

The Battle for Conical Hill

By Robert C. Muehrcke, M.D.

Many units of the 96th Infantry Division were involved in taking Conical Hill, Okinawa, from the Japanese. This is a story of the "blood brothers" of the 1st Platoon, Company F, 383rd Infantry Regiment, and their role in securing Conical Hill on Okinawa from 10 May to 25 May 1945.

"We few, we happy few, we band of brothers.
For he today that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother."

(Shakespeare, Henry V)

In 1945 it was imperative that the U.S. Armed Forces capture Okinawa Island as quickly as possible so that its harbors, ports and airfields could be used to mount the invasion of Japan from a secure base. As the Japanese were well aware of this, they had thoroughly prepared themselves not only to resist to the last man, but they also had planned to inflict as many casualties as possible against the U.S. forces invading the island. Thus the battle itself was a ferocious one, and an enormous number of casualties occurred among both the Japanese and Americans. The battle was, in fact, a blood bath.

Conical Hill was the east anchor of the Japanese Yanabaru-Shuri-Naha defense line. During the battle, the U.S. Navy supported the 96th Infantry Division by pouring thousands of shells and rockets into Japanese positions on the hill. Because of the Navy's large expenditure for these devastating shells, the Navy referred to Conical Hill as the "Million Dollar Hill". More American and more Japanese casualties resulted from the Conical Hill battle than from any other single battle for Okinawa.

In May 1945 the war in Europe ended and attention was turned toward the Pacific Theater and Japan. In the Americans' preparation to invade the Japanese homeland, U.S. Armed Forces required large bases near Japan to house great numbers of troops, ships and planes. Okinawa was ideal; it provided not only the air fields, harbors, but staging areas for troops.

Less than two miles south of Hill 176 on Okinawa, Conical Hill was approximately 500 feet above the ocean. It had six long sharp ridges with spurs that extended from the pinnacle. The first ridge or spur was the eastern one, which ran for about a mile toward Yanabaru Bay. It was renamed Buckner Bay after Lt. Gen. Simon B. Buckner, Jr., the Tenth Army Commander who was killed observing the battle. A second ridge projected northeast toward Gaja Ridge, which was the military objective of Company F, 383rd Infantry Regiment. A third ridge extended due west toward Love Hill, and a fourth ridge ran due south for 800 yards along the coast to end in Sugar Hill. It was northwest of the Yanabaru Port. The city of Yanabaru was the third largest city on Okinawa.

A flat plain extended eastward to the coast for 600 yards from Conical Hill and its ridges. Okinawa's main Highway 13 passed across this plain. A long valley separated Conical Hill from the three hills west of this pinnacle; Fox, Charlie and King Hills. The valley ran into the Naha-Yanabaru Road. Oboe Hill guarded the eastern flank of Medieval Shuri Castle as well as the western flank of Conic-

al Hill.

At Leyte, Philippine Islands, the 96th Infantry Division had its first baptism of combat with the Japanese. On Easter Sunday, 1 April 1945 the Division invaded Okinawa. The Division was low in battle wise officers and enlisted men. Moreover, throughout April 1945 the 96th Infantry Division lost its fighting efficiency caused by unexpected, extremely high attrition and casualties of sergeants and



Okinawa: S/Sgt James Pruit, T/Sgt. Guy Dale and S/Sgt Orrie Gruwell (Courtesy of Robert Muehrcke)

lieutenants on Okinawa. During the Okinawa battle more than 3,500 enlisted replacements filled the Division's ranks. Newly commissioned officers arrived; they only partially filled the ever increasing company-grade officers shortage. These officers had to learn leadership skills in battle.

The majority, of the replacement officers had prior combat experience, usually as acting platoon leaders who had fought the Japanese at Guadalcanal, Bougainville, and elsewhere in the Pacific Theater. Among these battle wise and experienced line officers were Lieutenants William Elbertson, Ernest Teeman, Earl Soderman, Jack B. Fitzgerald, Leonard K. Warren, James O. Jewel, John S. Janiszewski and Robert C. Muehrcke.

Approximately 1,000 Japanese troops occupied fortified positions on Conical Hill. They were well dug into caves and behind rocks in the hills, which made for very strong fortified positions. These Japanese troops were members of Col. Hotishi Kanayama's 89th Infantry Regiment, 24th Infantry Division, and part of the Thirty-third Army. In addition Col. Kanayama's troops were reinforced by the 27th Independent Battalion, one company of the 3d Independent Machine Gun Battalion, and the 23rd Anti-tank Company. These troops were supported by heavy mortars and hundreds of 75MM artillery guns. The ground between the coastal city of Yanabaru and Conical Hill held two battalions of the Japanese 44th Independent Mixed Brigade.

On 5 May 1945, during the Japanese offensive, Gaja Ridge was lost by the 184th Infantry Regiment, 7th Infantry Division. Two days later, on 7 May, the 7th Infantry Division troops reoccupied the ridge with relative ease. The enemy's offensive action in May

ended in failure. Their attention was now concentrated on preparing strong defensive positions. Three days of extremely violent ground fighting preceded the attack on Conical Hill.

On 9 May, during torrential rains, Company F was given the objective of relieving the 2nd Battalion, 7th Infantry Regiment, 7th Infantry Division at Gaja Hill.

On 9 May the units of the 96th Infantry Division started the attack on Conical Hill. The main effort was made at Dick Hill in the Shuri-Yanabaru Defense Line by the 382nd Infantry Regiment. Company B, 383rd Infantry Regiment, was atop Charlie Hill. Company G tied in with C Company. Other companies secured footholds: Company C occupied an area from Charlie Hill to Fox Hill; the west side of Charlie Hill, Easy Hill was occupied by Company B; the northern end of King Hill was occupied by Company L. None of our troops reached the summit.

Conical Hill was a Japanese observation post, and from its peak and the Chinen Peninsula enemy could direct accurate artillery fire on U.S. positions. They could place this concentrated fire on any approach to Conical Hill. Fortunately the enemy artillery file was neutralized and eventually destroyed by concentrated American artillery as well as effective naval rocket attacks. The Japanese troops were specifically ordered to stop the Americans at Conical Hill, and they were moved from other areas along the Naha-Shun-Yanabaru Line to reinforce Conical Hill.

Col. Edwin T. May, Commander of the 383rd Infantry Regiment, believed the best approach to the Conical Hill summit was to secure Charlie Hill first. Company G advanced and gained a strong foothold on Charlie Hill. This was done despite heavy casualties to both Japanese and American Forces.

On 11 May 1945 Company F cleared out the forward slopes of Gaja Ridge. The 1st Platoon, under Lt. Muehrcke, knocked out 11 pillboxes without a single casualty; he previously had fought at Gaudalcanal and Bougainville with the Americal Infantry Division. Muehrcke was cautious, considerate of his men's lives; he moved slowly but deliberately. He did everything to preserve the lives of his men.

On 11 May T/Sgt. Elmer A. Wolf from Detroit, Michigan was the Heavy Weapons Platoon leader. He joined Lt. Muehrcke by jumping into his foxhole. Wolf inquired about the enemy's locations, as he wanted to make sure his mortars were firing accurately on them. Lt. Muehrcke then did a fast push-up above the foxhole parapet, and on coming down he described the Japanese position to Wolf, who confirmed Muehrcke's description. Unfortunately, on Wolf's second push-up over the parapet a Japanese bullet struck him between the eyes and killed him instantly.

Lt. Muehrcke was wounded when he tried to bring Wolf's body back. The arm wound was superficial but painful. Capt. Robert Becker cleaned and dressed the wound and Muehrcke rejoined the 1st Platoon.

On 12 May the 1st platoon was ordered to rid Gaja Village of Japanese and to occupy the high ground on the ridge. Early that morning as ordered, the 1st platoon met with the tank commanders of the 763rd Tank Battalion in the village of Kibara. The previous day the tankers had lost their commanding officer, Lt. Col. Harman L. Edmonson, killed by enemy mortar fire.

After the meeting Lt. Muehrcke discussed the battle plan with his platoon sergeants, T/Sgt. Guy J. Dale, Platoon Guide S/Sgt. Orrie Gruwell, and Squad leaders S/Sgt. Edward Mankunas, S/Sgt. Roy Simpson, and S/Sgt. James E. Pruitt. The 1st platoon was sup-

ported by three flame throwing tanks and two Sherman tanks.

T/Sgt. Guy J. Dale from Dongola, Illinois was the platoon sergeant. He was with the 383rd Infantry Regiment since their training in Oregon. He fought at Leyte, Philippine Islands; on Okinawa he was awarded the Silver Star for valor. He was battle wise, intelligent, and a great leader in combat. He remained in the service, was commissioned, fought in the Korean War and was killed in action.

Lt. Muehrcke was behind the center tank with S/Sgt. Edward Mankunas and his squad. T/Sgt. Guy L. Dale was behind the right tank with S/Sgt. James Pruitt, from Abilene, Texas and his squad. S/Sgt. Orrie Gruwell, the platoon guide, was behind the left tank with S/Sgt. Roy Simpson and his squad. S/Sgt. Gruwell, of Mountain Ranch, California was a quiet happy-go-lucky man who led by example and got along well with his men.

The tank flame throwing gun was installed in a standard 75MM gun tube. The fuel was a mixture of Napalm and gasoline. On Okinawa there were 55 flame-throwing tanks. Death by fire from these devastating tanks was associated with severe smothering, resulting in horrible and painful death. The smell of roasted human flesh resulting from these tanks was never to be forgotten.

As the tanks slowly crossed the rice paddies from Kibara to Gaja Ridge, a squad of men followed behind each flame-throwing tank for mutual protection. As the tanks gradually moved toward Gaja Ridge, the men advanced closely behind. Fifty yards from the objective, their machine guns and 75MM guns were firing. At 35 yards from the ridge, each of three flame-throwing tanks let fly a long stream of concentrated deadly fire that spread widely and saturated the objective. The flame lasted for at least 15 minutes which seemed an eternity. Long before the deadly fire reached the ridge, numerous Japanese retreated from all their strong defense positions, only to be cut down by the 60MM mortars and light machine guns of F Company's heavy weapons platoon.

After the tankers covered the hill with liquid fire, S/Sgt. "Lefty" Mankunas was ordered to move out with his squad up Gaja Hill. He left the protective security of the tanks. As he approached the ridge he found his squad was still behind the tanks. Mankunas felt as though he was stripped naked of the tank's armor. A few choice words brought his entire squad up to him on the double.

The entire platoon formed a skirmish line up Gaja Hill. The ground was still burning. Burnt and charred Japanese were all over the approaches to Gaja Village, and all Japanese resistance had ceased. The 1st platoon then consolidated its front line over the Gaja Hill, with the balance of Company F.

On 12 May during the 1st platoon infantry and tank attack, T/Sgt. Dennis O. Duniphin led his 3rd platoon through the town of Gaja. They advanced up a draw just short of Conical's northern spur. Three lead men were killed shortly after they started the ascent. For three hours, the remainder of the 3rd platoon was pinned down. Under heavy phosphorous smoke the 3rd platoon withdrew to their positions on Gaja Ridge.

During the continuous and intensified American attack at Conical Hill from 9 May into June, Lt. Gen. Mitsuru Ushijima, the Japanese Army Commander, who had continuously reinforced his troops on Conical Hill, now committed his reserve to protect the north ridge of Conical Hill. The Tenth Army general staff officers believed Conical Hill was getting ripe for the "taking." However, for success they felt the attack must be made along the north and east slopes.

On 13 May Generals Buckner, Hodge, and Bradley unanimous-

ly agreed that Conical Hill was the key to securing Okinawa; at 1000 hours, General Buckner ordered: "Take the summit."

That same morning the 1st and 3rd platoons, Company F, eliminated all resistance at the base of Conical Hill. Prior to jump off, Company F received direct fire support from the 921st Field Artillery Battalion, the Regiment's Cannon Company, Antitank Company, and H Company's Mortars.

Major Lee Morris, 2nd Battalion commander, having reviewed the exact objectives with the two platoon leaders, had the two platoons move out on Gen. Buckner's order. At 1015 hours the 1st platoon moved out in a column of squads. T/Sgt. Dennis O. Duniphin was abreast of the 1st platoon; he also moved the 3rd platoon forward in a column of squads.

T/Sgt. Duniphin was a professional soldier. He led by example. He was tough but fair. He talked to his men, never down to them. T/Sgt. Duniphin then led his platoon in a single column of men up through a small protective canyon avoiding the draw where the day before three men had been killed.

They crossed irrigation ditches littered with dozens of Japanese killed during the enemy's early May offensive. They reached the summit by 1045 hours. Not a shot was fired. However, at 1040 hours when the 1st platoon advanced 1000 yards up the northeast slopes to a group of large rocks, a light machine gun opened fire. The 1st platoon halted and took cover.

Lt. Muehrcke sent T/Sgt. Dale the remaining 500 yards to occupy the summit with S/Sgts. Roy Simpton and James Pruitt and their squads. Simpton's squad was in the lead. Pfc. Gene Brown was the lead scout. S/Sgt. Pruitt, from Abilene, Texas, followed with his squad. He was slim and gained the respect of his men and reminded one of Gary Cooper.

S/Sgt. Lefty Mankunas' squad contained Pfc. Clayton Baker from Rapid City, South Dakota. He was the squad's Browning Automatic Rifleman (BAR). Baker was brave and courageous with great strength. Baker became the BAR man when Sgt. Dolores "Bull" Medina was made assistant squad leader. Baker was a recent replacement to Company F. He stated, "The battles for Conical Hill to the Yuzu-Dake Escarpment were pure hell."

A Japanese machine gun position was found in a large cave and quickly destroyed. The smoke of white phosphorous grenades escaped through several openings in the cave. These gun ports were sealed. In this deep cave, a Japanese 50MM mortar and a large amount of ammunition were found. S/Sgt. Mankunas brought this knee mortar with some ammunition to the summit. At 1100 hours, the balance of the 1st platoon reached the summit. There was no initial resistance received by either the 1st or 3rd platoon.

The heavy weapons platoon had its mortar section dug in on a rock ledge below the summit. Light machine guns were along the Company's flanks. From the summit, one could observe the enemy's primary positions. The summit was a front row seat to observe the kamikaze air attacks on our Navy, which took an enormous toll of ships and men.

At 1100 hours T/Sgt. Duniphin noted a well camouflaged Japanese light machine gun. The soldiers were unaware of T/Sgt. Duniphin's presence. He took a platoon member's Browning Automatic Rifle and fired into the positions destroying all Japanese.

In the anticipation of a counterattack, Lt. Muehncke instructed Sgt. Mankunas and his men in the use of the Japanese knee mortar. During the advance to the summit neither the company commander, Lt. Owen O'Neil, nor M/Sgt. Lewis Stone, the first sergeant, could be

reached by the walkie-talkie radio. Okinawa was called "radio country;" however, during the heavy rains on Conical Hill there were many radio problems. Neither the 1st platoon (Fox One) or the 3rd platoon (Fox Three) could communicate with the company command post. Generals Buckner, Hodge and Bradley, with Col. Edwin T. May, observed the Conical Hill advance with great pleasure.

The 2nd platoon of Company F was led by Lt. Richard "DM" Frothinger from Minneapolis, Minnesota. The platoon was in company reserve and later became the support platoon. The 1st platoon messenger, Pfc. Burton Denney, was sent to bring up Lt. Richard (Bill) Frothinger with his 2nd platoon at double time to the summit. At 1130 hours they were positioned between the 1st platoon on the right and 3rd platoon on the left. F Company's left flank was tied in with the 7th Infantry Division and the right flank with Company E, 383rd Infantry Regiment.

At 1130 hours, although there was no forward artillery observer on Conical Hill, an airborne field artillery observer noted the Japanese troops massing for their counterattack. By radio the air artillery officer observer was heard ordering artillery fire. This artillery observer from the 921st FA Battalion warned us about the impending Japanese attack. He spontaneously ordered "time on target" concentration of rapid air burst fire. This fire devastated and slowed down the attacking Japanese. The 921st FA Battalion deserved much credit for preventing the Japanese from pushing the American Infantry off the hill.

Between 1200-1300 hours the support artillery was supplemented by Sgt. Lefty Mankunas' use of the captured Japanese knee mortar. He used it with deadly accuracy. Pfc. Burton Denny brought the remaining Japanese knee mortar shells to the summit. It was a pleasure to use this effective enemy weapon against the Japanese. In addition, the 88th Chemical Battalion's 4.2 mortars had effectively fired across F Company's front. The best choice in support came from F Company's 60MM mortars. They were used with deadly accuracy. The Japanese infantrymen never advanced close enough to push Company F off the summit, no matter how hard they tried. The initial counterattack and two others brought the Japanese to a halt.

The artillery observer put his air burst pattern so close to the F Company's position that a recently arrived artillery observer requested the fire be moved out from our front line positions. The infantrymen were saved by both the captured knee mortar fire, mortars, and massive and deadly artillery fire. S/Sgt. Mankunas, now retired in Chicago, Illinois, still remembers the effective deadly use of the knee-mortar.

At 1330 hours S/Sgt. Bud Lierly from Scottsdale, Arizona, was digging his defensive position. Before each enemy ground attack they laid down concentrated knee-mortar fire. During an attack, knee mortar shrapnel struck S/Sgt. Lierly in the arm and broke it. Pfc. Dwight F. Fry and Pfc. Leslie E. Middlebrooks, the Regimental aid-men assigned to Company F, cleaned the wound, bandaged it, and injected Sgt. Lierly with morphine. S/Sgt. Lierly reported his wound to T/Sgt. Duniphin and descended the slopes of Conical Hill

At 1430 hours S/Sgt. Lierly reached a group of rocks 20 yards down the slope. There he was wounded a second time- A sniper's bullet severed a leg artery. Plc. Dwight Fry came down the slope, stopped the hemorrhage and dressed both of Lierly's wounds. Lierly staggered back down Conical Hill to get himself back to the battalion aid station for additional medical attention. That night S/Sgt. Lierly reached the regimental aid station and found T/Sgt. Duniphin had beat him there.

At 1500 hours T/Sgt. Duniphin was inspecting his platoon area. There was a 10 foot wide crack in a huge rock. It narrowed to four feet wide at the base. Although several other infantrymen passed

through the low area, T/Sgt. Duniphin in passing through the crevasse unfortunately exploded a Japanese land mine. His body was hurled into the air; the explosive charge shattered both legs. The severe injury later required bilateral amputation. T/Sgt. Duniphin was to have received a field commission on 14 May 1945. Because of his injuries he never was commissioned. At 2000 hours a battalion medical officer attended to T/Sgt. Duniphin and had litter bearers carry the brave platoon leader down the steep slopes of Conical Hill to the support tanks before they withdrew for the night T/Sgt. Duniphin's litter was placed on top of the tank and headed for the regimental aid station

General Buckner complimented the 2nd Battalion in securing Conical Hill on 13 May. He said; "This was the most brilliant example of small unit action I've ever witnessed."

During the night of 13 May, Company F was continuously under Japanese mortar fire. Pfc. Baker was in a large foxhole shared with two Browning Automatic Rifle assistants, Pvts. James O. Saxe and Harvey H. Lunaman. A knee-mortar shell exploded on the foxhole parapet and sprayed fragments into the foxhole. Pvts. Saxe and Lunaman were instantly killed.

To protect US. infantrymen during darkness, the Navy fired illumination flares along the entire American front. Thus, it was difficult for the enemy to attack during the night. There were many fire fights before the entire Conical Hill was secured. Fighting occurred at Charlie Hill, King Hill, Love Hill, and Sugar Loaf Hill. Repeatedly prayers could be heard, and many times the infantry men's prayers were said in quiet.

On 17 May two squads from the 1st platoon of Company F waited for a patrol from Company C, 383rd Infantry Regiment to clean out the forward slope of a more distant ridge at King Hill. A Sherman tank was firing in a cut between two ridges at Japanese on the reverse slope of hills. The tank had several periscopes shot out by the Japanese.

Lt. Frank E. Switzer brought the C Company patrol around to the safety of the tank and joined Lt. Muehrcke under the tank. Both lay next to each other. Despite their long growth of face hair, they recognized each other. Suddenly a Japanese machine gun shot off Lt. Switzer's canteen cover and riddled his field Jacket with bullet holes. After members of Company C left, Lt. Muehrcke called for artillery smoke to permit the platoon to clean out the reverse side of King Hill.

A Japanese sniper was seen in a deep foxhole. S/Sgt. "Lefty" Mankunas, a star softball pitcher who was actually a clown when it came to providing laughs, threw a fragmentation grenade that bounced off the foxhole parapet and exploded. Lt. Muehrcke kidded the sergeant about his star pitching. Lefty threw a second grenade, this one a white phosphorous grenade. It exploded in the foxhole and three Japanese soldiers rolled out. They were killed instantly.

A short while later all hell broke loose. Pfc. Ed "Big" Brown was wounded. Lt. Muehrcke called the artillery for more white phosphorous smoke. This dense smoke shielded the platoon; thus no target was presented to the Japanese. A denim field jacket was converted into a litter by putting an M-1 rifle through each sleeve. Ed "Big" Brown was slung over the jacket and carried to safety by Lt. Muehrcke and Pfc. Gene "Little" Brown.

On 22 May Company F relieved men of the 381st Infantry Regiment at a portion of the main line at the southern hogback between Conical Peak and the Cutaway. In this area, despite well built positions, Japanese knee-mortar and grenade fire killed seven men and wounded 12; Lt. Muehrcke and Pfc. Nobel Henson, a BAR man, were two of the 12 men wounded. Both were struck by machine

gun bullets. The next day a large cave and tunnel through the ridge was found. This gave the 1st platoon excellent fields of fire on Conical Hill's western slopes.

S/Sgt. James Pruitt led a patrol of four men with satchel charges. They found a Japanese heavy machine gun on the forward slope of the ridge. S/Sgt. Pruitt lowered a satchel charge with a detonator attached. The Japanese pulled the satchel charge into their machine gun position and quickly removed the detonator and threw it away. A second satchel charge with an exposed detonator was lowered. The Japanese pulled the second explosive charge into its position and quickly removed the exposed detonator.

A third satchel charge with Iwo detonators was lowered. The Japanese pulled the third explosive into their cave and removed only the exposed detonator. Within five seconds, a tremendous explosion rocked Conical Hill's hogback. The mountain trembled and Japanese bodies, with large logs and other debris, were flying high in all directions.

Late the next day, S/Sgt. Pruitt received a Japanese machine gun wound in his left thigh. Pfc. Middlebrooks treated him. Pruitt remained with his squad up front on the hill overnight. In the morning, he was transported to the base hospital. A few days later he died. The men of Company F were greatly saddened by his death.

Finally on 31 May, after the most intense and bitter combat during the battle of Okinawa, Company F secured the eastern slope at Sugar Loaf Hill of Conical Hill. It resulted in a forced break in the main Japanese lines and permitted a flanking action to the Shuri Castle by the XXIV Corps. The 7th Infantry Division made the end run. Throughout the campaign the fighting was intense and severe due to Japanese fierce resistance. The first platoon of Company F fought as a unit until their final battle at the Yuza-Dake Escarpment near Yuza Village. Along the combat route, many casualties resulted among close friends.

During the Conical Hill battles and clear to the Yuza-Dake escarpment villages, the 1st platoon of Company F never had an attack stall. They aggressively but cautiously took every military objective when ordered by the staff. The fighting was tough, hazardous and deadly. The men continuously faced a vivid type of death that was everywhere. Wounds in battle always reinforced the ever-present hand of death. During the intense fighting boys became men and men aged rapidly. At night the men guarded the perimeter from their foxholes. Any movement at night was considered enemy. The infantrymen never left their foxholes at night, not even to defecate.

During various phases of the Okinawa offensive, the 1st platoon always had extremely effective Browning Automatic Riflemen. When required they always gave the platoon accurate and deadly supportive fire power. These men included Pfc. Clyde O. Franklin, Bernard Baar, Noble J. Henson, Ralph Phillips, Clayton Baker, Ed Brown, Glen Bowers, and Sgt. Dolores (Bull) Medina.

The finale to the saga of the 1st platoon follows:

On 5 June, in the vicinity of the Iwa crossroad, Col Edwin T. May, regimental commander, was up front observing the 1st platoon engaged in an intense infantry battle. Heavy rains, bullets, and knee mortar fire saturated the grounds. In spite of a warning, Col. May remained up front. A Japanese machine gun bullet pierced his heart, killing him instantly.

In the vicinity of Iwa, a recently arrived captain assigned as company commander of a heavy weapons company came alongside Lt. Muehrcke. Without introducing himself he asked, "Where are the

Japs?"

The Captain wore an Army poncho which protected him from the torrential rain. His battle fatigues were clean, and free of mud. He was freshly shaved. The entire 1st platoon was soaked wet and filthy. A single shot by a sniper instantly killed him. We never knew his name

On 16 June the 1st platoon was briefly held up by torrential rains during their attack on the Yuza Dake Village. The Japanese fought from well constructed defense positions including the Okinawa burial caves. Only flame-throwing tanks could eliminate the enemy's resistance.

On 17 June, Company F's last mission was to occupy the Yuza Dake Village on the 1st Marine's left flank. On the previous day, elements of the U.S. First Marine Division collided head-on with what seemed to be the very strength of the remaining Japanese Army. Unfortunately, the Marines were pinned down, trapped, and massacred; their bodies were found lining the streets of Yuza village. The following day Company F attacked the Yuza Village supported by flame-throwing tanks. All Japanese resistance crumbled. Thus the Army revenged the First Marines Division massacre.

It was here that S/Sgt. Francis Schoemaker of the 2nd platoon was fatally wounded destroying a machine gun firing on the 1st platoon. Unfortunately this machine gun position was re-occupied by the Japanese and the sergeant was killed. Pfc. Leo Bottini, the radio operator of the 1st platoon, tried to rescue S/Sgt. Schoemaker. He, too, was killed in the attempt

The Japanese killed by the 1st platoon at Yuza Village were Imperial Japanese Marines. They were tall and dressed neater than the usual Japanese Army soldiers. On searching the dead Japanese Marines, at least five or six American watches were found on each of their forearms, which they had removed from the bodies of the American Marines.

On 18 June all organized Japanese resistance was rapidly coming to a close. The remaining men of Company F were slated to be relieved by troops of the 381st Infantry Regiment. Pfc. Burton Denny, a rifleman and the platoon messenger, was seen high on a wall. He appeared to be asleep from the extreme exhaustion experienced by all. On closer observation he was found dead. A small bullet had entered his head but there was no bleeding. His body was gently lowered to the street and covered with his poncho. Capt. Clarence F. Hauber supervised the movement of the body to the American Cemetery for burial.

Company F walked off the Yuza Dake Escarpment with 21 men and two officers, Lts. Muehrcke and Frothinger. All men were consolidated into one platoon. They were exhausted, filthy, dirty; their combat fatigues were coated with blood, either from their "buddies" or from their own blood.

Very little food was eaten. Coffee and C- rations were warmed by igniting a small glob of the explosive plastic, composition "C", from satchel charges. The men hadn't washed or shaved in the past 39 days. They had no fresh underwear or clean socks. They were a pitiful sight, but they were alive and very proud men as they walked off the Okinawa escarpment to the reserve area. The sun was shining brightly but they still received heavy enemy fire.

This special group of infantrymen included Lt. Bob Muehrcke, the platoon leader, Lt. Richard (Bill) Frothinger, from Minneapolis, Minnesota, T/Sgt. Guy Dale, S/Sgt. Orrie Gruwell,, from Mountain Ranch, California, S/Sgt. Ed Mankunas enlisted and retired in

Chicago, Pfc. Clayton Baker from South Dakota, Pfc. Tolley Beaver, and Sgt. Dolores "Bull" Medina. Others included Pfc. Bowman, Pfc. C. E. Bowers from Fredericksburg, Texas, Pfc. Stephenson, and Pfc. Leslie Middlebrooks, the regimental medical aid-man assigned to Company F.

All members but one were wounded at least once, several members twice and two members had shed their blood on the battlefield at least three times. This worn, tired, haggard and stinking group of infantrymen was the epitome of fighting men to behold.

During the 82-day Okinawa Battle, some of the toughest fighting was encountered by the 383rd Infantry Regiment. It became much more severe in the time before the Japanese surrender. Company F had 59 men killed and more than 300 replacements. Most were wounded and evacuated. The 1st platoon had several platoon leaders killed, one company commander killed and another wounded. There were five different battalion commanders; all were wounded at least once. The regimental commander, Col. Edwin T. May, was killed on 6 June while an observer up front. Brig. Gen. Claudius M. Easley, Assistant Division Commander, was killed on 19 June in the battle zone. The highest ranking officer killed was Lt. Gen. Simon B. Buckner, Jr., commander of the Tenth Army. On 18 June, while he was up front, an exploding Japanese artillery shell sent rock fragments into the general's chest and killed him.

The blood spilled on the battlefield bound these officers together with the men from Company F. They will always remain "blood brothers".

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: The author thanks the many Company F men interviewed and described in the Conical Hill saga. This is their special story. Sincere appreciation and thanks are extended to Orrie Gruwell, Ed Mankunas and Clayton Baker.

[A note from the Web Editor:](#) This is one of the War Stories that were copied by permission from the Web site of the original 96th Division Association. Some of the stories, including this one, were difficult to read because they were in the form of low-resolution images. This one was nearly unreadable, so I have typed it into a page layout that is easier to read.

In the process I undoubtedly made typing errors and misspelled some names that were hard to make out. I also made some editorial revisions. I moved one paragraph and changed some punctuation and a few words. Normally, the author would have had the final say on editorial changes, but Robert Muehrcke passed away in 2004; he was included in the Taps section of a *Dead-eye Dispatch* in that year. Readers who spot errors, especially vets who served with the author, should contact me.

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