

Robert Youngdeer

Robert Youngdeer enlisted in the Marine Corps in 1940. It is ironic that, as a Native American, he would experience his first and only incident of racism at that time. He was a member of the Cherokee tribe and lived in Cherokee, North Carolina before enlisting. He and two other Cherokee friends had just graduated from high school and decided to drive to Asheville and enlist. At the Marine Corps recruiting office they were told that they all had bad overbites and would not be accepted for service. Youngdeer felt this rejection was based on their race and had nothing to do with their teeth. He was not dissuaded however. He was in Pennsylvania later that summer visiting his mother and went to the local Marine recruiting office. He was immediately accepted and returned home to convince his brother Henry to join also. They joined up on July 29, 1940.

Youngdeer had two years' service in the marines when he was involved in landings at Guadalcanal in August 1942. This action was the first major US offensive action in the Pacific. The 1st Marine Division was assigned to capture a Japanese airfield on Guadalcanal in order to provide air cover for further US operations in the Solomon Islands chain. Youngdeer was part of the 1st Marine Raider Battalion and they were tasked with capturing Tulagi, a smaller island located near Guadalcanal. Their fellow marines in the 1st Marine Parachute Battalion were going to capture Gavutu and Tanimbogo, two islands adjacent to Tulagi.

The fighting at both locations was fierce. Tulagi was defended by Special Naval Landing Force troops, the Japanese equivalent of marines. Raider battalion lost thirty seven men, seven in Youngdeer's company alone. The battalion took the losses hard as it was a close-knit unit made of old-timers, men who had joined the marines before the war. Despite their losses the battalion captured Tulagi after a three day fight. They took a few prisoners that Youngdeer and a few other marines were assigned to ferry to the main prisoner of war stockade on Guadalcanal. They loaded the prisoners onto a landing craft and, followed by a Higgins boat, set sail for Guadalcanal. Intelligence had informed them that there might be a Japanese submarine in the area and there was a lack of suitable anti-submarine escorts available. If the submarine appeared they were to try to drive it off with machine gun fire and if not successful to jump in the lighter, faster Higgins boat to escape. Fortunately they crossed to Guadalcanal without encountering the submarine.

They were not able to cross back to Tulagi immediately so they were assigned to guard the stockade on Guadalcanal. He was interested to see that most of the prisoners in the stockade were not Japanese soldiers but Korean laborers who had been working on the airfield when the marines landed. He was there when the Japanese began launching the first air raids on the marine positions. Due to the long distance from their bases they were forced to attack at generally the same time each day. The first raid caught Youngdeer and a friend doing laundry and bathing in a nearby river. The marines fought back with anti-aircraft fire but had no fighter aircraft as yet to send up against the Japanese bombers.

A few nights after he landed with the prisoners from Tulagi the Japanese launched a fierce counterattack along the Tenaru River. It was along this river that the 1st Marine Regiment had set up a defense line to protect the captured airfield, now named Henderson Field. As Youngdeer said, “the attack went on all night, we could hear the firing, a big war went on down there all night.” He and another guard were given Thompson submachine guns and posted at two corners of the stockade. They were told to “do what we needed to do” (i.e. kill the prisoners) if the Japanese succeeded in breaching the Tenaru River defense line. Fortunately for Youngdeer and the prisoners the Japanese were thrown back and Youngdeer was not called on to carry out such a distasteful task. As a testimony to the bloody fighting, after the battle the marine burial detail, of which Youngdeer was a part, buried 700 Japanese bodies.

Earlier that day the Youngdeer and the other marines had celebrated the arrival of the first marine fighter aircraft and dive bombers. Now when the Japanese bombers came over for their daily raid “Joe Foss (future marine ace) and his gang were up there to waiting.” Youngdeer could “hear the dogfights, hear the machine guns and see the planes falling. It was a great day for us.”

Later Youngdeer took a Higgins boat back to Tulagi to rejoin the Raider battalion there. The next day they were loaded onto two destroyers-transport (warships modified to transport and land small number of marines) and taken back to Guadalcanal. As the ships pushed into the beach to offload the marines an air raid warning was sounded. Youngdeer and those marines who had managed to get off of the ships dove into foxholes as the Japanese dive bombers struck. By the time he looked up one of the destroyer-transport was already sunk, “it had gone down real fast” leaving the survivors floating in the water.

Despite the tough fight on Tulagi and the loss of the destroyer-transport, the Raider battalion was assigned to attack a Japanese base on the coast of Guadalcanal 8-10 miles from Henderson Field. The Japanese were gathering reinforcements and supplies for another attack on the airfield. The Raider battalion was to attack the base, destroy the supplies and in general disrupt the Japanese plans to attack. The battalion loaded up in destroyer-transport and small YP (yard patrol) or “yippie” boats for movement to the Japanese base. By the time the Raiders arrived the main Japanese had left to attack the airfield but they were able to destroy their supplies, including an artillery piece that they dragged into the ocean with a Higgins boat. The marines acted quickly, destroying what they could and then leaving. They moved so fast that Youngdeer thought the Japanese had mistakenly bombed their own troops who had moved in as the marines moved out. He recalls, “They thought we were still there.”

After the raid the battalion was taken back to the marine perimeter in Guadalcanal and set up camp in a coconut grove. That night they were bombarded by Japanese warships, the large naval shells “sounded like freight trains going down a grade without an engine.” One marine, diving for cover, landed in a straddle trench used as an outdoor latrine. Youngdeer dove into a trench and landed on top of another marine. He remained on top of the man till the bombardment was over.

The Raider battalion was then moved to ridge on the southern flank of the marine perimeter. It was later named Bloody Ridge because the battle the Raider battalion fought over the next few

days. The battalion had taken under its command the remnants of the 1st Marine Parachute battalion and had extra machine guns from Youngdeer's company attached to the unit to defend the ridge. Youngdeer was one of the machine gunners assigned to Charlie Company. The company which was positioned at a creek that ran along the base of the ridge. It was here that Youngdeer captured a Japanese soldier on his first day at the ridge. The man came floating down the creek waving a white flag. Youngdeer sent him to the rear to be interrogated. The first and second days were quiet but the second night, the night of September 12, 1942, proved to be anything but quiet.

The Japanese began with another naval bombardment of the marine positions at 9:30pm. When the bombardment ceased Youngdeer could hear many Japanese crossing the river in front of his position. The night was pitch dark so he couldn't see them. Despite the darkness the marine machine gunners had preplanned firing lanes in front of their positions. They could shoot down the lanes to provide machine gun fire along the front of their entire position without actually seeing their attackers. The Japanese soldiers opened a sudden fire on the marine positions and as Youngdeer recalls "just that fast it seemed they had infiltrated us." Very quickly the Japanese had moved through the machine gun fire and into the marine positions all along the ridge. "We were spread pretty thin" remembers Youngdeer, "the Japanese were all around us. They had us completely surrounded." The marines resorted to throwing hand grenades out of their foxholes in every direction. The Japanese were able to move past Youngdeer's company and up the ridge to the main marine defensive line but were repulsed. The Japanese fell back through Charlie Company's position but there was no firing this time. At one point during the battle Youngdeer heard the anguished cries of a man in pain. He assumed it was the Japanese, "getting after one of their own" but later discovered the cries were from a fellow marine. He was Kenneth Ritter, a friend of Youngdeer's. He had contracted dysentery earlier and was too weak to move. He had remained next to the trail leading down to Charlie Company's positions. The Japanese found him during the attack and bayoneted him.

The next morning there were Japanese still in the vicinity of the marine positions. Youngdeer and another man were walking down a trail when they heard the metallic click of a spoon being released on a hand grenade. This device is the lever that is held in place by the safety pin. Once the safety pin is pulled the spoon is released and the fuse in grenade begins to burn. Youngdeer knew when he heard the sound that an explosion would follow within seconds. He and the other man hit the deck as the grenade exploded and miraculously neither was injured by the Japanese grenade.

As if being ambushed by infiltrators was not enough, as the battalion regrouped from the tough fight the previous night, Japanese snipers began firing at them. The bullets from the Japanese rifles were snipping off the branches of tree like scissors. Youngdeer heard one marine get wounded and sent a private to assist him, the private was then shot by a sniper and killed. Youngdeer could still hear the first wounded man lying a thicket asking for help. As he stood up to see what he could do, "everything went black." As he came to the first thing he remembered seeing were the gloves on his hands that were used to ward off mosquitoes. A corpsman, Navy medic attached the marine units, appeared quickly and begin to treat Youngdeer. He recalls that

for some odd reason the medic, who he had known as a fellow member of a boxing team, called him John. Youngdeer had been shot right between his nose and mouth, the bullet exiting under his right ear. After getting his wounds tended to by the corpsman, Youngdeer joined a lieutenant and two enlisted men and walked back to the main marine defense position on the top of the ridge. There Youngdeer ran into member of his own company who, seeing his wound, quickly got him a stretcher. Before he could be evacuated to the field hospital he had to endure a Japanese air-raid lying on his back on the stretcher. After the air-raid he and the other wounded were evacuated on a jeep ambulance to the field hospital located inside the marine defense perimeter. When he arrived Youngdeer realized that he still had a hand grenade in his pocket from the battle, he turned it over to a corpsman at the hospital. That night the Japanese resumed their assault on the ridge. The hospital staff moved all of the wounded into bunkers during the night to protect them from Japanese fire. Youngdeer recalls being able to hear the marine artillery officers directing the fire of howitzers onto the ridge, at one point he could even hear the voices of infiltrating Japanese. The Japanese “did their level best to take that ridge” remembers Youngdeer but they were not successful. The ironic part of the battle was that these Japanese soldiers were the same soldiers whose base the Raider battalion had destroyed in the raid a few days previous. They had marched from the coast into the jungle and attacked the marine perimeter from what they hoped was a weak flank.

After the second night of fighting Youngdeer was taken to Henderson Field to be flown out to a rear area hospital. While waiting to be loaded in a transport plane the airfield was bombed by the Japanese again. All of those who could run scrambled into bunkers, unfortunately a doctor had given Youngdeer an injection of morphine and he couldn't run so experienced a second Japanese air-raid in as many days while lying on a stretcher. Once the air raid was over he was flown out to the New Hebrides islands where the US had a hospital. He was there for two weeks recovering before he was transferred to a navy hospital ship for transport to New Zealand. As he was being helped aboard the hospital ship he met his brother Henry. He had been bayoneted by a Japanese soldier on Guadalcanal and was on his way to New Zealand to recover. Youngdeer was able to get the bunk next to his brother for the voyage to New Zealand. He was pleasantly surprised to find that his brother had hidden away \$5 in an old can so, as Youngdeer put it, “he bought the ice cream at the gedunk stand.”

The ship took them to Auckland and then Wellington, New Zealand to the navy hospital there. They were both ultimately able to get home to Cherokee for Christmas going by way of Mare Island, California. Henry was discharged from the marines but Robert stayed in and was transferred to Quantico, Virginia. From there he was transferred to New River, North Carolina where he joined a unit that was training African-American marines to for guard duty. He then went with that unit as it deployed to Naval Ammunition Depot in McAllister, Oklahoma for guard duty. He was in Oklahoma for two years and while there got married. In May 1945 he was given orders to move to Camp Pendleton, California where he soon boarded a navy transport that took him to Okinawa. He was a replacement for men who had been killed or wounded earlier and was assigned to the 1st Marine Regiment of the 1st Marine Division. Youngdeer fought in the remainder of the campaign to capture Okinawa and then began training, with the 1st Marine division, for the planned invasion of Japan. He was there one night when he heard a loud

commotion, men yelling and screaming. They were celebrating the end of the war, brought on by the dropping of the two atomic bombs in August 1945.

After the war the 1st Marine Division was sent to Tsingtao, China but Youngdeer had enough points, with his pre-war service and combat duty, to go home so he did. Six months later he was on his way to China anyway! Upon arriving in Tsingtao he was given a choice of serving in the infantry or the military police. A fellow marine, “who was a law enforcement type” convinced Youngdeer to join the MPs. He served for two years in China as a military policeman.

In 1948 Youngdeer was discharged and returned to the United States. He visited Oklahoma to see his wife and they traveled to Cherokee to see his family. He was only out of the military for three months when he realized that “soldiering was all I knew” and he yearned for the military life. He also had a family to take care of and wasn’t sure of what kind of work he could get as a civilian. He had been discharged from the Marine Corps as a Staff Sergeant since he had been out for three months the only way he could get back in was to be reduced in rank. That was not something that Youngdeer really wanted to do so he looked at joining the army instead. He talked with an acquaintance of his who was a First Sergeant in the 101st Airborne Division and advised him that the Airborne branch was the closest thing to the marines he could get in the army. The army also agreed to enlist him at his previous Marine Corps rank. That was good enough for Youngdeer and he enlisted in the army at Ft. Chaffee, Arkansas in 1948 as a Staff Sergeant.

His first impression of the Army was not good. He, a marine veteran of eight years who had scene combat on Guadalcanal and Okinawa, was sent to basic training. He spent a few boring weeks there before being pulled out and sent to Airborne School at Ft. Benning. He joined the paratroopers and spent three years in Germany, making Master Sergeant while there. Later, in 1960, his unit, the 2nd Airborne Battlegroup of the 503rd Parachute Infantry Regiment, was transferred to Okinawa. It was a unique opportunity for Youngdeer’s military career to come full circle. The process started right before the transport ship carrying the paratroopers reached Okinawa. The non-commissioned officers of the 503rd were invited to the Marine NCO club on Okinawa. One night after arriving they went to the club, known as the Habu Pit after a local snake, to meet their marine counterparts. As Youngdeer walked a marine approached him and asked “Are you Henry or Robert?” Youngdeer was very surprised to recognize a classmate of his from Cherokee High School. This was the first of many reunions with men that Youngdeer had known in the marines, including Doug Jacobsen, a Medal of Honor winner from Okinawa.

It was fitting that Youngdeer was reunited with marines from the beginning of his career since it was now that he had decided to end his military career by retiring. He informed the commander of the regiment that he wished to retire. The colonel then asked if wanted a parade and ceremony. Initially Youngdeer declined but when the colonel advised him that he could arrange for the Marine Corps band to play he consented. It was a classic closing to a military career that spanned both the marines and army airborne.

Youngdeer was discharged in California and returned to Oklahoma and Cherokee. From there he embarked on a career in law enforcement with the Bureau of Indian Affairs. He worked for

thirteen years on a variety of reservations in North and South Dakota, Arizona, Alaska and Mississippi. He started as a GS-4 (government pay grade) corporal and retired as a GS-12 criminal investigator. During that time his main job had been as a special investigator to assist the local reservation police forces in law enforcement. It was a tricky job at times because some local police forces resented the presence of a federal official in what they saw as their own affairs. Youngdeer was forced to rely on all of the leadership experience he had gained in the military to gain the cooperation of these police forces.

In 1973 Youngdeer retired for a second time from federal service. He returned to Cherokee and decided to get into politics. At the time the Cherokee tribe was dissatisfied with the leadership the tribal council was providing and Youngdeer decided to run for election to the council. Not only did he win a seat he won the top seat on the council. He was not overly fond of politics, much preferring the military lifestyle.

In 1989 Youngdeer was instrumental in arranging a visit by the Commandant of the Marine Corps to the annual reunion of the Marine Corps Raider Battalion. As part of that event Youngdeer and his wife and other leaders of the Raider veterans group were taken to Parris Island, where marines are put through boot camp, for a tour. They were given VIP treatment and taken around the whole base.

Youngdeer is very proud of his service in the marines and the army. He served his country in its time of need and learned some valuable life lessons. He readily admits that the leadership and supervisory experience he gained in the military helped him to handle tough situations in civilian life. In fact Youngdeer believes that every eighteen year old ought to serve in the military for a couple of years. He feels that young men these days don't get what they are missing, "it's a fraternity." Youngdeer also learned respect for the flag and for the national leaders.

Most interestingly Youngdeer found a place that was, except for his initial experience at the recruiter in Asheville, free from the racism he found in civilian society. He appreciated that in the military a person could go as far as their ambition, skills and intelligence could carry them. Despite the fact that in many cases he was the only Native American serving in his unit, he never once recalls experiencing racism. Youngdeer says it best when he says that in the Marine Corps, "No one ever called me chief."