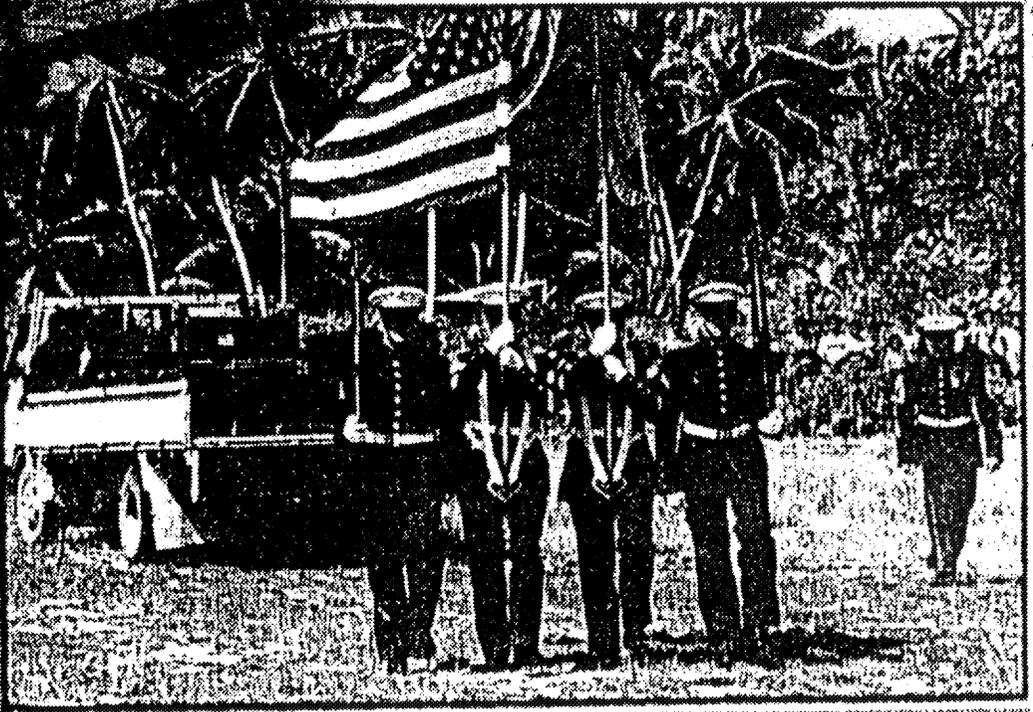


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SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 26, 2000

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Bringing I Them Home



PHOTOS COURTESY THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES; HONOR GUARD PHOTOS BY U.S. ARMY CENTRAL IDENTIFICATION LABORATORY HAWAII

■ *Their victory, and their sacrifice, was nearly forgotten. But those who still survived refused to abandon their fallen comrades, even if it took 58 years to find them.*

By **KEN RINGLE**
Washington Post Staff Writer

BRIAN QUIRK AND HIS BUDDIES have some unfinished business. Fifty-eight years ago in the early days of World War II they left the bodies of 19 fellow Marines on a piece of atoll in the South Pacific now called Butaritari Island. Now they want them back.

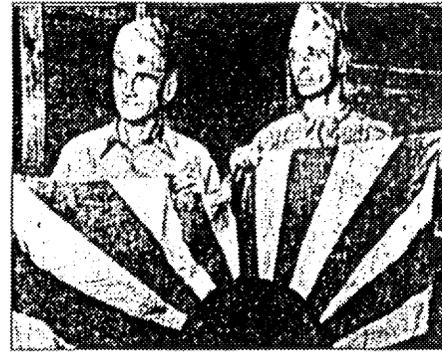
The 19 were casualties in one of the first U.S. offensives against Japan, a poignant, error-plagued raid against an isolated Japanese outpost with almost no strategic value. So many things went wrong that the Marines at one point tried to surrender to a Japanese garrison they had already wiped out.

But veterans of the raid on Makin Island, as it was then named, who included President Franklin Roosevelt's son James, were welcomed back to Hawaii as heroes in August 1942. They had won their little battle after all, giving the United States almost the first good news of the war at a time when almost all allied fortunes seemed to be flowing the other way.

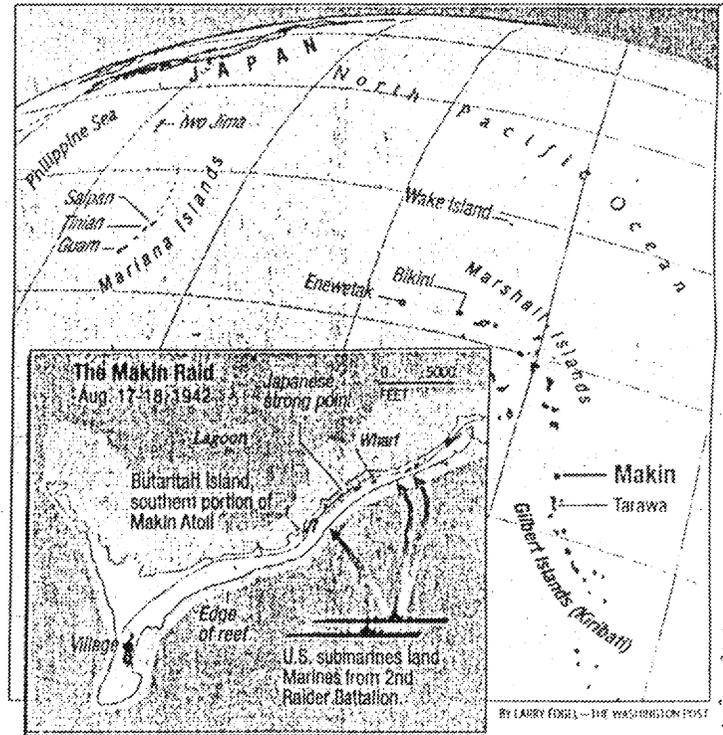
Next Aug. 17, if all goes well, on the 59th anniversary of their death, those killed in the Makin Island raid will be reburied with honors in Arlington National Cemetery—home at last from a long-forgotten skirmish that has weighed on the minds of its survivors for half a century.

"We never meant to leave them behind," says Quirk, a member of the Marine Raiders Association. "Marines don't abandon their dead."

The search for the Makin Island Raiders is a story about memory and loyalty and the strange corners of history, including a maverick Marine Corps general who studied tactics under Mao Zedong. It is also the story of the extraordinary medical detective work being done by the U.S. Army's Central Identification Laboratory in Hawaii, which started off more than 30 years ago tracking down MIAs among the unknown dead of the Vietnam War and



Clockwise from top: a Marine commando on the USS Nautilus preparing for the August 1942 raid on Makin Island; a Marine Corps color guard escorting remains of the men who perished in the raid back to Hawaii; Raider Battalion Commanding Officer Lt. Col. Evans F. Carlson, left, and Major James Roosevelt, son of the president and second in command.



By LARRY FENEL—THE WASHINGTON POST

See **MAKIN ISLAND, P4, Col. 1**

Digging Into the Mystery of the Makin Island Missing

MAKIN ISLAND, From F1

these days searches as well for the 97,000 MIAs from World War II and Korea.

But it is also a story of unsolved mystery. The Makin Island Raiders also left behind five men they were certain had been shot or drowned at sea while trying to assist others through heavy surf to a pair of U.S. submarines waiting to evacuate them.

But after the war they learned the Japanese, after re-garrisoning Makin, had removed nine American Marines to Kwajalein Atoll and beheaded them as part of a holiday festival. Five of the executed men are believed to be those thought drowned. But who were the other four? The Marine Raiders Association is hoping at last to find out.

The story begins in part with Winston Churchill. The great British prime minister had an undying attachment to cloak-and-dagger derring-do, and urged President Roosevelt in 1941 to establish a U.S. counterpart to the famed British commandos.

At the same time such guerrilla tactics were being championed by Col. Evans F. Carlson, who had witnessed them as a Marine in both Nicaragua and China in the 1920s and 1930s. Carlson subsequently had a stint with FDR's presidential guard detachment in Warm Springs, Ga., and became a friend of the president. Returning to China in 1937, he received permission to accompany the Chinese Communists as an observer in their war against the Japanese. He then resigned from the service so he could write and argue for more U.S. help for China.

In 1941 he rejoined the Marine Corps, where one of his adherents was James Roosevelt, then a Marine captain. The younger Roosevelt proposed formal creation of a Marine guerrilla unit in January 1942.

His proposal meshed with amphibious assault developments being championed by Gen. Holland M. Smith. The result was creation within the Corps of a two-battalion specialized fighting force called the Marine Raiders. One of the battalions was commanded by Carlson.

"I remember when he showed up at our boot camp in San Diego recruiting volunteers," Quirk says. "He pitched the Raiders to us as an elite outfit that thrived on hardship and danger and would be the first to fight the Japanese. He said he promised us nothing but rice, raisins, wet blankets and glory. The glory part appealed to me."

Carlson's Raiders set up camp on a farm near Camp Elliot in the hills near San Diego. They lived in the open, marched 30 miles or more a day and held midnight musters to go over Carlson's unique military philosophy, which one historian has described as "an admixture of Chinese culture, Communist egalitarianism and New England town hall democracy."

Unlike the usual armed service hierarchy, officers would have no greater privileges than enlisted men and would lead by consensus rather than rank. Their battle cry was "gung-ho," a Chinese expression—then new to Americans—which means "work together."

After extensive training in weapons, hand-to-hand fighting and use of rubber boats, two companies of Raiders were sent to Midway Island where they helped the Navy turn back a massive Japanese attack June 3-6, 1942, in what would become the turning point of the Pacific war.

But the bulk of Carlson's troops were earmarked by Adm. Chester Nimitz for an attack Aug. 17, 1942, on Makin Island in the Gilbert Islands, about 1,000 miles northwest of Guadalcanal. They were to destroy the island's small Japanese seaplane base and its garrison, gain intelligence on the area and, perhaps most importantly, divert Japanese attention and troops from Guadalcanal and Tulagi in the Solomon Islands. There U.S. troops had landed 10 days earlier to begin the major offensive of the Pacific War. The Japanese, however, were pouring reinforcements into Guadalcanal, and Nimitz was looking to the diversionary hit-and-run raid on Makin to ease the pressure.

The force of 220 Raiders arrived off Makin, main island in the atoll, in the predawn hours of Aug. 17. They had been ferried from Pearl Harbor aboard the submarines

Nautilus and *Argonaut*, which had stripped and reconfigured their torpedo storage compartments to make room for the Marines. Even so, Quirk remembers, "we were stacked all over the place and sleeping on the deck."

The raid was supposed to be a predawn surprise attack, but things started going wrong at the start.

"We had drilled a lot at Barber's Point in Hawaii, where the surf and current are supposed to be about as rough as it gets," Quirk says. "But it was cold and rainy off Butaritari and rougher than we anticipated, and loading the 21 rubber boats was a pretty dicey operation. I was carrying about 160 pounds with all the demolition gear I had, and I knew if I slid off the slippery side of that sub and missed the boat it would take me straight to the bottom."

In addition, the Raiders found the current far stronger than they anticipated and the outboard motors on the rubber boats wouldn't start. "So once they were loaded it was impossible for the rubber boats to keep stationary near the subs while the others loaded up. The result was that even with everybody paddling like hell the boats got out of place and landed in the wrong sequence on the beach, out of sight of the landmarks that were supposed to guide us to our objectives."

Furthermore, while the troops were sorting themselves out on the beach, one of the men accidentally discharged his Browning automatic rifle, "which you could have heard in Tokyo."

Realizing the enemy was now alerted, the Raiders spread out and began working their way across the 300-yard-wide island to the lagoon. At first they made little headway against the fortified Japanese positions, but the Japanese launched two banzai charges in an effort to overrun the Marines, and were cut down by the Raiders' machine guns.

"We started about 6:30 a.m. and the battle was over by 8:30," Quirk remembers. "But those two hours were very intense."

He killed his first enemy soldier during that time—a sniper in a palm tree—but most of the time I was stationed on the flank of the action by the harbor," the hinge of a pivoting sweep by his fellow Marines.

Oddly, what he remembers best was the incredible tropical beauty of the little island—the white sand and scattering of coconut palms and thatched native huts and the peace of the harbor within the atoll.

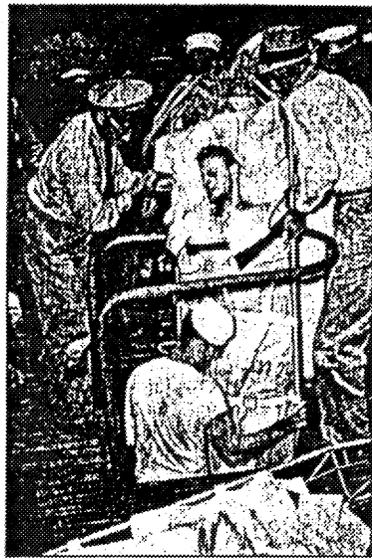
"There used to be a popular song in those days called 'Sleepy Lagoon,'" he says. "That's what it reminded me of. It was a strange place to be making war."

The garrison on the island was supposed to consist of 45, but the Raiders counted 90 dead Japanese after the battle—18 Raiders were killed as well and several wounded—and Carlson was certain more of the enemy were hidden somewhere else on the island. In addition, the Japanese soon landed two large flying boats in the lagoon. The Raiders managed to sink both with heavy weapons fire, but remained uncertain whether any of the reinforcements aboard had reached shore. Enemy planes bombed and strafed the island intermittently during the day, but Quirk, dug in beside the wooden stakes of a native pigpen, noticed that the pilots steadily overshot their targets and did little damage.

Around 5 p.m., Carlson decided to withdraw the Raiders as planned, protected by a covering force of 20, but the effort soon proved disastrous. The surf had mounted ominously, the rubber boats rolled repeatedly in the surf and the Raiders lost most of their weapons and supplies.

"We must have overturned eight or 10 times before my boat got through the surf," Quirk says. Once through they finally got the motor started and made it to one of the submarines, which had stayed submerged most of the day. Other boats made it back finally in the darkness to one sub or the other, "but few of us made it to the right sub, we were all soaked, chilled and exhausted" and 120 men—Carlson among them—remained stranded on shore, unable to make it through the surf. Only the covering force and a handful of others still had weapons.

When a small Japanese patrol stumbled on the stranded Marines during the night, wounding one Raider, Carlson decided to



surrender those on shore out of concern, he wrote later, for the wounded and for the fate of the president's son who was with him. But unknown to him, there were only a handful of Japanese still alive on the island. One of these was found and dispatched to his commander with a surrender note, only to be shot later accidentally by other Raiders before he could deliver the message.

Other boatloads had made it out through the surf to the subs during the night, however, and with dawn Carlson and his troops on shore realized no organized enemy force remained. Dodging occasional air attacks during the day as they destroyed Japanese supplies and installations, they contacted the submarines, arranging a night rendezvous at the mouth of the lagoon where there was no surf to contend with. They dragged four rubber boats across to the lagoon, and with the help of a native outrigger got the remainder of the force back to the submarines.

But during the transfer, five Raiders who had volunteered to return from one sub to the island to help the others through the surf were lost. While they were paddling in, Japanese fighters attacked, forcing the submarine to submerge.

"When we came back up there was no trace of their boat," Quirk remembers. "We had to assume they'd been strafed or drowned."

It took the subs "five or six days" to get back to Hawaii, Quirk remembers, and by then the men were a ragtag bunch. Most had lost all their clothing in the surf and were dressed in what rags the sub crews could throw together. But they were greeted as heroes in Pearl Harbor.

"All the ships were dressed with flags and there were all kinds of generals and admirals and bands to meet us," Quirk remembers. "People were starving for an af-

Digging Into the Mystery

of the Makin Island Missing

An 82-year-old islander who said he helped bury the Marine casualties as a boy of 16 helped the recovery team locate the bodies. Below, a WWII photograph of a wounded Raider Battalion member taken from the USS Argonaut upon return to Pearl Harbor.



U.S. ARMY CENTRAL IDENTIFICATION LABORATORY HAWAII. PHOTO BELOW, COURTESY THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES

firmative story." Newspapers trumpeted the Makin Island raid as a major swipe at the Japanese empire.

If the Raiders knew better, they kept it to themselves.

Before leaving the island, Carlson had paid some natives in a nearby village, who had helped the Americans, to bury the Marines killed during the battle. But confusion about the numbers persisted. The official American tally was 18 dead and 12 missing. But only after the war would the Marine Corps learn from Makin Island natives that nine of the missing had apparently been left alive on the island—among them some of those thought killed in the boat that returned.

With the assistance of the natives, the nine evaded capture for a time but finally surrendered to a reinforced Japanese garrison on Aug. 30. On Oct. 16, according to records of the Naval War Crimes Commission, nine allied prisoners thought to be these men were beheaded on Kwajalein as part of the Yasakuni Shrine Festival, a Japanese holiday honoring departed heroes.

The Makin Raider dead, however, were not forgotten. In 1948 a graves registration team conducted a search throughout Makin atoll, excavating several sites but finding nothing. It was thought that construction of an airstrip on the island later in the war had probably scattered their remains beyond recovery.

There the matter lay until several years ago when veteran members of the Marine Raiders Association, most in their seventies and eighties, began working to clear up the remaining mysteries. Some had returned to Makin in the intervening years on their own and become convinced the story wasn't over.

"I want to be the first to say that it was the Vietnam generation that raised our consciousness on this issue," says Ashley Fisher of Memphis, a Raider who was not on the Makin raid but has been active in the movement to repatriate the Makin remains. "The incredible efforts they've made to account for all the MIAs in Southeast Asia got us to thinking: Why have we waited all this time to account for ours?"

Working through the Pentagon's POW/MIA personnel office, the Raiders made contact with officials at the Central Identification Laboratory, which over the past 30 years has grown into a staff of 170 investigators, anthropologists and organic chemists who travel around the world to solve the forensic puzzles of past wars.

While the bulk of their work is tracking the dead from the war in Vietnam, the lab sets its search priorities not by war, but on the probability of locating remains.

In the case of the Makin Raid, the probabilities looked pretty good. Butaritari is only about three miles long and there were relatively few places where the dead would likely have been buried. So in August 1998, when heavy rains in Vietnam made a scheduled survey there impossible, the two-man survey team was diverted instead to Butaritari to interview natives, check out possible grave sites and set up logistics for a subsequent recovery effort.

The following May, William R. Belcher, a forensic anthropologist, and an eight-member team excavated two sites over a three-week period—sites suggested by an 82-year-old islander named Bureimoa Tokarei who said he had helped bury the Marines as a boy of 16.

Belcher's team again found nothing, but another team returning last Nov. 30 had better luck. Excavating a third site between several thatched huts and a vegetable field and only 16 feet from Tokarei's first guess, they uncovered 20 nearly complete skeletons, some still in boots and helmets, along with several rifles, ammunition packs, 60 hand grenades and 11 sets of Raider dog tags.

Twenty remains found in one site was a record find. The soil at the site was sifted to recover the smallest fragments. Every recovered particle was carefully tagged and bagged or placed in aluminum cases for transport.

The remains were flown to Hawaii where, using dental records and DNA technology, one was found to be a Butaritari native. The others were matched with next of kin from the Makin Raiders, some of whom were distant cousins halfway around the world. One was located in South Africa.

"We can identify someone from remains as small as a five-gram fragment of bone or a single tooth," says Johnnie Webb, the identification lab's deputy director. "But the difficulty is that we can't match a father with a son. The DNA has to be traced through the maternal line. . . ."

"Early this year we recovered remains from a World War II air crash in China where the maternal line of the deceased appeared to have died out. He had no siblings or daughters and his grandmother had just been buried. The family said we could disinter granny to get a match, but we didn't want to do that. So instead we got a genealogist who traced the man's family back to the 1840s and down another branch to distant cousins the family didn't even know. They provided the sample and we were able to make positive identification."

Webb says next of kin of all those found on Butaritari have been notified and the remains identified, and work is proceeding to reinter most of them in Arlington Cemetery next August.

But he said the puzzle of the nine beheadings on Kwajalein has yet to be solved. Recently, he says, an archivist located the records of Vice Adm. Koso Abe, the Japanese officer executed for war crimes because of the beheadings, but no one is yet sure just who the nine executed were. Or precisely where they are buried.

Abe's trial records give some clues, however, he says, and a team has surveyed the area to make certain the most probable grave sites don't lie beneath buildings or paved roads. Next month or early next year a full excavation team will return to see if the last mysteries of the Makin raid can be solved.

The difficulty, Pagano says, is that unlike Butaritari, Kwajalein has been completely transformed by air base construction over the past 50 years. It's more than 200 acres larger now "and looks nothing like it used to."

Yet a series of articles by island historian Eugene Sims in the Kwajalein Hourglass earlier this year appears to triangulate the site of the beheadings, if not the graves, to the Kwajalein Public Gardens. There is a major question, Sims writes, whether any graves on Kwajalein could have survived the six-day allied bombardment that preceded American landings on the island in 1944.

The Makin raid seems like a long time ago, but wonderful links to that time remain. When the identification lab directors notified the Marine Corps of their discoveries on Butaritari last December, the Corps not only deployed a C130 Hercules aircraft from Hawaii to fly the remains back, it sent a color guard as well.

As the flag-covered transport cases from Butaritari were being ceremonially loaded onto the plane for Hawaii, he said, the old native who had buried them half a century ago suddenly broke into the Marine Corps Hymn.

"The man spoke almost no English and Marines had been gone from the island for 40 years," Webb said. "But he was very much aware what this was all about."