

## Fighting at the Front

Goal: Students will gain an understanding of the harsh realities of warfare for the soldiers who participated in it.

Objectives:

- 1) Students will read a firsthand account of combat.
- 2) Students will recognize the tone of the writing and summarize the soldiers' feelings about warfare.
- 3) Students will explore their preconceptions about warfare.
- 4) Students will describe warfare in their own words.

Many young soldiers entered the Armed Forces not knowing the realities of warfare. They were anxious to serve their country and to protect their families, friends, and the American way of life. They quickly found that battle was not glorious, but rather was full of danger, discomfort, and death. Soldiers faced new environments – like the jungles of the Pacific Islands – and endured the emotional struggles that accompanied the loss of their fellow soldiers.

Have the students read the following account by an Appleton soldier of Company D in the 32<sup>nd</sup> Division of the Wisconsin National Guard. Men of Company D fought the Japanese in New Guinea. As a class, locate New Guinea on a world map. Company D flew from Port Moseby over the Owen Stanley Mountains to Buna in December, 1942. Buna is located on the Papua Peninsula of the Island of New Guinea. The peninsula is made up of swamp and jungle and is four miles wide. Company D landed at Dobodura near Buna during the wet season. In addition to battling the enemy, the men fought giant rats, leeches, man-eating crocodiles, venomous (poisonous) snakes, and swarms of flies in the hot and humid climate. Company D was able to help other American and Australian soldiers push Japanese soldiers out of Buna by the end of January, 1943.

Following their reading (as a class or individually) of the account, students should respond in their journals.

Here are some questions to prompt their responses:

- 1) What was combat like for this soldier?
- 2) Do you think it was what he expected?
- 3) Was there anything that you expected to read in this account of war that was not included? Please explain.
- 4) How would you describe the experience of combat after reading this account?

## A True Account of War . . .

We left from Ward's Drome at Port Moresby on Christmas morning, 1942. We had the jungle-died fatigues with which we had left Camp Cable, and we had exchanged our heavy .30s and 81-mortars for light weapons. The mortar platoon had gone up the day before, but the two machine gun platoons went together . . .

We flew over the Owen Stanley range in Boston bombers of the RAAF, about 45 minutes from Port Moseby to Dobodura . . . After landing at Dobodura, as usual we sat around waiting (in this case for the rest of the contingent to arrive) and finally started up the track for Buna.

It was a hot day – in that part of the world, of course, it was the beginning of summer. We made a fairly slow march, reaching a small village (either Herahamburi or Ango) for the noon break ...

We got as far as Government Gardens that night. We were ordered not to undo our bedrolls, so we just took off our equipment and lay down in the mud. The artillery, located some distance behind us, began firing over our heads on the [Japanese] positions at Buna. I had heard that passing shells sounded like railroad cars, and I found that it was true – though a noisier set of railroad cars I had never heard. The sound of those passing shells was the last thing I heard on Christmas, 1942.

Late [the next] afternoon we pushed through the coconut grove, then over to Entrance Creek. We were warned to keep our heads down ([an unnecessary] warning if I ever heard one) and began moving northward in the creek bed.

After going three or four hundred yards, we were halted. There in water up to our knees, we stayed until dark. I was pretty indignant about having to sit in the water, but as it turned out, I stayed in water most of the time for the next week. I was lucky because those who got out of the water got shot at pretty frequently.

Just after we got into position, Lt. Sternfeld sent me back down to the company C.P. (Command Post) beside Entrance Creek to guide the communications Corporal out with our phone line ... [When I] arrived safely at the C.P. Miller was waiting for me, and we began stringing the wire out along the trail.

The artillery south of us had begun shelling Buna Mission, and about every third shell seemed to be bursting short, directly above us. Probably we weren't in such danger as we thought, but it was our first experience with artillery fire and we could distinctly hear the shell fragments whizzing through the air.

To make matters worse, we ran out of wire when we were about halfway out to our platoon position. The corporal allowed as how we'd have to spend the night there, and promptly crawled into the foxhole with some riflemen beside the trail. When I tried to find a friendly hole, however, it turned out they were all full.

I stuck it out for awhile, lying in the trail with the shell fragments whizzing all around but a little

of that went a long way. I finally told Miller that I wasn't particularly happy, so he called company headquarters and got permission for me to go back to Entrance Creek. I crawled back to the stream, nestled down in the water, and dropped off finally into my first fitful sleep in combat . . .

By the time I started back along the trail, the sun was high, and in the tall bunai grass it was unbearably hot. I began suffering from heat exhaustion before I had covered 50 feet. At that point I made the mistake of resorting to my canteen, and I was so parched that I half drained it. Promptly I passed out.

I couldn't have been unconscious too long. When I work up, lying on my back in the middle of the trail, an aerial dog-fight was going on above me. It looked like the sky was full of zeroes [a type of Japanese combat plane] and P-38s, and in my semi-conscious and depressed condition it looked like our side was getting licked. [Actually, according to Milner, p.278, fourteen of the 56 [Japanese] planes were shot down and only one of the 20 P-38s.]

After resting and recuperating for an hour or so, I crawled back to the company C.P. Oh, how wonderful to get into that cool shade and sink into the cool water!

I stayed at the company C.P. until the evening of December \_\_\_\_\_. During all that time, I didn't carry a single message to the platoon, but rather made myself handy around the place. The most exciting adventure I had during that period was one night that I helped carry a wounded man on a litter back to the aid station. That was a pretty rough go, splashing along the creek bed and stumbling over roots in the inky blackness – but I was mighty glad I wasn't on that litter . . .

Although I had no particular desire to go out where the shooting was, I finally concluded that Lt. Sternfeld had just forgotten about me and that I wasn't really accomplishing anything at the company C.P. so when [Private] Dean came back to the C.P. on the afternoon of Dec. 31, I returned with him to the platoon position.

We went through Government Gardens (walking where we had crawled five days before, then through a swamp, and then we came to the edge of the coconut grove along the coast. What a sight! The entire area was pocked with shell holes, the trees were blasted and literally covered with bullet holds, and in general the whole thing had an untidy appearance. The peculiar fibrous structure of the coconut palms made each bullet or shell-fragment hole look like it was still being made, and I reflected uncomfortably on how many holes might still be made in them.

“From here on, we run for it – just follow me,” Dean said. I was quite ready to follow instructions.

We ran out, in short spurts, stopping in shell holes every few yards. I hadn't realized we were so far out, but by the time we jumped into Dean's home foxhole, we were right on the beach.