

2nd Prize Winner 16-18 age group

Letters from the Front:

Guadalcanal



Patrick Denham, Colorado

The following are a compilation of letters from Private First Class Jonathan Williams of the 1st Marine Division on Guadalcanal, written for his family in Fort Worth, Texas.

7 August 1942

Several Miles East of Lunga Point, Guadalcanal

Dear Ma, Pa, and Eddie,

I, along with my company and most of my division, landed on Guadalcanal at around 0900. We have set up camp for the night near our first objective, an airfield to the west occupied by the enemy. We have set watches throughout the night, and I am currently posted at the perimeter of our camp. I have stolen a little ways from my position to write this letter to you. There are no bright lights here like there are back home, so the stars are as bright as I've ever seen. They shine so bright that I have no need of manmade light to pen this letter. My two good friends, Walter and Mike Tomlinson, are not with me, as they and about 3000 others split from the group to take over the nearby islands of Tulagi, Gavutu, and Tanambogo up north. Maybe Eddie can find these places on that big world map of yours, Ma, although they are very small. I still do not understand why we have been sent here to this insignificant island in the Pacific, and do not know if I ever will. All I know is that my country needs me, and that is enough for me to go. I still remember that night, Pa, when you and I took a walk down to the WWI memorial just outside of town. I was 11 at the time. I clearly remember your words: "Johnny, our American

country is the greatest there ever has been. But the freedoms we have are not free, and have been fought and died for over many generations. Don't you ever let anyone take this away from you." Those words resonate with me still, and I am now fighting against those who want to take our liberties away.

Luckily, we encountered hardly any resistance on the trek to our current position, and hopefully it will stay that way as we advance to the airfield tomorrow. I know that I will often be in your thoughts, as you are in mine.

Your loving son,

Johnny

22 August 1942

Henderson Field, Guadalcanal

Dear Ma, Pa, and Eddie,

I hope this letter reaches you well. We have taken the airfield with overwhelming force, and have begun the process of fortifying and reconstructing to make way for U.S. aircraft who will be stationed here. The airfield has been renamed Henderson Field, after a SBD Dauntless pilot who was the first casualty in the Battle of Midway. Many men in my division are sick with dysentery, and morale is as low as it has ever been. It rained all night, a steady, heavy downpour that soaked all of my gear and clothing. I awoke last night to the loud crackle of thunder as it shook the night sky above me.

The men of the First Division who split from the group to assault the islands of Tulagi, Gavutu, and Tanambogo have returned, but my friends Mike and Tommy are not with them. They were killed on Tulagi on August 7th, the very night I penned my first letter. I asked around to see if anyone had seen them in their final moments, hoping that whatever happened was quick and painless.

I struggle now to find a reason for their sacrifice. Everything on this island reeks of death and decay, and everyone around me feels the despair that this forsaken island brings. My company is especially struck by the losses of Tulagi. Out of our 120 men, 43 were killed. Everyone has lost a friend. Why did they have to die on an island so trivial as Tulagi?

On Guadalcanal, I fear the same may happen to me. I have already narrowly escaped death many times. In the early hours of yesterday morning, the 21st, the Japanese launched a frontal assault on our partially-complete defense fortifications around the airfield. Our line of sight was blanketed by a heavy layer of fog, hanging low to the ground. The attackers came upon us without warning, emerging from the trees 100 yards away. The Marine beside me, Robert Kalowski, died instantly with a shot through the head. The jungle was instantly filled with explosions, smoke, and bullets. For almost 2 hours, the relentless assault continued. The smoke from discharged rounds and haze of thundering gun barrels rendered it almost impossible to see or hear. When it was all over, the ground was littered with hundreds of bodies, mostly the enemy's. Out of the 11 men initially at my forward post, only 4 of us survived. Whether it was Providence or luck, I do not know.

I will write to you whenever I find the time. Tell Eddie that I look forward to seeing him as soon as I can, and that I often think of him. I hope he will understand.

Your loving son,

Johnny

19 September 1942

Henderson Field, Guadalcanal

Dear Ma, Pa, and Eddie

Much to my surprise and possibly yours, I am still alive and well. A great deal has transpired here since my last correspondence. There are constant naval and aerial battles around our position, and there have also been several major land engagements these past months. For the most part, we are defeating our enemy. The Japanese are constantly repelled from our newly fortified positions, and are losing in both the sea and air. However, we too have suffered losses. Hundreds have been killed and countless more wounded. And while our losses are minimal in comparison to the Japanese, every man lost was an American son, brother, husband, leader, or soldier.

However, as the losses compound, I begin to realize why we fight. I see the fiery resolve in every Marine, and have discovered that our sacrifices are not in vain, but are for the liberties of those that we love. The lessons I have learned from these months of conflict are priceless. Hopefully, those that come after us, my children and grandchildren, will know that sacrifice is necessary to preserve our monumental nation. The sacrifices of Mike and Tommy, and the hundreds of Marines that will forever rest on these muddy and lonesome islands, are for a cause that will stand long after we are forgotten in the dust of history. For the liberty and prosperity of a free America, and the survival of this legacy for generations to come; that is the reason that we fight. I now realize that I fight not only for myself but for my future children and their children,

that they may always live in the free nation that I have helped preserve, and may never have to know the struggle and sacrifice of my generation. But, through their remembrance of our country's heroes, I pray they may always be willing to lay down their lives for the preservation of the future, as we have for them.

This change of heart comes after many long discussions with the great men of this Marine Division. Their boldness is inspiring and their motivation is strong, fueled by the love and hope of those back at home whom they fight to protect. I will never forget their ceaseless and fiery drive, and wish it to be my own.

Your loving son,

Johnny

30 October 1942

Medical Bay, USS Minneapolis

Dear Ma, Pa, and Eddie,

I am overjoyed to be able to write you again. These past 6 weeks have been a whirl of activity. There have been several major engagements in just the past week. I write to you from the medical bay of the USS Minneapolis, moored just off of Tulagi Island. I was wounded, shot in the left shoulder, during the final major Japanese offensive on October 25th. I will be awarded the Purple Heart, although I do not believe that I deserve it. It is Mike and Tommy who should be recognized, not I.

I have found that our impact here is much greater than I might have first perceived. We, on this desolate island, are turning the tide of the war in the Pacific. It is so easy to see now. America is no longer fighting defensively, like we have been since Pearl Harbor. America is now pushing the enemy back, gaining ground everyday, advancing towards Japan and breaking their sphere of influence in the deep Pacific. I can see the fear in the movements and actions of the enemy; they are now wary of us, having seen our strength and resolve. I finally see our effect, that this island is the turning point towards peace. What we did here is a feat of courage and tenacity, finally beating back an enemy we once feared. I rest well knowing that the sacrifices we have made are not made in vain.

Due to my injury I am finally coming home. All of us wounded soldiers will be transported back stateside as soon as possible. We are on track to arrive in San Diego in early

December. Maybe I will make it home for Christmas! I am eager beyond words to see you all again. This war has drained out of me almost all that I have. Those who have fought and died by my side are of the highest caliber of Americans; they are beyond heroes. I am truly honored to be counted as one of them.

When I reminisce on the outstanding bravery and sacrifice of our Marines, a certain memory arouses within me. I distinctly recall, on the 4th of July before I shipped, reading a poem to Eddie by the fireplace that night. It was *Stars and Stripes* by Mary Weston Fordham. The words strike with a beauty and emotion I cannot explain, describing the resolve of my fallen brethren:

Hail Flag of our county, when thrown to the breeze

Thy power is acknowledged, far over the seas.

Thy influence so boundless, that none may deny,

Thy potency reaches all lands 'neath the sky.

Should war like a dark cloud, encircle our land,

With its threat'ning besom o'ershadow the main.

With head lifted high, thou would'st laugh them to scorn

Who from thy tall flagstaff would try to pull down

Long, long may thy Stripes and thy Stars proudly wave

O'er hearts that are true and hands that are brave,

And ne'er may thy children, resign to the foe

The Flag that was Baptized, in blood long ago.^[1]

Your loving son,

Johnny

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Footnotes:

[1] Fordham, Mary Weston. *Magnolia Leaves*. Tuskegee Institute, 1897.