

Simon B. Buckner, Jr. Class of 1908

No. 4699 ■ 18 Jul 1886 – 18 Jun 1945

Killed In Action near Mezato, Okinawa, Japan ■ Interred near Hagushi Beach, Japan



He was the only son of the Kentucky soldier whose name he bore, and of Delia Hayes Claiborne of Richmond, VA.

The Buckner home, where he was born, was built in the early 19th Century by his grandfather. *Simon Bolivar Buckner, Jr.*, was the only child of his father's second marriage. Of his boyhood days he once wrote for an article appearing in *Time*. "I went barefooted hunted, trapped, fished, swam, canoed, raised chickens, fought roosters, rode five miles daily for the mail, trained dogs, did odd farm jobs, learned not to eat green persimmons, and occasionally walked eight miles to Munfordville to broaden my horizon by seeing the train come in, learning the fine points of horse trading, or listening to learned legal and political discussion on county court day."

After attending various schools near home, he spent two years at the Virginia Military Institute whence he received his West Point appointment from President Theodore Roosevelt, entering 16 Jun 1904 and graduating 14 Feb 1908, number 58 in a class finally numbering 108. He took his academic course in stride, holding his position about mid-class with little effort. In the battalion of that day, he was a corporal, a sergeant, and finally a lieutenant. Without excelling in athletics, he played scrub football, was a member of our indoor meet teams, and gave much time to boxing and wrestling under Tom Jenkins. He ranked high in "dis," earning all the Christmas leaves possible under the demerit rules of that day, and had a standing date to spend each in Washington, where he was the bright spot of every party he attended. At each annual class meeting, he always was returned second ranking hop manager.

Upon graduation he was assigned to the 9th Infantry. To show how earnestly he took his

chosen career, he devoted part of his graduation leave to a trip to the Canal Zone, where the job was approaching its maximum swing. Here he stayed with the chief engineer who was very fond of him; he hiked for miles through the Cut and over the lock sites, rode dirt trains, and pounded jungle trails for his first taste of what moving foot troops over such ground and in such climate would mean. Thus began the preparation for his supreme command. It might be said his whole career was ideally patterned for that climax but it will be enough in this sketch to name the more important details. He began to know the Philippines from a tour in Cebu during 1910–12. After various details in the U.S., which included a year as assistant superintendent of Public Buildings and Grounds in Washington, he returned to the Philippines for another year in 1916, now with the 27th Infantry, spent between Manila and Baguio.

While on this tour he went on leave to marry Miss Adele Blanc of a well-known New Orleans family, the wedding taking place in Louisville, KY, 30 Dec 1916. Of this happy union were born three children: Simon Bolivar Buckner III at Louisville, KY, 18 Nov 1918; Mary Blanc Buckner at West Point, NY, 22 Aug 1922; and William Claiborne Buckner at Ft. Leavenworth, KS, 29 Jun 1926. Simon is a veteran of WWII, having come up through the ranks and served overseas with distinction through North Africa, Sicily, Italy, and France with the 927th Signal Battalion, attaining the rank of captain. Mary graduated from Stanford University in December 1945. William, in the Class of '48, graduated just 104 years after that of his illustrious grandfather.

If Simon Buckner, Jr., was disappointed to miss action in WWI, he contributed valuably to training the more fortunate, for at Kelly Field, TX, as major in the Aviation section of the Signal Corps, he successively commanded and put through the traces the 5th Provisional Regiment, SC, and other units including the 1st and 3rd Training Brigades. In August 1918, he was with the Operations section of the Air Service in Washington, becoming, in October, a student at the War College. In May 1919, after assignment to the 83rd Infantry, came his first detail to West Point as instructor of Infantry tactics, commanding a battalion of cadets.

After four years of this came a detail as student at the Infantry School at Ft. Benning, followed by CGSC at Ft. Leavenworth, which

he completed as a distinguished graduate, remaining to instruct for an additional three years. Then came another four years at the Army War College where, after completing the one-year course, he remained as executive officer until 1932.

That year saw his return to West Point, this time as assistant to the commandant of cadets for one year, then as commandant for three years until June 1936. His rule is remembered for constructive progressiveness, with a share of severity tempered with hard, sound sense, and justice.

His regime, as commandant thus highlighted and typified, marks him as an outstanding leader among those to fill that important office. To honor his service, Camp Popolopen, now the summer training camp for the cadets, has been redesigned and named Camp Buckner.

The succeeding four years found him on short details all over the country from Texas to Massachusetts: as umpire at maneuvers, taking refresher courses, organizing and training, attaining his colonelcy in January 1937. In July 1940 came his first real opportunity for important troop service when he was put at the head of the Alaskan Defense Command at Ft. Richardson, attaining the rank of permanent brigadier general on 1 September, one of the first of his class to wear the star with troops.

His work in Alaska was that of a pioneer. He built roads, bases, personally tested types of clothing, boots and sleeping bags, and maintained high morale despite weather and terrain. Fully appreciating the value of cooperation with the other branches of the service, he gave a fine example of teamwork with the Navy. He spent much time flying around the Aleutian chain. He became a major general, A.U.S., on 4 Aug 1941. On 4 Jun 1942, his fliers and those of the Navy located a fleet of Japanese carriers, cruisers, and destroyers patently bound for Dutch



Harbor and drove them back, despite fog and rain, with heavy loss and damage, thus defeating the nearest actual threat to security of the Pacific Coast region. His was the training of the Army task force, which finally recovered Attu in May 1943. On the 4th of that month he was promoted to lieutenant general, A.U.S.

During that summer of 1943 he made an official visit to Washington during which he was host at an impromptu class gathering held at Harvey's. We found him unchanged, in superb physical trim, boyishly jovial as ever, loving his assignment, preaching his hobby of going all the way to instill into his troops the creed of cooperation with those in other arms of our service. He was so taken with the Alaskan country that he bought property at Anchorage for a permanent dwelling, and at Homer for a log cabin, planning to make the Territory his home after the war. At Homer the American Legion Post has been named after him.

In June 1944, he was assigned to Central Pacific Area, Ft. Shafter, Territory of Hawaii, where he began training of units later to constitute the Tenth Army. Here he was most exacting in the physical tests and fitness demanded of his officers and men, and in the following silent months he was whipping his command into shape for one of the most vital campaigns of the whole war—Okinawa. How well this was done is given in words of Secretary Forestal in citation for the Navy Department's Distinguished Service Medal, posthumous: "Charged with training and equipping the Tenth Army for the Okinawa Campaign, LTG Buckner developed each unit to a high state of combat readiness, integrating the whole as a formidable fighting command. Rendering invaluable assistance throughout the planning phase, he subsequently cooperated wholeheartedly with amphibious commanders during landing operations and immediately established his lines of supplies and communications when the beachheads were secured. Skillfully coordinating the fire power of all branches of the armed services under his command, he boldly executed maneuvers designed to neutralize savage Japanese resistance and despite the difficulties of extremely rugged terrain and adverse weather which frequently delayed the movements of both men and equipment, relentlessly pressed onward toward the objective, constantly rallying his tired, depleted troops and waging furious battle..."

In the combined operation for which GEN Buckner commanded the Army troops, he launched the offensive on the Ryukyus when his 77th Division landed on Kerama Retto on 26 Mar 1945, and in three days secured all small islands in that chain and brought Okinawa,

the key island, within artillery range. Then on 1 April, the XXIV Army Corps and III Marine Corps established beachheads along the west coast near Kadena. After a drive across the island, the latter swung north and soon mopped up all the northern portion. The former, swinging south, ran into the stiffest, most stubborn opposition of the Pacific War requiring all the ingenuity and leadership of the commanding general to bring eventual success. The citation for his Distinguished Service Cross, posthumous, says: "After planning and directing all phases of his army's activities in the Okinawa operation, GEN Buckner had forced the Japanese to the southern tip of the island. Realizing that decisive action would undoubtedly result, he joined a forward regiment and proceeded to a battalion observation post approximately 300 yards behind the front lines closely to supervise the action of his troops."

He had been struck by a shell fragment. Despite the efforts of a Medical officer with him, GEN Buckner was pronounced dead ten minutes after being hit. Thus passed the officer of highest rank in the U.S. Army in this war to lose his life in action while exercising troop command. In a matter of hours, the fighting in Okinawa was over, but it was written he might not witness the final victory. Had he been able so to read, his course would have been no different. He would not have complained. Through and through he was a soldier. The next day he was laid to rest beside comrades in the cemetery of the 7th Infantry Division, near Hagushi Beach, where he had led his men ashore that Easter Sunday—there to "find a soldier's resting place beneath a soldier's blow."

Of the many traits of leadership he displayed, mention has been made of the "get-along" spirit with which he inculcated his component of a mixed command. It is interesting to note the reaction of his Navy comrades. In the Alaskan days he worked closely with Admiral Thomas C. Kinkaid, and of this association the admiral writes: "If the Japanese forces penetrated to the eastward of a certain meridian, Army interests were to be considered 'paramount'. If they remained to westward of that line, Navy interests were 'paramount'. In each case the other commander was to

cooperate with and to coordinate with, the commander having paramount interest. As all of the operations were to the westward, the Navy was in direct command. GEN Buckner gave a full measure of cooperation. I could not have asked for greater courtesy and consideration. We made a point of consulting each other and of keeping each other informed. All important dispatches were discussed before sending, and they invariably ended with 'Buckner concurs' or 'Kinkaid concurs' depending upon who was the originator. When GEN Buckner was killed on Okinawa, I lost a friend whom I had learned to admire and trust, and the armed services lost a gallant and courageous officer of high integrity." What a pattern to lay before those engaged in the study of future joint operations!

On 19 Jun 1945, on the floor of the Senate, this tribute was paid by Senator Chandler of Kentucky: "This ruddy-faced, white-thatched apostle of the vigorous life had seen the new United States Tenth Army drive deeper and deeper into enemy territory in Okinawa until at last he stood on the threshold of complete victory on that important battlefield. Fate deprived him of seeing the curtain run down on one of the most important acts that foretells the fall of Japan. He leaves behind him a heritage as rich as that received from his father. It was the will to win that characterized Simon Bolivar Buckner as he met his death on Okinawa. A man who attacked life aggressively, he never asked the men under his command to do a job he would not do himself."

President Truman, in citation for award of the Purple Heart, posthumous, sets forth that "in the unbroken line of patriots who have dared to die that freedom might live ... he lives—in a way that humbles the undertakings of most men."

His classmates and friends who glimpsed the early signs of his promising qualities take pride in all the words of high praise, which acclaim their realization. And as we broadly view his whole career and personality, we may also humbly add, as one of them suggests, those lines of Kipling: "E'en as he trod that day to God, so walked he from his birth, in simpleness and gentleness and honour and clean mirth."

—A classmate



General Simon B. Buckner on Okinawa.