

Mitch Paige

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“My Story” From A Marine Named Mitch



About 0200, in a silence so pervasive that men many yards

apart could hear each other breathing, I began to sense movement all along the front and deep in the jungle below us and to our left. We could hear the muffled clanking of equipment and periodically, voices hissing in Japanese. These were undoubtedly squad leaders giving their instructions. At the same time, small colored lights began flicking on and off throughout the jungle. I could hear Price whispering for me to come to his foxhole. I quietly crawled over to him and he had an excellent view of someone flicking a light on and off. Price said, *‘I thought I was cracking up seeing all those fireflies.’* I assured him he was not cracking up because those were lights handled by Japanese soldiers.

As I crawled around telling the men to glue their eyes and ears to anything and reminded them that the small lights we were seeing were assembly signals for the enemy squads, I again instructed everyone not to fire their guns as the muzzle flash would give away our positions and that we would be raked with fire and smothered with grenades. We had to let them get closer as we were outnumbered, but when things started popping, I urged each man to just hang on. Earlier Jonjock, Swanek and I stretched a piece of wire out in front of our position and hung several empty blackened ration cans on it. We put an empty cartridge case in each can which would rattle if hit by someone’s foot.

I had previously requested an artillery and mortar concentration. This was, however, denied because the enemy was still in the jungle where the effect would almost be nil. I then returned to my foxhole. Manning my number two gun was Corporal Raymond

'Big Stoop' Gaston and Private Samuel 'Muscles' Leiphart. Their gun was at the part of our line which bordered on the side where the jungle came up to meet the ridge. They both whispered to me that there was considerable rustling very near to the undergrowth. I said, 'Hold your fire.'

Corporal Richard 'Moose' Stanberry arranged several grenades in a neat row in front of him, then nervously rearranged them. He was fond of his Thompson sub-machine gun and I never worried about him as he was well-trained, a perfectly disciplined marine who could handle himself in any situation. Now everyone was straining to hear and see.

The bushes rustled and the maddening voices continued their soft sibilant mutterings, but still, nothing could be seen. Then, I sensed a dim, dark figure lurking near Gaston's position. I grabbed a grenade, pulled the pin, and held the lever ready to throw it. Around me, I could hear the others also pulling pins as we did the night before.

We heard the ration cans rattle and then somebody let out a shriek and instantaneously the battle erupted. Grenades were exploding all over the ridge nose. Japanese rifles and machine guns fired blindly in the night and the first wave of enemy troops swarmed into our positions from the jungle flanking Gaston's gun.

Stansberry was pulling the pins out of his grenades with his teeth and lobbing them down the slope into the jungle. Leiphart was skying them overhead like a baseball pitcher. The tension burst like a balloon and many men found themselves cursing, growling, screaming like banshees. The Japanese were yelling Banzai! and '*Blood for the Emperor!*' Stansberry, in a spontaneous tribute to President Roosevelt's wife, shouted back, '*Blood for Eleanor!*'

The battleground was lit by flashes of machine-gun fire, pierced by the arching red patterns of tracer bullets, shaken by the blast of shells laid down no more than 30 yards in front of the ridge by Captain Louis Ditta's 60mm Mortars. It was a confusing maelstrom, with dark shapes crawling across the ground or swirling in clumped knots; struggling men falling on each other with bayonets, swords, and violent oaths. After the first volley of American grenades exploded the wave of Japanese crowding onto the knoll thickened. Pfc. Charles H. Lock was killed from a burst of enemy machine-gun fire.

I screamed, '*Fire machine guns! Fire!*' and with that, all the machine guns opened up with all the rifles and Tommy guns. In the flickering light, I saw a fierce struggle taking place for the number two gun. Several Japanese soldiers were racing toward Leiphart, who was kneeling, apparently already hit. I managed to shoot two of them

while the third lowered his bayonet and lunged.

Leiphart was the smallest man in the platoon, weighing barely 125 pounds. The Japanese soldier ran him through, the force of the thrust lifting him high in the air. I took careful aim and shot Leiphart's killer.

Gaston was flat on his back, scrambling away from a Japanese officer who was hacking at him with a two-handed Samurai sword and grunting with the exertion. Gaston tried desperately to block the Samurai sword with a Springfield he had picked up off the ground, apparently Leiphart's. One of his legs was badly cut from the blows. The rifle soon splintered. The Japanese officer raised his sword for the killing thrust and Gaston, with maniac strength, snaked his good leg up and caught his man under the chin with his boon docker, a violent blow that broke the Japanese's' neck.

The attackers ran past Gaston's gun and spread out, concentrating their fire on the left flank gun, manned by Corporal John Grant, Pfc. Sam H. Scott and Willis A. Hinson. Within minutes, Scott was killed and Hinson was wounded in the head. Then Joseph A. Pawlowski was killed. Stansberry, who had been near me, was hit in the shoulder, but the last time I saw him he was still firing his Tommy gun with ferocity and shouting, *'Charge! Charge! Blood for Eleanor!'*

Corporal Pettyjohn on the right, cried out in anguish, *'My gun's jammed!'* I was too busy to answer his call for help. At the center, we were beating back the seemingly endless wall of Japanese coming up the gentle slope at the front of the position. There were at that point approximately seventy-five enemy soldiers crashing through the platoon, most of them on the left flank, but the main force of the attack had already begun to ebb. The ridge was crowded with fighting men it seemed.

Somehow, I vividly recall putting up my left hand just as an enemy soldier lunged at me with a fixed bayonet. He must have been off-balance as the point of the bayonet hit between my little finger and the ring finger, enough to let me parry it off, and as he went by me he dropped dead on the ground.

The enemy started to melt back down the slope, and almost before they were out of sight, Navy Corpsmen began moving forward to treat the wounded. At Petty john's gun, James 'Knobby' McNabb and Mitchel F. 'Pat' Swanek were badly wounded and had to be moved off the line. Stansberry was still around and didn't want to leave. I crawled over to Pettyjohn's gun.

'What's wrong with it?'

Pettyjohn said 'a ruptured cartridge which refused to budge'.

I said, 'Move over,' and fumbled with stiff fingers, broke a nail completely off, but somehow pried the slug out with a combination tool, which I found in the spare parts kit under the tripod. I also changed the belt feed pawl, which had been damaged in the rough slamming trying to get the round out. Pettyjohn and Faust covered me.

Though the first assault had flopped, a number of enemy soldiers had shinnied to the top of the tall hardwood trees growing up from the jungle between the platoon and Fox Company's position. From this vantage point, they could direct a punishing, plunging fire down in two directions. The men in the foxholes along the crest were especially vulnerable; Bob G. Jonjock and John W. Price were wounded and helped back of the line by corpsmen.

I was getting ready to feed a new belt of ammunition into Pettyjohn's gun. My left hand felt very slippery so I rubbed it in the dirt under the tripod of the gun, then as I reached up to hold the belt again, I felt a sharp vibration and a jab of hot pain in my hand. I fell back momentarily and flapped my arm and stared angrily at the gun, which had been wrecked by a burst of fire from a Japanese Nambu light machine gun.

Almost immediately, a second assault wave came washing over our positions. This attack was more successful than the first. Oliver Hinkley and William R. Dudley were wounded. Hinson, over on the left gun and already wounded, continued to fire until all his supporting rifles were silenced. He then withdrew down around the hill in the rear of George Company, putting the gun out of action before he left as I had instructed.

That section had been hit hard with mortars and grenades, causing severe shock to all the men; one of the first being August P. Marquez. All the men on the spur had been literally blasted off, including Lieutenant Phillips, Bill Payne, and John Grant.

In the Fox Company area back toward my left ear, I saw Fox Company men pulling out and disappearing over the crest. I picked up a Springfield and fired a shot at them, yelling for them to hold the line.

The Japanese swarmed up that seventy-foot cliff in great numbers, armed with three heavy and six light machine guns, a number of Tommy guns, and several knee mortars. I thought, "*Dear God, Major Conoley and his small command post are just over the crest,*" but here was the only grazing fire I had with my machine gun, so I quickly found Gaston's gun and swung it around toward our own lines as there was nothing between my gun and the crest but enemy soldiers.

I fired a full belt of ammunition into the backs of those crouching enemies, praying that they could not get over the crest to the command post. I learned later from

Captain Farrell, who was with Colonel Hanneken's command post, that the word was that the enemy had one of Paige's fast-firing machine guns and the rounds were ricocheting over the line over Major Conoley's position. He had also heard reports that all my men had been killed and in fact, some had seen me sprawled out dead on the ground before they left the ridge.

I learned later, too, that this information had gotten back to the Division Command Post.

By 0500 the enemy was all over the spur and it appeared they were going to roll up the entire battalion front. A second prong of the attack aimed at our front had not fared as well, but my platoon was being decimated. A hail of shrapnel killed Daniel R. Cashman. Stansberry had been pulled back over the hill after being hit again.

I continued to trigger bursts until the barrel began to steam. In front of me was a large pile of dead bodies. I ran around the ridge from gun to gun trying to keep them firing, but at each emplacement, I found only dead bodies. I knew then I must be all alone.

As I ran back and forth, I bumped into enemy soldiers who were seemingly dashing about aimlessly in the dark. Apparently, they weren't yet aware they had almost complete possession of the knoll. As I scampered around the knoll, I fired someone's Springfield that I happened to pick up. Then somehow, I stumbled over into the right flank into George Company. There I found a couple of men I knew named Kelly and Totman. They had a water-cooled machine gun. I told them I needed their gun. At the same time, I grabbed it and they took off with me.

I said, '*Follow me!*' and ordered several riflemen to fix bayonets and to follow us to form a skirmish line back across the ridge. I told the riflemen not to be afraid to use the bayonet. We still had 1905, 16-inch bayonets with the front end sharpened throughout its length and the back edge five inches from the point.

It was by then not quite as dark as it had been. Soon dawn would break. I knew that once the Japanese realized how much progress they had made; the third wave of attackers would come up the slope to solidify their hold on the hill.

On the way back I noticed some movement of Japanese on the ridge just above Major Conoley's position, which I had raked with grazing fire earlier. I fired Kelly's and Totman's full belt of 250 rounds into that area and once again the rounds were ricocheting over Conoley's head, but he had no way of knowing that I was doing the firing. He could only surmise that the enemy was now using our machine guns.

As we advanced back across the ridge, some of the Japanese began falling back.

Several of them, however, began crawling awkwardly across the knoll with their rifles cradled in the crooks of their arms. Then I saw with horror that they were headed toward one of my guns, which was now out in the open and unmanned.

Galvanized by the threat, I ran for the gun. From the gully area, several Japanese guns spotted me and swiveled to rake me with enfilading fire. The snipers in the trees also tried to bring me down with grenades, and mortars burst all around me as I ran to that gun. One of the crawling enemy soldiers saw me coming and he jumped up to race me to the prize. I got there first and jumped into a hole behind the gun. The enemy soldier, less than 25 yards away, dropped to the ground and started to open up on me. I turned the gun on the enemy and immediately realized it was not loaded. I quickly scooped up a partially loaded belt lying on the ground and with fumbling fingers, started to load it.

Suddenly a very strange feeling came over me. I tried desperately to reach forward to pull the bolt handle back to load the gun, but I felt as though I was in a vise. Even so, I was completely relaxed and felt as though I was sitting peacefully in a park. I could feel a warm sensation between my chin and my Adam's apple. Then all of a sudden, I fell forward over the gun, loaded the gun, and swung it at the enemy gunner, the precise moment he had fired his full thirty-round magazine at me and stopped firing.

For days later I thought about the mystery and somehow, I knew that the 'Man Above' also knew what had happened. I never wanted to relate this experience to anyone, as I did not want to ever have anyone question it.

I found three more belts of ammunition and quickly fired them in the trees and all along the ridge. I sprayed the terrain with the remaining rounds clearing everything in sight. All the Japanese fire in the area was being aimed at me apparently, as this was the only automatic weapon firing from a forward position. The barrage, concentrated on the ridge nose, made me feel as if the whole Japanese Army was firing at me.

I was getting some help from our mortars controlled by Battalion with the George Company Commander, Captain L.W. Martin, observing. These rounds laid on the spur and prevented the enemy from moving up which would have probably enveloped me from the rear. Other than this, I was still alone as my George Company friends were still behind me some distance.

In addition to being in this position, I had an immediate need for more ammunition and I couldn't see any more lying around anywhere. Just at that time, aid came that made me glow with pride. Three men of my platoon voluntarily crossed the field of

fire to resupply me.

The first one came up and just as he reached me, he fell with a bullet in the stomach. Another one then rushed in and was hit in the groin just as he reached me too. He fell against me, knocking me away from the gun. Seconds later, Bob Jonjock, who had also been wounded earlier, came from somewhere with more ammunition. Just as he jumped down beside me to help load the gun, I saw a piece of flesh fly off his neck. He had been hit by an enemy bullet.

I told him to get back while I sprayed the area. He refused to leave. I said, '*Get the hell back, Jonjock!*' and he again said, '*No, I'm staying with you.*'

I hated to do it, but I punched him on the chin hard enough to bowl him over and convinced him finally that I wanted my order obeyed. He somehow made his way back as I was afraid, he would bleed to death.

Meanwhile, Major Conoley, at the forward command post, was rounding up a ragtag force with which to retake the Fox Company spur. There were bandsmen serving as stretcher-bearers, wiremen, runners, cooks, even mess boys, who had brought some hot food up to the front lines during the night and stayed just in case. Those men, numbering no more than twenty-four, mounted a counterattack up over the crest line that I fired some 500 rounds at. They found the Japanese machine guns and several of Fox Company's weapons, including three light machine guns, all in good working order. That counterattack found ninety-eight dead on the spur by actual count.

That was about 0530 or so. Dawn was already breaking. I was able to observe the progress of that charge from my position as I was directly out in their front. I also watched quite a few enemy soldiers scrambling back into the jungle, but I couldn't fire in that direction. As I watched that beautiful charge, it gave me the inspiration to get up and yell to my George Company fighters with their fixed bayonets to stand by to charge. I yelled out in Japanese to stand up: '*Tate! – tah-teh, tah-teh!*', hurry: '*Isoge!*' – *ee-soh-geh, ee-soh-geh!*'

Immediately a large group of Japanese soldiers, about thirty in all, popped up into view. One of them looked quizzically at me through field glasses. I triggered a long burst and they just peeled off like grass under a mowing machine.

At that point, I turned around to tell my friends I was going to charge over the knoll and I said, '*I want every one of you to be right behind me,*' and they were. I threw the two remaining belts of ammunition that my men had brought me over my shoulder, unclamped the heavy machine gun from the tripod, and cradled it in my arms. I really didn't notice the weight which was about a total of eighty pounds and was no more aware that the water jacket of the gun was red hot.

I fed one of the belts into the gun and started forward, down the slope, scrambling to keep my feet, spraying a raking fire all about me. There were still a number of live enemy soldiers on the hillside in the tall grass, pressed against the slope. I must have taken them by surprise, as the gun cut them all down. One of them I noticed, was a field grade officer who had just expended the rounds in his revolver and was reaching for his two-handed sword. He was no more than four or five feet from me when I ran into him head-on.

The skirmishers followed me over the rim of the knoll and they, too, were all fired up and were giving the rebel yell, shrieking and cat-calling like little boys imitating marines, sounding like there were a thousand rather than a mere handful.

They followed me all the way across the draw with fixed bayonets, to the end of the jungle, where long hours before, the Japanese attacks had started. There we found nothing left to shoot at. The battle was over.

The jungle was once again so still, that if it weren't for the evidence of dead bodies, the agony and torment of the previous hours, the bursting terror of the artillery and mortars rounds and the many thousands of rounds of ammunition fired, it might only have been a bad dream of an awful death.

It was a really strange sort of quietness. As I sat down soaked with perspiration and steam still rising from my hot gun, Captain Louis Ditta, another wonderful officer who had joined the riflemen in the skirmish line and had earlier been firing his 60mm mortars to help me, slapped me on the back and as he handed me his canteen of water he kept saying, '*tremendous, tremendous!*' He then looked down at his legs. We could see blood coming through his dungarees. He had a neat bullet hole in his right leg.

There were hundreds of enemy dead in the grass, on the ridge, in the draw, and in the edge of the jungle. We dragged as many as we could into the jungle, out of the sun. We buried many and even blasted some of the ridges over them to prevent the smell that only a dead body can expel in heat. A corpsman sent by Capt. Ditta smeared my whole left arm with a tube of salve of some kind. He cleaned off the bayonet gash, since filled with dirt, and the bullet nicks on my hands also filled with dirt and coagulated blood. He stuck a patch on my back just below the shoulder blade. (In 1955, I felt something irritating in my back, and then had a piece of metal about 3/4 of an inch long removed from my back; right where the corpsman had placed that patch.)

As the corpsman left, he said, '*You know, you have some pretty neat creases in your steel helmet.*'

I replied:

“Yes, thank God – Made in America.”

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