COMMISSIONED IN BATTLE

A Combat Infantryman in the Pacific, WWII

Jay Gruenfeld

with Todd DePastino

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"I was rewarded by an intense memory of men whose courage had shown me the power of the human spirit…That spirit which could withstand the utmost assault. Such men had inspired me to be at my best when things were very bad, and they outweighed all the failures. Against the war and its brutal stupidity those men had stood glorified by the thing which sought to destroy them."

—Siegfried Sassoon,
"WWI Memoirs of an Infantry Officer"
(1930)

"All the world's a stage,
And the men and women merely the players."

—William Shakespeare,
"As You Like It" *(1623)*

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To the brave Filipinos who resisted the Japanese occupation and aided American soldiers on Luzon.

And to my late wife Jan, the best thing that has happened to me in a full and largely happy life.

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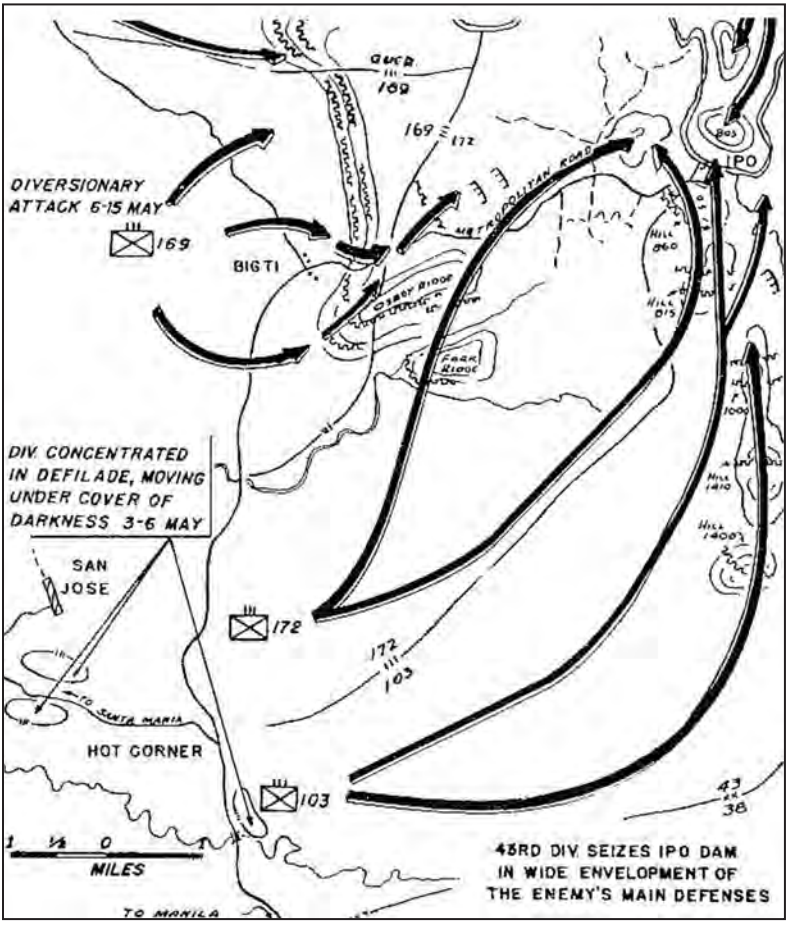
CHAPTER ONE

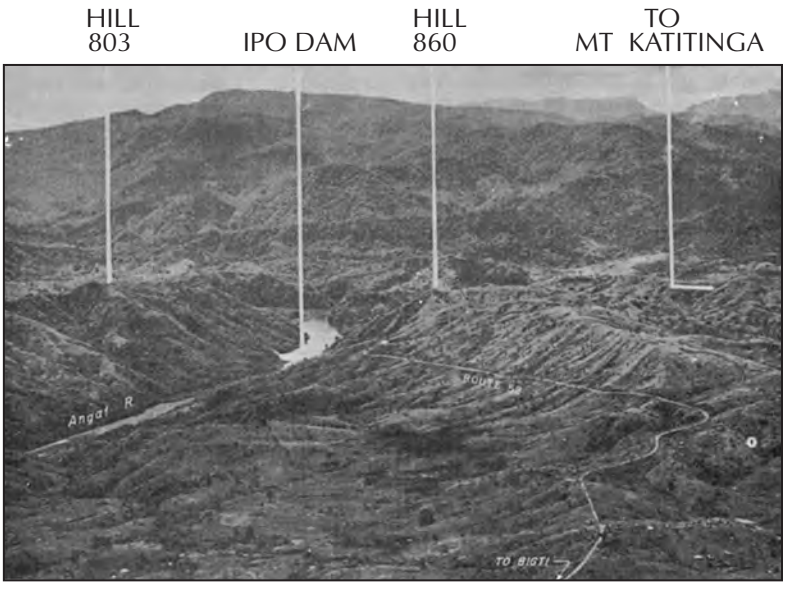
Last Day

My last day as an active warrior began in a rain-soaked foxhole on Hill 860 near the Ipo Dam, about twenty-five miles northeast of Manila on the Angat River on Luzon in the Philippines. It was May 15, 1945, the ninth day of the Ipo Dam offensive and my ninetieth as a battlefield commissioned rifle platoon leader in the 103d Infantry Regiment of the 43d Division. I was twenty years and three months old, a veteran of two campaigns and coming to the end of the greatest, most enriching time of my life.

For the past four months and seven days, I'd been in combat on Luzon continuously, except for two several day rests, grabbing a few hours sleep on the ground and bathing out of my helmet



Map of Ipo Dam Offensive. (*U.S. Army, Department of Defense*)



Photograph of Ipo Dam Offensive. (*U.S. Army, Department of Defense*)

when I got the chance. I had, to my knowledge, killed at least fifteen Japanese, some with grenades, but most with my M1 Garand. Some were so close I could have bayoneted them. I prayed daily on Luzon for strength that I might fulfill my duty. A couple times, while under mortar fire, I've broken down and prayed for a Golden Wound that would send me home. By my last day, I knew I probably wouldn't survive the war without a serious wound or sickness. Yet, like so many frontline ri-

flemen, I'd become tough and took pride in enduring what seems unendurable.

Camaraderie made this possible. Together, we laughed in the grimmest of circumstances and devoted ourselves completely to our mission and each other's welfare. I knew of no other bond like it. When, after the war, I read Siegfried Sassoon's remark that his comrades in the trenches of World War I "stood glorified by the thing which sought to destroy them," I understood exactly what he meant.

As platoon leader, I comprehended just enough of our mission this last day to know it was important. We attacked the Ipo Dam to save Manila, which American and Filipino forces had liberated in early March. Cut off from the dam's clean water supply, the city was on the verge of a cholera epidemic. The 43d Division was in the best position to move quickly, so with little preparation or reconnaissance of the area, we found ourselves in this strange mountain terrain, part jungle, part grassland studded with wild outcroppings of rock.

The Japanese, exhausted like us and poorly supplied, occupied a raggedy defensive line between the dam and Manila that tightened into a ring at Hill 860. Nambu machine gun pits, mortars, and artillery hid among the rock slabs, jungle stands, and shallow caves above the dam. Seven thousand

entrenched soldiers awaited our approach, about 2,000 more than we anticipated.

On my last day, late in the morning, a Nebraska farm kid turned radioman named Chuck Wakeley relayed a message from our new C-Company commander, Captain Galyea.

"Galyea wants you to send over a squad to help out Mullins' platoon," Wakeley said. "They're in a helluva fight."

I saw Mullins' 3d platoon about 300 to 400 yards east of my position. They were stuck on a steep open ridge. I had only two squads left. Battle wounds and disease had more than halved our original fighting strength of forty-two men. I ran over to my squad leader, Staff Sergeant Hollis Morang, and his assistant Sergeant Harris Choate.

"Take your men and head over to 3d platoon," I ordered. "They need help." Then I added, "I'm coming with you."

I didn't have to join the ten-man squad. According to battlefield procedure—by the book—my job was to stay at platoon HQ, my foxhole, and direct action. But I never considered staying back. Playing the role of fearless leader, despite some fear, was what kept me going. I couldn't surrender the façade.

Soldiers standing upright under fire adopt a characteristic hunch in all wars in all places, as if

to make themselves a smaller target, which is what they're instinctively doing. We assumed that position as we made our way east-southeast down Hill 860. The soft ground threw up little splashes of mud where bullets occasionally struck around us, like hail on a muddy road.

The trapped 3d platoon occupied a slope offering little cover, save an occasional tree and ankle high grass that drooped with rain. Machine gun fire prevented their advance, while a large force of Japanese rifleman harassed them from the rear and right. The forward part of the platoon was pinned down in an untenable position, surrounded on three sides.

I arrived to find the rest of the platoon, at least twelve men, with rifles and a machine gun, but they weren't firing. Their closest target was a honey, about twenty Japanese riflemen arranged in columns of two 200 yards to the south, directly downhill from their position.

"Everyone get ready to fire on my count of four!" I shouted.

The blast scattered all twenty Japanese but one. The lone enemy remained in place either dead or too badly wounded to leave.

Almost immediately, the sporadic rifle fire we'd been receiving from the south exploded in intensity. The rounds struck everywhere, and we re-

turned them. Through the rain, I spotted a rifle muzzle showing an unusual amount of flash and smoke. Most Japanese rifles were smokeless and presented little flash. Perhaps it was one of our M1s being used against us. I watch carefully and, after three flashes, determined the location of the shooter. I squeezed off a shot. The muzzle flash ceased.

I looked back at the machine gun, and no one was on it.

"Get someone on that damn gun!" I shouted, adding a generous dose of Army expletives for emphasis.

Then, I took another shot, and my rifle jammed. For the first time in my Army career, I'd not cleaned it after heavy use. The seventy-odd rounds I fired the day before fouled the action. I was in the worst firefight of my war, and I was ineffective. Shit. I struggled with my rifle as Japanese rounds hit so close they splashed mud in my face.

But we had bigger problems than that.

Our mortars and artillery, so helpful against the supply-challenged Japanese on Luzon, were absent. The torrential rains slowed down the whole offensive, transforming our few engineered mountain roads into winding strips of mud. I later learned that our mortar squads had been ordered to save their ammunition until our supply routes

could re-open. That left us without the biggest advantage we had against the Japanese: superior firepower.

A voice called out, "Gruenfeld!" I turned to see Captain Galyea in a foxhole not thirty feet from me. Why hasn't he been directing fire? I wondered. He must have been afraid of unleashing the kind of response from the Japanese that we were getting. But this kind of war, a grim war of attrition, wasn't about gaining valuable real estate or seizing commanding ground. It was about killing. You had to kill to take the ground. The enemy seldom retreated.

"Gruenfeld, send a noncom and four men over there to help Mullins," Galyea ordered, pointing uphill to the northeast where the rest of the 3d platoon was located. "They're in trouble."

I relayed the order to Morang, who took off with his men. I wished I'd gone with them.

Just minutes later, Morang returned and dropped into my foxhole. His face had two ugly purple-edged holes in it where a .31 caliber bullet had entered and exited.

"You gotta get over there, Jay," he puffed. "Mullins is hit. Nearly everyone is hit."

I reached down to my pistol belt, grabbed my medicine kit, and tore open a sulfa packet. I held it over Morang's face. My hand trembled invol-

untarily, distributing the sulfa powder into the ugly holes. So much for being fearless.

After wrapping Morang's head in a bandage, I left the foxhole and headed 150 yards uphill. Reaching the crest, I ran into one of our company's radiomen, my friend Bill Mitchell, staggering out toward our lines. His face was gray and vacant. He's a goner, I thought. Mitch was delivering ammunition to the 3d platoon when a bullet entered the front of his right shoulder and blasted a big hole left of his backbone. It broke a rib and collapsed his lung. Still, I found out later, he refused at first to leave the field. He saw a dead Japanese officer in a foxhole and wanted his saber. With a carbine slung over his only good arm, his left, Mitch stopped in the middle of the firefight and tried for the sword. The carbine slid down his arm and slammed to the ground. Three times Mitch bent over to reach for the prized souvenir before thinking better of it and stumbling over to our medic, Bert Johnson. There was an eyewitness to Mitch's souvenier hunt.

Bert, himself wounded in the shoulder, was now a busy man. After quickly patching up Mitch and sending him back to our company command post, he began working on another bleeding soldier and then another. I crouched a couple yards below him. The side hill was steep with only the grass to

protect us from Japanese rifle fire coming mainly from the east. Uphill to the north about 150 yards, I saw two of the 3d platoon's riflemen prone on the ground exposed to this fire. Their officer, Lt. Mullins, has been evacuated, shot in the head. With no artillery or mortar support, their position and ours were untenable. I called for the two prone men to withdraw.

"We have a wounded man here!" one of them yelled back pointing down the hill.

I shifted my eyes below them and spotted the wounded man being dragged in our direction by another soldier.

An exhausted mind doesn't always know it's exhausted, and in combat adrenaline overwhelms the senses. I tried to stay clinical, focused on getting the job done with a minimum of casualties. These prone men appeared to be sitting ducks. I couldn't allow them to be added to our rapidly growing casualty list.

"Get out of there!" I hollered back. "We'll take care of the wounded man!"

I've sometimes wondered since if that order was a mistake.

Another gray-faced soldier, caked in mud, lurched toward me. It was Joe Briones, one of our scouts, a replacement, and the wag who christened our 2d platoon "The Fighting Deuce." Joe had

always kept us in good humor during the worst of times, and I counted him a special friend.

"Hi, Joe," I said nonchalantly as he flopped next to me in obvious shock.

He'd been shot through his elbow and other places and was bleeding badly. Bert our medic was working on someone else, so I did what I could for Joe, which wasn't much. I put his arm in a sling and bandaged some holes as he slipped out of consciousness. Then, I laid him down and said goodbye. He was probably already dead when I rose and headed out to help the wounded man on the hill.

Before leaving, I briefly considered staying back with Joe. Going out would attract more fire, since adding a third man to a pair makes for a more attractive target. But, I reasoned, we'd all stand a better chance of surviving once we got that wounded man out of there since two crawling men made good enough targets in low grass. Besides, I didn't feel right remaining in the relative safety of my position while a fallen soldier and his rescuer lay vulnerable on the battlefield. It went against my role, and my role was everything to me.

I ran 150 yards in wet grass like a man hurrying home in a rainstorm. Bullets splashed about, revealing just how many guns were trained on our

position. But they were a couple hundred yards away, too far, in rain at least, to get the job of hitting me done without a great many shots.

I bent down to the wounded man from the 3d platoon. It's Pedro. I knew him slightly. I was surprised to find he recognized me though I was caked in mud, wore no insignia, and toted an M-1 Garand instead of a carbine, which most lieutenants carried.

Dragging Pedro was my friend Brum, Virgil Brumfield, a superb replacement who was Joe Briones' scouting partner.

"We'll get you out, Pedro," I said.

"I know you will, Lieutenant," he replied.

We were both wrong.

I all but threw my rifle to Brum and crouched down next to Pedro to put him in a fireman's carry across my shoulders. I reached for his left wrist. Part of his hand was missing, and the wrist was smashed. So rather than gripping his forearm, I mistakenly wrestled his 170 pound body on to my left shoulder and staggered off balance across the steep slope. After several steps I slipped, and both of us crashed into the mud. Pedro groaned. Brum helped to position Pedro on my back for a second try. As I was about to raise him up, I heard a sharp crack and my right arm went dead. A .31 caliber bullet had entered and exited just above the elbow, cutting clear through my bicep and severing nerves.

"I'm hit, Brum," I grunted.

"Then get the hell out of here!" Brum replied.

I pressed my left thumb against the artery in my arm and hustled my way back to Bert. I added to his growing backlog of cases on the hillside. He grabbed my arm and pulled out a knife to cut away my sleeve. All of a sudden, what felt like a bolt of lightening surged through my body.

The jolt of electricity knocked me into a black void. I tumbled into darkness, and time seemed to stop. I entered a serene twilight state of unemotional detachment.

"So this is the way it feels to die," I said to myself. Then, before I even hit the ground, more spontaneous words formed in my mind:

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of Heaven and Earth…

Before starting the second line of the Apostles' Creed, I re-gained consciousness. Bert, who had seen my eyes roll back in my head, asked, "What's the matter?"

"I'm hit low," I responded, looking down at my legs. They moved, but I couldn't feel them.

Bert examined the holes where a .25 caliber bullet had entered my left hip and exited my right.

"You're lucky," deadpanned Bert, who administered morphine and began patching me up. "It just grazed you."

In my case, there was some truth to this old

well-meaning lie. If that bullet had been .31 caliber, it would have severed my spine, but the lighter .25 caliber jogged around it and saved my legs.

I was numb but perfectly alert, lying in the rain next to Bert, Joe Briones, who was dead, and another dead soldier Bert couldn't save. With no rifle and only one arm, I felt vulnerable and wondered briefly what I'd do if the Japanese attacked us. But I quickly resigned myself to being a spectator and no longer a functioning warrior. Perhaps, too, I was a bit relieved.

Brum soon hobbled up to join us. I noticed blood on his fatigue pants.

"I got hit," he muttered in disgust and received aid from Bert for a bullet through his knee. I asked him about Pedro. Brum shook his head.

"Pedro didn't make it," he said.

We lay quietly for what seemed a long time. I looked over to Joe Briones. I reached out and stroked his black hair as a final goodbye. I was surprised to find it so thick and curly. I thought of his two kids and his wife, now a widow, in Rosemeade, California. She was Hispanic, and Joe, a Greek, spoke the Castilian dialect.

There was a young replacement soldier I didn't know from another platoon leaning against the only tree in the vicinity. He was supposed to be covering us, but he was shaking so violently he

couldn't have hit a man at five yards. Someone sent him back, and, after a time, I was comforted to see Harris Choate arrive to take his place. Choate, a National Guardsman before Pearl Harbor, was one of the best marksmen in the division. He'd come in first with the M1 in his regiment during Basic Training. Of the ten men from my 2d platoon who'd come out to assist the 3d, Choate was the only one not killed or wounded.

My calm at watching events unfold was suddenly broken by a mortar shell exploding just a few yards uphill from us. The electric jolt to my hip hadn't zapped my fear of mortars. "Oh shit," I said, "that's all we need." But none of us was hit, and no more come.

After thirty minutes or so, a lull in the action permitted four scared green replacements from Headquarters Company to start evacuating us. Brumfield was the first to be loaded onto a makeshift litter, a poncho. Just as the soldiers grabbed the corners of the poncho, Brum let out a groan. A Japanese bullet had just ricocheted off the ground and blown two holes in his back.

"Goddamn you dirty cocksuckers, shooting a man when he's already hit!" shouted Brum.

I laughed a bit as the shaken replacements hurried Brum out of there.

Four new replacements came out for me. I in-

troduced myself and extended my left hand in courtesy. They didn't respond, except with a funny look, and ignored the hand. They had no poncho, so they grabbed me under the arms and began to drag me. My lifeless right arm flopped about, getting in the way.

"Just take my hand and stick in the belt in the back," I suggested, trying to be helpful.

They did as I said but still had trouble lugging me without disturbing my wounds. Finally, we reached the top of a small hill, and they decided to slide me on my stomach down the other side.

"Hi-yo, Silver! Away!" I yelled as I pitched headfirst forty yards down the wet grassy slope. This probably only confirmed to them my deranged state of mind.

I hit the bottom of the hill and landed in a large mud puddle. With my dead legs and my only good arm wedged under me, I found I could barely lift my face out of the brown water. The replacements, meanwhile, had forgotten me. They were standing a few feet away, talking excitedly about the day's action. I began to fear I'd survive my wounds only to drown in a mud puddle.

I raised my face to the side and lifted my mouth above the puddle like a freestyle swimmer getting a breath.

"Will somebody get me out of this water?" I croaked.

They guys jerked their heads up and came to my rescue. They put me on a litter and carried me to the battalion aid station. The doctor in charge, a major, gave me morphine and re-bandaged my wounds.

"You're lucky, Gruenfeld," he said, "it looks as though this is something that will get you back home without crippling you."

It was late in the afternoon, still raining, and getting dark already. A fierce Japanese artillery barrage shook the earth and rattled nerves. But we were safe from it here in defilade on the reverse side of a slope. The cots in my tent soon filled up with the newly wounded. About forty of us awaited further evacuation.

My fighting part of the war was over. All that remained was a long journey home.