

**LOOKING FOR THE “IRON OKIE”  
SERGEANT RAYMOND RANDALL WINDLE, USMC**

*“Her mandates make heroes assemble, when Liberty’s form stands to view.”*

The Marine Corps had many heroes, but my favorite is Sergeant Raymond Randall Windle, USMC. Sgt. Windle was our machine gun section leader as far back as the early days of Camp Pendleton. Windle came aboard in February 1944.

When he first arrived I knew that he was a special kind of Marine. His demeanor and carriage said, “*Career Marine.*” The Sergeant carried a single red slash trimmed in green on his right sleeve signifying four years in the Marine Corps. What that hash mark meant to me was that we were being led by one of the best, as Windle was already a veteran of the war in the Pacific.

The then Corporal, as a member of the famed Second Marine Parachute Battalion had seen action during the Bouganville campaign. U.S. history books about World War II won’t tell you much about the Marine Corps engagements at Vella La Vella or Choiseul. Vella La Vella was a tiny, obscure island on the Great War map of the Pacific theater of operations. Not so much a Japanese stronghold as it was a hindrance and potential menace to the main event, the battle to take Bouganville.

**Admiral Halsey decided that Vella La Vella, in addition to having an airstrip on the island, would also make a good forward operating base. On September 128, 1943 the 3<sup>rd</sup> New Zealand Division landed at Barakoma. At the same time the 2<sup>nd</sup> Marine Parachute Battalion landed at Ruruvia. This was north of Barakoma. The operating plan called for setting up an administrative and communications organization for the embryo base. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Parachute Battalion raised a little hell with what few Japanese there were, but mainly their duty consisted of guarding the Seabees that were building the airstrip and killing some snipers.**

**By September 20, 1943 most of the Japanese forces had escaped to Kolombangara and on September 29, 1943 the main evacuation to Choiseul began. It wasn't until October 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> that the last of the Japanese troops were evacuated from Vella La Vella, leaving the Marines and the New Zealanders not much to do. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Marine Parachute Battalion then went back to Guadalcanal to rest and train for their next mission.**

**As always, the Navy had planes and a mission for the Marines. The next big target for the Marine Corps was Bouganville in the British Solomon Islands. This task was assigned to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Division. Sometimes in war deception and a feign at the right time can do as good as a full-scale battle; to decoy the Japanese attention away from the Marine's real plans: the invasion of Bouganville.**

**Admiral Halsey and the big naval brass decided that the 2<sup>nd</sup> Marine Parachute Battalion would pull a “raider” type action against the Japanese-held island of Choisul. (Why didn’t the Marine Parachute troops just drop on the Japanese via their parachutes? Good question. Answer: Too damned many trees. The Marine Parachute troops never had a combat drop in the Pacific.)**

**This decoy action, if it worked, would cause the Japanese brass to think the Marines next invasion was to be against Choisul. This would hopefully fake the Japanese high command into sending troops from Bouganville to reinforce their garrison at Choisul. The instructions for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Marine Parachute Battalion under the command of Lt. Col. Victor Krulak was to raise as much hell as possible, to disrupt communications and to create as much mayhem as possible for seven days. The Marines landed at Voza near Sangigai on October 27, 1943. During the seven days that followed the Marine’s mission was fulfilled and then some.**

**Major General a. A. Vandergrift, the commanding general, in a letter of commendation to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Marine Parachute Battalion said, “*A series of raids by your Marine parachute battalion resulted in the destruction of several hundred tons of Japanese supplies, the capture of Japanese documents of great value to our nation and to the destruction of an enemy barge and staging area at Sangigai. During the period on Choisul one hundred and forty-three Japanese were killed and undeterminable number wounded with a loss of only eight killed and thirteen wounded in your battalion.*”**

**The letter reads on, *“These highly commendable, aggressive Actions on the part of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Parachute Battalion (reinforced) contributed greatly to the success of the current operations in the South Pacific area and were carried out in conformity and with the highest traditions of the Marine Corps.”***

**The Japanese troops fought as hard at Vella La Vella and Choisul as they did at Guadalcanal or Tarawa. Most people don’t know that there is no word for *“defeat”* in the Japanese vocabulary. There was no mass surrender on the part of Japanese soldiers at any time or place in World War II.**

**The Japanese who were captured were almost always wounded. The engagements at Vella La Vella and Choisul were part of the real war in the Pacific; the Japanese roadblocks were out of the path of victory in the Pacific.**

**Sergeant Windle never talked about his role on Vella La Vella or Choisul, but then he never talks about himself. I don’t know if he had brothers or sisters, a girlfriend or if his parents were still alive. I had to question a lot of men that had served with him for the information I have.**

**The Marine Corps was his home. He was a career Marine. The Marines were his life; he was devoted to the Corps and we were all to be the better for it. I had made myself a promise to pattern my career in the Marine Corps after Windle. He was one of my heroes.**

**The Japanese held island of Iwo Jima, Volcano Group: D-Day, February 19, 1945 on the beach at Iwo Jim cost the machine gun platoon most of it's leadership. The machine gun platoon lost:**

**Lt. John Deager, DOW**

**Gunnery Sergeant Kavato, DOW**

**Sergeant George Lutkus, WIA**

**Cpl. Brookshire, WIA**

**Cpl. Whaley, WIA**

**Cpl. Pospisil, KIA**

**and a lot of men. This created a leadership void in the machine gun platoon that would be hard to fill. Luckily we still had Sergeant Windle, and Corporals Tremilius, Wilson and Chelf.**

**Sergeant Windle became the acting platoon leader, Cpl. Tremilius action section leader and action platoon sergeant. If you lived long enough on Iwo Jima you would get old quick, smart or promoted to the next rank through attrition. Being lucky and in the grace of God, were your best armor. The next best thing you could have, next to God on your side, was the redheaded sergeant from Snyder, Oklahoma.**

**Being under his leadership was better than a double insurance policy and a thousand good luck charms. This Marine sergeant was crafty., His personally picked good positions to fight from, and machine gun positions need good protection and a protected place to fire from. The average life of a machine gunner under combat was in**

**the 20-minute range. Open fire with a machine gun and the entire Japanese defense in that area would focus their attention on shortening up your life span.**

**To Windle we were not expendable, we were his platoon and he committed us to battle like a precious commodity; our health and welfare were always his main concern. At night each field of fire, for the guns were checked by Windle, corrections were made as needed. His constant vigilance was like a shield.**

**Our night defense was the best. I don't remember any Japanese defenders infiltrating our lines at night, from the front at least. The Sergeant was like a mother hen. Everyone was under his wing. Leadership by example was his style.**

**I guess the best thing that Windle did was to give us the courage to carry on day in and day out on Iwo Jima. After all, who would want to disappoint the Sergeant and let him down? He wasn't letting us down. He was everywhere and everywhere all at once it seemed.**

**Windle was about 5 feet 10 inches tall, almost skinny and he was always hungry. Some wore that the Sergeant had a tapeworm. He had the agility of a mountain goat and the heart of a lion. You see, the Sergeant, like the Japanese, didn't have the word "*defeat*" in his vocabulary. The Sergeant was to receive the Silver Star for his actions against the Japanese enemy. The citation reads like this:**

*The President of the United States takes great pleasure in presenting the Silver Star Medal to*

*Sergeant Raymond Randall Windle, United States Marine Corps*

*Citation:*

*For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in action against the enemy while serving with a Marine battalion on Iwo Jima, Volcano Islands, 12 March, 1945. When the Company to which he was attached was held up by numerous spider traps, three pillboxes and heavy mortar fire, Sergeant Windle, a machine gun platoon leader, after placing his machine gun in position, moved forward and ascertained the situation, which he reported to his company commander.*

*He requested that he and his troops be sent forward to rectify the situation that he had reported on. The Sergeant personally directed their movement to targets holding up their advance. Sergeant Windle then moved from one platoon to another, giving advice and encouragement to the men and corporals, who were acting platoon leaders. The voluntary presence, personal skills, initiative, courage and outstanding devotion to duty of Sergeant Windle were largely responsible for the continued advance of the company. His actions throughout were in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service.”*

**Now that was just for one day. The Sergeant was entitled to a least one citation per day, ranging from the Medal of Honor to a letter**

**of commendation. And all of the medals in between. Trouble was no one was left to do the write up for those citations. I guess that when Capt. Shon was wounded Windle became the company commander, till the battalion sent someone to take over the company.**

**On the same day he won his Silver Star medal, March 12, 1945 D+20, the good Sergeant Windle's luck ran out on him. D+20 was the last day on Iwo Jima for Sergeant Windle. He took a wound to his right leg.**

**Now I wasn't there but they tell me that before he would allow himself to be evacuated, he insisted that his souvenir Japanese book which had a bullet hole in it (which was put there by Windle when he killed the former Japanese owner ) be placed on the stretcher with him. No way would he leave Iwo without his prize of war. He had paid a lot for it.**

**Medical care had greatly improved as the battle wore on, the 5<sup>th</sup> Marine Division had it's own hospital ashore by this time of the siege. The trip form the front lines to the rear areas took less than twenty minutes and you would be under expert care and treatment.**

**Windle was wounded 03-12-45 and on the 13<sup>th</sup> of March was air evacuated the 700 air miles to the Island of Guam, USFH Number 111. On Guam he had top-notch facilities to expedite treatment. This air evacuation proved to be a vital factor in saving many lives on Iwo Jima.**

**After treatment and some recuperation on Guam, the Sergeant was transferred to Naval Hospital Number 10 at Pearl Harbor. He arrived on March 31, 1945. Now that's where the trail ends.**

**Except for the information that was supplied by PFC Lloyd Hurd. It seems that Sergeant Windle had just been in the neighborhood one day in St. Cloud, Minnesota. That's near Sartell, Minnesota, Lloyd's hometown. Windle came to see Lloyd at the St. Regis Paper Company. Lloyd had worked there before joining the Marine Corps and had taken his old job back. Lloyd told me that Sergeant Windle now a civilian, had married a lady from St. Cloud and he was stopping by to say hello to one of the former members of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Section, Machine Gun Platoon, B Company, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 27<sup>th</sup> Marines.**

**Lloyd said that the Sergeant was now in Sales. Now I won't give up looking for Windle, no matter the cost or time it takes. Oh how I've tried to find him. I have called all of the area codes in Oklahoma. I sweet-talked long distance operations into giving me all the phone number of anybody with the last name of Windle in the State of Oklahoma. Still no luck; well, he could be in any of the 50 states, he could be anywhere. He could be dead, after all a lot of time has passed since Iwo Jima.**

**New attack! I'm now in contact with the 5<sup>th</sup> Marine Division Association. Perhaps that will help. Maybe someone reading this book will know where he is. I will next write the Veterans Administration. Perhaps they will know something. Maybe he gets a pension.**

**I will always remember the pat on the back he gave me just after we entered the Amtrak and was on the journey to the beaches of Iwo Jima. No words were spoken; I just knew that the Marine Sergeant from Snyder, Oklahoma was with me and he was: all the way! I pray to God that he is somewhere out there; that he is eating good; that someone will tell him that PFC Charles William Tatum is looking for “The Sarge.”**

**At the 40<sup>th</sup> Reunion of the 5<sup>th</sup> Marine Division held in Phoenix, Arizona on September 27, 1989 I attended my first reunion with great excitement. I was to meet Mr. Lloyd Hurd from Sartell, Minnesota for the first time in forty-five years.**

**The last time I had seen Lloyd was on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of March, 1945 on the island of Iwo Jima. Platoon leader Sergeant Windle had ordered Lloyd back for some vitally needed rest. Lloyd had been spitting up blood for a couple of days and his condition was getting worse. I almost hated to see him go as Lloyd was my steadfast foxhole companion. We had been fox holing together since D+9, the day that my former buddy, PFC Steve Evanson was killed at Hill 362A.**

**The hotel where we stayed had booked our rooms just two doors apart. I had instructed the desk to have Mr. Hurd call my room on his arrival. Just as I was finishing shaving the telephone rang, as they always do where you are in the bathroom. It was Lloyd. I told him that I would come to his room as soon as I finished shaving and got dressed. In less than five minutes I was knocking on Lloyd’s door. The door**

**opened and my foxhole buddy and I were reunited after all those long years. It's hard to explain your emotions. Joy, exaltation, gladness! Yes, I know they all mean the same thing, but how else can you explain the feeling you get after meeting a true friend again after all the years that had gone by.**

**We shook hands and embraced. I must confess that a tear or two suddenly appeared in the corner of my eyes. Lloyd had to wipe his eyes, also. Across the room I could see a nice looking lady sitting on the bed. Lloyd introduce me to his wife Amelda. She told me how happy she was that Lloyd and I got to see each other again. We all started talking all at once. There was so much to bring each other up to date on in our lives.**

**When we started talking about the Marines that we had served with the first name that came up was our former section leader Sergeant Russell Randall Windle from Snyder, Oklahoma. Lloyd told me of his last encounter with Sergeant Windle. That was back in Sartell, Minnesota when Windle had paid him a visit shortly after the war was over. He told me again that the Sarge had married a lady from St. Cloud. He had lost track of him over the years. We both agreed that Windle was the best damn Sergeant the Marine Corps ever had.**

**I told Lloyd that I had made up a bulletin to place in the main meeting area (the bar). The bulletin had the names of Marines I was attempting to locate. Windle's name was at the top of the list. I thought**

what with 700 Marines from the 5<sup>th</sup> Division in attendance that surely someone would know the whereabouts of this Marine sergeant.

The bulletin didn't work. No one knew anyone on the list. Another dead end. Someone told me that he just might be dead. After all he would be nearly seventy years old now. I refused to believe it. I had a gut feeling that Windle was still alive and that if I kept trying I would find him sooner or later.

It was October 10, 1989 in Stockton, California after the reunion in Phoenix that I got a new idea. I would place a notice in the Spearhead News, the 5<sup>th</sup> Division Associations' official publication. I called my good friend Greg Emery, the editor of the Mail Bag section of the Spearhead News. Greg was nice enough to place my request for information concerning the whereabouts of Sergeant R.R. Windle in his column for the February, 1990 issue. Greg was a naval corpsman with the Marines on Iwo Jima and is the current Vice President of the 5<sup>th</sup> Marine Division Association.

Great idea, right? Yes, but it didn't work worth a damn. Maybe they were right. Maybe, just maybe the Sarge had passed on to the big battlefield in the sky. My gut feeling told me they were wrong. Windle is a survivor. He is out there somewhere and I won't give up looking for him. But the net results here was another dead end.

On December 9, 1990 at home in Stockton, California on a kind of lazy Sunday I watched a few football games. The 49ers beat the

Cincinnati Bengal's in a close game. Then I watched the Bears and the Redskins. As the game wore on it lost its interest for me. My wife told me I had promised to clean up my office and today would be a good day to do it. While cleaning my office I became bored and picked up the November 1990 issue of the Spearhead News. I had glanced through it when I first got it, but this time I settled down to read it from cover to cover. While reading the "Welcome Aboard" section I came across a couple of names that rang a bell. Gunner O. Johnson and Jack Beatty. I remembered that the machine gun platoon of Company B had a Gunner O. Johnson in it. Yes it probably was the same Marine, as he listed B Company, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 27<sup>th</sup> Marines as his old outfit. I wrote down both of their names and addresses, intending to write them a letter the next day.

My wife came into my office and caught me reading. She reminded me that I was supposed to be cleaning my office. My wife Evelyn is a real nice lady and all of that but she can be tougher than a mean gunnery sergeant when she's pissed, so no more reading; back to work. A little later she told me she was going to visit her mother in a small town about 20 miles away. After she left I went back to reading the Spearhead News.

It was now about six o'clock in the evening. I looked up the area code for Lawton, Oklahoma. That's where Gunner O. Johnson lived. The long distance operator gave me his number. I dialed his number and in a few minutes Gunner and I were talking about the old days with the 4<sup>th</sup> platoon of B Company (the correct name for the Machine Gun

Platoon in a Marine Corps company). During the conversation Windle's name came up, and then I got a real surprise. Gunner O Johnson said he used to live in Snyder, Oklahoma, Windle's hometown. Gunner told me that he had been in touch with the Sarge over the years and that he lived in a small town named Valley View, Texas. The next surprise was that Gunner had the Sarge's phone number and his address! What a break! I had finally hit pay dirt!

Gunner O. Johnson and I must have talked for the better part of an hour. It takes time to bridge forty-five years. Gunner told me that he had recently retired from the U.S. Postal Services and had seen my request for information about Windle in The Spearhead News and he intended to call me and give me Windle's address, but just hadn't gotten around to it yet. Would his information lead to pay dirt or would this be just another blind alley? I couldn't wait to find out.

I picked up the phone and dialed the number Gunner had given me. I heard the telephone ringing on the other end and after the third ring I thought, *"oh well, there's no one at home,"* when on the fourth ring a lady's voice answered, hello. I asked if this was the residence of a Raymond R. Windle. The lady replied it was and asked who was calling. I told her that I was a former Marine who had served with Sergeant Windle. She said, "All right," and I could hear her call, "Randall, the phone is for you."

The next voice is Windle's. "Windle here," he says. I say is this Sergeant Windle, USMC? He replied, "I was a sergeant in the Marines,

who is this?" I said, "This is PFC Charles Tatum, reporting in, Sir!" Windle said, "Who did you say?" I replied that I was Charles William Tatum who had been in his section of the machine gun platoon of B Company, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 27<sup>th</sup> Marines. "Do you remember me?" I asked. There was a short pause. Then he replied, "Hell yes, I remember you very well. You were from California. Is that where you are calling from?" I told him I was calling from my hometown of Stockton, California. Then he asked how I had found him. I told him that Gunner Johnson had given me his address and phone number.

We both began asking each other questions: How have you been? What have you been doing? Where did you work? How many children do you have? I asked what happened to him on Iwo Jim after he sent me back (Windle had to send me back to the rear after 15 days on Iwo Jima, he said I was coming apart at the seams.)

Windle told me what had happened to him. As the battle waged on in the siege of Iwo Jima, attrition thinned the ranks of B/1/27. All of the officers were dead or wounded except one (Second Lt. Trower of the mortars' squad was still with the company). Windle was now the ranking non-commissioned officer left in B Company. Windle's guardian angel had taken good care of him, shielding him from harm's way. But sometimes angels get busy somewhere else. On March 12, 1945 (D+20) Windle's angel must have taken the day off.

The tactical situation was this, a series of spider traps, three major pillboxes, and heavy mortar fire had thrown sand in the wheels

of B Company's attack. Windle, after placing his machine guns in position, went forward to see what in the hell was holding up the company's advance. Windle reported back to the commanding officer that the situation called for tanks . The call went out for the Tank Marines. You could soon hear the clank-de-clank noise that heavy tanks make when coming up to an area. When the tank Marines and their M1 Sherman's arrived Windle directed their advance, calling in targets to the tank commander. All of the time he was shouting orders, giving advice to and encouraging the corporals that were now acting platoon leaders to keep up the advance.

Needless to say this kept the Sergeant very busy, so busy in fact he didn't notice a Japanese soldier emerging from a spider trap had him in his sights. An alert Marine that was in the attacking columns but behind Windle opened fire just in time to dispatch the luckless Spiderman to his just rewards. Then all hell broke loose. The rounds that the saving Marine poured into the Spiderman and his trap set off ammunition that had been stored there. The resulting explosion got the good Sergeant Windle in his right leg and he went down to one knee and then rolled over grasping his leg in pain. Windle's luck had just run out. The iron man had fallen, the machine gun platoon had just lost their leader. Windle had taken command of the machine gun platoon on D-day and had been it's driving force ever since. B Company's best Marine was now out of action. His actions that day would win him the Silver Star Medal. The Silver Star is given for gallantry in action. Windle's leadership had carried the day for B Company that day, March 12, 1945. A corpsman was quick to Windle's side, a couple of

**Marines helped pull him to a protected area. The corpsman cut the leg of his dungarees and with his leg exposed the corpsman could see he had suffered multiple wounds to his right leg, but that it wasn't broken. The Corpsman seeing that there were no wounds to head, injected Windle with morphine to ease his pain and help overcome the shock that was sure to follow. Stretcher-bearers were called to the area and Windle was quickly taken to the rear where quality medical attention was available.**

**Windle's evacuation from Iwo Jim is covered in Mr. Tatum's book Red Blood Black Sand.**