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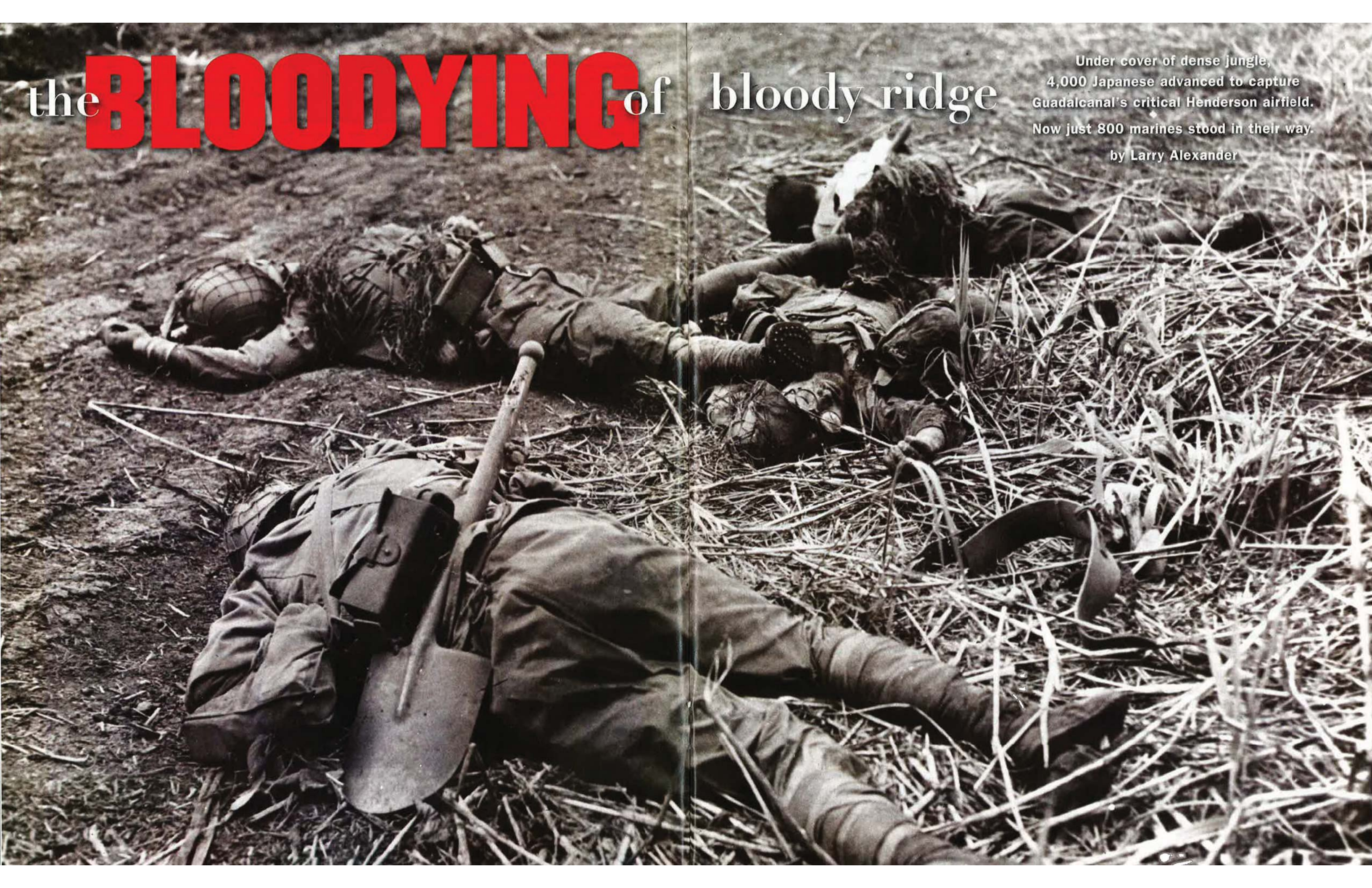
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# the **BLOODYING** of bloody ridge

Under cover of dense jungle,  
4,000 Japanese advanced to capture  
Guadalcanal's critical Henderson airfield.  
Now just 800 marines stood in their way.

by Larry Alexander



## the **BLOODYING** of bloody ridge by Larry Alexander

**C**OLONEL MERRITT AUSTIN “RED MIKE” EDSON STOOD ATOP a grassy knoll on the South Pacific island of Guadalcanal and scanned the barren ridge that, unbeknownst to him, would soon bear his name. The ridge, officially known as Lunga Ridge, stretched for 2,000 yards and rose 150 feet above sea level at its highest point. Except for scattered clumps of brush, it stood virtually bare above the surrounding jungle that lapped at its base. Seven hundred yards to the east, the Lunga River sliced through the thick rain forest, paralleling most of the ridge until veering off to the northwest.

This high ground wasn't straight, but bowed eastward between its highest point—Hill 120, where Edson now stood, roughly halfway along its length—and Hill 100, about 600 yards to the south. The ridge's spine dipped slightly between these two hills, forming a saddle. A well-worn native foot trail traversed the ridge's entire length.

As Edson focused his gaze to the east on September 12, 1942, he knew that beneath that green canopy of foliage, about 4,000 Japanese were trudging toward him, determined to sweep him from his perch. Their goal was Henderson Field, the Japanese-built airbase that US marines had taken after storming ashore on Guadalcanal five weeks earlier. Since then, the Americans had held a thin oval perimeter that reached some 9,600 yards from Alligator Creek to the east to Kukum to the west and pushed inland from near the coast to a depth of about 7,000 yards, encompassing the airfield.

This perimeter was a thorn in the Japanese defenders' pride, and it had to be removed. But the Japanese also knew Henderson Field was the key to ousting the Americans from Guadalcanal. The US Navy had lost control of the waters around “the Canal,” as Americans called the island, in the disastrous Battle of Savo Island, just north of Guadalcanal on August 8. Without naval support, Henderson Field and its fighter planes became crucial to the island's defense. For its own defense, the airfield depended on Edson's marines.

Edson recognized that the ridge provided a back door into the marine perimeter. Its grassy northern slope gave way to open ground all the way to Henderson Field 1,000 yards beyond. If the enemy seized the ridge, Japanese attackers would come pouring down on the airfield with little to stop them—unless Edson's men got in their way.

From reports from native scouts, Edson knew that Japanese troops under Major General Kiyotake Kawaguchi had landed to

the east, around Taivu Point, on September 7. After establishing a supply base at the village of Tasimboko, they began cutting their way west through the jungle. But on September 8, Edson and his men raided Tasimboko, completely destroying Kawaguchi's supplies. Three days later, on September 11, Edson brought his force—840 men of the 1st Marine Raider Battalion and the 1st Marine Parachute Battalion—to the ridge, where he was convinced Kawaguchi would strike. The next 24 hours were spent creating a defensive line connecting the ridge to the Lunga River.

To man his line, Edson deployed Baker Company (Company B) at the ridge's southern nose, with its line extending westward down the slope and into the jungle, where it was to link up with the left flank of Charlie Company (Company C). What Edson didn't know was that a narrow, elongated lagoon made the linkup impossible. So Charlie Company's line began at the lagoon and stretched for 800 yards through thick underbrush to the Lunga River. With so few men available, however, this was less a defensive line than a series of strong points with mutually supporting fields of fire. Two hundred yards behind Charlie Company was Able Company (Company A), which in turn had one platoon of the 1st Pioneer Battalion some distance behind it. The parmarines (the 1st Marine Parachute Battalion) were entrenched on the ridge's east slope.

Stringing barbed wire and clearing fields of fire so they looked like native trails, the Raiders spent a tense day preparing for the attack they knew would come with the night. One of the Raiders in Edson's line was 19-year-old Marlin Groft from Lebanon County, Pennsylvania. At his interview after volunteering for the Raiders, Groft had been rejected by Edson himself due to his poor swimming ability. So he was amazed when he received orders to report for Raider training. Assuming it was an error, he reported and kept his mouth shut. Since then, he had kept a low profile whenever he was near Edson—or, as the men called him, “Eddie



Previous spread: Men of Major General Kiyotake Kawaguchi's 35th Infantry Brigade lie dead after vicious combat on the nights of September 12 and 13, 1942, on Guadalcanal's Lunga Ridge. Colonel Merritt A. Edson's marines remembered the place as Edson's—or Bloody—Ridge.

Above: The savage battle's object was Henderson Field, seen here from the air. Marines had taken it in August, gaining a fighter base. Opposite: Air power was crucial on Guadalcanal, where, as these inland-bound marines would attest, jungle terrain made movement difficult.



the Mole,” so named because his small head caused his helmet to rest on his shoulders.

Groft had thought the ruse was up on September 10, when he was assigned to a reconnaissance patrol to the ridge, led by Edson himself. Once atop Hill 120, Edson scanned the terrain, then suddenly walked over and stood beside Groft. The young private feared Edson would recognize him and demand to know what he was doing there. Instead, Edson said, “What did you think about this ground for a battle, son?” Taken aback, Groft simply replied, “I think it'll be all right, Sir.” Satisfied, Edson walked away.

**G**ROFT WAS A MEMBER OF Dog Company (Company D), which was down to 25 men, not due to combat losses, but because its men were used to replace losses in A, B, and C companies. Dog Company, along with Easy Company (Company E), the Raiders' weapons unit, were dug in around Hill 120, where

Edson's forward command post was located. An aid station was set up on the hill's reverse slope.

Early on the 12th, Groft was part of a patrol sent to locate the enemy. The scouts not only found the Japanese, but passed unseen through one of their advancing forces. Then, with the enemy behind them, the scouts came under fire from their flank and rear. Taking shelter in a dry riverbed, the patrol returned fire, then fled along the riverbank into the safety of the dense jungle, and back to the ridge. There, bursting from the underbrush, Groft found himself staring down the barrel of a marine paratrooper's semi-automatic M1941 Johnson Rifle. Luckily, the trooper held his fire.

As night began to descend, Groft and his comrades prepared for the attack. Turning to his buddy Alex Stewart a few feet away, the only man he could still see in the fading light, he said, “I'll see you in the morning.” Then the darkness became complete.

The Japanese attack opened about 9:30 p.m., not from the jun-

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gle, but from the sea. The 5,000-ton cruiser *Sendai*, accompanied by three destroyers, had quietly steamed into Sealark Channel (one of three channels between Guadalcanal and Florida Island to the north). The cruiser opened up on the ridge with her seven 5.5-inch guns, followed by the destroyers, each mounting six 5-inch main guns in three turrets. The shelling was terrific, the incoming rounds roaring like an approaching freight train.

Harsh fingers of light next swept the ridge as the *Sendai* turned on her spotlights. Star shells were soon bursting overhead, illuminating the ridge with a nightmarish glare. The Raiders flattened themselves as the ground beneath them shook and red-hot shrapnel zipped overhead. The barrage lasted about 20 seemingly endless minutes. Kawaguchi joined this cacophony, opening fire on the ridge with what meager artillery his men could manhandle through the harsh terrain they had crossed. Then the Japanese infantry came forward.

Kawaguchi had wanted his three center battalions in position by 2:00 that afternoon, but because the units had become divided and disoriented in the jungle, only the 1st Battalion of the 124th



Infantry arrived on time. Of the other two, now groping their way forward in the pitch dark, the 124th's 3rd Battalion would not be in position until 10 P.M., and the 2nd Battalion of the 4th Infantry wouldn't jump into the fight for yet another hour. These units were still trying to get into position even as the naval barrage was underway. Still, Kawaguchi didn't seem worried, convinced as he was that the ridge was the American perimeter's weakest point.

In fact, the ridge was probably the marines' strongest position. West of the Lunga River, only a few scattered strong points lay in wait, manned by pioneer and amphibious tractor battalions. East of the ridge, a solid mile of empty jungle was Kawaguchi's for the taking, had he but known.

At first the Japanese approached stealthily. Private First Class Robert Youngdeer, posted near the Lunga bank, heard men sloshing through the water, as enemy troops waded in his direction. The Raiders held their fire. When the Japanese opened up, the Raiders responded with grenades to avoid revealing their positions.

Charlie Company took the brunt of the first night's attack. Rifles cracked, machine guns chattered, grenades exploded, and

PATCHES COURTESY OF THE BANKS COLLECTION

Top left: Private First Class Marlin Groft of the 1st Raider Battalion is all smiles at war's end. But on Guadalcanal—a name enshrined on the 1st Marine Division patch—Groft fought hand-to-hand on Bloody Ridge. Top right: Groft's commander, Edson (seen in 1947 as a major general), received the Medal of Honor for his actions there. Patches: Edson led his outgunned paratroopers (top) and raiders (bottom) by example.

men yelled and screamed in the melee. The Japanese quickly broke through C Company's thin defenses. Hitting the spot where Charlie Company's left and Baker's right would have met if the lagoon hadn't been there, Kawaguchi's men folded B Company's flank platoon back toward the ridge like a gate swinging open and scattered C Company's leftmost platoon. Suddenly, the marine line had a gaping hole. Fortunately for the Americans, the darkness confused the Japanese, making it all but impossible for them to press their assault to full advantage.

In other parts of the C Company line closer to the Lunga, Japanese wandered along the "paths" cut by Raider machine-gun crews. Soon, the Raiders' .30-caliber automatic weapons opened up, raking the approaching enemy. But the Japanese hurt the Raiders, too. They overran a machine-gun squad led by Neil Champoux. Champoux was killed and his men scattered. The Japanese pushed through, surrounding and cutting off some Raiders, who hunched quietly in the dense underbrush as enemy soldiers charged past them.

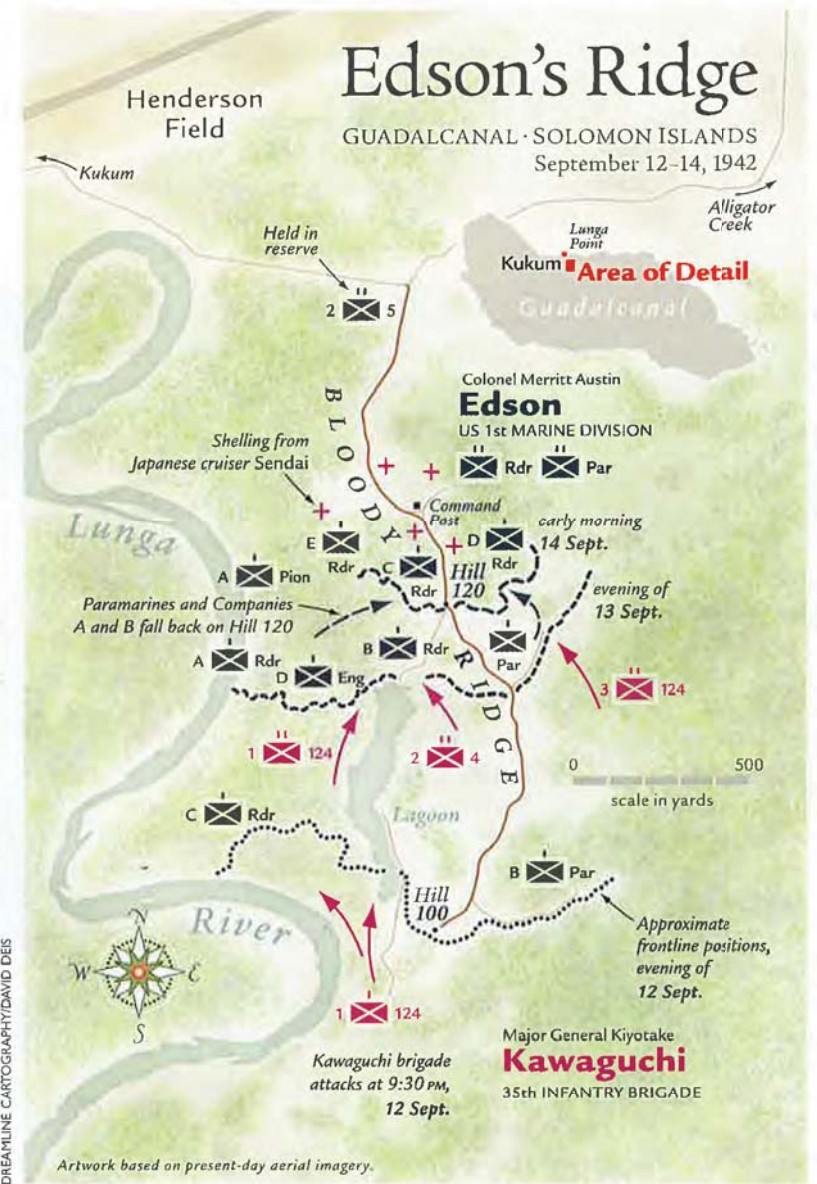
One member of the overrun gun squad, Browning Automatic Rifle (BAR) man Joseph Rushton, lay quietly in the underbrush, cradling his Browning as several of the enemy passed by. Then came a moment of sheer panic: a Japanese soldier stepped on Rushton's leg. Reacting to the sound of a samurai sword being drawn from its scabbard, Rushton turned quickly. A Japanese soldier opened fire with a submachine gun, striking Rushton's arm and leg with several rounds. Despite his painful wounds, Rushton rolled and opened up with his BAR, emptying his 20-round clip in all directions.

**A**N AMERICAN GRENADE landed nearby and exploded, its shrapnel striking everyone around, including Rushton. Lying amid several dead Japanese, Rushton remained still, praying softly as he listened to wounded comrades being bayoneted where they lay. Finally daring to move, Rushton crawled a short distance in the direction of the ridge, following a strand of communication wire. Soon he came across his assistant BAR man, Private First Class Kenneth E. Ritter, badly wounded and barely conscious. Unable to leave his friend, Rushton grasped Ritter by the left arm and, despite terrible pain, began dragging him through the brush. Japanese voices punctuated the darkness all around.

Private First Class Youngdeer was also isolated by the sudden Japanese onrush. He would never forget the sound of Raiders being tortured and killed by enemy soldiers using swords and bayonets. "The sound of someone being worked over out there in the darkness remains with me to this day," he said years later. "The whole battalion could hear their screams."

Youngdeer was correct. Up on the ridge, the sound of helpless men being murdered mercilessly was far worse than the sounds of gunshots and explosions. The screams filled each man with a deep sense of outrage and helplessness, and a yearning to get back at the men committing those atrocities.

Working his way back toward the ridge, Youngdeer located



DREAMLINE CARTOGRAPHY/DAVID DIES

Artwork based on present-day aerial imagery.

wounded Private First Class Charlie Everett of Meadville, Mississippi, one of Champoux's machine-gunners. Everett had lain low after Champoux's death. Trying now to make his way back, he came under fire from a Japanese machine gun. Yanking a pin from a grenade, he lobbed the pineapple. The resulting blast took out the enemy gun, but not before Everett was hit in both legs and had his left hand shot off. In severe pain and unable to move his legs, he crawled into the underbrush, where he applied a tourniquet around his left wrist. Then he lay still, blood seeping into his shoes.

Youngdeer and another man found Everett in shock and weak from loss of blood. Using a blanket as a sled, Youngdeer and the other Raider began dragging Everett. A Japanese machine gun sputtered and the Raiders hit the dirt. Then an enemy sniper tucked away up in a tree opened fire. One slug hit the marine helping to drag Everett. Youngdeer spotted the sniper and rose up, taking aim. The sniper fired first and his bullet struck Youngdeer beneath the left nostril, shattering several teeth and creasing his tongue before exiting near his right ear. Youngdeer collapsed and blacked out. When he regained consciousness, he and the other wounded Raider realized they could no longer drag Everett and

were forced to abandon him. Everett would be found later, barely alive, and carried out on a poncho.

The wounded Joe Rushton, still dragging the critically injured Ken Ritter, avoided using trails, knowing the enemy would be watching them. Rushton worked his way around the lagoon, hoping to reach the midpoint of the ridge. Suddenly, with a shout, three Japanese soldiers charged from the undergrowth. Rushton got off a round, dropping one of the attackers. Then his rifle jammed. Reversing it, he used it as a club and bashed a second attacker in the face. The man fell, but not before he had bayoneted Rushton in the leg. His third attacker fled into the jungle.

Rushton now faced a new problem. Ritter was becoming delirious and calling for his mother. Rushton clamped a hand over his comrade's mouth, lest he give their location away. His hand was still in place when the 21-year-old marine died. There by the murky lagoon, Rushton hid Ritter's body beneath a large fern and crawled on. Ritter's body would be found by other Raiders just after daybreak and carried up the hill.

**A**LTHOUGH THE JAPANESE HAD almost fully occupied C Company's former position, massive confusion and a complete breakdown of command converted the assault from a concerted attack into isolated savage actions between small groups of armed men. Even more troubling, at least for the Japanese, was that, despite the battle racket, some units never found the ridge, at least not in time to join the fight. The great assault Kawaguchi had planned had dissolved into a disjointed brawl at the end. Kawaguchi had lost any semblance of control. "Due to the devilish jungle, the brigade was scattered all over and was completely beyond my control," he later wrote. "In my whole life I have never felt so disappointed and helpless."

The sound of battle died away with the new day. For Raider Marlin Groft, who was a relative spectator this first night, the end of the fighting meant you could lie back "knowing you were alive." But even as the tensions faded, D Company's commander, Lieutenant Ed Wheeler, moved along the line telling his men to get some rest. "They'll be back," he said. "And when they come, they'll come stronger than they were last night." Groft remembered, "So we just laid there with that thought, and ate the rations that we had."

Not far away, Edson sat on a log, eating cold meat and potatoes. "They were testing us," he told the men around him. "Just testing. They'll be back. Maybe not as many of them. Or maybe more. I want all positions improved, all wire lines paralleled, a hot meal for the men. Today we dig, wire up tight, and get some sleep. We'll need it."

Above: General Kawaguchi, the Japanese commander on Bloody Ridge, received the risky mission of retaking Henderson Field, in part because of his vocal objection to the killing of prisoners in the Philippines. Opposite: Bloody Ridge in October, after the battle. Kawaguchi and Edson both realized that the ridge provided a ramp for a downhill attack that could break through the marine perimeter and recapture the airfield.



As the sun rose on September 13, Edson took stock of his situation in the light of the new day. He became convinced that Kawaguchi would not repeat his mistake of launching a nighttime attack through thick jungle. Instead, Edson believed, the Japanese would come up the ridge and across the open ground, allowing Kawaguchi to bring the weight of his numbers to bear.

With that in mind, Edson began laying out a new defense. Because Charlie Company's original position was lost, the new line started 400 yards farther back, with Able Company on the right along the Lunga, exactly where it had been posted the night

before. On Able's left was Dog Company of the 1st Engineers Battalion, which had been held in reserve the previous night. Baker Company came next, deployed partly in the jungle north of the lagoon and partly up the west slope of the ridge leading toward Hill 100. The paratroopers on the ridge's eastern slope remained where they were.

The battered Charlie Company was pulled back and ordered to dig in at the bottom of Hill 120, with Easy Company on its right flank and Dog Company on the left. If the Japanese exerted unendurable pressure, Companies A and B and the paratroopers were also to fall back on Hill 120, linking up with the rest of the battalion to establish a defensive horseshoe around the hill. There, Alamo-style, they would fight to the end.

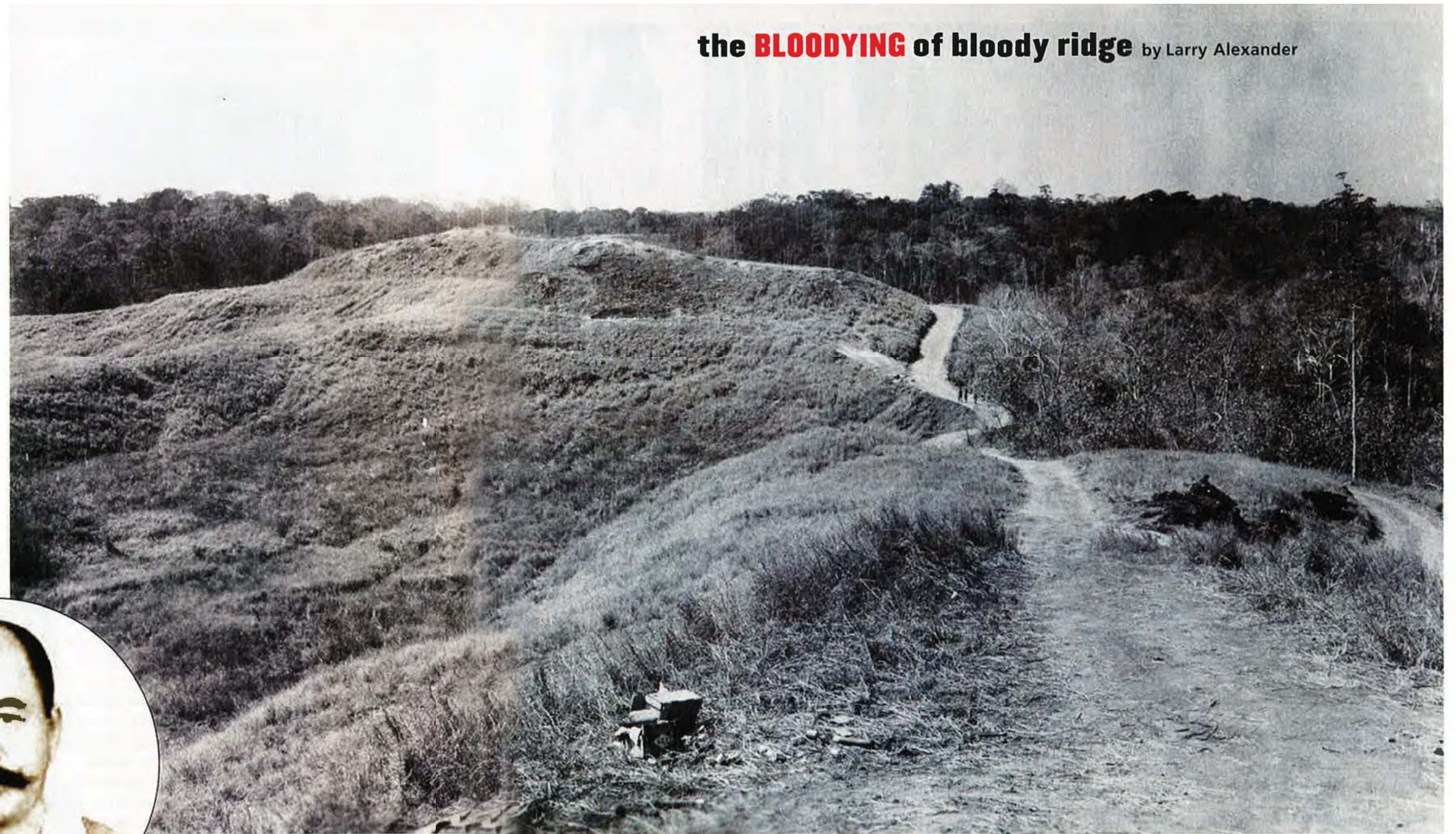
The 2nd Battalion of the 5th Marines was held in reserve between the ridge and Henderson Field, to be called up if needed.

Groft spent part of the day rereading old letters from home

and, he recalled, "preparing for the moment, should it be the Lord's will, when I would be separated from this life. I asked only to be able to have courage once again, as was given me the night before. We were all aware that this could be our finest hour."

Late in the afternoon, Edson stepped up onto a grenade box and addressed his exhausted troops. They had "done a great job," he told them, and he asked them to hold fast one more night. Groft later said the speech "raised the spirits" of the men and strengthened their resolve.

As expected, the Japanese returned with the night. Groft said the Raiders could hear a large body of men approaching through the jungle, goaded along by the shrill commands of their officers. "A Japanese soldier was no good making decisions on his own," Groft recalled. "And so their platoon sergeants, or maybe it was their company commanders, were doing a lot of yelling and giving directions. And so...it wasn't difficult for us to know where they were."





COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

Marlin Groft (kneeling, farthest right) poses with his squad from Dog Company. Groft's company dug in near the command post from which Edson directed the battle. In the first night's fighting, Groft was spared from close combat. On the second night, he had to fight for his life.

The Japanese, inadvertently driving a wave of terrified small animals ahead of them, first hit B Company's westernmost platoon. Like American Civil War skirmishers 80 years earlier, the Raiders slowed the enemy advance by neatly folding their line back like a jackknife blade on its handle, firing as they went. Then the Japanese surged forward into a hail of marine hand grenades, and the Raiders made for the ridge.

As the Japanese drew closer, unseen in the night, a new smell reached the nostrils of Groft and his friends on the ridge. "I caught the sweet odor of chrysanthemum soap used by Japanese soldiers," Groft later wrote. "It was a scent that I was to recognize in future battles on other islands as the war moved on."

**T**HE ASSAULT ON HILL 120 COMMENCED under the harsh glare of a magnesium flare, fired into the air by the enemy. Drawing his sword, Major Yukichi Kokusho, commander of the 1st Battalion of the 124th Infantry, shouted "Tsu-geki!" ("Charge!") and led his men forward. Backlit by more flares, they

came on, shouting "Banzai!" and "Death to Roosevelt!" as they raced uphill, through the kunai grass (a tropical Pacific grass also known, ironically, as Japanese bloodgrass) and into a deadly hail of bullets and grenades. Machine guns cut them down as they bunched up at the barbed wire. All along the line, Groft heard the thuds of bodies colliding, and the shouts of men in desperate hand-to-hand combat. "I heard a lot of yelling going on," Groft recalled. "There was a lot of dying."

Finally the Japanese fell back, leaving their mangled dead, including Major Kokusho, on the ridge. With the first assault now driven back, the marines barely had time to catch their breath before the Japanese—veterans of the December 1941 conquest of Borneo, angered at suffering their first-ever repulse—returned with even more fury than before. Reinforced by the 2nd Battalion of the 4th Regiment, they lobbed smoke grenades. Some Raiders mistook the smoke for a gas attack, and having long ago disposed of their cumbersome gas masks, began breaking for the rear, but were stopped by their officers.

## the **BLOODYING** of bloody ridge by Larry Alexander

Adding now to the hellish battle was the artillery of the 11th Marines, which began dropping 105mm rounds on pre-selected points across the open ridge.

The Japanese charged through the artillery, grenades, and small-arms fire, aided by their own mortars, and again collided with the Raider line. The fighting was up close, with point-blank firing and bayonets driven into flesh. A Japanese soldier lunged at Groft, who thrust his M1903 Springfield Rifle forward, the sharpened bayonet piercing the man's body. It was a horrific moment that would stay with Groft for the rest of his life.

Behind Hill 120, navy corpsmen and doctors tended the wounded marines who were flowing back from the firing line, working by flashlights whose glow was shielded by ponchos. Thirty feet from that grisly place, Edson stood erect, directing the battle.

The Japanese assaults continued, each wave breaking in blood, only to be followed by another. As the fighting raged, Major Ken Bailey organized several members of Edson's staff to form a resupply line. Procuring a truck, they loaded it with crates of ammunition and caseloads of grenades and ran it up the ridge.

Slugs tore at Edson's clothes as he called in artillery. When the communications wire to the 11th Marines was cut, Edson sent his runner, Walter Burak, back to tell the artillery to keep firing on its last called-in coordinates. Burak delivered the message, and brought back with him a new spool of wire, reestablishing radio contact.

Once Edson was back in touch with the artillery, he made the desperate decision to bring in the gunners' well-aimed fire practically on the Raiders heads. The ridge was ablaze with yellowish-orange flashes and the roar of exploding shells, whose concussions bowled over some of the Raiders and left others temporarily deafened. Before the battle was over, the 11th Marines would pour 2,800 shells onto the ridge and the surrounding jungle.

The fight for the ridge was reaching its zenith, and Japanese soldiers at last gained a foothold on the eastern slope. It was then that Captain Harry Torgerson of the paratroopers launched a fierce counterattack. In bloody hand-to-hand combat, the paratroopers swept away the Japanese, suffering heavy losses in the process. All the while, Edson paced his line, warning, "I'll shoot any man who heads for the rear."

Some Japanese managed to get through the Raiders and struck three companies of the 5th Marines' 2nd Battalion, which had dug in on the ridge's northern slope. Some of the enemy even reached Henderson Field before they were eliminated.

By 4:30 A.M., the Japanese attacks began losing steam, and by dawn, except for lingering sniper fire, the fighting ended, at least

for the Americans. The Japanese now began an agonizing withdrawal, dogged by US fighters who relentlessly strafed the bleeding, limping column.

**E**DSON'S RAIDERS SUFFERED 135 casualties in the two nights of fighting, and the 1st Parachute Battalion another 128. Of those, a total of 59 men were dead or missing in action. Japanese losses are more difficult to pinpoint. No less than 700 corpses littered the battlefield, with at least another 500 men wounded. Many of the wounded, given the terrible trek back to the coast that lay ahead of them, across difficult terrain and with little or no food to sustain them, would perish, too. Some estimates put Kawaguchi's overall losses at 41 officers and 1,092 enlisted men, or about 27 percent of his total force.

Relieved at last on the morning of September 14, the Raiders, by then exhausted and hollow-eyed, descended from what historians dubbed Edson's Ridge, but which was rightly remembered as Bloody Ridge. It was time for a brief rest.

Years later, Groft wrote about what it was like to stagger off that hill:

*Somehow, by the Grace of God, most of us survived that night. At the first hint of dawn the artillery let up and things got quiet. Then, as had happened the night before, the Japanese withdrew, but they left some 1,500 of their dead strewn along our line, some hanging from trees like Halloween figures. Edgar Allen Poe could have set the scene around us. I was in some kind of daze, numb, looking into the faces of men I did not recognize, people moving about with forms so lifeless. One who has never stood in the middle of a battlefield can never*

*grasp what it is like. Hollywood can never produce this effect: its smells, the sickening odor of powder, the stench of death, of smashed and broken bodies. I remember leaving my position and crossing over the ridge in the grip of emotion, and for a time I lost control. I fell on my knees and wept. It crossed my mind that we had lost and that we were falling back. But that thought did not last long, as men began to grab me and hug me, reminding me that others too had tears running down their faces. This is what it is like in victory after a desperate battle. ★*

Larry Alexander, an award-winning journalist and columnist for Lancaster Newspapers in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, is the author of the 2005 bestseller *Biggest Brother: The Life of Major Dick Winters, the Man Who Led the Band of Brothers* and the 2009 book *Shadows in the Jungle: The Alamo Scouts Behind Japanese Lines in World War II*.



Debris litters the trail along Bloody Ridge less than a month after the hellish nighttime battle. About 59 of Edson's marines were killed or lost in the fight, another 204 wounded. Kawaguchi lost more than a quarter of his men.