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Combat

A Seabee's "Guadalcanal Diary"

Eli Merchant was a 41 year old self-trained electrician working at the Bankhead Mines in Jasper, Alabama, when the war broke out. He answered his country's call August 10, 1942, and joined the Seabee's. Assigned to the 24th Naval Construction Battalion, he was soon in some of the Pacific's hot spots.

1942

December 12 - We arrived in New Caledonia. Was on USS Mt. Vernon for 11 days. The crossing was uneventful. There was no trouble. Pacific was calm. The biggest thrill of all came when just out of New Caledonia harbor several planes met us. Flew alongside of the ship.

December 13- Now will begin a few days on New Caledonia. We moved to our new camp. There is nothing but woods. Nothing is built.

December 17- We began erecting tents. In two days we had everything under shelter. The chow has not been so good, but is getting better. We had hot cakes and sausage for breakfast this morning.

December 24- Christmas Eve. Sure don't feel like it. Folks back home are having fun now. Too hot here. Walked down to the beach. Went back by the Mission. The moon is beautiful again. Think I will climb that mountain soon.

December 25- Christmas morning. Sure is hot. Have been to church. Heard a good sermon. Had turkey for dinner.

December 26- Made a trip to Noumea. What a town. Quaint old French town. Saw a funeral procession pass. Could not buy anything. Nothing to sell.

24th
N.C.B.



1943

January 3- Sunday. Am off today. Went to church. Heard Pop Gordon preach. Climbed the mountain. Sat on top (and) wrote a letter home.

February 20- We continue to work on dock. Catch the worst end of everything. Last night we worked hard without anything to eat. Our officers don't care as long as they live in ease. They are a bunch of cheap skates.

February 22- This is the birthday of the father of our country. He led the fight for our liberty. Personally (I) am glad to be among them.

March 2- Took an unjust bawling from a 90 day wonder (Braid) at docks. Would love to meet him in private life.

March 20- Worked on Pier 2. Our battalion has really done some work since landing here.

March 25- Last night we had a amateur show. Some of the boys can sing real good. We hear we are leaving soon. Don't know (for sure). Maybe move to a better place or a worse place. Anyway we have been here long enough.



Eli Merchant

Walked down to the beach and gathered some shells.

April 12- Packing for something. Don't know for what. May be moving or may not be.

April 23- For the last 9 days have been training from a ship. We went over the sides 2 and 3 times each day on nets into landing boats. Camped on the beach 3 nights (and) lay out in the woods. Made actual landings with equipment. This is really hard work.

Today when we came back to the old camp we were all glad to get back. There is something about this life. You are always glad to get back where you were before. What a strange frame of mind you have when you live in a seabag.

April 26-27- Back to this old drilling and mustering. Just about as soon they take us out and shoot us as to have to go through this again.

April 29- What in the world has happened? We are still hanging around. Something is bound to happen (soon).

May 22- Secured from job last night. Everyone is happy. We are packing our sea bags. Must be leaving for the war.

May 23- Aboard ship again bound for somewhere. God only knows and maybe the commander. We become to have a peculiar state of mind in the service. They load you on a boat, or train—haul you off somewhere and tell you nothing. Funny thing about it you don't seem to mind.

May 25- Sailed at 10:30. Good-bye to New Caledonia. This boat is as rough as riding a jackass through Arkansas.

May 27- On ship in Coral Sea. Here is where (a) big battle was fought and Lexington was sunk. Hope we have no trouble.

May 29- We must be nearing port. There has been a carrier and a few planes have been flying over (us) all day. We must be getting close to "Nip." We were given ammunition today.

May 30- Well, here it is a last, the much talked about Canal. Hope the Nips don't come tonight. Sure is hot.

May 31- Spent last night near beach on Guadalcanal. Came across channel to Tulagi this morning. Have docked here all day unloading oil. You can see

Florida Islands and a number of other small ones. These are real tropical islands. This Tulagi is real pretty. Would love to make this trip in peace time. There are palm trees on all the mountains. Scuttlebutt is that we are going back to the Canal tomorrow.

June 1- Well, here we are on Guadalcanal. Have pitched tents in a coconut grove. Martin is out busting a nut now. Well, this is life. Tough is no name for this way of living.

June 2-4- Building camp and other small details. This is one terrible place. Rain and heat. How long can a man stay in the tropics?

June 5- Had a small air raid last night. No damage.

June 7- Rain again. These air raids are getting to be a habit. This is the 3rd in as many days. When these Japs start this way, there is a regular bee hive stirred up. Our planes really take to the air.

June 11- The Japs bothered us all night last night. Had two air raids. Poured cement. Sure was hot.

June 16- We had a good picture (show) started last night, (but) just as we started the Japs came. Then today we were working at dock. There was a big raid. Two ships were hit and several Jap planes were shot down. We stood on the beach and saw the whole show. This is real war. Our aircraft gave them a fit.

June 17- These air raids have gotten to be a regular thing. Another one last night, one today. We live in fox holes lots of the time.

June 18- Wow! Those yellow devils came again last night attacking Tulagi. Could see the anti-aircraft fire. Today there was an air raid alarm at the docks. The yellow devils were beat off before they reached us.

June 29- Last night we worked until around 3 o'clock on a ship. Some Marines woke me early this morning as they passed on their way to load a ship to go out and meet the Japs—singing as they went. These boys are great.

June 30- Big offensive launched. Went to Karney and Henderson Field today. Have been having trouble with my leg for several days. Must be getting old. July 4- Independence Day.

Heard a good sermon by Island Chaplain. Was very inspiring. Worked in the afternoon.

July 6- Well, Nip called last night (and) got us out of bed. Chief Elkins and some of our men were hurt by bombs. Several were killed.

July 7- Am getting tired of this South Pacific. These little old islands are terrible. Wonder how long one can stay out here and not go crazy.

July 11- Had an air raid last

late in the afternoon???

July 15- We sailed all night. Just after daylight someone saw a man on a rubber raft. We turned aside to him. As we came alongside him, I reached over the side and helped him aboard. He was one of our aviators who had been forced down yesterday. We lay over at Wickham anchorage, Vangunu, all day. Loaded on ship at 6 o'clock.

July 16- Came ashore to beach again. Spent the day resting.

"Some Marines woke me early this morning as they passed on their way to load a ship to go out and meet the Japs — singing as they went. These boys are great."

night. Saw the picture "You Were Never Lonelier." These shows are lots of comfort.

July 12- There were 3 air raids last night. They sure are disturbing when they come at night. Well, here we go again. Packing up to go.

July 13- Loaded on boat at 5:30 in Guadalcanal. Sailed during the night.

July 14- Came into the channel at Russell Island. We lay over in Russell during the day. Leaving

Some soldiers brought in a Jap prisoner. I stood and looked at him and felt sorry for him as he lay on a stretcher. There was a company of soldiers that came in from the jungle. They were muddy and tired. This jungle warfare is tough. Loaded back on ship.

In the next issue, we will follow the Pacific War through Merchant's diary to New Georgia, Espiritu Santo, Auckland, New Zealand, and finally back to the states.

Christmas miracle

FROM PAGE 3

died.

How could any of the "lost legion" possibly have survived Chosin, given the enemy numbers, flesh-killing weather, isolation and encirclement? Legendary Lt. General Lewis "Chesty" Puller, then commander of the 1st Marine Regiment, voiced his opinion long after the war:

"The 1st Marine Division at the Chosin Reservoir was the finest fighting force ever fielded."

Marine vets credit brilliant leadership by their officers and senior NCO's, most veterans of World War II, for the outcome at Chosin.

But the ranks, too, were combat mean and lean by the time of the Reservoir, many initiated in the Pusan defense perimeter, the

majority tested and proved at Inchon and Seoul.

Beyond leadership and experience, the last legion of Chosin prevailed because of indomitable spirit. Perhaps it was best exemplified when the Marines incoming from Yudam-ni paused and formed ranks outside of Hagaru-ri—even wounded and frostbitten crawled down from vehicles to join—and marched in to the perimeter without a command given or cadence uttered.

Overcome at the sight of the depleted but proud ranks and weeping with the other defenders, Lt. (jg) Robert Harvey, a Navy surgeon, cried, "Look at those bastards, those magnificent bastards—"

Proud then. Proud now.

Airmen, Marines, Sailors, Soldiers. The Chosin Few.

