

PAULA BROWN

Photograph, Solomon Islands, 1944

The caption reads: *These men have earned the bloody reputation of being skillful jungle fighters. They are U.S. Marine Raiders gathered in front of a Jap dugout on Cape Totkina on Bougainville, Solomon Islands, which they helped to take January 1944.*

To see only their faces, you might think you were viewing a photograph of the men's rowing team from a long forgotten college yearbook. Thin, clean shaven, juvenescent smiles mixed with solemn intent gazes, they all wear the purposeful look of a team of young men pulled together with a common goal of bringing home a victory. But looking past their faces you see the frog skin battle dress merging into fronds of jungle leaves, the turned up toe of the boot, the too-loose helmet strap falling beneath a stout chin, steel metal shell helmets sitting slightly askew. You note the care with which slender, keen fingers nestle the rifle up against the body.

Their eyes draw you in, shadowed beneath those taut brows, the faraway glaze, and though the hallway where you stand beckons you forward, you cannot walk away and so you stare, your own eyes wandering from face to face, studying the lines from cheek to chin, pushing hard against the decades old two dimensional exposure of young men's faces as if expecting them to speak. Young men who on another day may have sat across the table from you at breakfast, talking about, what, a girl? You hope there was a girl.

Twenty of them pose on this silent victory mound. Some sit and some stand. With skyward pointing muzzles, their rifles are clasped close. All except for the one on the left in the back. His rifle hangs low, slung in both hands, his eyes focus forward while

his image fades into leaves of vegetation. The boyish one in the middle, the one framed between the camouflaged arms of those on each side, this one stands with eyes fixed to the ground, his mouth half open with unspoken words. In the front, there are two who look away, as if they pose for a different picture, the one that came before, the one you didn't see.

As much as you want to believe that these faces could have been those of young men anywhere clambering to their seats in college classrooms throughout the country, you know that is not how it worked. Scientists, engineers, and teachers be damned. Their profession was warfare. Their education was gained in the precise movements they learned through countless hours of drill, with their boots marching as one unit at one-hundred-twenty beats per minute and their bodies aligned with forty inches from back to breast. Their grades were received for accuracy in zeroing in their rifle scopes to targets two hundred, three hundred, and five hundred yards away. Their diplomas were awarded for mastering the instinct to run forward toward the sound of gunfire and uncertainty while forgoing all sense of self-preservation. The world had plans of its own for young men, and in their time there was only one thing the world demanded a bloody warrior know how to do.

Your eyes are fixed on this jungle. Your ears hear the footsteps of those passing by. They glance to the side at your curious pause. Still your feet will not let you move on. Your hands want to reach in and grab them, to pick them up by fistfuls like the plastic army men you carried so long ago, to cradle them gently then set them oh so carefully down to rest on the map of your own country.

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