the battles of Peleliu and Okinawa.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

DEATH, HORROR, AND TRAUMA

Eugene Sledge's memoir *With the Old Breed* relates his experience as a Marine infantryman in World War II. As part of Company K, 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines (K/3/5), he is sent to fight against the Japanese and takes part in harrowing battles on the Pacific Island of Peleliu and on the Japanese island of Okinawa. Despite his intensive training, Sledge soon realizes that war is infinitely more gruesome than he could have imagined. Exposed to the unbearable experience of close-range shelling, the death of close friends, and the sights and smells of decomposing corpses, Sledge understands that war has the capacity to turn everyone involved into savages. Therefore, although he fears losing his own life, he soon concludes that the horrors of war can prove just as debilitating as the threat of injury or death—if not more so. Sledge's narrative suggests that, if soldiers ostensibly fight against the enemy, they also wage a battle against terror and despair within their own selves, as they attempt to maintain their sanity in the face of chaos.

Over time, on Peleliu and Okinawa, Sledge realizes that a Marine's fear of death or injury soon becomes substituted by

intense disgust at the gruesome nature of the soldiers' environment. When the Marines first arrive on Peleliu, the Japanese immediately begin attacking them on the beach. There, during his first experience of enemy fire, Sledge describes feeling intense panic, as the fear of putting his own life at risk almost makes him lose control of his body and his mind. Later experiences, such as close-range shelling, are capable of inducing the same fright: "to be shelled in the open on your feet was horrible; but to be shelled point-blank was so shocking that it almost drove the most resilient and toughest among us to panic. Words can't convey the awesome sensation of actually feeling the muzzle blasts that accompanied the shrieks and concussions of those artillery shells fired from a gun so close by."

Over time, however, as Sledge becomes a combat veteran, such life-threatening experiences no longer fill him with the same panic. Rather, it is the routine nature of war's horrors, such as disgusting sights and smells, that proves most threatening to his well-being. On Peleliu, accumulating filth makes Sledge feel as though he is no longer a dignified human being. On Okinawa, the constant rain and wet mud, which make any movement excruciatingly difficult, almost drive him to uncontainable frustration and rage. Most poignantly, Sledge describes the horror of being constantly surrounded by death. Human excrement, decomposing bodies, and the large flies attracted by them all contribute to making war unbearable. As the days drag on and Sledge receives no respite from such a harsh environment, he concludes that such horrors are more mentally draining than fear alone.

In addition to losing their life because of enemy fire, Marines thus also face the potential danger of losing their sanity—a process referred to as going "Asiatic," a term used to describe extravagant, unsound behavior caused by prolonged military service in this part of the world. Sledge concludes that, in order to survive the war, he will need to protect his mental well-being as much as his physical survival. Over the course of the war, Sledge witnesses various soldiers' descent into madness. Affected by the stress of battle, one of his companions begins to shout uncontrollably in the middle of the night, risking alerting the enemy. The only way to silence him is to hit him on the head, which ultimately causes his death. The constant presence of decomposing corpses and maggots also proves unbearable. "We didn't talk about such things. They were too horrible and obscene even for hardened veterans. The conditions taxed the toughest I knew almost to the point of screaming. Nor do authors normally write about such vileness; unless they have seen it with their own eyes, it is too preposterous to think that men could actually live and fight for days and nights on end under such terrible conditions and not be driven insane."

Sledge soon realizes that he too is capable of falling prey to madness. To counter the stress of fighting, he sometimes tries to convince himself that he is living in a nightmare from which he will soon wake up. On Okinawa, he notices that he is gradually losing touch with reality and is no longer capable of imagining a world without war. The thought of going crazy scares him so much that he makes a pact with himself, promising himself not to give in to insanity. This pledge helps him maintain faith in himself, giving him a specific commitment to uphold in the face of such adversity. He knows that, if he does not maintain his sanity, surviving the war will be of no use whatsoever.

Through such gruesome experiences, Sledge thus understands that surviving does not only mean protecting one's body, but also involves sheltering one's mind from the danger of mental illness. This serves as an early indication of the difficulty for soldiers to return to civilian life, where they will no longer be confronted with direct violence, but will need to learn to live with the memories of agony and terror they have accumulated abroad. What Marines called "combat fatigue" at the time—what, in World War I, was referred to as "shell shock" and is now known as PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder)—remains a dark specter looming over each combatant's future civilian life.

PATRIOTISM AND MORALITY

Eugene Sledge's desire to take part in World War II derives from his patriotic attachment to the U.S. Moved by a strong commitment to protect the country he loves, which he views as a moral duty, Sledge also finds that combat experience causes him to develop a visceral hatred of the Japanese enemy. This hostility derives less from political considerations than from the Japanese's vicious fighting techniques, which Sledge considers unnecessarily cruel. Throughout the war, Sledge struggles to reconcile two conflicting attitudes: his embrace of morality and his need to destroy the enemy in a violent way. Ultimately, if Sledge fights hard to win the battles on Peleliu and Okinawa, he also remains attached to ethical norms of fair treatment, and refuses to degrade the Japanese in the same way they might torture the Americans (and other Americans might torture them). He aims to show that although war breeds a natural desire to kill the enemy, there are moral limits to the kind of brutality that is acceptable in armed combat.

Sledge believes that, as an American, it is his duty to fight against the Japanese. Sledge recalls the reasons behind his military engagement: "Until the millenium arrives and countries cease trying to enslave others, it will be necessary to accept one's responsibilities and to be willing to make sacrifices for one's country—as my comrades did. As the troops used to say, 'If the country is good enough to live in, it's good enough to fight for.' With privilege goes responsibility." Sledge thus conceives of fighting as a moral obligation, meant to protect the ideal life one believes in.

Along with this patriotic conviction, it is the direct experience of being shot at that convinces Sledge of the necessity to kill the Japanese. Although Sledge initially feels pity for the Japanese corpses he sees on Peleliu, he finally accepts that war is so cruel that one must accept to follow a simple principle: "them or us." The emotional toll of seeing one's companions die or become wounded also serves as powerful motivation to crush the enemy at all cost. In addition, Sledge and his companions develop a deep hatred of the Japanese. This attitude results in large part from what Sledge views as the Japanese's excessive brutality. For example, the Japanese are famous for taking no prisoners and torturing Americans to death. On Peleliu, Sledge also sees that Japanese soldiers have mutilated three American corpses, cutting off their body parts in horribly brutal ways. Witnessing such gratuitous cruelty on dead bodies strikes Sledge to the core. This episode serves as a decisive moment, a turning point in which he concludes that he will no longer feel compassion for the Japanese enemy.

Nevertheless, Sledge still tries to retain a sense of what constitutes morally acceptable behavior in a combat zone. He determines that, although killing is necessary and inevitable, some cruelty is gratuitous and should be avoided. After witnessing the Japanese's brutality firsthand, Sledge is moved not to imitate them but, on the contrary, to remain committed to what he perceives as the Marines' superior moral values. One day, he sees a wounded old Japanese woman in Okinawa who begs him to kill her, so as to put her out of her suffering. Instead of doing so, Sledge goes to seek medical help. After a few minutes, he returns with a medic to discover that another Marine has killed the woman. This drives Sledge into a rage and he angrily tells the soldier that their job is to "kill Nips, not *old women*!" Despite his use of an offensive term to refer to the Japanese, Sledge remains committed to the idea that he is fighting *an armed enemy*, not the entire Japanese people. He makes keeping innocent civilians from harm his ethical duty.

At the same time, Sledge knows that he is not impervious to brutal behavior himself. The Marines regularly strip Japanese corpses to search for "souvenirs," often taking the Japanese's **gold teeth**. While Sledge is initially disturbed by this practice, one day he decides that he too should try to keep a gold tooth for himself. Doc Caswell, a friend of his, convinces him not to do so, arguing that gold teeth carry germs. Reflecting on this episode later, Sledge realizes that Caswell was not actually concerned about hygiene, but was trying to keep Sledge from becoming callous and insensitive to violence. Similarly, when one of Sledge's companions tries to keep a Japanese's dead hand as a "souvenir," Sledge and other Marines convince the man that this is disgusting, and that he should leave the hand on Peleliu. In both cases, communal intervention plays an important role in encouraging Marines to understand the limits of what constitutes acceptable violence. Such episodes put the enemy's brutality in perspective, suggesting that anyone is capable of unnecessarily vicious acts, such as degrading an enemy's corpse. Sledge's struggle to remain in control of his own brutality reveals just how difficult it is to maintain a strong moral compass in the midst of such death and destruction.

Sledge's understanding of war thus combines two beliefs: the knowledge that war is brutal and uncivilized, but that one has a duty to defend one's own country in any possible way. The horrible conditions of life at the front occasionally leads Sledge to feel bitter toward politicians who describe war in terms of nobility and self-sacrifice, when the Marines are in fact immersed in horrific situations, far from ideal visions of war. All Sledge can do, he believes, is hope (perhaps naively) that political leaders will be respectful enough to limit the duration of war as much as possible in order to keep fighters from suffering any more than is strictly necessary. In the meantime, though, Sledge looks beyond the particular circumstances of national politics, defining the U.S. as a land he loves and for which he is ready to kill and die.

LEADERSHIP AND COURAGE

Although *With the Old Breed* often praises the valor of American Marines, it does not necessarily recognize all fighters as equal in combat. Like any other infantryman, Eugene Sledge is forced to respect the hierarchical nature of the U.S. military. However, this does not keep him from noticing that some of his superiors are sometimes cowardly and ineffective, whereas some of his peers' bravery goes unacknowledged. Sledge's various experiences in combat thus reveal that, although the military system aims to be meritocratic, it occasionally fails to reward courage adequately and to place the best fighters in positions of power. Therefore, more than official decorations or rank, what ultimately matters most in determining Marines' worth is the respect they are able to instill in their peers and the soldiers they command.

In the military hierarchy, valor is not always officially recognized or rewarded. Before the war, Sledge resolves to attend officer training in order to acquire knowledge, secure a good position in the military, and not enter the war at the lowest rank. However, along with ninety other students, Sledge decides to bypass two years of theoretical officer training and enlist directly in the Marines, thus sacrificing personal advancement in order to better defend the country. This suggests that rank alone—here, the difference between an officer and an infantryman—does not necessarily reflect one's motivation, capacities, and commitment to the war.

In fact, Sledge later discovers that officer training can be less effective than combat experience. When a new mortar section leader, Mac, arrives in Okinawa fresh out of officer school, he proves to be an ineffective leader, moved by a naïve understanding of war and an arrogant, unnecessarily cruel attitude toward the enemy. His cowardly attitude and his

inability to handle difficult combat situations ultimately show that he is less competent than the men he commands. In the context of war, being a veteran fighter can thus bring greater knowledge and skill than theoretical training far from the front.

In combat, Sledge also realizes that official recognition of military worth—such as rank or medals—does not account for all the acts of bravery soldiers perform. Sledge describes one of his fellow companions' brave acts: John Redifer ran across a stretch of land exposed to enemy fire in order to ask tanks to protect his companions as they moved ammunition from one position to the next. Instead of being praised for this valiant act, which helped save his companions' lives, Redifer is berated by a first lieutenant nicknamed Shadow, who condemns him for taking such a big risk. "The troops often expressed the opinion that whether an enlisted man was or wasn't recommended for a decoration for outstanding conduct in combat depended primarily on who saw him perform the deed. This certainly was true in the case of Redifer." In this case, although the first lieutenant has a more important position than the infantryman, he is not able to assess the situation as poignantly as the people who benefited from Redifer's act—Redifer's companions.

Therefore, more than rank or medals, combat experience and the respect one receives from fellow fighters can prove to be the most reliable form of military recognition. The capacity to inspire respect in one's subordinates does not necessarily rely on one's rank, but on one's attitude and knowledge. Although Sledge initially finds one of his drill instructors, Corporal Doherty, mean and callous, he later understands that the man's harshness is meant to prepare the future Marines for the harrowing conditions at the front. "Doherty commanded our respect and put such fear into us that he couldn't have been more effective if he had had the six stripes of a first sergeant instead of the two of a corporal." Doherty's capacity to inspire respect allowed the men to grow under his guidance, even if they did not yet know how useful these skills would prove at the front.

In this sense, military competence involves not only skill and bravery, but also the capacity to understand and influence one's companions' state of mind. Captain "Ack Ack" Haldane, whom Sledge describes as "the finest and most popular officer I ever knew," displays a sincere interest in his men's lives. On one occasion, Haldane makes a request for tanks to fire their guns ahead of Company K. Although Haldane knows this is not strictly necessary from a military standpoint, he justifies himself by explaining that he wants "[his] boys to feel secure." Such acts of compassion demonstrate Haldane's intelligent understanding of war not only as a physical act, but as a mental struggle in which optimism and solidarity can play a crucial role. This respectful attitude toward his men makes him one of the most admired officers in the Marines, both among his superiors and the fighters he commands.

Being respected by one's fellow fighters thus becomes a sign that one is a reliable ally in combat, committed to personal survival as well as the lives of one's companions. Although Sledge never receives an individual decoration for bravery, one of his companions compliments him on how well he fought at Peleliu, noting that he initially had doubts about him, but that Sledge proved him wrong. After hearing this, Sledge feels overwhelmed by pride and considers this comment just as valuable as a medal—one that he carries inside of him, not on his uniform.

Even though soldiers are forced to obey orders from superiors, people's ranks are not necessarily indicative of their actual leadership capacities and their valor in battle. Rather, as soldiers gain combat experience, they soon learn whom to fear and whom to trust, based on their own assessment of each other's worth, not necessarily on official markers.

FRIENDSHIP AND CAMARADERIE

After witnessing so many horrors on Peleliu and Okinawa, Eugene Sledge concludes that war is savage and uncivilized. However, he also realizes that he has formed special bonds with his companions, established in a context of intense solidarity and emotional turmoil. He concludes that fighting would have been impossible without the support he drew from his comrades in Company K. Paradoxically, though, these special bonds of friendship, based on a commitment to each other's lives, highlight how intensely different the realm of war is from the routine of ordinary civilian life. Ultimately, the book suggests that, although friendship formed around shared combat experience plays an essential part in maintaining soldiers' well-being, it also highlights soldiers' exclusion from the civilian population, thus making their return to civilian life all the more difficult.

To Sledge, none of what he experienced in the war would have been endurable without the support of his war companions. To him, shared feelings of companionship and solidarity play a crucial role in giving the Marines the strength to fight. The 5th Marines Regiment that Sledge is assigned to has a long history of military success and valor. Such prestigious history builds a strong sense of pride and loyalty (an "esprit de corps") among its members, which makes Sledge feel as though he is part—as the book's title suggests—of "the old breed," an honorable line of esteemed combatants. In fact, Sledge often notes that his division's discipline, sense of duty, and patriotism gives his comrades the high morale necessary to get through the war. Far from being trivial, this feeling of being part of a tight-knit family allows Marines to cooperate and rely on each other during the difficult moments of combat.

Beyond group identity, shared physical and emotional experience also plays an important role in bringing fighters together. On Peleliu, Sledge once confides in "Hillbilly," his machine-gun platoon leader, about how depressed and terrified war makes him feel. Hillbilly then explains that all soldiers,

including himself, experience fear, but that what ultimately matters is being able to do one's duty. Sledge draws much comfort from this conversation and admires Hillbilly for his honesty. In turn, on Okinawa, Sledge is later able to recall this episode and reassure one of his comrades, who is overcome by fear and despair. Sledge thus realizes that he is paying Hillbilly's kindness forward and participating in a network of solidarity, based on the shared emotional trauma that all soldiers endure. This allows Sledge to conclude that the only thing that makes war tolerable is friendship among the fighters: "War is brutish, inglorious, and a terrible waste. Combat leaves an indelible mark on those who are forced to endure it. The only redeeming factors were my comrades' incredible bravery and their devotion to each other."

However, if such friendships, formed in intense life-or-death situations, sustain soldiers during the war, they also make the return to civilian life all the more jarring. Indeed, as soldiers return home, the absence of such a tight-knit community often makes them feel depressed and isolated, unable to connect with the non-combatants at home. On Peleliu, Sledge understands that a deep gap has grown between him and ordinary civilians. "The fierce struggle for survival in the abyss of Peleliu eroded the veneer of civilization and made savages of us all. We existed in an environment totally incomprehensible to men behind the lines—service troops and civilians." As Sledge abandons certain civilian principles, such as the duty not to kill others, he realizes that people back home will never fully understand his experiences during the war.

Although Sledge does not narrate his return to civilian life in *With the Old Breed*, he recalls other soldiers' difficulties to adjust to life at home. When Sledge and his companions receive letters from former Company K members who are back in the U.S., they notice that these former fighters initially express relief at being back in a peaceful American setting, but "later the letters became disturbingly bitter and filled with disillusionment. Some expressed a desire to return if they could back into the old battalion." The Company K Marines who are currently risking their lives in battle do not understand such attitudes, since they all dream of going home. However, the former Marines' narratives suggest that peace and safety might be pleasant, but that "the good life and luxury didn't seem to take the place of old friendships forged in combat."

Company K members thus realize that, although war risks taking their lives, it also gives them the comfort of a community that cannot be replicated anywhere else. Even though all soldiers dream of returning home safely, they do not necessarily anticipate how isolated and lonely they are likely to feel once they are back. Although surviving the war is the soldier's primary challenge, it appears that new, equally challenging ordeals might await them at home, as they will have to overcome the trauma of war and find new meaning in the routine of civilian life.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

GOLD TEETH

The gold teeth that Marines collect as "souvenirs" from Japanese corpses reveal the dehumanizing effect that war has on people's minds, as it makes it difficult for individuals to maintain moral behavior in the midst of complete destruction and chaos. Although it is common practice for Marines to strip the Japanese dead of their belongings, Eugene Sledge finds the process of collecting a dead man's gold teeth with a knife utterly revolting. Sledge concludes that war dehumanizes fighters: it turns the Japanese dead, in Marines' eyes, into mere objects, instead of former human beings whose dignity should be respected—and it makes Marines less human themselves, as they prove capable of such savage behavior. Sledge grasps his own fallibility when he feels inclined to take a gold tooth himself, thus proving just as barbarous as his companions. However, Sledge's friend "Doc" Caswell's ability to convince him not to do so reveals that camaraderie can play a crucial role in helping soldiers retain their moral values. Sledge concludes that friendship has the power to encourage individuals to be better human beings, more respectful of each other and their surroundings. In this way, collecting gold teeth is a sign of the emotionally crippling effect that war has on people's psyches, turning previously good men into unfeeling warriors—yet *refusing* to collect gold teeth indicates that moral strength and the positive influence of community can sometimes prevail over the brutality of one's environment.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Oxford University Press edition of *With the Old Breed* published in 1981.

Part 1, Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ *Official histories and memoirs of Marine infantrymen written after the war rarely reflect that hatred. But at the time of battle, Marines felt it deeply, bitterly, and as certainly as danger itself. To deny this hatred or make light of it would be as much a lie as to deny or make light of the esprit de corps or the intense patriotism felt by the Marines with whom I served in the Pacific.*

My experiences on Peleliu and Okinawa made me believe that the Japanese held mutual feelings for us. They were a fanatical enemy; that is to say, they believed in their cause with an intensity little understood by many postwar Americans and possibly many Japanese, as well.

This collective attitude, Marine and Japanese, resulted in savage, ferocious fighting with no holds barred.

Related Characters: Eugene "Sledgehammer" Sledge (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

When Sledge's company is training on the Pacific island of Pavuvu, Sledge describes the intense hatred that his companions bear toward the Japanese, even before many of them have had hands-on experience of combat. He recalls various famous incidents in which the Japanese have proven treacherous and cruel—for example, pretending to be wounded only to kill the corpsman who comes to help. Such actions, Sledge explains, bred deep resentment within the Marines toward such a deceptive enemy.

Sledge's experience of war on Peleliu and Okinawa soon proves particularly horrific, as he witnesses atrocious acts committed on both sides. The Marines' practice of collecting Japanese gold teeth as souvenirs is an example of such ferocity, as neither side shows any respect to the enemy dead. Although Sledge does not condone such acts, he does understand their context, and tries to communicate it to the reader.

However, on a personal level, although Sledge understands hatred and resentment as the basis for many fighters' actions, he does not necessarily believe that it justifies all kinds of behavior. Rather, he tries to maintain a critical distance from cruelty in order to keep on behaving morally during the war—a task that proves particularly trying in an environment of constant, dehumanizing brutality.

Part 1, Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ To be under a barrage or prolonged shelling simply magnified all the terrible physical and emotional effects of one shell. To me, artillery was an invention of hell. The onrushing whistle and scream of the big steel package of destruction was the pinnacle of violent fury and the embodiment of pent-up evil. It was the essence of violence and of man's inhumanity to man. I developed a passionate hatred for shells. To be killed by a bullet seemed so clean and surgical. But shells would not only tear and rip the body, they tortured one's mind almost beyond the brink of sanity. After each shell I was wrung out, limp and exhausted.

Related Characters: Eugene "Sledgehammer" Sledge (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 74

Explanation and Analysis

On D Day, the day the Marines land on Peleliu, Sledge is confronted with extensive shelling for the first time in his life. Although Sledge's combat experience later gives him greater control over his body and mind, keeping him from panicking in situations that once terrified him when he underwent them for the first time, shelling is not one of these experiences. Instead of decreasing in intensity, the intensity of every new shelling experience drives Sledge to the same state of absolute helplessness and near-panic.

This time, Sledge does not argue that the Japanese are uniquely cruel but, rather, that *war* is inhuman because of the violent way in which it destroys bodies and minds. Sledge is thus faced with a moral contradiction: his decision to take part in war and his utter disgust of it. Although he is forced to accept that shelling is an integral part of modern war and that he has decided to join this war out of a sense of moral responsibility, he also knows that there is something immoral about exacting such mental and physical violence.

Ultimately, Sledge's description reveals the moral and personal sacrifices a fighter is forced to make, as he must resign himself to taking part in the immoral *process* of war in order to defend what he considers to be its moral *aims*.

I wondered also about the hopes and aspirations of a dead Japanese we had just dragged out of the water. But those of us caught up in the maelstrom of combat had little compassion for the enemy. As a wise, salty NCO had put it one day on Pavuvu when asked by a replacement if he ever felt sorry for the Japanese when they got hit, "Hell no! It's them or us!"

Related Characters: Eugene "Sledgehammer" Sledge (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 85

Explanation and Analysis

On Peleliu, Sledge discovers that his friend Robert Oswalt has been killed and concludes that such a loss is a great waste, given Oswalt's high intellectual potential and the contribution he could have made to society. When the Marines drag a dead Japanese soldier out of the water, Sledge transfers his thoughts about Oswalt to this enemy corpse, wondering if he should feel compassion for him, too.

This represents a moment in which Sledge realizes that the cost of death in war is equally heavy on both sides, as both camps are made up of people with individual desires, emotions, and hopes for the future. However, Sledge concludes that feeling compassion for the enemy is senseless—not only because the Japanese soldiers are so notoriously cruel, but because killing in war is a matter of necessity, not of pure choice. In other words, even though killing other human beings is saddening, such sadness naturally disappears in the face of the threat posed to one's own life. Choosing to fight in any given camp inevitably means choosing to kill the enemy—which, according to this reasoning, makes any compassion for the enemy unproductive and absurd. This logic of self-protection allows soldiers to circumvent moral questions, enabling them to fight the enemy without having to consider the human cost of their actions beyond issues of national allegiance.

Fear and filth went hand in hand. It has always puzzled me that this important factor in our daily lives has received so little attention from historians and often is omitted from otherwise excellent personal memoirs by infantrymen. It is, of course, a vile subject, but it was as important to us then as being wet or dry, hot or cold, in the shade or exposed to the blistering sun, hungry, tired, or sick.

Related Characters: Eugene "Sledgehammer" Sledge (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 92

Explanation and Analysis

On Peleliu, Sledge discovers that basic Marine Corps standards such as keeping one's rifle and one's person clean are extremely difficult to fulfill. When he notices that he is dirty and smells bad, he feels as though he has lost part of his dignity not only as a Marine, but also as a human being.

Sledge concludes that this feeling is just as debilitating as fear. This is surprising and paradoxical, given that being dirty leads to no apparent danger, whereas fear in battle is usually tied to the very real threat of dying or being wounded—much more immediate consequences. However, throughout Sledge's narrative, it becomes apparent that war is traumatic beyond the obvious issue of violence itself, oftentimes because of seemingly simple issues such as food, personal hygiene, and physical discomfort.

Sledge's narrative thus insists on considering war from an intimately human perspective, instead of reducing it to considerations about violence and casualties. He reveals that, in war, maintaining one's dignity as a human being is just as important as surviving physically—and that, therefore, filth is just as difficult to bear as the constant violence the Marines are immersed in.

Heading into the thick scrub brush, I felt pretty lonesome, like a little boy going to spend his first night away from home. I realized that Company K had become my home. No matter how bad a situation was in the company, it was still home to me. It was not just a lettered company in a numbered battalion in a numbered regiment in a numbered division. It meant far more than that. It was home; it was "my" company. I belonged in it and nowhere else.

Related Characters: Eugene "Sledgehammer" Sledge (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 98

Explanation and Analysis

On Peleliu, Sledge and some of his companions are sent on a mission beyond company lines, in order to prevent the

advance of the Japanese enemy. This experience disconcerts Sledge, as he realizes that he feels deeply attached to Company K, which brings him a strong sense of friendship and stability.

Throughout his narrative of the war, Sledge frequently refers to this feeling of home and comfort in Company K. He notes that this is not mere sentimentalism, but that such attachment plays an important strategic role in Marines' experience. Not only does it allow Marines to maintain a strong morale and thus give them greater motivation to fight, but it also builds a tight-knit community in which Marines learn to fight for themselves as much as for each other. In concrete terms, they learn to depend on each other both emotionally and physically and to put their lives in each other's hands.

On various occasions, Sledge finds solace in his superiors and his peers. He discovers that, in moments of despair, such close relationships are the main driving force allowing him to keep on fighting.

> I had the sensation of being in a great black hole and reached out to touch the sides of the gun pit to orient myself. Slowly the reality of it all formed in my mind: we were expendable!
>
> It was difficult to accept. We come from a nation and a culture that values life and the individual. To find oneself in a situation where your life seems of little value is the ultimate in loneliness. It is a humbling experience. Most of the combat veterans had already grappled with this realization on Guadalcanal or Gloucester, but it struck me out in that swamp.

Related Characters: Eugene "Sledgehammer" Sledge (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 100

Explanation and Analysis

One night in Peleliu, in his foxhole, Sledge finds himself overwhelmed by the darkness around him. Unable to distinguish the contours of nearby objects, he feels completely lost. He concludes that his life is meaningless, since other Marines could so easily replace him—in the same way that the war has gone on despite the deaths of so many other soldiers. The darkness of the foxhole is comparable to that of a tomb, accentuating Sledge's feeling that his life hangs by a thread.

This experience causes him to reevaluate his cultural beliefs about individualism, as well as his notion of solidarity in the Marine Corps. Indeed, Sledge suddenly realizes that everyone dies alone and that, despite his noble intention of sacrificing himself for his homeland, his individual engagement makes little difference in the outcome of the war. Rather, it is only thanks to everyone's collective participation—in which so many soldiers have come and gone—that the war is able to go on.

Nevertheless, although this experience puts Sledge's life in greater perspective, it does not diminish his desire to survive, which remains an embedded human instinct—more deeply rooted, perhaps, than any cultural notion he might have acquired about the value of his life.

> Reporters and historians like to write about interservice rivalry among military men; it certainly exists, but I found that front-line combatants in all branches of the services showed a sincere mutual respect when they faced the same danger and misery. Combat soldiers and sailors might call us "gyrenes," and we called them "dogfaces" and "swabbies," but we respected each other completely.

Related Characters: Eugene "Sledgehammer" Sledge (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 104

Explanation and Analysis

Sledge often refers to the particular "esprit de corps" (common sense of pride and camaraderie) that exists among Marines, as well as the pride he takes in forming part of the 1st Marines Division. He also recounts various episodes in which his companions and he prove capable of reacting violently to any insult or provocation that diminishes the prestige of being a Marine in Company K. However, this pride and sense of identity does not keep him, on Peleliu, from feeling respect for army infantrymen who are veterans of another battle in the Pacific.

This leads Sledge to explain that rivalries between military services ultimately matter less than the similar experience of taking part in combat at the front. In fact, Sledge and his companions occasionally prove contemptuous toward *non-combatants* in general, who do not understand the misery combatants are exposed to.

After the war, this gap between veterans and civilians will prove infinitely more difficult to bridge than any difference

that might exist between fellow combatants. It is the trauma caused by war, and not any particular affiliation, that will mark fighters from the front, whether army soldiers or Marines.

Part 1, Chapter 5 Quotes

❝ This standard procedure in combat on the front line was based on a fundamental creed of faith and trust. You could depend on your buddy; he could depend on you. It extended beyond your foxhole, too. We felt secure, knowing that one man in each hole was on watch through the night.

Sam had betrayed that basic trust and had committed an unforgivable breach of faith. He went to sleep on watch while on the line. As a result his buddy died and another man would bear the heavy burden of knowing that, accident though it was, he had pulled the trigger.

Related Characters: Eugene "Sledgehammer" Sledge (speaker), Bill, Sam

Related Themes:

Page Number: 108

Explanation and Analysis

One night on Peleliu, Sledge sees two Japanese soldiers infiltrate Company K's foxholes. Chaos ensues and, in the scuttle, the Marine Bill is mistaken for a Japanese infiltrator and shot dead. This tragic situation emerges because Bill's buddy Sam fell asleep while on watch duty and did not see Bill leave the foxhole.

Although no one in Company K actually meant to kill Bill, this episode underlines that any mistake in the war, however small, can lead to fatal consequences. Given the circumstances, the man who shot Bill was justified in doing so. Sam, however, is at fault, because he did not respect a crucial rule that all Marines are meant to follow: to help protect his buddy's life. In this sense, he failed in his duty.

The other Marines' anger derives not only from grief at Bill's death, but from their knowledge that the buddy system is their only protection against the total chaos of violence. This system ensures that everyone benefits from a network of mutual protection, in which all members of the company look after each other's lives. Without such insurance, Marines are left to themselves, alone in a world of chaotic brutality.

❝ I had just killed a man at close range. That I had seen clearly the pain on his face when my bullets hit him came as a jolt. It suddenly made the war a very personal affair. The expression on that man's face filled me with shame and then disgust for the war and all the misery it was causing.

My combat experience thus far made me realize that such sentiments for an enemy soldier were the maudlin meditations of a fool. Look at me, a member of the 5th Marine Regiment—one of the oldest, finest, and toughest regiments in the Marine Corps—feeling ashamed because I had shot a damned foe before he could throw a grenade at me! I felt like a fool and was thankful my buddies couldn't read my thoughts.

Related Characters: Eugene "Sledgehammer" Sledge (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 117

Explanation and Analysis

When Company K attacks a pillbox (small, fortified guard post) where Japanese soldiers are hidden, Sledge kills a man who is about to throw a grenade at him. His ability to see the details of the man's suffering, since he shoots him from a short distance, makes him feel pity for the soldier. Sledge realizes that what he is so used to calling "the enemy" is in fact a collection of men like him, capable of the same pain and despair.

At the same time, Sledge knows that learning to detach oneself from the enemy is one's only option in war, because the decision to take part in the war involves accepting to kill others. Sledge thus concludes that feeling compassion for the enemy is a form of betrayal.

This conclusion does not erase the malaise Sledge intuitively felt, but merely represses it. It aims to ignore Sledge's moral qualms in order to focus on what Sledge considers to be a positive moral commitment: helping his country. Ultimately, though, even if Sledge wishes not to feel compassion for the enemy, reality reveals the opposite: that causing pain to others is an unpleasant, potentially immoral deed, which does not fit into soldiers' typical conception of their strength, nobility, and duty—but which most soldiers, if they are honest with themselves, are bound to experience.

To the noncombatants and those on the periphery of action, the war meant only boredom or occasional excitement; but to those who entered the meat grinder itself, the war was a nether world of horror from which escape seemed less and less likely as casualties mounted and the fighting dragged on and on. Time had no meaning; life had no meaning. The fierce struggle for survival in the abyss of Peleliu eroded the veneer of civilization and made savages of us all. We existed in an environment totally incomprehensible to men behind the lines—service troops and civilians.

Related Characters: Eugene "Sledgehammer" Sledge (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 121

Explanation and Analysis

On Peleliu, Sledge once sees a Marine attempt to collect gold teeth from a Japanese soldier with his knife. However, when the Marine realizes that the soldier is not dead but is in agony on the ground, he merely tries to hold the soldier still, focusing blindly on the task at hand. Sledge describes this anecdote with pure horror, realizing how detached the men around him have become from their own brutal actions and their human consequences.

Sledge's assessment of war derives from such brutal episodes. He describes war neither as a noble pursuit, nor as a cause of excitement, but as an experienced marked by fear, terror, and violence. As Marines find themselves immersed such a violent world, they can lose track of what delimits acceptable violence and what represents cruelty. They become "savages"—men who no longer respect the ethical standards that civilization defends.

This detachment from society's norms foreshadows the men's later difficulties to reintegrate into civilian life. Not only will they probably realize that no one understands their experience beyond their own war companions, but they will also likely find it difficult to conform their own actions to what society condones.

Part 1, Chapter 6 Quotes

As I looked at the stains on the coral, I recalled some of the eloquent phrases of politicians and newsmen about how "gallant" it is for a man to "shed his blood for his country," and "to give his life's blood as a sacrifice," and so on. The words seemed so ridiculous. Only the flies benefited.

Related Characters: Eugene "Sledgehammer" Sledge (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 146

Explanation and Analysis

On Peleliu, Sledge once has to spend the night in a gun pit where two Marines were killed the day before by a Japanese infiltrator. He finds the idea of sleeping in a blood-stained hole intolerable, and decides to use some cardboard to cover the stains. This experience tests his limits of endurance and, affected by this episode, he concludes that outsiders' visions of war are unable to illustrate what war truly is.

Although Sledge never mentions losing heart in his decision to take part in the war and defend his country, this moment does reveal the contempt he has for politicians—who, as non-combatants, use glorified visions of war to serve their own interests, without necessarily understanding the suffering that fighters experience on the ground.

Sledge's cynical conclusion that only flies benefit from the war suggests that Sledge has not taken part in war out of a belief that he might *benefit* from it in any way, but out of an understanding of sheer *necessity*—the necessity to protect his country from ruin. Any other description of war that does not focus exclusively on the inevitable combination of necessity and suffering, he implies, is deceptive.

I learned realism, too. To defeat an enemy as tough and dedicated as the Japanese, we had to be just as tough. We had to be just as dedicated to America as they were to their emperor. I think this was the essence of Marine Corps doctrine in World War II, and that history vindicates this doctrine.

Related Characters: Eugene "Sledgehammer" Sledge (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 157

Explanation and Analysis

When Company K is sent back to Pavuvu after the battle on Peleliu, Sledge reflects on his experience of combat. He concludes that war has made him lose his optimistic innocence, but has also taught him realism—specifically, the need to fight as ferociously and mercilessly as the Japanese in order to win.

Sledge rarely mentions history in *With the Old Breed*. Here, his invocation of global historical circumstances, though vague, puts his own experience in perspective: it suggests not only that the Marine Corps is effective at performing its various tasks, but also that the Marines' actions ultimately played an important role in bringing an end to World War II. Without making explicit reference to the development of the war, Sledge's comment serves as a reminder that the U.S. helped defeat tyrannical countries such as Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany.

Sledge thus argues that however brutal life might have been on Peleliu and Okinawa, it served an important function: to bring an end to a dangerous conflict threatening global peace and justice.

Part 2, Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ Despite these momentary lapses, the veterans of Peleliu knew they had accomplished something special. That these Marines had been able to survive the intense physical exertion of weeks of combat on Peleliu in that incredibly muggy heat gave ample evidence of their physical toughness. That we had survived emotionally—at least for the moment—was, and is, ample evidence to me that our training and discipline were the best. They prepared us for the worst, which is what we experienced on Peleliu.

Related Characters: Eugene "Sledgehammer" Sledge (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 164

Explanation and Analysis

After Peleliu, Sledge reflects on the impact of the battle on his and his companions' lives. Although he previously invokes his pride at participating in the global course of history, here he focuses more specifically on the impact of combat on individuals. This time, instead of focusing on negative consequences, he mentions the pride that Company K Marines felt at knowing they had survived such a terrible ordeal.

In this sense, Sledge is no longer concerned with the global, long-term impact of the Marines' actions, but with their extraordinary human ability to perform nearly any task. Sledge and his companions are glad to be known—by others as well as by their own selves—as extraordinary fighters. These comments highlight Sledge's intense sense of pride and identity at being part of the Marine Corps. Although this affinity is not necessarily representative of any particular moral commitment, it does give him the impression of contributing to an elevated, inspiring project driven by incredible human beings.

Part 2, Chapter 9 Quotes

❝ As I looked at the flotsam of battle scattered along that little path, I was struck with the utter incongruity of it all. There the Okinawans had tilled their soil with ancient and crude farming methods; but the war had come, bringing with it the latest and most refined technology for killing. It seemed so insane, and I realized that the war was like some sort of disease afflicting man.

Related Characters: Eugene "Sledgehammer" Sledge (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 197

Explanation and Analysis

When Sledge and a group of companions come across a spot where another company was recently ambushed, he notes the absurdity of seeing signs of terrible violence (such as blood spattered around) in the middle of such a peaceful, natural landscape. This comment reveals Sledge's respect for other societies and the Okinawans' way of life. Although Sledge does continue to see the Japanese as the enemy, he understands that this involves only armed soldiers, not innocent civilians. In times of peace, Sledge would probably have been interested in knowing the Japanese people on friendly terms, instead of fighting its men so aggressively. Therefore, in the same way that military technology is unnatural and excessively destructive, war also perverts even the best men's intentions, keeping them from expressing their most laudable human and intellectual qualities, such as the desire to learn from foreign cultures. Sledge's comments here also highlight how humans tend to use technology and innovation to further their worst impulses—they might still be using "ancient" methods to grow food, but are sure to have all the "most refined technology for killing."

Part 2, Chapter 11 Quotes

❝ On 8 May Nazi Germany surrendered unconditionally. We were told this momentous news, but considering our own peril and misery, no one cared much. "So what" was typical of the remarks I heard around me. We were resigned only to the fact that the Japanese would fight to total extinction on Okinawa, as they had elsewhere, and that Japan would have to be invaded with the same gruesome prospects. Nazi Germany might as well have been on the moon.

Related Characters: Eugene "Sledgehammer" Sledge (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 223

Explanation and Analysis

Although the Marines' participation in combat is meant to help their country win the war, this concern loses prominence in the face of immediate death and danger, which forces them to concentrate on their own survival—not on their country's political-military goals. This reveals not lack of patriotism on the men's part, but a realistic understanding that their own lives as fighters are expendable, capable of being replaced by new recruits, and that the victory in Germany is not going to protect them on the Japanese battlefield.

In the military context of World War II, the men's indifference can also be understood in light of the fact that, for a long time, the United States was more focused on defeating Nazi Germany than in invading other theaters of war. In practical terms, this helps explain the Marines' difficult struggle to defeat the Japanese enemy, as they often had fewer men, resources, and knowledge about the terrain—and, therefore, they reach the conclusion that Nazi Germany's surrender is a success unrelated to their own struggles.

❝ The troops often expressed the opinion that whether an enlisted man was or wasn't recommended for a decoration for outstanding conduct in combat depended primarily on who saw him perform the deed. This certainly was true in the case of Redifer and what he had done to get the ammunition across the draw. I had seen other men awarded decorations for less, but Redifer was not so fortunate as to receive the official praise he deserved. Just the opposite happened.

Related Characters: Eugene "Sledgehammer" Sledge (speaker), "Shadow", John Redifer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 226

Explanation and Analysis

Despite Sledge's frequent praise of the Marine Corps, he does accept that it is occasionally marked by injustice. In this case, Sledge recalls an episode in which Redifer exposes himself to enemy fire in order to protect his companions, and he is successful in his endeavor. Later, though, Redifer receives harsh criticism from his officer, Shadow, who believes Redifer behaved recklessly—a reaction that Redifer's companions find deeply unfair.

Instead of focusing on external signs of valor such as decorations and rank, the Marines thus learn to trust their own reactions—in this case, their admiration and gratitude for Redifer's actions—when determining bravery and competence. In many cases, one's companions' appreciation is a greater indicator of valor than any official military decoration.

Part 2, Chapter 12 Quotes

❝ The stench of death was overpowering. The only way I could bear the monstrous horror of it all was to look upward away from the earthly reality surrounding us, watch the leaden gray clouds go skudding over, and repeat over and over to myself that the situation was unreal—just a nightmare— that I would soon awake and find myself somewhere else. But the ever-present smell of death saturated my nostrils. It was there with every breath I took.

I existed from moment to moment, sometimes thinking death would have been preferable.

Related Characters: Eugene "Sledgehammer" Sledge (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 253

Explanation and Analysis

On Okinawa, Sledge describes constant sensory discomforts, such as knee-deep mud, rotting corpses, maggots, and the smell of death. Although these aspects of war might seem less terrifying than the threat of being shot, they ultimately prove more consistent—and, therefore, more capable of driving a man insane.

Sledge's effort to convince himself he is in a nightmare is an attempt for him to separate himself emotionally from his situation, which could make him go crazy. Although this is a laudable objective, emotional detachment itself involves risk, as it is possible that Sledge could slip into fantasy and lose touch with reality—in particular, with a world without war.

This is a moment in which Sledge's despair is extremely acute. It suggests that, over time, as one becomes relatively used to the shock of battle, it is the everyday horror of life that can consume one's mind, making a soldier so desperate that the thought of death is a relief instead of a source of fear.

❝ Viewing that picture made me realize with a shock that I had gradually come to doubt that there really was a place in the world where there were no explosions and people weren't bleeding, suffering, dying, or rotting in the mud. I felt a sense of desperation that my mind was being affected by what we were experiencing. Men cracked up frequently in such places as that. I had seen it happen many times by then. In World War I they had called it shell shock or, more technically, *neurasthenia*. In World War II the term used was combat fatigue.

Related Characters: Eugene "Sledgehammer" Sledge (speaker), "Kathy"

Related Themes:

Page Number: 257

Explanation and Analysis

When Sledge chats with "Kathy," a fellow Marine nicknamed after the name of his lover Kathy, he realizes that Kathy's love life is so removed from their current reality that Sledge cannot fully picture it—nor does he feel entirely sure that the civilian world even exists anymore. This impression of being severed from reality is terrifying, but it allows Sledge to become conscious of the extent to which war has affected his mind—brutalizing him not in the sense that he now behaves cruelly, but in the sense that he has lost touch with a non-brutal world and has become convinced that the world is an inherently war-like, violent place.

Sledge's awareness of how prevalent "combat fatigue" is among Marines later inspires him to make a promise to himself not to give in to such moments of despair—but, rather, to constantly remind himself that he cannot afford to lose his sanity. Instead of a mere act of wishful thinking, this personal pledge gives Sledge the strength to trust in his own identity and in his capacity to make it out of the war both alive and sane.

Part 2, Chapter 13 Quotes

❝ We didn't want to indulge in self-pity. We just wished that people back home could understand how lucky they were and stop complaining about trivial inconveniences.

Related Characters: Eugene "Sledgehammer" Sledge (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 267

Explanation and Analysis

When Company K receives the letters of former Marines who have reintegrated into civilian life, they are surprised to note that these former combatants are not satisfied with their peaceful lives. Rather, they complain about their grief at losing the intense friendships formed at the front and about their inability to communicate their combat experience to people back home.

Although Sledge is shocked to discover that these men's return to civilian life is not as joyful as he expected—a circumstance that likely foreshadows his own future difficulties—he understands that Marines might feel frustrated with non-combatants. After having been through such horror and violence, Marines no longer understand the norms of civilian life, which seem so detached from the necessities of the brutal world they have been immersed in.

In this sense, Sledge's complaint about civilians' attitudes expresses his frustration at being misunderstood, but is also not entirely fair. Indeed, it is natural for people who live peacefully to complain about their own discomforts, even if they are disproportional to those of others—for example, to the discomforts that affect Marines who live in horrific circumstances. Expecting civilians to mentally grasp what Marines have been through is probably an insurmountable task.

Rather than determine clear blame, Sledge's comment thus highlights the gap in understanding—and, perhaps, in compassion—that can develop between civilians and the very people fighting for their safety.

Part 2, Chapter 15 Quotes

War is brutish, inglorious, and a terrible waste. Combat leaves an indelible mark on those who are forced to endure it. The only redeeming factors were my comrades' incredible bravery and their devotion to each other. Marine Corps training taught us to kill efficiently and to try to survive. But it also taught us loyalty to each other—and love. That esprit de corps sustained us.

Until the millenium arrives and countries cease trying to enslave others, it will be necessary to accept one's responsibilities and to be willing to make sacrifices for one's country—as my comrades did. As the troops used to say, "If the country is good enough to live in, it's good enough to fight for." With privilege goes responsibility.

Related Characters: Eugene "Sledgehammer" Sledge (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 315

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of Sledge's narrative, he reflects on his entire experience of the war. On a personal level, he admits that it has brought him tremendous suffering, but also exceptional joy, as the bonds he has formed at the front are of an intensity that cannot be replicated in any other context.

He concludes that although war involves intolerable levels of violence, grief, and destruction, it is sometimes necessary. Therefore, Sledge understands his commitment to the war as ethical not because he believes war itself is moral, but because he trusts in its objective: to protect the country he loves. In other words, he accepts that the world order is potentially unjust and dangerous, and that a nation's only form of protection against global violence is violence itself.

Sledge does not necessarily comment on the U.S.'s political or military strategies during the war, some of which are highly controversial, such as the decision to drop atomic bombs on Japan. Instead, he prefers to trust that his country will always use his own skills as Marine for the best purpose possible—the defense of the land and the protection of its own citizens.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PART 1, FOREWORD

Lieutenant Colonel John A. Crown gives an introduction to Eugene Sledge's description of the battle in Peleliu. He explains that, although this battle was extremely deadly and painful for the Marines to experience, it became apparent after the war that it was perhaps unnecessary, as the battle did not bring clear strategic gains to the U.S. However, Crown describes Sledge's narrative as a crucial window into an individual Marine's experience, which anyone who has taken part in armed combat will recognize as powerful and truthful.

This Colonel places Sledge's personal experience in a larger historical context. He suggests that, on a larger military scale, the impact of a Marine's individual actions depends on location and context, even if all soldiers are equally willing to sacrifice themselves. In the case of Peleliu, this meant to suffer horribly, even if this had little notable impact on the outcome of the war. This injustice highlights the importance for politicians and military strategists to take extremely prudent decisions when it comes to putting other people's lives at risk in combat.

PART 1, CHAPTER 1: MAKING OF A MARINE

Eugene Sledge (nicknamed "Sledgehammer" by his fellow Marines) recalls the decisions that led him to enlist in the Marine Corps in December 1942. Although he was pursuing studies at the Marion Military Institute in Alabama, he wanted to join the Marine Corps as soon as possible so that he might take part in combat before the end of World War II. Following the advice of friends and family, he decided to join an officer training program, in order not to enter the war at the lowest—and thus most dangerous—rank.

Sledge's commitment to helping his country win the war highlights both his patriotism and his personal qualities of courage and self-sacrifice. It suggests that, however much he might end up personally suffering during the war, he remains convinced that he is taking part in a noble, moral task: defending his country as best he can. At the same time, his effort to become an officer also shows his desire to protect his life and be spared some of the horrors of combat.

During Sledge's interview for officer training, the recruiting sergeant asks him many questions about any particular physical features he has, explaining that these are helpful if Sledge is killed abroad and his dog tag destroyed. This introduces Sledge to what he describes as the Marines' typical, crudely realistic attitude.

Sledge's introduction to the realities of war involves confronting the brutal fact of death—and, in this particular case, the possibility for his body to be destroyed beyond recognition. The recruiting sergeant's attitude reveals that the Marines bond over their knowledge of such terrible, frightening realities.

After finishing his first year of college, Sledge goes to Georgia Tech for Marine officer training. Once there, however, he is disappointed by how peaceful and boring life there is, in contrast to the violent world of war. The students discover that they will have to endure two years like this before becoming Marines, and ninety of them—including Sledge—decide to leave officer training to enlist directly into the Marine Corps as infantrymen. The captain in charge is impressed by the young men's resolve to take part in the war and expresses his admiration for their spirit.

Sledge and his companions' enthusiasm for war serves as a prelude to the enthusiasm and solidarity he so often lauds within the Marine Corps: a shared motivation to perform one's duty to the best of one's capacities, in order to help one's country win the war. At the same time, Sledge's frustration with his current life also reveals that he is naïve and idealistic, as he does not yet know how horrific actual combat can be.

During the train trip from Atlanta to San Diego, where these Marine recruits will start boot camp, they all sing and cheer, excited about what awaits them. Looking back, Sledge realizes that they were all naïve, completely unaware of the dangers and horrors that lay ahead. When they arrive, a friendly sergeant, decorated for distinguished combat service in World War I, warns them about the tough training they are going to endure. The boys then get on buses taking them to boot camp and, when they arrive, begin to feel nervous about the strict discipline they witness outside the bus window and the scared faces of their fellow recruits.

The boys' optimistic, enthusiastic attitude shows how unaware they are of the harsh realities that await them—a world marked by strict discipline, fatigue, and fear. Their attitude might seem overly naïve, but it can also be understood as a powerful motivator. Indeed, the boys' enthusiasm plays an important role in sustaining them throughout the rough following weeks of boot camp. What they are about to experience will determine how committed they truly are to the war, turning their innocent enthusiasm into endurance and strength.

Once they get off the bus, fellow recruits tell the new boys they are going to regret their decision. The boys then meet Corporal Doherty, their drill instructor (DI), a terrifying man who reminds them, in an angry tone, that they are mere recruits and might not actually be capable of becoming Marines. Sledge describes Corporal Doherty as a New Englander and the meanest man he has ever met. Doherty does not necessarily yell in a loud manner, but terrifies his recruits by issuing cold, threatening commands, which make them fear him as much as the prospect of the Japanese enemy.

Corporal Doherty's insistence on the boys' naïveté highlights the difficulty and prestige of becoming a Marine, which involves taking part in a series of experiences capable of testing even the most dedicated recruit's ardor. Doherty's attitude serves as an introduction to the various types of leadership Sledge will encounter throughout the war, which vary in terms of competence, as well as in leaders' capacity for kindness and compassion.

Corporal Doherty takes the recruits to a beach near San Diego Bay, where he drills them to the point of exhaustion. If they cannot perform a certain task well enough, he humiliates them publicly. The recruits soon learn to clean their rifles every day, as they understand that this is a Marine's "best friend" and most precious possession. Once, when Doherty hears a recruit talk about his rifle as a "gun," he makes him run in front of everyone, holding his rifle in one hand and his penis in the other, screaming that the former is his rifle and the latter his "gun." The recruits thus learn, in this severe way, to use the proper names when referring to pieces of artillery.

It will remain common, throughout Sledge's experiences of training and combat, for people to use humiliation and violence in order to convey the importance of respecting rules. This is not necessarily a deliberate effort to make the soldiers feel bad but, rather, to instill in them—through pure fear, if necessary—the life-or-death importance of respecting rules. Sledge often criticizes such methods as much as he understands their greater purpose: to save soldiers' lives.

As a recruit's day begins at 4 a.m. and ends at 10 p.m., Sledge does not understand his superiors' cruel practice of interrupting their sleep to make them perform drills during the night. Later, though, he realizes that this was not gratuitous harassment, but a technique to prepare recruits for combat, in which sleep is extremely scarce. Under the icy command of Corporal Doherty, the recruits also become used to following clear rules, such as never leaving one's assigned area without the permission of the DI, or staying in line with the platoon's cadence. Looking back, Sledge concludes that neither his fellow recruits nor he realized how crucial such discipline and physical endurance would later prove in combat, where it could help save one's life.

The purpose of boot camp is to instill in recruits certain skills that prepare *them for the war, but also to* immerse *them in a context similar to that of combat, so that they will become used to it more easily. This combination of learning and suffering prepares them to the harsh conditions of war, where having automatic habits—which might initially seem too strict or arbitrary—can save one's life in moments of stress, in which the mind is not capable of thinking rationally. This forces the Marines to trust in their body's reflexes, as well as in the validity of their superiors' orders.*

One day, the recruits are sent to the rifle range. There, Sledge receives training in rifle marksmanship that he describes as exceptionally thorough and effective. The men become used to the pain and difficulty of certain positions, and also internalize certain rules, such as never pointing one's rifle in a direction in which one does not intend to shoot, or checking a rifle to determine whether or not it is loaded, as the opposite can lead to many accidents.

During the war, Sledge will find himself in situations in which he witnesses first-hand the fatal consequences of not respecting such basic rules. In this manner, the harsh discipline that recruits are subject to during boot camp always has a concrete objective—to protect men's lives—even if it initially appears too extreme or unpleasant.

During this period, Sledge finds that the particular mental and physical harassment he has become used to is replaced by serious, methodical, and respectful training. However, he notes that punishment is still severe. Once, when a man turned toward a friend to chat during training, thus moving his rifle away from the targets, a captain kicked him hard, making him fall on his face, before yelling at him profusely. This taught all recruits about the importance of following such a crucial rule.

Although the captain's use of violence against a recruit seems abusive, it reveals the man's awareness of the crucial importance of what he is teaching—specifically, the knowledge that in war, any breach in rule-following can lead to someone's death. As Sledge often notes, dying in the middle of combat or by pure accident is equally tragic, and should be taken equally seriously.

After eight weeks of training, Sledge realizes that Corporal Doherty and the other DIs have successfully turned the recruits into mentally and physically strong potential fighters. On December 24, 1943, the men graduate from boot camp and are told that they are officially Marines. Afterwards, Sledge is sent to Camp Elliott, where, like most other new Marines, he will train to become an infantryman—what Sledge describes as "cannon fodder" that will fight in the Pacific. As Sledge leaves boot camp, he watches Doherty and realizes that, although he still dislikes him, he respects him for the training he has given him.

Sledge's gratefulness for the training he has received does not suggest that all forms of leadership are equal. As Sledge later discovers, it is possible—though not common—to combine discipline with respect and compassion for one's subordinates. This is a difficult attitude to adopt, found in only a few, exceptional leaders. Sledge understands that situations of extreme stress can lead even the best-intentioned leaders to express themselves in harsh ways.

PART 1, CHAPTER 2: PREPARATION FOR COMBAT

When Sledge enters the barracks at Camp Elliott, he notices that the atmosphere there is entirely different from boot camp. No one yells at them, the NCOs seem relaxed, and the men are able to sleep through the night. The new Marines receive theoretical instruction about the various types of weapons available.

The new, relaxed atmosphere at Camp Elliott suggests that, beyond mere discipline, what unites Marines is their willingness to work hard on their own, without necessarily needing too much external pressure to perform their duty well. This underlines the trust and respect that exists in the Marine Corps.

When asked to choose a weapon, Sledge picks the 60 mm mortar. His training instructor, a sergeant, appears self-confident and detached, exhibiting an aloofness that Sledge will later recognize as the typical look of Pacific combat veterans. The sergeant tells the new Marines that, unlike in boot camp, their main job now is to relax and work hard, as this will help get them through the war. His attitude impresses the men, who show immediate respect for him.

The training instructor's attitude highlights the trauma that combat has left him with—the typical, hollow look caused by emotional strain—as well as the fact that one's survival depends in part on hard work and competence. Sledge will later conclude that high-quality training, in addition to luck, makes an enormous difference in how likely one is to survive the war.

The sergeant explains the various situations in which the 60 mm mortar should be used, and demonstrates the various movements one should make. Sledge puts a lot of effort in performing gun drills well. One day, when he first sees someone fire live ammunition, he finally realizes the concrete nature of what he is doing: using a weapon that is capable of harming and killing another human being. When Sledge realizes that the reason one shoots others during war is because one is also being shot at, he concludes that this differentiates fighting and hunting. From that moment on, he decides never to hunt again.

This moment marks Sledge's first understanding of the concrete consequences of war and fighting: the death of other human beings. Although this does not necessarily lead him to have moral qualms about his participation in the war, which he still sees as a necessary, patriotic act, it does make him more sensitive to the meaning of death in his life. In particular, he realizes that killing innocent animals, who—unlike humans at war—do not have the tools to defend themselves, is unfair. Sledge thus insists that his participation in war makes him a fighter, *not a* murderer.

The new Marines are also taught hand-to-hand combat, which they are told is useful because the Japanese often infiltrate American positions to slit Marines' throats at night. For this reason, they are taught to use a Ka-Bar knife, which is less fancy than other knives but most capable of fighting off a Japanese soldier in a foxhole. Although this training is thorough, Sledge explains that neither his companions nor he truly realized that they were about to take part in a war that had already killed millions, and that they were all likely to die. The men thus train with optimistic enthusiasm, convinced that they are going to take part in crucial battles, capable of winning the war.

The particular horror of Japanese infiltrations suggests that, despite the importance for Marines to follow rules, war itself does not necessarily follow specific rules, beyond the simple objective of killing the enemy. This suggests that there is no particularly "noble" way to kill, but that war consists in killing others and avoiding being killed. This pragmatic emphasis on various forms of murder and survival serves as a prelude to what Sledge will later discover to be the chaotic, uncivilized nature of warfare, far from glorious images of noble self-sacrifice.

Some time earlier, in November 1934, the 2nd Marine Division fought the battle of Tarawa in the Gilbert Islands of the Pacific, the first modern amphibious assault in history. Although the Marines killed almost all the Japanese on the island, they suffered heavy losses, for which they were heavily criticized. Nine months later, Sledge and other young Marines would fight an equally vicious battle on Peleliu, suffering twice as many losses as the Marines at Tarawa.

This explanation puts the battle of Peleliu in perspective. It highlights the fact that amphibious landings are a new military technique, thus showing that innovation is central to winning a war. It also underscores the absurdity of war and the horrific nature of the battle of Peleliu—which, despite not leading to clear strategic gains, took so many young men's lives.

In February 1944, Sledge and fellow Marines board a ship to the Pacific. Sledge is disturbed by the thought that some of them will never make it back home. After boarding the ship, walking down to a crowded, smelly room, and being assigned a bunk, where Sledge soon realizes he can barely move, he walks out to explore the ship, too excited to sleep. When the ship begins moving the next morning, Sledge walks out and is assailed by doubts. He wonders if he will prove to be a coward in battle and if he will actually be able to kill another human being.

Sledge's worries are both self-centered and concerned with his fellow soldiers: he fears dying, but also not helping his companions as best he can, thus revealing his compassion and sense of solidarity. These fears highlight the intensely personal nature of war, as it forces all soldiers to confront their own mortality and fallibility. It suggests that even the most reliable fighters can be assailed by self-doubt and that war is not always glorious, but that it involves commitment and grit.

Over the course of the next few days, Sledge finds the routine on ship boring. The Marines take part in daily exercises and drills, but spend most of their time waiting in line for chow, where they are served terribly smelling food in an overheated, sweaty room below deck. When Sledge sees the fancy food that officers are served in a separate, well-ventilated room, he wonders if he made a mistake to abandon officer training. However, he later realizes that rank brings little privilege in the middle of battle.

The boring, often disgusting daily routine on the ship serves as a prelude to the weight that unpleasant, ordinary circumstances can have on a Marine's experience, beyond the hardships of combat. Indeed, Sledge will remain as deeply concerned with issues such as eating and sleeping as with mere survival during his time in the war. This brings greater complexity to public conceptions of soldiers' lives.

After nearly three weeks at sea, Sledge is relieved to finally reach New Caledonia. There, they receive training on fighting strategies with veteran officers and NCOs. One day, as trucks carrying army troops pass by and Marines mock the soldiers for being "dogfaces," one of the soldiers teases Sledge, calling him "soldier." The man's buddy immediately reprimands him, showing the man Sledge's emblem, which proves that he is a Marine and should not be insulted. Sledge explains that, although Marines might complain about their own experiences, being insulted or mocked by an outsider usually leads to an actual fight.

This episode highlights the playful yet potentially violent rivalry between members of the army and the Marine Corps—men who, nevertheless, are fighting for the same country. Although Sledge later notes that combat experiences serve as a bonding event between all soldiers, regardless of their military affiliation, this episode underlines the importance of respecting each soldier's identity and status. It highlights the strong feelings of pride and prestige that each soldier has toward his own military "home."

After weeks of physical training, Sledge's Replacement Battalion is told that they will be sent up north. The Marines board a ship and reach Pavuvu, in the Russell Islands, on June 2nd. The 1st Marine Division is staying there and, when the new Marines disembark, Sledge is awed by the sight of these veteran Marines who are known as some of the best fighters in the U.S. after fighting at the famous battles of Guadalcanal and Cape Gloucester. However, instead of trying to impress the new Marines, these veterans have a friendly, unassuming manner, as well as an exhausted, detached look.

The combination of prestige and humility that these veteran Marines demonstrates highlights the gap between external and internal experiences of war. Although Sledge, from the outside, might expect these men to be haughty or arrogant, he discovers that combat breeds grief, trauma, and humility—the simple notion that one is lucky to have survived a battle in which so many others perished. On a personal level, war is often far more trying—and far less glorious—than external spectators imagine.

The next day, Sledge watches as some Marines are sent home, visibly tired but relieved to be leaving combat. Sledge, by contrast, is about to join the war. He is called to join Company K in the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines Regiment, which is part of the 1st Marine Division. Sledge admires the history and reputation of the 1st Division, which has participated in historical battles since World War I and is known as the "Old Corps," and he is thrilled to be part of the very regiment and division he would have chosen himself. He feels proud to be part of such a distinguished group of fighters.

The Marines' relief at leaving combat contrasts with Sledge's naïve excitement at being part of a prestigious division. It highlights the gap between people with first-hand experience of combat and other people (like Sledge) who have not yet been traumatized by it. However, Sledge's sense of excitement and pride does play an important part in the war, as the "esprit de corps" (sense of shared loyalty and pride) in Company K encourages all members to stay strong and optimistic, thus allowing them to remain as sane as possible throughout combat.

In the meantime, no one in the Marines understands why the division chose Pavuvu as a base camp. The island is muddy and its facilities inadequate. Sledge takes part in work parties that attempt to build drainage to keep the men from constantly walking in mud. He also is sent to collect rotten coconuts—an experience he finds so disgusting that, after the war, he still cannot stand the smell of fresh coconut. As Sledge and the Marines make absurd jokes about these useless tasks, which do not contribute to the war effort, Sledge explains that their ironic, absurd type of humor is characteristic of an "Asiatic" attitude—a term used to describe extravagant behavior that Marines who have served a long time in East Asia begin to demonstrate.

Sledge's frustration and disgust at collecting coconuts appears trivial in the context of the war, but highlights the deeply human *quality of war—in which one struggles not only to avoid death and suffering, but to maintain a sense of dignity and self-respect. This episode suggests that humor is often Marines' only protection against absurdity and horror. It also serves as a prelude to the horrific sensory experiences Sledge will later undergo on Peleliu and Okinawa, where he will no longer be disgusted by rotting coconuts but by rotting corpses.*

Although veteran fighters remind Sledge that he should not complain about anything until he has seen battle, Sledge still finds certain aspects of life on the island intolerable. He mentions the enormous number of land crabs that infest the tent area, invading the Marines' possession, as well as the dehydrated food and beetle-infested bread they are served. He also notices that many Gloucester veterans are thin and in poor health, after taking part in a long battle in which they stayed wet for entire weeks. However, although Marines feel isolated and abandoned on this hot, humid island, Sledge notes that the strong discipline and powerful "*esprit de corps*" (feeling of shared loyalty and pride) among the Marines allow them to endure such frustrations, since everyone does their duty diligently.

Once again, although it might seem paradoxical for Sledge to complain about land crabs and food when there is a war going on, Sledge's experience suggests that war is *also defined by infantrymen's everyday experiences—not only by political rivalries and existential issues of suffering and death. Seemingly trivial issues such as personal hygiene ultimately matter enormously to actual fighters, who are forced to perform their duty in disgusting circumstances. As he often does, Sledge notes that camaraderie is the only antidote to the horrors of war.*

Sledge also notes that the men's hatred for the Japanese keeps them motivated. The Japanese are known for vicious tactics, such as pretending to be wounded only to kill an American corpsman who comes to help, or the attack on Pearl Harbor. Such episodes convince Sledge that the Japanese are a fanatic enemy, ready to defend their cause with extraordinary intensity. For Sledge, this explains the ferocious nature of fighting in the Pacific, as men on both sides are animated by rage and hatred of the enemy.

Sledge's denunciation of Japanese brutality suggests that hatred only breeds greater hatred: in this case, the Japanese's lack of compassion for Americans encourages the Americans' hatred of the Japanese. His criticism suggests that he believes in respecting moral codes even during war. However, although he criticizes Japanese actions such as the attack on Pearl Harbor, he does not necessarily comment on similar American actions, such as the atomic bombings of Japan in August 1945.

The Marines begin training more intensively for the approaching campaign, practicing landing exercises, in which they are meant to exit amphibious tractors as fast as they can. When Sledge practices firing a flamethrower, he is appalled to realize that this could be used to burn an enemy to death. However, he explains that he later learned that this was often the only method to destroy the Japanese's island defenses.

Sledge understands that certain actions, such as burning an enemy to death, seem immoral or cruel from the outside. However, he justifies them by invoking military strategy—namely, the fact that the Japanese's use of a mutually supportive defense network of caves and pillboxes makes it impossible to defeat them without killing everyone inside. This suggests that, according to Sledge, harmful acts can be justified by pure necessity.

To illustrate the influence of the "old breed" on young Marines, Sledge describes Gunnery Sergeant Haney. He recalls Haney's idiosyncrasies, such as washing his genitals with a stiff brush used to scrub floors, which amazes and disturbs other Marines. He also describes Haney's rage at seeing a Marine turn to answer an officer while still holding his pistol in his hand, and thus deviating the pistol from the target. In reaction, Haney throws a bit of sharp coral at the man's face and yells at him uncontrollably. This makes everyone more committed to respecting safety regulations.

Sledge's description of Sergeant Haney highlights the influence of in-group dynamics on Marines' appreciation of their superiors. Haney's punishment of the absentminded Marine mirrors Corporal Doherty's physical and emotional abuse of Marine recruits. This time, however, Sledge's judgment of Haney is influenced by his pride at being in the same corps as this esteemed veteran fighter. This allows Sledge to understand Haney's punishment method as necessary, meant to protect everyone's lives, and not as gratuitous brutality.

Sledge also mentions that, unlike other Marines, Haney does not have a buddy but spends most of his time on his own, obsessively cleaning his rifle multiple times a day and talking to himself. Sledge does not believe that Haney is "Asiatic," but simply that he belongs to his own category, as though he had been born in the Marine Corps. Haney's knowledge and experience draws men to admire and like him.

Haney's attitude highlights the difference between civilians and Marines, as Marines accept that a certain level of emotional aloofness or absurdity is intrinsic to the war. During the war, Haney's unusual social behavior ultimately matters less than his discipline and competence, which are sufficient to make him respected among his subordinates and his peers.

Sledge describes another much-admired officer: Company K's commanding officer, Capt. Andrew "Ack Ack" Haldane. Haldane takes the time to get to know each of his men individually. During a particularly uncomfortable drill in the mud, Haldane asks Sledge about his roots and Sledge tells him he is from Alabama. The conversation makes Sledge feel valued and welcome. Everyone in Company K admires Haldane's mix of intelligence, courage, and kindness, and feels grateful to have him as their skipper. Unlike other officers who yell, Haldane gives quiet orders, encouraging the men to perform as best they can.

Good leadership plays a crucial role in the war, not only in its capacity to spare men's lives and make use of effective strategies, but also to make every soldier feel respected and valued. The family atmosphere that Haldane is able to nourish in Company K is essential to the men's well-being, as it fosters their feelings of loyalty, solidarity, and discipline, encouraging them not only to fight for their own survival but for each other.

In August, discipline on Pavuvu increases to the point of becoming intolerable, as the Marines prepare to land on Peleliu. As the Marines discuss the situation among themselves, they realize that the officers' plan might be to make the Marines tired of life on Pavuvu so that they're more capable of handling the intense stress and violence of Peleliu, which Sledge describes as "savage" and "dirty business." The officers' job, therefore, is to prepare the Marines psychologically for the trials that await them.

The officers' increasing severity with the Marines mirrors Corporal Doherty's behavior with Sledge's platoon during boot camp: these officers use harsh discipline as a means to imitate a war scenario. Their goal, in essence, is to desensitize Marines, making them used to brutality so that they will able to perform well in a brutal context.

PART 1, CHAPTER 3: ON TO PELELIU

On August 26th, Company K heads to Guadalcanal, where the men practice amphibious landing exercises that involve using an amtrac, an amphibious tracked vehicle. During these few days of training, as Sledge explains to sailors that Haney is not "Asiatic," he realizes that, from the outside, Marines might seem crazy or reckless, but this is only because they adopt an attitude of ironic detachment in order to prepare themselves for stressful ordeals.

In addition to feeling a sense of family in Company K because of the valor of its members, Sledge realizes that part of his feeling of identity with the Marines derives from their difference *from the rest of the population. In particular, men (such as Haney) who have fought on the front lines are affected mentally and emotionally by war, and often display social behaviors that appear odd to external spectators.*

In anticipation of landing, Sledge explains that Peleliu, in the Caroline Islands chain, has the shape of a lobster's claw, which allows the Japanese to defend landing beaches from the surrounding coral ridges. On September 14, "D Minus 1," the Marines embark for Peleliu. On the ship, Sledge and a friend try to appear relaxed about the next day. However, as Sledge watches the beautiful Pacific sunset, he suddenly realizes that he might not actually be alive at the same time tomorrow, and he feels panic overcome him. A lieutenant then gives a speech in which he says they expect the battle on Peleliu will be rough but will last only a few days.

The geography of Peleliu explains why the Marines' amphibious landing on the beach proved so deadly, as the Japanese were able to attack them from all around. The lieutenant's expectations about the battle also prove mistaken, revealing that no one suspected the Japanese would adopt new defensive techniques that would transform the battle of Peleliu into a war of attrition. This highlights the tragedy of the battle of Peleliu, which proved infinitely more horrific than anyone anticipated.

Sledge then chats about what he wants to do after the war with his companion Oswalt, whom Sledge admires for his intelligence. Although Oswalt says he plans to be a neurosurgeon, because he is fascinated by the human brain, Sledge explains that Oswalt was later killed on Peleliu. As Sledge prepares to go to sleep that evening, he tries to convince himself that he will not die because God loves him, although he also realizes that God loves everyone. He begins to panic and prays silently to himself to find reassurance.

Sledge's mention of Oswalt serves as an example of how cruel war is in any camp, as each country sacrifices many of its most physically and intellectually fit men for its own survival. Sledge's reflections about God give a window into the personal anguish of a soldier forced to confront the prospect of his own death. It underlines the fact that there is no inherent justice in war, since so many innocent lives are sacrificed.

On D Day, September 15th, 1944, the Marines wake up, eat the typical meal Marines eat before combat—steak and eggs—and most of them find that stress leads them all to the bathroom. Although there are only two toilets, Haney occupies one of them for a long time, forcing the Marines—who do not dare tell him to hurry—to form a long line in front of the other one.

Haney's occupation of the bathroom is comic and tragic at the same time. It highlights everyone's terror of death, regardless of rank, which is capable of overpowering their minds and bodies, turning this existential fear into a bodily necessity. The absurdity of this situation is typical of war, where ordinary needs coexist with extraordinary events.

As dawn arrives, Sledge stays close to Snafu, who makes Sledge feel safe because he is a Gloucester veteran. Snafu offers Sledge a cigarette, which Sledge refuses. Snafu then laughs, betting Sledge that he will be smoking before the end of the day, just like everyone else. The men are then ordered to wear their gear and enter an amtrac. Sledge recalls the moment in which the amtrac began to float and move through the water, and concludes that no other time in his life had the intensity of that moment in which the amtrac drew closer to the smoke- and flame-covered beach where the Marines were supposed to land.

Sledge's comfort in Snafu mirrors his later comfort in his own veteran self, as he discovers that combat experience is the best preparation for fighting, since it gives one concrete skills and serves to bolster one's self-confidence. Snafu's prediction that Sledge will smoke ultimately comes true, as Sledge will be so affected by the stress of the landing that he looks desperately for any emotional outlet.

Sledge interrupts his narrative to explain that most historians now believe that the battle of Peleliu was not necessary to the outcome of World War II. At the same time, they agree that this was one of the most vicious battles of the war. Peleliu also played an important role in teaching the Marines about a change in Japanese tactics: instead of having one defense line, as the Japanese did in the past, they started using a system of fortified positions in caves and pillboxes (small guard posts), spread as a network throughout the island. This led to a ferocious, merciless battle of attrition, fought until all defenses were destroyed.

The fact that Peleliu was both extraordinarily savage and strategically unimportant underlines the tragedy of such fighting. It shows the absurdity of war as, in this case, the horrors that the soldiers experienced were not necessarily justified—since they did not necessarily serve the higher goal of advancing the course of war. The injustice of this situation will later augment the veterans' grief, keeping them from understanding why so many of their comrades had to die.

PART 1, CHAPTER 4: ASSAULT INTO HELL

At 8 a.m. on D Day, Sledge and his companions watch as American ships shell the island of Peleliu, filling the air with strong smells and deafening sounds that force the Marines to scream to each other. Sledge finds waiting in the amtrac intolerable. He is unable to swallow or to stand on his legs, and holds onto the sides of the tractor for balance.

Sledge's physical difficulties reflect how terrified and stressed he is, as he knows that the environment he finds himself in is capable of killing him at any moment. Later, on Okinawa, he will discover that having undergone such an experience once keeps him from feeling exactly the same panic a second time.

When the amtrac is given the signal to move forward, Sledge feels as though they are moving toward the surreal scene of an exploding volcano, as shells constantly explode near the tractor. Finally, the men are ordered to exit the amtrac and Sledge follows Snafu. When machine-gun fire barely misses his face, he loses his balance and falls on the beach. He begins to panic, telling himself that he needs to get off the beach as soon as possible to avoid being hit. A Marine comes over to help him stand up and both of them run away as fast as they can, while shells are crashing around them. Sledge finds himself in the middle of a chaotic, blurred world, which his mind cannot fully comprehend.

The hellish scene that Sledge describes serves as an impressionistic description of the chaotic violence of war, in which anything can happen, sometimes out of sheer luck. For example, Sledge could have been hit immediately upon exiting the amtrac and never survived the war. This suggests that luck plays just as important a part in people's survival as other factors such as courage or training. The soldier who helps Sledge stand up exemplifies solidarity, taking the time to help a comrade instead of running for safety on his own.

As Sledge reaches the end of the beach, he turns around to see an amphibious truck, hit by a shell, blow up exactly where his amtrac landed. Sledge finds himself watching with strange detachment, even as he notes that no men exited the vehicle. He watches the rest of the chaotic scene and feels an overwhelming mix of rage and frustration overcome him, as he finds himself incapable of doing anything to save his companions. He asks God "Why, why, why?" and feels deeply bitter about the injustice of war. At the same time, as he exits the beach, avoiding a bomb by inches, he also feels a sense of pride that his country is capturing this enemy territory to win the war.

The explosion of an amtrac where Sledge's used to be shows that, in war, all lives are both unique (because of every man's individual desires and fears) and interchangeable (as the difference between dying and living is so often a matter of sheer luck). Sledge's mixed feelings of pride and injustice suggest that, according to him, although war might not be laudable on a moral level, fighting to defend one's country is a noble endeavor.

When Sledge reaches a group of veterans, he asks for a cigarette and Snafu teases him for doing exactly what he had said he would. As Company K moves inland, Sledge feels so tense, sweaty, and shaky that he wonders if he is having a convulsion. He experiences waves of complete helplessness and feels as though the shelling on the beach lasted hours, even though it only took about thirty minutes. He notices a friend of his with a wound and feels sorry for him, but the man enthusiastically replies that he has received "the million-dollar wound" and can now leave the war.

Sledge's lack of control over his own body reveals how strongly a brutal environment can overcome individuals' minds. This idea will later resurface itself in Sledge's difficulty to retain a sense of moral behavior or to control his own sanity. Sledge's friend's joy at being wounded highlights the mixed feelings that all soldiers must handle: the willingness to fight for a cause that puts one's own life in danger, combined with the desire to survive at all cost.

Moving through the scrub, Sledge and his companions try to avoid snipers. There, Sledge sees his first enemy corpse, a Japanese medic who was hit by a shell. Sledge stares at him in horror, unable to believe that this is a human being. Rather, the dead body reminds him of the animals he has killed while hunting. To Sledge's surprise, a Company K veteran sees the dead body and removes the man's glasses from his face. As Sledge watches him remove the man's pistol and a Japanese flag that the medic had in his helmet, the veteran encourages Sledge to take "souvenirs." Sledge is frozen on the spot, wondering if he too will one day become so "dehumanize[d]," inured to the sight of death. He explains that this later did indeed happen, over the course of his time on Peleliu.

Sledge's horror at seeing a dead body highlights his humanity, as he is able to feel compassion for another human, regardless of his nationality. Although Sledge does indeed become inured to the sight of enemy dead, he constantly struggles to remain a dignified, moral being who does not engage in heinous acts. However, the combination of soldiers' emotional desensitization and an attempt to retain moral principles reveals that there is often a fine line between trying to survive in a brutal world and becoming brutal oneself.

As the company moves through the scrub, Sledge sees friends from different units and is shocked to notice that everyone has vacant, strange looks, making their faces almost unrecognizable. He then realizes that he must have the same expression, as his face muscles are tight and unmovable, keeping him from smiling.

Sledge's description of the Marines' empty looks is what he later defines as the "thousand-yard stare," a blank expression revealing emotional detachment, an inevitable reaction to the trauma of combat.

When the company reaches a clearing, the Marines begin to fire at Japanese soldiers. They are then instructed to move back, in order to join the 7th Marines. The company spends the afternoon walking in intense heat through heavy fire and trying to avoid being ambushed by the Japanese, which will happen if they fail to reach the 7th Marines before nightfall. Finally, the two companies are able to reunite during the night. That night, Sledge learns that the division suffered many casualties. Some of the veterans even tell him this is their worst day of fighting so far.

Sledge often describes fighting as brutal and harrowing. However, he also enjoys putting his own impressions in perspective—for example, hearing from veteran Marines what they think about the day's fighting. This allows him to keep in touch with reality, confirming to him that he truly is experiencing something extraordinarily violent, which everyone can recognize. It reassures him that he is not abnormally fearful or cowardly.

At the end of the day, Sledge finds that he is completely dehydrated, and that no one knows when they will receive more water. Snafu and Sledge then settle for the night in their gun pit. When he sees Sledge take off his shoes, Snafu yells at him, and Sledge is ashamed to realize that this is indeed a stupid decision, since he could never run away from a Japanese counter-attack barefoot on the coral. Sledge also feels uneasy when he sees Snafu place his kabar knife right by his right hand, in case of a Japanese infiltration.

Snafu's advice to Sledge is one of many occasions in which Marines help each other out, keeping their companions from harm. Sledge notes that, in situations of extreme stress and exhaustion, individuals often make mistakes that they would never commit in other circumstances. The fact that even small mistakes can lead to death underlines how important it is to follow the rules and adopt useful, automatic habits.

Sledge then watches the green light of shells exploding during the night, noting that they make the earth tremble and explode. To find a measure of comfort, he begins to pray out loud. He explains that being under prolonged shelling is utterly terrifying, affecting one's mind and body to profound extents, capable of causing insanity. Shells, to him, are an example of "man's inhumanity." Helpless and unable to sleep, he fears losing his mind and merely hopes that they will soon receive more water, as most of the men have already exhausted their supply. He grasps the desperation that dehydration can lead to.

Sledge's description of shelling is deeply impressionistic, focusing on the sensory effects of war. This allows him to try to convey to the reader the physical intensity of combat and the spiritual helplessness that comes from it. Sledge's attempts to pray mirror his later efforts, on Okinawa, to abstract himself from reality by imagining himself in a nightmare. These techniques reveal that losing control over one's mind is just as dangerous as being hurt physically.

Although Japanese machine-gun fire has erupted near them since the early hours before dawn, it suddenly ceases before the men have to leave their gun pits. As dawn arrives, bringing increasing heat with it, the men despair about having no water. Finally, someone arrives with a water supply and Sledge fills his canteen, even though he is disgusted by the brown color of the water. After his first gulp, his stomach immediately cramps, and Sledge realizes that this water, covered in blue oil, comes from oil drums that the men had cleaned on Pavuvu, using a technique that did not succeed in actually cleaning them.

Sledge's disgust at the water they receive highlights the tragedy of his situation, in which shelling might not kill him, but dehydration or poisoning potentially could. This makes war seem all the more absurd, as even a simple need such as hydration becomes dangerous and unpleasant. This episode emphasizes how complex it is for men to feel normal and healthy in such an inhuman environment, in which all of their senses are constantly under stress.

The Marines are then told to launch an attack across an airfield. They are meant to run in a dispersed manner while the Japanese shell the area. The Marines thus move in various waves, bending down as low as they can, and Sledge finds this whole process scarier than the landing because, this time, they are completely exposed to the shelling, without the protection of a vehicle. Sledge repeats prayers to himself while running under terrible heat and avoiding the blasts caused by the shells all around him.

Throughout Sledge's narrative, various military strategies prove more or less risky—that is, more or less capable of minimizing human losses. The airfield episode suggests that certain operations will inevitably lead to heavy human losses—a situation that Sledge's panic renders all the more tragic, as he shows the human experience of feeling utterly vulnerable, capable of being wounded at any moment.

At one point, Sledge and Snafu stumble and fall down. Snafu is hit by the fragment of a shell but only harms his pistol belt, leaving a mere bruise on his skin. The two of them then continue running and, when they finally make it across the airfield, Sledge notices terror in the eyes of even the most seasoned veterans. This makes him feel relieved, as he realizes he is not the only one to be scared. In the meantime, it is so hot that water pours out of Sledge's shoes when he takes them off.

Once again, Sledge appreciates being able to compare his fear with veterans' reactions. This reassures him that he is neither cowardly nor too sensitive but that, rather, situations of such intense violence are bound to make anyone *panic. The fact that water pours out of Sledge's shoes is humorous, even as it emphasizes the physical discomforts to which Marines will constantly be subjected on Peleliu and Okinawa.*

That evening, the Marines dig their foxholes and follow a daily routine: they set up mortars where they best protect the company and repeat the password for themselves—a code that changes every night and uses the letter "L," which the Japanese have difficulty pronouncing. Soon, the men hear some Japanese try to infiltrate the company around them, which they recognize because of the small-arms fire and grenades exploding.

The linguistic difference between the Japanese and Americans highlights the enormous cultural gap between the two nations. This serves as a reminder that, even though men on both sides are busy fighting each other, they actually know very little about their enemy's way of life, and do not necessarily have any personal stake in killing each other beyond loyalty to their homeland.

Sledge explains that, in such circumstances, anyone who moves around at night without calling out the password can be shot. That night, Sledge suddenly hears movement in the dry plants near him. Tense and focused, Sledge points his automatic pistol toward the noise. Recognizing a mix of rustling and silence, he concludes that this must be a Japanese infiltrator. His heart pounding, he then notices a man wearing a helmet. He asks the man to say the password, but hears no answer. His finger on the trigger, he calls out again and the man then suddenly calls Sledge by his nickname, "Sledgehammer." Sledge realizes that this is an American Marine and relaxes.

This stressful situation is one of many episodes in which accidents can easily happen, leading to the death of a fellow Marine. Such episodes are rarely the fault of the Marine who shoots another—rather, they are usually caused by carelessness or incompetence. In this case, the Marine's failure to call out the password makes Sledge entirely justified in shooting him, since this is standard practice for infiltrators. Such situations highlight the importance of following procedure at all times.

The man then appears—it's Jay de l'Eau, one of Sledge's best friends and a Gloucester veteran, who has come to ask for water. Shaking and with a strong desire to cry, realizing that he could have easily shot his friend—an action that would have been entirely justified given the circumstances—Sledge then gets mad at him, yelling at him for making such a stupid mistake.

The fact that Jay actually has previous combat experience makes his careless behavior difficult to understand. It suggests that even the most trained men occasionally make mistakes in stressful circumstances. Sledge's anger is not cruel, but represents his effort to protect his friend and to release the intense fear he felt a few seconds earlier.

The next day, Sledge learns that his friend Robert Oswalt has been killed, and concludes that the war is a waste of important human lives. He also reflects on the value of the Japanese lives the U.S. has taken, but then recalls an NCO's opinion that it is "them or us," and that one should not feel guilty about killing the enemy.

Sledge is capable of accepting two contradictory beliefs: war leads to the death of talented human beings, yet killing is sometimes necessary. In this case, the moral imperative to protect all *human lives does not prove as strong as the patriotic need to protect one's country—and, more urgently, one's own self.*

When Company K moves north in extreme heat to relieve a battalion of Marines who are under heavy attack, they soon come under attack themselves by a mountain nicknamed "Bloody Nose Ridge." After hours of fighting, as evening approaches, the men set up their holes for the night. Sledge goes to the beach to help an NCO unload a tractor full of supplies, including an oil drum full of water, which is extremely difficult to unload. There, they are attacked by mortars and try to work as fast as they can. Suddenly, another Marine appears, offering help, and the men are fascinated to notice that the man, who presents himself as Paul Douglas, is over fifty years old. When asked why he joined the war, Douglas simply says that he wants to help. He mentions that he knows Captain Haldane, and everyone agrees that he is the best company commander.

Once again, even the most mundane activities, such as receiving food supplies, prove fraught with danger during war, making everyday life precarious. The men's unanimous agreement that Captain Haldane is an excellent commander suggests that the best form of leadership does not involve humiliation and violence but, rather, integrity and compassion—qualities that are far more difficult to demonstrate under stress. Douglas's decision to take part in combat shows how strong certain men's commitment to the war is, as they prove ready to sacrifice their lives even when they would be fully justified in retiring.

The Company K Marines then return to the company lines, enjoying a warm meal for the first time in three days, which Sledge finds refreshing despite the heat. The next day, they receive fresh water, which makes Sledge feel relieved.

Sledge's mention of such seemingly routine activities suggests that they are, in fact, extraordinary, as they provide much-needed respite from the dangers and discomforts of armed combat.

That night, Sledge has a conversation with Company K's machine-gun platoon leader, a man nicknamed "Hillbilly." Sledge describes it as one of the most decisive conversations in his life. Hillbilly is admired for his "gentlemanly" appearance, as he takes great care to stay clean even in the most difficult circumstances. More importantly, though, he is equal to "Ack Ack" Haldane in terms of excellent leadership, courage, and solidarity.

Sledge often notes that personal hygiene and appearance play an important role in the Marine corps, as they demonstrate one's ability to remain dignified and self-controlled in the most trying circumstances. He describes cleanliness not as a superficial attribute but as a sign of pride and respect for one's status as a Marine—which Hillbilly demonstrates, fulfilling his role as officer with elegance.

As Sledge and Hillbilly begin chatting about their childhoods in the South, Sledge feels comforted by Hillbilly's optimistic, soft voice. When Sledge admits that he has sometimes felt terrified to the point of being ashamed of himself, Hillbilly proves surprisingly honest. The officer tells him that he, too, experiences deep fear, but that the most important thing is performing one's duty anyway. By the end of the conversation, Sledge feels completely reassured and almost jovial.

Sledge is reassured to discover that his relationship with his superiors does not necessarily involve hierarchy and authority, but can be marked by genuine sharing and compassion. Hillbilly's realistic assessment of fear reveals that learning to handle one's emotions—and that of one's subordinates—is just as important as staying alive physically.

In that moment, as silence settles, Sledge suddenly hears a voice say: "You will survive the war!" When Sledge asks the other men around him if they heard anything, they reply that they did not. Although skeptical of people who hear voices, Sledge becomes convinced that God spoke to him on that night. The knowledge that he will survive convinces him that he will need to have a good, productive life after the war.

This spiritual experience proves prophetic, as Sledge does indeed survive the war. Although it remains ambiguous what actually happened, this episode gives Sledge new optimism and strength—two qualities that he describes as crucial to surviving the war, since they keep one from giving in to despair.

That night, Sledge realizes that he has not showered in days and stinks. He explains that keeping oneself and one's rifle clean is an essential aspect of Marine standards, and being dirty makes one feel less dignified. He expresses his surprise at noting how little this aspect of war appears in soldiers' narratives, since this can make a Marine just as miserable as fear, or other physical sensations such as being too hot or sick.

Sledge's honest narrative style leads him to talk about all unpleasant aspects of war, from personal hygiene to death itself. In explaining the psychological ramifications of staying clean, he shows that such seemingly trite details—which might seem insignificant in light of greater problems like death—color a soldier's experience and constitute a form of suffering as valid as any other.

The next morning, on September 18, Company K pursues its rifle attack against the eastern side of Bloody Nose Ridge. Sledge explains that the worst job during such attacks is that of the riflemen, who spearhead attacks and are thus most exposed to enemy fire. Later, when the Marines reach the Japanese's complex network of caves and pillboxes, which hindered the Marines' usual assault tactics, everyone takes turns being a rifleman in the front and a stretcher bearer in the rear. This allows all company members to understand the dangers involved.

The fact that all Marines alternated being riflemen and stretcher bearers demonstrates an attempt at making everyone equal—and, thus, giving everyone a chance to survive. In light of the numerous cases of mental breakdown that Sledge describes, it can also be seen as a strategy to minimize emotional stress on soldiers, allowing everyone to benefit from moments of relative rest.

While K/3/5 is attacking the eastern side of Bloody Nose, the 1st Marines (2/1), attacking the end of the ridge, suffer heavy casualties. One of Sledge's friends in Company K tells him he has heard from a friend in 2/1 that the Marines there are being sent for frontal attacks in which they do not even see the Japanese who are shooting at them, and thus cannot defend themselves in any way. Members of Company K agree that this amounts to slaughter. One veteran says that such a strategy only benefits the officer who makes such decisions without actually bearing the brunt of the violence. While an officer's Marines are killed in combat, the man can return to the U.S. and receive a medal for his work. Sledge and his friends in Company K feel bitter about this, especially since they know they will probably have to attack that part of the ridges at some point.

This episode suggests that Marines do not consider all leadership and strategizing equally valid—even if, in combat, they have no choice but to obey their superiors' orders, however unfair or illogical they may seem. The infantrymen argue that bravery does not depend on one's rank or on the success of one's military strategies, but, rather, on one's respect for the human lives involved. In these Marines' eyes, only people who have experienced combat should be able to determine who deserves recognition—and who, on the other hand, has proven wasteful of human lives. Bravery and competence, they conclude, can only be measured by the people who benefit from it.

That day, the Marines walk through stifling heat, Sledge's pack causing him to sweat profusely. His small New Testament is safely tucked away inside a plastic bag. The men then hear that they are going to be served hot chow: pork chops. The Marines find this unbelievable, and are filled with gratitude.

The Marines' joy at the simple announcement of hot food shows that, once again, small treats of this kind bring both physical and psychological relief to the soldiers, allowing them to take a break from constant violence and physical discomfort.

The next day, part of Company K joins other squads to move into the peninsula, beyond the company's lines. The goal is to reach a swamp where the Marines will need to keep the enemy from advancing. Severed from the tight-knit group of Company K, Sledge feels a little lost, and realizes that he sees Company K as his family, the place where he truly belongs. He describes this feeling of belonging as a crucial aspect of Marine life, allowing the men to maintain a high morale and to depend on each other in matters of life and death.

Sledge's attachment to Company K is sentimental but also, from a military perspective, strategic, as it gives him more strength and optimism in fighting. This suggests that it is crucial to take men's emotional well-being into account when planning military strategies. The structure of tight-knit Marine companies—as well as excellent leadership by men such as Haldane and Hillbilly—allows for this process to happen naturally.

As the men move through the growth, Sledge notices two man-o-war birds nesting in a tree. He takes a minute to watch them, realizing that they remind him of the birds near Mobile, Atlanta, but a friend scolds him, telling him to focus. Although Sledge knows that losing one's concentration is dangerous, he is also grateful to enjoy a few moments of peace and joy in the midst of the horrors of war.

Sledge's friend's advice highlights the deep solidarity that exists among Marines, as they learn not only to perform well individually but also to help each other remain concentrated. The contrast between Sledge's fascination with birds and his violent surroundings also underlines how absurd war is, as it causes human beings to behave like animals instead of exercising their greater intellectual instincts.

As night falls, the group settles by an abandoned Japanese machine-gun bunker, trying to make as little noise as possible, to ensure a surprise effect if the Japanese attempt to move forward. Sledge is amazed by how black the night is and, as he observes the dark world around him, he feels completely disoriented. In this moment, he becomes overwhelmed by the feeling that his life is completely disposable. Aware that he comes from a culture that puts a lot of emphasis on the individual value of life, he finds this thought humbling and difficult to accept.

Sledge's existential angst is intimately tied to his capacity to connect to his surroundings through his senses—in this case, understanding the darkness of the night as a symbol of the death that surrounds him, which has led so many young men like him to oblivion. His struggle to understand his life in this context causes him to reevaluate the cultural principles with which he has grown up, and which have led him to go to war. He gradually realizes that there is an enormous gap between American civilians' concept of life and his new understanding of death.

Over the course of the next few hours, Haney makes frequent rounds asking the Marines for the night's password. Although his goal is to keep the men alert, his coming and going only increases everyone's anxiety. Suddenly, in the middle of the night, someone begins moaning loudly, before calling out for help in a wild tone. The men soon realize that this Marine is not having a mere nightmare, but has actually gone insane, unable to cope with the stress of combat.

Haney's zeal once again reveals his idiosyncratic (potentially "Asiatic") behavior, as he does not realize that he is making other people more anxious. The fact that danger emerges from within the Marines' own camp—and not from a Japanese night attack—is symbolic, emphasizing that war is often fought within oneself as much as without, as each soldier struggles to retain a hold over their own sanity.

The situation soon grows tense, as the man's screams could easily reveal their position to the Japanese. Hillbilly attempts to reassure the man, and someone hits him in the jaw to keep him from screaming. A corpsman gives the man various morphine injections, which have no effect. Everyone grows increasingly nervous about the possibility for the Japanese to hear them. Finally, an officer orders someone to hit the man with a shovel. In the tense, horrible silence that ensues, everyone feels equally sorry for the man and nervous about a possible Japanese attack.

This uncomfortable situation reveals how inglorious war can be. In this case, leaders are forced to consider the well-being of the screaming Marine as well as the protection of the entire group. This leads them to make a highly unpleasant decision—to act violently toward one of their own in order to protect everyone else. The fact that this action is both brutal and necessary shows that war sometimes leaves no other choice.

The next day, Sledge discovers that the man is dead. Noticing the agony on the faces of veteran officers such as Hillbilly and Hank Boyes, Sledge realizes that this is more horrifying moment than anything these men will face in combat, even in situations that will earn them decorations for bravery. That day, Hillbilly calls a commander to ask for the patrol to retreat, explaining that everyone is too nervous to go on. Sledge believes that Hillbilly's strong reputation is the only factor that leads the superior, who wants to determine where the Japanese are currently positioned, to listen to him. Sledge and his companions are allowed to relax and move back to Company K's lines, where he feels at home again.

The leaders' horrified reactions reveal that, despite the omnipresence of brutality during war, exercising fatal violence against one's own men is still too shocking to contemplate calmly. It also highlights the fatal danger of losing one's sanity, as it can lead to one's death as surely as an enemy bullet. Hillbilly's concern for his men's well-being once again demonstrates his excellent leadership capacities, as he understands that the Marines' psychological state is just as important as their physical readiness.

Over the next few days, Company K is sent to relieve the 1st Marines, who have been decimated and are going back to Pavuvu—but who have achieved significant strategic gains by securing crucial territories. When he runs into men he knows, Sledge is appalled to see their defeated, resigned faces, deeply affected by the horrific fighting they have been through. Company K will ultimately endure such grueling combat for twenty days, and will return just as crushed as these men. On their way to a new position, Sledge crosses paths with army infantrymen, for whom he feels a strong affinity. Fighting at the front line, he explains, overcomes any differences among military branches and units.

The soldiers' attitudes are typical of what Sledge calls the "thousand-yard stare," which signals extreme emotional detachment—soldiers' protection against (and indication of) the emotional trauma caused by combat. The fact that all men who have fought at the front feel solidarity for each other, regardless of military status, reveals that the experience of combat is so terrifying that it naturally leads to bonding, as they are able to understand each other's universal stories of fear and horror.

PART 1, CHAPTER 5: ANOTHER AMPHIBIOUS ASSAULT

The 5th Marines go to secure the northern section of Peleliu. One night, when Sledge is sent to bring water to the company's command post, he sees Haldane deeply concentrated, looking over a match with a small flashlight. Sledge then hears him ask commanders to fire tank guns ahead of Company K. Haldane explains that he knows this is not strictly necessary from a strategic standpoint, but that he wants "[his] boys" to feel safe. Sledge later tells his companions about this and they all agree that Haldane has an extraordinary capacity to take his men's feelings into account.

This episode once again highlights Haldane's excellent leadership skills. He shows that he takes his responsibility toward the company seriously, and considers his men an actual family—as Sledge will later emphasize after Haldane's death, noting that he served as a parental figure for Company K, making them feel safe and protected. Haldane's focus on his men's emotional security reveals his knowledge that psychological preparation is just as important as physical strength.

That night, in the foxhole, Sledge keeps guard while his buddy Snafu sleeps. Suddenly, Sledge sees two figures emerge from the darkness, speaking in Japanese. With his carbine ready, Sledge notices one soldier head in one direction and the other one toward him. However, he does not yet shoot because he knows two other Marines are in a foxhole right in front of him, and he would risk shooting them in the back. At the same time, he does not understand why his companions, Bill and Sam, have not fired at the Japanese soldier yet.

Sledge's thinking process emphasizes the difficulty of making the decision to shoot, as he wants to kill the enemy to protect the entire group, but must not put his nearby companions' lives in danger. This difficult situation shows the interconnectedness of the buddy system, as defending the company as a whole depends on the ability for each foxhole *to shoot in its immediate surrounding areas, without impinging on another foxhole's line of shooting.*

Sledge then sees the Japanese soldier jump into the foxhole in front of him. After hearing the horrific sounds of hand-to-hand combat, Sledge sees a man jump back out. Another Marine soon jumps out and knocks him down. From the right, where the other Japanese soldier went, Sledge hears agonizing screams that horrify him beyond description. He also hears a rifle shot in the foxhole ahead of him, and a Marine's confirmation that he has shot the infiltrator. When interrogated by a sergeant nearby, Sledge maintains that there were only two infiltrators, though this does not explain how another Japanese infiltrator could have exited Sam and Bill's foxhole. Someone then agrees to solve the mystery and walks toward the man on the ground, firing a pistol shot to silence him.

This chaotic situation proves deeply confusing to everyone present. The fact that someone—presumably a Japanese infiltrator—ran out of Bill and Sam's foxhole suggests that there were three: the soldier Sam shot, the soldier who ran to the right, and the soldier who left the foxhole. Sledge's insistence that he only saw two infiltrators serves as an indication of the situation's tragic outcome: the man who exited the foxhole was not a Japanese infiltrator but an American Marine, unable to declare his identity after being hit by one of his own, who mistook him for the enemy.

When dawn arrives hours later, Sledge notices that the figure on the ground is not Japanese. Rather, he discovers that it is Bill. Sledge feels sick to realize that the Marine was shot by one of their very own. The man who killed Bill then goes to admit what happened. After Haldane interrogates Sledge, the officer tells him that this was nothing but a tragic mistake and that Sledge should never discuss what happened.

This episode confirms that some deaths during the war are purely accidental—and thus all the more absurd and tragic, since there was no actual reason for Bill to die. Haldane's insistence that Sledge say nothing underlines his desire to maintain high morale and trust within the company, so that the men can move on from this episode and keep fighting the war.

In the meantime, the men all agree that the person at fault in this story is not the shooter but Sam, who was supposed to keep watch while Bill was sleeping. This buddy system is crucial to the functioning of the Marine Corps, and the men attack Sam—who admits that he might have fallen asleep—for his actions. In the eyes of fellow Marines, Sam's remorse does not make his actions excusable. As the men begin to move out of their positions, Sledge learns that the man who killed the Japanese who had gone toward the right did so by jamming his finger in the enemy's eye, after both of them lost their weapons. Sledge describes this anecdote as typical of the savage nature of this war.

Sam's inability to protect his buddy proves that the buddy system is indeed not only a means for soldiers to bond, but a matter of life and death. It also suggests that sheer exhaustion can prove just as deadly as incompetence, as it forces soldiers to struggle against the needs of their own bodies. Sledge's account of the unconventional, brutal way in which a Marine killed the enemy shows that there are no rules when it comes to personal survival: any way of killing the enemy is justified, as long as it ensures the well-being of the company.

The next morning, the company learns that Japanese reinforcements have reached Peleliu from larger islands in the north. One veteran comments on the similarity of this situation with his experience in Guadalcanal: as the Japanese send waves of reinforcements, he says, the battle could go on and on.

The Marines gradually discover that what they were initially told would be a rough yet short-lived battle might in fact prove more treacherous than military commanders had anticipated. This highlights the difficulty of making military predictions, as one never knows what new strategies the enemy might use.

On September 28, the company makes a new beach landing, which terrifies Sledge given his experience of the last one. However, American planes bomb the area by the beach and, although Sledge moves out of the water while repeating a prayer to himself over and over again, he is relieved to note that no one is firing at them as they approach the island.

Over time, Sledge will discover that the same experiences that once drove him to absolute panic, such as beach landings, are manageable—not only, as in this case, because the past does not necessarily repeat itself in such violent ways, but because he gradually gains greater knowledge, experience, and self-confidence.

However, Sledge soon has to dive for cover with a buddy to avoid a Japanese machine gun. Suddenly, his friend is hit in the arm by a sniper. Sledge calls out for a corpsman, and his friend Ken Caswell, nicknamed "Doc" like all U.S. Navy corpsmen, crawls over. A Marine comes by to help and, in his rush to cut off the injured man's shoulder pack, slices Doc's face to the bone with a knife. Showing incredible courage and composure, Doc keeps on working while Sledge presses a battle dressing to Doc's wound. Sledge explains that, after this, Doc's wound was tended to and he returned to the battle after barely a few hours. Sledge notes that such behavior is typical of the navy corpsmen serving in the Marines, who are regarded highly by the fighters.

Although Ken Caswell is neither a soldier nor Sledge's superior, he demonstrates extraordinary qualities of bravery, endurance, and leadership. In this case, he shows his capacity for self-sacrifice, as he puts another man's safety before his own. Later, he will also serve as a moral guide to Sledge, encouraging him not to take gold teeth from a Japanese corpse. Such behavior demonstrates not only Doc's courage, but his ability to remain ethical and lucid in the midst of such terrible brutality and chaos.

The company then moves inland and reaches a pillbox which they are told is empty. When Sledge hears Japanese voices emerging from the pillbox, Cpl. Burgin initially disbelieves him. However, when he goes to look through the ventilator, he sees the enemy. curses, and begins to shoot at them. The Japanese then throw grenades from inside the pillbox. When instructed to see what is happening, Sledge looks over a sand bank and sees a Japanese machine gunner at the door of the bunker. He quickly lowers his head and avoids a shower of bullets by a fraction of a second. Sledge knows that he has made a crucial mistake by looking at the pillbox without having his carbine ready, and realizes that he is lucky to be alive. As his fear subsides, he grows enraged at this Japanese machine-gunner who almost took his life.

This series of actions shows how Marines' lives so often depend on sheer luck—in this case, the fact that Sledge overhears some voices, and that he is able to move his head in time to avoid the bullets. The fact that these near-death episodes drive him to rage against the Japanese highlights the personal nature of the hatred the Japanese and Americans feel toward each other, as it derives from firsthand combat experience more than any kind of political consideration. In addition to feeling lucky, Sledge will also later praise Burgin's competence and training for his quick reaction in taking over an unpredictable situation.

Unable to kill all the men in the pillbox with grenades, the Marines ask for a tank reinforcement. In the meantime, a few Japanese escape the bunker while holding their pants up with one hand—a strange action that Sledge does not understand, but finds culturally fascinating. The Marines kill all the Japanese who try to exit the pillbox, having lost too many friends to feel any compassion for them.

Sledge's fascination for the strange scene he witnesses—which he defines as "cultural" but for which the reader is offered no further explanation—does not keep him from wanting to kill the enemy. This proves once more that the instinct of self-protection and aggression is ultimately more powerful than any compassionate concern for the other.

When the amtrac finally arrives, it fires three shells at the pillbox. However, as the dust settles, Sledge sees a Japanese man about to throw a grenade. In reaction, Sledge raises his carbine and hits him at close range. He then sees the man's pain at every shot and feels ashamed. At the same time, he realizes that cursing the war for all the suffering it causes is foolish, since that soldier was about to throw a grenade at *him*—and thus inflict equal suffering. In the end, it is only with the arrival of a flamethrower that the Marines are able to kill all the Japanese in the pillbox. Although Sledge does not enjoy the idea of burning an enemy to death, he admits that this is the only solution, since the Japanese would never surrender willingly.

Sledge's rapid reactions prove that he has been well trained and is capable of reacting efficiently to danger. His ability to kill someone at close range also shows that his initial fears about killing the enemy were unfounded, since instinct moves him to do so. At the same time, his moral qualms about this action reveal his humanity. Even though he ultimately feels ashamed by his thoughts, they demonstrate that he is not callous, but is still capable of feeling compassion for others—even though he tries to repress these feelings as soon as they arise.

After the fight, the Marines search the Japanese dead for souvenirs. Sledge finds this practice repulsive, brutal, and uncivilized, but accepts that it is typical of wars in which enemies feel deep hatred for each other. That day, however, he sees a fellow Marine use his kabar to take a Japanese man's **gold teeth**. The soldier is still alive, and instead of killing him on the spot the Marine merely feels annoyed by the Japanese man's movements and tries to hold him still. Another Marine then arrives and shoots the soldier, putting an end to his suffering. Sledge describes the first Marine's actions as excessively cruel, a signal of the savage life that they are living—one that could not be comprehended by people outside of the war.

Sledge understands the reasons behind the Marine's effort to take a gold tooth and to ignore the Japanese soldier's suffering, because he attributes such actions to the dehumanizing effect of war, which makes soldiers immune to brutality—especially their own. However, Sledge also tries to retain a critical, moral distance from the scene, because he does not want to turn into such an insensitive souvenir-collector as his companion. His description of the scene highlights that the Japanese are not alone in committing cruel acts—rather, anyone involved in war is potentially capable.

The next day, Sledge sees a fellow Marine throw bits of coral into the mouth of a dead Japanese man, as though he were throwing pebbles in a puddle, without realizing that there is anything odd in his behavior. Although Sledge comments on how much war can brutalize a soldier, to the point of making him lose all notion of what is acceptable and inacceptable, soon after he finds himself inclined to take a few **gold teeth** from a Japanese corpse himself. However, Doc Caswell sees him and tries to stop him. He tries to remind Sledge that his parents would be disgusted by this, but only convinces Sledge not to take the tooth by invoking germs, which Sledge tells him he had not thought of. It is only later that Sledge realizes Doc was trying to keep him from becoming a cruel, unfeeling soldier, and remind him that there are certain moral limits to a fighters' actions in war.

Although this Marine's act of brutality does not actually harm the enemy, since the Japanese soldier is already dead—unlike in the previous episode, in which a Marine ignored the enemy's suffering—it does reveal how common the sight of death has become to these soldiers, who no longer recognize it as anything out of the ordinary. Sledge's temptation to collect a gold tooth also shows how easy it is for anyone *to fall prey to brutality—even Sledge, who was initially revolted by this very practice. At the same time, Doc's intervention highlights the intense networks of solidarity that exist among Marines. Doc does not want to appear condescending toward Sledge, but wants his friend to maintain his sanity and his capacity to reason morally.*

As tanks begin to pull back because Sledge's battalion is going to be relieved by an army battalion, the sound and concussion of shell firing erupts extremely close to them. Although the tanks successfully return and destroy the enemy weapon, Sledge sees the terribly distraught face of a man who was close to the camouflaged artillery weapon. This man is an experienced army veteran who has undergone shelling before, but Sledge explains that being shelled at close range is unbearable, leaving even the most seasoned fighters terrified. Sledge, in fact, recalls this particular episode as one of the most distressing of the war, because of the panic and helplessness shelling has the capacity to instill. The sudden, brief attack leads to many deaths and horrific wounds.

This episode reveals that, however much experience a soldier might have, no one is ever inured to particularly horrifying episodes. Instead of disappearing, fear is always present—as Hillbilly once told Sledge, all one can do is learn to go on anyway. This is one of many anecdotes in which Sledge describes shelling as particularly terrifying not only because of the wounds it can inflict on a man's body, but because of the mental strain it causes, capable of leading anyone to insanity—which the World War I term "shell shock" exemplifies.

That afternoon, Sledge and his companions find themselves looking blankly into space. Remembering the words of the officer who had said the battle on Peleliu would be "short, but rough," and realizing that he has now been on Peleliu for fifteen days, Sledge turns away from his companions and sobs, unable to control the despair he feels at undergoing such a cruel, absurd experience, in which young men like him are killed on a daily basis. Lieutenant Duke then puts his hand on Sledge's shoulder, asking him what is wrong. He tells Sledge that he feels the same way as him but that it will all be over soon. This gives Sledge the strength necessary to endure the next fifteen days of battle on Peleliu.

The blank stare Sledge and his companions share is a sign of extreme shock and emotional detachment from the horrors they have just witnessed. In Sledge's case, however, this does not keep him from feeling overwhelmed by despair. Duke's conversation with him is reminiscent of the conversation Sledge once had with Hillbilly. It confirms that everyone—even Sledge's superiors—feel terrified and helpless, but that they must maintain the optimism and courage necessary to go on. Once again, this episode highlights how important emotional support and solidarity are.

As Sledge's battalion is replaced by an army battalion, the men are able to rest for a while in a quiet area. There, Sledge asks others about his friends in other units, and learns mostly depressing news about their fates.

The negative aspect of forming such strong friendships in war is that one is inevitably forced to confront the grief that comes from losing so many close friends. This is yet another aspect of the war that weighs on everyone's conscience.

PART 1, CHAPTER 6: BRAVE MEN LOST

At a period when most of Peleliu is under American control except for the central ridges, Sledge's battalion is sent to relieve the 7th Marines, who are experiencing casualty figures almost as high as the 1st Marines. Sledge and his companions find themselves focused exclusively on day-to-day survival, as any greater notion of time or purpose vanishes under the grim realities of every new day of combat. Although it is nearly impossible to picture one's own death, most men become fatalistic about being wounded. They all hope for the battle to end soon or to be sent home with a million-dollar wound.

As the battle of Peleliu drags on, the men discover that their commitment to the war does not trump their desire to make it out alive, nor does it alleviate their despair at knowing that they might die. This suggests that bravery and patriotism, in Sledge's narrative, become a matter of pure grit: everyone wants *to leave combat, yet they still remain faithful to each other and to their duty, demonstrating extraordinary endurance and solidarity.*

Sledge describes taking part in an attack on a rugged hill, the Five Sisters, and having to work as a stretcher bearer, a nearly impossible task in such difficult terrain, exposed to enemy fire. He notes that the wounded always seem peaceful and confident, in large part, he believes, because of the deep trust that exists among all Marines. In addition, leaving a wounded Marine behind would involve condemning him to being tortured to death by the Japanese.

The task of stretcher bearer is yet another indication of the network of solidarity embedded in the system of the Marine Corps, which ensures that no man is ever left alone. The Marines' fear of the Japanese (justified by the enemy's past cruelties) also means that they would rather risk their lives than abandon their companions to such suffering.

Sledge also describes the agonizing nights in which the Marines have to fight against Japanese infiltrators, whose recklessness is met with the Marines' alertness and discipline. Sledge recalls an episode in which his friend Jay stepped on a hiding Japanese soldier while going to relieve himself during the night. When Jay tried to shoot the man, he discovered that his firing pin was broken. He began to run away from the soldier, calling out to his fellow Marines to shoot him, and felt a grenade thrown against his back—although, surprisingly, the grenade did not explode. Finally, he ran toward a Marine with an automatic rifle. Instead of shooting the Japanese soldier directly, the man let him come close, so that when he shot him, he could cut his body in half with the bullets—a decision that rightfully enrages Jay. Jay, in the meantime, was so terrified that he had diarrhea in his pants.

This episode shows the extent to which war can prove absurd—almost, in this case, to the point of becoming humorous. Pure accident (the malfunctioning of two separate weapons) makes this situation seem unreal. The fact that Jay's companion chose to prolong Jay's suffering also reveals how accustomed to violence everyone is, as the Marine sees this scene as an ordinary game—one in which he can have fun by slicing the enemy's body in half. Only Jay's terror—and its concrete consequence in the form of human excrement—underlines the gravity of this situation: the fact that Jay was very nearly sent to his death.

Sledge and two companions fight for a few days in a mortar squad separate from the rest of Company K. After they are told to regroup with their company, they run into Johnny Marmet, who has a distraught look on his face. Sledge feels sick when he hears the news: "Ack Ack" Haldane is dead. Sledge describes this moment as the worst grief he felt during the war. Haldane's death signifies the disappearance of a figure of stability and strength in the company, similar to a parent in his capacity to provide physical as well as mental security. As the men all around Sledge cry, Sledge feels as though their world has fallen apart.

Sledge and his companions' utter shock and pain at Haldane's death emphasize how important Company K's leader was to the Marines. Despite the omnipresence of death in the war, the men have not lost the capacity to mourn their beloved skipper, suggesting that even the toughest veterans experience deep emotions of loss. The men's dependence on their leader reveals how crucial the family-style structure is to the Marines' strength and morale, as it gives them a sense of peace and stability.

During this period, fighting comes in sudden spurts. The Japanese on the island know that they are condemned, and have no more hope in regaining territory or receiving reinforcements. Therefore, they begin to kill for the simple purpose of killing. Around this time, the heat also proves unbearable, and brings out the smells of rotting corpses all around. Although Marines always try to remove their own dead from sight, the intense heat makes the bodies smell and rot within a few hours. Sledge describes the horror of being constantly surrounded by the smell of decaying corpses and human excrement, as the coral rock surface on Peleliu keeps men from digging into the ground and adopting adequate sanity practices. As a consequence, huge flies abound, and Sledge finds it nearly impossible to dislodge them from their positions, even when they fall in his own food.

The Japanese's desperate reaction only makes fighting all the more ferocious, emphasizing the Japanese's common self-sacrificing attitude, according to which they would rather die than surrender to the Americans. Sledge's horror at the human excrement around him suggests that one of the most unbearable aspects of war is not necessarily fear and the omnipresence death, but the intolerable conditions soldiers are forced to endure. In the same way that early lack of hygiene shocked Sledge, these circumstances force the men to live like animals, far from the normal standards of living that civilization entails.

One night, as Company K is relieving certain troops, Sledge learns that a Japanese infiltrator recently killed two Marines in the gun pit he is going to sleep in. Unable to bear the idea of sleeping in an area covered with blood, Sledge places cardboard around the sides of the pit. As he does so, Sledge recalls some politicians' words glorifying the idea of war and patriotic sacrifice, and finds these ideas absurd. He concludes that flies are the only ones that benefit from such carnage.

As Sledge is increasingly surrounded by horrific sights and smells, the signs of violence as well as lack of hygiene, he begins to adopt a resentful attitude. Although he does not express regret for enlisting in the war, he does prove cynical toward politicians' and civilians' glorification of war. Instead, he wants to insist that war is a horrific, traumatizing experience.

Observing the landscape around him, made muddy by rain and gray and forlorn by the destruction of war, Sledge realizes that the strange outline of Peleliu's coral ridges seem surreal, as though they belonged to another planet. Affected by constant stress, lack of sleep, and exhaustion, Sledge finds that he is barely coping with each new horror.

The various traumatic events that Sledge has experienced begin to affect him. His fascination with the surreal world around him mirrors a later episode on Okinawa, in which he will fear losing his sanity. The threat of a mental breakdown is always near, often more ominous and unnerving than the fear of violence itself.

One day, Sledge and a friend come across three dead Marines lying on stretchers, left there after the stretcher bearers had to escape. Although such sights usually disturb Sledge, this one is all the more shocking because the Japanese enemy has deliberately mutilated these bodies, decapitating one man and placing another one's severed penis in his mouth. In that moment, Sledge feels blind rage run through him. He concludes that he will never feel compassion for the enemy again. Although he knows that Marines can occasionally prove brutal and do take souvenirs from the dead, he has never witnessed such horrific treatment of the enemy, and concludes that the Japanese are "mean as hell."

Although Sledge has become more accustomed to the sight of dead bodies, the fact that he still feels disturbed by American corpses suggests that there is a qualitative difference between his vision of the enemy (as targets to kill) and of his companions (as full human beings). In this particular case, the horrific nature of this scene seems meant to inspire rage in Americans. Sledge's indignation shows that he believes there are clear limits to what soldiers should do to each other in war, and the deliberate mutilation of enemy corpses definitely is beyond these limits.

On October 15, three days after learning about Haldane's death, Company K is relieved by army troops. Sledge and his comrades are exultant. They move to a northern defense zone overlooking the sea where they are in charge of stopping any Japanese counter-landing. The Marines are able to relax during the day but must remain alert at night. One day, a buddy shows Sledge a souvenir he has kept wrapped up in waxed paper: the hand of a Japanese enemy. Sledge tells him that he has gone "Asiatic" and cannot keep this. The man insists, but other Marines intervene, convincing him to leave it here. Sledge concludes that the war has turned him into "a twentieth-century savage," without any emotional sensitivity. Sledge shudders at the thought of what this man might do if the war continued.

Although fighting is over for Company K, the horrors of war still remain as present as ever. Indeed, Sledge's companion's decision to keep a human hand as a souvenir only highlights how completely desensitized these men have become. Sledge's mention of "a savage" reveals that some of these men no longer follow society's rules—indicating how difficult it will later be for them to reintegrate into civilization. Although this episode takes place after Sledge has seen mutilated American corpses, this scene is related differently—not only because this time Sledge is talking about his own cherished companions, but because the Marine's intention was not necessarily to humiliate or degrade an enemy corpse, but merely to keep an exotic souvenir for himself.

At the end of October, Company K moves to a quiet section of the island where they are told to shave and clean up. The day before they leave the island, Sledge is sleeping in a hammock when he hears machine-gun bullets zip by underneath his hammock. Sledge determines that the machine-gun is far away and must be shooting at army lines, but he knows that he can be killed by a stray bullet in the same way that he can die from a bullet meant for him, so he crawls out of his hammock and sleeps on the ground.

Once again, Sledge is confronted with the fact that accidents in war are just as dangerous as personal mistakes. This highlights the absurdity of war—since Sledge could easily have been killed while sleeping peacefully in a hammock, far from the lines of combat—as well as the permanence of violence in these men's lives, since they are unable to escape even when far from the front.

On October 30, the men finally board the ship that will take them away from Peleliu. Too accustomed to seeing death and destruction, Sledge cannot convince himself that they are actually leaving, and expects to be killed or wounded at any time. As they move away from Peleliu, Sledge asks Sgt. Haney, whose experience of war dates back to World War I, what he thinks about their experience there. Sledge expects Haney to put what they have experienced in perspective and deemphasize its horror, but, to Sledge's surprise, Haney replies that it was terrible, that he never experienced anything of the sort before, and that he is now ready to return to the U.S.

Sledge's inability to believe that there is a world beyond war will later prove more pervasive on Okinawa, where he will fear losing his sanity and his capacity to reintegrate civilian life. His desire to hear Haney's opinion shows how much he looks up to his superiors, as well as his wish to confirm that he is not a coward, and that what he has experienced truly is out of the ordinary.

Sledge concludes that none of the men involved in this battle would ever be the same again. They have lost their innocence and their faith in the goodness of humanity, as well as in politicians whose job should be to protect them from savagery. At the same time, Sledge draws comfort from the fact that the effective training and the amazing discipline and esprit de corps among Marines played a crucial role—along with pure luck—in their survival. In light of the Japanese's impressive military skill and devotion, he concludes that only Marines equally devoted to combat and to defending their country could have possibly defeated them. Looking back, he realizes that his drill instructor at boot camp was not mean, but insisted on severe discipline because he knew that perfectionism could make the difference between life and death.

Sledge's intuition that these veteran fighters will be marked for life serves as an ominous signal of the difficulties many of them will feel when trying to reenter civilian life, which follows rules and standards at odds with the brutal world they have been immersed in. Sledge's disappointment in politicians does not diminish his desire to take part in the war, since he is committed to his country more than to any particular government. His positive conclusions about the Marines' discipline thus focus on personal and interpersonal dynamics more than worldwide politics, which he doesn't trust. This leads him to celebrate the human qualities of the Marines more than their strategic gains.

PART 2, FOREWORD

Captain Thomas Stanley, in the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve, explains that Okinawa was different from Peleliu because it consisted in "land" warfare, as the island had a network of urban and rural communities, airfields, roads, and a civilian population. There, the Japanese fought with the knowledge that they were defending their own territory, and that this was their last barrier before the Americans could reach the rest of the country. They displayed sophisticated new defensive tactics that made attack extremely difficult.

This introduction puts Sledge's personal narration in greater geographical and historical perspective, emphasizing that—unlike in Sledge's story—the goal of the war is not necessarily for individual Marines to survive, but for the United States to force Japan to surrender and thus put an end to the war. The Japanese's desperation serves as an explanation for the particularly ferocious nature of fighting on Okinawa.

PART 2, CHAPTER 7: REST AND REHABILITATION

As the Marines move toward Pavuvu, Sledge realizes that most of his friends in rifle companies have been wounded or killed. When a friend asks him what the purpose of taking Peleliu was, Sledge cannot find a good answer, even though he is unable to accept that their losses were useless to the war. Sledge prefers to conclude that they have all learned crucial lessons—such as the fact that they were able to survive such an ordeal, both physically and emotionally, and that they are now ready for the worst.

Sledge's inability to explain the purpose of the battle of Peleliu derives from a fact that will become clearer in the years to come: the battle did not *bring any clear strategic gains. Instead of focusing on such injustice, absurdity, and loss, Sledge prefers to remain optimistic, emphasizing the personal skills and knowledge he has acquired instead of focusing on the greater geo-military context.*

When Sledge steps off the ship, a new lieutenant who has visibly not been in combat yet refers to Sledge as "sonny" and Sledge stares back at him in amazement, unable to understand that anyone would call him that after what he has experienced in Peleliu. Noticing Sledge's reaction, the lieutenant looks away, embarrassed, and Sledge concludes that his vacant stare, the result of many days in battle, must have disturbed the lieutenant.

Naturally and unconsciously, Sledge has become like one of the veteran Marines he first saw on Peleliu: emotionally detached and intimidating. Sledge has acquired crucial experience that has destroyed his innocence, making him less naïve and enthusiastic than he once was—and than his age might suggest.

As the Marines move through Pavuvu, they notice that the infrastructure has largely improved since they were last there. After arriving, a stern 1st sergeant gives Company K a speech in which he praises their behavior, saying that they have proven they are "good Marines." Sledge is impressed by such compliments from such a severe, experienced officer.

Sledge's pride at being recognized as a good fighter confirms his own high opinions of the excellent discipline and spirit of the 1st Marines division. It suggests that surviving such a terrible ordeal as Peleliu is an impressive feat, signaling an individual's skill and courage.

After being on Pavuvu for a week, Sledge has a deeply rewarding experience. One night, when everyone is in bed, a Gloucester veteran tells Sledge that he did not know how Sledge would fare in battle, since Sledge belongs to an intellectual background, but that he was impressed by Sledge's behavior on Pavuvu. The man concludes that "by God you did OK; you did OK." Although Sledge never received an official decoration, his friend's simple comment makes him feel immensely proud, and he still finds it heartwarming many years after the war.

Sledge's friend's simple words are sufficient to make him feel immensely proud of his military performance on Peleliu. It gives value to the suffering he has undergone—if not on a large military scale, at least on the level of his companions' respect and admiration. This highlights the importance that camaraderie has in Sledge's life, as he considers it his duty not only to be a good fighter, but to have a positive role in his comrades' life.

On Christmas Eve, the Marines attend a special church service, sing carols, and eat roast turkey. Although Sledge finds these activities deeply enjoyable, they also make him homesick. On New Year's, a can of gasoline catches fire near the kitchen. After the fire is put out, one of Sledge's friends, Howard Nease, tells everyone from Company K to come to his tent. As the men soon discover, Howard was responsible for starting the fire, thus creating a distraction that would allow him to steal a few roast turkeys. Everyone laughs at this story and relaxes together, enjoying some good food.

These lighthearted moments contrast intensely with the brutal world the men have just left. Howard's behavior serves as a reminder that these are young men—ordinary people who enjoy having fun and laughing together, like any young people on the planet. In this way, the scene signals how inhuman war is, as it forces people hardly out of adolescence to take on a horrifically brutal role, in which they are often kept from expressing their humanity.

Sledge finds Howard's attitude admirable, as Howard demonstrates a capacity to remain cheerful in the face of adversity, and highlights the importance of sharing warm moments with friends. Sledge mentions that Howard was later killed during the early days on Okinawa. Nevertheless, he notes that one of his favorite memories remains that of Howard handing him a piece of turkey and wishing him a Happy New Year in 1944.

The comfort Sledge finds in Howard's attitude derives from the fact that it brings humanity to this war environment, reminding the Marines that they can still behave like ordinary, loving people. It also highlights the tight-knit nature of Company K, as the men are able to appreciate each other's company in combat as well as in a peaceful context.

On Pavuvu, the men take part in light drills, enthusiastically receive two beers per week, and join parades in which some Marines receive decorations for their actions in battle. One day, Sledge is called to the company headquarters, where he is offered the position of officer. Instead of convincing his interviewer that he wants the job, Sledge tells him that he would be unable to send another man to his death and that he would only want to be an officer if this meant returning home. When Sledge's companions ask him why he gave such absurd answers, Sledge explains that he does not actually want to leave Company K, where he feels at home, and that he does not want the extra burden of responsibility that officers are forced to bear.

Sledge's discomfort with taking on the role of officer shows his humility, sensitivity, and sense of friendship. His unwillingness to send other people to their death reveals not lack of confidence but, rather, a deep respect for human lives and an understanding of war as inhuman violence. His desire to remain in Company K also underlines the importance friendship plays in his life, as he gives greater weight to remaining with his companions than taking on a more prestigious role that could bring him greater material comforts.

Training intensifies over the weeks and Company K discovers that their new mortar section leader, Mac, is a New Englander who has just graduated from an Ivy League college. Sledge notes that Mac is meticulous but has the irritating habit of bragging about all the vengeful ways he would attack the Japanese. All the veterans consider him condescendingly, as they know that Mac's attitude will change radically as soon as he is exposed to the harsh reality of combat. Company K is then told that they will move to Guadalcanal before invading the Japanese island of Okinawa.

Mac's arrogance contrasts with his subordinates' actual combat experience, which will later prove more valuable than the theoretical training Mac has received. Mac's aggressive nature toward the Japanese thus highlights his innocence and naïveté, but also signals his inherently cruel, vengeful attitude toward the enemy, as he will later prove to be a sadistic officer, taking part in heinous acts against Japanese corpses.

PART 2, CHAPTER 8: PRELUDE TO INVASION

After a few weeks of practicing maneuvers on Guadalcanal, during which Sledge and some friends sneak into the chow line of the naval construction battalion, the Marines are sent to Ulithi Atoll, an island where they join the gathering invasion fleet. Sledge is awed by the number of ships prepared for the invasion—it's the largest invasion fleet ever prepared in the Pacific. During the week in which they are anchored at Ulithi, the men take part in a joyful baseball game, which breaks the monotony of their routine and makes them feel like children.

Sledge's sneaking into a chow line and participation in a baseball game once again highlights that even the most hardened veterans are capable of moments of carefree enjoyment, which allow them to escape the stress of the war. Sledge's awe at seeing the American ships emphasizes the strategic importance of the battle he is going to take part in, which is capable of determining the outcome of World War II.

When the Marines are briefed for Okinawa, they are told that this is not going to be a short battle, and that they can expect over 80 casualties on the beach where they will land. Officers still expect a large *banzai* counterattack, without realizing that the Japanese have abandoned such suicide charge tactics.

Ironically, if officers' optimistic vision proved wrong on Peleliu, their pessimistic assessment of Okinawa will also prove wrong, as the beach landing goes smoothly, without any casualties. This is a reminder of the relative unpredictability of military actions.

On D Day, April 1, the Marines are served the usual pre-combat meal of steak and eggs. Waiting to land, they watch as American warships bomb the beach. They are then ordered to wait in a safe room below deck, but the room is not ventilated and, angry that their safety is compromised in this way, the Marines disobey a navy officer's orders to stay below, explaining that they would rather be killed by enemy fire than asphyxiate in a closed room.

The Marines' willingness to disobey orders reveal that they are no longer naïve young Marines, but seasoned veterans who understand the risks they are taking and do not want to jeopardize their lives uselessly. The lack of official reaction to such disobedience suggests that the Marines were probably right in resisting, and that their officers were focused on more important tasks.

Although Sledge feels nervous about landing, he realizes that he does not experience the same panic as on Peleliu, because being a combat veteran has taught him what to expect from the Japanese. The size of the American fleet also serves to make him feel more reassured.

Sledge's new sense of self-confidence derives from his greater skills as well as the process of becoming accustomed to fear, death, and brutality—a greater emotional detachment that his body and mind have acquired over time.

PART 2, CHAPTER 9: STAY OF EXECUTION

As Sledge's company is on its way toward the beach, they learn that, apart from some shelling by mortars, the landing is unopposed. Although Sledge is amazed to be able to land without being shot, as he moves inland he finds the atmosphere eerie, as he wonders what the Japanese troops are up to. That night, after the Marines dig foxholes in soft earth, they hear a Japanese plane overhead and see it head toward the American fleet. They then see the plane fly directly toward a ship and explode there, in typical fashion of the *kamikaze* or suicidal attack, a Japanese strategy during the war.

The peace and quiet on the beach contrasts not only with the officers' and infantrymen's expectations, but with the Japanese's ferocity, as they are not afraid of using suicide attacks to harm their enemy. This unexpected occurrence serves as a foreboding signal that the Japanese are using a new technique—one which the American officers ignore, and which might make the battle more difficult than they imagined.

When Sledge wakes up to start his watch in the foxhole he shares with Snafu, he grabs their "Tommy" or submachine gun. After a few minutes, he notices a man crouching by trees nearby, although he is not sure if it is a man—and if it is, whether it is a Japanese or a Marine. He decides to shoot. Although the men hear the cries of Japanese infiltrators during the night, Sledge wakes up the next morning to discover that what he thought was a man was nothing but a stack of straw. His friends make fun of him for hours for this mistake.

The contrast between Sledge's concentration and the result of his action proves humorous, suggesting that war can sometimes seem like a game. In this vein, despite the dangers of war, the Marines still find the time and energy to focus on jokes, such as Sledge's mistake. Humor plays an important part in Marines' lives, as it allows them to cope with the emotional weight of their environment and to bond over shared experiences.

The next day, the Japanese enemy remains invisible. The Marines do see some Okinawans, civilians whom Sledge finds sad and miserable because they are so terrified by their invaders. The Marines, however, take a strong liking to the children, to whom they often give candy and rations. Sledge recalls laughing at humorous, non-violent scenes, such as an Okinawan mother spraying breast milk at her older, annoying son, and an episode in which some Marines rescue a horse trapped in a ditch.

Sledge's opinion about the Okinawans suggests that he does not bear hatred toward the Japanese people as a whole, but only to their ferocious combatants. He is able to separate his natural compassion from his role as a Marine, which forces him to be merciless with the enemy. This also highlights the injustice and absurdity of war, as innocent civilians are forced to suffer for the actions of their own government and army.

Company K spends their first days on Okinawa encountering little opposition to their advance, although they hear of the 7th Marines being ambushed and suffering casualties. The men are told to only shoot Japanese soldiers and Okinawans who are clearly hostile, and not to take part in target practice.

The military command clearly wants to avoid taking part in any war crimes, such as killing innocent civilians. International wars do (or are supposed to) follow certain ethical rules—although most of these were laid down only in the aftermath of WWII.

Sledge is grateful for patrol sergeant's Burgin's presence, as he mistrusts Mac's orders. One day, Sledge forms part of a group that will patrol the spot where the 7th Marines were ambushed. Although the new men like Mac are relaxed and aloof, Sledge and other veterans know the danger of not taking the enemy seriously and are worried about this new task.

The mistrust and discomfort in Mac's Company K creates an ominous atmosphere, suggesting that terrible things could happen under Mac's command. The new men's inability to understand the dangers of war suggests that combat experience can bring greater competence and lucidity than any amount of theoretical training.

A they walk through a footpath on a low hill where traces of the vicious ambush are obvious, Sledge is shocked to grasp the absurdity of war. He realizes that the Okinawans have cared for this land for centuries with basic farming methods, but that war has brought destruction to it with its latest technology. Sledge concludes that war is an illness, ruining the beauty of a peaceful, natural landscape.

Despite his willingness to defend his country in a patriotic way, Sledge disapproves of war itself. His understanding of the way in which it affects innocent local populations, as well as the earth itself, reveals his intelligence and his compassion, as he trusts that humans are capable of much more admirable acts than this war-time violence.

Sledge and a friend, a Gloucester veteran, are then sent to investigate a section of road nearby. When they suddenly hear shots behind them, the veteran says that it must be an ambush. Scrambling back toward where the shots came from, they see Mac standing over the carcass of a dead animal. He is shooting it in the jaw to see if he can shoot the teeth away. Burgin and the Marines are disgusted by this behavior. Sledge concludes that if Mac had not been an officer, the Marines would probably have "stuck his head in a nearby well," but they maintain discipline.

Mac proves not only excessively interested in morbid details, but also purely incompetent, as he blatantly disregards the order to shoot only armed Japanese soldiers. His reckless, despicable behavior puts the lives of his own men at risk, revealing either total lack of forethought or lack of care for other people's lives. The fact that everyone is forced to respect military hierarchy in such circumstances is unnerving, showing the injustice that can take place within Marine ranks.

Sledge explains that Mac is not incompetent, but does not understand the gravity of war. Although Mac has successfully graduated from officer training, which is an impressive feat, he occasionally behaves like a teenager. Sledge describes Mac's most disgusting habit: urinating in the mouth of every Japanese corpse he sees. Sledge calls this the most revolting thing he ever saw an American do, adding that it repelled even the most hardened combat veterans. He notes that Mac proved insensitive to brutality before even taking part in combat.

Mac's earlier boasting about behaving aggressively toward the Japanese does not necessarily translate into courage on the battlefield, but expresses itself through hateful acts—potentially as cruel as those Sledge denounced in the Japanese. Mac's inability to understand the true dangers of war or the necessity to leave enemy corpses alone is a distressing sign of his lack of compassion and sensitivity to other human lives.

During patrols in April, Sledge learns a lot about local Okinawan customs. Sledge is particularly fascinated by the horses and the particular type of halter that Okinawans use, which is made of wood and ropes. He is so intrigued by this system that he takes one to examine it, with the hope of taking it home. (He later abandons the halter, which makes his pack too heavy.) The Marines adopt a horse for a week but, after being ordered to change positions, they are forced to let it free. Sledge tells himself that the horse will be safe and happy in the hills, while the men will have to return to a world of shells, bullets, and death.

Sledge's respect for Okinawan customs reveals his intellectual curiosity and understanding that the Japanese are not inferior to him in any way simply because they are the enemy. The men's attachment to a horse also shows that they are still capable of kindness and compassion, despite their immersion in a world of seemingly endless brutality. Sledge's thoughts on the horse's peaceful future are a poignant reminder that even the dangers of the natural world cannot compare to the unique horrors of war, and all the unique cruelties humans inflict on each other.

On April 13, the company learns of the death of President Franklin Roosevelt. Although the men are not interested in politics during the fighting, they feel sad about this loss. They wonder if the President's successor, Harry Truman, will handle the war well—ensuring, most importantly, that it does not last any longer than absolutely necessary.

The men's interest in politics extends solely to their own fates—namely, whether or not politicians will respect the lives of soldiers. This lack of interest in politics seems paradoxical, given their participation in the most intense form of international politics, but highlights the way in which war overwhelms all the senses and the intellect.

Company K is then told to land on Takanabare Island, where they still encounter no Japanese soldiers. They spend some relaxing days on the island, with few responsibilities beyond making sure the enemy does not try to occupy the island. They receive news that the Marines are experiencing a lot of trouble in the south and are then told that they will go relieve an infantry division there.

The surprisingly peaceful progress of war on Okinawa for Company K starkly contrasts with Sledge's later description of omnipresent death and horror. It suggests that one's experience of war is highly dependent on luck and circumstance.

Nervous about this new, dangerous assignment, the men are enjoying a last meal around a fire when Mac suddenly yells "Grenade!" and the men all crouch. Sledge sees Mac throw the grenade, which explodes only slightly. Everyone looks at Mac with surprised, shocked looks, though no one is hurt. They learn that Mac wanted to play a joke on them—a typical trick of pouring out the explosive charge of the grenade before throwing it. Mac, however, did not throw out all the liquid. Outraged, the men are disappointed that the company commander did not witness Mac's actions. Sledge concludes that this is a sad, depressing way to prepare for the upcoming fight.

Once again, Mac proves unable to understand the dangerous, potentially fatal consequences of his own acts. His behavior also highlights his inability to understand how to socialize with his men—or perhaps, his unwillingness to actually learn how to become a good leader, rather than an excited potential warrior. This episode suggests that, in the same way bravery is not always rewarded, foul acts are not always punished—and that fairness does not necessarily reign in all aspects of the Marine Corps.

PART 2, CHAPTER 10: INTO THE ABYSS

When Company K arrives at their new position, Sledge notices many artillery shells on the ground, concluding that the American soldiers they are relieving must have been met with heavy shelling. When Company K meets the soldiers they are relieving, these men all have tragic, vacant expressions that reveal that, as one soldier tells Sledge, "It's hell up there."

Sledge's assessment of shelling as one of the most terrifying experiences in the war proves justified here, as the men's expressions suggest they are traumatized by what they have undergone. This will prove to be a common feature of Okinawa, where frequent shelling will put Sledge's own sanity to test.

Sledge and his companions then experience the chaos of battle. They run through an open field exposed to shells and machine-gun fire while the army troops attempt to leave their positions unscathed. Although Sledge is terrified, he knows since Peleliu that he can control his fear, and does not experience the same numbing panic as he did the first time. As Snafu and Sledge reach a side of the ridge where they are to dig their gun hole, they learn that two good friends from the company have died. The news fills them with gloom and anger.

Sledge's new self-confidence does not necessarily make him a more skillful fighter, but allows him to retain better control over his own mind—a crucial element in such a brutal, upsetting war. Learning about dead friends serves to accentuate Sledge's anger at the injustice of the war and at the enemy. He now views the Japanese enemy with even less compassion than before.

In the meantime, the men notice that Mac is digging an extremely deep pit. They make fun of him for it, even though it is disrespectful to talk that way to an officer. They all laugh about the contrast between Mac's current fearful attitude and his previous boasting.

Mac's effort to dig a deep gun pit reveals how little practical knowledge he has of war—in which he will probably soon become too tired to dig such large pits, and will also realize they do not ensure his safety. The men's insubordination toward Mac also shows how little trust and respect he has earned from them.

That night, it begins to rain torrentially, and the Marines learn that they will take part in a large attack the next day. The next day, the attack fails, and the Marines are forced to retreat because of the enemy's heavy fire. Sledge remains in his foxhole under heavy rain, hoping that he will not have to serve as a stretcher bearer in the area exposed to Japanese fire. Sledge describes the mud on Okinawa as a terrible source of frustration, making daily life miserable. He remembers seeing pictures of soldiers during World War I suffering from exactly the same dire circumstances, and demonstrating the same disgust.

Sledge's fear of stepping out into an exposed area does not reveal a lack of concern for his companions but, rather, the realistic consequences of duty, in which one can easily be shot while working as a stretcher bearer. Sledge's description of mud on Okinawa suggests that the enemy is not the only source of hatred and anger, but that one's immediate circumstances—the daily routine of life as a Marine in such a harsh environment—can provoke the same effect.

From his foxhole, Sledge witnesses the pathetic sight of four stretcher bearers struggling to save a wounded comrade in the crippling mud, under enemy fire. Two of the stretcher bearers are soon shot, and the remaining two succeed in carrying the Marine on the stretcher in addition to their newly wounded comrades. From their hidden position, Sledge and his comrades cheer at this sight.

The stretcher bearers' plight reveals that launching an assault against the enemy is one's duty just as much as saving one's comrades. There are strong standards of camaraderie and solidarity in the Marines—standards that derive from men's friendships as much as from their obligation to follow the rules.

Company K then learns that they will launch another assault the next day. One of Sledge's friends, overwhelmed by despair at the thought that he might never make it home, comes to speak to him. Remembering the comforting conversation Sledge once had with Hillbilly, he comforts his friend in the same manner. He concludes that such conversations are a crucial, heartwarming aspect of being an infantryman at the front, where only friendship makes life bearable. This time, the attack is partially successful, and Company K is able to move to a quiet area of the front lines before nighttime. Sledge then sees the friend he comforted the night before being carried off on a stretcher, bearing the million-dollar wound that will take him home, far from the war.

Sledge's ability to comfort his friend derives not only from the model of Hillbilly's leadership, but from his own personal experience of fear and anguish. His understanding that all soldiers must share the same conversation underlines that everyone experiences such feelings at some point during combat. The friend's luck at being taken away from combat highlights the absurdity of war, in which some wounds can lead to peace and freedom, whereas others lead to suffering and death, regardless of an individual's skill.

That night, the Japanese launch a large counterattack to isolate the 1st Marine Division and cause confusion in the American organization. Sledge and his fellow companions are forced to stay awake all night, hearing the sound of heavy artillery attacking the 1st Marines ahead of them. However, the 1st Marines succeed in killing the hundreds of Japanese who try to corner the division's flank by arriving through water. They also witness an air attack against the American fleet, with *kamikaze* planes diving into ships.

Nighttime attacks, especially those that include shelling, are particularly harrowing, as they deprive men of precious moments of rest. This situation mirrors Sledge's frustration at boot camp with being woken up during the middle of the night by his officers—a drill he only understood later as realistic practice for life at the front.

PART 2, CHAPTER 11: OF SHOCK AND SHELLS

On May 8, the Marines learn that Nazi Germany has surrendered. However, the men are so focused on their own survival that they meet the news with indifference, convinced that, in this area of the world, the Japanese will defend their land until they are all dead. In the meantime, the mud makes carrying ammunition draining. This activity of wading through knee-deep mud, often while exposed to Japanese fire, is capable of driving exhausted Marines to a state of utter collapse, as it proves exhausting and seemingly unending.

The Americans' indifference toward Nazi Germany's surrender seems absurd, since they are fighting to defeat the Axis powers in this global war. It suggests that at this point they are not fighting for any particular political goal, but for other reasons—the defense of their nation, regardless of the world's political alignment. Their indifference highlights their feeling of isolation from the outside, civilian world, as they are too immersed in their present dangers to see beyond the immediate threats to their lives.

One day, while the men are carrying ammunition, a Japanese machine-gun begins to fire at them and Sledge is able to hide behind some supplies. Redifer then intervenes, throwing a grenade to shield his companions. Although Sledge is terrified of being hit, Redifer's courage forces him to step out of his hiding spot, as he would never forgive himself for letting Redifer get hurt while he is safely hiding away. Concerned with getting the other men across, Redifer then decides to run alone toward the sound of American tanks. He succeeds in convincing them to serve as a buffer between the machine-gun and the Marines, and everyone is able to make it out safely.

Redifer's actions highlight his leadership abilities. Not only does he expose himself to enemy fire, but he takes it upon himself to devise a solution that will shield all of his comrades, thus revealing both bravery and intelligence. His behavior—and Sledge's decision to move himself—reveals that Marines' actions are often influenced by those of their comrades, who give them the strength and motivation necessary to fight in the name of their own survival and for the well-being of their friends.

Although the Marines all realize that Redifer has behaved bravely and saved their lives, a first lieutenant, nicknamed "Shadow," whom everyone hates for being unkempt and irascible, suddenly intervenes. He yells at Redifer for behaving recklessly, arguing that he should not have exposed himself to such direct fire. The men know that receiving a decoration for bravery always depends on the *person* who witnesses the act, rather than the *nature* of the act, but they still cannot believe that this officer would reach such an absurd conclusion when all the men directly involved recognize Redifer's action as courageous.

Shadow displays lack of judgment in two respects: his misunderstanding of Redifer's actions as reckless instead of brave and his inability to understand that berating Redifer will only make him (Shadow) less popular with the infantrymen. This situation demonstrates that the difference between bravery and recklessness might be slight, determined—as Sledge implicitly argues in this case—by its successful outcome: here, the protection of the lives of an entire company.

Sledge describes the debilitating and demoralizing next days and weeks, as the Marines are overwhelmed with fatigue. The Japanese strategy of mutually supportive defensive positions makes the battle seem endless. In addition, although mail usually cheers Sledge up, he receives news that his beloved dog Deacon has died. This brings Sledge to tears as he recalls his memories with this special pet. During this period, although the Marines always try to cheer each other up through jokes, their mood soon fades when they approach the front lines or when they become frustrated to the point of uncontrollable rage by the mud in which they are forced to advance.

Once again, the everyday material and physical circumstances the Marines live in prove just as capable of driving them to insanity as violence. Sledge rarely speaks about his family, and his mention of his dog suggests that he might harbor more longing and sadness for his family than he readily discusses. The Marines' inability to joke at all times reveals how harrowing their current life is—more difficult to bear because of the mud and rain, it seems, than other circumstances on Peleliu.

In the meantime, Mac makes some mistakes in judgment, which Burgin, who has the combat experience of three campaigns, is forced to correct. Sledge also recalls being given some days of respite, in which the men can rest and clean up. Although this helps with their morale, Sledge finds it increasingly difficult to return to the suffering of combat. He notes that the nightmares he had after the war were all related to the idea of going to the front line on Okinawa in May, filling him with terror and dread.

More than any particular experience, it is the accumulation of discomfort and suffering that ultimately upsets Sledge beyond control. His psychological suffering serves as a prelude to his fear that he might go insane and lose touch with reality—in particular, with a world not defined by the endless violence and horror of war.

PART 2, CHAPTER 12: OF MUD AND MAGGOTS

On May 15, while K/3/5 provides support to an attack by 2/5, the attack is so fierce that Company K is told to take cover and wait for instructions. Sledge then learns that "Doc" Caswell is hit and, forgetting about the intense shelling, Sledge suddenly feels sick and decides to run toward his friend. When Sledge sees the state Doc is in, he tells him that he will be OK, but is convinced that his friend is probably going to die. However, Sledge later discovers that Doc actually survived his ordeal and, since then, has remained one of his closest friends from the war.

Sledge's decision to put his own life at risk so that he can speak to his friend mirrors Doc's willingness to sacrifice himself for others. Their ability to remain friends after the war speaks to the intense connection that soldiers develop at the front, where they learn to trust each other not only with their feelings but with their very lives. Sledge will later note that civilian life does not provide such satisfying, intense bonds.

For the next few days, the Marines are exposed to such constant heavy artillery fire that Sledge develops a deep headache. During that period, as Company K moves from fight to fight, Burgin is wounded, although he returns eighteen days later—to the Marines' joy, as Sledge notes that Burgin is an excellent officer.

Sledge's greater concern for Burgin than for Company K's leader Mac suggests that compassion and competence play a much greater role than rank itself in Marines' appreciation of their superiors.

For ten days, the Marines are exposed to rain that turns everything to mud, to the point of making the section of the island they are in, Wana, seem like a lake. Because of this, it becomes difficult to carry the wounded or dead, to receive supplies, to stay in the same foxhole, and to sleep. The exposed cadavers cause flies and maggots to multiply, and dysentery breaks out. When Sledge looks around him, he feels as though he is in hell. The decay and destruction are overwhelming. In particular, the smell of the dead gives him no respite. To cope with these conditions, he tells himself that he is in the middle of a nightmare from which he will soon wake up. Sometimes, he wonders if he would prefer to simply die.

Sledge's comparison of his situation to hell and to a nightmare shows that he is at risk of gradually letting himself fall into a world detached from real life. Although pretending that he is not experiencing reality but a dream beyond human comprehension might keep him from becoming too emotionally overwhelmed by the horror of his surroundings, it also risks turning into an automatic reaction to trauma—one that might actually impede him, in the long run, from healing and staying in touch with reality.

During this period, Company K's commanding officer, the last officer who fought with them on Peleliu, needs to leave the war because of malaria. This severs the last tie the men had to their beloved officer Capt. Haldane, and Sledge recalls this as a demoralizing turning point on Okinawa. When this commanding officer is replaced by the infamous Shadow, everyone in Company K is outraged.

The alternation of excellent and despicable leaders highlights not only the importance of maintaining the men's trust and morale in the midst of combat, but also the fact that, despite undergoing the same rigorous training, Marine officers are extremely different from each other, and not always equally competent.

During a lull in an intense battle, Sledge chats with a Marine everyone calls "Kathy" because of the name of his lover. "Kathy" shows Sledge a picture of the girl, whom Sledge finds beautiful. Sledge tells Kathy that he is in a difficult situation, since Kathy is married but also having an affair with such a beautiful girl. Sledge then realizes that this scene is surreal: they are looking at a picture in the middle of utter destruction, mud, and the fat maggots covering Japanese corpses.

This lighthearted episode provides a window into the Marines' everyday life, as they find ways to joke and talk about a variety of topics besides war. At the same time, it also highlights the utter horror of what the men are experiencing—a world they now accept as their own reality, far from the concerns and comforts of civilian life.

This episode leads Sledge to realize that he no longer fully believes in a world outside of war. He understands that his mind is becoming affected by his immersion in combat. He knows that what was once called "shell shock" in World War I is now known as "combat fatigue," and that any fighter is likely to suffer from it. In that moment, however, he promises himself that he will not let the Japanese "crack [him] up." This pledge gives him a sense of security, allowing him to hold onto this resolve in the moments when he feels his mind drift away, too deeply affected by the violence around him.

Sledge's fear of the enemy gradually transforms into a fear of his own self: his inability to endure the stress and horror of combat. He knows that no amount of external help will suffice in keeping him sane, and that he must remain conscious of his own mental state to make sure that he is not giving in to insanity. His mention of World War I suggests that soldiers throughout history have probably experienced such a feeling. This reveals war as an inglorious, degrading affair, which destroys men's minds and bodies.

During the following attack, after Sledge's conversation with Kathy, Marines shoot an already-wounded enemy soldier who is crawling in the mud. Uncharacteristically, a Marine shows compassion for this man and tells his comrades that the soldier is going to die anyway and that it is not necessary to keep on firing. However, another Marine yells back a him that he is "a goddamn Nip." Reflecting on this situation, Sledge realizes that this foreign soldier's family will be told that he "died gloriously on the field of honor for the emperor," when he actually died on a death-infested, muddy slope for no truly honorable reason.

The Marine's reaction to the Japanese man's suffering shows that, unlike what Sledge thought, there is not necessarily anything shameful about feeling compassion for the enemy—an emotion that most soldiers probably harbor in silence at some point in their combat experience. Although Marines know it is necessary for them to kill the enemy, they do not necessarily condone making them suffer in vain. Sledge's comment reveals his disgust for war, which disguises terrible deeds behind noble formulations.

Sledge mentions that sliding down one of these muddy slopes could drive any Marine to vomit and, potentially, to complete insanity, because slopes are made of mud and the piled-up, rotting dead. At the bottom of the hill, Marines are likely to be covered in thick maggots, crawling in every possible crevice. Sledge notes that most Marines or writers tend not to mention such details, because it is too unbelievable to imagine men living in such conditions for days on end, but that this convinces Sledge that the war is nothing but pure insanity.

Sledge describes a soldier's greater struggle: to resist insanity while living in a world so horrific that it defies human comprehension—a world defined by absurdity and insanity itself. Sledge's willingness to discuss such gruesome topics shows his desire for an honest depiction of war to come to light, perhaps precisely in order to denounce its numerous cruelties.

PART 2, CHAPTER 13: BREAKTHROUGH

As the fighting drags on, Sledge describes increasing cases of combat fatigue: men whose faces go blank, as though they have moved into a different reality from their companions. Their symptoms can include utter detachment, uncontrollable crying, or yelling. Sledge concludes that, of all the miseries of war, shell fire is the most likely to break a Marine's mind. Sledge also recalls men falling sick and suffering—as he did—from what was called "trench foot" in World War I: a state in which one's feet are continuously wet and sore. Luckily, Sledge's feet never become infected.

Once again, in addition to fighting the enemy, the Marines are forced to wage an invisible war against themselves: to protect themselves, that is, against the fragility of their own minds. The fact that Sledge and his comrades suffer from a World War I affliction suggests that, although civilization evolves, war is universally cruel and unfair, regardless of the epoch one is fighting in.

Sledge also describes the surprising experience of receiving letters from former Marines who have been lucky enough to be sent home. Although these soldiers usually express initial relief at the comforts of civilian life, they later begin to show resentment. They describe feeling isolated from ordinary civilians and longing for the companionship that Company K provided. The Marines in combat do not understand such attitudes, since they all hope to be taken out of the war safely. However, Sledge explains that what those former Marines want is to be with people who have experienced what they have gone through—events and circumstances deeply incompatible with anything civilians might imagine war to be.

The former Marines' difficulty to adjust to civilian life foreshadows all the current Marines' probable difficulties to return to ordinary society. Although friendship between Marines makes war tolerable, it also excludes them from the rest of the civilian population, who might not understand how to interact with people who have been so deeply immersed in violence, suffering, and death. These experiences highlight precisely how large the gap is between the Marines' lives at war and their former lives at home.


In the last weeks of May, the Marines suffer heavy shelling in a section of the island called Shuri. After this exhausting ordeal, which keeps Sledge from sleeping, he recalls falling asleep one day on an empty stretcher placed on the ground. It is the first time he is actually able to rest in a long time. However, all of a sudden, he feels that he is being lifted up. Removing the poncho he had used to cover himself, he sees two startled stretcher-bearers carrying him away. When he hears his companions' laughter, he realizes that his friends told the stretcher bearers he was dead. The episode leaves him with an eerie sensation but amuses his companions greatly.

This episode reveals the Marines' desire to laugh at even the most serious events, such as the death of their friend. Laughter allows them to cope with the stress and violence around them, and also creates a tight-knit community in which members learn to accept teasing and jokes as a form of bonding, not as insults. Sledge's unnerving sensation, however, suggests that he is distraught by the possibility that he might actually die someday—and that he could rightfully be carried away on a stretcher, like he almost was.


At the end of May, Company K learns that the Marines have taken over Shuri Castle, an important strategic landmark that marks a turning point in the battle. There, the Marines raised the Confederate flag in celebration of this victory. The Southerners in Company K, including Sledge, cheer enthusiastically, while Americans from other areas of the country feel hostile or indifferent to this event.

Sledge's celebration of the Confederate flag—a symbol of the American Civil War made controversial by the Confederacy's support of slavery, and the Ku Klux Klan;s later adoption of it as a banner—does not necessarily imply that Sledge is racist, but does highlight his feeling of Southern pride. The existence of separate, segregated African-American Marine units in World War II, however, suggests that the Marine Corps was far from being at the forefront in the fight against racism and discrimination.

One day, on the eve of a battle in Shuri that all Marines know is of crucial importance, Sledge digs his foxhole straight into a Japanese corpse full of maggots. An NCO tells Sledge to keep on digging anyway, because of instructions about the specific locations for foxholes, but Sledge angrily retorts that he cannot possibly do so. Duke, a lieutenant who was Company K's sections on Peleliu, arrives and tells Sledge to dig in a slightly different spot instead. Deeply affected by the sight of the corpse, Sledge does not understand how he succeeded in not vomiting during this experience.

The NCO's instruction for Sledge to keep on digging shows his lack of intelligence, sensitivity, and compassion, as he does not understand that a Marine cannot possible live in a foxhole built inside a rotting human body. By contrast, Duke remains lucid and aware of the psychological issues at play. His ability to listen to Sledge emphasizes the importance of compassion and communication in good leadership.

Later, when Sledge's foxhole buddy slips and falls in the mud, the man's body becomes entirely covered in maggots. This Marine, a Gloucester veteran that Sledge knows intimately, almost loses his mind, finding that this experience is too much for him to bear. Sledge is so affected by these events that he finds himself unable to concentrate when Duke shows the Marines the plans for the next day's attack on the map—a uncharacteristic decision by an officer, as officers never share the details of military strategy with mere infantrymen. Sledge and his companions know that they have reached a historic juncture and will participate in an epic battle, but Sledge, still affected by his friend's fall in the mud, regrets not having the concentration necessary to ask questions or listen to the dialogue between the officer and his men.

Sledge and his friend's reaction to being so close to rotten bodies and maggots reveals that they are losing their patience and their endurance for the horrors of war, since they cannot even concentrate when they are given the unique opportunity to understand the strategic development of the battle. Duke's willingness to take the time to show the map to his men highlights his uniquely human qualities, such as his passion for military strategies and his capacity to see his subordinates as equals capable of the same emotions and intelligence as any officer.

PART 2, CHAPTER 14: BEYOND SHURI

During the next battle, the Marines take twenty Japanese soldiers prisoner. A scuttle ensues when one of the prisoners places himself in the middle of the path on which the Marines are advancing. Sledge assumes that the soldier's action can be explained by the shame he must feel at surrendering, since surrender is utterly shameful for the Japanese. However, this attempt to disturb the Marines' advance only breeds greater rage and resentment toward the Japanese enemy.

The Japanese soldier's shame at being made prisoner underlines the cruel pressure he must feel in his own army, where he would be encouraged to die rather than surrender. This pressure to give in to self-sacrifice partly explains the Japanese soldiers' ferocity. This man's actions, however, only seems to confirm to Sledge and his companions that the Japanese are incapable of following rules of good behavior.

One day, during a period of sporadic opposition, Sledge walks up to an old Okinawan woman sitting in front of her house. Although Sledge is initially suspicious of her behavior, she tells him that there are no hidden Japanese soldiers there and shows him a wound on her abdomen, which is causing her much pain. Sledge realizes that she must have been wounded for a long time, for her wound is severely infected. The woman begs Sledge to kill her on the spot, to put her out of her misery. However, Sledge quickly goes to look for a corpsman, who agrees to try to help the woman.

This scene highlights the injustice of war on civilian populations, who find themselves at the mercy of a war they have not chosen. It also shows that, despite his emotional exhaustion, Sledge is still capable of reasoning ethically and feeling compassion for people who need his help. His attitude reveals that, in an ideal scenario, if he has the option of killing or saving someone, he would rather save them.

As Sledge and the corpsman walk back, they hear a shot and notice a Marine emerge from the hut. The man, a young, innocent-looking Marine, tells them he just killed the Japanese woman because she asked him to. Sledge then loses his temper and tells him that they should only shoot at people who shoot back—that they are here "to kill Nips, not *old women*." An NCO arrives and, as soon as he learns what happened, insults the young Marine, who is visibly embarrassed. Sledge does not know if the man was ever disciplined for shooting the old woman in cold blood.

Sledge takes his moral responsibilities seriously, holding to the belief that he should only kill people who are intent on killing him back. However, the young Marine, too, probably thought he was acting morally by relieving an old, innocent woman from her suffering. The blurring of the line between morality and cruelty, in this situation, thus depends on the set of ethical rules and assumptions that one chooses to follow.

In early June, the seemingly endless rain finally stops, and Sledge is able to wash his feet, which are almost bleeding all over. He finds instant relief from putting on dry socks, though it takes months for his feet to heal. Sent to a position in reserve, the Marines are able to enjoy relative rest, with new rations and a quieter routine.

In the same way that physical discomfort can prove as unbearable to soldiers as the fear of death, moments of peace and quiet and the mere relief *from physical hardship can bring joy proportional to the intensity of the discomfort itself.*

One day, Sledge and a fellow mortarman are sent on a routine mission to give someone information about the unit's supply. Although the landscape is peaceful, the two men are suddenly attacked by a hidden machine-gunner on their way back. They begin to despair and soon realize that their only solution is to stay hidden behind an old ticket booth until darkness, when they will be able to slip out. However, after a few hours, another group of Marines, worried about not seeing their companions return, arrive and kill the Japanese soldier, allowing Sledge and his companion to return safely.

This episode underlines the unpredictable emergence of violence in war, which can arise anytime and anywhere, as well as the network of solidarity that defines Marine Corps units, in which men do not hesitate to put their lives in danger in order to save their comrades. Once again, Sledge is confirmed in his understanding that his companions are reliable combat buddies, to whom he can entrust his very life.

During the next few days, Sledge takes part in a seven-day battle on Kunishi Ridge whose viciousness reminds him of Peleliu. There, he sees an officer crying uncontrollably, unable to go on, and also witnesses a Marine saving a soldier who went insane and almost exposed himself to Japanese fire, condemning him to certain death. By the end of this battle, Sledge learns that only about twenty percent of the original Company K remains.

Sledge's descriptions of other people's mental breakdowns and moments of insanity show how strong—and lucky—he must be to maintain his lucidity in such circumstances, which so many others can no longer bear. The fact that so few original members of Company K are still alive also emphasizes the grief that he will be left with after the war.

PART 2, CHAPTER 15: END OF THE AGONY

The successful battle of Kunishi marks the end of organized Japanese resistance on Okinawa. Sledge's company is soon relieved by Marine replacements, who seem unprepared for battle on Okinawa, as many of them were sent to the war directly after having barely a few weeks of training.

The fact that so many unprepared recruits die in battle seems to confirm Sledge's argument that rigorous training has played a crucial role in his and his companions' ability to stay alive for so long.

During the days before the final securing of the island, the Marines fight scattered groups of Japanese soldiers and capture others, as the enemy knows that they are no longer going to be able to win. On June 21st, Marines learn that the island is officially secured. However, after celebrating this event by eating two fresh oranges and looking out at a beautiful sunset on the sea, Sledge and his companions receive the instructions to move north, where they will need to kill any remaining enemies and bury all the enemy dead.

Sledge's inability to fully savor the joy of having won the battle proves once again that violence during the war seems utterly endless, incapable of giving the men rest. The Japanese's ferocious attitude shows their desperation, as they know not only that they have lost this battle, but that the Americans are now free to move onto the Japanese mainland after invading the island of Okinawa.

Sledge and his companions cannot comprehend such orders, which they find unacceptable after all the fighting they have been through. For the first time, Sledge even sees some of his veteran comrades stand up to officers, defying their orders. In the end, however, the Marines are forced to throw dirt over the enemy dead, while cursing their superiors.

Sledge's comrades are here disobedient, despite their usual excellent discipline and rigor—these men truly have endured too much. Although they are willing to fight for their country, they want their dignity to be respected, and not to be sent on trivial and needlessly dangerous tasks.

After a few days, Sledge and a friend are finally able to rest in a beautiful, wooded area overlooking a field. They find the scene magnificent and unreal. There, they finally begin to relax. However, an NCO suddenly appears, telling them to move out, because this area is off limits to enlisted men. Sledge and his friend cannot believe that they are being forced to leave this area when they are not even close to the other officers. They find it hypocritical to note how friendly the officers were barely a few days ago, when the enlisted men were still fighting with them.

Once again, the officers' orders seem to diminish the infantrymen's worth, as they treat them as tools they can use to complete any task, however ignoble. Sledge is outraged not to be treated as a human being deserving of praise and dignity after all the hardships his company has suffered. This episode suggests that, despite the positive atmosphere among men in the same company, officers can sometimes abuse their rank to promote their own comfort, at the expense of equally deserving soldiers.

Suddenly, though, they all hear a rifle shot and see a Marine fall dead, shot by his own buddy. The buddy explains that his friend dared him to shoot, believing that his rifle was unloaded. The buddy's shock and horror at having killed his best friend is evident on his face. Sledge explains that this man later went through a general court-martial, but that his greatest punishment is undoubtedly to have caused the death of his best friend, simply for playing with a loaded weapon.

This episode proves highly ironic. Despite having survived the war, a Marine ultimately dies as a result of failing to respect the most basic rules they all learned in boot camp: never to assume a gun is unloaded and never to point a gun at something that is not a target. This tragic episode again shows that even silly mistakes can lead to death when they involve dangerous weapons.

Finally, Sledge is sent in a small group to guard some of the company's gear and, as he moves farther from the battlefield, finds himself back in civilization, as the Americans have built modern roads and tent camps where the Marines once fought. As friends return from the hospital, fully recovered or bearing the effect of severe wounds, Sledge realizes how many of his companions are gone. Of the men Sledge knows, only twenty-six veterans from Peleliu have survived. Sledge notes that, overall, Marine casualties amount to around one-third of the Japanese's.

Sledge's mention of the high number of Japanese casualties highlights the Marines' strategic efficacy. At the same time, Sledge knows that every man who died was a unique human being, and that every loss is saddening. This is apparent in his grief at seeing Company K as such a small group, indicative of the many friends and companions he has lost over the course of the war.

On August 8, as the Marines are relaxing, they learn that the first atomic bomb was dropped on Japan. The war finally ends on August 15, 1945. Although the Marines feel deeply relieved, they are also amazed at the fact that the Japanese finally surrendered and remain in shock, as they remember their dead friends. Shocked and quiet instead of ecstatic, most Marines attempt to grasp what the future might look like, in a world without war.

Sledge does not discuss political-military decisions such as the American dropping of atomic bombs in Japan on August 6 and 9. Although he is usually sensitive to the plight of civilians, he does not reflect on the injustice that an atomic bomb would mean to them. Instead, he is so overwhelmed by his personal experience of the war that he immediately struggles to understand what new role he could play in ordinary society.

Sledge later spends four months on occupation duty in Beijing and finally returns home. Although he is overjoyed to go home, he also finds the separation from his companions painful. K/3/5 has become his home in the most extreme circumstances, allowing him to form a lifelong, family bond with his companions.

Sledge's sadness at leaving his companions mirrors many former Marines' complaints about being isolated in civilian life, without the support of their war-time friends. Although Sledge does not mention this explicitly, it is likely that he, too, will struggle to become comfortable in society again.

Sledge notes that it is ironic that, in such an elite company, so few members received decorations for bravery. He concludes that the men demonstrated courage so often that no one noticed. In reflecting that almost everyone in his company received the Purple Heart, Sledge is grateful to have been one of the few men who survived.

Sledge once again suggests that official descriptions of war or recognitions of bravery are at odds with the reality on the battlefield, in which so many men take part in courageous actions on a daily basis. Therefore, his pride at being part of such a group of people is not limited by outside recognition.

Sledge concludes his narrative by insisting on how savage and wasteful war is. He explains that the only aspects that made life bearable were his companions' solidarity and courage, which has taught him loyalty and love. He argues that, until the world is free from inter-country domination, it will always be necessary for men like his companions in Company K to sacrifice themselves for their country. He recounts a frequent trope among troops: "If the country is good enough to live in, it's good enough to fight for," agreeing that privilege necessarily entails a sense of responsibility.

Sledge's conclusion does not attempt to diminish the horrors of war. Rather, he argues that moral behavior involves fighting violence in any way possible—and, if necessary, through war and violence. Therefore, instead of debating the ethical or unethical nature of such means *to fight injustice, he concentrates on the objective of the fight itself: to defend one's beloved home and bring peace and stability to civilians.*

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