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Marine coming home

26-year-old killed in Pacific to be buried near his father

BY JULIE STEWART
SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

MOUNTAIN HOME — Kenneth K. Kunkle's long journey from an Arkansas town to a South Pacific island and back again is nearly over.

The story of the 26-year-old Marine corporal from Mountain Home sheds new light on a little-known World War II commando unit.

It also concludes a remarkable chapter in the history of U.S. efforts to account for missing service members.

The Pentagon announced on Nov. 29 that it had identified the remains of 19 Marines whose bodies were left behind after a raid on Makin Atoll in 1942. Military investigators found Kunkle's dog tags in a mass grave containing the soldiers' remains.

After 58 years of wondering just what had happened to him, Kunkle's family was floored.

"It's very emotional — extremely emotional. And if I talk too much, I'll cry," said

Karen Kitzing, one of his nieces.

Later this month, a Marine is to deliver Kunkle's remains to another niece, Alice Trivitt.

Trivitt said she will bury the remains in the cemetery where his father is buried, near her home in Cotter, a small town on the White River southwest of Mountain Home.

The 2nd Marine Raider Battalion's mission on tiny Makin Atoll, in the Gilbert Islands, was to destroy a Japanese garrison and to divert attention from Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands, where U.S. forces had landed days earlier.

The two-day raid began on Aug. 17, 1942, and was staged from two submarines, the USS Argonaut and USS Nautilus.

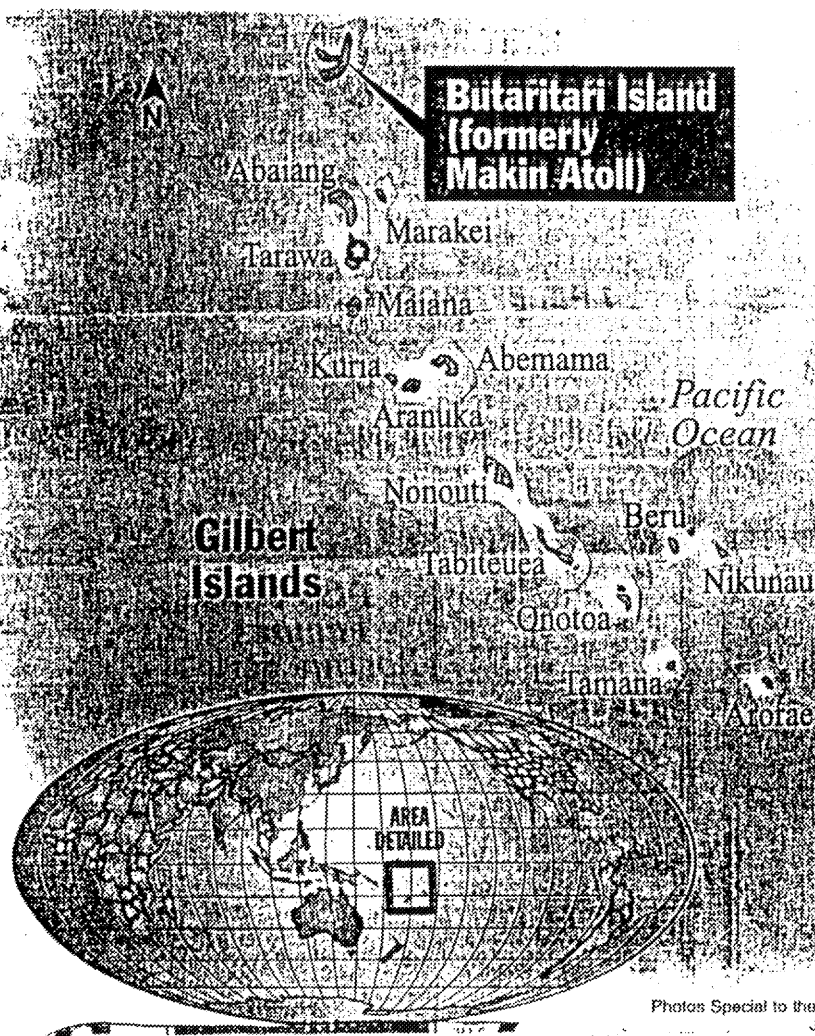
Also called "Carlson's Raiders" in recognition of their commander, Lt. Col. Evans F. Carlson, the Marines came ashore in rubber boats. President Franklin D. Roosevelt's son, Capt. James Roosevelt, was the operation's second-in-command and was among the fortunate who made it back to the submarines.

Twenty-one Marines and 83 Japanese died in the fighting.

Unable to evacuate the dead,
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Butaritari Island (formerly Makin Atoll)



Cpl. Kenneth K. Kunkle, (upper left) a Marine killed in a daring raid in the South Pacific in 1942, poses with an unidentified woman before he left Arkansas to serve in World War II. Kunkle's niece, Alice Trivitt, (below) stands in front of a memorial to Baxter County's war dead outside the county courthouse in Mountain Home.

BAXTER COUNTY'S EVERLASTING TRIBUTE



Photos Special to the Democrat-Gazette/
JIM BODENHAMER

Marine

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Carlson hastily arranged for some of the islanders to bury the bodies. Decades later, one of the islanders would help U.S. military investigators find the grave.

Another nine Marines were unable to leave with their unit and surrendered to the Japanese a few days later. They were taken north to Kwajalein Atoll in the Marshall Islands and were executed on Oct. 16, 1942.

In all, 30 Marines were listed as either "missing in action" or "killed in action — body not recovered."

The military told Kunkle's father, Oscar, and his two brothers, Elmer and Jack, that Kunkle died in the raid and was buried "in field" on the island.

Trivitt, born a year after Kunkle's death, grew up hearing about her war-hero uncle and her grandfather's desire to know his fate. Trivitt's father, Jack, was the youngest of the brothers.

"It's something I've always wondered since I was a child, what really happened to him," Trivitt said.

Across the country in California, Kitzing also was raised on stories about her "Uncle Kenny."

"All I know is what my mom and dad said," recalled Kitzing, now 59 and living in Anchorage, Alaska. Her parents and uncle were very close, she said, and her childhood home was filled with photographs of Kenneth Kunkle.

Kitzing's father, Elmer, was the oldest of the three brothers. He had left the family farm in the Shady Grove community near Mountain Home, settling in California.

Kenneth Kunkle enlisted in the Marines in 1938 and was sta-

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— Karen Kitzing, one of Kunkle's nieces

tioned near his brother's home in California. He spent a lot of time at the house before going overseas, Kitzing said.

Kitzing said her parents described her uncle as a happy, fun-loving person. "And he loved the Marines. He loved his buddies in the Marines," she said.

He was tall and dark-haired, with tattoos of a girl's head on his right arm and Cupid on his left. He married, but the marriage didn't last, said Trivitt, who was unsure of the ex-wife's name. He had no children.

Her grandfather didn't talk much about his dead son, Trivitt said, because it was too painful of a subject for him.

But Trivitt recalls her grandfather's wistful comments: "I wish Kenneth was here," and, "I wondered what really happened to him."

She said her grandfather, who died in 1960, always held out hope that his son's body would be found and returned to Arkansas for burial.

Both Trivitt and Kitzing were brought up to revere their Uncle Kenneth and the family's history of military service. Trivitt's father served in the Navy during World War II. Kitzing's father tried to join the Marines after his brother's death, but was told his job in a California defense plant was more vital to the war effort.

Kenneth Kunkle had been

wounded in action at some point before the August raid but refused to leave his unit, said Kitzing, who has his Purple Heart. No one in the family knows any details of how or where he was wounded.

Back in Arkansas, Trivitt heard the family stories about her uncle refusing a medical discharge so he could go on a mission with his unit.

Trivitt said she believes the mission was the raid on Makin Atoll.

"Uncle Kenneth apparently was a very determined man, to fight for his country," Trivitt said.

At some point, the name of the atoll where he died was changed to Butaritari Island.

In early 1948, an Army unit made a futile search for the remains of the Marines lost on the island.

A military review board subsequently ruled that the men's remains were "nonrecoverable."

In recent years, however, members of the Marine Raiders Association, retired veterans from the unit, pushed the Pentagon to renew the search.

In August 1998, a team of investigators from the Army's Central Identification Laboratory at Hickam Air Force Base in Hawaii went to Butaritari Island and interviewed four local villagers. The villagers provided some information about the burial of the Marines, and the team identified two possible sites.

Investigators excavated the sites in May 1999 but found nothing.

Later that year, another team returned to the island and again interviewed a villager who had taken part in the burials.

With the man's help, the team found the grave containing 20 skeletons, including one islander

apparently killed during the raid. The grave was under an abandoned road built by the Navy Seabees after U.S. forces took the island in November 1943.

The burial site also contained items the soldiers had with them when they died, including dog tags, helmets, compasses, wire cutters, buttons, coins, a belt buckle, a toothbrush, fragments of their boots, even the stem from a corncob pipe.

The remains were brought to the Central Identification Laboratory in Hawaii, where investigators used dental records and DNA to identify the 19 Marines. Trivitt said Kunkle's dental records were used to identify his remains. Investigators determined that he had been shot twice in the head.

Trivitt learned about the recovery operation last year, when a local newspaper carried a Pentagon news release looking for Kunkle's survivors.

She contacted the military and received in-depth reports on progress in identifying his remains.

Trivitt asked the military to cremate her uncle's remains and bring them to her. She expects to receive a bronze urn containing the remains later this month and hopes to hold a funeral before the new year, she said.

"I'm just glad to bring to him home. It's something that's been a long time coming," she said. "Not only for him, but for the other boys that was with him."

The Pentagon said the identification of the 19 Marines is a result of the military's continuing effort to find and identify more than 83,000 U.S. service members who remain missing in action from World War II and military action during the Korean, Vietnam and "Cold" wars.