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James Jones on Guadalcanal

JAMES JONES, AUTHOR OF *From Here to Eternity* and *The Thin Red Line*, made his reputation primarily as a writer of the Second World War. His most successful works are set in locales Jones visited as a regular Army soldier during and after the attack on Pearl Harbor and the American offensive on Guadalcanal. Critics interested in sources for his combat novel, *The Thin Red Line*, have looked to Jones's own experiences on Guadalcanal in an infantry company (F Company, 2d Battalion, 25th Infantry Regiment, 27th Infantry Division). Unfortunately, the account of his service on Guadalcanal changes with each telling, and this confusion has caused problems for scholars exploring the links between Jones's service and his novel.

In a way, the desire to connect *The Thin Red Line* to Jones's personal experiences is understandable. In his collection of drawings, sketches and paintings by combat artists of the Second World War, *WWII*, Jones makes it clear that many passages in the novel are based on incidents he experienced. For instance, the description of Cpl. Fife's being wounded and hearing his own scream as if it were another person's in *The Thin Red Line*¹ closely resembles Jones's own wounding.² Furthermore, as Fife leaves the battlefield, he comes across the body of a soldier on a stretcher who had been killed by a sniper even as he was being evacuated,³ an encounter very similar to one that made an indelible impression on Jones as he walked to the rear after being hit by shrapnel from a mortar.⁴ Ultimately, Fife, like Jones, is evacuated to the United States because of an old ankle injury.⁵ The episode in which Sgt. Keck falls on his own grenade⁶ was drawn from a story Jones heard from his fellow soldiers.⁷ Lastly, in his chapter about casualties, Jones admits in a footnote that he is using language from *The Thin Red Line* in his own autobiographical account:

I suppose I should confess here that parts of the above passage about our first air-raid wounded I have excerpted from a larger, similar passage in a combat novel I wrote called *The Thin Red Line*. Realizing when I came to write about them that I could never write about them better than I had done there, I used from it.⁸

Despite these clear parallels between Jones's combat experience and his war fiction, the passage in *The Thin Red Line* that biographers and critics most often claim exemplifies Jones's traumatic experiences on Guadalcanal is an encounter between Pvt. Bead and a Japanese soldier. After two days without a bowel movement, Bead, a shy private in C-for-Charlie Company, decides to take advantage of a lull in the fighting and "have himself a pleasant, quiet, private crap."⁹ At this point, Bead's company has not yet jumped off for its first attack. Without announcing his plans to anyone, he leaves his equipment in his hole¹⁰ and heads to the edge of the jungle.¹¹ With his pants at his ankles, Bead "looked up and saw a Japanese man with a bayoneted rifle moving stealthily through the trees ten yards away."¹² The Japanese soldier "was a small man, and thin; very thin. His mud-slicked, mustard-khaki uniform with its ridiculous wrap leggings hung from him in jungledamp, greasy folds. [...] Beneath [his forage cap] his yellowbrown face was so thin the high cheekbones seemed about to come out through his skin."¹³

The Japanese soldier charges Bead, who is "still squatting with his pants down."¹⁴ Desperately, "Bead pulled up his pants over his dirty behind to free his legs and dove forward in a low, shoestring football tackle [...]. Surprised, the Japanese man brought the rifle down sharply, but Bead was already in under the bayonet."¹⁵ The Japanese soldier hits the ground hard and loses his wind, allowing Bead to climb onto his chest and begin to beat and tear at his face.¹⁶ At this point, "Bead heard a high, keening scream and thought it was the Japanese begging for mercy until finally he slowly became aware that the Japanese man was now unconscious. Then he realized that it was himself making that animal scream. He could not, however, stop it."¹⁷ Slumping forward with exhaustion, Bead suddenly feels the Japanese soldier move under him.¹⁸ Bead, "alternately sobbing and wailing [...] seized the enemy rifle and on his knees raised it above his head and drove the long bayonet almost full length into the Japanese chest."¹⁹ The Japanese soldier suddenly regains consciousness. Horrified at the sight of the impaled man grasping at the blade, Bead stands to pull out the bayonet and finish the job, and his pants fall down.²⁰ The bayonet does not budge until Bead remembers his bayonet training and pulls the trigger—the bayonet pulls free.²¹ Still the Japanese man does not die; he continues to claw at his chest wound. Instead of sticking his opponent a second

time, Bead beats the man with the rifle butt “until all of the face and most of the head were mingled with the muddy ground. Then he threw the rifle from him and fell down on his hands and knees and began to vomit.”²²

When Bead comes back to his senses, he tries to clean himself up, “terrified someone might think he had crapped his pants from fear.”²³ “[S]attered with blood and vomit,” he decides that “he was not going to mention this to anybody.”²⁴ Nonetheless, Bead’s comrades immediately recognize that he has been in a fight, and they drag the story out of him. They set out to find the body, and Pfc. Doll returns with souvenirs, including the dead man’s wallet. Bead earlier could not bring himself to look at or touch the man he had killed,²⁵ but he accepts the wallet and the dead man’s personal photographs.²⁶ When his guilt is met only with the support and admiration of his fellow soldiers, Bead realizes “that he could survive the killing of many men. Because already the immediacy of the act itself, only minutes ago very sharp, was fading. He could look at it now without pain, perhaps even with pride, in a way, because now it was only an idea like a scene in a play, and did not really hurt anyone.”²⁷

This scene is among the most excruciatingly vivid in the novel, and Jones’s biographers have stated that this episode is a fictionalized account of something that actually happened to Jones, that it was in reality Jones who stepped into the forest for a moment of privacy, was caught with his pants down, and beat a man to death with his own hands. Despite this anecdote’s frequent appearance in biographies of Jones, he left no written evidence that he underwent what Bead had endured. The details of the story also tend to change in its various incarnations and seem to draw increasingly on the novel. These inconsistencies and elaborations are clear when one examines the different versions chronologically. I suggest that a closer inspection of both Jones’s autobiographical account in *WWII* and the archival record suggests that the encounter, if it ever happened at all, almost certainly did not resemble the one that biographers have described.

The first account of Jones’s encounter with the Japanese soldier was published in 1978 by Jones’s close friend Willie Morris, who was still mourning Jones’s recent death.²⁸ In his *James Jones: A Friendship*, Morris describes Jones’s experiences on Guadalcanal:

The combat had been bad enough, but he was all alone taking a shit behind a rock by a ravine one day when a half-starved Japanese soldier came out at him from the jungle, and after a struggle he had to kill him with a knife, and then he found the family photographs in the dead man’s wallet; for a time he refused to fight again, and they put him in the stockade and busted him to private.²⁹

This telling recounts a number of verifiable incidents that occurred to Jones during his wartime service, but makes them seem as if they happened in much quicker succession than they in fact did. Here, Morris gives the impression that as a direct result of fighting with the Japanese soldier and finding family photographs on the body, Jones set down his rifle, lost his corporal's stripes and was locked away until he agreed to return to combat. Jones was disciplined repeatedly in the army, but he only lost his stripes after he had returned to the United States.³⁰ In the story's first incarnation, then, it seems that Morris conflates events that are supposed to have occurred on Guadalcanal with events that did not. Morris is also the first person to associate Bead's fight in the jungle with Jones's personal history: "In Jones there was the American rifleman taken by surprise with his pants down in *The Thin Red Line* and grappling hand in hand to the death, his death dance with the starving foe who startled him at the edge of the jungle."³¹ In both *The Thin Red Line* and Morris's accounts, the Japanese soldier is ragged and apparently starving (though Jones only implies this in the novel). Taken together, these passages clearly indicate that Morris means for the reader to identify the character Bead as the author Jones, and most scholars have done just that.³²

Three years after the appearance of Morris's memoir, James R. Giles published the biography *Jones Jones*. According to Giles:

In the worst kind of hand-to-hand combat, he killed a Japanese soldier with a knife. It is revealing that, with one glaring exception, Jones chose not to discuss this incident in all his autobiographical accounts of the war. Nevertheless, it is obviously the source of the short story "The Temper of Steel" and the almost unbearable account of Bead's killing of the Japanese soldier in *The Thin Red Line*.³³

In this description, the scatological context of the story is omitted, but the story is recognizably the same one Morris tells. Giles asserts that a "glaring" autobiographical account exists, but he provides no citation. It is possible that this account is the one Morris recalled and wrote about: after all, in both versions the weapon is a "knife," both authors associate Jones's experiences with *The Thin Red Line*, and neither claims that Jones killed his opponent with the Japanese soldier's own weapon. Giles takes comparison one step further and associates Jones's experience with "The Temper of Steel," one of Jones's earliest published short stories.³⁴ In it, a Japanese soldier attacks Johnny, the story's protagonist, but that is virtually the only similarity the narrative shares with Bead's encounter. Johnny is lying on his back, fully prepared and waiting for the unseen soldier to pounce him in his "slit trench."³⁵ He has "unfastened the snap and freed the knife from the

sheath strapped to his leg.”³⁶ Bead’s victory comes only after aggressive, brutal and exhausting effort, while Johnny is completely passive when the attack comes: “The knife in the hand made of the arm the sharpened spike of the elephant trap. The nothing [the unseen but strongly suspected attacker] impaled itself by the weight of the body.”³⁷ In “The Temper of Steel,” Johnny uses an American knife, in *The Thin Red Line* Bead uses the bayonet, muzzle, and butt of a Japanese rifle. In the short story, Johnny remains in his hole; in the novel, Bead leaves his hole. Johnny knows full well that a Japanese soldier is about to pounce him and prepares accordingly; Bead is anything but prepared—he’s not even armed. In this light, it is difficult to see how these two stories could possibly stem from a single incident. More likely, Jones’s story draws on emotions experienced by soldiers on the line at night, as the story enacts what soldiers continually anticipated and feared.

In the 1984 biography, *James Jones*, George Garrett gives a greatly expanded account:

[D]uring those three days of action two things happened to James Jones which are not part of official public histories, though they marked his life forever and figure in [*The Thin Red Line*]. First, Jones killed a Japanese soldier in hand-to-hand combat. At some point, early on in the action, he left the safety of his slit trench and went into the cover of some dense jungle to relieve himself. He had pulled down his pants and was squatting when out of the thick bushes came a scarecrow-ragged Japanese soldier who attacked him with a bayonet. Jones managed to defend himself, disarm the Jap, and kill him. As he told the story in later years to Gloria, and to some few close friends, he fought for his own life and killed his man, who proved to be half-starved and disease ridden, probably half-crazed if the truth were known. From his wallet Jones said he took some photographs of the soldier in better days with his family and friends. And he swore he would not kill again. (There are several faded, wallet-size photographs of a Japanese soldier and his family and buddies in an envelope among the Jones papers at Texas.)

Jones’s resolution was not to be immediately tested, because not long after that (on January 12), and before he had any serious opportunity to harm anyone else, he was hit by fragments of a mortar shell.³⁸

Garrett apparently takes Morris's misleadingly abbreviated account to mean that Jones killed a man and swore never to kill again. Despite this vow, Jones inexplicably returns to combat with his outfit.³⁹ The "scarecrow-ragged" attacker recalls both Morris's "half-starved" Japanese soldier and Bead's "very thin" opponent. Garrett also embellishes his description of the Japanese soldier, calling him "disease-ridden" and "probably half-crazed if the truth were known."

It is also important to consider the physical evidence with which Morris and Garrett support their accounts of Jones's experiences, the "wallet-size photographs of a Japanese soldier and his family and buddies" that are housed among Jones's personal papers at the Ransom Humanities Library in Austin, Texas. Unfortunately, this evidence only proves that at some point Jones acquired a Japanese soldier's wallet-sized photos—such souvenirs were the basis of an elaborate barter system among American troopers in the Second World War, and even a soldier who had never been near the front line could acquire photos from a Japanese corpse.⁴⁰ How these photographs were acquired cannot be known for certain, and Garrett's citations omit the story's origins. It is entirely possible that Jones took them from a soldier whom he had killed, but even though they are suggestive, they are no evidence that Bead's story in *The Thin Red Line* comes directly from Jones's experience.

In his 1985 *Into Eternity: The Life of James Jones, American Writer*, Frank MacShane reports that Jones's encounter with the Japanese soldier occurred after he had returned from the hospital:

On another day, while on duty at the command post, Jones stepped into the jungle to defecate. Squatting down, with his trousers around his feet, he suddenly heard a high keening sound. Whirling around, he saw a Japanese soldier running at him with a bayoneted rifle. Jones got up as quickly as he could and the two men began a bloody and gruesome duel, which Jones later described in *The Thin Red Line*. Although the man was badly wounded, he refused to die, and only with the greatest difficulty did Jones finally succeed in killing him. Covered with blood, nauseated, filthy, and exhausted, Jones went through the man's pockets and found a wallet containing two snapshots of the soldier standing with his wife and child. He staggered back to the command post, told the captain what had happened, and said that he would never fight again.⁴¹

In MacShane's version, Jones's return from the hospital is a return to his job as a company clerk. MacShane uses *The Thin Red Line* as a direct source for describing

Jones's own "bloody duel." He adds some whirling and staggering, but most of the account comes directly from the novel. Once MacShane has accepted the novel to be a faithful representation of what happened to Jones, he freely adds all manner of detail that previous biographers have omitted. What had become in Garrett a "bayonet" is now a "bayoneted rifle," the Japanese soldier "refused to die," and Jones emerges from the jungle a bloody and apparently feces- ("filthy") and vomit-coated ("nauseated") mess.⁴² Even the "high keening" sound comes directly from the novel, though he places it in the mouth of the Japanese attacker (perhaps to give Jones a reason to "whirl around"). Lastly, he repeats the story about Jones vowing to never "fight" (Morris) or "kill" (Garrett) again.

According to MacShane, "After ten days, Jones returned to his unit with a bandage around his head, covering one eye, and was assigned to the command post as company clerk. His job was to supervise the arrival of supplies, food, and ammunition for the men in the field and to assist the first sergeant."⁴³ MacShane, unfortunately, gives no citation for this very specific information and it is impossible to verify.⁴⁴ There is, however, a passage in a diary at the Yale collection dated only "Feb '43" that might have led MacShane to place Jones at the headquarters during the final phase of the campaign: "When I got back from the Hosp, I found that Wilbert had wormed his way into cutting me out of my job. Burn kept me in the Orderly Room, but Wendson tried to make a dog-robber out of me giving Wilbert the work I was supposed to do."⁴⁵ This entry is frustratingly suggestive but gives no sense of how long Jones was in the Orderly Room, or even if he stayed there on permanent assignment. By the time Jones wrote this entry, his unit had been pulled back to the airfield and out of combat. He opens the same entry with a description of his company's activities:

Don't know the date or the day of the week. No one tries to keep track of them. It doesn't matter much. The Co is scattered out over a wide area.—Being used as guards for hosp., beach, & emergency air field. There is no more organized enemy resistance. The fighting on Guadalcanal is ended I think.

When Jones says that he "returned from the hospital," it is not clear whether it is from his short convalescence or from guard duty. Nonetheless, we can probably assume that Jones did not encounter a live Japanese soldier between the time his unit came off of the line and the writing of this entry, even if he was attached to the headquarters company at this time—otherwise, he would not be so likely to assume that the fighting was over.

The next retelling of the story comes from Jones's wife Gloria. In a 1989 *Paris Review* interview, she explains that "[Jones] was born gentle. He had the most terrible war for a young man to have gone off to. He had to kill a young man his own age. He wrote about it in *The Thin Red Line*. That did him in. I mean he couldn't stand that. He became such a pacifist after that."⁴⁶ Most telling is what this passage omits. There is no detail whatsoever. Gloria says that the event is somewhere in *The Thin Red Line*, but she does not say that it is the story of Bead. She says he became a pacifist at some point after he killed a man, not that he went directly back to his commanding officer and refused to fight. There is no private moment in the jungle, no bayonet, no context whatsoever. Even though Jones's wife can substantiate the most basic kernel of the story, that Jones took a life, wrote about it somewhere in *The Thin Red Line* and became a pacifist, her testimony does not establish any relationship between Jones and Bead.

By the time George Hendrick published his edition of Jones's letters, *To Reach Eternity* (1989), the perceived relationship between Jones and Bead seems to have been accepted by scholars, so much so that in his introduction to Jones's letters from the war years, Hendrick, when he refers to Jones's Guadalcanal experiences, simply retells the story of Bead from *The Thin Red Line*.⁴⁷ Nearly a decade later, in his *James Jones: An American Literary Orientalist Master* (1998), Steven R. Carter accepts what other Jones scholars have repeated:

Bead [...] has a hysterical victory over the Japanese soldier who attacks him while he defecates, an objectification of Jones's most traumatic personal war experience. The fight excites readers and concerns them for Bead's safety, yet they recognize the ludicrousness of the circumstances and Bead's viciousness in killing his enemy. Even though the incident satisfies a thirst for adventure in fiction, it also compels a complex, unidealized view of the victor.

Jones's decision to give this personal experience to Bead rather than Geoffrey Fife (the character most closely modeled on himself) indicates his concern with balancing group and individual experience.⁴⁸

While Carter perceptively notes Jones's decision to keep any one character from dominating the novel and how undignified war is for everyone involved, he suggests that Jones and Bead share "this personal experience." As we have seen, there is simply not enough evidence to support such a claim.

With the reviews of Terrence Mallick's 1999 film adaptation of *The Thin Red Line* came comparisons of the film to the novel, and reviewers picked up on the

purported relationship between Bead and Jones. This appears to be the case in Kenneth Jackson's review of the film for the American Historical Association's journal *Perspectives*: "At the end of 1942, as a member of the 25th Infantry Division, Jones went ashore on Guadalcanal, where he killed a Japanese soldier before he was himself wounded by shrapnel and evacuated to safety."²⁹ In Jackson's account, Jones never returns to battle, and the encounter with the Japanese soldier occurs before Jones's wounding.

The most recent retelling of the story, Gerald Linderman's address to the James Jones Literary Society in 2000, also seems to rely on earlier versions of the story:

At one point [...] he goes into the jungle to relieve himself and glances up to see a Japanese soldier charging at him, bayonet extended. James Jones must kill him with a knife.

[...] Jones describes it, as you know, in *The Thin Red Line*, with Bead the protagonist: Nowhere is there a grizzlier or grittier passage on close-quarters combat. In the actual event, Jones—utterly spent—searches the dead man's pockets and there finds a photograph of a young woman with a new baby in her arms. He is shocked and sickened and in tears—and he then swears that he will, his words, "never kill anyone ever again."³⁰

Like so many of the accounts that came before his, Linderman's version ends with Jones's vow to never kill again, even though there is no written evidence by Jones that he ever made such a vow.³¹

According to his own published account of his service, Jones's role in the Guadalcanal campaign was minor and perhaps unremarkable by the standards of the thousands of soldiers who fought on the island. In *WWII*, Jones summarizes his combat service:

I fought as an infantry corporal in a rifle company in a regiment of the Twenty-Fifth, part of the time as an assistant squad leader, part of the time attached to the company headquarters. I went where I was told to go, and did what I was told to do, but no more. I was scared shitless just about all of the time. On the third day of a fight for a complex of hills called "The Galloping Horse" I was wounded in the head through no volition of my own, by a random mortar shell, spent a week in the hospital, and

came back to my unit after the fight and joined them
for the relatively little that was left of the campaign.⁵²

The Army's account of the Guadalcanal offensive, John Miller, Jr.'s *Guadalcanal: The First Offensive* (1949), makes it possible to trace Jones's whereabouts on the island to within a few thousand yards for most of the campaign. The 27th Infantry Regiment landed on Guadalcanal on 1 January 1943,⁵³ and the entire 25th Division bivouacked east of the Lunga River.⁵⁴ While the 25th Division was committed to action at 0635 on 10 January,⁵⁵ Lt. Col. Herbert V. Mitchell's 2d Battalion, Jones's unit, was held in regimental reserve at the base of Hill 55,⁵⁶ part of the hill formation Jones mentions in *WWII*, "The Galloping Horse." By the end of the first day, according to Miller, "Col. Mitchell's 2d Battalion, 27th Infantry, in regimental reserve, occupied the Hill 50-51 area, and had established contact between the 3d Battalion, 27th Infantry, and the 3d Battalion, 182d Infantry, on the Matanikau [River]."⁵⁷ Jones's battalion remained in reserve, holding the ground that had been taken by the other two battalions and bringing up supplies until the 12th of January, at which point the 2d Battalion relieved the 3d, and F Company assaulted Hill 53. On this day, the third day of the assault on the Galloping Horse, a few hours into the attack, Jones was wounded by shrapnel from a mortar round. By the end of the day, F Company had only made it about halfway to its objective.⁵⁸ This seems consistent with an account of his wounding that he sent in to Jeff on 28 January 1943. In this letter he says, "If I hadn't been lying in a hole I'd dug with my hands and helmet, that shell would probably have finished me off. The hole was only six or eight inches deep, but that makes an awful lot of difference, and it looked like a canyon."⁵⁹ His company had been on the attack for only about three hours when Jones was hit, but in that brief time Jones was stationary long enough to scratch out a hole for himself.

During all of this, F Company's "baptism of fire," when Jones was wounded, it seems that he was attached to the company headquarters. In *WWII*, he describes the moments after he was hurt: "According to the rules, my responsibility to stay ceased as soon as I was hurt. It really wasn't so bad, and hadn't hurt at all. The thing I was most proud of was that I remembered to toss my full canteen of water to one of the men from the company headquarters lying there."⁶⁰ As a member of headquarters company, Jones's job during those three days would have been similar to that of an office staffer, assisting with the smooth running of the headquarters by preparing reports, doing miscellaneous running or any other job assigned to him by his superiors. He was armed and in harm's way, but probably not expected to engage directly with the enemy unless an emergency or an unusual opportunity arose.

Jones was walking wounded and got to the rear under his own power. The head wound was not serious; the shrapnel seems only to have broken skin. Nonetheless, it kept Jones out of duty for a number of days. During that time, his division took the entire Galloping Horse complex, which finally fell on 13 January.⁶¹ Before the next phase of operations could begin, however, supply lines needed to be improved and lengthened, and this was not completed until 22 January.⁶² On 21 January, 2d battalion moved up to the line again, and according to the chronology supplied in *WWII*, Jones had already rejoined his company, which attacked at 0630 the next morning.⁶³ If Jones was a member of his company headquarters when he was wounded, it seems likely that he was an assistant squad leader “for the relatively little that was left of the campaign,”⁶⁴ namely the push to and seizing of the town of Kokumbona.⁶⁵ Unlike the days that Jones spent in the shadow of the Galloping Horse, this latter phase of the campaign, once it was under way, progressed so rapidly that the 27th Infantry Regiment did not have enough communications wire to remain in contact with the rest of the division.⁶⁶ The entire regiment was on the verge of taking its objectives by nightfall, with Jones’s 2nd Battalion ordered to hold the line in the hills south of Kokumbona.⁶⁷ According to Miller, at this point, “F Company moved west and killed about thirty Japanese in the jungled draw between Hills 97 and 100 cut by the Beaufort Bay trail and by the Kokumbona River, and took Hill 100 without suffering casualties.”⁶⁸

On the 24th, the 27th Infantry Division pushed onward toward their objective, but Japanese resistance stiffened and they did not reach it until the next day, when Miller reports that the “2d Battalion [...] advanced to Hills 105 and 106 overlooking the Poha [River].”⁶⁹ The 2d and 3d Battalions held the Poha line until they were relieved by other units around noon on the 26th, at which point they were pulled back to an airfield so that they could respond to a possible Japanese invasion of the island, an attack that never materialized. American offensive operations on Guadalcanal concluded shortly thereafter, on 9 February. Miller summarizes the actions of Jones’s regiment: “The 27th Infantry’s successful January attacks had cost the regiment few casualties. Seven officers and 67 enlisted men had been killed and 226 were wounded, largely in the capture of the Galloping Horse. Losses in Kokumbona had been light.”⁷⁰ Since it seems that Jones would have been a squad leader during the 25th Division’s last push on Guadalcanal, it is far more likely that Jones participated in close quarters combat during this phase of the campaign. It is known that during this swift offensive that his company killed thirty Japanese, and it certainly plausible that his squad engaged the enemy during this period. This chronology of Jones’s movements on Guadalcanal, however, does not agree with Jones’s biographies—none of them seems to linger on the fact that Jones was an assistant rifle squad leader, which is a part of Jones’s own account in *WWII*.⁷¹ By their accounts, the supposed encounter would have to have happened to Jones

while he was in the headquarters company, even though it was far more likely that he would have encountered a live Japanese soldier in a forward rifle squad on the attack.

The question remains, what did happen to James Jones on Guadalcanal? While no published account by Jones exists about his killing a Japanese soldier, two consecutive, undated entries in Jones's personal diary may shed some light on the question. In a wire-bound notebook housed at Yale's Beinecke Library, Jones writes:

The doctor examined me today. He's a fool—but a likeable one. About 35—naieve ^(sic) as 15. He thinks I'm a hero & adventurer. He kept pumping me about the Japs I've killed, the close calls I've had. He was excited and thrilled when he finally dragged out of me how I'd gone into a dugout & bayoneted two Japs. Wanted to know where I stuck them—(one in the belly, the other in the throat.) Wanted to know if they yelled.⁷²

Because the doctor had to “drag” the story out of Jones, it appears that Jones was reluctant to tell the story. Nonetheless, as he reports in the next entry, he used the story to shock a nurse:

I sat up reading last nite ignoring the nite nurse's protest that I should be in bed until the OD & nurse supervisor came around. They gently chided me condescendingly & sent me to bed like a small child. It griped my ass. I came back & read till 2AM after they left. I asked the nurse ask the OD if he'd ever shoved a bayonet thru a man's belly. She looked kind of funny & stammered around not knowing what to say.

While the dates of these diary entries cannot be determined precisely, they were clearly written after Jones had returned to the States, not while he was recuperating on Guadalcanal. There are two dated entries in the notebook, one for Oct 11 and Nov 3. Because the November 3 entry says “Leaving KGH for duty 26 Dir Ft Campbell” we can say that he almost certainly kept this diary in Memphis while recuperating at Kennedy General Hospital at the end of 1943, before he returned to limited duty at Ft. Campbell.⁷³

In these entries, Jones says that he killed someone in close combat, but it is virtually nothing like the story told in *The Thin Red Line*. In the first entry, he is clearly on the attack. Because Jones probably spent much more time on the offensive after he had returned from the hospital than before he was wounded, it seems more likely that this occurred while he was an assistant squad leader. It is

difficult to see how a company clerk behind the line would have the opportunity to take the offensive and jump into a Japanese dugout, especially during a mere three-hour period in which his unit is failing to advance. Why a clerk would have his rifle bayoneted is also difficult to conjure. The most striking difference between Jones's own account and the story often repeated by his biographers is that there seem to have been two Japanese soldiers. Perhaps Jones was exceptionally proficient with the bayonet, but it seems more likely that in order for Jones to be able to kill two Japanese with his bayonet in their fixed defensive position, his opponents had to be somewhat incapacitated. The most common method for destroying such a position drew on the doctrine of "fire-and-maneuver"; part of the attacking squad fired at the position to force enemies' heads down so that other soldiers could get close enough to knock out the position with a grenade. Once the position had been bombed, the assault team would clear out any surviving enemy.⁷⁴ Jumping into an enemy hole with a bayonet sounds like the last seconds of such an assault on a defensive position. This, of course, is only speculation, but it better fits the evidence.

Jones's tone may discourage some from reading these entries as literal accounts of acts that Jones performed on Guadalcanal. When, for instance, Jones describes the doctor as "naive," it is possible that he means that the doctor believed a fictitious account that Jones fed him. In the next entry, when Jones only apparently repeated part of the story, he seems to use the episode for its shock value. Nonetheless, his tone is consistent with a feeling widespread among combat veterans: that the experience of combat is one that cannot be understood by those who have not been through it. Jones came to understand this very soon after he left combat. In the same February 1943 entry where Jones discusses his unit's reassignment to guard duty on Guadalcanal, Jones remarks that he and the remaining members of his company "talk about the front now for it is no longer actuality but memory & so the real fear is gone. We talk among ourselves, because we know the others will understand. I've found out why veterans don't talk about what they've been thru." His tone with the nurse also reveals something of his emotional state when he returned, which was increasingly erratic and eventually led him to go AWOL three times. Such trauma explains why a preeminent writer of the Second World War chose not to record his personal experience of killing in print.

A complete and accurate account of Jones's experiences on Guadalcanal will probably never be written. It seems likely that Jones had at least one close-quarters encounter with Japanese soldiers and killed them with a bayonet. Such an experience certainly would have given Jones the emotional experience upon which to base his depiction of Bead's fight. While it is satisfying to imagine that Jones must have had an experience like Bead's in order to write about it so vividly and with such intensity, it seems more likely that this memorable scene drew on emotions that Jones felt while he was in combat. Emotionally, the scene

is absolutely authentic; the evidence, however, suggests that Bead's encounter with the Japanese soldier was probably the product of Jones's imagination.

Notes

1. James Jones, *The Thin Red Line* (1962; reprint, New York: Dell, 1998), 261.
2. James Jones, *WWII: A Chronicle of Soldiering* (1975; reprint, New York: Ballantine Books, 1976), 41-2.
3. Jones, *The Thin Red Line*, 357.
4. Jones, *WWII*, 92-3.
5. Jones, *The Thin Red Line*, 499-503; *WWII*, 127-30.
6. Jones, *The Thin Red Line*, 239-40.
7. Jones, *WWII*, 41.
8. *Ibid*, 90
9. Jones, *The Thin Red Line*, 169.
10. *Ibid*, 169.
11. *Ibid*, 170.
12. *Ibid*, 170.
13. *Ibid*, 170.
14. *Ibid*, 171.
15. *Ibid*, 171.
16. *Ibid*, 171.
17. *Ibid*, 171. Dissociative episodes are common in the trauma literature of *WWII*, and are not simply a narrative technique used by Jones. See, for example, Robert Kotlowitz's description of playing dead when his unit was caught in the open by a German machineguns: "[...] I went on for hours, playing the living corpse, beginning to believe, at odd moments, that I might really be dead and already in a transitory state, and occasionally distracting myself, in a purely nervous, hallucinatory reflex, by pretending to slip out of my body as I waited for the end so that I could detachedly observe my own sodden form from above, cringing and shriveled into itself in the mud below. An awful sight." Robert Kotlowitz, *Before Their Time: A Memoir* (New York: Anchor-Doubleday, 1998), 139.
18. Jones, *The Thin Red Line*, 172.
19. *Ibid*, 172.
20. *Ibid*, 172.

21. Ibid, 172.
22. Ibid, 173.
23. Ibid, 173.
24. Ibid, 173.
25. Ibid, 173.
26. bid, 179.
27. Ibid, 181-2
28. Morris completed the last three chapters of Jones's posthumously published novel *Whistle* (1978).
29. Willie Morris, *James Jones: A Friendship* (1978; reprint, Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2000), 23.
30. George Garrett, *James Jones* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984), 70.
31. Morris, 99.
32. Morris does get many details of Jones's time on Guadalcanal right. For instance, he accurately reports that Jones was wounded by a mortar fragment on the third day his division was in combat and that he "spent some time in the hospital before returning up the line" (41); he realizes that Jones was with the 25th Division until it was pulled out of the line on Guadalcanal for good; and he is clear that an old ankle injury was the reason that Jones was finally evacuated to the United States (44).
33. James R. Giles, *James Jones* (Boston: Twayne, 1981), 20-1.
34. James Jones, "The Temper of Steel," *The Ice-Cream Headache and Other Stories* (New York: Delacorte-Dell, 1970), 3-11.
35. Ibid, 6.
36. Ibid, 8.
37. Ibid, 8.
38. Garrett, 65.
39. Garrett, 66.
40. John McManus notes that American soldiers were notorious souvenir hunters. See *The Deadly Brotherhood: The American Combat Soldier on World War II* (Novato: Presidio Press, 1998), 75-7, 96.
41. Frank MacShane, *Into Eternity: The Life of James Jones, American Writer* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1985) 56. This version of the story is faithfully repeated in George Hendrick, Helen Stowe and Don Sackrider, *James Jones and the Handy Writer's Colony* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois U P, 2001), 27.

42. While what is literally claimed has changed, Garrett has already changed what Morris called "taking a shit" and what is in the Bead story "a quiet, private crap" to "defecate."
43. MacShane, 55.
44. The notion that the Army would return to combat duty a soldier who only had use of one eye is highly dubious; Jones might not have needed 20/20 vision to be returned to combat, but he would at the very least have needed depth perception.
45. James Jones, diary, c. 1943, YCAL MSS 23, Box 26, Folder 317, James Jones Paper, Yale University Library. Hereafter referred to as YCAL MSS 23. A dog-robber is a low and demeaning job for an enlisted man like Jones. According to William L. Priest, a dog robber was an "officer's orderly or servant, who supposedly stole scraps left by the officer (dog) he served." See William L. Priest, *Swear Like a Trooper: A Dictionary of Military Terms and Phrases* (Charlottesville, VA: Rockbridge-Howell, 2000), 77.
46. Gloria Jones, Norman Mailer, Irwin Shaw, William Styron, et al., "Glimpses: James Jones," *Paris Review* 103 (1987), 205-36. 209.
47. Hendrick's full account reads: "He did not mention the killing in his letters; but he later told friends about it, and he gave a vivid account of it in *The Thin Red Line*. In the fictionalized account the character Bead went into the jungle to defecate, and while he was squatting down, a starved and dirty Japanese soldier came charging at him with his bayonet. The two fought on the muddy floor of the jungle, and Bead, younger and stronger, was able to claw at his enemy's face. 'Bead heard a high keening scream and thought it was the Japanese begging for mercy until finally he slowly became aware that the Japanese man was now unconscious. Then he realized it was himself making that animal scream. He could not, however, stop it.' Bead seized the bayonet and plunged it into the chest of the Japanese soldier. Bead lost his sense of time, and when he finally came to, one hand was resting 'in a friendly way' on the knee of the dead soldier. Bead 'had an obscure feeling that if he did not look at the corpse of the man he had killed or touch it, he would not be held responsible.'" See *To Reach Eternity: The Letters of James Jones* (New York: Random House, 1989), 24-5.
48. Steven R. Carter, *James Jones: An American Literary Orientalist Master* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1998), 98-9.
49. Kenneth Jackson, "The Thin Red Line: Not Enough History," review of *The Thin Red Line*, dir. Terrence Malick, *Perspectives* 37 (1999), reprinted online by the American Historical Association <<http://www.historians.org/Perspectives/issues/1999/9904/9904FIL6.CFM>>, accessed 31 July 2007.
50. Gerald Linderman, "Keynote Address to the James Jones Society 10th Annual Symposium," delivered in Urbana, IL (Oct 2000), reprinted online in James Jones Society Newsletter 10 <<http://rking.vinu.edu/vol10-a.htm>>, accessed 31 July 2007.
51. While the vow appears to be a direct quotation in the published transcript, no citation is given.
52. Jones, *WWII*, 40.
53. John Miller, Jr., *Guadalcanal: The First Offensive* (Washington, D.C.: Historical Division, Department of the Army, 1949), 218.
54. Miller, 254.

55. Ibid, 257.
56. Ibid, 262.
57. Ibid, 270.
58. Ibid, 272-4.
59. qtd. in Hendrick, *To Reach Eternity*, 25.
60. Jones, *WWII*, 42.
61. Miller, 319.
62. Ibid, 319.
63. Ibid, 325.
64. Jones, *WWII*, 40.
65. The Army held no positions for wounded personnel. By the standards of the war in Europe, Jones was lucky to return to his own division, much less his own company. There is no reason to assume that his clerking job was even available when he returned. The logical point at which Jones would have been reassigned would have been when he reported back to duty. At this time, he could have been placed where he was most needed.
66. Miller, 326. So many of the details of the novel resemble the account in Miller's official history, it seems possible that Jones used Miller to jog his memory while writing *The Thin Red Line*.
67. Miller, 329.
68. Ibid, 329.
69. Miller, 333.
70. Miller, 335.
71. Jones, *WWII*, 40. MacShane mentions that Jones "worked both as infantryman and assistant company clerk" (54). He presumably means as a rifleman and an assistant company clerk, both of which are assignments given to infantrymen.
72. James Jones, diary, c. 1943, YCAL MSS 23, Box 26, Folder 318, vol. 2 of 2.
73. Morris, 45.
74. David T. Zabecki describes typical American small-unit infantry tactics of *WWII*: "The 12-man American infantry squad was organized into three teams. The squad leader (a sergeant) usually moved with the 2-man scout (Able) team. Once an enemy objective was located, the squad leader ordered the 4-man fire (Baker) team, which was [organized around] a Browning automatic rifle (BAR), to lay down a base of fire. The 5-man maneuver (Charlie) team then attacked the objective in short rushes," 737. David T. Zabecki, "Infantry Tactics," encyclopedia entry, *Encyclopedia of World War II: A Political, Social, and Military History*, 5 vols (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2005), 737.

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