

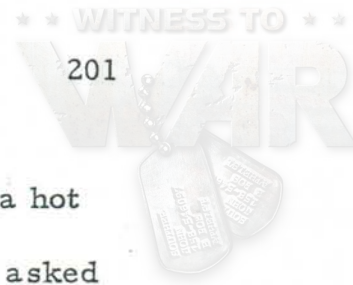


## CHAPTER NINE

### LOVE COMPANY

The old water-cooled 50 cal. platoons had been done away with while I was in school. I was assigned to L Company (Love Company) Third Battalion, Third Regiment, as Weapons Platoon leader under Captain John Kovacs. Kovacs was a handsome man with a big, black handlebar moustache and jet black hair. I reported for duty to his office tent. He had a visitor, Captain John Monks, his bosom buddy and an author who had written the book and movie, Brother Rat. After reporting, I stepped outside the tent and paused to light a cigarette. I heard Monks say, "Now by god, there's a killer if I ever saw one!" I went to my quarters, broke out my mirror and studied myself carefully. I thought I looked more like a lover.

When I took command of my platoon, glory be, there were most of my old 50 cal. boys. This was unusual as it was the policy to put new officers with unacquainted men if possible. It is sometimes hard to call a man "sir" when you've been drinking buddies for months or years. This was impressed on me the first time I stood O.D. watch. I was running bed check and noticed a chink of light coming



out of a crack in a tent. I pulled back the flap and there was a hot blackjack game in progress. To be a nice guy and all that, I asked if I could sit in for a few hands. Besides, I wanted to play. After a couple of hands, one of my old friends, Arabasz, was dealing and I said, "Hit me with a six," as that's what I needed to win.

Arabasz said, "Well, fuck you--(long pause)--sir!" That broke the tension and we all roared.

Wiggins was a little older than the rest of us. He was a professional marine with several years service. Shortly after I took over the platoon, Wiggins was about half-soused, and as I approached, I heard him say to the others, "Stand by, here comes my boy."

I told him I wanted to talk to him in my tent. In the tent I said to him, "Listen, you son of a bitch, you're not fucking with a ninety-day wonder. If I ever hear you make a remark again like you just did, I'll pinch your head off like a grape. Is that clear?" I had no more trouble with Wiggins and he was always what a gunnery sergeant should be.

Arabasz was a tough, solid-built man of Lebanese extraction, or so he claimed. He had been a circus performer and amazed us all by sewing buttons to his bare skin, chewing up light bulbs and



razor blades and doing other impossible feats. He was rather quiet but always had the look on his face of someone about to pull a big joke. I picked Arabasz for promotion to corporal because he was an intelligent natural leader, and I never had cause to regret the decision.

Another corporal I picked was a lean skinny kid from some town in Georgia. Batt didn't have much formal education but he was natively intelligent and a quick learner. I received much criticism when I promoted him, but he sure proved to be a leader, especially in combat.

I don't know how Chick Zook got in the Marine Corps. He was only fourteen and not a big fourteen at that. He loved the Corps and we all kept his secret. Sometimes I felt fatherly towards him and would try to ease up on him, but he would have no part of that. One day we were struggling up a big hill, and I said to him as he lugged a machine gun, "Want me to spell you on that gun?"

"Lieutenant," he snarled, "I'll carry my own goddamn gun!" I let him alone after that.

My staff sergeant was Murawski, my old friend from the Panama days. What Ski didn't know about mortars hasn't been



written yet. He always had some quiet remark ready for every situation. He had a name for everyone. In the battalion H. Q. was an officer that was crabby and sour as hell. Ski always called him "Laughing Boy." When no one was around he usually called me a son of a bitch.

One of my guys was named York, a relative of the famous Sergeant York of World War I.

One guy I missed was Corporal Martin. I don't know where he got to after the 50 cal. platoon was disbanded.

As every place has, we had our songsters on Samoa. Especially when we were loaded on trucks for a boring ride. Ours was a former cowboy from Texas named "Smitty." He had a voice as big as his native state. Whenever the trucks rolled you could hear Smitty singing something like --

I saw an old cowpuncher  
a comin' down the trail,  
with his peter in his hand  
and a cow by the tail!

-- and the rest of the truck would chorus --

Come a ki yi yippie yi yay, yi yay,  
come a ki yi yippie yi yay!



He knew a million verses to each song.

My platoon was a hell of a bunch of jungle bunnies. Your senses develop when you've lived there awhile, the eyes, ears and nose. We did things we could never do in the noise and pollution of civilization. Once we were out on a three-day jungle problem. We stepped out of the jungle onto a jeep trail that had been built around the island coast for defense purposes. My men sniffed the air and exclaimed in unison, "Ah, women!" I found out later that a detachment of nurses had stopped at Pago Pago and had been given a jeep ride around the island. They had passed the point where we entered the road a good two hours earlier. They had left a faint trace of perfume and other once-familiar aromas on the damp jungle trail.

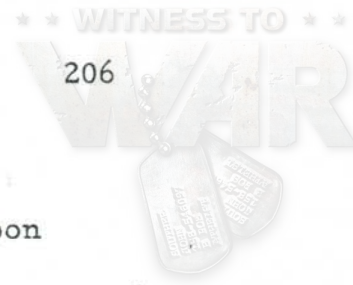
Captain Kovacs was a dark, swashbuckling guy who easily could have played Clark Gable's role in Gone With The Wind, just by being himself. He was a brilliant commander and his exuberant manner was contagious. He always assembled his officers and N. C. O.'s in his headquarters while he attended the company commanders' meetings. Never will I forget him striding towards the tent, flinging back the flaps and saying, "Okay, gentlemen, here's the latest hot poop!" When you left the meeting, you always had the feeling that the most important thing in the world was to carry out those orders.



And what talent to carry them out. One of his lieutenants, Arthur "Red" Hendershaw, was a tiger of a little man who would tackle a mad elephant. He was stocky and energetic as a bouncing ball. His men loved him. Lieutenant Luke Morris was a soft-spoken but talkative Georgia boy. He was a peach-fuzzed lieutenant, akin to Beetle Bailey's "Lieutenant Fuzz," but was very steady and reliable.

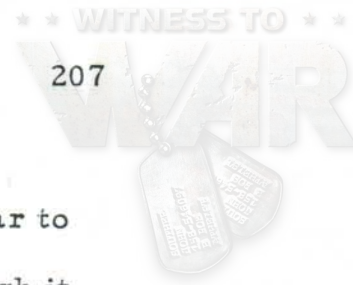
Then there was Lieutenant John O'Neil. John was an immaculate man in body, mind, heart and soul. He seldom swore, but when he did, he was either hilariously funny or you knew damn well not to push him any farther. On one of our rare afternoons off, I was lying on my bunk, studying a huge lizzard on the wooden frame that held up our tent roof. John was finishing a letter to his beloved wife. He was sitting at the table, with the pencil eraser between his teeth and his thoughts 10,000 miles away with her. As I watched that lizzard, it suddenly began to strain and it dropped feces the size of a grape-- smack in the middle of John's letter. John calmly looked up and said, "Why, you goddamn lizzard!" I rolled and howled.

There were few days or nights on Samoa without a rain squall. The rain was always warm and you dried off quickly. We became so accustomed to operating in rain that, when it started to pour, no one would even look up. But O'Neil always said the same thing



about the rain. He would shoulder his pack, pick up his weapon and say, "Well, the heavens are pissing on the Third Marines again."

Our ranks were now being victimized by two very bad diseases common in the Pacific jungles. One was a glandular disease caused by the filaria mosquito. There are three stages, filiariasis, lymphatitis, and elephantiasis. I saw old natives in the final stage whose forearm flesh hung past the fingertips, feet that looked like they weighed fifty pounds and scrotums as large as a big water bucket. Some even had babies sleep on them to ease the pain. These were not reassuring sights when you knew you had the first stage of the disease. The Samoans called it mu mu, which means "the Red." We about all got it and came to be known as the "Mu Mu Regiment." Everyone kidded about getting a ticket home with the mu mu, but no one did until they were in such bad shape they were forced to leave. Our company executive officer, "Bones" Turnbull, was a tall old Georgia boy from the same hometown as my Corporal Batt. Bones had a slight speech impediment. Whenever he was asked how he was, he would always answer, "Well, I think my balls are a swehwin." This became the stock answer among us. Ask anyone how they were and you got, "Balls are swehwin."



The other disease was the "yaws," which was similar to syphilis and was treated the same way, or so I heard, although it wasn't a venereal disease. They said if you had the yaws, you were immune to syphilis and vice versa. With the advent of penicillin, yaws was about conquered on Samoa, but you about had to lasso the afflicted to make them take the shots. Yaws ate holes in your body and made body hair fall out. This led to further complications. Bald people were rather discriminated against, about as you would be in the States if you were known to have V. D. The marines took advantage of this. They would yell at some shapely lass, "Hey, kingie (girl), no hair on the mi mi (private organ)!"

She usually would flip back her lava lava and point out your mistake and was likely to say, "Eat shit, maline," which was the standard retort of the innocent Samoans.

Whenever I had some free time, I scrounged a few cans of salmon, mackerel, or spam, grabbed a jeep, and went to visit the High-talking Chief of Vaitogi. I usually managed to get there for a delicious meal and then the chief and his wife got out the cards to play cutthroat pinochle, a penny a point. As time went by, he began to occasionally mention that I should quit the Marines when my time was up and come back to live on Tutuila. He even suggested that I go over the hill. He said he knew an island where they'd never find





me. I wouldn't do it, but it sure was a tempting thought.

Samoa was changing. The girls were wearing their lava lava up under their arms now, and their fathers would rather have a can of salmon than go fishing. We marines began to itch for more action. It was coming. We got orders to embark.

I took a jeep to Vaitogi and we played our last pinochle game. Then the chief and I took a walk along the deserted beach. He tried one last time to persuade me to go A. W. O. L., to no avail. Then he bowled me over--

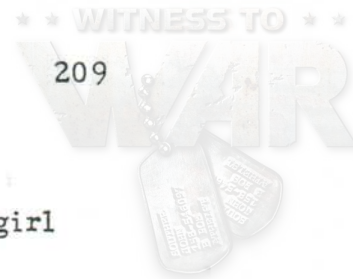
"I'm an American," he said.

"What?"

"I'm from the States. I deserted the Navy in 1917."

Holy Toledo! The man sure had fooled me. His skin was bronzed and he had always spoken pidgin English.

The Third Marines saddled up and marched in full combat gear seven miles to the ships in Pago Pago Harbor. It was quite a sight, with the men all swinging along and their girlfriends crying and clinging to them all the way. Many romances came to light that hadn't been known about before.



One of my buddies had married a beautiful Samoan girl under Samoan law, which was illegal at the time. Now she was pregnant. I heard him tell her he would return for her. She replied, "You pepello (liar). You leave--I have little marine--and I never see you again."

When we got to the ship I conducted a thorough search for women before the gangplank was lifted. After that train deal in North Carolina, I was taking no chances.