



*PORTRAIT BY ARNOLD BLANCH*

# ALWAYS A COMMANDER

THE  
REMINISCENCES  
OF  
MAJOR GENERAL WILLIAM H. GILL

AS TOLD TO  
EDWARD JAQUELIN SMITH

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enlisted man in the division, as well as those attached, played a very important part in the division's success. I wish to compliment each individual and to express my personal appreciation for the splendid work accomplished in this campaign. Without this coordinated effort by each individual, the division could not have been so successful. I extend season's greetings to each of you and in so doing express my confidence in your continued success. May God watch over you and help you through the strenuous days ahead. W.H. Gill, Major General, Commanding."

Also Gen. Krueger, commander of the 6th Army, paid tribute to the troops in a general order at the end of the Leyte operation: "The combat troops have displayed the highest degree of gallantry, skill, tenacity, and fortitude in fighting a resourceful and determined enemy, in adverse conditions of weather, and on exceedingly difficult terrain. They have added a glorious page to the history of our army and the country. The exploits of the combat troops were equaled by the devoted and highly effective work of the service units who are deserving of the highest praise for unremittingly toiling day and night to serve and support their comrades in the battle line."

On December 23 the westward movement toward the coast began. "The 32nd Division moved out with the attached troops. I think the 24th Division was on our right and probably the 1st Cavalry Division on our left; I'm not sure about that. It was a tough move because of the bad weather and the little pockets of Japanese that we ran into. It was through mountainous country and some of it was also swampy due to the rains. There was a supply problem. Actually the division as a whole was supplied by our little artillery cub planes. Food, supplies generally, and in particular medicines were dropped to the troops. It was just the only way we could supply them with any degree of accuracy. These little planes flew low and they could see the troops and the troops could see them. The supplies would be dropped and our men would get them before the Japanese could. The terrain was bad. It was wet and muddy all the way, but we finally reached the west shore of Leyte and found that the Japanese had either been killed or had been able to get on some Japanese ship and go. I think Yamashita got on a ship and went back to Manila or Luzon with the idea of continuing the fighting there, and if he could get any of his troops out of Leyte, he was that much ahead. But not very many got out. A few did, I guess, but our Air Force then had superiority and we bombed their ships and sank some of them. So any outfit that might be actually escaping had a minimum chance of getting away.

"There was one very sad thing that happened during this time. If we go back in history a little bit, the 32nd Division had, as its reconnaissance troop, a very fine outfit with high morale. It was commanded by Capt. Herman Bottcher who was a hero already in the division since his great help to Gen. Eichelberger in the Buna campaign. He had done some very fine work there. And contrary to any regulations that I ever heard of, Eichelberger recommended that Bottcher be promoted from a staff sergeant to a captain over the heads of second and even first lieutenants. Unusual, but probably deserved. He was certainly a great guy.

"He was German born and had fought in the Spanish Civil War on the Loyalist side. He was one of the great heroes. I guess he must have had a tint of Communism about him somehow or other; I don't know what he had, but his records showed maybe that he did. After he was killed, they were going to make a movie about him-and it would have been a very good one-very realistic and a lot better than a lot of them you see that are based on fiction. But it fell through, because I think the 'powers that be' had some hesitancy about using Bottcher as an example, since they thought he was tainted with Communism.

"I inherited him, along with many other officers. And I employed him all along through all the fighting we did with the 32nd Division in the Leyte business. This reconnaissance troop was just that. It tried to give us information as to where the enemy was and how they were operating and so forth. During the Leyte campaign he went out behind the Jap lines with his radio operator, medical enlisted man, and two or three others. There were four or five all told. This group, working at night behind the Japanese lines, succeeded in giving us information from time to time throughout the whole movement, particularly during the period after we turned west. It was because of his very fine job that we were able to direct our artillery on the masses of enemy that were concentrated in those areas.

"Well, the sad thing was that we had a message one afternoon on the radio at my little command post which was hooked up with him that Bottcher had been wounded. He had just gotten a case of bad luck. The Japanese had put a small mortar shot right into the area where he was and he couldn't get out. It had wounded him very badly in one leg. The artery was cut and, according to the radio, he was bleeding very badly. I was very sad about the whole thing and I got hold of my division surgeon right away and told him to get on the radio and talk to the medical man with Bottcher. He was not experienced, certainly not a doctor, and my doctor tried to tell this man how to stop the bleeding and save Bottcher's life. Well, there was spasmodic conversation between the doctor and the enlisted medical man but finally the sad part of the thing was that, with no equipment of any kind, they were unable to stop the bleeding. So Bottcher died right there on the field and we mourned the loss of a very great soldier. When things quieted down a little bit, I told them to bring his body in. It was brought in to our little command post there and he was given a burial in the regular cemetery that they had there on Leyte. It was a very sad thing and a terrible ending to the successful termination of the Leyte campaign. But, that's the way life is.

"He was the only man that I was intimately connected with in many ways. I admired him so much because he was completely fearless. I never knew another man that was so truly, truly fearless. He had no fear of anything. He would get up when the rifle and machine gun fire was intense and go right through it. He was never hit before ... He was a great fighter, loved his work, and all his men worshipped him. They would go anywhere with him. In the Philippines they went behind the Japanese lines and stayed there for almost a month. I did decorate him with the DSC, but that was back in Australia before he was killed, of course. I gave him a soldier's burial, and that was it."

The division surgeon, who did his best to instruct the enlisted medical man as to how to stop the uncontrollable bleeding from Capt. Bottcher's leg, was Col. John F. Wurz. "He was a very skillful doctor and the division surgeon. He stayed with me throughout the war. He came from Grand Rapids, Michigan, and I think he is still alive and practicing medicine in the state of Wisconsin."

At the end of the Leyte campaign in December '44, Gen. Sibert conferred on Gen. Gill the Silver Star with the Oak Leaf Cluster. (He had already been decorated with a Silver Star during World War I). A picture taken on the occasion shows Generals McBride, Limon and Col. Barlow looking on. The citation reads: "For gallantry in action in Leyte Province, Philippine Islands, from the 16th of November, 1944 to the 22nd of December 1944. On numerous occasions Major General Gill inspired and instilled confidence in his front line troops, making possible successful attacks against the enemy. On the 16th of December, he went forward to the battalion command post and personally directed an attack on a strategic ridge. His presence calmed and inspired his officers and men and the mission was successfully accomplished. On the 19th of December, while in front line positions, he fearlessly exposed himself to enemy rifle, mortar, and machine gun fire in order to seek and encourage individual soldiers and to observe and direct the operation of the front line troops. His intrepidity under fire was a continual inspiration to both officers and men taking this position. He personally directed an advance on the 22nd of December which involved a long march over difficult terrain, which was subject to enemy sniper machine gun fire. On all occasions, Major General Gill's coolness and courage in face of enemy fire and his disregard for personal safety in order to establish personal contact with his men, inspired and encouraged his troops and had a direct bearing on the success of the Ormoc Valley operation."

Gen. Gill was not in the Navy, but he did have his own boat! "Yes. That was a very fine thing. Somewhere back in the early part of the campaign in New Guinea, shortly after I joined the 32nd Division, Gen. MacArthur's headquarters assigned for my use a very fast and very well armed small boat. It had 50-caliber and 30-caliber machine guns and could give you good overhead cover when you went ashore. I used it in both New Guinea and Leyte. It was the only means of transportation I had. I either had to fly or go by water and for the short trips I needed to make around New Guinea and Leyte it was much better to use this boat, and I did constantly. We had a crew of four. I named it the Elizabeth G. after my lovely wife. Of course she never saw it. It was a very good boat and it was very useful to me when I had to make frequent trips from one area to another. It was very difficult to get to your troops to see what they were doing, so I went by water on the Elizabeth G. most of the time. It had no galley; we used to bring our food on which was already prepared and we just warmed it up when we took extended trips. We did have bunks in there which we could use on these longer trips and might be late getting back at night. We seldom underwent any attacks while we were on the boat. I do remember once I landed with a patrol on one of the New Guinea beaches to look

around to see who was there. We didn't find anybody, but we had some fire. The few Japanese who were in there disappeared very shortly after we opened fire on them ... When we closed up the deal on Leyte, I left the boat there because I was going to Luzon where it wouldn't be of any particular value."

In this jungle warfare there was another kind of enemy in addition to the Japanese soldier: disease, especially malaria. While malaria was seldom fatal "it made you feel bad when they said you weren't active enough to be in combat and that you had to be evacuated. We lost a good many men that way. Somewhere earlier in this record we told how, when the 32nd was brought back to Australia after the nasty Buna campaign, we had to establish a convalescent camp, Camp Cable, where we had some 3000 malaria cases which had to be treated for quite some time. That was about the time when I took over the division. When we went back into New Guinea I still had that malaria problem which was very difficult because we had no way of controlling the mosquito that transmitted this disease. Those New Guinea mosquitos had been looking for white meat for a long time. They had been working on Japanese and natives and presumably had gotten tired of that kind of blood and wanted some white blood. It was so terribly hot in the jungle, and it was so tempting to take off your coat or blouse, roll up your sleeves and give those mosquitos a good chance to bite you-and they did. It was also very hard to make the soldiers take their medicine. I think a good deal of the antagonism to taking the medicine, Atabrine, for malaria was due to the fact that Tokyo Rose was working on our men. (You probably remember hearing of her-that Japanese girl who broadcast from Tokyo and who spoke English very well. She became quite famous for her ability to presumably influence our American soldiers some). Anyway, she said several times on the radio-and our men did listen to her-that people who took Atabrine lost their sexual abilities, and naturally the young soldier sitting off there by himself somewhere in New Guinea would believe a thing like that. Well, that was one of the reasons. And of course that medicine was bad tasting and it wasn't very nice. So it became necessary for me to make very definite arrangements for the taking of Atabrine as a preventative of this malaria which was so bad. I did that by requiring the lieutenant or non-commissioned officer (whoever was in command of the platoon) at the evening meal when hot food was brought up, personally to give a pill to each man in the platoon. Standing in front of him, the soldier was to take the pill and drink water from his canteen. And the officer was to stand there until the soldier swallowed it. That was pretty stringent, but even so I began to think I'd better check this over. So after the meal one night, I went back to the area where the platoon was supposed to have been issued the Atabrine and I found a yellow streak on the ground about the same length and width of a platoon. So I concluded that my scheme wasn't working. You understand that the pill wouldn't have cured the malaria once it had started any way, because I wound up when I came out of New Guinea with a terrible lot of malaria cases.