

“UNTIL SOMEONE CALLS MY
NAME”

*A short story written in tribute to
James D. Jackson
MIA 11 May 1945 Okinawa*

Deadeye Company C, 382nd

Raymond Baird



Then it began to happen again.

If Jackson had ever had anesthesia, he might have thought that this was sort of similar. Sort of like that incoherent flailing as you try to shake off the effects of the drugs and try to re-become yourself. You drift into conscious awareness, then in spite of all your clawing, you lose it, the cycle, like some toxic mental miasma, being completely outside your control.

Someone nearby was saying his name. He had experienced that same thing once before, too. “When was that?” he asked himself. In one of his lucid moments it came back to him. “Jackson, James D.” the voice had intoned in a somewhat mechanical, almost disinterested way, “Company C, 382nd Infantry. This report says he was hit by a sniper somewhere around here, when they were pinned down by a Nip machine gun on that ridge over there.” The voice continued, “No remains were found. Scatter out and see if you can find anything.” That was the last thing he could recall, and it was followed by the velvet darkness closing in again.

Until now. Disoriented, unconnected images swirled slowly in the syrup-like chaos that was his mind as he fought to wake up. Waiting on the ship before finally landing on the island. The smell of vomit on the landing craft. The constant low grumble of battle in the distance. Walking down to hire some of the local women to try to wash the foul stench from his uniform. Then the battle itself, his only battle; men yelling; men hit; men replaced; more yelling. Then a thump; Graves Registration’s fruitless search of the area; then nothing.

“The after-action report was filed by Lt. Doyle several days later and it says that PFC Jackson was a replacement and had been in the Company only five days....” said a male voice, different than the first one. “But the details are a bit sketchy and sometimes contradictory. I hope you understand. The only reason we have any records at all is because we won.”

“Are they talking about me? Why are they talking about me? Who is talking about me?” As his mind had cleared, his uncertainty had become focused, and his questions had become more coherent.

Another new voice, then several new voices. He became aware that he did not see them, he only heard them. Maybe he wasn't even hearing them – he just seemed to know what they were saying. Whoever they were, they spoke in hushed tones, almost reverential. Suddenly he realized that several voices were female. “Women? Here? Where did they come from?”

A new male voice: “Every day when we take off from Futenma, one of the landmarks we use is that water tower on top of the knob you called Dick Baker. I see it almost every day.”

“Take off? So that guy's a pilot? A water tower? There's no water tower on Dick Baker.”

One of the female voices, a girl's voice, inquisitive: “Mama?”

“How'd she get out here?”

Having gotten the adult's attention, the girl continued, in that linear tone that children often show when they want to make sure they understand something they can't infer, to make sure they have gotten their arms around a storyline: “Mama, your grandfather Jackson was killed here?”

A woman's voice “That's right.”

“Did you know your grandfather Jackson?”

“No, honey, he was killed long before I was born. In fact he was killed when your Grandmother was a baby and even she never got to see him.”

“My God, she's talking about my baby daughter. That woman talking – that must be my granddaughter. And she says I am dead.” Like a wave, a sense of being overwhelmed swept over him, crested, crashed down, and swallowed him.

Then there was silence, disturbed only by the sound of shoes on grit. He remembered the grit - the sound of it under his boots, the feel of it in his clothes and on his skin and on his rifle, and the moldy smell of it when it was wet, which was most of the time. It was heavy with the almost physical smell of rotting plants, a smell so heavy that the breezes could not blow it away, and the unmistakable on-again—off-again pungency of a mixture of odors of decaying flesh, jellied gasoline, and cordite.

Pilot's voice again: "Trees up ahead -- keep your eyes open for habu, everyone. We don't want anyone to get bitten now, not today, not on our last day here." A pause, "Look at this, girls. It's a detonator from a 75 mm howitzer round. Amazing that you can tell what it is through all the corrosion 70 years later." After they looked at it, he had them return it, laying it just off the trail, unwilling to take the artifact from the battle site.

Over the course of the next two and a half hours Jackson accompanied the family and the guide as they walked the ground where so many had died, as the guide filled them in with the few details he had been able to locate, placing them geographically in the battle as best he could. Then the tour was over. The girls, who had been uncharacteristically hushed throughout the morning, were eager to eat lunch. As sandwiches were brought out, the pilot told them not to dawdle, because the flight to Osaka was only four hours away and they still had to drop the car off. These comments were vaguely disconcerting to Jackson, though he wasn't too sure why. In a break in the conversation he mused "They're flying to Osaka." That was an unforeseen development: the novelty ("kids flying....?") and peculiarity ("...from Okinawa?" "...to Osaka? ...that's in Japan, isn't it?"), reinforcing the growing conclusion that it had been a long time between this conversation and the last one he had been party to, and that much had happened in the interval. Then the mundane momentarily took precedence as the sandwiches, now having been handed out, were eaten and conversation temporarily subsided.

In a few minutes, the conversation resumed, but it was mostly a monologue now, punctuated by an occasional question from one of the girls. The girls' mother related more details about her mother's life and how it had been shaped indirectly by the events that took place here, 70 years earlier. She tried to put it in context by repeating the old butterfly wing adage, concluding, "the butterfly flapping its wings in Samoa didn't 'cause' the tornado in Texas in any direct way that we can figure out, but it changed the initial conditions, and those conditions affected other things, which eventually allowed the tornado to form, when still other things happened." Jackson had heard this before. "Was it in school?" He doubted it. Maybe in one of the endless bull sessions in the Santa Fe rail yard before he was drafted or in the barracks or on the troop ship. "The latter, most likely," he thought. The girls' questions and comments led Jackson to believe that they had a rudimentary understanding of the idea she was trying to put across – a pretty good understanding of it, in fact – but even though they had a good handle on it, it would be a long time before they grasped it fully, and, he thought, maybe he would have to think about it some more too.

The pilot re-focused Jackson's attention on the immediate situation when he said, "OK, everyone, let's load up."

The mother's ambivalence was evident in her voice. Ever organized and efficient, she oversaw the gathering up of the trash. But with her voice

quavering, she asked the guide to take one more picture of her family overlooking the battlefield of long ago, now calm and peaceful in the noontime sun. There, in tears, her voice now breaking, she said goodbye to Jackson, the grandfather whom she had never met, and thanked him. "Your being here, in this place at that time, doing what you did, established the conditions that allowed my mother to become who and what she is, and that allowed me to become who and what I am, and that allowed me to have and to know these wonderful girls. I cannot ever thank you, and even if I could, I could not thank you enough." She was unable to continue, and they got into the cars and drove away.

In only minutes, a change stole over Jackson. He could hear them less and less well. As the conversation became less distinct he felt, rather than saw, the opaque fog creeping back over him. The implication was finally clear. They were leaving, leaving and likely never to come back. "No!" he screamed soundlessly, "Don't leave me alone. I don't even know your names. For the love of God, don't leave me here...all alone. You're all I have. Without you..."

But it was no use. They passed beyond his reach. They never knew, and like before, he slipped into the dark seamless, patternless silence, until someone might again call his name.