From the *Leatherneck* Archives:
September 1945

Marines Used Horses, Drums of Oil in Their Most Fantastic Fight

Editor's note: "Tales from Okinawa" is made up of stories written by Second Lieutenant Diggory Venn, a Marine Corps public relations officer; 2ndLt Milburn McCarty Jr., a Marine aviation correspondent; Sergeants Murray Lewis, Harold T. Boian, William Boniface, Joseph P. Donahue, George K. Voigt, Bill Dvorak, Peter B. Germano, Roy Fitzpatrick and Frank Acosta, and Privates First Class Scott Myers-Summers, Odell Griffith and Stanley R. Leppard, combat correspondents. The material was compiled by Sgt John Conner, Leatherneck *staff correspondent.*

This illustration from the September 1945 issue of *Leatherneck* depicts Marines riding horses through the northern end of the island of Okinawa during the fierce battle.

Through the red, soupy swamps and the rice paddies came the Marines, not on foot or in tanks, but like Cossacks, booting their horses into the fray. Instead of swords they brandished flame throwers and charges of TNT. They rode through the northern reaches of the island in what historians may speak of as the Charge of Okinawa.

Mounted on native steeds commandeered from the countryside, the horsemen formed a highly mobile unit that in seven days pushed remnants of retreating Japanese 9 miles farther northward. They did it by flushing out caves and pillboxes with flame and dynamite. The horses made the work quicker and more terrifying to the pedestrian enemy.

It was spectacular and fun for the Marines—with one possible exception. One guy's horse enthusiastically took a 6-foot cliff in his stride. Down went the rider with an armful of explosives, his heart in his mouth. He came up unhurt, but that didn't stand much in the way of his getting back to the foot soldiers, post haste.

Nothing was too fantastic for ancient Okinawa, where the women do all the work and the dead have the best housing. It was a weird place to fight in, and the Japanese made it tough—tougher than Peleliu and nearly as nasty as Iwo Jima.

The ridiculous ease of the assault landing fooled no savvy Marine. Waiting for the first thunderbolt of stiff resistance to strike, the Marines marched north in comparatively easy going, singing:

"Oh, don't you worry, Mother, your son is safe out here.

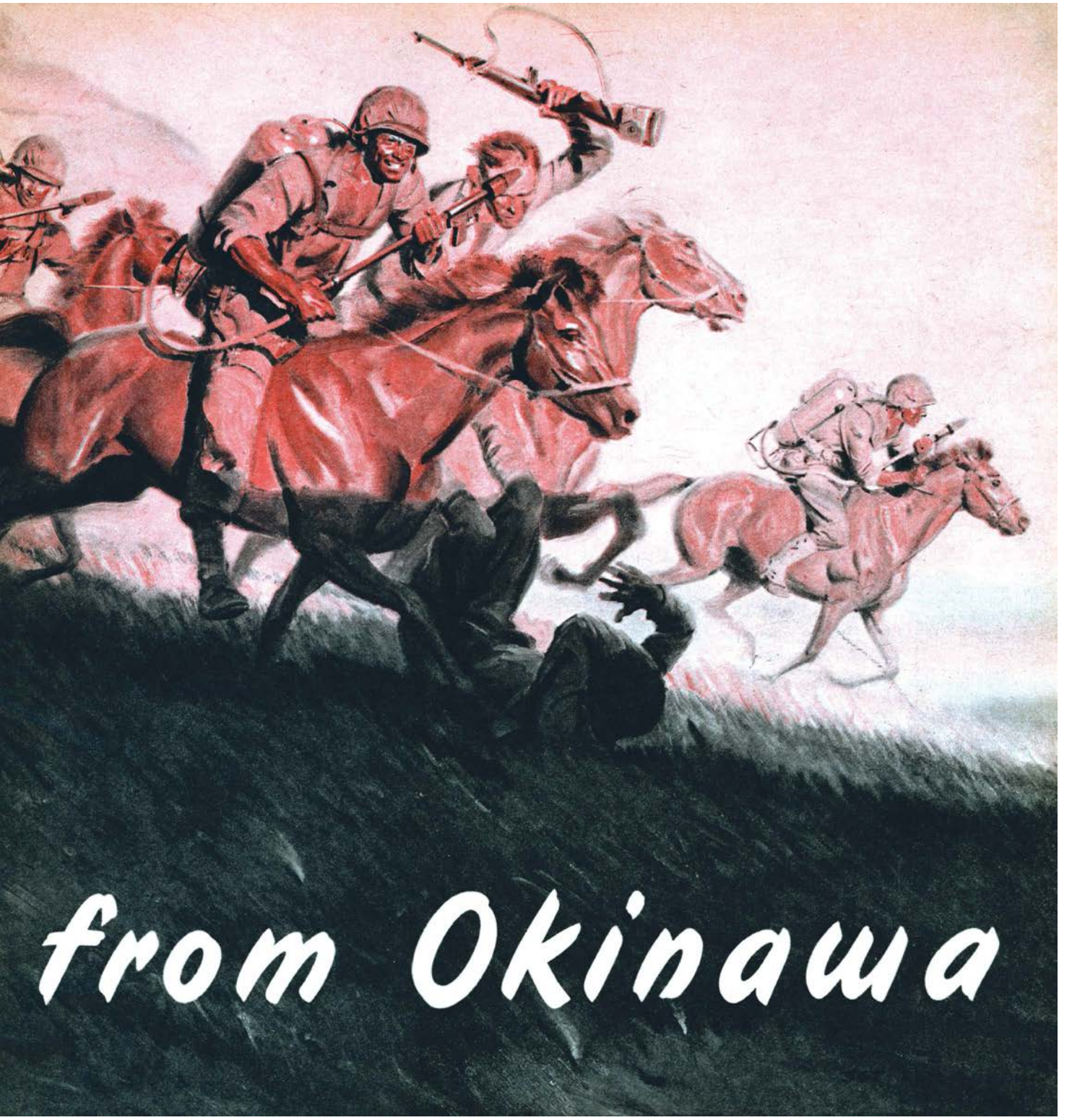
"No Japanese on Okinawa, no sake, wine or beer.

"Your son can find no Japanese, so we're going back on ships.

"But don't you worry, Mother, we're going on another ..."

Which they were. When the northern part of the island was secured the two Marine divisions, the 1st and then the 6th, turned south where the Army was meeting fanatical opposition along the Shuri line. Before the northern cleanup had ended, 3rd Corps artillery was being sent to aid the soldiers. The biggest artillery contest in the Japanese war was developing. As on Iwo, Japanese gunners had the advantage of high ground.

Marines paid heavily in blood for their



succession of victories in the south. High ridges that lined the terrain often changed hands several times before the Americans could finally retain them. Machine guns and mortars concealed in caves and burial vaults cost Marine lives.

On Dakeshi Ridge near Shuri, a mortar position twice stopped a Marine infantry attack. Three tank destroyers came up and one was knocked out before the Japanese mortarmen could be spotted at the crest, slipping shells into their tube at split-second intervals.

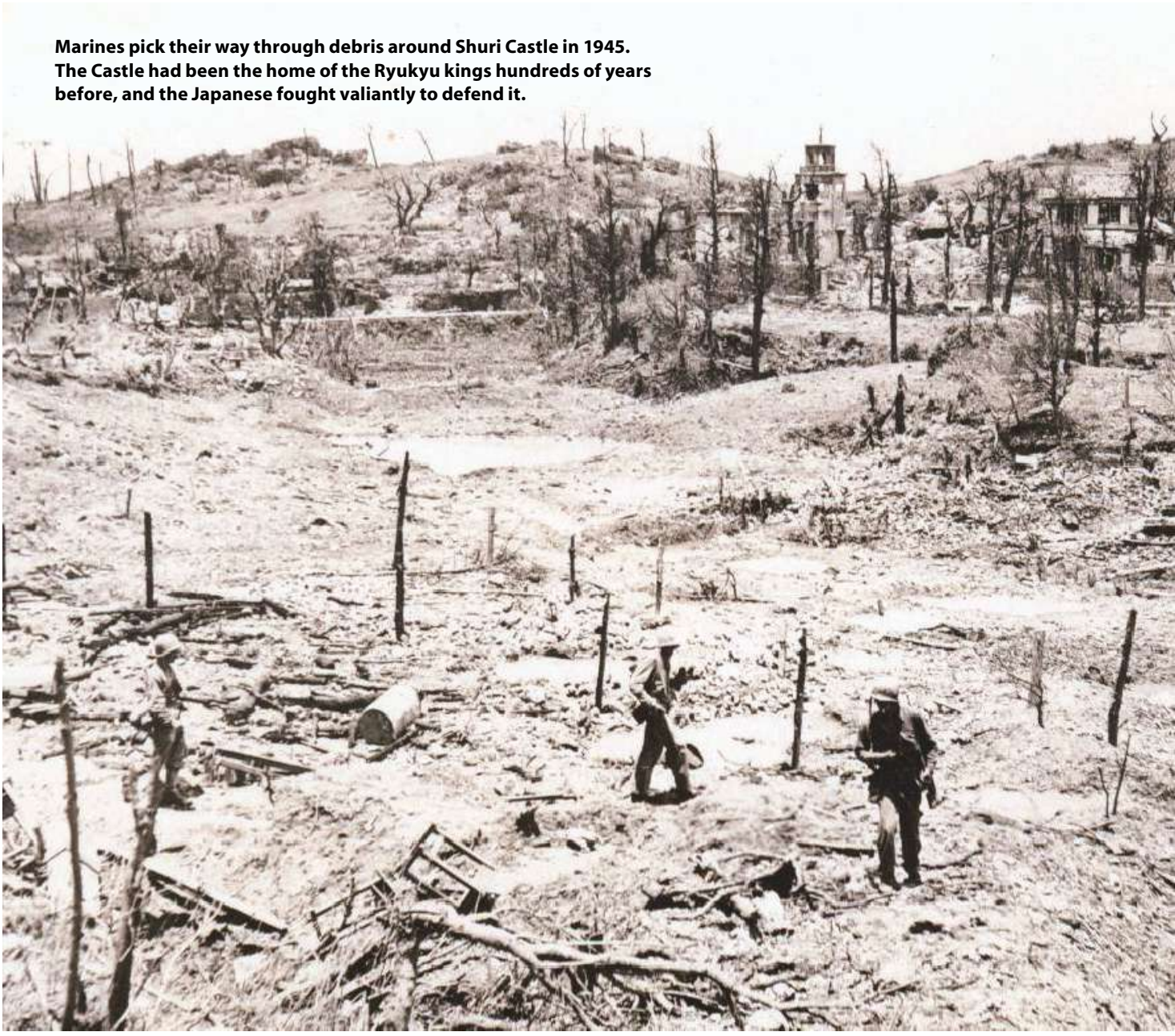
"Range 1,200 yards," barked Sergeant Joseph Madajewski Jr., of Plymouth, Pa., a section leader.

The 105s dropped their first rounds squarely onto the mortar position, wiping out the crew. Before the smoke had cleared away, four more Japanese soldiers were racing out of a cave with another mortar. They set up their weapon and began firing.

"Same settings as the first time," said Madajewski.

The 105s went into action again and with the same result. The second crew vanished into a spout of debris and a third raced out. They did it six times before the tank destroyers could retire and the infantry proceed with the attack.

"Irish George," as they called First Lieutenant George E. Murphy of South Bend, Ind., died on bloody Sugar Loaf hill.



Marines pick their way through debris around Shuri Castle in 1945. The Castle had been the home of the Ryukyu kings hundreds of years before, and the Japanese fought valiantly to defend it.

The former Notre Dame football captain led his 6th Division platoon against the ridge, then was forced to withdraw as his men fell like flies. Some of those who were hit and couldn't get back themselves he carried in his arms, like a father.

It was after his second trip to the aid station that he sat down to rest a moment. A mortar shell struck within a few feet of him. Filled with its fragments, Irish George struggled to his feet, aimed his pistol over the hill and emptied it before he crumpled in death.

The citadel of Shuri, visited by Commodore Perry on his way to Japan in 1853, sat defiantly in the center of the Japanese line across the island. Shuri castle, where the Ryukyu kings once lived, was so stout that 725 direct hits from a U.S. battleship bounced off the walls like rubber balls.

Japanese soldiers fought with everything they had to defend it, and so did Marines to take it. Dusk was falling one battle-filled day when Marine amtracs rattled up to the American side of a Japanese-infested ridge before Shuri town. They were loaded with 400-pound barrels of oil. Marines of Captain Lawrence Hennessey's company hauled the drums up their side of the ridge in 16-man teams, punched holes in the sides and rolled them down the rocky incline. Descending in a roaring avalanche, the drums whirled a storm of black oil into caves and brush. After them the Marines hurled phosphorous grenades.

The whole bluff burst into flames, lighting the sky with a pinkish glow that silhouetted the town beyond. Japanese came running from cover, most of them obviously bewildered by what was happening. Some got away before the fiery juggernauts reached them. Others didn't, and the leathernecks could see them running and jumping down the hill like balls of flame, screeching to their ancestors.

In the holds of Okinawa-bound transports they built up Naha into a Pacific Paris. It rated more cross-hatching on the maps than had any other city yet faced with a Marine attack, and scuttlebutt was rampant. Naha was credited with streetcars. There were public baths where mixed bathing was the rule, and geisha girls and saki joints were to be found everywhere.

A lot of this was forgotten during the fighting until a patrol skirted a group of tombs and paused on a razorback ridge overlooking the city. It sprawled below, filling the river valley and spreading up the ridges to the south. Instead of a Paris,

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Below: Tanks and infantrymen of 6thMarDiv enter Naha, the capital of the Okinawan prefecture.

USMC

it turned out to be an untidy collection of red-tiled houses with no life in them.

Hidden beneath the carcass of the city were little strongpoints of Japanese that the first patrol couldn't see. The 6th Division infantry penetration that followed cost one Marine for one Japanese.

The crossing of the Asato River was made by the 1st and 3rd Bns of the 4th Marines in the face of heavy machine-gun and artillery fire. Leathernecks leaped the 4-foot river embankment by twos and threes and waded over the mucky bottom in water that boiled with enemy fire. A lot of them didn't make it.

As the survivors moved through the city, wiping out snipers and machine-gun nests, the only civilians they saw were the stinking corpses of Naha.

Whoever held Sugar Loaf hill controlled the western approach to Shuri castle and the eastern flank of Naha. In the toe-to-toe struggle for control, a 50-man platoon was committed to the fight one afternoon with orders to hold its section of the ridge at all costs. During the night the Japanese pushed to the crest and rolled grenades down an American-held slope into Marine foxholes.

By dawn, 46 Marines of the platoon had been killed or wounded. The remaining four huddled in a single foxhole, listening to the moans of the injured and not knowing whether they were friend or enemy. Then the Japanese dropped a white phosphorous shell into the holdout foxhole and three were burned to death.

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PFC Orie B. Clark of Houston, Texas, crawled down to an aid station.

"I'm the only one left," he reported.

Nonessential Japanese truck driving on Okinawa, all unnecessary sleeping at night by Japanese soldiers, and other enemy activities of negligible importance were closely policed after dark by the 2nd Marine Air Wing's "Red Devil" squadron. The Devils called their puckish nightly missions "insomnia attacks." Unlike the regular troop-supporting flights, they ignored obvious targets and only loosed their 100-pound bombs when some nerve-wracked Japanese had the impudence to protest their interruption with ack-ack.

The Japanese had to take anything Marine aviators chose to dish out for their air force was scraping the bottom of the barrel it rolled out nearly four years before at Pearl Harbor. They were short of planes and men who could fly them. Their dive bombers came over without rear gunners at times. Suicide pilots frantically aimed at anything. A Kamikaze bomber, bearing five Japanese dressed in their ceremonial burial robes, vented the fury of the emperor on an unoccupied tractor.

It was the seventh day of assault on Sugar Loaf. Three times the Marines had fallen back from the top—twice when the tanks moved rearward at nightfall, and the third time so that artillery could pound the hill's crest. Now the 29th Regiment was slogging upward again. Supporting tanks were having a hard time finding an opening when First Lieutenant Donald

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Above: Riflemen draw sights on a Japanese hillside position as a flame-throwing tank shoots a tongue of fire at the enemy on May 11, 1945.

Left: A Marine from a 6thMarDiv flame thrower team blasts a Japanese cave.

COURTESY OF NATIONAL ARCHIVES

The riflemen of the 305th Regiment, 77th Division, fire at a cave dug in an escarpment southwest of Yuza, Okinawa, while a radio operator relays progress of the duel to his command post, June 20, 1945.

Pinnow of Oswego, Ill., a tank platoon leader, forced his way around one end of the ridge. He gasped at what he found. The other side was honeycombed with caves that no Marine artillery fire could reach. To the other tanks the lieutenant yelled, over the radio:

"Come on around. It's a field day."

The tanks chased around that area for hours, firing 75s into cave openings and machine-gunning the Japanese as they came out. Flame throwers jumped in and soon the Shermans were cutting down running, flaming Japanese.

Later, as the tanks passed the infantry, Marines stood up in their foxholes, grins on their faces, clasped hands overhead. Sugar Loaf was secured.

As the last organized Japanese defense line on the island was cracking, death struck down Lieutenant General Simon Bolivar Buckner Jr., commander of the Tenth Army. He was killed by a Japanese shell burst while he sat among his staff officers overlooking the battlefield on the 6th Division front.

The 8th Marines of the 2nd Division had come into the lines for the first time during the night and were spearheading a successful pre-dawn attack when two Japanese shells came screaming in. The first one struck a rock near where GEN Buckner was sitting, injuring him fatally in the chest.

Command of the Tenth Army passed briefly to Lieutenant General Roy S. Geiger before Gen Geiger was named commanding general of Fleet Marine Force, Pacific, succeeding LtGen Holland M. Smith. LtGen Geiger had been commanding the Marine 3rd Amphibious Corps in the operation.

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The Japanese resorted to carrier pigeons for communications after ordinary methods had taken a terrific pounding from American guns. When a Marine artillery observer saw pigeons issuing from a house, he alerted his FDC.

The battalion had been busy knocking out blockhouses.

"And how thick are the walls?" asked Lieutenant Colonel Robert C. Hiatt of Indianapolis, in the FDC.

"Whose walls?"

"The Pigeon's," the colonel said. "What's that code-name for, by the way?"

"It's the code-name for nothing, Sir," the observer answered. "I'm referring to pigeons, homing birds, white. They're carrying messages to the Japanese down south."

"I see," said the colonel. "Military installation, communications, pigeonry in valley. I'll put the boys on it, but I don't know what they'll think."

The observer heard the guns behind him roar. The little house disappeared into rubble and smoke.

"How was the shooting?" asked the colonel.

"Right on the button, Sir. Part of the target landed a few yards away from me and I'm having it for noon chow. Want me to save you a wing?"