

World War II at 80 – May 1945 (Part II)

Slugfest at Okinawa, more deaths in the Philippines

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OKINAWA, Japan — The battle for Okinawa — which had begun with naval and aerial bombardment on March 26 and was followed by the Allied landings on April 1 — raged on throughout the month of May.

The false sense of security that came during the unopposed landings quickly evaporated as Allied forces reached the interior of the island.

Combat operations turned into a slugfest, especially in Southern Okinawa, as Tenth Army forces engaged the majority of 76,000 Japanese soldiers and over 40,000 Okinawan conscripts, many of whom were concealed and protected by caves throughout the region.

Death statistics were grim on both sides of the battle.

Often described as the bloodiest battle in the Pacific, and certainly the longest in duration, casualty figures reached 50,000 for Allied forces and near 100,000 for the Japanese and Okinawans.

Even more tragically, close to 150,000 Okinawan civilians died in the line of fire or by coerced suicide.

The water was no safer for U.S. service members as Japanese kamikazes continued their assault on Navy vessels.

David Martin witnessed the aerial attacks from the sea bordering Okinawa.

Originally from Stinesville, Martin later moved to Bloomington and then Martinsville and was a member of the American Legion in Martinsville.

Martin was a machinist mate serving on an LSM 166 (Landing Ship Medium), which carried 50 troops and several tanks to shore.

From April 1 to June 30, 1945, LSM 166 was engaged in the assault and occupation of Okinawa Gunto, for which she earned one battle star.

During the invasion, the ship was periodically fired upon by the enemy, and she returned fire with her 40 mm and 20 mm guns.

Martin wondered if he would make it home alive.

During one aerial attack, there was another LSM in front of Martin's ship unloading high-octane fuel when a Jap Zero dropped a bomb.

"It blew her up to bits," he recalled in an interview. "The only ones who survived were the ones who jumped overboard before the bomb's impact."

Philippines

The carnage of combat continued in the Philippines, producing more deaths during the month of May.

Several Morgan County men lost their lives.

On May 5, Charles E. Watkins of Martinsville was killed on Luzon.

A private serving in K Company, 151st Infantry, with the 38th Infantry Division, Watkins had earlier been stationed in New Guinea and Hawaii.

Just a few weeks prior to his death, he had a joyful reunion with his oldest brother, John, also serving with an Army unit in the Philippines, whom he had not seen for three years.

The younger Watkins was 23 years old at the time of his death and left behind his wife, Duma Veal of Georgia.

Robert W. "Cobb" Norman of Martinsville died six days later, on May 13, in a plane crash on Mindoro Island, located south of Luzon.

Norman was a member of the 1933 Martinsville High School state basketball championship team.

He joined the Army Air Forces in June 1941 and had served for 27 months overseas in both New Guinea and the Philippines.

A week later, death claimed another Morgan County son.

On May 21, William (Billy) R. "Brunnemer" Mize of Martinsville was killed by a Japanese sniper along the Villa Verde Trail in Luzon.

Pvt. Mize, serving with the 128th Infantry Regiment, 32nd Infantry Division, was shot while providing covering



U.S. Marines from the 2nd Battalion, 1st Marines, engage in a firefight on Wana Ridge in the battle for Okinawa. (Public domain photo)



Lt. Col. Lawrence R. St. John, a graduate of Martinsville High School and West Point Academy, was instrumental in the construction of the Villa Verde Trail, by way of his 6th engineering battalion. The twisting footpath stretched for 27 miles from Santa Maria to Sante Fe and crossed the Caraballo Mountains along the 4,800-foot high Salacsac Pass on Luzon in the Philippines. (National Archives photo)

fire for the men in his Company B platoon as they engaged Japanese forces on a hillside.

Morgantown native Richard E. (Dick) Johnson, who had arrived in the Philippines with Mize just a few weeks earlier and served in the same unit, was standing alongside him when he was killed.

Mize was buried temporarily on Luzon before his body was returned to the U.S. in April 1949 for final burial at Fairfield Cemetery in Marion County.

Eight days later, another Morgan County man paid the ultimate sacrifice.

On May 29, Arnold "Dutch" Hacker of Martinsville was killed in action.

He was one of the many men from Morgan County who joined the Martinsville National Guard in 1940 and served with Company K, 38th Division, 151st Infantry Regiment.

His years of service had already earned him enough points to return home. He was waiting for his transportation orders when he was shot.

Hacker was planning on getting married to his fiancé upon his return.

His brother, Jarvis Hacker, recalled the moment when the news of his brother's death reached his parents in a July 22, 2000, "Hometown Heroes" article written by Elmer Reynolds:

"I was with my father down the road from our house helping our neighbors at a sawmill cutting lumber when the news came of 'Dutch's' being killed in action in the Philippines.

Dad, clutching the telegram, dropped to the ground in despair. Pounding on the ground in grief, Dad looked up to me and said, 'My God, Jarvie, how will I ever tell your mother?'"

Hacker's parents made the difficult decision to have their son permanently buried at the Manila American Cemetery on Luzon.

There was, thankfully, also good news regarding some Morgan County boys serving in the Pacific theater.

Alvin L. Hastings, a staff sergeant with the Army Air Forces, experienced relief and joy as he was finally released from a Japanese POW camp in Burma.

A Martinsville native, Hastings served as a tail gunner on a bomber crew with the 7th Bombardment Group, Tenth Air Force, in both India and Burma.

He completed 50 missions and 200 hours in the air before he was captured.

Held captive for 18 months (December 1943 – May 1945), his parents hadn't heard from him since late 1943.

In May, he and his fellow prisoners were marched by Japanese guards from their POW camp in Rangoon to what they believed would be the site of another camp.

Two days into the forced march, their captors inexplicably left them and never returned.

That night, the POWs discovered a British Army camp two miles away and walked into freedom.

The free men were then flown to a hospital in Calcutta



David Martin, of Martinsville, served aboard a landing ship medium, which carried troops and tanks, during the battle for Okinawa. (Ronald P. May courtesy photo)



Capt. Robert 'Cobb' Norman



Pvt. William 'Billy' Mize



Arnold 'Dutch' Hacker



SSgt. Alvin Hastings

for medical treatment.

Hastings returned to the U.S. and was discharged from service in October 1945.

Lt. Col. Lawrence R. St. John, a graduate of Martinsville High School and West Point Academy, also grabbed a positive headline.

The May 3, 1945, Daily Reporter printed a portion of an article by Scripps Howard staff correspondent, Lee G. Miller, about the impressive road construction of St. John's 6th engineer battalion on Luzon.

Known as the Villa Verde Trail, the twisting footpath stretched for 27 miles from Santa Maria to Sante Fe and crossed the Caraballo Mountains along the 4,800-foot high Salacsac Pass.

The route was critical for the advance of the 6th Army, but it first had to be widened, cleared and repaired by the 6th Engineer Battalion for military ar-

mored vehicles to pass.

Described in Miller's article as the "Burma Road of Luzon," the road project followed the "old carabao traces up from the Marikina valley across the crazy quilt ridges and draws of the watershed where this battle-weary (1st) division is laboriously rooting out Japan's cave-dweller troops."

"Rooting out" Japanese forces on Luzon dragged on until the end of the war.

Next time: June 1945 – Closing in on Japan

Learn more about Ronald P. May and his books at <https://ronaldpmay.com> or contact him by email at ron@ronaldpmay.com. Check out his videos on YouTube at: World War II History & Stories with Ron May.