

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 was first in his class in English Literature. He elected the United States Marine Corps for his branch of service. Naval cadets have the choice of the regular Navy or the Marines upon graduation from the academy.

The Naval Academy was John's second college. He had finished his third year at Loyola before receiving this appointment to the Naval Academy in 1930. After graduation from the Academy, the newly commissioned 2nd Lieutenant of Marines was sent to the Marine Corps basic school at Philadelphia, Pennsylvania from 1935 to 1936. Captain Lewis B. "Chesty" Puller was one of the instructors at the school during this period. Puller, who later became a Lt. General and a legend in the Marine Corps, won five Navy Crosses for his exploits. He no doubt had great influence on 2nd Lt. Butler.

After basic school 2nd Lt. Butler was ready for the fleet and was assigned to sea duty aboard the U.S.S. Trenton, a light cruiser. He must have liked cruisers, because for the next two years he served successfully aboard the Memphis and the Omaha. The Navy must have had long-range plans for John A. Butler. As a 1st Lieutenant, his next

assignment was the Office of Naval Intelligence. He was being groomed for something big.

After a two-year tour of duty with intelligence, he found himself attached to the Fleet Marine Force at Quantico, Virginia. What was behind all this schooling and training? His next assignment. Captain Butler served as U.S. Naval Attaché and Naval Attaché for Air at the American Legation in Ciudad Trujillo, Dominican Republic. He was to put his aristocratic bearing and high level of intelligence to work dealing with the friendly banana republic dictator, Raphael Trujillo.

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. Things were quite different from life down in the banana republic. His Marines were fighting back and he wanted to be in on the action. First, the powers that be said “more school.”

In 1943, Lt. Col. Butler was graduated from the Marines’ Command and Staff School at Quantico, Virginia. Lt. Col. Butler craved action, and he knew that big things were happening at a place called Camp Pendleton, near Oceanside, California. A new Marine division, the Fifth, was being formed and he wanted in on the action.

Colonel Thomas A. Wornham was the commander of the 27th Regiment of the Fifth Marine Division. He wanted the Marine Corps’ best officers and men for his 27th Regiment. He asked division headquarters for Lt. Col. Butler, and John Butler was

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finally where he wanted to be, leading troops. Early in 1994, Lt. Col. Butler took command of the 1st Battalion of the 27th Marine Regiment, Fifth Division at Camp Pendleton.

I remember the first formation the colonel attended, a battalion review of some kind. Rumors had been rampant for a couple of weeks that the 1st Battalion would soon have a new commander. It was said that he was an Annapolis man and that Major Duryea was going up to Regiment to head up R-3 (Plans and Training). 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 this book. 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

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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 a Captain Samuel Head, USMC, 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. His older brother is also a Marine officer and attended the Naval Academy, graduating in the class of 1961. Captain Butler had spent a six-month tour of duty in Viet Nam as an advisor. He separated from the Marine Corps in 1967 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, and Lt. Colonel Butler and Denise's first daughter, is Mary Jo Butler Stieger. 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 Upshir, 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 home

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(mansion) with 10 acres on the Caloosahatchee River. The estate included a small cottage (servants' quarters). The driveway to the home led one through two giant rock pillars, then down a line of palm trees. The home was built in 1903. The home was built of cypress and 90% 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.

“Pope, my grandfather, 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 on a soldier that had gone off to war and never returned. The first lines were “A wee laddie, ever so sad because his father had gone off to battle with his sword of steel.” I can still see the tears in her eyes as she sang it. The

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point I'm trying to make is that the emotional bond she had for my father was kept and 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 was lucky in the children they had borne. He told her it was God's will that they would not share 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 November 12, 1944. The Lt. Colonel Butler and his 1st Battalion were in the final stages of training for Iwo Jim at Camp Tarawa when word of Clint's birth reached John Butler. A lot of cigars

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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 a tour with the Marine Corps, enlisting after high school. In 1962, Clint was an intelligence specialist during his tour of duty in Viet Nam. 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.