

LEAVING MAC BEHIND

The Lost Marines of Guadalcanal

Geoffrey W. Roecker



FONTHILL

*To those who fell,
and those who wait.*

Fonthill Media Language Policy

Fonthill Media publishes in the international English language market. One language edition is published worldwide. As there are minor differences in spelling and presentation, especially with regard to American English and British English, a policy is necessary to define which form of English to use. The Fonthill Policy is to use the form of English native to the author. Geoffrey W. Roecker was born and educated in the United States; therefore American English has been adopted in this publication.

Fonthill Media Limited
Fonthill Media LLC
www.fonthillmedia.com
office@fonthillmedia.com

First published in the United Kingdom and the United States of America 2019

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data:
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © Geoffrey W. Roecker 2019

ISBN 978-1-78155-734-1

The right of Geoffrey W. Roecker to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior permission in writing from Fonthill Media Limited

Typeset in 10.5pt on 13pt Sabon
Printed and bound in England

Prologue: The Last Day

He awoke early on the patrol's last day.

Everything hurt. He had long since stopped counting the blisters, the bites, and the bruises as the march went on; they were merely a collective ache. His skin, lashed by liana vines and sliced by knife-like *kunai* grass, was pruned and softened from ever-present moisture. When he was not wading a stream, he was pouring with sweat, and the weather cycled between raining, just about to rain, and just finished raining. Yesterday's punishing climb was the latest exertion of a month-long sojourn through the swamps and thickets, ridges, and valleys of a sweltering, stinking bump on the backside of the world. His officers called it Mount Austen; the native guides called it Mombula—their word for “rotting body.” Whatever you called it, this mountaintop on Guadalcanal was just about as far from Coleraine, Minnesota, as a guy could get.

He lit a cigarette with the dawn, red-rimmed blue eyes staring out of a ruddy face turned jaundice yellow from atabrine. They were all dragging ass. Dysentery was the order of the day; the sudden liquefying of the bowels robbing men of strength and dignity as they scampered for the tree line or simply slit holes in the seat of their pants. Others shivered and sweated in the early stages of malaria, their perspiration irritating the weeping ringworm ulcers that covered their bodies. “Jungle rot,” they said. “Got that creepin’ crud.” Blood ran down their legs and pooled into their boondockers, rotting their socks faster than they could wring them out. More than a quarter of them fell out, and many more should have. Tempers were short, but morale was still high. They were all volunteers.

He raised his hand and signed his name in 1939, two years out of high school and the Civilian Conservation Corps. His mother was dead, and his father was ailing, but his siblings always worked together and now he,

the youngest by far, would do his part. In San Diego, he learned the new language of shitbirds and boots, of '03s and BARs, of pride in traditions dating back to the Revolution. He was intelligent, trustworthy, of good character, and took to the training like a fish to water. They presented him with an emblem, named him Marine, and shipped him to Hawaii. Two months later, he learned that his father had died.

He saw the meatball-marked aircraft swooping low over Ewa Field on one December Sunday in 1941, saw the smoke billowing from stricken ships in Battleship Row, saw the oil-blackened bodies of sailors pulled from the wrecks at Pearl Harbor. He made a personal vow of vengeance, but after the raid, aviation gasoline was more valuable than a PFC's crusade. So he took eight men to Damon's Island, posted guards, and watched for saboteurs.

Months passed. Wake fell, Bataan fell, Corregidor fell, and their Marine defenders disappeared into captivity or oblivion. Midway held by the skin of its teeth; some of the newly-minted hero pilots had flown or fueled from Ewa Field. The 1st and 2nd Marine Divisions boarded convoys and sailed west, their destinations classified but their intent unmistakable—revenge for Pearl Harbor. Soon, the word Guadalcanal was on everybody's lips. Marines and sailors were launching the first offensive against Japan. Meanwhile, defending Damon's Island required a daily phone call to the first sergeant at the barracks.

Pvt. Purcell approached him in August 1942. "Corporal, I'd like permission to put my name on the Carlson Raider list."

The 2nd Marine Raider Battalion was back from Makin. Newspapers blared the story of a daring commando raid carried out by hand-picked volunteers clad in black-dyed dungarees and published photos of the President's own son holding a captured Japanese flag. This first official recognition of the Raiders painted a picture of "hard-bitten veterans" ready to give "plenty of hot lead and cold steel to the Japs."¹ Col. Evans Carlson wanted more volunteers for his battalion, and Purcell wanted a piece of the action. The corporal gave his permission, with a condition: "I can't get away now, but will you put my name on the list, too?"²

Now he was here on Guadalcanal, one of the "Gung-Ho" Raiders. He had good leaders in Lt. Does and Cpl. Croft, and a trustworthy fire team in Privates Farrar and Van Buren. They called him "Whitey" for his fair hair. He could subsist on bacon and rice, communicate with Melanesian guides, and identify the distinctive prints of Japanese boots on a muddy trail. He had stood security at the base at Binu, walked point on patrols, and fought the Japanese in near total darkness. He knew how Barber from Company "C" was tortured and killed and scattered in pieces, and how his own company moved through a Japanese field hospital, bayonetting

the wounded and sick where they lay. They had buried Marines along the way but none from his company; it did not seem to matter that he had left his lucky rabbit's foot in his bags at Espiritu Santo. It was almost over, the Old Man said, and they would return to the perimeter as conquerors of the Japanese, of the island, of the base human nature that sought the easy way out. Then Carlson himself led them in their hymn, "from the halls of Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli," and when the native boys joined in for "Onward Christian Soldiers," the melody blended in "a daring challenge to any enemy soldiers within [the] sound of our voices."³ It was the proudest moment in many a young life.

And it was in this spirit that Cpl. Albert Laddce "Whitey" Hermiston was told that he would be the point man for the point squad, leading Carlson's Raiders down the final trail to safety, to a hero's welcome, to a hot meal. He had marched and fought for 150 miles. What was one more day?

They buried him beside Farrar and Matelski at noon.

Publisher Proof layout. © G. Roeder 2019.

Author's Note

I first learned about my family's role in World War II when Robert Ballard's *The Lost Ships of Guadalcanal* hit bookstore shelves.

I was nine or ten years old, and Dr. Ballard was who I wanted to be when I grew up. He had found the *Titanic* and the *Bismarck* and brought the stories of ships, passengers, and crew to vivid life. I had no idea where Guadalcanal was, but the book had Dr. Ballard's name on it and one of those great Ken Marshall paintings on the cover. That was enough for me. I sat right down on the bookstore floor, looking at the pictures, planning a future in maritime archaeology and wondering how to convince Mom to buy me a \$40 book.

Like all of Ballard's books, *Lost Ships* is richly illustrated with photographs and paintings. There is a shot of an American cruiser flying a dozen signal flags, one of those rare color shots that reminds you that the past is not all just black and white. I was on this page when my grandmother wandered by and glanced over my shoulder. "Oh," she said, "that looks like the *Quincy*."

She was right. I was surprised. My grandmother is a wise woman, but identifying warships in a single glance was not a talent I knew she possessed.

She told me her uncle, Ned, whom the Navy called Lt. Cdr. Edmund Billings, was an officer on the USS *Quincy*. He had gone to sea and never returned. Missing in action and presumed dead. We looked through the book together and found a picture of the *Quincy* in her death throes at the Battle of Savo Island. She was lit up by searchlights and burning. Perhaps at that very moment, Billings was staggering out of the ruined pilothouse, muttering his last words to a frightened ensign: "Everything will be fine. The ship will go down fighting."

There were more pictures and paintings of the wreck site. Clearly, Dr. Ballard had done it again. I was in heaven; my grandmother was very quiet. I did not think to ask what she was thinking. If I remember right, she was the one who bought me the book. It is sitting on my desk as I am writing, and a photo of Great-Granduncle Ned Billings hangs on the wall. He never did come home. And he is not alone.

There is collective anguish preserved in our National Archives system, tucked in the personnel files of lost loved ones. Letters from families asking for news, for confirmation of a rumor, for personal effects, for photographs, for the return of the dead. Some are brief and businesslike, even formal, as if concluding an unpleasant but necessary transaction. Others last for pages, appealing to the humanity of the bureaucracy, invoking a child who never saw their father or an ailing parent who cannot accept their child is dead. From page to page, neat penmanship grows shaky and devolves into a scrawl as the writer's emotions take over. All are difficult to read, but those on behalf of the missing are doubly so. And there are so many of them.

"Missing in action" carries an awesome weight, even after several generations when the individuals concerned are long gone. They are missing not in the sense that they may still live, but in the sense that, to their families, they never really died. It is the difference between "killed in the war" and "never came home," between "Here lies" and "In memory of," between healed scars and open wounds. The trauma grows less with each generation until it is buried beneath the surface, but it is still there, dormant. The return of a long-lost family member has the potential to heal a hurt that was never fully realized. I have been to a few of these repatriation ceremonies and know this to be true.

This book is, by necessity, limited in scope. I chose to focus on Marine Corps ground units, partly because the evolution of doctrine is more evident in the records they left behind, and partly because history tends to blend the "grunts" into nameless statistics. Except for the infamous Goettge Patrol—which happened to fit the subject matter perfectly, and (to paraphrase another author) "no history of the campaign would dare omit"—I tried to bring lesser-known events to the forefront. I could not tell every story, and for that I am sorry. Marines, soldiers, sailors, Coast Guardsmen, pilots and tankers, artillerymen and infantrymen—everyone who went to that island left a part of himself behind, and so this book is for them.

Many have helped along the way, and although some may not know it, I owe them a debt of gratitude. The professors of Norwich University's graduate program, especially Dr. David J. Ulbrich and Dr. Jonathan House, helped channel enthusiasm into scholarship. The patient, helpful

staff of the National Archives in College Park answered repeated email requests and rewrote my illegible pull slips. I particularly wish to thank Nate Patch for his invaluable help with the Marine Corps muster rolls. Also, the archivists at the Marine Corps History Division in Quantico, who let me leaf through Col. Goettge's unit journal. Next time, I will bring a quieter scanner.

An incredible circle of colleagues and fellow researchers kept me on track, honest, and well-supplied with documents and information. Justin Taylan of PacificWrecks and Rob Rumsby are incredibly knowledgeable, and their years of dedication to Pacific War history and to non-recovered servicemen are both admirable and inspirational. Geoff Gentillini of Golden Arrow Research helped me acquire scores of records from the St. Louis archives, and has been a trusted sounding board for the past five years. Michael Bracey helped track down records in College Park. Marnie Weeks and Lisa Hirano keep an eye on all the boys in the Punchbowl and have provided pictures and information about the last resting places of Marines from across the Pacific. Jennifer S. Morrison has forgotten more about genealogy than I will ever know, and her ability to navigate the tangled roots of family trees is past compare. Jennifer also connected me to Katie Rasdorf, without whom I would probably still be struggling to find the front door of Archives II, let alone any of the useful information that made its way into this book.

The families of veterans provided invaluable insights, as well. I am particularly indebted to David Wollschlager, for sharing his interview with Charles "Monk" Arndt. To Trish Berne, Katie Wahrhaftig, Scott and Wayne Tompkins, Carl and Kevin Custer, Becky Ague, Drs. Jeffrey Panosian and Claire Panosian Dunavan, Dottie Pendleton, Anne Anderson, Tony Corriggio, David Stacey, Gordon Thompson, and many more: may your ancestors rest in peace and come home soon. My own family gave their love, lent their support, and occasionally let me escape to upstate New York for a bit of fresh air and some quiet writing time. My mom even bravely agreed to read—and proofread—the first draft, and if that is not a mother's love, I do not know what is.

To Gunga—a good Marine and a better friend—we will get MuMu back. *Semper Fi.*

And finally, my wonderful wife and best friend, Esther. Without your patience, perspective, love, and encouragement, I do not know where I would be. The best book is a done book, and this one is done. For now.

CONTENTS

<i>Prologue: The Last Day</i>	5
<i>Author's Note</i>	8
1 The Exorbitant Bill	13
2 "Current Regulations Prescribe..."	28
3 Blood on the River: The Goettge Patrol, August, 1942	52
4 Burying Grounds	79
5 An All-Volunteer Patrol: September 17, 1942	107
6 Ghosts on the Trail: September 24–25, 1942	128
7 Beach Road, Beach Ridge: November 18–20, 1942	148
8 "An Indigenous Growth": Graves Registration, Cemeteries, and Field Recoveries, 1943–1946	166
9 <i>Tell Me About My Boy</i>	189
10 Rosettes: 1970–2018	219
<i>Epilogue: He Is My Boy</i>	227
<i>Endnotes</i>	230
<i>Bibliography</i>	263

Publisher Proof layout. © G. Roecker 2019.

The Exorbitant Bill

The price paid for victory by a nation ill-prepared to fight was apparent to all who studied the record. A single item of this exorbitant bill was the cost of deferring preparation for proper care of the dead in war until the outbreak of hostilities.

Edward Steere, *The Graves Registration Service in World War II*¹

On a little embankment a few feet inland from the coast road, in what had once been a grove of trees, stood a crude cross marking the grave of a Marine.

After months of devastation, the land was beginning to heal. A thick carpet of new grass covered the grave, and communications wire hung from the branches of young shrubs. Tendrils of green vines snaked up the shattered stumps and crept along the ground. In time, they would climb the monument and pull it down. A bandolier draped casually over the crossbar as if misplaced and awaiting the return of its owner. The shrapnel-pocked helmet atop the cross was beginning to rust, but the flattened mess tin bearing the name of Cpl. Robert Wallace still shone brightly in the February sun. The makeshift monument was visible to anyone headed west along the coast road; the name scratched on the tin could be read by anyone who cared to pause. However, those heading west along this road were heading for action, and there was nothing special about the grave of Cpl. Wallace. There were hundreds like his on Guadalcanal.

Gunner John F. Leopold was one who paused. As the assistant D-2 (intelligence officer) of the 2nd Marine Division, Leopold had a keen interest in observing the final stages of the campaign and was probably headed towards the front at Tassafaronga when he passed the lonely grave

on February 2, 1943. The gunner pulled out his camera—he was also the Division’s photographic officer—quickly composed his shot and moved on. Two weeks later, while touring the banks of the infamous Matanikau River, Leopold spotted another lonely grave just feet from the water. A rusted Garand rifle poked from a mound of rocks. Leopold read the inscription scrawled in childish capitals on the scrap wood cross. “RIP. HERE LIES A DEVIL DOG.”

On February 18, shortly before leaving Guadalcanal, Leopold paid a visit to the island cemetery. He might have found the place unusually busy, as the first Graves Registration unit in the Solomon Islands was being commissioned there that very morning. The entire strength of the platoon—seven former quartermasters and one former artillery corporal—bustled back and forth with stacks of forms as native laborers sweated over their shovels, digging new graves. Army trucks unloaded a grim cargo; the bundles, wrapped in stained ponchos, quickly disappeared into the makeshift morgue. Leopold wandered over to the old section of the cemetery, where the Marines killed in the early days of the campaign were laid to rest. A poem adorning the grave of PFC William Cameron caught his eye:

*And When He Goes To Heaven
To St. Peter He’ll Tell
“Another Marine Reporting Sir
I’ve Served My Time In Hell.”*

It took several years to tabulate the butcher’s bill exacted by the Guadalcanal campaign. The Army estimated some 550 fatal casualties from the Americal and 25th Divisions, though their history of the campaign questioned the numbers.² The Casualty Division Headquarters, US Marine Corps, arrived at a total of 954 leathernecks of all ranks killed in action, with a further 103 dead of wounds and 145 “missing, presumed dead.”³ Some 60,000 ground troops fought there between August 7, 1942, and February 9, 1943; hundreds fought in the air, and the United States Navy contributed thousands of sailors whose loss figures were never accurately compiled but easily numbered in the thousands. Historians writing in the late 1940s quibbled over the figures, but most agreed on one thing: “the cost of victory, though dear, had not been prohibitive.”⁴

As these military chroniclers wrote of the dead in the past tense, the story was still unfolding. Between 1947 and 1949, American ships returned to the Solomon Islands for the express purpose of repatriating more than 3,000 fallen servicemen. While civilian crews labored to exhume the largest cemetery in the South Pacific, uniformed specialists climbed ridges

and slogged through rivers, retracing old battle lines with tired maps, searching for signs of those who had died or disappeared in the jungles of Guadalcanal. The passage of time frustrated their efforts; new growth, both natural and manmade, had transformed the battlefield so that even those who had fought for the island had trouble getting their bearings. They found a few dozen out of the hundreds that they sought.

The ships returned bearing caskets of bones for processing at a laboratory near Pearl Harbor. Here, anthropologists confirmed or rejected the identities attached to the dead of the Solomon Islands. The completion of their work triggered a multitude of forms to the deceased's next of kin. Some forms inquired about cemetery preferences. Others reported that a loved one thought forever lost had been found. And many carried the unwelcome news that the father, husband, brother, or son was not coming back at all. A board in Hawaii had examined his case and deemed him non-recoverable. The cases were closed, but the wounds remained open.

In April 1951, accomplished historian Edward Steere put the finishing touches on Volume 21 of the Quartermaster Corps' Historical Studies series. Entitled *The Graves Registration Service in World War II*, Steere's opus tracked the evolution of the administrative process by which the American military recovered, identified, buried, and eventually repatriated its war dead. This noble task, he opined, was necessary to satisfy the emotional and patriotic needs of a civilized nation. Invoking the words of Thucydides, Steere described the return of the dead from the Peloponnesian War, when the citizens of Athens turned out to publicly celebrate and mourn the departed and dress their bones with flowers. The "similarity of sentiment and method of expression accorded the warrior dead in ancient Athens and in modern America" led him to argue that the veneration of military dead was all but essential to the foundation of a democratic society. It was a "melancholy fact that only within the past hundred years has any government been willing or able to assume the obligation of identifying and burying in registered graves the remains of all who gave up their lives in war."⁵ He told of the dedication of national cemeteries at Antietam and Gettysburg, and how Lincoln so movingly eulogized the dead to give meaning to their sacrifice, comfort to the bereaved, and motivation to a war-weary population. He recalled how the Quartermaster Burial Corps marked the graves of soldiers lost in the Spanish-American War, and the groundbreaking effort to bring the honored dead home as "probably the first attempt of a nation to 'disinter the remains of all its soldiers who ... had given up their lives on a foreign shore and bring them ... to their native land for return to their relatives and friends.'⁶ He remarked on the revolutionary evolution of the service between 1917 and 1921, as skilled technicians and trained administrators

accounted for no less than 79,129 fatalities suffered in the Great War. To Steere, this was more than performing a service, it was carrying out the embodied will of the American people.

However, the progress made after World War I did not carry over into World War II. "Planning for the emergency of war was regarded in many intellectual circles as a base betrayal of the memory of those who had fallen in the recent conflict," Steere wrote of the interwar years. If the "war to end wars" had been fought, why continue the grim study of preparing to receive and bury an army of corpses? The question, foolish in hindsight, had been answered more than 400,000 times since December 7, 1941.⁷ Steere's 200-page tome was an attempt to future-proof the burial process, and the experience had been a trying one. He gave vent to his frustration in a heated preface:

The continuity of graves registration organization was broken during the peace, resulting in an arrest of the function and such a condition of atrophy that it could not be reinvigorated at will. Changes in tactical doctrine ... were paralleled only by revisions in the paper organization of the Quartermaster Graves Registration Company. Then, while some sixty manuals were prepared for the field forces during 1941 with a view to embodying lessons of the revolutionary form of mobile warfare that had destroyed the Polish and French armies in campaigns of a few weeks duration, the graves registration manual was written in reference to conditions of the war of position fought over two decades before in Western Europe.⁸

Steere is referring to Technical Manual Number 10-630 *GRAVES REGISTRATION*, the first War Department publication dedicated to the subject since 1924. Previously, the subject had been covered in the briefest possible terms by sections in other manuals, notably the December 1940 TM 10-100 *Field Service Regulations: Administration* (six paragraphs in the final chapter, titled "Miscellaneous") and the April 1941 TM 16-205 *The Chaplain* (two pages of a section entitled "The Chaplain at War.") Both volumes drew upon the 1924 manuals with minimal revisions.⁹ The new manual (abbreviated to TM 10-630) provided a comprehensive overview of the quartermaster's duties as relating to the collection, identification, burial, and eventual repatriation of wartime dead, it made no provisions for establishing a peacetime Graves Registration Service. The companies it described on paper would be called up in the event of war, and not before. Any plans for disseminating new information in advance of armed conflict were not to be. TM 10-630 entered publication on September 23, 1941, a scant ten weeks before the attack on Pearl Harbor. The Quartermaster

General had, as the saying goes, prepared to fight the last war instead of the next.

Naturally, a lack of preparedness led to confusion. The shipment home of remains from stations outside the United States was suspended immediately after Pearl Harbor, thus mandating the need for temporary overseas cemeteries and requiring commanders stationed abroad to address the problem as they saw fit. A February 1942 War Department circular required adherence to TM 10-630, but apparently provided little in the means of instruction; the manual itself “as a reference guide left much to be desired.” The Army’s Quartermaster Graves Registration Companies, duly called up at the outbreak of hostilities, were still being trained; eight of them were in existence in August of 1942, but none were ready for overseas duty. Until training programs could catch up with the demand—and no facilities for comprehensive training would exist until early 1943—the process would be defined by a lack of coordination, standardization, and cohesion, all of which would have a massive impact in the years to follow.¹⁰

Steere continued:

In these circumstances, the establishment of a graves registration service for the field forces necessarily took the form of attempting to activate an obsolete paper scheme and then adapting it to situations alien to a doctrine that had consistently ignored existing conditions by looking fixedly to the past.... The lag imposed by an almost studious neglect of graves registration until the eve of Pearl Harbor was never completely overcome during the course of hostilities.¹¹

At no time was this need for adaptation more glaringly apparent than during the first year of war in the Pacific—a frantic few months that Steere and other scholars have characterized as a “period of improvisation.” There was no accumulated knowledge of how to handle massive casualties in an amphibious operation. The pre-war experience of South Pacific garrisons—“where deaths were few and problems of evacuation, identification, and burial were totally dissimilar to those encountered in the battle zone”—would be of little help.¹² Nor would the emergency methods devised on Wake Island or in the Philippines: the burial parties were either in Japanese prison camps or were themselves dead and buried. Troops in the Solomon Islands would have to figure out proper procedures on the spot. The results of their improvisations would last for decades.

In *Soldier Dead: How We Recover, Identify, Bury & Honor Our Military Fallen*, author Michael Sledge identifies five categories for the recovery of military fatalities: combat, post-combat, non-combat, area clearance, and

historical.¹³ Guadalcanal was (and still is) the scene of countless instances of these five categories, each of which has influenced, directly or indirectly, the recoverability of individual fighting men.

Combat recovery is, as the name implies, the act of collecting the dead while under fire. "It is a given that soldiers want to recover their fallen comrades," writes Sledge. "At the time of death, they are not thinking of identification and further handling, temporary burial or concurrent return. All they want is to bring the bodies of their friends to a safe place, and this entails great risks."¹⁴ When two men from his company were killed in action at Point Cruz in November 1942, Plat. Sgt. Rhynette Spell took a patrol of volunteers into enemy territory to retrieve the bodies; failing that, he reportedly had them buried on the spot rather than leave them to the enemy. In another instance, PFC Richard J. Kelly and PFC Francis E. Drake, Jr., went to the aid of a wounded friend trapped between the lines. Drake was himself shot and killed on the return trip; Kelly managed to get the wounded man to safety and then went back out to retrieve Drake. These were individual acts of bravery, motivated not by any official policy but by the unspoken understanding of no man left behind. Only in the most extreme circumstances would a unit withdraw without making some attempt to recover its dead, or at the very least collect personal effects or identity tags that might help confirm the death. Unfortunately, these circumstances did exist, resulting in more than a few notations reading "due to battle conditions, body not recovered."

Post-combat recovery occurred immediately after the bullets stopped flying. Sledge divides this category into two phases. First was the removal of the dead from the battlefield or aid station to a collection point, a task usually accomplished by combat troops who were handling the bodies of their friends. In a by-the-book instance, this would have been a designated spot established by Graves Registration Service (GRS) personnel who were prepared to handle remains properly, check and confirm identification, and begin the rigorous administrative process that ensured the right name stayed connected to the right remains. However, few Marines possessed such training in 1942, and a Guadalcanal collection point was more likely to be a nearby trailhead or road—if one existed near their location. This point was chosen to facilitate Sledge's second phase of recovery: Sledge's second phase of recovery: transport from the collection point to "areas where the next steps of disposition took place."¹⁵ On Guadalcanal, this meant the cemetery near Henderson Field, initially called the First Marine Division Cemetery (FMC) and later expanded to the Army, Navy, and Marine Corps Cemetery, Guadalcanal (ANMC). The "next steps" involved collecting dog tags or other identifying media, fingerprinting the body (if possible), and taking a tooth chart (also if possible) before burial in a marked grave.

This system worked well enough for casualties sustained inside the perimeter or on defensive actions where Marines retained control of their position. In more remote areas or units on patrol, the second phase was generally not possible. Firefights in the jungle usually resulted in more men wounded than killed outright; the necessity of evacuating those who were not yet dead outweighed the need to bring back a buddy who was past help. These patrols were frequently operating several miles from friendly lines, over rough terrain. Heat and humidity exhausted stretcher bearers—as many as six were needed to transport a single casualty—and needed an armed escort for protection. In one event in September 1942, a combat patrol by the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, had so many wounded that the battalion commander detailed two of his three companies to bring them back to the perimeter. In another, the 2nd Raider Battalion sustained three casualties, including a severely wounded platoon leader, in a fight atop Mount Austen on December 3, 1942. Their need for medical attention dictated a faster pace the following day; as a result, the point walked into an ambush and suffered an additional three killed and four wounded. The three dead were buried near the ambush site; an hour later, the wounded officer succumbed and was interred in a lone grave beside the trail. (A fourth wounded man later died in the Division field hospital; the patrol's last casualty became their first to be buried in a Guadalcanal cemetery.) Neither unit was able to bring out their dead; thus field burial was a necessary expedient. In these cases, the collection point became more of a consolidation point. A group of graves standing together stood a better chance of being rediscovered than single graves scattered about an area. Consolidation was done in both preceding examples. The battalion created two small cemeteries of five graves each—distance and terrain prevented further consolidation—while the Raiders carried the body of one ambush victim some distance up a steep slope to ensure his burial in a visible location. (The lone officer, 1Lt. Jack Miller, was the exception; unfortunately, his grave was later lost.)

It should be noted that these field burials, while hardly ideal, were performed with the understanding that they were only temporary. Most combat Marines believed that eventually “somebody” would be back to get their buddies and did their best to situate graves in visible locations—along trails or tree lines, on riverbanks or ridges—and to describe the location, either by map coordinates, measured distances, or other notable landmarks. One Marine's grave was, somewhat unhelpfully, described only as being the “only grave in the vicinity.”¹⁶ However, any number of mishaps could befall a marker: washed away by flooding, knocked over by a falling tree, uprooted by foraging animals, removed by vengeful enemy troops, or even destroyed in a subsequent battle. The time elapsed between

burial and retrieval efforts was such that many markers were simply gone by the time anyone came looking, and by that point, rough coordinates or landmarks were usually not enough information.

Non-combat recoveries involve deaths of servicemen in incidents related to military operations, but not direct contact with the enemy—anything from an accidental drowning or vehicle collision to plane crashes or explosions while handling munitions. While the recovery conditions for non-combat fatalities were generally more favorable than combat situations and had a higher identification rate, they could still pose problems. A particularly nasty incident occurred on December 21, 1942. Two trucks collided; one happened to be carrying a cargo of land mines for the Army Corps of Engineers, and the resulting explosion obliterated the occupants of both vehicles. The dog tag of PFC Herman Dallas Avery (Weapons Company, 2nd Marines) was found near the site; this was the only clue that he had even been present. A luckless labor detail had the grim task of collecting the pieces, which were all buried together in a single grave as Unknowns X-42 through X-45. This grave was thought to contain only four remains, but post-war laboratory analysis identified parts of no less than seven men. Even then, the remains could not be segregated into individuals, so the men were given a group burial in Chattanooga National Cemetery.¹⁷

Sledge includes his final two categories—area clearance and historical—under the umbrella heading of “non-combat” operations, as these may only take place once an area is secure from threats that might impede the careful, thorough search for lost remains.

Area clearance involves “searching for those remains that have not been recovered in previous operations, and ... disinterring bodies from temporary gravesites established when it was impossible or impractical to remove them to major cemeteries.”¹⁸ On Guadalcanal, this operation began shortly before the island was formally secured and continued, in various iterations, through 1949. The first evidence of a mass reinterment occurred in January 1943, when the bodies of five soldiers from Company “I,” 164th Infantry were reportedly interred in Row 94 of the FMC. All five had been killed in action the previous November; the fact that they were identified at the time of reburial suggests that they were in well-marked and well-preserved graves. The 164th retrieved most of their field burials before the battle ended. Immediately after Guadalcanal was declared secure, other Army units took to the field and searched out their dead, which led to a massive increase in the size of the recently established ANMC. Fortunately, by this time a rudimentary Graves Registration outfit was available to assist with cemetery operations. From that point on, although the units occasionally rotated, there was always a GRS presence on Guadalcanal.

These GRS teams handled area clearance when they could, although it does not seem to have been their primary duty. Guadalcanal grew into a major base, with supply depots, training areas, and hospitals all contributing their share of fatal incidents. Occasionally, when new construction turned up scattered bones or a curious sightseer unearthed a grave in the jungle, the GRS troops were dispatched to collect the remains. By this point, no recognizable physical traits remained; fingerprinting was impossible, bones were often eroded or fragmentary, and the GRS men, while better trained, were by no means forensic experts. Without identifying evidence—a tag, a grave marker, or marked personal effects—these remains were buried as “unknown.”

After the war, two major area clearance tasks remained. The first was the closing of the ANMC, which had grown to include well over 3,000 graves. (Many of these men were initially buried on other islands; Guadalcanal served as a consolidation point for all cemeteries in the Solomon Islands.) Responsibility for exhuming these graves fell to the 9105th Technical Services Unit. The other was a search and recovery mission for isolated graves and missing personnel across the Pacific. The 604th Quartermaster Graves Registration Company (QMGRC), one of the more experienced units of its type in the theater, assumed responsibility for this complex task. The 604th made two such expeditions, visiting Guadalcanal in 1947 and 1949, but met with limited success. Only 178 remains—just under 2 percent of those thought to be missing in the entire theater—were found. Active searching officially halted in 1950. Those left behind were declared “permanently nonrecoverable” while hundreds of remains were “approved unidentifiable” and buried in national cemeteries as unknowns.

We are currently in the era of historical recovery. The Central Identification Laboratory, Hawaii (CILHI)—created to identify the remains of World War II Pacific theater dead—was reestablished in 1976 with “the mission to recover and identify all unrecovered United States service members from past wars.”¹⁹ Since then, an evolving array of government agencies have conducted active investigations into incidents involving non-recovered military personnel, and civilians lost in military operations, dating back to 1941.²⁰

The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) is the current government entity charged with recovering, identifying, and repatriating the physical remains of American servicemen killed in action and buried overseas. In their terminology, individuals buried with honor as unknowns, lost at sea, or missing in action are classified as “unaccounted for.”²¹ This grammatically unwieldy yet surprisingly handy phrase, which frequently extends to include “those not repatriated or identified from isolated burials,” is a blanket designation for servicemen whose identity

or precise burial site is not confirmed. Determining the fate of the dead is personnel accounting. (Its companion term, personnel recovery, relates to “the recovery and reintegration of isolated personnel” who are still living and should not be confused with “remains recovery” as used in this book. There are no ongoing personnel recovery missions for World War II-era losses.)

When compelling evidence of an incident site (e.g., an airplane crash site, mass grave, or scattered bones with American military equipment), the DPAA’s Research and Investigation Team (RIT) generates leads from archival files and oral histories. An Investigative Team (IT) explores the most promising leads and conducts a survey, searching for evidence that may connect the site to an individual case. Sites are prioritized by factors such as terrain and accessibility, political and international relations, jeopardizing factors like urban development, and the likelihood of finding identifiable remains. If the IT recommends a site for further inspection, a Recovery Team (RT) is dispatched to conduct an archaeological dig, which hopefully results in the recovery of identifying media or human remains. The DPAA also oversees the exhumation of remains from national cemeteries, in conjunction with the Department of Veteran’s Affairs.

Currently, the DPAA reports a total of 82,134 individuals unaccounted for in conflicts from World War II to the present day. Of these, 72,744 date to the World War II era, with 47,469—including nearly 3,000 Marines—in the Indo-Pacific area.²² An imaginary DPAA field team deployed to the Guadalcanal in February 1943 would have had about 520 members of the United States Marine Corps on its priority list. This figure would include individuals missing in action on land, sea, and air—who might, conceivably, still be alive—and those who were known to be dead but whose remains lay buried or unburied in remote or unrecorded locations on Guadalcanal or the surrounding islands. First, the team would eliminate some thirty Marines buried at sea with the appropriate ceremony (not, technically, unaccounted for, as opposed to those missing as the result of ships sinking, aircraft losses over water, or drowning). As the years went by, they would gradually tick off 108 other names identified from unknown burials and field recoveries. By 2019, they would count a total of 386 Marine Corps personnel (including eight Navy corpsmen attached to Marine units) still unaccounted for from the Guadalcanal campaign. This number represents 28 percent of fatalities in Marine units during the campaign, and more than one in ten of all World War II-era Marines so classified today.

The National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific in Honolulu (commonly called “the Punchbowl”) holds the remains of more than 160 unidentified individuals who were exhumed from the ANMC or found in isolated graves on Guadalcanal. This number includes American soldiers, sailors, and

Coast Guardsmen from across the Solomon Islands; a few Japanese soldiers and Melanesian civilians are thought to occupy plots here, too. It is likely, therefore, that at least some of the 386 Guadalcanal Marines are not lost in the boondocks but buried as unknowns in Hawaii. And it is possible that additional research into their cases might reveal their identities.

While the DPAA is the only agency that can officially “account for” an individual, independent researchers and non-profit groups have had a decided impact on increasing the visibility of non-recovered cases, and in influencing which sites are targeted by Recovery Teams. The MIA Recovery Network, Justin Taylan’s Pacific Wrecks, Ted Darcy’s WFI Research Group, and others spend countless hours working with original documentation and creating case files arguing for DPAA investigations. Pearl Harbor survivor Ray Emory spent twenty-five years researching the mass graves of USS *Oklahoma* crewmen at the Punchbowl and campaigned to have the remains exhumed for identification. A trial run on one mass grave was made in 2003. CILHI director John Byrd estimated that the site contained the commingled remains of nearly 100 individuals, of whom only five were tentatively identified.²³ Between 2008 and 2010, Emory’s research helped identify those five sailors and return them to their families. Encouraged by this success, the Department of Defense ordered the exhumation of the remaining *Oklahoma* burials in 2015. Since then, more than 100 sailors and six Marines from the ship’s company have been accounted for, and the investigation is still ongoing.

Other nonprofits send teams into the field. Usan Kurata’s Kuentai was formed in 2006 to search for Japanese soldiers in the Philippines and Mariana Islands. In 2014, when the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC, the predecessor of DPAA) dismissed a proposed cooperative effort on Saipan, Kurata created the subgroup KUENTAI-USA to handle any American remains found at his excavation site. With a minuscule budget and limited time—the area was slated for residential development—KUENTAI-USA recovered the remains of several American soldiers. Thanks to these efforts, four members of the 105th Infantry Regiment were returned to their families. The Bentprop Project sends a volunteer team to Palau every year; they claim to have located dozens of wrecked World War II-era aircraft, both American and Japanese. Their 2004 discovery of a B-24J Liberator, which they nicknamed “Number 453,” led to the recovery and successful identification of eight of the eleven crew off the coast of Babeldaub Island. The search became the basis of Wil S. Hylton’s book *Vanished: The Sixty-Year Search for the Missing Men of World War II*.

A Florida-based organization, History Flight, focuses their Pacific efforts on the island of Betio in the Tarawa atoll, where over one thousand

Americans fell during a three-day battle in November 1943. Several hundred Marines, sailors, and Army aviators were not recovered from the field after the war. When the organization's research into mass graves on Betio met criticism from JPAC, founder Mark Noah built a team including archaeologists, forensic odontologists, and a renowned cadaver dog named Buster. In 2015, History Flight conducted a dig at a shipping facility on Betio and discovered "Cemetery 27," one of the largest American field burial sites found to date. The remains of almost fifty Marines were handed over to the DPAA and CILH for identification; more than half—including a Medal of Honor recipient, 1Lt Alexander Bonnyman—have been returned to their families. History Flight's continuing work on Betio has resulted in the recovery of hundreds of partial remains, some of which are helping to resolve the identities of unknowns buried in Hawaii. These achievements have not only helped solve an enduring mystery of the Pacific war but brought closure to many families and increased public awareness of the "Tarawa Marines."

Guadalcanal has not been the subject of such scrutiny, but recent activity suggests that it may move up the priority list. Honiara, the capital city of the Solomon Islands, is built on the site of many bloody battles; many unaccounted for individuals, both American and Japanese, lie within its limits, and several have been discovered quite by accident. In 2013, a Honiara resident unearthed three sets of remains while working in his yard; two of these, PFCs Harry C. Morrissey and Francis E. Drake, Jr., were accounted for late in 2017.²⁴ A few miles away on the slopes of Mount Austen, another local man discovered the wreckage of an American F4-F Wildcat fighter. Bureau number 02095 was still visible on the fuselage. Researchers quickly identified the plane as one flown by 2Lt Elwood Ray Bailey, a fighter pilot with VMF-223, who went missing after a dogfight on August 24, 1942. Bailey was long thought to have parachuted from his plane over Iron Bottom Sound; the discovery of human remains and personal effects changed the story of his last moments completely. Bailey's identity was confirmed on September 27, 2017. Even more recent reports suggest the discovery of two more burial sites, reported to be the resting place of ten additional Marines. Army remains have been found as well; two pilots, Maj. Peyton Mathis and 1Lt Leonard Farron, were discovered near the remnants of their aircraft, while remains and a set of identification tags belonging to PFC Dale W. Ross of the 35th Infantry were turned over to American authorities in 2017. Ross has not yet been officially accounted for.

The difference between "recovered," "identified," and "accounted for" should be clarified. The first classification pertains to remains when retrieved from an isolated burial or location; these are, officially,

still nameless individuals. The presence of media like issued equipment, identification tags, or personal effects is a valuable clue, but not enough to confirm a recovered individual. Soldiers may borrow or salvage one another's equipment, personal belongings entrusted to a friend may wind up buried with them, and identification tags might wind up with the wrong body for any number of reasons. The body of an individual last seen in one place might turn up in another; one need only reference the case of Elwood Bailey for proof. Because the margin for potential error is tremendous, investigators err on the side of caution. According to period records, the third individual buried with PFCs Morrissey and Drake ought to be Pte Albert L. Bernes—their battalion lost three men killed in the same area, and primary sources indicate that they were buried at the same time and in the same location. However, the final pieces of the puzzle are still missing, and so Bernes—and whoever the 7th Marines buried in “Lunga Area, Grave #2”—are not, officially, one and the same.

The second classification indicates that sufficient evidence has been received to definitively state that a particular set of remains may be associated with an individual (or, in the case of commingled remains, multiple individuals). Proof of identification may be obtained through the comparison of dental and physical characteristics, much as it was in the 1940s. Enlistees at the time were screened for tuberculosis; some still have X-rays in their medical files, and these can be compared with recovered clavicles. Comparison of mitochondrial DNA (mDNA) with a living person is considered the most accurate indication of identity, but this can be an expensive process. Taking a sample from seventy-year-old bones that have been burned, blasted, or buried in acidic soil for years is a challenge; locating a matrilineal relative willing to submit their genetic information can be difficult as well. Most identifications are achieved through a combination of these factors.

The DPAA works closely with different Casualty Assistance Offices, which act as liaisons between the agency and the family of the deceased. Once identification is complete, a full report is sent to the Senior Casualty Officer for presentation to the Primary Next Of Kin. The PNOK is asked to accept the findings and assume the required responsibilities. Often, the question is just a formality: families are informed of developments in their case, which can span several years, and many are understandably anxious to settle the mystery. This is the penultimate step in the process; the DPAA issues a press release announcing that a missing serviceman is officially accounted for, and the family begins planning a long overdue funeral.

Today's researchers benefit from unprecedented access to primary sources. Declassified documents are obtainable with a simple request under the Freedom of Information Act. The National Archives and the

Marine Corps History Division at Quantico are a treasure trove of records; online resources contain many more. Finding clues in primary sources and interviews is a heady experience, and it is tempting to believe that a single overlooked detail is all it takes to prove identity. In some cases, mistakes made by the original record keepers are readily, even glaringly apparent. However, it is no simple feat to argue for the exhumation of remains. An airtight case must be built from multiple sources. Genealogists must trace the family of the deceased and hope to find one willing to submit a sample for DNA testing. Every scrap of information is assembled into a case for submission to the DPAA; the decision to disinter, and the entire identification process, is handled by the government. A successful identification means a funeral with full honors, closure for a family, and another proof of Steere's Thucydidean argument for "fulfilling our nation's promise."

Of course, this is easier said than done. The amount of paperwork attached to each unaccounted for or unknown serviceman can be both dizzying and frustrating. At the individual level, casualty cards, Official Military Personnel Files (OMPFs), Individual Deceased Personnel Files (IDPFs), X-files (pertaining to unidentified remains), Reports of Interment, Weekly Reports of Burial, Disinterment Directives, and cemetery charts are available from the National Archives or the Marine Corps Historical Division. Muster rolls, After Action Reports, war diaries, and unit histories provide additional puzzle pieces; so too do photographs and maps, personal diaries and correspondence, eyewitness reports, and the occasional contemporary publication. These primary sources contain vital details, albeit in various stages of completion and degrees of accuracy. For example, one company's muster roll may include the cause of death, date of burial, and precise map coordinates for every one of its deceased members; another may simply say "buried, details not known" or "killed in action, details later." A Report of Death in an OMPF might read "Buried in Police Barracks Cemetery, Tulagi" while a division-level roster of burials reports "US Naval and Marine Corps Cemetery #3, Grave C." This discrepancy is vexing to the researcher, and may have resulted in the misidentification of the individual in Grave C, as well as the Marine in question. Map coordinates present yet another problem. Period military maps of Guadalcanal were infamously inaccurate or insufficient—one officer even subtitled his memoirs "Remembering Guadalcanal, A Battle Without Maps"—and different units used different reference points at different times. (Most of the 1st Marine Division's trained intelligence men and mapmakers died early in the battle on a poorly-planned patrol; none of their remains have been recovered.) With its 1,000-yard grid, the standard "Map #104" could help a company commander direct artillery

fire; it lacks the detail required to pinpoint something as small as a grave in the jungle. Even with the naked eye, one can see that some squares are slightly larger or smaller than others, throwing the entire scale into question.

Veteran memoirs and interviews can hold valuable clues—or false memories of incidents and anecdotes. In one example, a Marine battalion commander radioed a report of seven men killed in action in a single skirmish, and that number was picked up by several contemporary and modern histories. Muster rolls for his battalion, however, report ten fatalities in the same incident. One veteran recalled that several men died of wounds overnight; a second remembered burying a buddy where he fell along with four other men; a third insisted that he had personally helped to bury not five, seven, or ten, but thirteen men the following day. By comparing these personal accounts with primary sources, it becomes clear that there were, in fact, ten fatalities—seven killed outright and three who succumbed to wounds—and that they were buried in two distinct groups of five graves each some distance apart. Each veteran told the truth as he remembered it; as with any oral history, one must account for the passage of time and the tricks of memory.

It is not possible for a single researcher to say that every case may be resolved someday, or to say that any individual case is impossible to solve. Nor is it possible for a single book to tell the story of every man who lost his life in the Guadalcanal campaign, or of the families who lived with the lingering uncertainty of “missing in action” or “body not recovered.” This one hopes to provide some detail into the last days of a few Marines who have not yet been accounted for, and the ongoing efforts to bring them home.