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Kevin O'Hara: The saint and the Jewish lieutenant



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Lt. Marc Jaffe, USMC, 1943

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PITTSFIELD >> When my dear friend, Marc Jaffe, was being treated for complications of lymphoma at BMC in 2006, I spent many nights by his bedside after visiting hours. Despite his dire prognosis—a few caretakers believed he wouldn't last another week, he shared episodes of his long and storied life, from his editorial days at Bantam Books to his enduring romance with his lovely wife, Vivienne.

One night, Marc abruptly emptied out a backpack of memories from his three-year stint as a Marine lieutenant in World War II, a topic he'd never brought up before. A graduate of Harvard '42, he joined the Marine Corps as an officer candidate. After boot camp and further training at Quantico and Camp Lejeune, he received orders for the Pacific Theater.

Before shipping out, however, he went home on furlough to Philadelphia where he met a young Catholic woman. They hit it off famously, and on their last night together she tied a St. Christopher medal attached to a brown shoelace around his neck, saying, "Wear this at all times, and you'll come home safe." Marc jokingly asked her if it would work on a Jewish fellow like himself, and she assured him it would.

Fierce fight

In December, 1943, Marc boarded the Orizaba in San Diego and ultimately joined the 2nd Battalion, 1st Marines, as the forward observer in the 81-mm mortar platoon. In early 1944, his battalion prepared for a major operation to capture the island of Peleliu, presumably as a stepping stone to retake the Philippines.

Though this small island was protected by 11,000 well-fortified troops, command guaranteed the officers that the ground assault would last 72 hours. The ensuing 73-day clash would become one of the fiercest battles in Marine history.

Marc landed in the first wave on Peleliu on Sept. 15, 1944, finding the beach torn up "like a newly-spaded garden." Japanese machine gun fire rattled in long bursts from coral bluffs, and artillery shells rained from above. Marc's radioman, Charlie Long, lost a kneecap, and one sergeant, Bob Miller — "the best Marine in the platoon — took shrapnel in his arm. Marc turned to see two stalled amphibians bobbing in the waves. One caught fire, and with it, Pappy Giannetti.

Marc reached weakly for water on his night stand. "Pappy had made me a ring out of an Australian florin, after I'd given him a pint of rum."

His ongoing narrative was so telling I could feel the vibrating rush of shells and concussion of heavy artillery. I even sensed the pain of his annoying split lip, and the island's blistering 110-degree heat.

He explained how he felt like a giant marionette, "hopping from foxhole to shell hole as if handled madly from above." He spoke of wounded men, "who limped by like mechanical toys, their mainsprings nearly sprung." He described Japanese tanks as "brown clanking monsters festooned with colorful streamers," and brave black Seabees who brought troops needed supplies, "never knowing they had joined the Navy to become pack mules." Nearly half the platoon Marc landed with never cleared the beachhead.

Protecting the island and its prized airstrip was Bloody Nose Ridge, a honeycombed battlement of 500 linked caves where the enemy was entrenched, situated on steep hills. "No, not a ridge," Marc remembered, "but a ragged medieval fortress with tiny window portals high up in its walls." Marc winced

at the memory. "A fortress that became a grater; our men scraping against it and falling, broken and raw."

He spoke reverently of fellow officers who fell during the campaign; John Decker, son of a Texas county judge, with a honey-sweet whispered drawl. Jim "Chicken" O'Donnell, tall and lanky, the most likeable officer in the battalion. Gordon Maples, a Tennessee mountaineer, who hunted in his native forest all his life, only to be killed on a hellish outcrop of coral and vine. "Monk" Myer, a cop from Edgewater, New Jersey, who died on the operating room table after having a leg amputated, crying, 'How can I be a cop with only one leg?' And "Molly" Mercer, killed the last day after walking into a burst of Nambu fire.

All told, the Marines suffered 6,500 casualties, and the Army's 81st Infantry another 3,300. Ironically, Allied forces never used the island's air field after taking it.

Medal did job

On Dec. 6, 1945, Marc returned to San Diego, his war over. Before disembarking, he took off his St. Christopher medal for the first time and draped it over his bunk to shave. Sadly, he was already on the mainland before he realized he'd left it behind.

Marc propped himself up in bed. "But that medal did its job, didn't it? Pity I never saw that dashing girl again to thank her, but somehow I think she knew."

Now perhaps it was Marc's grit and determination, or the bedside vigils kept by his loving wife, or the excellent care of Dr. Harvey Zimble. Or just maybe the new St. Christopher medal I gave him, attached to a brown shoelace. But as sure as Lt. Jaffe was awarded the Bronze Star for later action in Okinawa, he marched out of BMC in shipshape condition.

Today at 11, if you happen to be in Williamstown, go to the Legion Post 152 observance of the ending of World War I at Field Park. There you'll find Marc Jaffe, saluting the flag proudly with fellow legionnaires — a hale and hearty marine of 93.

Kevin O'Hara, a Vietnam veteran, is a regular contributor to The Eagle.

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