Call Me No Hero

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CHAPTER ONE

Just a Quiet Little Town

"Monticello is another of the interesting communities you should visit while you are in Florida."
— 1930's Monticello advertisement

November 17, 1929

Captain Theodore "Teddy" Sledge felt the cold steel of the gun's barrel as it was shoved roughly into his ribs.

"Move over and keep your hands high!" came the imperious command. Theodore obediently slid to the center of the car's front seat as the gunman leaped into the vehicle, commandeering the wheel. Crammed against his right shoulder, Teddy's sister Jerry sat in stunned silence as a second man slipped quietly into the back seat of the car. The gunman drove the vehicle back onto the highway and swerved quickly down a side road in the gathering darkness.

Everything had happened so quickly that it was difficult to piece it all together. Only a moment ago, Teddy and his sister had been driving peacefully down State Highway No. 1, the main road leading from Tallahassee to the little town of Monticello.[1] Sledge, an Army captain stationed in Atlanta, Georgia, was spending the weekend with his brother Lamar and his family in Monticello. On their way to his brother's house, Teddy had thought nothing of the car approaching him from behind, framed in the waning light of the setting sun. The vehicle was soon only a car's length behind them, and pulled into the opposite lane as though to pass. As it came abreast of his car, however, the mysterious strangers swerved violently to the right, forcing Sledge's vehicle off the road.

Teddy had brought his car to an abrupt halt along the road's uneven shoulder, but before he had a chance to realize what was happening, two

1. Present-day Highway 90.

men had leapt from the menacing vehicle and were standing, one at each window of Sledge's car. The loaded gun had quickly made the strangers' intentions clear, and as the twilight increased about him, Teddy—with his hands still held high—exchanged glances with his sister Jerry as they both wondered where they were being taken.

They hadn't long to wonder. After driving a mile down the dirt road, the man behind the wheel stopped the car.

"Get out," he said as his accomplice slipped from the back seat. Teddy and Jerry did as they were told and were searched for valuables. Captain Sledge had forty dollars on him which was quickly pocketed by the thieves. His pocket watch was also found and taken. Teddy wore a second watch on his wrist, a beautiful timepiece presented to him at the end of the Great War in honor of his services. When the robbers recognized the personal nature of the watch, they returned it to the Captain, satisfying themselves with what they had already taken.

After Sledge had been searched, the men turned to his sister. Jerry had twenty dollars in a small purse, which she had hitherto been successful in concealing in the palm of her hand.

"Where are your rings?" the men asked.

"I don't have any," Miss Jerry replied.

"Let me see your hands." Jerry obediently lifted her hands for inspection—one at a time. While doing so, she kept her small purse cleverly hidden in the other hand. She deftly switched the purse from hand to hand as needed and the men concluded their inspection without discovering the purse's existence.

When the search had been completed, the man with the gun ordered the Sledges to continue walking down the road without looking back. In a gentlemanly manner he assured Captain Sledge that his car would be left along the main highway where he had been forced off the road. Teddy and his sister turned their backs while the robbers made their escape. They then walked the mile back to State Highway 1, where their car was waiting with two flat tires.[2]

The tale of the Sledge holdup made headline news the following week in the local Monticello paper. Featured prominently on the front page of the *Monticello News*, the inhabitants of the sleepy town read the startling account and wondered where the world was headed. With the October stock market crash less than a month old and such armed

2. *Monticello News*, November 22, 1929, page 1.

robberies occurring right outside the city limits, it appeared to the paper's readers that the nation might truly be falling apart at the seams.

But, at the end of the day, the readers mused, perhaps it wasn't such a big deal after all. Hadn't the local Monticello community always looked a little askance at Wall Street? Anybody imprudent enough to invest in such a hazardous business ought to be prepared to enjoy its concomitant troubles, they opined. And surely these local robberies cropping up were merely the broadening ripples of that big city disaster. Give it a little time, they advised, and the world would be back to normal. In the meantime, the paper's readers turned their attention to the next front-page article to find out which talented housewife had taken the blue ribbon for the best pickles in the county fair.

Situated in beautiful Jefferson County along the panhandle in north Florida, the city of Monticello had received its name from President Jefferson's famed home in Virginia (though in this southern latitude the name was pronounced *Montisello*).[3] Home of the county seat, the town's two main streets (Washington and Jefferson) were laid out in the form of a cross, at the conjunction of which the courthouse was located, rising majestically over the quiet streets and dirt roads of the little city and adding a touch of elegance to the otherwise rural landscape.

Though small, little Monticello was by no means insignificant. The county's rich and well-watered soil had proved ideal for agrarian pursuits and even in the 1920's the town was renowned for its produce, particularly its pecans and watermelons. Boasting thousands of acres of watermelons in 1929, Monticello farmers packed and shipped their seeds across the nation and around the globe.[4] Indeed, so popular were the county's seeds that they were soon being shipped to almost a dozen countries worldwide, including Germany, Russia, and Japan.[5]

Though enjoying a worldwide market, Monticello's dusty roads and serene church bells pealing through the quiet country air reminded the occasional passerby that the town aspired to be nothing more than an unpretentious collection of dairymen, farmers, and merchants, just as its citizens preferred.

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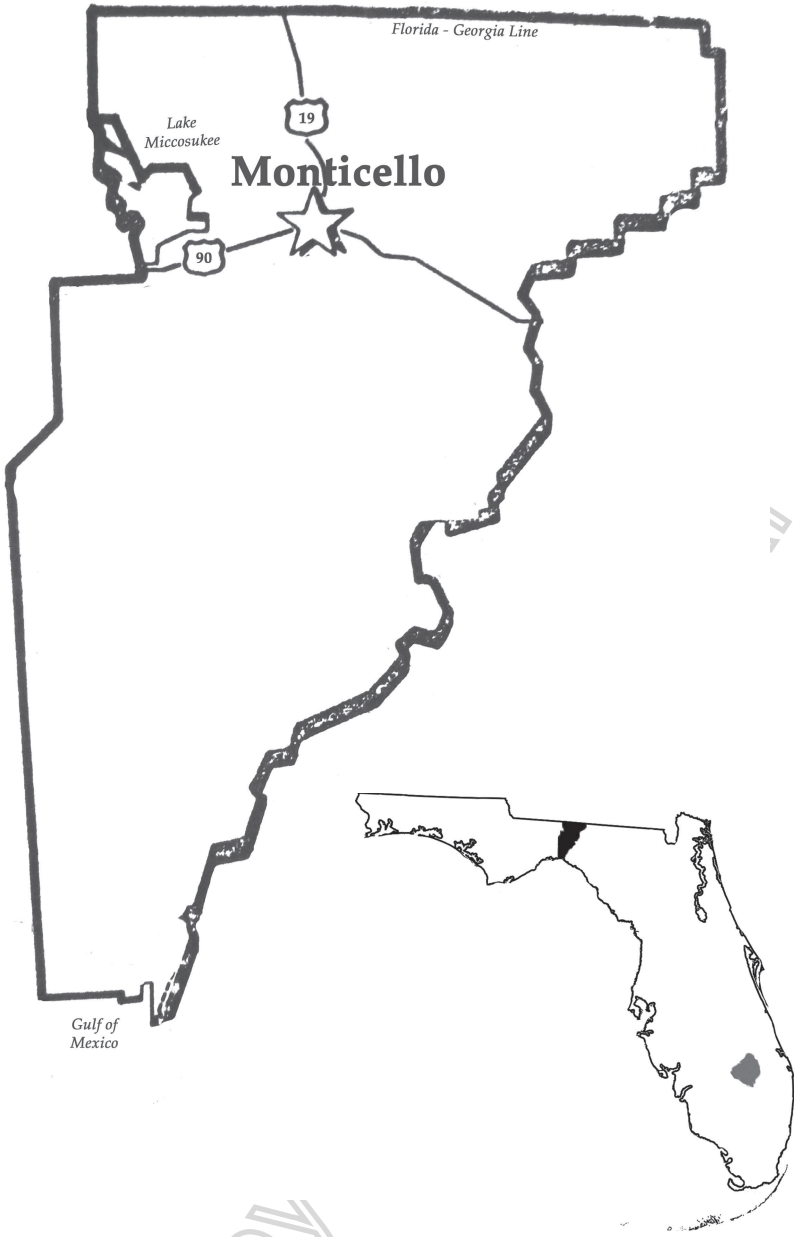
3. McRory, Mary Oakley, and Edith Clarke Barrows, *History of Jefferson County* (Monticello, Florida, 1958), page 9.
4. Jerrell H. Shofner, *History of Jefferson County* (Sentry Press, Tallahassee, 1976), page 514.
5. *Ibid.,* page 540.

Jefferson County



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Men In Deed

"My little children,
let us not love in word,
neither in tongue;
but in deed and in truth."
— I John 3:18

"I'll tell you . . . the most intense, the most effective weapon that I had in my company was not a flamethrower, not a rifle, not a machine gun. It wasn't a tank. It was the individual [Marine], the spirit of bravery, of patriotism, the belief in himself and his fellow Marines. That individual Marine is what made us win on Iwo Jima."
— Lieutenant General Lawrence Snowden

The attack on Suribachi was scheduled to begin at 8:25 A.M. About an hour beforehand, Sergeant Thomas moved from crater to crater to alert the men in his platoon of the coming advance, and to inform them that a pre-attack bombardment would begin shortly. He was also able to assure the men that their movements would be assisted by tanks.

On that crisp morning, the Third Platoon readied themselves for what might be their final charge as their company headquarters called in an air strike. Forty planes, lifting from the decks of the naval carriers in the fleet offshore, flew low over the mountain, dropping bombs and rockets at its base. Where possible, the aircrafts strafed within one hundred yards of the Marine front lines in an effort to dislodge the Japanese waiting safely in their underground fortresses.

While the airstrike continued, the men waited expectantly for the

tank support that would cover their attack, but the desperately-needed support never materialized. Having left the front lines the night before in order to rearm and refuel, the tanks had not finished their tasks by the coming of dawn. Captain Dave Severance, recognizing the vital necessity of tank support, postponed the attack in hopes that the tanks would arrive. "H-hour was delayed while we waited for the tanks," he recalled, but noted, "When they didn't show up by about 9:00 A.M., we were ordered to advance without them."[1]

Wells received the order to advance, and knew that no support was available to them. Looking forward across the two hundred-yard-span of open, naked ground covered by machine gun fire and countless invisible enemy emplacements, he thought the attack near suicidal and could not bring himself to call his men forward. Instead, he simply clambered out of his shell hole, silently raised his weapon, and charged the base of Suribachi. "Never did I feel so alone in my life," he remembered:

> The urge to look back to see if anybody was coming was strong, but I fought it off. What I would do when I got to the enemy, I had no idea except to attack something.[2]

As Wells led the charge, his platoon rose silently from their craters and dashed after him. Thomas raced forward ahead of his men to drag the barbed wire out of the way of the coming Marines. Behind him the men came on, courageously following their leaders. The danger was imminent—even more so than the men realized. Boots later described the moment:

> First, we had to pull out some barbed entanglements to get through. What we didn't know, because we couldn't see them, was three or four pillboxes within twenty or thirty yards of the wire.[3]

Despite the proximity of the Japanese defense positions, during the first few moments of the Third Platoon's dash the menacing Suribachi remained silent. But, as the Marines neared its line of defenses, the mountain suddenly appeared to explode as the air filled with machine

1. Quoted in Albee and Freeman, *Shadow of Suribachi*, page 26.
2. Wells, *Give Me Fifty Marines*, page 213.
3. Quoted in the *Charleston Gazette* (Charleston, West Virginia), February 27, 1945, page 5.

gun and rifle fire. Bullets whipped past the advancing men while mortars arched overhead and landed with earth-shattering explosions.

Private First Class Raymond Strahm was the platoon's first casualty that morning as a piece of shrapnel sliced through his helmet, entering his head above his right ear. Though wounded, his injury would not prove fatal. Private First Class Robert Blevins dropped next, wounded in the leg. Still the men ran on. A mortar exploded a moment later, killing Corporal Edward Romero. Richard Wheeler was the next to fall when two mortars exploded, seriously wounding him and killing another member of the platoon.

Despite the casualties, the platoon pressed ever forward, and soon Wells and Thomas, accompanied by Donald Ruhl and "Hank" Hansen, reached the lines of defenses skirting the mountain's base. Before them a mammoth blockhouse stood to their right and a pillbox to their left, between which a trench ran, connecting the two defenses. Ruhl and Hansen raced to the trench, intending to use it as a temporary cover. They stopped in surprise at its edge, however, when they found it crowded with Japanese soldiers. The Japanese, as astonished as the Americans, dashed for cover while the Marines opened fire. The retreating Japanese hastened down the trench toward a bend in the ditch, letting fly a grenade as they did so. It landed between the two Marines. Ruhl saw it first, and with a cry of "Look out, Hank!" he threw himself upon the grenade. It exploded a second later, killing Ruhl instantly.

No time could be taken to mourn Ruhl's death. Wells immediately ordered Sergeant Snyder forward to hurl grenades into the fleeing Japanese while Robeson and Adrian opened fire with their Browning rifles. Snyder quickly expended his stock of grenades, and Wells threw his own to the sergeant.[4]

With the action which fiercely engaged them, the platoon was quickly running out of ammo, and Wells sent Corporal Wayne Hathaway and Edward Krisik back to headquarters to retrieve more ammunition, charges, and grenades. The desperately-needed munitions did not arrive, however; both men were mortally wounded on the way back for supplies, and never returned to the front.

As the two Marines began their unsuccessful journey to the rear, mortars continued to explode among the Third Platoon, and the chatter of machine gun fire filled the air. The deadly weapons could not long

4. Wells, *Give Me Fifty Marines*, page 216.

continue without achieving their intended effects, and Louie Adrian, while firing upon the Japanese within the trench, soon fell dead, shot through the heart.

The small platoon, receiving fire from the trench before them as well as from the blockhouse and other enemy emplacements to their right, was in a dire situation. Wells and Thomas looked anxiously about them to find the location of Company I, which ought to have been covering their right flank. Though straining to peer through the hailstorm of bullets and mortars, the company was not to be seen.

When Company I could not be found, Sergeant Thomas, recognizing the peril of leaving their right flank unprotected, volunteered to return to lead the men forward. Reluctantly Wells agreed, stating:

> I did not want Thomas to go, but we were running out of everything fast, including men. He knew "I" Company needed to be hooked into our line, and with their help, the enemy flanking fire would stop. The job needed to be done, and if anybody could do it, Thomas could.[5]

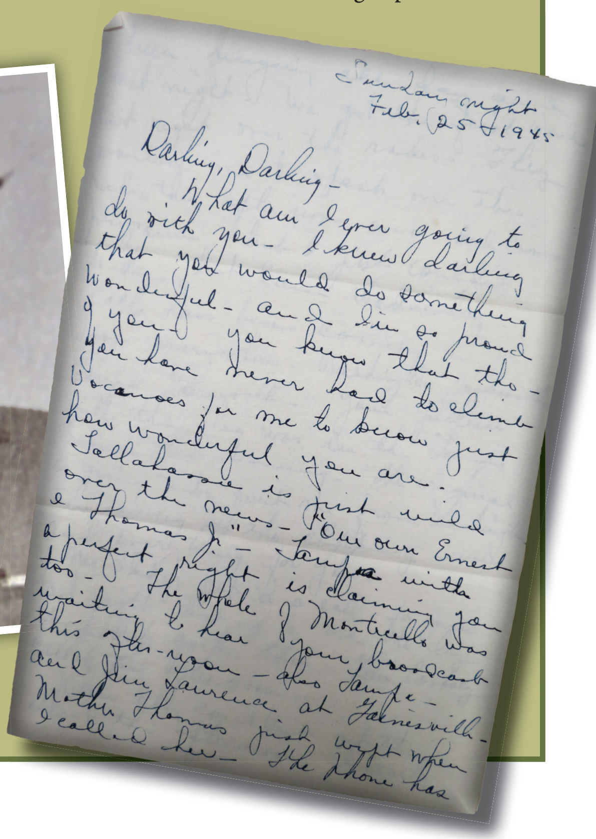
As Thomas raced back across the open ground to bring Company I forward, shots and shells continued to pound the Third Platoon, causing numerous casualties. Boots noted that, during that morning, "we lost 17 men out of 46."[6]

On the front lines the battle raged with deadly results. The storm of bullets and mortars persisted unmercifully, and the platoon's commander would be the next casualty. Wells, taking temporary refuge in a bomb crater to report via telephone to Captain Severance, had just finished his call when a mortar landed directly behind him. In the shell hole with him were Corporals Bob Lane and Everett Lavelle and Privates Richard White and William Wayne, all of whom were wounded by the direct hit. Corpsman Bradley quickly dressed the men's wounds, and advised Wells—who had received deep leg injuries—to return to an aid station behind the lines for evacuation. Despite Bradley's recommendations, Wells refused to leave his command, and continued directing the platoon.

A moment of joy was found when the battered men at the front were joined by Chuck Lindberg and Robert Goode, the platoon's

5. *Ibid.,* page 217.
6. Quoted in the *Charleston Gazette,* February 27, 1945, page 5.

Gen. Smith and Plt. Sgt. Thomas aboard Admiral Turner's flagship



Sunday night
Feb. 25 1945

Darling, Darling -
What am I ever going to do with you - I knew darling that you would do something wonderful - and I'm so proud of you - you know that tho - You have never had to climb volcanoes for me to know just how wonderful you are.
Tallahassee is just wild over the news - "Our own Ernest Thomas Jr." - Tampa with a perfect right is claiming you too - The whole of Monticello was waiting to hear your broadcast this after-noon - also Tampa - and Jim Lawrence at Gainesville - Mother Thomas just wept when I called her - The phone has

Martha Thomas' letter of February 25, 1945

APPENDIX ONE

Navy Cross Citation and UDC Military Service Cross

In May of 1946, during Tallahassee's observance of Confederate Memorial Day, the Daughters of the Confederacy presented Mrs. Martha Thomas Bryan with the UDC Military Service Cross which had been posthumously awarded to her son.[1] Tallahassee's local paper explained Boots' qualifications for this honor: "The recipient [of the UDC Cross] must have served honorably in the armed forces of his country and be a lineal descendant of a Confederate veteran. Sergeant Thomas' great grandfather, James Lafferty Turrentine, served as a private in Company G, 48th Alabama Infantry, CSA."[2]

The month following this presentation, Martha Thomas Bryan was invited to the Naval Air Training Station in Pensacola, Florida, where she was presented with the Navy Cross posthumously awarded to her son for the heroism he displayed while leading his men against the Japanese forces entrenched around the base of Mt. Suribachi. The medal was presented by Colonel E. J. Farrell, USMC. The citation reads:

> The President of the United States of America takes pride in presenting the Navy Cross (posthumously) to Platoon Sergeant Ernest Ivy Thomas, Jr., United States Marine Corps Reserve, for extraordinary heroism as a Rifle Platoon Leader serving with Company E, Second Battalion, Twenty-Eighth Marines, Fifth Marine Division, during action on enemy Japanese-held Iwo Jima, Volcano Islands, 21 February 1945.

1. *The Monticello News*, February 23, 1978.
2. *The Daily Democrat*, May 1946.

When his platoon leader was wounded, Platoon Sergeant Thomas assumed command and, before supporting tanks arrived to cover him, led his men in an assault on a fanatically defended and heavily fortified sector at the base of Mount Suribachi.

With the tanks unable to proceed over the rough terrain beyond positions seventy-five to one hundred yards at the rear of our attacking forces, Platoon Sergeant Thomas ran repeatedly to the nearest tank and, in a position exposed to heavy and accurate machine-gun and mortar barrages, directed the fire of the tanks against the Japanese pillboxes which were retarding his platoon's advance.

After each trip to the tanks, he returned to his men and led them in assaulting and neutralizing enemy emplacements, continuing to advance against the Japanese with a knife as his only weapon after the destruction of his rifle by hostile fire. Under his aggressive leadership, the platoon killed all the enemy in the sector and contributed materially to the eventual capture of Mount Suribachi.

His daring initiative, fearless leadership and unwavering devotion to duty were inspiring to those with whom he served and reflect the highest credit upon Platoon Sergeant Thomas and the United States Naval Service.