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BEYOND VALOR

A War Story by Charles W. Tatum

LIEUTENANT COLONEL JOHN AUGUSTUS BUTLER

Midshipman John Augustus Butler graduated with the Class of '34 from the United States Naval Academy at Annapolis, Maryland. He excelled in English Literature and contributed articles to a Midshipman literary publication. Upon graduation Midshipman Butler selected the United States Marine Corps for his branch of service. Midshipmen had the choice of accepting a commission the regular Navy or the Marine Corps upon graduation from the Academy.

The Naval Academy was John's second college. He had previously completed two years of college at Southwest Louisiana and Loyola in New Orleans before receiving an Appointment to the Naval Academy in 1930.

After graduation from the Academy in 1934 the newly commissioned 2nd Lieutenant of Marines attended the then nine month Marine Corps Basic School at Philadelphia with the 1934/35 class. Many of the instructors at Basic School in those years were veterans of World War 1 and the Banana wars. One of the courses of instruction during this period was "bush warfare", reflecting the Corp's experience in Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Nicaragua.

After Basic School 2nd Lt. Butler was ready for the fleet and was assigned to Sea Duty with the Marine detachment aboard the U.S.S. Trenton, a light cruiser with the Special

Service Squadron, also known as the Banana fleet, which was based in Panama. Later he served on the light Cruisers Memphis and Omaha. Young Lt Butler became very proficient in Spanish and frequently was sent ashore to facilitate arrangements for the vessels arrival. He was also assigned frequent shore patrol duties. His Spanish linguistic ability and reputation for developing excellent relations with the people and officials throughout the region led to a two year assignment with the Latin American Section of Naval Intelligence in Washington DC. He was being groomed for further assignment in a region where the Marine Corps had a long history of peace keeping operations, however his mentors felt his intelligence work was taking him to far away from the operating Marine Corps so in 1938 he requested assignment to the 1st Marine Brigade, the primary unit of the Fleet Marine Force, where he served as a company officer and in various staff billets with the 1st battalion 5th Marines. During that period he participated in landing exercises in Vieques, Culebra, and Guantanamo Bay. The Marine Corps was in the early stages of preparing for the coming war when in February 1940 1st Lt. Butler received orders to report to the Dominican Republic as the U.S. Naval Attaché and Naval Attaché for Air at the American Legation in Ciudad Trujillo, Dominican Republic. Shortly after arrival there in May he was promoted to Captain. In September 1940 the 1st Marine brigade deployed to Guantanamo Bay for further exercises and when joined by the newly formed 7th Marines was designated the 1st Marine Division under command of “Howling Mad” Smith. In August 1942 the 1st Marine Division began the first American offensive ground action of the war at Guadalcanal. On the west coast the 2nd Marine brigade, less its 6th Marine Regiment, which had been deployed to Iceland, began to take shape as the 2nd Marine Division. The small peace time Marine Corps was preparing for War.

In the meanwhile Captain Butler put his aristocratic bearing, high level of intelligence, and

superb Spanish fluency to work dealing with the friendly banana republic dictator, Raphael Trujillo. His duties there included identifying and observing the activities of German agents and sympathizers, then prevalent in many Latin countries. With the outbreak of war and with assistance from the Dominican government these agents and 5th columnist were rounded up and deported.

While serving in the Dominican Republic, Captain Butler was promoted to the rank of Major. This post was to test his skills as a diplomat/soldier. The Major and his wife, Denise, made a handsome couple at diplomatic affairs. This type of duty went with the job.

Far away from the sun swept islands of the Caribbean, the world was engulfed in World War II and Major Butler was itching for action. His Marines were fighting back on Guadalcanal and other Pacific locations and he wanted to be with them. Despite having commendation letters from the Ambassador and the Chief of Naval Operation for his superb work and their request for his retention as attaché' he continued to submit letters to Headquarters Marine Corps requesting relief and assignment to the Fleet Marine Force.

In March 1943 Major Butler was promoted to Lt Col and in Oct Headquarters Marine Corps responded to his request by ordering him to the Command & Staff School in Quantico from where he graduated on December 15th. Lt. Col. Butler who had craved action in the war with his Marines then received orders to report to the Fifth Marine division, just beginning to form at Camp Pendleton California.

Colonel Thomas A. Wornham, commander of the 27th Regiment of the Fifth Marine Division wanted the Marine Corps' best officers and men in his Regiment. He asked division

headquarters for Lt. Col. Butler who had just reported aboard on January 10th, after driving across country with his family.

Col Butlers initial assignment was as Col Wornham's XO but six days later He was re assigned to Command the 1st battalion. He was finally where he wanted to be, however, there were few troops available to command as the battalion was very early in its formative stage. That would change rapidly in the early days of February when disbanded veteran Para marines and raiders and new men began arriving in large numbers. Col Butler's battalion was blessed with many veteran leaders in the NCO ranks including Sgt John Basilone, national hero from Guadalcanal. Basilone, an early arrival, wasted no time in putting details to work around the barracks and preparing for the hard work and training he knew was ahead.

A day after her arrived to take command Col Butler had emergency leave to bury his Father who had just died in New Orleans. He and his younger brother, an Army major with orders to China hitched a ride to New Orleans on an army bomber. Eight Days later on 29 January Lt Col Butler returned and took command of the 1st BN 27th Marines relieving Major Justin Duryea, who had been the acting commander. Duryea was reassigned as the R-3 (Operations & Training) for the 27th Marines then as more troops arrived the battalion began to take shape and training commenced.

I remember the first formation the colonel attended, a battalion review of some kind. Rumors had been rampant that the 1st Battalion would soon have a new commander and that he was an Annapolis man. I always wondered where the rumors came from, but this time it was good scoop.

The first time I saw the colonel, I thought how much he resembled my late father, John W. Tatum. My father had been a soldier in World War I. The resemblance was uncanny. My father had been 6 foot 2 inches tall and I judged Col. Butler to be about the same height. My father had weighed between 180 and 190 pounds and it looked like the colonel was about the same weight. The colonel had the same coal black hair and the same swarthy complexion. Both had extremely dark beards, like they might have to shave twice a day. They both had eyes that seemed to be able to look right through you.

My father was born in Texas, but my grandparents had migrated to Texas from Louisiana after the Civil War. I remember my grandmother said they came from someplace near New Orleans. My father passed away when I was eight years old and maybe I wanted to see more in Col. Butler than was there, but I must admit that the resemblance was more than a figment of my imagination.

Because of this resemblance, I became a Lt. Col. Butler watcher. In my mind Lt. Col. Butler personified a Marine officer. Don't get me wrong. Lt. Col.'s in the Marines have more than a 1,000 Marines under their command and I know that he didn't have the faintest idea that I was watching him. To tell the truth, I watched everyone. If I had known then that I would write a book about my old outfit, I would have taken notes.

The Colonel and I did speak on occasion, not chitchat, military talk. During an inspection one day, he took my carbine out of my hands so fast that I thought I would lose both arms. And, as he was peering down the barrel of my carbine, he asked me:

"Pfc. Tatum, are those regulation boots that you are wearing?" "No, Sir!" I

replied.

“Where did you get those boots, Pfc. Tatum?” (We had our names and rank stenciled on our dungaree jackets.)

I replied, “From California, Sir.”

He then asked if I would wear my regulation shoes to the next formation. I snapped back my reply, “Yes, Sir!”

God! I never dreamed that anyone would notice my deviation of footwear. Little, if anything, went on in the 1st Battalion that Lt. Col. Butler wasn't aware of.

I observed the Colonel under training conditions at Camp Pendleton and later in Hawaii at Camp Tarawa. Often as not, he was on a hill, silhouetted against the sky, observing the 1st Battalion undergoing training. I can still remember Lt. Col. Butler's voice on the U.S.S. Hansford loud speakers when he announced that the destination of the 1st Battalion, 27th Marines, was an island called Iwo Jima in the Volcano group, less than 700 miles from Tokyo, Japan.

Lt. Col. Butler's leadership of his men, and his untimely death on Iwo Jima, are described elsewhere in “Red Blood, Black Sand”. While writing the book, I realized that I needed more information on Lt. Col Butler. I underlined paragraphs in books that I read on Iwo Jima and re-read them. It wasn't enough. I contacted the Marine Corps and got more information because I wanted to write all about this Colonel of Marines, but I was at a dead end and the publisher was asking “when” and “was I doing War and Peace over again?”

It's funny how one piece of information leads to another. Captain Richard O'Toole, the last

commander of B Company, 1st Battalion, put me in touch with Captain Samuel Head, USMC, and a former platoon sergeant from B Company, my old outfit and the Colonel's command. In our conversation, he mentioned that he and Col. Butler's son, Morey Ford Butler, a retired Army major, had met at the last Iwo Jima Veterans' reunion in Biloxi, Mississippi. Captain Head told me that Major Butler wanted to contact and talk to Marines who had served with his father.

The day I got the letter from Captain Head, I took the liberty of calling Major Butler at his home in Gulfport, Mississippi. We talked for more than an hour, the time just flew by.

Major Butler explained that he had been just two years old when his father lost his life on Iwo Jima. His youngest brother, Clinton R. Butler, had never seen their father. They have an older sister and brother, and that his older brother's name is John A. Butler III who was also a Marine officer and attended the Naval Academy, graduating in the class of 1961. He served as a Marine infantry and counterintelligence officer. He was a platoon leader in 2/8 during the Cuban missile crisis and was in Vietnam in July and Aug 64 on a TAD assignment with a South Vietnamese infantry unit operating in I Corps, where Marine units would be committed in April 65. He separated from the Marine Corps in 1966 as a captain and now lives in Fort Pierce, Florida. He is in the ocean shipping business and has four children, two boys and two girls. Captain Butler's oldest son is John Augustus Butler IV.

Morey's older sister, Lt/ Colonel Butler's and Denise's first child and only daughter, is Mary Jo Butler Steger. She has 5 children, three boys and two girls. Her husband was a career Army officer who retired as a full colonel in 1984. Mary Jo and John III are the only children of Lt. Col. John Butler to have recollections of their father.

Morey gave me a quick rundown of his career to date. He explained that he joined the PLC program in college while attending Florida State University. In 1962, he attended Quantico's Camp Upshur, Virginia, for 9 weeks of good old Marine Corps training. Morey was then assigned to a reserve unit. When he dropped out of school, he joined an Army reserve unit so he could attend meetings in his hometown.

In 1966 he was called to active duty from an active reserve pool. He told me that he trained as a "grunt" (11B) then underwent engineers' school. He then went through OCS (Officers' Candidate School) and graduated in 1967. His next school was flight training from 1968 to 1969. When he graduated, the Army sent him to Viet Nam as an aviation detachment commander. He returned to the States in 1970 and spent 15 of his 20 years on flying assignments. In 1980, he was selected to attend the Air Force Command and Staff College. Major Morey Butler retired in March of 1986 but he wasn't through with military life. He now instructs in a JROTC program (Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps). He has five sons and lives in Gulfport, Mississippi.

Morey Butler's letter to me telling me what happened to the Butler family after the Colonel's death is one of the finest letters I have ever read. I asked his permission to use his letter just as he wrote it. It reads as follows:

"After my father was killed, my mother moved back to New Orleans and later to Fort Myers in 1945. Father's insurance was used to buy a beautiful old southern estate with 10 acres on the Caloosahatchee River. The estate included a small cottage, chicken houses, and cow barns. The driveway to the home led one through two giant rock pillars, then down a line of palm trees. The home built in 1903 was constructed with virgin cypress and heart pine. It had large southern porches surrounding the house and was

nestled between three huge live oak trees. French doors opened from a formal dining room and a living room onto the porches. All of the rooms in the house were large, especially the living room. The only fireplace was in the living room. There, over the mantel, was the picture of my father. The house had two stories with four bedrooms and a bath upstairs. My mother's father (stepfather) and mother lived with us and had a bedroom and a private bathroom downstairs. The house was just 100 feet from the wide Caloosahatchee River. There was a long fishing dock in front of the house which was washed away in a 1946 hurricane, but it was rebuilt by my grandfather.

“Poppa, my grandfather, who was a retired veterinarian, told me that my father's death nearly devastated my mother. With little money coming in, he put her to work raising chickens, ducks, cows, pigs and growing a truck garden. She later went to work at an all-women real estate firm, and actively worked as a saleswoman until 1975. She currently lives in a portion of the old home place taking care of two very elderly aunts.

“My mother's relationship with my father must have been special. She never dated and was never interested in sharing her life with another man. She accepted what fate had dealt her and never looked back. Her focus in life was on raising her children. At this point, and it looks like it's stopped, she has 17 grandchildren.

“I remember as a child, a song she used to sing to me at night. I can't remember all the words, but its main theme was about a soldier that had gone off to war and never returned. The first lines were “A wee little lad came home so sad because he wanted to play soldier like his dear old dad.” I can still see the tears in her eyes as she sang it. The

point I'm trying to make is that the emotional bond she had for my father is still intact today.”

I found it a very touching letter. No one has ever called me a softy, but I have to admit that Morey's letter brought tears to my eyes. It's more than a letter, it's a love story.

Lt. Col. John A. Butler's date with destiny was on D-day plus 14. March 5, 1945. The place: the front lines on Iwo Jima. The time: about 1000 hours. The word about his death swept through the ranks of the 1st Battalion like a wildfire. It was whispered from position to position. Those bastards got the Colonel!

The news was a shock. A stillness fell on the battalion. The loss of Lt. Col. Butler was hard to take. If the leader has fallen, who's going to be next? Morale was affected. Lt. Col. Butler was a respected and admired officer and leader of men.

As a practical military man going off to battle, Lt. Col. Butler made contingency plans. He left a will and insurance. He also left a letter for Denise and her father, to be opened in the event of his death.

Denise Butler very kindly released a part of this very personal letter to use in this book. In the letter he thanked her for the beautiful times they shared and told her not to feel sorry for herself, that she would be comforted by the children they had brought into the world. He told her it was God's will that they would not be with each other in this world but that he would be waiting for her in Paradise.

Clinton Robert Butler (he likes to be called “Clint”) was born on November 12, 1944 when Lt. Colonel Butler was at Camp Tarawa in the final stages of training the battalion for Iwo Jima. When word of Clint’s birth was received a lot of cigars were passed around in the officers’ quarters. A new son is always a joy to a father, (so are daughters, but in a different way). The birth of a son is special to a man. It insures that his line will continue on after his death, that his name will not perish.

Of all of Colonel Butler’s sons, Clint is the most like his father. He has a build very close to his father’s. He stands nearly 6 feet 2 inches, with a medium frame. All of Colonel Butler’s sons are big men, over 6 feet tall. They take after their dad, I guess. Clint spent 4 years with the Marine Corps, enlisting just after he graduated from High school in 1963. Clint served as communication specialist with the 3rd Marine Division during a 13 month tour of duty in Viet Nam in 1965/66 and left the Marine Corps as a Sgt in 1967. Presently, he lives in Nashville, Tennessee and is an executive officer with a major insurance corporation. He and his wife have 3 daughters.

Colonel John Augustus Butler richly deserved the Navy Cross he won for his gallantry in action. It was a fitting tribute to one of the finest Marine officers I was privileged to know and serve under. But if we had a medal of honor for widows of the Marines who fell in battle, Mrs. John Augustus Butler would surely have one.

Post Script:

John Butler has kindly reviewed and corrected some of the initial information that was

originally posted in this story about his father. All the changes have been documented and are correct. Since my initial conversation with Morey Butler and my letter the following life changes in the Butler family are noted.

Denise Butler, the Col's wife passed away October 1st 2003. Her ashes were carried to Hawaii by John and Morey and interred at Col Butlers grave site in the Punch Bowl. The Colonel told her before he went to battle he wanted to remain with his men and she honored the request. The Senior catholic chaplain at the USMC base in Kahnoe Bay provided grave side services. She is with him there now and surely with him in paradise.

Mary Jo, The Colonels oldest daughter, passed away peacefully on August 27th, 2010 after a gallant fight with cancer. Her husband, children, grand children, all her brothers and their wives, her niece, and many friends, some from childhood in Florida, gathered at her grave site at a country cemetery in Kansas to tell her good bye.

Captain John, the Col's;’ oldest son who was five when his dad left for war in August of 44 was medically retired from the Shipping business in 1997, but stays busy with a number of activities including visiting his children and grandchildren scattered from Florida's east coast to Montana. He is president of his condo association, serves as a Eucharistic minister at the VA hospital in Tampa and does some occasional consulting work in the maritime business. He also remains active in various USMC organizations including the 5th Marine Division Association and the Iwo Jima Association of America (IJAA). He is a frequent contributor to the Spearhead newsletter and has just been appointed as a board member to the IJAA. He has visited Iwo Jima twice. First in 1965, when he was still on active duty and travelled there with Marine Vets from Okinawa and Japan. Father Paul

Bradley, then chaplain for the First Marine Air wing, got him a seat on the plane. The second visit was in 2005 when accompanied by his brother Clint and Clint's wife he visited Iwo with Military History 60th Reunion of Honor tour. His account of that tour is on the web site story links.

Morey, finally retired from instructing ROTC in Gulfport, is finally recovering from the blows of Hurricane Katrina, which obliterated his retirement home. He spends his time helping his in laws, visiting grandkids, and helping his 5 sons when called on. He usually finds time to help needy neighbors and elderly ladies in his neighborhood who need their grass cut and other chores done. He does manage to do some occasional fishing which remains a passion, and when he goes fishing, usually with one of his sons, he is successful.

He recently assisted Leonard and Celine Nederveld with hosting the 5th Divisions reunion in Biloxi. For his extraordinary efforts Morey was given a lifetime membership in the 5th Marine Division association. He has also joined the IJAA.

Clint is a retired country farmer in Tennessee and for a time was busy raising cattle, however he recently acquired a large 36' boat and he and his wife Lea have become boats people, touring the canals, lakes and waterways of the South east. Plans for future water ways trips and a larger water craft are in the planning stages. When not boating Clint can be found visiting his 3 girls and his grand kids who all live in Florida. Clint is active in the 3rd Marine Division Association, and recently served as its Treasurer. He recently joined the IJAA.