

December 3, 2006

Allen Lee

Thanks for sending the article regarding the exploits of Captain Herman Bottcher in the March 1945 issue of the Yank publication. As you may know the 32nd Red Arrow Division had some 300 days in actual combat - more than any other division in the U.S. Army, so the event of violent death became a common occurrence. Yet Captain Bottcher's death had a profound effect on me and my remembrance of the events on that barren hillside in Leyte on December 31, 1944 seems as vivid today as it was some sixty years ago.

As I may have mentioned to you Herman Bottcher was my commanding officer from sometime in April 1943 at Camp Cable, Brisbane, Australia where the Red Arrow Division was preparing for its second invasion of New Guinea. At that time Herman Bottcher was already a living legend and to serve under him was to admire him. Our paths parted at the Aitape, New Guinea operation and the Drinimore River defense when he was promoted to command the Division Recon Troop. Although during that time I ran into Captain Bottcher a number of times.

In June of 1944 Captain Bottcher was ordered to form a patrol base some 15 miles east of the Drinimore River. This consisted of 45 men, some of the recon troops with a platoon of infantrymen from Company B, the 126th Regiment. This was a desperate and foolish venture for the strong Japanese force, who were heading west, soon discovered the Americans were there. About a week later all radio contact with this outpost was lost and a well armed patrol was sent out to make contact with Captain Bottcher. It was 15 miles of jungle and beach completely controlled by the advancing Japanese. I was on that patrol. Some three miles from our objective four B-25 bombers flew low overhead and a little later we heard the dull thud of bombs exploding. We couldn't believe what we had heard and we made all haste to get to the outpost. Sure enough - the outpost was in complete disarray. The aerial raid had caught them by surprise and three men were dead and several wounded. A Navy destroyer, patrolling the coast line, was finally contacted by radio and several hours later Captain Bottcher and his men were evacuated. Our ten man patrol returned to the Drinimore by foot.

Although I made every effort to see this fiasco, then or later, in print I was unable to find anything and finally came to the conclusion that the Army or the Army Air Force had effectively made a complete cover-up of the incident. I knew one of the officers who had been killed in the bombing attack and some years later his father told me that they had received a purple heart medal with a statement that their son had been killed in combat.

While Yank's interpretation of Captain Bottcher's death was fairly accurate I remember a few differences. Leyte's typhoon season was at its height with a cold, bitter wind bringing rain making for miserable conditions. We had been on a probing patrol nearing Ormoc on the south side of the main road, feeling fairly safe because the campaign was nearly over with the main Japanese troops on the run. However, we had underestimated the persistence of the

Emporer's Imperial Division. Nearing our lines were found some our our troops erecting pup tents to get out of the rain on a bald hillside just south of the Ormoc Road. Captain Bottcher, with some of his men were there and I remember his joking about celebrating New Year in such a lovely atmosphere.

At about midnight the Japanese launched a major mortar attack directed on the one hundred or so American troops bivouaced on that bald hillside. They must have had three heavy mortars because they laid them right on us in salvos of three and they also threw in a number of small knee mortar rounds. Soon there were cries of "Medic - Medic" and I believe only two medics were available. Some of the A Company riflemen fired into the tree line where they supposed the enemy was located, but this was ineffective - we were at their mercy.


Two men were hit in the tent near us. The tent was nearly blown away and we got both men into our pup tent. One man had a bad shoulder and neck wound while the other's left was blown off above the ankle. The officers and NCO's carried a first aid kit and we gave both men a serette of morphine and put a tourniquet on the other man. When the mortar fire finally abated we collected all the ponchos and blankets we could as both men were in shock and had to be kept warm. In spite of our efforts the man who had lost his foot died of shock before daylight. To the best of my knowledge the sergeant with the neck wound made it.

We didn't know Captain Bottcher had been hurt until just before dawn we heard a man yell, "The Captain's been hit real bad!"

I believe it was inaccurate to state that Captain Bottcher, or any off the wounded were taken out of the area that night. For one thing, it was totally dark with constant rain and there was no place to go to - we had no idea where the enemy was. A radio man had got the message out and just after dawn troops from the 2nd Battalion, 126th Infantry arrived with medical personnel. When it was light enough to see I walked over to where Captain Bottcher's tent was and there lay a still form covered with a green poncho. Some of the men there told me that the Captain had died before dawn from shock and blood loss.

As I looked down at the lifeless form covered with the poncho I couldn't believe the Captain was dead, altho I knew he was.

JS



A typical reconnaissance patrol at Aitape, New Guinea in April to July 1944. Six men with light packs and armed mostly with the .45 caliber Thompson sub-machine gun, wearing fatigues and baseball caps. The two men on the right were KIA - Sgt. Roy Valadick by a sniper on Leyte and Pvt. Johnson on the Villa Verde Trail on Luzon, also by sniper fire.

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RECONNAISSANCE PATROL BEHIND NATIVE HUT

A TYPE-44

PVT. ST. JOHN - PVT. NEAL - PVT. STOCKMAN PVT. MORRIS -

PVT. JOHNSTON - SGT. VLADICK

2 TOR -