

Mitch Paige: Forgotten Hero

By Tom Bartlett

Who was the Marine hero on Guadalcanal who nearly singlehandedly stopped a large-scale Japanese attack? Cradling a heavy machine gun in his arms, he then pursued and drove the enemy back into the jungle. For his bravery he was commissioned a second lieutenant and awarded the Medal of Honor. Too valuable to be sent home, he fought in the First Marine Division's next campaign at Cape Gloucester. If you didn't know that he was Platoon Sergeant Mitchell Paige, you're not alone. He isn't even mentioned in many historical accounts of the battle, including official ones.

Retired Marine Colonel Mitchell Paige and I met in his hotel room at the Washington Hilton to recount some of the incidents of 50 years ago. He was in the nation's capital to participate in the 1stMarDiv's 45th annual reunion. Col Paige is an original member of the Division, which was formed in Cuba on Feb. 1, 1941. He is also a past president of the First Marine Division Association.

"I made up my mind 35 or 40 years ago, that if I lived to see the 50th anniversary of the Battle of Guadalcanal, that I was going to tell some things that I know. I want to set the record straight. After all these years, nobody has asked me to tell the whole story."

He dragged his briefcase closer and began removing letters, copies of official statements and citations. Nodding in my direction, he asked, "You ready?"

He took off as only former machine-gun Platoon Sergeant Mitch Paige can do.

Born in Charleroi, Pa., on Aug. 31, 1918, he enlisted in the Marine Corps after graduating from high school. "It was 1936, during the Depression, and everybody was poor. Jobs were hard to find. My mother packed this lunch for me. She put some sandwiches in a bag, some apples from our backyard tree, and a piece of cake. And I took off, on foot. It was about 200 miles to the Marine Corps Recruiting Station.

"And her parting words to me were, 'Trust in God. Don't try to figure out everything by yourself. Those Marine Corps sergeants will tell you what to do. Just trust in God.'"

After graduating from recruit training, he had a brief tour with Company H, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines at Quantico, Va., served in the battleship USS *Wyoming* (BB-32), and was ordered to the Philippines. "I'd walk post at Cavite Navy Yard, four hours on and eight hours off. And I played baseball on the Asiatic Fleet baseball team comprised of sailors and Marines. I was a pitcher and often pitched both ends of a doubleheader. I received a gold

baseball from the High Commissioner of the Philippine Islands, Paul V. McNutt.

"We played the Army, and Navy teams of ships in Cavite, Olongapo and Manila, Army teams in Manila and Corregidor, Clark Field and Filipino teams including colleges and professionals. We even played the American and National League All-Star team when it came to the Philippines. That long season, I had a 55 win and 17 loss record, but I still had to pull my share of walking post when not playing baseball.

"Then, after a year and a half at Cavite, I was transferred to Tientsin, China, to help guard American property as the Chinese and the Japanese were engaged in an all-out war. I was in the machine-gun company, just checking in. I was emptying my two seabags and as I dumped one, a 16-pound cannonball came rolling out, thumping on the wooden deck of

the barracks, and it began rolling down the aisle of the squad bay. Eight of us enlisted men in Cavite lived in an old Spanish fort which still had pyramids of cannonballs used against Dewey in the Spanish-American War. My Marine buddies planted one of the cannonballs in my seabag and I lugged it all the way to China. Today that same cannonball is in a foot locker in my garage at home.

"This pug-nosed, rugged Marine with cauliflower ears retrieves the cannon ball and says, 'Do you fight? How much do you weigh?'

"He says the Marines have a smoker that night and the Marine 160-pounder was in sick bay unable to box. The Marines didn't want to forfeit the fight to the British, French, Italian or Russian teams representing their concessions in Tientsin. So I get into the ring against this White Russian. He looked rough and tough, but I was in good shape and pretty solid.

"Fortunately, he didn't know any more about boxing than I did. So we start and we slug it out, and we bloody each other quickly, fighting three fast rounds. The fight ends in a draw, which made our troops happy, as we had just enough points to win the smoker."

He rummaged through the briefcase and smiled as he passed a sheet of paper, dated Dec. 21, 1939. The paper directed Private First Class Mitchell Paige to take charge of PFC Irving Buckland and two boxcars and one flatcar of a train at East Station, Tientsin.

"We were train guards," he explained, "escorting government supplies to the American Embassy in Peking and to the Marine Barracks, American Embassy. They locked me in the boxcar with a .45 pistol and a nightstick. That was the Peking Mukden Railroad. Terrible accommodations," he said, smiling. "We sat on whatever seemed soft or comfortable. I was in one car and Buckland was in the other.



Many Medal of Honor recipients were sent back to the U.S. after receiving their awards; Mitchell Paige, however, stayed in the Pacific and fought at Cape Gloucester, New Britain. He finally rotated home in July 1944.

"On another trip while alone, the train moved to a siding and just stopped. It was cold and raining hard outside. I peeked out through some cracks and saw Japanese troops moving closer to the train to get out of the rain by squatting by the boxcars. Others were cooking fish heads and rice or something that smelled terrible and the odors were coming in the enclosed boxcar. I thought I was going to heaven.

"I knew that if I coughed or sneezed or made some noise, those Japanese would shoot off the lock and blow the train apart, thinking that I was [Chinese]. The Chinese and Japanese had started their war in 1937. They'd have killed me for sure. So I had to remain perfectly still and quiet, and after what seemed a very long time, the train finally began to roll and we reached our destination in Peking.

"During September of that same year, 1939, the Hai Ho River had overflowed its banks and inundated the entire city of Tientsin. Only a small contingent of Marines was left there to protect American property. I spent the entire month of September floating around in a rowboat, alone, guarding the National City Bank of New York on Victoria Road, Tientsin, China. I was transferred to Peking where I spent October and November 1939. Then back to Tientsin.

"The Japanese were flexing their muscles as they had more than 150,000 troops in North China, whereas we had 125 Marines in Tientsin and about 250 in Peking. They put up a barbed-wire barricade around us in Tientsin on one occasion. General Masahura Homma (the Beast of Bataan three years later) visited our compound to an honor guard of Marines. We wore dress blues with fixed bayonets on our 1903 Springfield rifles."

In April 1940, Mitch Paige reported for duty at the Brooklyn Navy Yard and later the Philadelphia Navy Yard to play baseball and stand guard duty. Joining the Fifth Marine Regiment at Quantico, he participated in maneuvers at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and Culebra, Puerto Rico. Ordered to New River, N.C., he helped construct what was to become Camp Lejeune.

Following the attack on Pearl Harbor, he went overseas with the 7th Marines, landing at Apia, British Samoa. The unit later landed at Guadalcanal in September 1942.

"By the time I got to Guadalcanal, I'd been a machine-gunner for six years. I was a platoon sergeant, and I required every Marine in my platoon to be able to fieldstrip the water-cooled machine gun, the 1903 Springfield rifle and the .45-caliber pistol. They could do it blindfolded; take it apart and put it back together. Every man.

"I had the finest men in the world. I attribute my being here now to my drill instructors, the professionalism and bravery of all those Marines, and God, naturally."

The room became silent. Only the hum of the air conditioner and muffled sounds of Pennsylvania Avenue, traffic could be heard. The old warrior stood and stretched. He shook his head slowly. It happened 50 years ago in October 1942. He was a member of the 2d Bn, 7th Marines, 1stMarDiv. It was on Guadalcanal, part of the Solomon Islands chain.

He told of the night of Oct. 24. "It was raining to beat the band. We had moved into position, atop a hill, after dark. We couldn't see a thing. We moved up there under an enemy artillery barrage. I'm feeling around to see where I could put my machine guns. I knew my right rear was tied in with an infantry company, and my left rear was tied in with an infantry company. So, I figured, we must be the front of the whole line.

"Afterwards, I stretched out on the ground, lying on my back with the rain pelting my face and with my ear to the ground. All of a sudden, I hear this mumbling and snoring only 30 yards or so down the hill. I knew it wasn't our Marines because we were supposed to be the only Marines there. I listened intently and then it came to me, 'Japanese!'

"I recognized the talk from my days in China. Same sounds.

"So I got hold of my grenades and passed the word very quietly to the others that I was going to creep forward and throw a couple of grenades. Being an old baseball pitcher, I got ready to throw strikes but my dungaree sleeves were down and too tight. Anyway, I lobbed some grenades and we heard screeching and hollering, and then I heard a whole bunch of pins removed from grenades, and the other Marines began tossing grenades down the hill. It got real quiet, and, of course, we didn't sleep the rest of the night."

Mitchell Paige

HE HELD
THE LINE

LEATHERNECK FILE ILLUSTRATION BY H. KOSKINEN



When the Japanese broke through on Guadalcanal on Oct. 26, 1942, all of Paige's men were killed or wounded. Paige continued to fire his machine gun until it was put out of action by a full burst from the Japanese weapon that shattered the firing mechanism.



The rain stopped and after sunrise, Paige led a small patrol down the hill. "We found four or five dead Japanese and we found a lot of blood trails, but we couldn't follow them because the jungle vegetation at the bottom of the hill was so thick, and we didn't want to walk into an ambush. The Japanese always pulled their dead and wounded into the jungle so that Marines could not strip them."

Early the next day, he removed his dungaree jacket and cut the sleeves off with his Ka-Bar. "It took nearly two hours to cut those sleeves off," he said, grinning. "That was some tough material, but if I had to throw hand grenades again, I wanted to make sure I wasn't hampered by sleeves."

During the night of Oct. 25, Paige and his Marines "saw a whole bunch of lights down in the wooded area. We knew they were the enemy, but they were out of grenade range, and we couldn't see well enough to shoot. We could hear their gear rattling and all.

"There was so little vegetation atop our hill, we figured they knew just about everything they wanted to know about us as their positions high on Mount Austen overlooked the entire Marine lines. But in darkness, we did move our guns so we still had a chance to surprise them if they attacked. We had dug in with bayonets as the entrenching tools were discarded with every move for the past month. Some of the tools were getting too heavy to carry and too bulky."

Paige's position was between "Fox" and "George" Companies, 2/7, on a saddle on a hill. Around two in the morning of the 26th,

he heard the Japanese talking. They were roughly a hundred yards away. Paige began crawling from gun to gun, alerting his men for immediate action.

Then he heard bushes rustle and gear scraping the deck, as the enemy approached over the crest of the hill, getting closer and closer. Suddenly he saw a wall of troops charging his line. He pulled grenade pins and threw. His pitching arm was no longer encumbered by tight sleeves and his aim was true. Still the enemy came through the flame and roar.

"I gave the word for all guns to fire," Paige recalled. "Our whole line lit up. One of my men yelled that his gun was out of action and I saw him get wounded. I knocked off two Japanese with a rifle, but a third bayoneted one of my men. I shot that Japanese. Next thing I knew, everyone was fighting hand to hand, in the dark, bayonet to bayonet.

"Then all of a sudden, it was quiet. No more Japanese. We had repulsed the first assault. Now to get ready for the second, if there is one.

"Meantime I'm moving around, when I could, trying to clear or un-jam other guns, removing ruptured cartridges ... for my men who were wounded but who continued to fight. And I'm back to firing, and I felt something hot on my hand. A Japanese light machine gun hit the feeding mechanism of my gun, putting that one out of action."

The enemy swept his left flank as all of Fox Co were driven out of their positions. George Co could not fire as it was on



LEATHERNECK FILE ILLUSTRATION BY H. KOSKINEN



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Knowing a few words in Japanese, Paige called to the enemy to stand up. When they did, he began an offensive of his own. Grabbing his machine gun, Paige led the charge. He later received the Medal of Honor for his bravery.



LEATHERNECK FILE ILLUSTRATION BY H. KOSKINEN

When his gun was destroyed Paige fearlessly took over another; each time he moved, grenades exploded where he had been.

slightly higher ground to the right rear and would hit Paige's men. In the dark, Paige suddenly realized that he was manning machine guns, moving from one to another, and except for the Japanese in the immediate area, he was alone.

"I didn't have time to really think about it," he said, as he shrugged. "I was too busy shooting as fast as I could and trying to get a bead on the oncoming Japanese troops."

Another gun was shot out from under him. He quickly scanned the area. There were none left in sight in the dark. He scurried back to George Co and "borrowed" a machine gun. He told some of the riflemen to fix bayonets and follow him.

Paige picked up the machine gun, and two Marines assisted him as Paige and the riflemen charged back into the battle. Dawn was nearing, and Paige spotted another machine gun. He left the borrowed one and ran for the other one.

"For a while, it seemed like the whole Japanese army was shooting at me," he recalled. Three Marines attempted to bring belts of ammo to the platoon sergeant. All three were wounded, but every one accomplished his mission.

The battle continued. Paige, at one point, swung his gun around and fired at a group of enemy who overran his position shooting them in the back before they could go over the crest down the hill to the battalion command post.

As he sat on the ground behind his gun facing straight ahead where the charges had been coming all night, he noticed some movement in the Kunai grass. He was just beginning to load a new belt of ammo when he noticed a Japanese soldier suddenly drop to the ground only a few yards away with his Nambu machine gun. Paige had to lean over the gun to pull the bolt handle back to lock the belt into the gun. As he rolled back, getting ready to slide forward for the second pull, he could not move. It was like being against a stone wall.

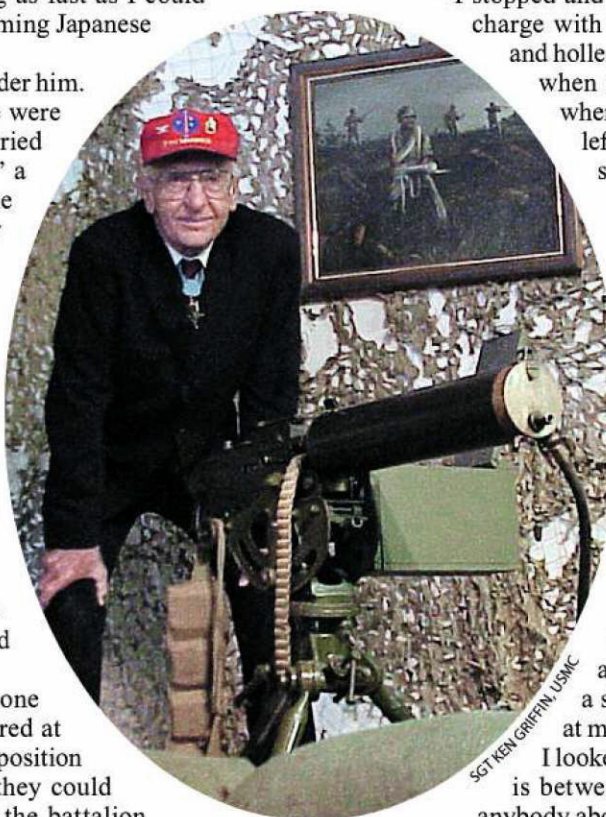
Meanwhile, he felt a warm breeze between his chin and his Adam's apple. Suddenly he broke loose and literally flew over the gun to pull the bolt handle back for the necessary second time. With that, he swung the gun around to the left to fire at the

Japanese machine-gunner who just seconds before had fired his entire 30-round magazine at point-blank range. He had perfectly lined up on Mitch's head and left shoulder when he was in the first pull. He pulled his trigger while Paige was in the backward move. The Japanese soldier was obviously so excited about this point-blank killing that he probably believed Paige was dead and just sitting there numb.

"I was so wound up at this point, I couldn't stop. I yelled back to the riflemen, 'Fix bayonets; follow me.' I threw two belts of ammo over my shoulders, unclamped the machine gun, picked it up and cradled it in my arms after loading it. Then over the crest of the hill we charged. As I was preparing to leave, I saw a Japanese officer watching me through field glasses even though he was only about 75 yards away. He dropped the glasses, pulled out a revolver, pointed it at me and emptied it at me as I was in a dead run toward him downhill. Many of his men had their rifles aimed at me. Suddenly the officer threw his revolver down as he had missed my bobbing body and reached for his samurai sword. I was firing bursts as I ran, and the riflemen all dropped. As the officer had his sword nearly out of the scabbard, I hit it and the officer also when we were about five yards apart.

"I stopped and watched the riflemen I had asked to charge with me come down the slope whooping and hollering like a bunch of wild Indians. And when they reached the bottom of the hill, where the jungle began, there was nothing left to shoot. The battle was over, and the silence was deafening."

Col Mitchell Paige inspected a display dedicated in his name at the SNCO Academy, MAGTFTC, Twentynine Palms, Calif., in 2001.



SGT KEN GRIFFIN, USMC

After the full impact of the battle was realized, Paige sat down. "I was soaked in perspiration. Steam was still rising from my hot gun. My hands tingled and I looked down to see a huge blister all the way from my fingertips to my forearm.

"I'm sitting there, my feet in a foxhole, and there are bodies all around. And I saw the soldier who just a short time before had fired 30 rounds at me from point-blank range and missed. I looked up into the sky and said, 'Lord, this is between you and me. I never want to tell anybody about this as I never want anyone to ever try to make a mockery of it.'

"I looked all around for my pack and finally found it. As I dumped the contents out on the ground, out came a small New Testament a Navy chaplain had once given me. When I picked it up, it was open to Proverbs. I put my dirty finger on the open page. It was Chapter 3, verses 5 and 6 and it read, 'Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him and He will direct your paths.' Suddenly I thought of my mother and the day I left home to join the Marine Corps more than six years before.

"On May 21, 1943, in Australia, General Alexander Archer Vandegrift, commanding general of the First Marine Division, hung the Medal of Honor around my neck," Paige recalled. "I remember his exact words: 'Son, you are the first enlisted Marine

in my division to be awarded this medal.' And as we shook hands, he glanced at my ribbons and said, 'I see you were also in China. I need men like you to stay with the division. I need your experience, so if you don't mind, I would like to keep you around for a while longer.' "

At the same parade in Australia, a photo was taken of Gen Vandegrift, Col Merritt Austin Edson, Second Lieutenant Mitchell Paige and Sergeant John Basilone. All had been awarded Medals of Honor: Vandegrift (for the Guadalcanal Campaign) and Edson, who commanded the 1st Marine Raider Battalion (for heroism on Bloody Ridge), had been presented theirs earlier. Paige and Basilone received theirs at the parade.

"An interesting aside to the photo is the fact that photographers wanted pictures of all of us, but Colonel Edson didn't have his medal or ribbons with him. All he had were his marksmanship badges.

"While he was at the command post, he saw the medals that were to be presented, so he borrowed the ribbon from my box. The photo shows old 'Red Mike' in all his glory, with shooting badges and the ribbon for my Medal of Honor, which he returned later.

"I consider Colonel Edson one of the greatest Marine Corps jungle fighters in our history, second only to Herman Henry Hanneken. I base this statement on the fact that Hanneken stopped a couple of Banana Wars singlehandedly, and when he landed at Guadalcanal, he already had a Medal of Honor and two Navy Crosses." (He was later awarded a Silver Star, Legion of Merit, and a Bronze Star.)

Paige received a field commission to second lieutenant in December 1942, and eight months later was promoted to first lieutenant. Departing Guadalcanal, he accompanied the 1stMarDiv to New Guinea, where his unit joined the American Sixth Army for the assault on Cape Gloucester, New Britain.

Later from Pavuvu, Russell Islands, he was sent back to the States just before the invasion of Peleliu. "They had me doing

war bond drive speeches. I remember going with movie actor Pat O'Brien to Chicago. And I went to Pittsburgh.

"I really didn't know what to say. Nobody advised me, so I simply thanked the factory workers for keeping us supplied with the bullets, tanks, bombs and machine guns. Then I got myself in trouble. I told them that Hitler, Tojo and Mussolini were our enemies, but that Joe Stalin was truly our greatest enemy.

"The very next day, a Marine colonel approached me before I was to give my talk, and he said, 'Lieutenant, I'm from Headquarters Marine Corps, and I'm here to tell you not to mention Joe Stalin or the Russians in your talk. Simply sell war bonds and thank the people.'

"And that's when my malaria got real bad. They first sent me to the naval hospital in Camp Lejeune, which we had helped build, where we cut down trees and cleared brush and killed rattlesnakes before we left for Guadalcanal. Then I was transferred to Klamath Falls, Ore., where the Navy had set up a research hospital for tropical diseases. I was to be a guinea pig for a new malaria drug called SN 7618 which our Army had captured from the Germans in North Africa. It proved to be an excellent medicine."

Paige stopped and stretched. He rose from the edge of the bed where he was sitting and paced a bit. "You know, I'm careful what writers I talk to about stories because I don't want those fellas making up stuff to make the story sound more heroic or gung ho than it really is. But I also want to correct historical mistakes. Some of it was badly written."

Asked if he had any advice to pass on to today's young enlisted Marines, he smiled and looked at his hands. "For all that I've seen and heard and done, I sincerely believe the best advice was my mother's admonition. 'Trust in God. Don't try to figure out everything by yourself. Those Marine Corps sergeants will tell you what to do. Just trust in God.' "



Left to right: Gen Alexander Vandegrift, Col Merritt Edson, 2dLt Mitchell Paige and Sgt John Basilone in Australia, May 21, 1943.

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