

constant roll of dice. "The element of luck is enormous. One guy's miracle is the next guy's death."

Two long days later, Stebbins's company was again pinned down by heavy, accurate fire from a hill in its path. It had been assigned a platoon of tanks to attack with it by Lieutenant Colonel Horatio Woodhouse, the commander of the 2nd Battalion. After encountering increasing fire as they neared that hill, the four tanks waited some eighty yards back. Stebbins himself was in an unprotected observation post some three hundred yards forward of the company's command post, where First Lieutenant Dale Bair, the executive officer, or second in command, was positioned with the machine-gun officer. Stebbins's 1st Platoon was on his right, the 2nd on his left, and the 3rd in a reserve position, just behind the company command post. Dashing to consult with him in his observation post, Second Lieutenant Edward Ruess reported that heavy fire had pinned down his platoon, the 1st, and was inflicting casualties. He hoped the tanks would help.

Rising for a better look at how they should use the terrain, Stebbins was quickly hit by three machine-gun bullets. He would recuperate for several months in a hospital and then go home, whereas the same burst that raked his little observation post, no doubt aimed at him, the officer, killed his runner—by that time, the single surviving rifleman in his forward observation post. His other runners had all been hit earlier.

Meanwhile, Ruess had sprinted back to his men, dodging, ducking, hitting the ground every ten yards. Platoon leaders were the officers who stood or crawled beside, or in front of, their men in battle. Known as one of the best, Ruess was virtually idolized by his men for his leadership. Two days earlier, Stebbins had noticed a dirty bandage the lieutenant was trying to conceal. Shot through the hand the day before, shortly after crossing the Asakawa, he went without treatment in a battalion aid station because he wouldn't leave his men when things were getting difficult. Stebbins also knew Ruess would never let his platoon stay pinned down long, which is why the captain had chosen it to lead the way onto the troublesome hill ahead. Fearless, "tiger-quick" Ruess liked to fix the positions of machine guns that were pinning down his men by showing himself to draw their fire. But this hill had too many concealed machine guns firing too great a volume of fire. Trying his daring move again, Ruess was killed.

The body of the runner who'd been killed beside Captain Stebbins tumbled into a decline. Unable to find his walkie-talkie radio, the captain crawled toward the rear until he was spotted by one of the tanks. It radioed the company command post, and stretcher bearers were dispatched to bring the captain farther back. While he was being bandaged, he told

Lieutenant Colonel Woodhouse, who'd run back from his battalion's forward observation post, that the tanks were needed quickly.

Woodhouse took First Lieutenant Bair, who replaced Stebbins as company commander, to where they could coordinate another go at the hill. Runners were sent to inform the three platoons to ready themselves for a tank-supported attack to be led by Bair. The obstacle had to be taken quickly. Its fire was holding up the entire advance in the area.

Casualties among the lieutenants serving as platoon leaders had been especially heavy in the two days following the crossing of the Asakawa. Stebbins had also lost the leader of his 3rd Platoon on that same advance—to mortar fire in the morning fog of May 10. His place was taken by Platoon Sergeant Edmund De Mar, the Brooklyn boy who'd ventured a spell in Miami before enlisting in 1940. Now twenty-five years old, De Mar was called not Pops, like so many men over twenty, but Mommy, thanks to his regular admonitions to his teenage charges during their training. "Do I always have to be a mother and father to you?"

When the runner arrived with the message from Bair, Mommy was in a protected little position near the company command post, several minutes' run behind where Captain Stebbins had been hit. Despite the delay during the previous hours and the casualties to the company's two other platoons, the new obstacle gave no indication that it would be uglier than others in the two-mile lake of fire since the Asakawa. The "prominent hill," as the Americans referred to it, stood beyond a slight draw that formed a corridor leading up to it. A similar rise called Charlie Hill had fallen the day before to the 1st Battalion, after a day and a half of tank and infantry assault supported by naval gunfire. There was no reason to expect the new hill, barren except for a few scrubby trees, would be more difficult. De Mar, studying it again from a few hundred yards north, saw it as "just another lump, a brownish incline with a little knoll on top."

G Company's return to combat had been hard. After suffering only two battle-fatigue casualties during its weeks in the north, it lost nine men to exceptionally heavy artillery, mortar, and small-arms fire in just two days in the south, including five killed on the first day alone. De Mar's 3rd Platoon had escaped from one action only with the aid of a smoke screen. But the company would soon look back to those two days pushing south to here as almost easy going. At least everyone could still keep track of the killed and wounded.

Actually, De Mar was reassigning the functions of the missing men in his weakened platoon when the runner arrived with the order to meet with Lieutenant Bair for coordination. De Mar had twenty-eight men left of a full complement of forty. According to the plan, they would be joined by nineteen men still fit for action from dead Ed Ruess's 1st Platoon and be

supported by the tank platoon. The hill had to be taken quickly, because its machine guns and mortars were badly chewing up everything in sight, including other companies.

The tanks were waiting in a depression not visible from the hill. When Lieutenant Bair gave platoon Sergeant De Mar and the replacement for Ed Ruess the plan of attack, they took the usual precaution of squatting far enough apart so that one mortar round couldn't hit them all. They were eager to learn one another's names to avoid calling out "Lieutenant!" or "Sergeant!"—another way of making themselves priority targets for snipers. The plan was straightforward: De Mar and his men on the left, Bair and the reduced 1st Platoon on the right, and the tanks moving out at the same time, while a machine-gun section would give additional fire support as they advanced.

The tank commander wanted assurance that he wouldn't be left "high and dry." Tanks were a great advantage to the infantry they supported, and the American 10th Army had vastly more of them than the Japanese 32nd Army. But enemy fire of such intensity and accuracy turned even the best American Shermans into a danger too, as targets for concentrated salvos. Veterans learned to control their first instinct to crouch behind them for protection and to mistrust the false sense of security they provided. Especially when antitank guns and other armament zeroed in on their whistling and clanking, the instinct of troops at their sides was to scramble as far from them as quickly as possible, leaving them vulnerable to dreaded Japanese infantrymen with satchel charges.

Against powerful defenses, therefore, tanks needed the protection of infantrymen as much as infantrymen needed the extra punch from tanks. De Mar urged the lieutenant in command of those four Shermans not to worry: "We'll stick to you like flies on shit." They synchronized watches. Jump-off time would be 1600 hours on a signal from Lieutenant Bair.

De Mar returned to his platoon and gave the word. Final preparations were made for the attack. Waiting was a miniature prelanding limbo, the men hoping the moment would come soon and that it never would. De Mar worried about them, about the steady Japanese fire from both flanks, and about communications because his radio had been knocked out. It would be nice, he mused, to be somewhere else. At 1600 hours, the lead Sherman's hatch cover closed and it started off with the 3rd Platoon.

It was only minutes to the hill. Starting the climb, De Mar and the others suddenly saw it was thick with guns. Tank fire had ripped down camouflage, exposing dozens, maybe hundreds, of emplacements now showing gun barrels and muzzle flashes. They didn't yet know that some of the most damaging fire pouring down on them was from other hills. De Mar had no time to look at anything other than his men, some of whom



were already down. The tanks were being hit just as fast by concealed, expertly placed mines and antitank guns. Two were put out of action almost immediately.

The crest was only a few hundred yards away. Hoping audacity would compensate for their lack of deception, the two platoons charged straight up and reached it, but with a much-reduced complement. Bair spread his remaining dozen-odd men into shell holes, but the Japanese fire was so intense and the American already so diminished that the lieutenant, his radio communications also out, sent a man back to report that G needed help to hold the summit. Racing and dodging down, that messenger could see little movement among De Mar's group, which was "getting the hell beaten out of them."

Nothing De Mar had seen in combat, let alone in films, had prepared him for such concentration of incoming fire. It very quickly killed many of his men and left others unable to function as fire teams. Soon only a handful remained unhit, most prominently Bair. The big, burly first lieutenant was a man of few words who, like Ed Ruess, had been among the noncommissioned officers selected for officer training as the Marines' need for more officers to replace casualties grew. He presented a fine target—but also served as an inspiration to the men—as he tried to see to the wounded and rally the others. He motioned to De Mar: something about one of the disabled tanks. Then he was violently spun around and De Mar saw a large chunk had been ripped from his upper leg. But powerful Bair picked up a .30-caliber light machine gun from alongside its two dead operators, threw a belt of ammunition over his shoulder, and, like a John Wayne character, laid out lead in the enemy's direction—one of the directions. It wasn't long before he took a second hit, this time in the arm cradling his machine gun. The lieutenant continued producing covering fire so that some men could crawl to help others who'd been wounded going up the hill until his third hit, in the buttocks, sent him spinning out of sight.

De Mar quickly threw some grenades and started crawling toward Bair. Then he felt as if someone had taken a log from a fire and slammed it with all his might into his leg. He went down flat and couldn't get up. Still down, he saw one of his 3rd Platoon men spring up and bang on a disabled tank with his rifle, after which the crew fired furiously for a moment—against what looked like "thousands of Japanese coming at us," as a crew member would later put it—until they ran out of ammunition and escaped through the tank's emergency hatch. Other tank crews continued firing although their vehicles were burning, then leaped out to help wounded riflemen.

There was no place anywhere to make a stand. Much later, in the sweet luxury of being alive to remember, De Mar would quip it was a situation