

AN OKINAWA INCIDENT

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Lt. Col. William E. Benedict—I distinctly recall the man and his action as Commander of the 2nd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment of the 1st Marine Division on Okinawa on June 22, 1945.

But reflect with me on the background that led to this eventful day.

I had joined the 2nd Battalion on the island of Pavuvu in November of 1944. They had just returned from the battle for the island of Peleliu under the command of Major Gordon D. Gayle, who was being transferred to Gen. McArthur's headquarters in Hawaii. Gayle, a strict disciplinarian, especially in the rest and training area prior to the battle for Peleliu, was replaced by Col. Benedict. Although Maj. Gayle had been cursed and hated by his men for his rough treatment in the rest and training area, they praised his leadership in the battle for Peleliu.

Lt. Col. Benedict, on the other hand, could not do enough for the men in the training area. We replacements really enjoyed the easy life, though the Peleliu veterans were confused by the soft treatment and easy retraining schedule. So after several practice landings on the long-since secured island of Guadalcanal, we headed for Okinawa, landing on Easter Sunday morning, April 1, 1945.

Sad to say, during the three months of fighting there, Col. Benedict appeared to the Peleliu veterans to be lacking in leadership, especially when compared to Maj. Gayle.

The Japanese forces were put to flight near the middle of June, and on June 22 the 10th Army headquarters or the First Marine Division headquarters called Col. Benedict at 3 p.m. and ordered him to take Hill 81 immediately, since it had just been officially announced that the battle of Okinawa was over and that the island was secured. But the truth was that the island was not secure. Hill 81, directly in front of the 2nd Battalion, was a veritable fortress honeycombed with caves. Some of the best Japanese troops with their supplies had retreated to that last pocket of resistance.

Col. Benedict asked Division headquarters that he be given artillery support immediately and was told that it was not available since infantry had advanced so rapidly that support units could not keep pace.

The Colonel then told headquarters that he would be glad to take the hill if he could in any way have needed artillery support. But to assault that hill without it would cause, as he expressed it, the needless murder of some 50 to 100 Marines and the wounding of no telling how many more, just to justify the premature announcement that Okinawa was secured.

Nevertheless, headquarters repeated their order to him to take the hill immediately.

The Colonel replied that if Hill 81 was to be taken that day without artillery support, someone other than he would have to take it.

Needless to say, Col. Benedict was immediately relieved of his command.

Hill 81 was taken the following morning with ease, with artillery support and with very few losses— but by a new commanding officer, Major Washburn. With that action Okinawa was in fact secured, though one day later than the official

announcement.

A month or so later, after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Japanese surrendered, and our battalion went to Peiping, China, ostensibly to help Chiang Kai-shek take the surrender of the Japanese there. After some two months I came home to Wickliffe, Kentucky, and was discharged in March 1946. Five years later I was working as a printer for the *Cairo Evening Citizen*, in Illinois, across the Ohio River from my home in Kentucky.

But what about Col. Benedict? I am not entirely sure, but I have continued my after-war life story in order to let you know what I have found out after leaving the Marines.

In 1951, while I was working at Cairo, Senator Paul Douglas of Illinois visited the newspaper, and I asked him about Col. Benedict.

During the war Sen. Douglas had resigned from the Senate, volunteered for the Marines, served as legal officer of the 1st Marine Division, and was wounded *five* times on Okinawa. He was an old man when he went in and was supposed to stay out of combat, but they couldn't keep him off the front lines.

Sen. Douglas and Col. Benedict, both from Chicago, had been friends before the war. Douglas knew the Colonel was a heavy drinker and had led a rather boisterous life.

The senator told me that day in 1951 that the Colonel was presently in a rehabilitation home, a physical and mental wreck.

That is the last word I have had of Col. Benedict, 42 years ago.

But that is not the last thought I have had of him. I still wonder, and am ashamed that I have not tried to find out, the following: Was he court marshalled for disobeying orders? Was he given a dishonorable discharge? Did he die in disgrace? Did he die a lonely man?

I know that I need to say something in his behalf. To me it is more important to save the lives of your men than it is to obey foolish military orders that were a mistake or at least unnecessary. May his Maker say to him, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

If they have not done so, the 1st Marine Division should publish all the truth of what happened concerning Col. Benedict on that day in June 1945.

