



With the Old Breed: At Peleliu and Okinawa

By E. B. Sledge

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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

In *The Wall Street Journal*, Victor Davis Hanson named *With the Old Breed* one of the top five books on epic twentieth-century battles. Studs Terkel interviewed the author for his definitive oral history, *The Good War*. Now E. B. Sledge’s acclaimed first-person account of fighting at Peleliu and Okinawa returns to thrill, edify, and inspire a new generation.

An Alabama boy steeped in American history and enamored of such heroes as George Washington and Daniel Boone, Eugene B. Sledge became part of the war’s famous 1st Marine Division—3rd Battalion, 5th Marines. Even after intense training, he was shocked to be thrown into the battle of Peleliu, where “the world was a nightmare of flashes, explosions, and snapping bullets.” By the time Sledge hit the hell of Okinawa, he was a combat vet, still filled with fear but no longer with panic.

Based on notes Sledge secretly kept in a copy of the New Testament, *With the Old Breed* captures with utter simplicity and searing honesty the experience of a soldier in the fierce Pacific Theater. Here is what saved, threatened, and changed his life. Here, too, is the story of how he learned to hate and kill—and came to love—his fellow man.

“In all the literature on the Second World War, there is not a more honest, realistic or moving memoir than Eugene Sledge’s. This is the real deal, the real war: unvarnished, brutal, without a shred of sentimentality or false patriotism, a profound primer on what it actually was like to be in that war. It is a classic that will outlive all the armchair generals’ safe accounts of—not the ‘good war’—but the worst war ever.”—Ken Burns

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With the Old Breed: At Peleliu and Okinawa By E. B. Sledge Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #68 in Books
- Brand: Sledge, E. B./ Hanson, Victor Davis (INT)
- Published on: 2007-05-01
- Released on: 2007-05-01
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.30" h x .70" w x 5.50" l, .63 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 352 pages

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Editorial Review

Review

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About the Author

E. B. “Sledgehammer” Sledge was born and grew up in Mobile. In late 1943 he enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps. After basic training, he was sent to the Pacific Theater where he fought at Peleliu and Okinawa, two of the fiercest battles of World War II. Following the Japanese surrender, Sledge served in China as part of the occupation force. Upon his return home, he obtained a Ph.D. in biology and joined the faculty of Alabama College (later the University of Montevallo), where he taught until retirement. Sledge initially wrote about his war experiences to explain them to his family, but he was persuaded by his wife to seek publication. Sledge died on March 3, 2001.

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Chapter One

Making of a Marine

I enlisted in the Marine Corps on 3 December 1942 at Marion, Alabama. At the time I was a freshman at Marion

Military Institute. My parents and brother Edward had urged me to stay in college as long as possible in order to qualify for a commission in some technical branch of the U.S. Army. But, prompted by a deep feeling of uneasiness that the war might end before I could get overseas into combat, I wanted to enlist in the Marine Corps as soon as possible. Ed, a Citadel graduate and a second lieutenant in the army, suggested life would be more beautiful for me as an officer.

Mother and Father were mildly distraught at the thought of me in the Marines as an enlisted man—that is, “cannon fodder.” So when a Marine recruiting team came to Marion Institute, I compromised and signed up for one of the Corps’ new officer training programs. It was called V-12.

The recruiting sergeant wore dress blue trousers, a khaki shirt, necktie, and white barracks hat. His shoes had a shine

the likes of which I'd never seen. He asked me lots of questions and filled out numerous official papers. When he asked, "Any scars, birthmarks, or other unusual features?" I described an inch-long scar on my right knee. I asked why such a question. He replied, "So they can identify you on some Pacific beach after the Japs blast off your dog tags." This was my introduction to the stark realism that characterized the Marine Corps I later came to know.

The college year ended the last week of May 1943. I had the month of June at home in Mobile before I had to report 1 July for duty at Georgia Tech in Atlanta.

I enjoyed the train trip from Mobile to Atlanta because the train had a steam engine. The smoke smelled good, and the whistle added a plaintive note reminiscent of an unhurried life. The porters were impressed and most solicitous when I told them, with no little pride, that I was on my way to becoming a Marine. My official Marine Corps meal ticket got me a large, delicious shrimp salad in the dining car and the admiring glances of the steward in attendance.

On my arrival in Atlanta, a taxi deposited me at Georgia Tech, where the 180-man Marine detachment lived in Harrison Dormitory. Recruits were scheduled to attend classes year round (in my case, about two years), graduate, and then go to the Marine base at Quantico, Virginia, for officers' training.

A Marine regular, Capt. Donald Payzant, was in charge. He had served with the 1st Marine Division on Guadalcanal. Seeming to glory in his duty and his job as our commander, he loved the Corps and was salty and full of swagger. Looking back, I realize now that he had survived the meat grinder of combat and was simply glad to be in one piece with the good fortune of being stationed at a peaceful college campus. Life at Georgia Tech was easy and comfortable. In short, we didn't know there was a war going on. Most of the college courses were dull and uninspiring. Many of the professors openly resented our presence. It was all but impossible to concentrate on academics. Most of us felt we had joined the Marines to fight, but here we were college boys again. The situation was more than many of us could stand. At the end of the first semester, ninety of us—half of the detachment—flunked out of school so we could go into the Corps as enlisted men.

When the navy officer in charge of academic affairs called me in to question me about my poor academic performance, I

told him I hadn't joined the Marine Corps to sit out the war in college. He was sympathetic to the point of being fatherly and said he would feel the same way if he were in my place. Captain Payzant gave the ninety of us a pep talk in front of the dormitory the morning we were to board the train for boot camp at the Marine Corps Recruit Depot, San Diego, California. He told us we were the best men and the best Marines in the detachment. He said he admired our spirit for wanting to get into the war. I think he was sincere.

After the pep talk, buses took us to the railway station. We sang and cheered the whole way. We were on our way to war at last. If we had only known what lay ahead of us! Approximately two and a half years later, I came back through the Atlanta railway station on my way home. Shortly after I stepped off the car for a stroll, a young army infantryman walked up to me and shook hands. He said he had noticed my 1st Marine Division patch and the campaign ribbons on my chest and wondered if I had fought at Peleliu. When I said I had, he told me he just wanted to express his undying admiration for men of the 1st Marine Division.

He had fought with the 81st Infantry Division (Wildcats), which had come in to help us at Peleliu.* He was a machine gunner, had been hit by Japanese fire on Bloody Nose Ridge, and was abandoned by his army comrades. He knew he would either die of his wounds or be cut up by the Japanese when darkness fell. Risking their lives, some Marines had moved in and carried him to safety. The soldier said he was so impressed by the bravery, efficiency, and esprit of the Marines he saw on Peleliu that he swore to thank every veteran of the 1st Marine Division he ever ran across.

The "Dago people"—as those of us bound for San Diego were called—boarded a troop train in a big railroad terminal in Atlanta. Everyone was in high spirits, as though we were headed for a picnic instead of boot camp—and a war. The trip across the country took several days and was uneventful but interesting. Most of us had never been west, and we enjoyed the scenery. The monotony of the trip was broken with card games, playing jokes on each other, and waving, yelling, and whistling at any and all women visible. We ate some meals in dining cars on the train; but at certain places the train pulled onto a siding, and we ate in the restaurant in the railroad terminal. Nearly all of the rail traffic we passed was military. We saw long trains composed almost entirely of flatcars loaded with tanks, halftracks, artillery pieces, trucks, and other military equipment. Many troop trains passed us going both ways.

Most of them carried army troops. This rail traffic impressed on us the enormousness of the nation's war effort.

*Together with the 1st Marine Division, the U.S. Army's 81st Infantry Division comprised the III Amphibious Corps commanded by Maj. Gen. Roy S. Geiger, USMC. For the Palau operation, the 1st Marine Division assaulted Peleliu on 15 September 1944 while the 81st Division took Angaur Island and provided a regiment as corps reserve. The 81st Division relieved the 1st Marine Division on Peleliu on 20 October and secured the island on 27 November.

We arrived in San Diego early one morning. Collecting our gear, we fell into ranks outside our cars as a first sergeant came along and told the NCOs on our train which buses to get us aboard. This first sergeant looked old to us teenagers. Like ourselves, he was dressed in a green wool Marine uniform, but he had campaign ribbons on his chest. He also wore the green French *fourragère* on his left shoulder. (Later, as a member of the 5th Marine Regiment, I would wear the braided cord around my left arm with pride.) But this man sported, in addition, two single loops outside his arm. That meant he had served with a regiment (either the 5th or 6th Marines) that had received the award from France for distinguished combat service in World War I.

The sergeant made a few brief remarks to us about the tough training we faced. He seemed friendly and compassionate, almost fatherly. His manner threw us into a false sense of well-being and left us totally unprepared for the shock that awaited us when we got off those buses.

"Fall out, and board your assigned buses!" ordered the first sergeant.

"All right, you people. Get aboard them buses!" the NCOs yelled. They seemed to have become more authoritarian as we approached San Diego.

After a ride of only a few miles, the buses rolled to a stop in the big Marine Corps Recruit Depot—boot camp. As I looked anxiously out the window, I saw many platoons of recruits marching along the streets. Each drill instructor (DI) bellowed his highly individual cadence. The recruits looked as rigid as sardines in a can. I grew nervous at seeing how serious—or rather, scared—they seemed.

"All right, you people, off them damned buses!"

We scrambled out, lined up with men from the other buses, and were counted off into groups of about sixty. Several

trucks rolled by carrying work parties of men still in boot camp or who had finished recently. All looked at us with knowing grins and jeered, "You'll be sorreee." This was the standard, unofficial greeting extended to all recruits.

Shortly after we debused, a corporal walked over to my group. He yelled, "Patoon, teehut. Right hace, forwart huah. Double time, huah."

He ran us up and down the streets for what seemed hours and finally to a double line of huts that would house us for a time. We were breathless. He didn't even seem to be breathing hard.

"Patoon halt, right hace!" He put his hands on his hips and looked us over contemptuously. "You people are stupid," he bellowed. From then on he tried to prove it every moment of every day. "My name is Corporal Doherty. I'm your drill instructor. This is Platoon 984. If any of you idiots think you don't need to follow my orders, just step right out here and I'll beat your ass right now. Your soul may belong to Jesus, but your ass belongs to the Marines. You people are *recruits*. You're *not* Marines. You may not have what it takes to be Marines."

No one dared move, hardly even to breathe. We were all humbled, because there was no doubt the DI meant exactly what he said.

Corporal Doherty wasn't a large man by any standard. He stood about five feet ten inches, probably weighed around 160 pounds, and was muscular with a protruding chest and flat stomach. He had thin lips, a ruddy complexion, and was probably as Irish as his name. From his accent I judged him to be a New Englander, maybe from Boston. His eyes were the coldest, meanest green I ever saw. He glared at us like a wolf whose first and foremost desire was to tear us limb from limb. He gave me the impression that the only reason he didn't do so was that the Marine Corps wanted to use us for cannon fodder to absorb Japanese bullets and shrapnel so genuine Marines could be spared to capture Japanese positions. That Corporal Doherty was tough and hard as nails none of us ever doubted. Most Marines recall how loudly their DIs yelled at them, but Doherty didn't yell very loudly. Instead he shouted in an icy, menacing manner that sent cold chills through us. We believed that if he didn't scare us to death, the Japs couldn't kill us. He was always immaculate, and his uniform fitted him as if the finest tailor had made it for him. His posture was erect, and his bearing reflected military precision.

The public pictures a DI wearing sergeant stripes. Doherty commanded our respect and put such fear into us that he couldn't have been more effective if he had had the six stripes of a first sergeant instead of the two of a corporal. One fact emerged immediately with stark clarity: this man would be the master of our fates in the weeks to come.

Doherty rarely drilled us on the main parade ground, but marched or double-timed us to an area near the beach of San Diego Bay. There the deep, soft sand made walking exhausting, just what he wanted. For hours on end, for days on end, we drilled back and forth across the soft sand. My legs ached terribly for the first few days, as did those of everyone else in the platoon. I found that when I concentrated on a fold of the collar or cap of the man in front of me or tried to count the ships in the bay, my muscles didn't ache as badly. To drop out of ranks because of tired legs was unthinkable. The standard remedy for such shirking was to "double-time in place to get the legs in shape"—before being humiliated and berated in front of the whole platoon by the DI. I preferred the pain to the remedy.

Before heading back to the hut area at the end of each drill session, Doherty would halt us, ask a man for his rifle, and tell us he would demonstrate the proper technique for holding the rifle while creeping and crawling. First, though, he would place the butt of the rifle on the sand, release the weapon, and let it drop, saying that anyone who did that would have a miserable day of it. With so many men in the platoon, it was uncanny how often he asked to use my rifle in this demonstration. Then, after demonstrating how to cradle the rifle, he ordered us to creep and crawl. Naturally, the men in front kicked sand onto the rifle of the one behind him. With this and several other techniques, the DI made it necessary for us to clean our rifles several times each day. But we learned quickly and well an old Marine Corps truism, "The rifle is a Marine's best friend." We always treated it as just that.

During the first few days, Doherty once asked one of the recruits a question about his rifle. In answering, the hapless recruit referred to his rifle as "my gun." The DI muttered some instructions to him, and the recruit blushed. He began trotting up and down in front of the huts holding his rifle in one hand and his penis in the other, chanting, "This is my rifle," as he held up his M1, "and this is my gun," as he moved his other arm. "This is for Japs," he again held aloft his M1; "and this is for fun," he held up his other arm. Needless to say, none of us ever again used the word "gun" unless referring to a shotgun, mortar, artillery piece, or naval gun.

A typical day in boot camp began with reveille at 0400 hours. We tumbled out of our sacks in the chilly dark and hurried through shaves, dressing, and chow. The grueling day ended with taps at 2200. At any time between taps and reveille, however, the DI might break us out for rifle inspection, close-order drill, or for a run around the parade ground or over the sand by the bay. This seemingly cruel and senseless harassment stood me in good stead later when I found that war allowed sleep to no man, particularly the infantryman. Combat guaranteed sleep of the permanent type only. We moved to two or three different hut areas during the first few weeks, each time on a moment's notice. The order was "Platoon 984, fall out on the double with rifles, full individual equipment, and seabags with all gear properly stowed, and prepare to move out in ten minutes." A mad scramble would follow as men gathered up and packed their equipment. Each man had one or two close buddies who pitched in to help each other don packs and hoist heavy seabags onto sagging shoulders. Several men from each hut would stay behind to clean up the huts and surrounding area as the other men of the platoon struggled under their heavy loads to the new hut area.

Upon arrival at the new area, the platoon halted, received hut assignments, fell out, and stowed gear. Just as we got into the huts we would get orders to fall in for drill with rifles, cartridge belts, and bayonets. The sense of urgency and hurry never abated. Our DI was ingenious in finding ways to harass us.

One of the hut areas we were in was across a high fence from an aircraft factory where big B-24 Liberator bombers were made. There was an airstrip, too, and the big four-engine planes came and went low over the tops of the huts. Once one belly-landed, going through the fence near our huts. No one was hurt, but several of us ran down to see the crash. When we got back to our area, Corporal Doherty delivered one of his finest orations on the subject of recruits never leaving their assigned area without the permission of their DI. We were all impressed, particularly with the tremendous number of push-ups and other exercises we performed instead of going to noon chow.

During close-order drill, the short men had the toughest time staying in step. Every platoon had its "feather merchants"—short men struggling along with giant strides at the tail end of the formation. At five feet nine inches, I was about two-thirds of the way back from the front guide of Platoon 984. One day while returning from the bayonet course, I

got out of step and couldn't pick up the cadence. Corporal Doherty marched along beside me. In his icy tone, he said, "Boy, if you don't get in step and stay in step, I'm gonna kick you so hard in the behind that they're gonna have to take both of us to sick bay. It'll take a major operation to get my foot outa your ass." With those inspiring words ringing in my ears, I picked up the cadence and never ever lost it again.

The weather became quite chilly, particularly at night. I had to cover up with blankets and overcoat. Many of us slept in dungaree trousers and sweat shirts in addition to our Skivvies. When reveille sounded well before daylight, we only had to pull on our boondockers [field shoes] before falling in for roll call.

Each morning after roll call, we ran in the foggy darkness to a large asphalt parade ground for rifle calisthenics. Atop a wooden platform, a muscular physical training instructor led several platoons in a long series of tiring exercises. A publicaddress system played a scratchy recording of "Three O'-Clock in the Morning." We were supposed to keep time with the music. The monotony was broken only by frequent whispered curses and insults directed at our enthusiastic instructor, and by the too frequent appearance of various DIs who stalked the extended ranks making sure all hands exercised vigorously. Not only did the exercises harden our bodies, but our hearing became superkeen from listening for the DIs as we skipped a beat or two for a moment of rest in the inky darkness.

At the time, we didn't realize or appreciate the fact that the discipline we were learning in responding to orders under stress often would mean the difference later in combat—between success or failure, even living or dying. The ear training also proved to be an unscheduled dividend when Japanese infiltrators slipped around at night.

Shortly we received word that we were going to move out to the rifle range. We greeted the announcement enthusiastically. Rumor had it that we would receive the traditional broad-brimmed campaign hats. But the supply ran out when our turn came. We felt envious and cheated every time we saw those salty-looking "Smokey Bear" hats on the range. Early on the first morning at the rifle range, we began what was probably the most thorough and the most effective rifle marksmanship training given to any troops of any nation during World War II. We were divided into two-man teams the first week for dry firing, or "snapping-in." We concentrated on proper sight setting, trigger squeeze, calling of shots, use

of the leather sling as a shooting aid, and other fundamentals. It soon became obvious why we all received thick pads to be sewn onto the elbows and right shoulders of our dungaree jackets: during this snapping-in, each man and his buddy practiced together, one in the proper position (standing, kneeling, sitting, or prone) and squeezing the trigger, and the other pushing back the rifle bolt lever with the heel of his hand, padded by an empty cloth bandolier wrapped around the palm. This procedure cocked the rifle and simulated recoil. The DIs and rifle coaches checked every man continuously. Everything had to be just so. Our arms became sore from being contorted into various positions and having the leather sling straining our joints and biting into our muscles. Most of us had problems perfecting the sitting position (which I never saw used in combat). But the coach helped everyone the way he did me—simply by plopping his weight on my shoulders until I was able to “assume the correct position.” Those familiar with firearms quickly forgot what they knew and learned the Marine Corps’ way.

Second only to accuracy was safety. Its principles were pounded into us mercilessly. “*Keep* the piece pointed toward the target. *Never* point a rifle at anything you don’t intend to shoot. *Check* your rifle *each* time you pick it up to be sure it isn’t loaded. Many *accidents* have occurred with ‘unloaded’ rifles.”

We went onto the firing line and received live ammunition the next week. At first, the sound of rifles firing was disconcerting. But not for long. Our snapping-in had been so thorough, we went through our paces automatically. We fired at round black bull’s-eye targets from 100, 300, and 500 yards. Other platoons worked the “butts.”* When the range officer ordered, “Ready on the right, ready on the left, all ready on the firing line, commence firing,” I felt as though the rifle was part of me and vice versa. My concentration was complete. Discipline was ever present, but the harassment that had been our daily diet gave way to deadly serious, businesslike instruction in marksmanship. Punishment for infractions of the rules came swiftly and severely, however. One man next to me turned around slightly to speak to a buddy after “cease firing” was given; the action caused his rifle muzzle to angle away from the targets. The sharp-eyed captain in charge of the range rushed up from behind and booted the man in the rear so hard that he fell flat on his face. The captain then jerked him up off the deck and bawled him out loudly and thoroughly. We got his message.

*“Butts” refers to the impact area on a rifle range. It consists of the targets mounted on a vertical track system above a sheltered dugout, usually made of concrete, in which other shooters operate, mark, and score the targets for

those on the firing line.

Platoon 984 took its turn in the butts. As we sat safely in the dugouts and waited for each series of firing to be completed, I had somber thoughts about the crack and snap of bullets passing overhead.

Qualification day dawned clearly and brightly. We were apprehensive, having been told that anyone who didn't shoot high enough to qualify as "marksman" wouldn't go overseas. When the final scores were totaled, I was disappointed. I fell short of "expert rifleman" by only two points. However, I proudly wore the Maltese Cross—shaped sharpshooter's badge. And I didn't neglect to point out to my Yankee buddies that most of the high shooters in our platoon were Southern boys.

Feeling like old salts, we returned to the recruit depot for the final phases of recruit training. The DIs didn't treat us as veterans, though; harassment picked up quickly to its previous intensity.

By the end of eight grueling weeks, it had become apparent that Corporal Doherty and the other DIs had done their jobs well. We were hard physically, had developed endurance, and had learned our lessons. Perhaps more important, we were tough mentally. One of our assistant drill instructors even allowed himself to mumble that we might become Marines after all.

Finally, late in the afternoon of 24 December 1943, we fell in without rifles and cartridge belts. Dressed in service greens, each man received three bronze Marine Corps globe-and-anchor emblems, which we put into our pockets. We marched to an amphitheater where we sat with several other platoons.

This was our graduation from boot camp. A short, affable-looking major standing on the stage said, "Men, you have successfully completed your recruit training and are now United States Marines. Put on your Marine Corps emblems and wear them with pride. You have a great and proud tradition to uphold. You are members of the world's finest fighting outfit, so be worthy of it." We took out our emblems and put one on each lapel of our green wool coats and one on the left side of the overseas caps. The major told several dirty jokes. Everyone laughed and whistled. Then he said, "Good luck, men." That was the first time we had been addressed as men during our entire time in boot camp.

Before dawn the next day, Platoon 984 assembled in front of the huts for the last time. We shouldered our seabags, slung our rifles, and struggled down to a warehouse where a line of trucks was parked. Corporal Doherty told us that each man was to report to the designated truck as his name and destination was called out. The few men selected to train as specialists (radar technicians, aircraft mechanics, etc.) were to turn in their rifles, bayonets, and cartridge belts.

As the men moved out of ranks, there were quiet remarks of, "So long, see you, take it easy." We knew that many friendships were ending right there. Doherty called out, "Eugene B. Sledge, 534559, full individual equipment and M1 rifle, infantry, Camp Elliott."

Most of us were designated for infantry, and we went to Camp Elliott or to Camp Pendleton.* As we helped each other aboard the trucks, it never occurred to us why so many were being assigned to infantry. We were destined to take the places of the ever mounting numbers of casualties in the rifle or line companies in the Pacific. We were fated to fight the war first hand. We were cannon fodder.

After all assignments had been made, the trucks rolled out, and I looked at Doherty watching us leave. I disliked him, but I respected him. He had made us Marines, and I wondered what he thought as we rolled by.

*Camp Elliott was a small installation located on the northern outskirts of San Diego. It has been used rarely since World War II. Thirty-five miles north of San Diego lies Camp Joseph H. Pendleton. Home today of the 1st Marine Division, it is the Marine Corps' major west coast amphibious base.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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