

Hell in the Pacific: A Marine Rifleman's Journey from Guadalcanal to Peleliu. By Jim McEnery with Bill Sloan. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012. 305 pp. Photos, Index. \$27.00)

For my first book review I read *Hell in the Pacific: A Marine Rifleman's Journey from Guadalcanal to Peleliu* by Jim McEnery with Bill Sloan. Through this book McEnery recounts his experiences serving in the 1st Marine Division's K/3/5 rifle company (the HBO miniseries *Pacific* is based on this company), fighting in three major campaigns against the Japanese in the Pacific during World War II. McEnery, born September 30, 1919, was 92 years old when this book was published in June of 2012 and passed away later that same year, leaving behind his wife Gertrude at their home in Ocala, Florida.

The book starts out on the morning of August 7, 1942, a little less than a year after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, with McEnery on a boat approaching the island of Guadalcanal. This was the first campaign in the Pacific he was a part of, so he spends time detailing his company's approach to the island and the hours following, digging foxholes and preparing for what they knew could be a long and bloody battle against the Japs for the airfield on the northern coastline of the island. The chapter ends with Jim in his foxhole for the night, wondering, "Okay, so how the hell DID I end up in this godforsaken place, anyway?"

From there, McEnery tells about his childhood growing up in South Brooklyn, New York, stating that he believes he was always a Marine at heart, before he even knew what a Marine was. He gives a little background on his friends and family. They were poor but they got along all right, living with his mom's parents for a time. Jim only finished school to the eighth grade and tried trade school before dropping out and going to work, landing a decent job to help provide for his family.

But in the fall of 1930, when the war started in Europe, Jim and his buddy Charlie Smith decided to enlist in the Army. McEnery calls it "sheer fate" that the Army recruiting office was

closed that day, and he and Charlie ended up in the Marines and were shipped off to boot camp at Parris Island, South Carolina, not too long after. He recalls mishearing “Semper Fidelis,” the marine motto, as “seventy-five dollars,” but doesn’t remember much joking after that. McEnery also introduces the reader to some guys he meets at boot camp that come into play later on when he is deployed to the Pacific.

On May 17, 1942, Jim McEnery and the rest of the K/3/5 company were shipped across the Pacific to a little island of Guadalcanal, where they would endure four months “that seemed more like four years.” After Guadalcanal, McEnery fought at Cape Gloucester, and finally at Pelelieu, where he says adamantly they never should have been in the first place. McEnery extended his leave before leaving the Pacific, assuming, like most Americans, that the war would last at least another two years. “Obviously we’d never heard of the atom bomb,” McEnery interjects.

When he was finally stateside again, McEnery had a thirty-day leave before being assigned as a drill instructor at his old boot camp on Parris Island. He had a hand in preparing dozens of untested recruits for the same dangers and challenges he had faced in the Pacific campaigns. After the war ended, McEnery headed home to New York, where he met Gertrude Johanson on a blind date and married her less than four months later. He went on to work as a maintenance man at Rutgers University in New Jersey until his retirement to Florida in 1981. McEnery ends his memoirs saying he hated every minute on those islands, but he was glad to fight those battles and he’d do it all again. “That’s what it means to be a Marine. Semper Fidelis!”

This book is a biography told by a man who experienced all these events, so there was of course some bias, both positive and negative. McEnery was uninhibited in the praise of his fellow Marines. Men from all different colors and creeds, they all came together on the battleground. Some would say he would have a pretty good argument against the Navy after they deserted the Marines at

Guadalcanal without adequate supplies, but McEnery correctly asserts that they had no air cover from the Air Force.

But as uninhibited as he was in his praise of his fellow Marines, he was equally critical of General “Dugout” MacArthur, who stayed well out of the action and had the attitude of “the Marines got all the glory of the last war, and they’re not getting any from this one.” McEnery also criticized President Roosevelt’s policy of putting the European theater ahead of the Pacific. All these opinions were stated as such though, and the reader is left to draw his or her own conclusions.

I really enjoyed reading this book. My grandpa was in the Navy during World War II, so the Pacific theater has always held a specific interest for me. Reading this book has rekindled my interest in this subject and taught me a lot about the reality of island hopping in the South Pacific. (I also learned some lingo - I had no idea what “Nips” were before reading.)

McEnery (with the help of Bill Sloan) is a fantastic narrator. He inserts his feelings into his retelling, from shedding tears when his buddies were killed, to being able to kill Jap soldiers without a second thought. That human connection is such an important aspect in a war novel. Everything is told from a grunt’s eyes’ perspective, not a history book. In movies I’m used to seeing gore and war, but hearing the descriptions straight from someone who was there and witnessed it firsthand is different. McEnery tells everything in such detail, from the battlefield to the foxholes to their time away from the action at Pavuvu (Definitely not what I expected from a tropical island – rats and rot everywhere!) Jim McEnery was one of the few soldiers who witnessed the killing of Captain Andrew “Ack-Ack” Haldane at the Battle of Pelelieu. “Then Ack-Ack’s head vanished in a flash of red, and a shower of blood blew back in my face.” I’m fairly sure I audibly gasped when I read that sentence. For me, Jim McEnery’s recounting just drove home the hell these men went through for the security of my country.