

Fighting the Unknown

The rain came down, hard and unforgiving, on the United States Marine Corp (USMC). Some men of the 3rd platoon were sitting in fox holes allowing the battering rains soak through their decimated uniforms, while others were watching for movement within the jungle, hoping to find where the Japanese were hiding. Kenneth Hildebrand was leaning against the eastern most side of the fox hole. He stared up towards the sky, letting the globules hit down on his scarred face.

“You know, I can’t take one more minute of this intolerable weather. Every minute of every day the rains pours down, and the mixture of humidity and heat becomes unbearable! It has been five fuckin’ months and not a single Jap army has been seen since the battle at Henderson’s field. They only Japs I have seen are those a spot through the scope of my sniper. We all know they’re here, so why can’t we see them? It is fuckin’ ridiculous!” he shouted to the sky.

He slammed his hand against the rain-soaked earth. Much like everything else, Hildebrand’s hand dissolved within the mud. It was silent as the other men in the fox hole shook their heads at each other. The silence was broken when Henry Coburn’s voice rose up next to Hildebrand.

“Text book GI” is what all the troops called Coburn in boot camp. He followed every rule and duty to the dot. He was much like all the young enlisted boys, ready to risk their life fighting their home country.

“Dude, you’re gonna make yourself go crazy if ya keep thinking that way. There’s gotta be a Jap army somewhere on this Island. If there weren’t we would have been takin’ off already.” Coburn gave a sturdy look as he patted his buddy, Hildebrand, on the back.

They had been childhood friends and enlisted a few days after the attack on Pearl Harbor. The two had always been inseparable since the day they met which is why they had enlisted for the same platoon. They had promised—themselves and mothers—that they would have each other’s backs and that if one of them went the other went with.

“Hey, boys,” Coburn spoke to the group of three men, “I propose that we brighten the mood with some Jap rice our boy Kenneth received from the last Jap he shot down!” Coburn reached into his bag, to pull out a smaller canvas bag that was filled with rice.

The men cheered in agreement to his proposal, as the bag was passed around. Each man pulled out the metal cup they were assigned before the ship left for Guadalcanal. Clinton Hoaston Jr. reached his bowl up as the sky continued to pour liquid down to it. His hand violently shook as he rested the bowl back down in his lap. Hoaston had been a grade school teacher who answered his country’s call in the year 1943. His wife, Pamela, was seven months into their first pregnancy. Hoaston always kept a folded note in his breast pocket. It was a note he wrote to his wife the day they shipped off, in case he did not make it home.

“Hildebrand’s right. I think this battle turned from a man versus man to a man versus nature. I can’t take this shit anymore,” He complained as he spooned some watery uncooked rice into his mouth.

Sweat dripped down his forehead as he wiped it away. He tilted his head and leaned his head looking up at the rain as his body started shaking.

“I am fuckin’ sweating my balls off here! Yet my body is tellin’ me I’m fuckin’ cold!” Hoaston screamed. “This weather has me all over the place. I hate this unknown place. Can’t we just go home already?” Hoaston pleaded to the sky as his eyes stayed shut.

“Yo ‘Lucky’?” the last man, Clifford Burton, placed a hand on Hoaston. “you’ve been lookin’ sick these since you got back. Did ya eat somethin’ some Jap poisoned?” Clifford Burton looked around at the others with concern written over his face.

“Red, I’m a runner. I run from platoon to platoon I don’t get the chance to eat. It is just the weather.” Hoaston shook his head.

Coburn and Hildebrand looked over to Burton and almost saw the concern radiating off his body. In a swift motion they both set their bowls down onto the saturated earth of the foxhole. Coburn was the first one out of the fox hole and reached back down to grab his helmet and Browning automatic rifle. (BAR) It was one of the seven weapons the United States Marine Corp (USMC) issued to the 3rd platoon before they arrived on Guadalcanal. Hildebrand then stood up taking his M1093A4 sniper rifle.

Once out Hildebrand shook his head in a westward direction signaling Coburn to follow him. They walked over to a tree in the northeast part of camp, other beat up drenched marines in their Platoon. Both men kept their eyes up to the tree line; they knew that the Japanese sent out of soldiers to locate where they set up camp.

“Man, I don’t know what to do,” Hildebrand spoke softly as they walked.

Coburn took his eyes off the tree line, “What do you mean, we fight and survive. That is what we were told, so that is what we do.”

Hildebrand stopped in front of a bent over palm tree, “You’re always so literal. How does this not get through you?” Hildebrand turned around and to face his friend.

Coburn stared at his childhood friend. Scars from battle rested on his young face. Dried blood still rested in the most recent scar.

“I block the world away. The shooting and death doesn’t exist in my mind,” Coburn softly whispered. “Hey we need to get back to Hoaston and Burton. Something serious might be up.” He finished.

“Bro, this is serious. I can’t take much more of this. It is killin’ me mentally and physically. I’m breaking down. I’m too young for this, we are too young for this. Hell we can’t even drink. What the fuck are we doing here? What happened to when we would ‘play’ war in your backyard? I never wanted to be in a real war!” Hildebrand shouted as tears ran down his face.

He felt the hard hand of his buddy hit gently on his broad shoulder. He looked up to see Coburn’s straight, hardened face looking at him.

“Dude, remember you go I go with ya. I promise your ma that. You’re nowhere close to alone here man. We are all fighting in this unknown world, and we are all gonna break sometime, but fight through it man. Just pretend we are in my backyard and the only two people

who exist are you and me.” Coburn patted Hildebrand’s shoulder with a strong hit to show he meant what he said.

“Ok, let’s go. We should figure out how bad Lucky is.” Hildebrand hoisted his rifle up to his hip and fell in step with Coburn.

They walked away from the tree and towards the medic tent. Red and Lucky were already there, and the platoon medic was already done with his look over.

“He has developed Malaria.” The doctor spoke, “Most likely a mosquito caught hold of him, and the rain made it worse. We will keep him here until the next helicopter gets back to pick up the rest of the sick or wounded,” The doctor spoke without a sense of care.

Lucky fell backwards onto the cot he sat on, which caused it to sink about an inch into the mud that over, took every inch of the camp.

“So much for being lucky, guess that name only goes for when you’re running to different platoons and escaping Jap fire huh?” Red softly said.

“Yea, I guess you might be right there, but ya mind stayin’ for a second? I give ya something.” Lucky smiled up at Red, but sadness still shinned through his eyes.

“Yea, sure I ain’t goin’ anywhere bud. Remember we’re Lucky and the Big Red Dog.” Red smiled down to him.

“Of course, but do you two mind leavin’? You boys are too young to understand this.” Lucky looked up to Coburn and Hildebrand.

Jenny Shepley
Professional Writing
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He had a point; they were only 18, not even old enough to drink. Lucky and Red both had jobs and families. Lucky even had a son now, his name was Clinton. Lucky received a letter back a few months from his wife telling him that she named their son after his father for how brave he was. He was so happy when he read about it, but now the look in his face radiated fear of never seeing his son.

“Sure, we understand, but hey if we don’t see ya before you ship off tell your son good old Coburn says hello.” Coburn smiled as he exited the tent with Hildebrand.

They two men didn’t say a word to each other as they walked to the foxhole where their night started.

“I always thought he would die in battle and not by some messed up disease, ya know?” Hildebrand shook his head as he slid down in the foxhole.

Both men sat in the foxhole pondering what the outcome of Lucky’s life when a piercing sound echoed over the island. Weapons in hands both men jumped out of the foxhole looking frantically around the camp, ready to take on a Jap army. The ground shook again, and this time a bright light came up from a distance in the jungle as the piercing sound ripped through the dense jungle.

“Holy shit! What was that, Coburn?” Hildebrand shouted as another explosion hit the ground and in the distance a fire ball engulfed the jungle.

“The Japs are bombing us!” a Marine from another foxhole shouted.

“Get down in your foxhole you idiots!” another man shouted from behind them.

Another explosion came as Coburn and Hildebrand jumped into their foxhole with two other Marines. The next explosion hit the camp, and after that, explosion after explosion hit the camp. Trees fell and screams of pain and death echoed and cut through the noise of the bombs. The bombing lasted only a few minutes, but that short time felt like hours to the person experiencing it. Once it stopped, Coburn and Hildebrand slowly raised themselves out of the foxhole, and looked around. The two men they were just with were already scrambling about the shambles of the camp. They searched for the wounded among the dead. Dead and wounded Marines laid everywhere. Some had only a few limbs, and were barely hanging onto life, while others were crushed to death under the trees that had fallen. Hildebrand looked around in disbelief until he spotted the medic tent; it had been hit.

“Bro, look. Red, Lucky. They’re gone. The tent took a direct hit, he never got to see his son. Nothing can keep you alive here, not even pretending it’s a backyard!” Hildebrand broke down screaming as his knees gave way.

He crashed into the mud as he shook his head and began to cry. The rain continued to pour down on the camp washing the smell of death into the earth. Hildebrand slowly looked up to Coburn who was kneeling in front of him.

“Man, you’re the best friend I’ve had threw my whole life. I’m sorry, but I can’t be here anymore, anywhere but here. I’ll stand by you, you know that, but I can’t do it here. Not in this unknown godforsaken island. I’m done, but you’re not. You gotta go home and tell my ma that I love her, and that I’m sorry.” Hildebrand had reached back to his belt where he wore his handgun.

He looked up to his buddy once last time. Then in one quick motion the hand gun was placed on an upward angle inside his mouth as he pulled the trigger. The blast rang out around Coburn in a piercing spiral. Coburn shook his head as silent tears left his eyes. He held Hildebrand's lifeless body in his arms. Blood washed out from his mouth and head. His eyes glared up to the sky with an empty void placed where life once was. Coburn lifted his buddy's body off himself and onto the ground so he could remove the dog tags from Hildebrand's neck. As he went to rip them off, Coburn noticed a piece of paper stuffed into his inside breast pocket. Coburn slowly took the not out and opened it:

Coburn,

This was not your fault. Hide what I've done. Do not tell my mother, and make it home alive.

You're Bud,

Hildebrand

Coburn refolded the note and stuffed it into his own pocket, "I promise you I will make it home. Not for me, but for you I'll live my life for the both of us and make sure everyone knows just how brave you were. They will never know what happened, your secret will stay with me up until I die," Coburn spoke to his dead friend as he removed the gun from the scene.

Coburn slowly closed his friends eyes as a Major came over and rested a hand on Coburn's shoulder. "Died from the blast, Private?" Coburn nodded in agreement.

"A lot of good men did tonight, it is a shame too," the Major spoke sternly.

"Sir? What do you mean it is a shame? Are we going back out to fight?" Coburn asked as fear laced his voice.

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“No not at all private. Word reached us before the bombing, the US Navy is back, and we’re leaving Guadalcanal in the morning.” The Major walked away to leave Coburn alone.

Coburn looked from his friend as the rain started to slow. He tilted his head up to the sky to see a sliver of sunlight creep through the tree line. Coburn smiled a sorrowful smile and closed his eyes. He placed a hand gently over his friends shoulder.

“Hey, we’re going home, Kenneth, you and me, we’re done fighting the unknown, and we’re going home.”