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Medal of Honor and Navy Cross Recipient

By James G. Fausone

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Statue of “Manila John” Basilone

The service of John Basilone, a Medal of Honor and Navy Cross recipient, is unbelievable and made more remarkable by the fact that the only U.S. Coast Guardsman to ever receive the Medal of Honor, Douglas Munro, saved Basilone’s life. Only with the backdrop of the [World War II](#) Pacific Theatre could this be possible. Not even Hollywood could drum up this story. John Basilone served both in the Army and in the Marines, so both services can claim his heroics. He has been called one of the most badass Marines in U.S. history. Even today, Marines visit and pay their respects to a statue of “Manila John” in Washington, D.C.

Early Life

Giovanni (John) was born to a large and loud Italian-American family with roots in Buffalo, New York, and Raritan, New Jersey. The ten children in this Catholic family would not have been unusual in the early 1900s. John was the sixth child born to Salvatore, who emigrated from Italy, and Theadora, who grew up in New Jersey. Theadora’s parents had also emigrated from Italy. In classic fashion, Sal and Theadora met at a church gathering and they married three years later. John was born on November 4, 1916, at home in Buffalo.

The family returned to Raritan in 1918, as Buffalo averages 89 inches of snow each year as compared to New Jersey’s 25 inches and 50 more days of sun. The Basilone’s were back home near the big extended Italian family. Basilone grew up in the nearby Raritan Town (now a Borough of Raritan) where he attended St. Bernard Parochial School. After completing middle school at age 15, he dropped out prior to attending high school. Raritan was a small town in 1920 with 4,500 people and today its size has not doubled. The area is between New York City to the northeast and Allentown, Pennsylvania to the west. The Delaware and Raritan Canal (D&R Canal) was built in the 1830s to connect the Delaware River to the Raritan River. It was an important feature

of the agricultural area. This was a time of peace and expected prosperity. A strong, hard-working young man could make his way in the world, even if he did not have a clear direction. In 1931, after dropping out of school, Basilone worked as a golf caddy for the local country club before joining the military. But the world was about to change.

Two events that would have been in the news in 1932, but would not have been of interest to young John who was free from the constraints of education. First, [World War I](#) veterans were making their way to Washington, D.C. to demand the bonus payments they had been promised. This would have foretold John that not all promises to military recruits are kept.

As [reported by the National Park Service](#):

“In the years after World War I, a long battle over providing a bonus payment to WWI veterans raged between Congress and the White House. Presidents Harding and Coolidge both vetoed early attempts to provide a bonus to WWI veterans. Congress overrode Coolidge’s veto in 1926, passing the World War Adjusted Compensation Act, otherwise known as the Bonus Act.

The act promised WWI veterans a bonus based on length of service between April 5, 1917 and July 1, 1919; \$1 per day stateside and \$1.25 per day overseas, with the payout capped at \$500 for stateside veterans and \$625 for overseas veterans. The catch was this bonus would not pay out until each veteran’s birthday in 1945, paying out to his estate if he should die before then...

In May 1932, jobless WWI veterans organized a group called the “Bonus Expeditionary Forces” (BEF) to march on Washington, D.C. Suffering and desperate, the BEF’s goal was to get the bonus payment now, when they really needed the money...

By summer, at least 20,000 people had joined the camps, with some estimates putting the total number above 40,000. Many were joined by their families.”

Then-President Hoover called out the Army to push the Bonus Army out of the nation’s capital. That action impacted Presidential politics and ultimately Congress, with Democrats holding majorities in both houses, passed the [Adjusted Compensation Payment Act in 1936](#), authorizing the immediate payment of the \$2 billion in World War I bonuses, and overrode President Roosevelt’s veto of the measure.

Second, young John should also have noted in the news that the NSDAP (Nazi Party) won more than 38% of the vote in Germany’s 1932 federal election. The seeds of the next World War had been planted. Little did the Raritan caddy know how the world winds

were blowing and if he could rely on the nation's promises to its servicemen.

The First Stint

Storm clouds were brewing in Europe and the Pacific. The Nazis were causing rumblings in Europe and the Japanese were causing rumblings in China and the Pacific. After WWI, there was a natural drawdown of the US armed services. A modest rebuilding of the force strength was occurring during the 1930s and the War Department Chief of Staff was [General Douglas MacArthur](#) from 1930 to 1935.

During the same period, the economic crash had many young men looking for gainful employment to support their families. In 1933, Congress passed an act that put large numbers of jobless young men into reforestation and other reclamation work. President Roosevelt directed the Army to mobilize these men and thereafter to run their camps without any way of making the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) program. This was not a job the Army wanted, but options were limited.

One option for a young man was to join the regular Army. After John Basilone turned 18 years old, he enlisted in July 1934. As an infantry grunt, Basilone completed basic training and after stateside training, his first overseas assignment was to the Philippines.

The American military had been in the Philippines since the end of the [Spanish American War](#) under the terms of the Treaty of Paris when the United States took possession of the Philippines from Spain. This arrangement had to be implemented by force in 1898 and American troops were still on the Island in the mid-1930s. Independence would not be achieved until July 4, 1946, when the United States declared the Philippines an independent nation.

Basilone's tour in the islands would have been exotic for a New Jersey boy with little risk of engagement. He enjoyed the food, temperature, women, and comradery of his Army buddies. When he left the Army and returned stateside, he often thought about how to get back to Manila. He drove a truck for three years in Raritan, but the tropical breezes of Manila were always on his mind. The coldest month on average in Manila was 78 degrees and with no snow. John had to feel it was much better than Buffalo, New York, or New Jersey. Good duty if you can get it.

John thought about getting back to that good duty and felt his best opportunity to get back to Manila was with the Marines.

The Second Stint

When asked about re-upping or multiple tours a common refrain from veterans is, "it was a blast... but I would never do it again." Maybe for most men, it is the pull of a

normal life, family, or age of wisdom, but at 24 years old, John had no such pull to stay in New Jersey. Also, a more experienced John would have been aware of the world events with the Nazi war in Europe and Japanese aggression in China. The Country was getting prepared for what may come. Congress passed several laws related to national defense, including the Selective Training and Service Act of 1940, which provided drafting and training for men in the Army, Navy, Marines, and National Guard. More than 16 million men registered for the draft. Congress authorized money to build planes and ships, house soldiers, and established new military bases across the Country.

He did this initial training like all Marines, although he was older and more experienced based on the Army stint. He was sent to Guantanamo, Cuba as his first overseas assignment with the Marines. The next assignment would not be as idyllic.

Guadalcanal

The name "Guadalcanal" is said with reference to the Marine Corps. Even today, finding it on a map in the Pacific would be a challenge. There have been dozens of movies made about the Guadalcanal campaign depicting heroes on air, sea, and land. That tradition continued in 2005 with the film, "I'm Staying with My Boys: The Heroic Life of Sgt. John Basilone, USMC."

As part of the Solomon Island chain, Guadalcanal was the first land campaign against the Japanese in WWII. The Battle of Guadalcanal, code-named Operation Watchtower by American forces was fought between August 7, 1942, and February 9, 1943. Since Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the Pacific war was primarily a sea campaign and Japan took islands at will. Nine months later it was time for the Americans to show they could fight the mighty Japanese Army. The reputation and honor of the U.S. Marine Corps were hanging in the balance.

On August 7, 1942, America mounted its first major amphibious landing of World War II at Guadalcanal, using an innovative landing craft built by Higgins Industries in New Orleans. The goal was to capture a strategic airfield site on the island (later named Henderson Field for a US pilot lost in the Battle of Midway). This island was the furthest south the Rising Sun Empire had captured and to halt Japanese efforts to disrupt supply routes to Australia and New Zealand victory was paramount but uncertain. The invasion ignited a ferocious struggle marked by seven major naval battles, numerous clashes ashore, and almost continuous air combat over eight months.

The Solomon Islands remain strategically important almost 100 years later. In 2022, China learned from WWII and signed a new security pact with the island nation for ship visits, logistical replacement, protection of the safety of Chinese personnel, and major projects. In the future, American blood may again have to be shed on

Guadalcanal.

The men who landed ashore at Guadalcanal in 1942 built the lore of the Marine Corps in blood, sweat, and fear. Getting ashore turned out easier than predicted by the war planners, but holding the island airfield was harder than anticipated.

The Navy, with the assistance of Coast Guardsman, gave the Marines a ride to shore. The boat of choice was the Higgins Landing Craft. It would be famous for the D-Day landing at Normandy. Its wooden construction and flat bottom drew almost no draft. Its innovation was the front lowering ramp so the men could disembark quickly. With previous boats, men had to jump over the sides, exposing them to enemy fire. The ramp allowed for a more orderly landing – although it was certainly still risky. Dissatisfied with the landing boats designed by the Navy, the United States Marine Corps tested several commercial designs in the late 1930s, eventually settling on the former bootlegger boat designed by the Higgins boatbuilding company.

Semper Paratus Aid Semper Fidelis

After ferrying Marines to Guadalcanal, the U.S. Coast Guardsmen (Coasties) under the command of the Navy, stayed on the island in August 1942. Coasties also served as signalmen from the shore to the ships. Douglas A. Munro set up blinkers to signal the ship at night until he returned to his ship.

However, in September, a plan by the commander of the 5th Marines did not proceed as envisioned. As the Higgins boats approached the shore on September 27th, they were forced to re-direct due to coral reefs. After they successfully landed the men further down the cove, the boats returned to their operating base. The Marines were quickly trapped between a larger enemy force and the sea. Having lost the radio which was their only means of communication in the aerial bombardment, the men used their white shirts to spell “HELP!” on the sand. This attracted the attention of a Marine Corps dive bomber who communicated the situation to the command post. Relief was immediately organized and Coastie signalman Doug Munro volunteered to lead the rescue effort.

“Munro led a group of 10 Higgins boats toward the island under continuous strafing fire by the enemy. With four other boats, he approached the shore and attracted the enemy fire while the remaining boats landed to evacuate the Marines. As the rescue craft was fully loaded, a boat was stranded on the coral reef. Munro led a boat between the shore and the trapped boat in order to draw enemy fire. On the disabled boat, the able-bodied Marines used water to lighten the load and release it from the coral reef. The boat turned toward the sea and departed, Munro’s boat being the last to leave. A few seconds later, Doug Munro was shot in the back of the head and died. Dying in Ray Evans’ arms, his final words were “Did you get them?” (Dexter, 1942).



Amongst the Marines rescued that day was future Medal of Honor recipient **Sgt. John Basilone.** For his sacrificial courage, the Canadian-born United States Coast Guardsman from Cle Elum, Washington, was awarded the Medal of Honor. Although his hands were so severely burned that he could not even hold a cigarette, he was awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions during the evacuation of the island of Guadalcanal on 27 September 1942. After making preliminary plans for the evacuation of the island, he led five Higgins boats, engaged in the evacuation of the island, and at great risk of his life, daringly led five of his small craft toward the shore. As he closed the beach, he and his crew bravely fought the enemy's fire and protect the heavily loaded boats, he valiantly placed his craft with its two small guns as a shield between the beachhead and the Japanese. When the perilous task of evacuation was nearly completed, Munro was instantly killed by enemy fire, but his crew, two of whom were wounded, carried on until the last boat had loaded and cleared the beach. By his outstanding leadership, expert planning, and dauntless devotion to duty, he and his courageous comrades undoubtedly saved the lives of many who otherwise would have perished. He gallantly gave his life for his country.”

Douglas A. Munro

Signalman First Class Douglas A. Munro's Medal of Honor citation reads: "For extraordinary heroism and conspicuous gallantry in action above and beyond the call of duty, as petty officer in charge of a group of 24 Higgins boats, engaged in the evacuation of a battalion of Marines trapped by enemy Japanese forces at Point Cruz, Guadalcanal on 27 September 1942. He led five of his small craft toward the shore. As he closed the beach, he and his crew bravely fought the enemy's fire and protect the heavily loaded boats, he valiantly placed his craft with its two small guns as a shield between the beachhead and the Japanese. When the perilous task of evacuation was nearly completed, Munro was instantly killed by enemy fire, but his crew, two of whom were wounded, carried on until the last boat had loaded and cleared the beach. By his outstanding leadership, expert planning, and dauntless devotion to duty, he and his courageous comrades undoubtedly saved the lives of many who otherwise would have perished. He gallantly gave his life for his country.”



Douglas A. Munro

Back on the Island

The first few months on Guadalcanal were brutal. The Imperial Army fought bravely but the Marines had a similar

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took their toll and reduced the fighting force of 19,000 Marines. John had to be thinking about promises made for supplies and broken promises to the troops.

In late October 1942, having returned to the island, Manila John Basilone would be in the fight of his life that would turn him into a war hero. Bloody Ridge was the key high ground above Henderson Field. He and the two machine-gun sections under his command held off an attack by a far numerically superior Japanese force. He was one of only three Marines in that group to survive.

That territory had to be held to hold the airfield from which the "Cactus Air Force" was flying. Henderson Field was important to Allied air efforts for the South Pacific. Cactus Air Force refers to the ensemble of Allied air power assigned to the island of Guadalcanal, from August 1942 until December 1942, during the early stages of the Guadalcanal Campaign, particularly those operating from Henderson Field. The term "Cactus" comes from the Allied code name for the island.

Basilone's unit came under attack by a regiment of about 3,000 soldiers from the Japanese Sendai Division using machine guns, grenades, and mortars against the American heavy machine guns. The Sendai were experienced elite fighters like the Marines. Basilone commanded two sections of machine guns which fought for the next two days until only Basilone and two other Marines were left standing. The machine guns Basilone commanded were the M1917 Browning. It was a crew-served, belt-fed, water-cooled machine gun capable of 450 rounds per minute with a range of over 3,500 yards. The M1917 weighed in at a hefty 47 pounds.

As in a long battle, ammunition became critically low. Basilone fought through the hostile ground to resupply his heavy machine gunners with urgently needed supplies. Basilone moved an extra gun into position and maintained continual fire against the incoming Japanese forces. He then repaired and manned another machine gun, holding the defensive line until relief arrived. When the last of the ammunition ran out shortly before dawn on the second day, Basilone, using his pistol and a machete, held off the Japanese soldiers attacking his position. By the end of the engagement, Japanese forces opposite the Marines' lines had been virtually annihilated.

In the Battle of Bloody Ridge, a few Marines – and most notably John Basilone – held the high ground above Henderson Field. Following the decisive Naval Battle of Guadalcanal, the Japanese abandoned their attempts to retake Henderson Field, though fighting would continue for a few more months.

For his own critical role in the Battle of Bloody Ridge, Sergeant John Basilone was awarded the Medal of Honor.

Gunnery Sergeant John Basilone's Medal of Honor Citation reads:

"For extraordinary heroism and conspicuous gallantry in action against enemy Japanese forces, above and beyond the call of duty, while serving with the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, 1st Marine Division in the Lunga Area, Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands, on 24 and 25 October 1942. While the enemy was hammering at the Marines' defensive positions, Sgt. BASILONE, in charge of 2 sections of heavy machine guns, fought valiantly to check the savage and determined assault. In a fierce frontal attack with the Japanese blasting his guns with grenades and mortar fire, one of Sgt. BASILONE'S sections, with its gun crews, was put out of action, leaving only 2 men able to carry on. Moving an extra gun into position, he placed it in action, then, under continual fire, repaired another and personally manned it, gallantly holding his line until replacements arrived. A little later, with ammunition critically low and the supply lines cut off, Sgt. BASILONE, at great risk of his life and in the face of continued enemy attack, battled his way through hostile lines with urgently needed shells for his gunners, thereby contributing in large measure to the virtual annihilation of a Japanese regiment. His great personal valor and courageous initiative were in keeping with the highest traditions of the U.S. Naval Service. FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT Presented at Balcombe, Australia, by Major General Alexander A. Vandegrift on May 21, 1943."

A Hero's Homecoming



As was common for those that received the Medal of Honor

at that time, the War Department used the men for patriotic purposes at home. In part to keep the recipient safe after going through hell, but also to be paraded around and even to be a salesman. None of the men wanted this showcase tour of duty. In the last half of 1943, Basilone was the best show in town. A September 1943 parade in Raritan, New Jersey drew a huge crowd. The parade made national news in Life Magazine and Fox Movietone News. After the parade, Basilone toured the country raising money for the war effort, and achieved celebrity status. Hundreds of War Bond tours and

rallies took place in the United States. Hollywood stars and starlets were often the attraction and military heroes like Basilone were in demand. Over the course of the war, 85 million Americans purchased bonds totaling approximately \$185 billion.

Manila John asked to go back to the war front, but the Marine Corps denied his request and told him he needed more on the home front. He was offered an officer commission, which he turned down, and was later offered an assignment as an instructor, but refused this as well. Finally, his request to return to the fighting was approved. This time he did additional training on the west coast at Camp Pendleton. While at Pendleton, Basilone met and married Lena Mae Riggi, a sergeant in the Marine Women's Reserve serving as a field cook. They married in July 1944.



Marine Corps Gunnery Sgt. John Basilone and Lena Basilone on their wedding day, July 10, 1944, at St. Mary's Star of the Sea in Oceanside, California.

(Photo courtesy of St. Mary's Star of the Sea)

The Last Stint

Gunny John Basilone received orders to return to the Pacific fight. The newlywed certainly knew what he was getting into. He was no longer the naive New Jersey boy looking for adventure and believing everything said by some slick military recruiter.

Returning to the fleet, Basilone was assigned to "C" Company, 1st Battalion, 27th

Marine Regiment, 5th Marine Division. On February 19, 1945, the first day of the invasion of Iwo Jima, he was serving as a machine gun section leader. While the landing at Guadalcanal was uneventful and even surprised the Japanese, that was not the case on Iwo Jima. While the Marines landed, the Japanese concentrated their fire on the incoming Marines from heavily fortified blockhouses staged throughout the island.

Units were pinned down everywhere. Basilone flanked the side of the Japanese positions until he was directly on top of the blockhouse. He then attacked with grenades and demolitions, single-handedly destroying the entire strong point and its defending garrison.

He then fought his way toward Airfield Number 1 and aided a Marine tank that was trapped in an enemy minefield under intense mortar and artillery barrages. He guided the heavy vehicle over the hazardous terrain to safety, despite heavy weapons fire from the Japanese. As he moved along the edge of the airfield, he was killed by Japanese mortar shrapnel or small arms fire.

His actions helped the Marines penetrate Japanese defenses and get off the landing beach during the critical early stages of the Iwo Jima invasion. Basilone was posthumously awarded the marine Corps' second-highest decoration for valor, the Navy Cross, for extraordinary heroism during the Battle of Iwo Jim.

Basilone's Navy Cross citation reads as follows:

“For extraordinary heroism while serving as a Leader of a Machine-Gun Section, Company C, 1st Battalion, 27th Marines, 5th Marine Division, in action against enemy Japanese forces on Iwo Jima in the Volcano Islands, 19 February 1945. Shrewdly gauging the tactical situation shortly after landing when his company’s advance was held up by the concentrated fire of a heavily fortified Japanese blockhouse, Gunnery Sergeant BASILONE boldly defied the smashing bombardment of heavy caliber fire to work his way around the flank and up to a position directly on top of the blockhouse and then, attacking with grenades and demolitions, single-handedly destroyed the entire hostile strong point and its defending garrison. Consistently daring and aggressive as he fought his way over the battle-torn beach and up the sloping, gun-studded terraces toward Airfield Number 1, he repeatedly exposed himself to the blasting fury of exploding shells and later in the day coolly proceeded to the aid of a friendly tank which had been trapped in an enemy mine field under intense mortar and artillery barrages, skillfully guiding the heavy vehicle over the hazardous terrain to safety, despite the overwhelming volume of hostile fire. In the forefront of the assault at all times, he pushed forward with dauntless courage and iron determination until, moving upon the edge of the airfield, he fell, instantly killed by a bursting mortar shell. Stouthearted and indomitable, Gunnery Sergeant BASILONE, by his intrepid initiative, outstanding skill, and valiant spirit of self-sacrifice in the face of the fanatic opposition, contributed materially to the advance of his company during the early critical period of the assault, and his unwavering devotion to duty throughout the bitter conflict was an inspiration to his comrades and reflects the highest credit upon Gunnery Sergeant BASILONE and the United States Naval Service. He gallantly gave his life in the service of his country.”



John Basilone’s Grave

John’s wife, Lena, originally from Oregon, remained in California after John’s death and never remarried. She remained active with the Women’s Marine Association and died

in June 1999 at 86 years of age. She was buried at a VA National Cemetery in Riverside, California wearing her wedding ring, having turned down being interred at Arlington near her husband John because she didn't want to make a fuss.

John Basilone died while doing his duty to his utmost. On his left arm was a tattoo that read "Death before Dishonor." John lived by that motto. To this day, "Manila John" Basilone is one of Marine's unbelievable stories of heroism.

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