

Ed Fitzgerald has spend a lot of time studying the book he's holding -- "The Old Breed" tells the history of the First Marine Division in World War II. It focuses on the Marines' involvement on Guadalcanal, Fitzgerald's first battle experience as a Marine machine gunner. The veteran also subscribes to "Guadalcanal Echoes," a publication of the Guadalcanal Campaign Veterans, a group which Fitzgerald joined several years ago. (Republic photo by M. Jill Sundstrom)

Veteran recalls Guadalcanal

BY M. JILL SUNDSTROM

When Ed Fitzgerald of Beresford remembers where he was 50 years ago, his eyes take on a far-away look, as he thinks about his experiences of war on the island of Guadalcanal.

Fitzgerald was a member of the First Marine Division, which, in August of 1942, landed on Guadalcanal in the Pacific Ocean, to undertake the first American offensive in World War II. Fighting included land, air and sea battles, which lasted into November. Besides the Marines, the Navy, Coast Guard, Army and combined air forces also participated in the fight, which resulted in the first defeat of the Japanese in the Pacific. After the loss of 37,400 men, both American and Japanese, the island was declared secure by Feb. 9, 1943.

Historically, Guadalcanal was a British protectorate in the Solomon Islands. But the Japanese had seized control of the island, building an airstrip in the jungle. From there, they posed a menace to Australia, 1,000 miles to the south. In an effort to stop the Japanese, American forces were dispatched to the area, with the Marines landing first on Aug. 7, 1942.

On Guadalcanal, the Marines captured the airfield, which had been abandoned, then formed a perimeter. Fighting occurred that day on several other islands as well - Florida, Tanambogo, Gavutu and Tulagi. And it was just the beginning.

Fitzgerald, a corporal in E Company 2nd Battalion 7th Marines, 1st Marine Division, landed on Aug. 9, 1942. The machine gunner enlisted at age 21, and had just completed basic training in January of that year.

"At that time we knew the odds stood at 99 percent that we'd probably go to battle," Fitzgerald said. "If you were in the infantry, which is what we were, there was no doubt about going to the front lines."

Until January 13, 1943, Fitzgerald and his fellow Marines patrolled the jungles of Guadalcanal, battling

their Japanese enemies, working toward a strategy for victory. Fighting didn't take place every day, Fitzgerald said, but even still, survival on the island was a battle in itself.

"It was hot, rainy and muggy -- a typical tropical forest," Fitzgerald remembered. "When it rained you slept with a poncho over your head in a wet foxhole. And it was impossible to make roads because the jungle was so thick you had to take a machete to chop through it."

As they patrolled, "jungle-wise native guides" helped the Marines move over the island, because we didn't always know where we were going," Fitzgerald said. "But by hook or by crook, we got there."

Dysentery and malaria were a constant threat, and the sweat and filth never-ending.

"Of course there were no showers," Fitzgerald said. "If you got to a muddy river, you jumped in to bathe. If you didn't have a river, you stunk that much worse."

"The only change of clothes you had was if you found some from a dead soldier," he added with some hesitation. "Other than that, everything you had, you carried on your back."

Meals consisted mostly of C-rations.

"They tried to get us a meal a day, but lots of times we didn't get it," Fitzgerald said. "Sometimes we salvaged food, like fish heads and rice, out of abandoned Japanese camps. If you were hungry, it got so you didn't pay any attention to what you were eating."

The soldiers did pay attention to the snakes and other "wildlife" on the island, such as land crabs.

"Sometimes when you went to sleep at night they would crawl up on you to stay warm," Fitzgerald said. "But that was minor compared to the other things we had to go through."

"I remember 'bonsai charges' -- when hordes and hordes of Japanese, willing to die for their emperor, came after us," he said. "The morning after, they would take

a bulldozer, dig a pit and bury the dead Japanese in it."

Fitzgerald also remembers fear.

"Heck, I was just a little old foot soldier carrying a machine gun," he said. "I remember we were told to 'keep your butts close to the ground so you don't get killed.' I did see some guys 'crack' on the front line, though. They just ran and got killed. You had to keep your cool to survive."

"But we did have some good times," Fitzgerald added. "I don't know if you could call it fun, but we did play jokes on each other and things like that."

It's obvious that the memories of Guadalcanal still have a stronghold in the veteran's mind, but he's hesitant to relate every detail.

"I remember the Battle of Bloody Nose Ridge distinctly," he said. But that was all he said about it. Some memories are meant to be kept locked away, even though Fitzgerald says time has made the memories less of a burden.

"I didn't talk about my experiences for 25 years after being there," he said. "But it's been easier these last few years."

Fitzgerald was in the service until October of 1945 when he came back to his hometown of Beresford and farmed, then worked for the Department of Agriculture as a weed inspector. But before returning home, he was sent from Guadalcanal to Australia "for training and to regrouping," he said. "And what a time we had."

But he also saw more fighting at Cape Gloucester and on the island of Peleliu, where it was "worse than Guadalcanal," Fitzgerald said.

"I had some bad experiences and some good experiences," he said. "I try to remember the good ones."

"I wouldn't take a million dollars for what I experienced," Fitzgerald added. "But I wouldn't take a million dollars to go through it again, either. Because when I read the statistics on how many men were lost -- 1,207 of them were Marines -- I thank God I'm here."