

With The Old Breed

By

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With The Old Breed by Eugene Sledge is a startling account of World War II and was based on his personal experiences as he served as a mortar man with Kilo Company, Third Battalion, Fifth Marines on Peleliu and Okinawa. These battles were known for their bloody and savage fighting. Private First Class Sledge gives a straightforward approach, illustrating the climate, conditions, and describes in detail the actions of the Marines as they fought the Japanese.

After enlisting in the Marine Corps, Sledge goes to boot camp in San Diego. Corporal Doherty, Sledge's drill instructor, amplified everything it meant to be a Marine and set a positive example for the recruits of his platoon. He demonstrated the attitude, character, strength, endurance, enthusiasm, experience, and determination of a true professional. He taught his platoon the basics of being a Marine. Weapons handling, shooting, marching, and basic discipline were emphasized throughout the entirety of boot camp. Sledge would use this basic Marine Corp knowledge as he furthered his training and preparation for combat at Camp Elliott. Arriving at Camp Elliott, Private First Class Sledge had to make a decision about which weaponry he wanted to be assigned and He chose 60 mm mortars. A Non Commissioned Officer taught Sledge his entire knowledge of how to effectively operate his weapon, assemble and disassemble, and how to strike the enemy when the opportunity came. For Sledge, the opportunity to apply his training in combat came earlier than anticipated.

On September 15, 1944 the 1st Marine Division landed on Peleliu. Peleliu was a defensive stronghold for the Japanese, who were entrenched in caves and waiting for the attack. The 10,000 Japanese covered every square inch of Peleliu with interlocking fields

of fire and fought using a new defensive style of fighting. The defense-in-depth tactic would be used to cover more areas and inflict many more casualties than previous strategies. In previous campaigns, a Marine landing would be met with the bonsai attack, in which the Japanese would charge in a costly frontal assault. The defense in depth tactic was now used with greater effect.

Sledge's accounts of the battle are a great illustration to the actual battlefield. With his description of the fight, the reader can imagine the nervousness, adrenaline, and fear of the men. His account details the sound of explosions, the whistling of rounds flying down range, and the cries of dying and injured Marines. From the beach assault to making landfall, Sledge carefully describes every footstep. Sledge begins to learn that war changes a man forever. He witnesses a dead Japanese soldier, cut open like an animal carcass at slaughter and how a combat veteran comes upon the scene and without hesitation begins to pilfer the personal belongings of the dead man. Sledge is astonished at the indifference to a dead human being. He would become hardened later on as the battles became bloodier and the loss of friends weigh deeper on his mind. The Marine Corps basic disciplines helped Sledge overcome his mental and physical exhaustion and emotional pain to maintain his focus of fighting and survival. Sledge leaves Peleliu a very different man than when he arrived.

As the American forces drew closer to the Japanese home islands, the tougher the fighting was expected to be. The Japanese were expected to defend their homeland using every able Japanese soldier to prevent the United States from winning the war in the Pacific. The fighting became tougher as the strategy of the defense-in-depth with interlocking fields of fire was refined and the number of defenders increased.

After Peleliu, the Men of Kilo Company, prepared for their next campaign on the Japanese island of Okinawa. As the day of the assault drew closer, fear and worry came over them as they contemplated the difficult fight ahead. Okinawa was to become an even more difficult fight for the Marines. It was even tougher than previous campaigns in that it lasted longer and involved larger numbers of men fighting, more ordinance expended, resulting in more death and destruction than any other battle of the Pacific.

The battle for Okinawa was the ultimate test of the fortitude of men in combat. Their resolve was tested daily as the fight consumed men and energy at a rate never experienced in fighting in the Pacific. For the infantry units, the losses were hard to comprehend, when compared to what are considered heavy losses by today's standards. Sledge describes the challenges of climate as the Marines deal with cold, rain and heat, all the while engaging the enemy in fierce combat. The sustained exposure to the stresses of combat, push the men to their limits and beyond as they fight for control of the island.

This book reminds all Marines the importance of the basic fundamentals of being a United States Marine. Eugene Sledge constantly referred to the necessities of personal hygiene habits, rifle cleaning and safe weapons handling, and maintaining his uniform. To have an enlisted Marine Private First Class give his perspective of combat through his own eyes and how he endured such nightmarish conditions is something everyone should know about.

I feel every Marine should read With the Old Breed. As a Corporal of Marines, I found the book to be motivating, in that it reminded me of the sacrifices of my predecessors and the responsibility I have in maintaining that standard. Throughout all the turmoil that surrounded Sledge's life, he was able to keep his sanity along with a

compassionate optimism for humanity. No one truly knows how he or she will handle combat until they actually experience it. Sledge's account gives an idea of the limits to which a man can go. I found the accounts of Sledge's experiences to be instrumental in my understanding of the battles of the Pacific and the Marine Corps' contribution to the defeat of the Japanese.