

Community Comment May 26th, 2013

By Jon Sapper

The Forgotten Battle

Today is Memorial Day, where we honor those men and women who paid the ultimate price in service to our country, giving their lives to preserve the freedoms and liberties we sometimes take for granted.

I just finished reading a book, *The Ghost Mountain Boys*, the 2nd World War story about a largely forgotten battle in the South Pacific; the terrifying battle for New Guinea. New Guinea is one of the world's largest islands, just north of Australia and was the stage for a horrendous struggle. As the author states, "It is an inhospitable, disease ridden land of dense jungle, towering mountain peaks, deep valleys, and fetid swamps. It was coveted by the enemy and became one of the most savage campaigns of the war.

The Ghost Mountain Boys were assigned the mission to march 130 miles over the rugged mountains without even the basic necessities for survival. Their hastily dyed fatigues bled in the intense tropical heat and left them with festering sores, an invitation for the swamp leeches. They waded through brush and vines without the aid of machetes. Their quinine and vitamin pills to ward off malaria crumbled in their pockets with the jungle heat and humidity. Disease was rampant. Combat, sometimes hand to hand, required energy that had all but disappeared due to lack of food and weight loss. Walking through swamps, enemy snipers picked them off one by one. The stench of rotting corpses in the oppressive heat nearly destroyed the will of the soldiers. The enemy resorted to cannibalism. Most of the troops did not survive. But they fought on, they prevailed and they won.

When I was eight years old, I remember riding with my father to the golf course. Out of the blue, I asked him if he had been in the war. I was enamored with soldiers and playing war as a child. He said, "Yes, I was." I asked him if he had ever killed anyone. He slammed on the brakes, stopped the car in the middle of the road, looked at me with a cold stare and said, "NEVER ask me that question again." It sent chills up my spine and I can still see him and hear that voice, and it happened more than 50 years ago.

You see, after my father returned from New Guinea, even though he wasn't in that battle for Buna, he spent two years in Letterman's General Hospital in San Francisco to try and adjust from those experiences from Hell. I was never told the details.

Although he lived almost 30 years after he stopped that car, the subject of war never came up again, and I didn't ask. But after reading this book, I now know why he slammed on those brakes and said, "Never ask me that question again." The battle for New Guinea was forever etched in his mind.

Today and every day, let us honor the brave men and women who have paid the ultimate price.

This has been Jon Sapper for Community Comment.