

Lay Bare a Few More Nerves: Under Fire at Roi-Namur

By Geoffrey Roecker

Like many of his comrades in the 4th Marine Division, First Lieutenant Philip Emerson Wood Jr. got his first taste of combat in Operation Flintlock—the invasion of Roi-Namur and the surrounding islets in early February 1944.

Wood, a 23-year-old Swarthmore alumnus, Yale Law student, and graduate of the 12th Reserve Officers' Class at Quantico, was a weapons platoon leader in Company A, 1st Battalion, 24th Marines. He wrote lengthy, insightful letters about his strange new life in the service—most of which were addressed to his mother Margretta and younger sister Gretchen, collectively called the “Dear Girls.”

On 2 April 1944—the second anniversary of his enlistment—Wood sat down to record his impressions of combat. The resulting letter, a cathartic explosion of thoughts, pride, fear and sorrow, is unusual for its degree of detail and poetic, yet brutal honesty. Most battalion censors would have cut such a letter to ribbons, but Wood just happened to be the censoring officer, and his missive reached home intact. The result is an unusually detailed look at a battle which is often glossed over in larger histories, but which left a profound impression on thousands of men.

The letter presented here has been edited for length and clarity.

2 April 1944

Dear Girls,

I've been thinking [of sending] you the story of Namur for quite some time. I guess I didn't because of censorship and because a great deal of what I saw wasn't nice and orderly and safe. That is, after all, the traditional view that one is supposed to impress on the loved ones at home.

I'm not writing because I want to shock or worry you, or because I'm proud of the dangers I've been through—it's just that knowing and loving you, I think that you would prefer knowing what it was like and how I felt, and thus what it will be like next time. Known fears and worries are limited ones. Unknown, they can become tremendous.



1stLt Philip Emerson Wood Jr., at Camp Maui in April 1944.

COURTESY OF GEOFFREY ROECKER

We knew where we were going as soon as we had been out to sea a day or two. We were issued many maps and photos, reams of intelligence data, spent long hours teaching the men. Physical exercise out in the hot sun, the huge convoy stretched out to the horizon all around us, swelteringly hot below decks, increasingly tense feeling all over the ship, sleeping on the cool decks with the breeze, the constant boil of the phosphorescent sea under the prow, the constant darkness and quiet, and the ever-constant star that twinkled red and blue. Singing every night, the company accordionist playing up on deck. More work during the day, firing the weapons over the side, rifle inspection, final word on boat assignment tables, the last time you clean and oil your rifle, fuse your hand grenade and hang it on your belt.

Land! Little low islands looking brilliantly green after weeks of blue sky and bluer water. The rumbling of guns, Roi and Namur marked by a thin trail of smoke threading across the sky. The Colonel [Franklin A. Hart] announces all events over the P.A. and is cheered by the men. This is it, the last officer's meeting, the Colonel's big red face, and bigger but unsteady grin under the only small light in the room, all the officers tense and still, getting the final dope, and deciding that we were excited but not afraid, and falling asleep with, strangely, no trouble at all.

Up before dawn, tight stomach but a ravenous appetite. Forgot to wake up Ted [1stLt Theodore K. Johnson, C/1/24 executive officer], and he almost missed the boat. The last time I saw him, he was mad as Hell and cussed me out for a knucklehead. Went down into the men's compartment, and they were all excited—we didn't see how there could be anything left. When we finally went over the net, I took off like a bat out of Hell for where I thought the Company was. I wandered from one rendezvous area to another and finally stumbled on A Company, shells screaming overhead, the smell of powder, the brilliantly blue lagoon, shivering with cold. The Word seemed clear that there was nothing left. I don't know how they thought they knew, but we believed it and felt bitterly disappointed. All the work,

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A Marine on neighboring Roi Island takes cover from the earth-shaking detonation on Namur. (USMC photo)

preparation, and worry seemed to be for nothing. There was nothing to do but walk ashore. About 40 minutes after the first wave went in, they called for us. We didn't know why, probably to share coconuts, but we started in.

When we were about 100 yards offshore a tremendous blast of air seemed to stop the boat, followed by a wave of sound that left everything throbbing. We involuntarily poked our heads up and looked. The whole right half of the island had heaved and coughed its flaming entrails up into the air, hundreds of feet above us—a pillar of fire in the daytime. The biggest munitions dump on the island had been mined and set off by the enemy. Concrete blocks rained into the water around us, every man muttered “Christ, this is it!” to himself, and a huge cloud of black ash drifted over the boat—so thick you couldn't breathe or see the man next to you in the boat—the most terrifying moment I've ever spent. There seemed to

be no more sound left in the world.

It was later determined that a demolitions team from F/2/24 breached a magazine containing torpedoes and bombs for aircraft based on Roi. The resulting explosion was the largest of the Pacific War up to that point. “Fox” Company suffered heavy casualties in the blast, and falling debris killed and wounded several men in boats offshore.

When it cleared, we were 10 yards from the beach (the ash stuck to the green and brown camouflage paint, and we fought the battle in blackface), the ramp went down, and I pounded ashore through the shallow water to find thousands of men crouched on the beach in the shelter of a slight rise. They were as thick as flies. I said, “another Tarawa” to myself, and found a Lieutenant that I knew calmly

The group known as the Agony Quartette aboard USS *DuPage* en route to the Marshall Islands. From left: First Lieutenants Philip Emerson Wood Jr., Frederic A. Stott, Harry D. Reynolds Jr. (WIA at Namur) and Theodore K. Johnson (KIA at Namur).



COURTESY OF GEOFFREY ROECKER

A rifle squad, bayonets fixed, prepares to move out into the thick underbrush on Namur's northern end.

trying to bandage a man who had half his face torn off by two machine gun bullets. He simply said, "Don't go up there, Phil, it's all mined. We had just knocked out the machine guns that were trained on the beach and started in and they blew it. It got Jim [1stLt James B. Heater, F/2/24] and every man in his platoon. We've lost a lot." I turned to go and stepped on a body burned black—so much foul meat; I cussed it and was mad at it when I should have been revolted.

The Captain [Irving Schechter] sensibly decided to go up through the blasted area. We moved out, scurrying from one shell hole to another as we realized for the first time that a lot of rifle fire was coming our way. There had been many buildings, pillboxes, and men there. Nothing was left but rubble—twisted iron, heaps of concrete, a few blasted palm stumps and shell-pocked earth; a super No Man's Land that you had read about so often, and here I was. This was the battle that I had pointed toward for so long. It all seemed



SGT ANDREW ZURICK, USMC

unreal. I felt detached, but very tense.

We met nothing but a few snipers until we came to the northern half of the island. There some shells had landed, but there was a lot of shrubbery and trees, many dugouts, pillboxes, and blockhouses—and almost all the Japanese left living on Roi and Namur. The first one I saw was half-naked, an officer brandishing a Samurai

sword. I slowly sighted on him, but before I squeezed the trigger he was down. One of my machine gunners was standing over him, smashed out a gold front tooth and put it in his pocket. I yelled, "Why?" He said because his dad had asked for one—I said I was glad it was for a sentimental reason.

I noticed Corporal [Arthur B.] Ervin up



USMC

Japanese soldiers huddled together in a trench on Namur met their end when Marines of the 4th Division landed on this important Central Pacific base. It took the leathernecks 24 hours to capture the island.

ahead, waving us on. As long as he was in the action, he stayed at least 50 yards ahead of anybody else in the Company. I took a couple of the others and went up to help him. He had stumbled on a dugout containing six or seven enemy, had fired at them, thrown a grenade or two, and come back for more. I went around behind the position and waited for any that might retreat. One did, and I shot him as he tried to sneak past me in the undergrowth. I was partly, very dimly conscious that I had killed, but more aware of the satisfying way my little carbine heaved in my hands and coughed up bullets.

A burst of machine-gun fire came from a blockhouse we were approaching; we all dove for nearby trenches, and Steve Hopkins and I landed in a small one. On a small projection lay a Japanese. I thought him dead and passed by him up the trench. Hoppy kept an eye on him, though, and when the wounded man rolled over to throw the grenade he had in his hand, Hoppy shot him. The kid was white-faced and chattery. "Did you see, Mr. Wood? Did you see the grenade? Did you see what he was going to do?"

PFC Stephen Peter Hopkins had recently joined Wood's platoon. His assignment caused a stir—his father was Harry Hopkins, personal advisor to President Franklin D. Roosevelt—and his return address was the White House. "Hoppy" was one of the most popular men in the platoon, and his actions likely saved Wood's life.

Over our heads all Hell broke loose. My machine guns behind me started a duel with the blockhouse, then a knee mortar started probing for our trench. During a lull, Ervin went forward again. He came on a machine-gun nest and killed two of the men manning it but was driven off when an officer knocked off his helmet with a round from his pistol. Ervin's face was sprayed with bits of lead. He came back and told us the situation. I hopped out and went back to assign the target to my mortars. By the time we had set up, the forward elements of the company had moved up too close to the position to let us fire safely.

That was the biggest trouble I had—our boys, the riflemen, were too eager to attack. Several times I could have saved lives if they had only waited for a preparatory mortar barrage, but they couldn't wait to close with the enemy. It made for a headlong, rushing attack that never gave the enemy a chance to reorganize. Every one of them is vividly conscious of the fact that he is a Marine.

We used bazookas on the blockhouse,



COURTESY OF GEOFFREY ROCKER

Lt Philip Emerson Wood Jr., at Quantico in 1942.

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and finally it was silenced. Harry [*1stLt Harry Dare Reynolds, Jr., A/1/24 executive officer*] and Ervin ran across the open and threw hand grenades into the firing ports. I picked up Ervin's helmet to toss it to him, but it was knocked out of my hand by a sniper's bullet. Ervin hopped up on top of the blockhouse, and stood there silhouetted against the sky, legs spread apart, hatless, with blood on his face and his coat flung open, firing his rifle from the hip into the dugout that lay in front of Sgt [*Frank Allen*] Tucker and myself. He killed some, but fire kept coming at him from the dugout, so he jumped down, ran to it, and was hit just as he got in front of me. Harry and I yelled to him. He said he "didn't want any help" and pulled himself out with his right arm (he was hit in the side) and Harry had to order him back to the hospital. Ervin claimed that he could still throw grenades with his one arm.

Corporal Arthur Ervin, a Pearl Harbor veteran and former Marine Raider, was decorated with the Navy Cross and Purple Heart for these exploits. He returned to the company shortly before Wood wrote this letter, and Wood "nabbed" him for his second in command of the mortar section.

Sgt Tucker was in a hole on my left. He and Harry and Roy [*1stLt Roy Irving Wood Jr., 2nd Platoon*] and two or three from Roy's platoon and I gave the dugout a barrage of grenades—at a range of 10 yards, they were deafening. Tuck and Cpl [*Franklin C.*] Robbins charged first but were driven back by fire. Then five or six of us went over the edge of the embankment and shot everything that



COURTESY OF GEORGE A. SMITH

Stephen Hopkins turned down Officer Candidates School in favor of going to the Fleet Marine Force and served as an ammunition carrier for a machine gun squad in A/1/24. "Hoppy" died of wounds on Feb. 2, 1944, at the age of 18.

moved. A rifle came around a corner. I shot it out of the enemy's hands and someone else drilled him. He had a big silk flag tied to his rifle which I cut off and stuffed into my pocket. It's one of the few found on Namur.

When I turned, the rest of them had gone on running, stopping to fire when they saw a fleeing enemy, following the beachline along the island. My runner [PFC William J. Imm] and I started after them, heard heavy firing, and stopped to reconnoiter. We were almost up to a wide, cleared area, just off a road running parallel to the beach. The "Daring Dozen" were across the clearing and apparently having a hell of a fight 100 yards ahead of us. We crawled into a shell hole with a Lieutenant from D Company. He told us to stay down for Christ's sake, the road and the clearing were machine gun lanes, and the enemy had been killing anyone who tried to go up.

Only four of us got out of that trap whole, and that was Sgt Tucker's doing. Seeing that they were being methodically slaughtered, he stood up and opened fire with his rifle. As each Japanese arose out of the opposing trench to fire, Tucker carefully sighted in and shot him—often, as we found out later, right between the eyes. They think that he killed about 30 that way, put two enemy machine guns out of action, and gave the others a chance to pull the wounded into nearby shell holes. Bullets creased his helmet, punctured his canteen, and cut off his rifle belt, but he didn't get down until the rest of them were safely in position. Harry was hit in the leg, but Roy was alright.

Sergeant Frank Tucker, a 30-year-old former salesman, also received the Navy Cross for Roi-Namur. The story

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of the Daring Dozen was picked up in nationwide newspapers and resulted in Silver Star citations for Platoon Sergeant James Adams, 1stLt Reynolds, and Corporal Robbins.

I didn't know any of this until later. I only saw one man run across the clearing, and he was cut down—that was enough. I lay on my back, looking up at a shell-scarred fragment of a tree that stood over our hole, watching the beautiful serene white terns soar over the battlefield—and for the first time, I was really afraid. Afraid of my own motives for staying there. I knew damned well that it was foolish to think of going up, but that didn't matter. Yes, I was afraid, but it was a justifiable fear of a certain death. In the growing dusk I sat and worried—still firing forward, what could I do? We are too disorganized to effect a mass rush. A halftrack passed over our hole on the way up the road, but it is stopped by the sheer force of thousands of rounds from heavy



Marines on Namur Island in the Marshalls display some of the articles they rummaged from Japanese effects including Japanese beer, rifles, and a Samurai sword. These Marines are believed to belong to the comms platoon of 1/24.

machine guns—it backs off. I now admit that I'm afraid, but am no longer ashamed of it, and the halftrack gives me an idea.

When it became quite dark, I woke Imm up. He almost knifed me when I shook him awake—luckily, I called him by name. The firing had quieted down, and we scurried off in the dark to where I thought the command post was to try to arrange to have tanks brought up at dawn. We were challenged many times, often incorrectly—the first time, without thinking, I bawled out "You lug-headed sonofabitch, that's no way to give the password!" Everybody was jittery and trigger happy that night, and the more I sounded like a tough old gunnery sergeant, the more at home they would feel.

I found a phone and called up Battalion

SERGEANT ANDREW ZURICK, USMC



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to tell them what was happening and ask for tanks. Col Dyess [*Aquila James Dyess, battalion commander*] surprised me by saying that the Captain had just radioed in the same dope and the same request. So I woke Imm up (with a long stick) and we headed back. We went by way of the beach around the island to avoid all the trigger-happy boys and were even more worried by the fact that we didn't hear any challenge at all. Only sporadic firing inland now, with 60 mm mortar parachute flares going off at regular intervals, during which we would freeze in whatever positions we happened to be in. Dead bodies everywhere, some lying in the shallow wash inside the coral reef. The island was beginning to smell already.

Back at the company, we found that

they had just moved reinforcements up. The Captain and "Fireball" Stott [*1st Lt Frederic A. Stott, D/1/24*] had placed half a dozen machine guns along our front line, which was about 50 yards from the enemy trenches and pillbox system. There wasn't much action that night. Some Japanese tried to crawl through our lines but didn't get very far. Hoppy got it that night as he was helping to dig in his machine gun.

An unfamiliar lieutenant ordered Hopkins' gun crew to leave their prepared position and redeploy farther forward—against the accepted wisdom not to move after dark. Hopkins was reaching for his carbine when he was shot in the head; mortally wounded, he was taken to the USS Bolivar (APA-34) where he died and

Japanese dead littering a field on Namur, Kwajalein Atoll, and mutilated coconut trees give the island a nightmarish look after Marines invaded the Marshall Islands.

was buried at sea. His death was widely reported in the newspapers in a variety of heroic exploits—however, some veterans insist Hoppy was the victim of friendly fire.

We crawled up to where the Captain was. He thought we were infiltrators, challenged us, but I was pretty deafened by the day's firing and didn't hear him. His runner almost plugged us before we were recognized. He had been on the left flank all day, the wounded had been evacuated, and we were expecting a counter-



A company coming back down the beach just after the battle. The island had been secured 20 minutes earlier. Philip Wood spotted this photo in a March 1944 issue of the *Marine Corps Gazette* and identified his machine gunners at the right edge of the frame.

attack that night. We had been told before we went in to expect it; no matter how hopeless the situation, the enemy would always counterattack to save face and all that. They did it, but it hit our left, in B Company's sector. Wild yelling and all the accoutrements, firecrackers, sword-waving officers who shouted commands in English. B Company was pushed back by the sheer violence of the attack, and they suffered pretty heavy casualties, but their 60 mm mortars saved the day. They fired at a perilously close range but succeeded in breaking up the charge. A damned good weapon—my favorite—if I had enough of them and enough men, I think I could pretty near win this war with them alone.

Approximately one company of Japanese soldiers struck at a gap between B/1/24 and I/3/24 in a fierce 45-minute fight. Company B took severe casualties in this encounter; their 3rd Platoon was "practically wiped out [but] had hundreds



LtCol Aquilla J. Dyess, known as "Jimmie" or "Big Red," commanded 1/24 in action on Namur and led their final attack on foot until killed by a Japanese gunner. He was awarded the Medal of Honor posthumously.

of dead Japanese piled in front of its positions" as Captain Milton G. Cokin later wrote.

At dawn, I crawled back to the guns and sat there with them, cleaned my carbine in the growing light, ate a couple of squares of chocolate—the first food I'd had in 24 hours—drank a little water, the first I'd had in almost a day, and smoked my first cigarette with relish as soon as it was light enough not to show. We fired about a hundred rounds, poured them into the dugouts and pillboxes that had given us so much trouble the day before. We heard screams and groans from where they fell, and it was all we could do to keep from cheering. Our shelling brought return rifle fire, but they were damned poor shots and we finally cut them out of the trees. The tanks finally came up, Col Dyess leading the way on foot. He was fearless to the point of being foolhardy, refused to take cover—even buck privates were yelling at him to get down, but he'd only wave

COURTESY OF GEOFFREY ROECKER

his Tommy gun at them and say he was a lucky Irishman.

That attack broke the back of the resistance. From then on, the Japanese were disorganized and fleeing. When the mortars went out of action, I went up and helped a couple of my machine-gun squads root them out of their dugouts. The mortars had made a slaughterhouse of the area, and then we chased the few remaining enemy up the tank trap, an 8-foot trench that ran around the island just inside the beach.

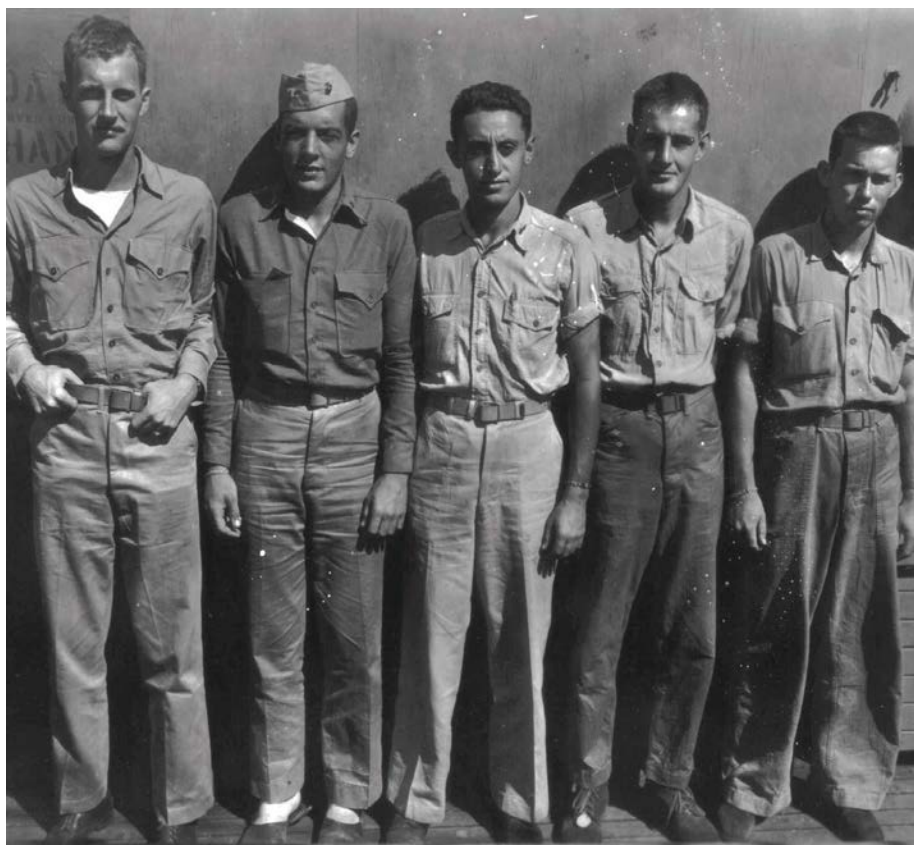
It was like hunting rats. They scurried and scrambled, hid among the bodies of their own dead. There were hundreds of dead, killed by the bombing the day before, lying in the trench, horribly twisted and mangled, headless, bodies laid open to the backbone, small pieces of flesh splattered on the ground, and carcasses so thick that at times we had to walk on them to get by. I remember stepping over a Samurai sword but was too tired to even pick it up. Didn't care. Col Dyess was killed halfway up by a machine gun that they had set up in ambush. Fired at me, I think, but I heard the click of the bolt and hit the deck, and the shots went over me.

Lieutenant Colonel Aquilla "Big Red" Dyess received a Medal of Honor posthumously for Roi-Namur—the only one awarded to a member of 1/24 during World War II. The airfield on Roi was later renamed "Dyess Field" in his honor. He is the only individual to receive both the Medal of Honor and the Carnegie Medal for civilian heroism.

Finally, it was over. We walked back down the beach and assembled in the center of the island and began to find out who was killed. I realized that my face was taut and tired, and it was from pulling my lips tight into a set expression so that the sight of those piled bodies wouldn't show on my face. My platoon found a couple of cases of Japanese beer—they forced five on me, and I promptly got tight—no food and almost no water.

And when the mopping up was over, and the terns were again beginning to show luminous white against the darkening sky, we fell exhausted on the ground. Never have I been so weary, so drained of feeling. I heard that Ted had been killed, and two boys in my platoon. These were merely facts to be noted, not to feel.

Lieutenant Wood's Co A lost three killed or died of wounds, and an additional 23 wounded in action—14 percent of their landing strength. The battalion as a whole suffered 114 casualties (34 KIA, 79 WIA, 3 sick), with the lion's share in Co B.



Officers of A/1/24 aboard SS Robin Wentley after Namur. From left: 1stLt Philip Wood, 1stLt Roy I. Wood Jr. (no relation), Capt Irving Schechter, 1stLt Endecott Osgood and 1stLt David E. Smith. Missing is company XO, 1stLt Harry D. Reynolds Jr., who was WIA.

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We slept, although it wasn't sleep that we needed—just a chance to stretch out in the sun, alone, and do and think of nothing at all.

We had to bury those dead, foul, rotting bodies, dig in defenses, and remove all the duds from the area. We were lucky enough to have left the island before it was bombed. We watched that from the lagoon. It reminded me of the Fourth of July, that time we were on the Boston boat and watched the fireworks along the sound.

And we came back here, to this paradise, to rest, that we might fight as well again.

All my love,
Phil

"It's a letter, not an article," Phil Wood said of his report. "I know I could do a much better job ... telling the tale of the next one." He would not have the chance. On July 5, 1944, Lt Wood was killed in action on Saipan. His close friend, Sergeant Arthur Ervin, fell while attempting a rescue. Sgt Frank Tucker also died on Saipan. Fred Stott and Franklin Robbins later were recipients of the Navy Cross, and both suffered serious wounds on Iwo Jima. William Imm, twice wounded, was discharged as a corporal in 1945. Captain Irving Schechter and Lieutenants Harry Reynolds and Roy Wood ended their careers as highly decorated Marine Corps colonels.

Wood's entire letter collection, and a history of his battalion, can be found online at www.1-24thmarines.com

Author's bio: Geoffrey W. Roecker, a cousin of 1stLt Philip E. Wood Jr., is the author of "Leaving Mac Behind: The Lost Marines of Guadalcanal." He is documenting the history of 1st Battalion, 24th Marines (www.1-24thmarines.com) and advocating for the return of missing Marine Corps personnel (www.missingmarines.com). 🍷