34. U.S. Marine Corporal Harry Jackson on Saipan, Central Pacific. 1944

CHAPTER 3

TO THE SHORES OF TARAWA

Although the general manager of the Pitchfork, Hugh Von Krosigk, urged him to take an agricultural deferment, Jackson knew he would eventually be accepted by the Marines and become a combat artist. Ed Grigware, who had just been commissioned a Lieutenant Commander in the U.S. Navy as a combat artist, advised him to "enlist in the regular way, and then be the best damn rifleman you can. Let the art come later."

Jackson went back to see his mother in Chicago, but she refused to sign the release that would allow him to enlist before he was eighteen. His bag still packed, he returned to cowboying on the Pitchfork until he came of age. In the fall of 1942 he went to Chicago again, but the Marines rejected him on medical grounds. He waited some more, enrolling in art classes at the Art Institute, then took the medical exam again and passed. His "heart murmur" of the previous test proved to be only the result of excitement at being on the brink.

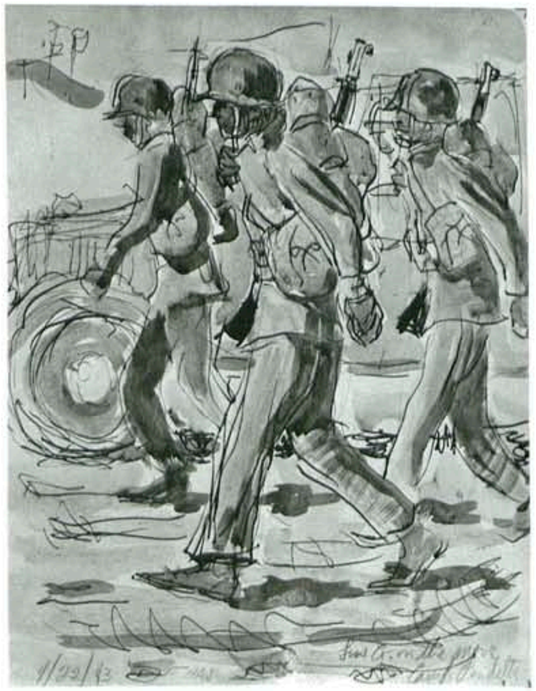
In December 1942, Jackson finally made it into the Marine Corps. After boot camp in San Diego he went to radio school. His drawings of fellow recruits came to the attention of Captain William McCahill, head of the base newspaper, who had him reassigned to the newspaper staff, where his job was to sketch wounded war heroes at San Diego Naval Hospital. One of the heroes was Colonel Evans F. Carlson, founder of the Marine Raiders, whom Jackson met again when he took a role in a Marine radio show about Carlson's victorious raid on Makin Island.

Despite differences in age and rank, there was an immediate rapport between the colonel and the private. Carlson was a man of culture as well as courage, whose effectiveness and toughness in hand-to-hand combat were complemented by an active interest in and knowledge of art, philosophy, and the civilization of China, where he had spent several years as an intelligence officer. Jackson was attracted by the integrity and strength he perceived in Carlson, and the colonel in turn must have seen something of the same in Jackson. They would meet again often during the war, in such circumstances that would make Carlson an unsurpassed influence in Jackson's life.

After San Diego, Jackson went to nearby Camp

35. *Marines Playing Cards on Troop Ship.* 1943. Pencil on paper. Collection of the artist

36. *Tech. Sgt. Henry K. Bruce, Dive Bomber Pilot.* 1943. Ink and wash on paper. Collection of the artist



37. *Line Company on the Move, Camp Pendleton.* Apr. 22, 1943. Ink and wash on paper. Collection of the artist

Elliott to serve under Lieutenant Martin Maloney. Maloney recognized Jackson's talent and introduced him to Colonel John W. Thomasson, Jr., a regular Marine and an author who illustrated his own stories for *The Saturday Evening Post*. "Thomasson was a gentle man, really well-bred in the true sense of that phrase, and he treated me as an absolute equal, because he liked my drawings. 'They have a touch and a swing to them,' he said. And I was just an eighteen-year-old punk." Thomasson alerted Captain Eugene McNerney, who was forming a special intelligence unit to serve under Major General Holland M. "howlin' mad" Smith, and Jackson was taken into the Fifth Amphibious Corps intelligence unit.

The effect of McNerney's friendship and guidance was profound on the intense young private. Making available his library, he introduced Jackson to classics of literature and gave him copies of works by Emerson, Shakespeare, Bacon, and Tolstoy, as well as Max Doerner's *The Materials of the Artist & Their Use in Painting*. Several of these volumes are still in the artist's collection, worn by years of use and marginal notes.

Then the war began in earnest for Jackson. He was flown with McNerney, Lieutenant John Popham, and Sergeant Wesley L. "Whitey" Kroenung under secret orders to join the Second Marine Division for its attack on Tarawa, largest of the Gilbert Islands. It was on this trip that Jackson had his second encounter with Evans F. Carlson, who was on his way to observe the assault on Tarawa. Again they talked for hours, almost as though the war did not exist, as the PBY "flying boat" made its way slowly across the Pacific.

On November 20, 1943, Jackson was among the

38. *Pier at Tarawa.* Nov. 20, 1943. Pencil sketch from Jackson's journal. Collection of the artist

5,600 Marines to storm the Japanese stronghold on Betio Island, Tarawa. Wave after wave of Marines attacked the beaches in amphibious tractors, LVTs and the flat-bottomed Higgins boats that grounded on the treacherous coral reefs five hundred yards offshore, within range of the withering fire laid down by the Japanese secured in coral sand-covered concrete bunkers.

Jackson's landing barge hit the ramp of the five-hundred-yard pier extending out from the island beyond the reefs (pl. 38). Under deadly mortar and machine-gun fire, the men charged onto the pier's coral sand surface and hit the deck behind the low barricade of a single coconut log lining its edge.

"I was lying down flat and there were mortars hitting all over on top of us and one hit right behind my feet. The man on my right, Eddy Jackson of Chattanooga, Tennessee, says, 'You're hit,' and I says, 'Shit, so are you.' I didn't realize I was hit; he didn't realize he was hit.

"It came up and hit me in the back of my head, at the base of my skull, in the right cheek, and on both sides of my backbone just above my ass; just what was exposed to that spray of mortar fragments.

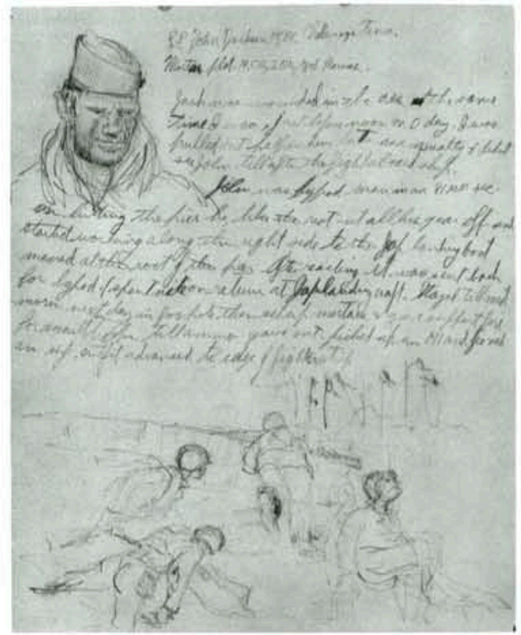
"Whitey Kroenung was behind me flat on the pier; it hit him full in the face and a couple of other Gyrenes there, too. Whitey, he was platinum blonde, and his hair stuck straight up like a porcupine's. He had no face, no face at all. The whole skull opened up, and I could see right into the goddamn—like half a melon—and of course, his helmet was blown off, and just that white hair sticking up off the top of this goddamn opened-up melon. That was Whitey.

"Everyone who wasn't dead was wounded, once, twice, three times. There was 85 percent mortality on that pier. Guys were calling for their mates. Cries of the wounded everywhere: 'Corpsman, Corpsman.'

"I accepted the fact that I was a dead man. Any trace of fear left me. It was just a matter of how long it would be before I cashed in. And there was no sense of fear—there was just a matter of doing what I had to do.

"I crawled back to a corpsman behind the Jap breeches buoy, a great big one that was hauled up on the end of the pier, and passed out—I hung myself over a coconut log brace to keep my ass dry and passed out. Then I came to—I don't recall how long I was out. My sight was fuzzy as hell, but then it came back and fairly cleared up.

"We were caught in a crossfire. We were getting



39. *Marines in Combat at the Sea Wall, Tarawa.* Nov. 20, 1943. Pencil sketch from Jackson's journal. Collection of the artist

40. Jackson sketches PFC Tom Lynch on Saipan. July 1944

it from the island, from under the pier and from a Jap lighter sunk behind us in the lagoon. I watched the landing boats get hit dead center and blow up and watched the men jump into the water. I watched them wade into point-blank fire. That goddamn coral reef, the boats hung up on it, there was an offshore wind. A lot of men fell into potholes in that red water and drowned. Hundreds walked five hundred yards up to their belts and sometimes their shoulders in water all the way till they got to the seawall along the beach. That water was red. It was absolutely red. All around the pier and clean to the beach the water was red from all the blood.

"The intensity of it, four-dimensional chess, I mean... things that were happening there all at one time. And the interesting thing is—it was beautiful. Once the fear left, it was beautiful—the clarity of the whole goddamn thing. The textures of everything were outstandingly clear.

"I crawled back up on the pier, and the firing was heavy. Evans F. Carlson came on the end of the pier and he was the rallying point. He told me and some of the other wounded to gather ammo and I went to gather up ammo off all the dead Marines. Captain McNerney pulled me off the island and put me back on the U.S.S. *Monrovia*, which had been turned into a hospital ship."

41. *Stalkin' Game*. 1944. Ink and wash on paper. Collection of the artist

42. *Plumb Tuckered Out—Sgt. Phil Smith*. 1944. Ink and wash on paper. Collection of the artist

Tarawa is said to have been the bloodiest battle of World War II. Nine hundred ninety-one were dead. Harry Jackson numbered among 2,311 men wounded in the successful three-day assault on the coral isle of Betio, whose entire surface covered less than half a square mile. The nineteen-year-old private's mortar wounds throbbed their presence, but not nearly so vibrantly as the ache within his skull. That head wound would later prove to have been the far more serious injury.

Manpower was critically short in the mid-Pacific, and when the fleet moved to the northwest, Jackson, though still not fully healed from Tarawa, again was involved, inching his way up the beaches of Roi-Namur the following January. Once again he crossed paths with Carlson, this time on Roi-Namur, after the islands had been secured. Carlson was there escorting a visiting group of brass that included Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal and Admirals Nimitz and King. As they all gathered at division headquarters, Carlson had just asked to see Jackson's latest drawings when some undetected Japanese snipers opened fire along the edge of the runway. Everyone ducked down except Carlson, who stood up to measure the situation and began walking toward the source of the shooting. Jackson followed as though it were the only possible course of action, and the two men even

43. *Browning Automatic Rifleman*. 1944. Ink and gouache on board. Whereabouts unknown

44. *Dawn Beachhead*. 1945. Oil on canvas. Collection of the artist

briefly continued their conversation while the snipers were being subdued. If the subject of art could remain alive in those circumstances, it was worth fighting for. Carlson became the model of calm and balance at the center of action that Jackson has associated with the making of art ever since.

Luck held for Harry Jackson on this occasion and across the Pacific, through the Gilberts, the Marshalls, the Marianas, until mid-June 1944, when American troops stormed the beaches of Saipan, to pick their way through concrete pillboxes and the human land mines sequestered in the caves of Mount Tapachow's rocky slopes. Here at Saipan, Harry again was wounded, with two bullets through his left leg. It became badly infected and was to be amputated the following day if no improvement was shown. A chief hospital corpsman broke Navy regulations, sat up with the young Marine all that night, cauterized the wound, applied poultices to draw the infection, and saved Jackson's leg.

This time there was a reassignment. At the ripe age of twenty, Jackson went back to the States to become a tech sergeant and the youngest combat artist in Marine history. He was assigned to Los

45. Norman Rockwell and Jackson at the latter's studio on Orange Grove Ave., Hollywood, Calif. Feb. 1945

Angeles as a full-time artist under film producer Captain Milton Sperling.

But the sunny disposition of the Chicago kid *cum* cowboy was gone. After Tarawa Jackson experienced periodic intense depressions. He lost his temper where before a willing, open confidence had prevailed. And there were the persistent headaches as well as more severe symptoms. One evening during the summer of 1945 he was walking down Sunset Boulevard with his mother when he felt a strange, terrifying sensation. The next thing he knew he was gasping and fighting for breath, running down the street, and screaming senselessly. As he fell to the sidewalk people gathered around him, shouting: "He's crazy." "He's gone mad." "He's throwing a fit." After recovering he went to the Naval Hospital at Long Beach, from which he was dismissed without treatment. It was the beginning of a thirty-year nightmare for Jackson, but the seizure was not diagnosed until two years later by doctors in New York as grand mal epilepsy.

Jackson's combat art was also filled with the visceral feelings of one who has been there and back. He drew and painted battle scenes, portraits of war heroes, hollow-eyed soldiers stalking or being stalked, men slumped in sleep, conversation, or card playing—all in a rapid, sometimes angry style that occasionally spilled over into an almost unbearable expressionism. His poem "Battle Fatigue" gives verbal expression to the anguish he felt:

Slowly they trudge back,
All drab and so heavy, so heavy and drab,
A lifeless procession,
Legs like granite on an infinite journey.

No light in the old men,
Still courting their wisdoms,
Ancients of eighteen and old men of twenty,
Back from the front lines,
Crusted and packed in the weight of blind ages.

Death and long torture,
Too much for young spirits,
So the spirits are broken,
And these are the holders that cradle the pieces.

Back to be mended,
Back to the freshness,
Back to soak light in,
Slowly they trudge.

Jackson's journals, too, reveal the direction his life was taking, the mixture of desperation and determination that drove him. On March 15, 1945, he wrote: "I am completely yellow, I completely lack self-discipline, but self-discipline is no good as a goal in itself. I first must set some tentative direction, and establish my faith in one thing or another. I think I know that humility and naiveté before God, as manifested in everything, and a desire to know that God intimately, through first knowing him that is me, *and recording that knowledge in plastic form*, is the only thing on earth for me."

In the meantime, he did paintings for the Marine Corps based on his combat sketches. In April 1945, he was called to Warner Brothers' Studio to narrate the now classic film documentary *To The Shores of Iwo Jima*, filmed and directed by Sperling. ("I had the voice for it, 'cause I could sound off like a red-assed sonofabitch.") The next day he was flown to San Francisco to be master of ceremonies on a radio show, called "Word from the People," saluting the San Francisco World Conference, prelude to the United Nations. As a living "unknown soldier," Jackson introduced United States Secretary of State Edward Stettinius, British Foreign Secretary Sir Anthony Eden, and Jan Masaryk, President of Czechoslovakia, as well as Thomas Mann, Carl Sandburg, Bette Davis, and other luminaries. But for Jackson the great moment was provided by the voice from Kansas City of Thomas Hart Benton, the American master whose work he had admired since childhood.

After the war Jackson continued his brief career in radio, playing roles on *Lux Radio Theater* (supporting Errol Flynn), *Cavalcade of America*, *Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, and *Red Ryder*. Sperling almost had him starring in a movie about the young Will Rogers, and CBS offered him a contract as a roving reporter, which he refused in order to continue his art studies full time. With the first fifty dollars from radio work, he purchased a book on the French nineteenth-century painter and lithographer Honoré Daumier ("God, what a phoney Marine—I didn't even have one lousy beer out of my money").

46. Jackson performs for CBS Radio on "Word From the People." Apr. 1945