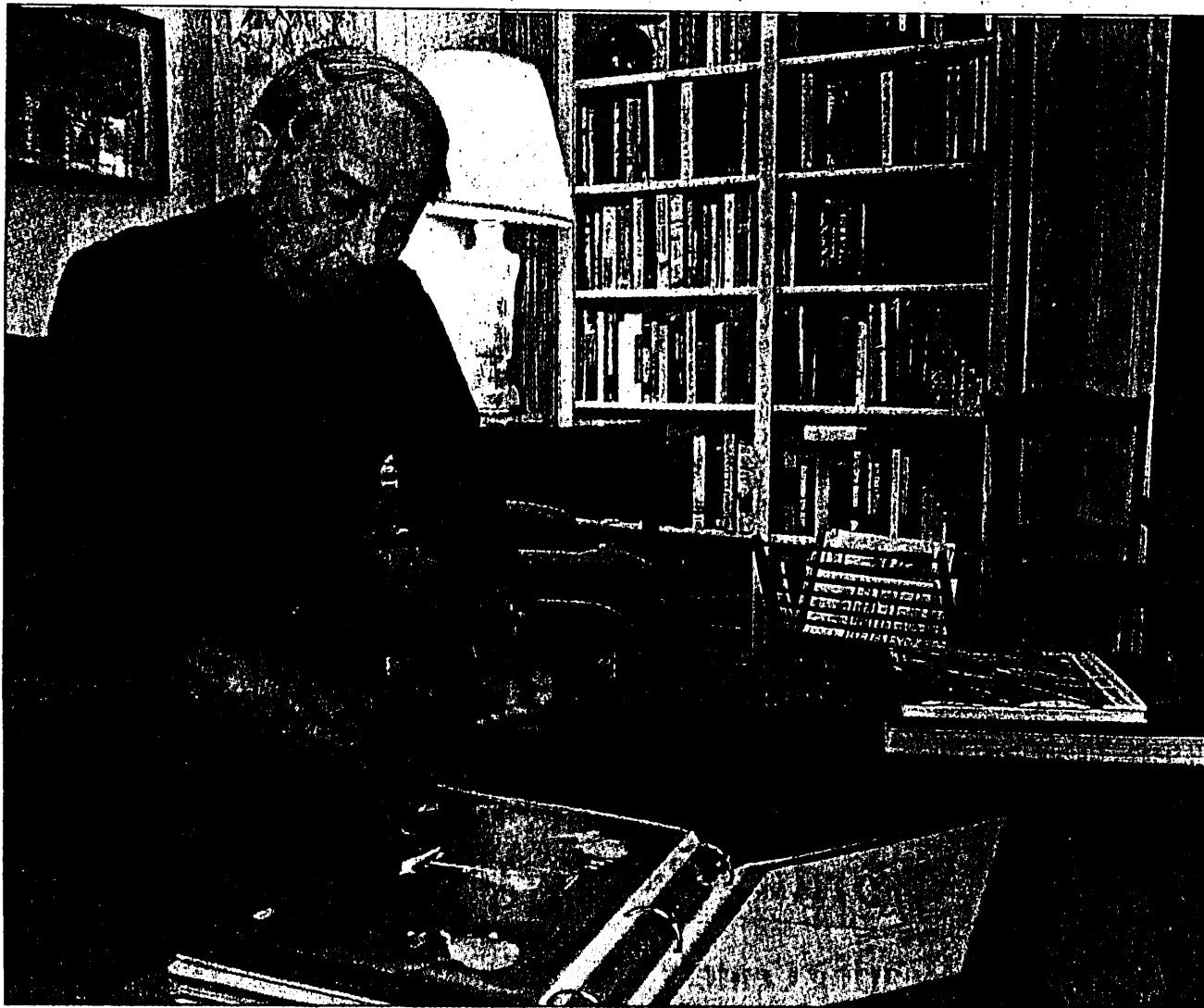


Search helps to lay
ghosts of war to rest

Recovery of Marines brings families relief



This Medal of Honor was awarded posthumously to Sgt. Clyde Thomason for bravery in battle.



BY JIM ROSHAN, SPECIAL TO THE COURIER-JOURNAL
Hugh "Max" Thomason of Bowling Green, Ky., has compiled four thick albums about the life of his half-brother, Clyde Thomason. "I thought the odds were against the site (where the body was buried) ever being found," he said.

Kentuckians part of quest to find bodies on island

By SARA SHIPLEY
The Courier-Journal

Bill Giesin never met his namesake uncle.

He only knew that Bill Gallagher could swim like a fish, and his mother told him to throw his shoulders back and walk with pride so that someday he, too, could be a Marine.

Likewise, Hugh "Max" Thomason barely knew his older half-brother, Clyde, who joined the Marines when Max was still a boy. But his mother saved snapshots of Clyde with a jaunty smile, and she catalogued his letters from the front.

The two servicemen died in combat on a Pacific atoll in Au-

gust 1942 during World War II. For nearly 60 years, their bodies lay hidden under the sand on Makin Island, now known as Butaritari, along with 17 other members of the Marine Raiders, an experimental corps of guerrilla-style fighters.

But in the largest single recovery of military remains by the U.S. government, the bodies of the two men are coming home, thanks to a military forensics laboratory in Hawaii, DNA testing, a dogged anthropologist and the remarkable memory of an old native islander. It is an astonishing ending

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Marine Raiders coming home



Sgt. Clyde Thomason, left, and Pfc. Bill Gallagher, above, were among the Marine Raiders who died in an assault on Makin Island in 1942. The guerrilla-style unit is part of World War II folklore.

Recovery of bodies brings families relief

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to the story about one of America's most unusual fighting forces and the clumsy but successful raid that brought America one of its first strategic victories over Japan.

Bill Gallagher and Clyde Thomason will be buried in Arlington National Cemetery in August.

"This is a lifetime dream," said Giesin, 57, who lives in Louisville. "If a person is willing to go and die for the country, the least we can do is bring them back."

"All the families, I'm sure, are relieved, gratified, grateful that the search was done," said Hugh Thomason, 79, who lives in Bowling Green. "It closes a chapter."

THE MARINE RAIDERS have a place in World War II folklore. Formed when Allied forces were desperate for a foothold, the Raiders were the first American commando outfit.

The unit was heavily influenced by the unorthodox tactics of Maj. Evans F. Carlson, who had observed Communist Chinese fighting forces. Promising his recruits pain and glory, Carlson focused training on hand-to-hand fighting and physical conditioning.

He favored consensus over chain of command. His troops' battle cry was "Gung ho!" — Chinese for "work together."

Carlson personally headed the battalion that attacked Makin Island, one of the Gilbert Islands. Second in command was Maj. James Roosevelt, son of President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

The raid on the Japanese-held island was intended to divert enemy activity from Guadalcanal, where U.S. forces had landed 10 days earlier. Arriving off the shore of the 60-mile-long island before dawn Aug. 17, 1942, the Marines awkwardly inflated rubber boats that had been carried in their submarines' torpedo chambers and slogged ashore through heavy seas.

The target, a Japanese garrison, was empty. Then a rifle discharged accidentally, unleashing a volley of return fire from Japanese snipers.

Within the first hour, the beach was littered with bodies. Some 83 Japanese died during the two-day raid. The official Marine count would be 18 dead, 12 missing, although that number was disputed.

One of the survivors, Brian J. Quirk, wrote Giesin that his uncle had died quickly. "He was killed right in front of me as we were all blazing away at a machine gun nest," Quirk wrote in a 1991 letter. "He rose to get a better position to see and fire ... that's when he was killed instantly."

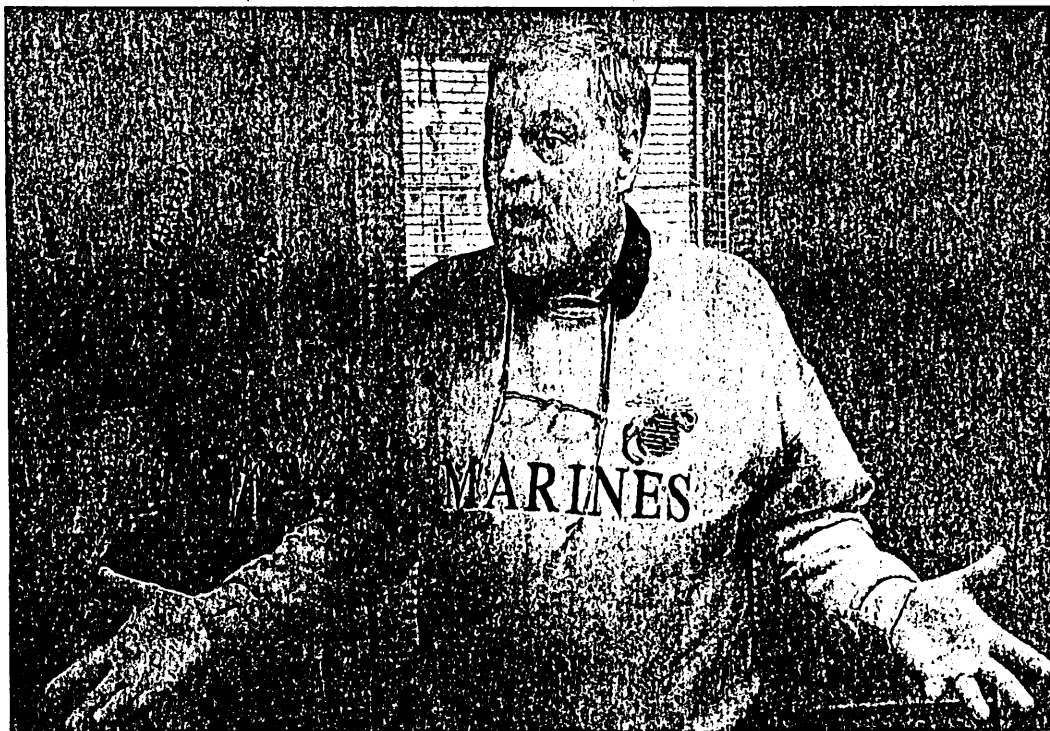
Thomason, a sergeant who was leading the advance of the assault, was shot as he burst into a hut where an enemy sniper was hiding. His actions won him a posthumous Medal of Honor, the highest honor given for bravery in battle. It was the first awarded to an enlisted Marine in World War II.

The Americans dodged Japanese fighter plane fire and sank two enemy boats that landed in the lagoon. But as the Marines tried to withdraw that evening, things worsened. Rubber boats piled high with wounded men overturned in the surf, taking weapons and medical supplies to the sea bed.

In a moment of desperation, Carlson tried to surrender to a Japanese patrol, only to have his men accidentally shoot the messenger. He thought hundreds of Japanese remained on the island, while only a handful were actually left.

Eventually, about half of the remaining Raiders made it back to the waiting subs on their own. The rest were picked up in a rendezvous the next day.

Five Raiders who paddled back to shore to rescue the stranded soldiers ended up missing. It is believed they were captured and later beheaded, along with four other Raider prisoners, by Japanese forces as part of a holiday festival. Their remains have never been found.



BY PAM SPAULDING, THE COURIER-JOURNAL

"This is a lifetime dream," Bill Giesin of Louisville said about the recovery of the body of his uncle, Bill Gallagher. "If a person is willing to go and die for the country, the least we can do is bring them back."

Carlson arranged with some natives to bury the dead. The mass grave would be their resting place for 57 years. After a military team searched the island in 1948 for the bodies and turned up nothing, the soldiers were listed as "unrecoverable."

"I was a doubter," Hugh Thomason said. "I thought the odds were against the site ever being found."

YEARS PASSED before the Marine Raiders Association — a tight-knit group of aging Raiders and their relatives — persuaded the government to try again.

The government enlisted the services of the U.S. Army Central Identification Laboratory, a high-tech forensics lab in Hawaii originally created to track down those missing and killed in action in Vietnam.

"It's a one-of-a-kind laboratory in the world," said Col. David Pagano, its commander. "We are the only nation in the world that brings our fallen comrades home, identifies them and returns them to be interred in America. Every one of those lives are important to us."

Investigators visited the island three times in 1998 and 1999. Initial interviews with islanders did not turn up the site. Remote sensing equipment found bits of metal, but no graves.

Then anthropologist Brad Sturm met again with an old islander, Buraimoa Tokare, who said he had helped bury the Marines when he was 16. Sturm had him imagine what the area looked like years ago, using an old road system as a template.

"We finally found an old road intersection, that wasn't really visible unless you knew it was there," Sturm said. "He put a pin flag about 10 feet away from where we finally found them."

Digging trenches by hand with the help of islanders, the forensics team unearthed 20 skeletons, along with dog tags, helmets and live grenades. Nineteen bodies were Marines, and one was a native.

A military color guard accompanied the remains when they were brought back to the lab in Hawaii for identification.

The bones were assembled, numbered and characterized by race, age, height. Forensic dentists matched teeth with dental records. In four cases, DNA samples from the person's maternal relatives were used to make an exact match. The process took about a year, said Robert Mann, the senior lab manager.

The lab put together a thick book of documentary evidence for each family. Hugh Thomason, sitting in his living room recently, paged



BY WES KENDALL, THE C-J

through pictures of his brother's remains. The complete skeleton was laid out for a photograph, like a formal pose.

"This is Clyde," he said. "Look at his teeth. They're still white."

THE FAMILIES of the dead have spent hours similarly assembling the memories of their loved ones. Thomason and his wife, Jean, spent two months compiling four thick albums about Clyde's life.

A history buff and retired political science professor, Thomason became the family curator of Clyde's legacy. The bronze Medal of Honor rests in his living room in a box with its original pale blue ribbon. On the fireplace mantle sits the silver mesh-encased champagne bottle that in 1943 christened a Navy destroyer, the U.S.S. Thomason, named after his brother.

"It's probably fair to say I really didn't know him, or at least, I didn't know him the way I do now after reading all his letters and putting all this together," said Thomason, who spent nine years on active duty in the Marines himself. "It made me regret even more his loss. He was such a promising young man — smart, full of fun, ambitious."

Giesin had heard tales of his uncle's heroism since he was a boy growing up in Michigan. He and his mother would stay up late at night watching and re-watching the 1943 movie "Gung Ho," which depicted the raid.

"He was supposed to have been a great athlete, into swimming, football, very shy," Giesin said. "My mother always told me to throw my shoulders back, walk proud, to show respect for the kind of man he was."

Giesin later joined the Marines himself, serving in a reserve unit, partly out of admiration for his uncle. But his interest in the subject waxed and waned over the years as he married, moved to Louisville and built a

career as a state social services employee. Then in 1989, someone handed him a book called "The Corps: A Call to Arms," a semi-fictional account of the Makin Island battle.

Wanting to put the ghost of his uncle to rest, Giesin began trying to find out more about the raid. Ultimately, he met other Marine Raiders who were pushing to have the remains recovered. Giesin wrote letters to Congress and provided the forensics lab with bits of information to help. He even found a contact for the native islander who later nearly pinpointed the grave site.

GIESIN HAS copies of articles from magazines in the 1940s and '50s about Carlson's Raiders. Spent bullet casings and vials of sand from Makin Island sit on his kitchen table.

He is fascinated by the Raiders, whom he considers to have demonstrated the ultimate courage. "The uniforms they wore were dyed black. This is strictly James Bond stuff back in the '40s. They wanted to blend in with the night," Giesin said.

Both Giesin and Thomason and their families plan to attend the official funeral in August as their relatives are laid to rest at last.

"I feel like we have a bond with these other people who died there," Giesin said. "I feel like we owe them something, really."