

# It Could Have Been Worse!

By Albert Blaisdell #3533

## Pelelui Island, September 14, 1944

I was a tank commander in the 3rd Armored Amphibious Tank Battalion, 1st Marine Division on this particular day. Our company of tanks had disembarked from the LSTs (Landing Ship Tank) five miles out from this island of the Palau group in mid-Pacific and were the first to land.

Our immediate target was the Japanese airfield and any targets of opportunity. We saw none.

The enemy was dug in deep and out of sight through the first wave landing and did not show themselves until we made the edge of the airfield. Our tank and crew were hull down in a shell or bomb crater with only our heavy 75mm cannon and a .50-caliber Browning MG showing above ground.

For several minutes, all was quiet except for the sounds of our aircraft and ship barrages from offshore passing overhead and to our flanks.

I was out of our turret and sitting above the engine compartment, listening to the radio traffic coming in. My crew were at their stations in the tank.

About us on our left were several Marine infantry who had just followed in our tracks and were digging in when suddenly all hell broke loose as the enemy came to and started defense fire on us.

Heavy MG, rifle and mortar fire began to rain amongst us, with one mortar shell landing close behind our tank, showering our tank and a small group of men using our tank as a shelter.

Several men were severely wounded, and I took some coral bits through my dungarees and was stricken partially deaf from the sharp crack of the shell.

Our tank was designed with a "wide open" turret about seven feet wide, and in it was part of our crew and many rounds of 75-mm high explosive shells, plus hand grenades, .50-caliber and .30-caliber ammunition that would have blown in a flash if one of those mortar shells had dropped in on us.

The radios came to life as any tanks taking close-in fire contacted our tank for orders. They were soon coming, and we cleared the infantrymen from behind us and backed out of the crater double time, all the way to the beach 200 yards to our rear. As soon as we reached the beach area, we refueled the tank by hand-over-hand with five-gallon cans. We closely checked our hull for punctures. There were dents and scratches to the 3/8-inch hull. I was the only casualty as I couldn't hear over the ringing in my ears.

By this time of day, just short of sunset, we were ordered to see to the securing of our tank against infiltrating enemy troops that night. We were to abandon the tank except for one man who could activate the .50-caliber MG in the turret if need be. As the top of the turret was about seven feet above ground and the .50 was maybe a foot higher, the gunner was well silhouetted against the skyline. So he was told to keep low until needed. He was also to act as radioman and to keep in touch with all radio traffic and with us.

I directed my crew to each dig foxholes in the lee of the tank. I had become ill due to the rigors of the day, my hearing and taking way too many salt tablets to help me with the 115 degree heat and 98 percent humidity.

I had my foxhole about half done when I went to my knees and upchucked all of those salt tablets, fuel-tainted water and "C" rations.

Lee Ruttle, my gunner, stopped what he was digging, told me to take a break and finished my three- by two- by three-foot foxhole. I thanked him and, standing down in the hole, I turned and told all hands not to show their heads above ground as they could be seriously hurt or worse, as the word was passed to that effect by our command tank a little distance away.

It was a dark, smoky, noisy night but was lit up brightly by parachute flares, long strings of tracer bullets, thermite grenades and the incoming 6-, 8-, 10- and 12-inch high explosive shells from the support fire offshore. No sleep for a sweaty, dirty and very nervous crew.

As I huddled, I took stock of my situation and took my .45 automatic Colt out of its holster and checked the loads in it. I laid it in my lap and twisted my web cartridge belt around so that I could reach the two loaded magazines in their pouch. I had 21 rounds besides the "K-Bar" trench knife I had stuck into the side of my foxhole close by my knee.

Late that night, things quieted down somewhat, though my ears were still out of whack and my stomach still acted up. I sat listening. I could almost hear my heart beat as I and, I guess, a lot more of us prayed for sunup. My GI wristwatch went belly-up due to sweat and humidity. Time went slowly by.

Then it started!

That small shuffling, scraping sound! I slowly, very slowly, pushed back my helmet away from my ringing ears. There it was. Again!

With my right hand, I lifted the .45 and cocked it.

My left hand pulled the K-Bar out of the sand. I dared not raise up as I could be spotted by whomever it was.

There, again, a quiet scraping sound. Closer it came. Now it was right at my left shoulder and a little behind my hole.

Then it happened!

Swoosh! A large (to me) amount of beach sand dumped down my sweaty back and neck! I didn't wait. The K-Bar went over my shoulder and with a crunch sank into who or what was there. I had him good!

I quickly retrieved the knife to jab again, but I had brought into that ink-black foxhole a very angry, foaming-at-the-mouth and very large, mad coconut crab! The kind that could, in minutes, shuck and open one of Lever Brothers very best. And it was lying impaled between my feet. I couldn't see him. I imagined it might and could neuter this marine in less time than that.

I hoisted the K-Bar and that crab up in the dim light, and he and it went sailing out onto the sand.

Phew! I took a deep breath or two, put the .45 on safe, unbuttoned my trousers and on shaky knees relieved myself right in that stinky hole.

My crew had a good laugh, and the battle went on!

### **Albert Blaisdell #3533:**

- Pelelui (Pell ^ eh- lew)
- Joined Marine Corps in San Diego, July 1938.
- Was wounded during the Pelelui engagement at Ngesebus on September 25.
- Spent 17 months in Naval Hospital at Oakland, California.
- Honorably discharged as a gunnery sgt. August 1946.
- Was also in the Guadalcanal Battle, 1942-43.
- Awards: Silver Star, Purple Heart, Good Conduct Ribbon, Asiatic Combat Medal, Combat Action Ribbon, American Defense Ribbon, Presidential Unit Citation Ribbon.
- Married Lucile November 19, 1946. (Now married 58 years.)