

The Right Kind of War

John McCormick

Naval Institute Press Annapolis, Maryland

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Annapolis, Maryland

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McCormick, John
The right kind of war / John McCormick.

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p. cm.

ISBN 1-55750-574-8

1. World War, 1939-1945—Campaigns—Pacific Area—Fiction.
I. Title.

PS3563.C34456R54

1992

92-19546

813'.54—dc20

CIP

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper @

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3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

First printing

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For the strawberry blonde

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At the Point

We took turns at the point. In the jungles of the northern Solomons, the underbrush was so dense, the vines and creepers and lianas and bamboo thickets so unyielding, that the Marine Raider in the lead, the man at the point, slashing his way with a machete, was soon worn down. Every five or ten minutes, as we shoved through the thick jungle single file at three-yard intervals, the second man in line moved forward to relieve the point man of his place and his machete; and, already breathing a little easier, the first man dropped back to the end of the file.

There was a second, more compelling reason to take turns at the point. In those occasional murderous sparring matches that erupted in the jungle, the Japanese—if they spotted us before we spotted them—would invariably shoot our point man first. It was a grim business, a Marine Raider game of Russian roulette. Yet it was a duty from which no man in a patrol excused himself. When it came to taking risks, all Raiders, officers or enlisted, were equal. Whether resolute or fearful, energetic or weary, each Raider, when his turn came, moved up to take the point.

In battle too, we shared the burden. For the 4th Raider Battalion that burden began in July 1943, when we wiped out the Japanese on the island of Vangunu, two hundred miles north of Guadalcanal. We then moved on to eliminate the enemy's small garrison at Viru Harbor. Convinced that we had done well in our first combat experience, our leaders sent a flotilla of destroyers to

ferry us to a rest camp on Guadalcanal. But only a few days later we were back in action. The 1st Raider Battalion, under strength because of heavy losses the year before in the fighting on Tulagi and Guadalcanal, had been stopped by the enemy during an attack near Bairoko Harbor in northern New Georgia. Sent north to help them out, we hurried to a ridge a few miles south of Bairoko and bivouacked several days while waiting for a battalion from the Army's 37th Division to join us. While we waited we sent out patrols each day, in every direction. Some patrols encountered the Japanese, and we lost more point men.

As a tommy gunner in the 3d Squad, 3d Platoon, of Dog Company, I was frequently invited to volunteer for jungle patrols and had frequent opportunities to take the point. My luck had been good. But there were men in our platoon whose luck had run out. Swede Meyer, late one afternoon, had just taken the point when he blundered into an unexpected clearing and caught three slugs in the chest from a Nambu machine gun. We lost Jerry Cramden at the point the next day to a Jap sniper and a .25-caliber bullet through the head. Other platoons had their losses too, light losses, perhaps, in the larger scheme of things. But the prospect of taking the point each day, even for just a few minutes several times during a patrol, became so nerve-racking that we looked forward to the time when we could make a frontal assault on Bairoko and get the whole deadly business over with.

Not only were the patrols deadly, they were a source of considerable irritation as well. Why, we asked each other, did the Japs insist on shooting the point man first? The proper and practical way for them to conduct an ambush, to kill the most Marines, was to let the point man pass by along with perhaps a half dozen others before attacking. But when the Japs shot the point man first, the rest of the men in the patrol scattered, formed a skirmish line, and fired back with rifles and machine guns. All that firepower whining and crackling and ricocheting through the underbrush gave the enemy something to think hard about; and very often they retreated in a hurry.

The fourth morning of the battalion's wearisome wait near Bairoko, Captain McNail, our company commander, sent the 3d Squad on a dawn patrol into the mangrove swamps below the ridge where, the afternoon before, a C Company patrol had traded shots with a platoon or so of Japanese. If the Japs were still down there, we were to surprise them and treat them, as McNail put it, "to a breakfast of hot lead."

Not as enthusiastic about the assignment as Captain McNail, we pushed through three or four tension-filled miles of jungle and swamp without running into anything more dangerous than the usual mosquitoes, land crabs, and flies. By late morning, safe, sound, and much relieved, we were back at the bivouac. While most of the guys in the patrol dug out what rations were left in their packs, I went off to ask our corpsman what could be done about the jungle rot on my legs. In a half dozen places on my ankles and shins, deep, ugly, and painful abscesses had developed, each about the diameter of a quarter. The worst one was on my right ankle, just where the top of my shoe made contact. After swabbing the affected areas with something that looked, smelled, and stung like iodine, the corpsman pronounced me in excellent health and fit to return to immediate duty.

As I slung my tommy gun and drifted back toward the 3d Squad foxholes, I ran into Bill Werden, a friend from boot-camp days. The only men in our sixty-man boot-camp platoon to volunteer for the Raiders, he and I had gone up to Camp Pendleton together and had been good friends ever since. Not long after becoming a Raider, Werden had joined the Scouts and Snipers Platoon and had adapted so readily that he was now considered the most skillful reconnaissance man in the battalion.

"Moe!" he said. "Just the guy I'm looking for. I need one more tommy gunner for a ten-man patrol Colonel Maxim wants me to take out."

"What?" I said. "Goddamn, Bill, why me? There're seven hundred other Raiders been sitting on their asses around here all morning."

"Two reasons," said Werden. "You can shoot straight, and you ain't ever had malaria."

I understood the first reason. I could shoot so straight that the Marine Corps, in what was for it an unusually generous policy, paid me, and all other expert riflemen, an extra five dollars a month.

"What's this shit about malaria?" I asked. Although 90 percent of the 4th Raiders were either suffering from malaria or, their bones aching with fever and their ears ringing from quinine, were just recovering from it, I was apparently immune, and so was Werden.

"We ain't taking any malaria people on this trip," he said. "They'd fall out before we got two miles."

I jerked up my dungarees and revealed the jungle rot. "I ain't got malaria," I said, "but look at these beauties."

Werden gave the ugly ulcers a scornful glance. "Hell, Moe," he said. "That ain't nothing. The sting will only make you run faster."

I tried one more time. "I just got off patrol," I said. "Been out since first light."

Werden laughed. "That's good news. You'll be all wound up and ready to run." He paused a minute. "Your tommy gun will give us five submachine guns, three BARs, and two M-1s. With all that firepower, we can take on the whole Jap army."

I wasn't so sure we could take on the Jap army or even a Jap platoon, but I had used up all my arguments.

"Where're we running?"

"Not far," he said. "A few miles along the ridge."

The crude maps that had been issued to our battalion showed that the ridge where we were camped rose about two hundred feet above the surrounding mangrove swamps and ran straight east for two or three miles before curving south toward the big Japanese base at Munda.

"Yesterday afternoon I found a native trail a couple of miles east," Werden went on. "Colonel Maxim wants us to follow it toward Munda for maybe ten miles. The Japs down there are supposed to be getting ready to move toward Bairoko. They've proba-

bly already discovered the south end of the trail." He paused and looked at my tommy gun.

"You got ammunition for that thing?"

"Eleven clips," I said. "Two hundred twenty rounds."

"Grenades?"

"Two in my pack."

"Get your ass in gear and find six more. We leave here in ten minutes."

The ulcers on my ankles forgotten, I hurried off to borrow six grenades and to tell Don Floyd, our platoon leader, that I had been shanghaied for a combat patrol. Then I trotted back to the big banyan at the south side of camp where Werden and the rest of his volunteers were gathering.

"OK," Werden was saying, "single file, three-yard intervals. I'll take the point."

No one said anything. It was understood that when Bill Werden led a patrol, he took the point and kept it. Even in the trackless rain forests, Werden seemed to know instinctively the path of least resistance. And whether in deep jungle or on a narrow trail, he could smell out a Jap ambush. In fact, Werden had been put ashore from a submarine weeks before either the 1st or 4th Raider battalions landed on the island and had scouted the entire area from Segi Point to Munda and north to Bairoko.

Now he glanced at his GI watch. "Colonel Maxim said to take off at high noon. We got five minutes."

As we milled around waiting for the last few minutes to tick by, I noticed for the first time that Werden had a sheathed samurai sword fastened to his pack. I pointed to it. "Where'd that blade spring from, Bill?"

Werden grinned. "Borrowed it from a Jap major at Enogai," he said. "He ain't going to need it no more." He looked at his watch again. "Let's go," he said, "before Colonel Maxim gets itchy and calls off the game."

Off we went through the light undergrowth along the ridge until, about two miles east, we hit a narrow trail. On that trail we

moved fast: a hundred yards at a rapid trot Marines call double time; the second hundred at a fast-paced walk; the third hundred at double time again; the fourth at that quick walk; and so on for mile after mile. It was the way of the Raiders, a pace that required much stamina but ate up the miles.

At times only a trace through the trees, at others perhaps a yard wide, the trail held to the ridge line, curving here and there with the natural contours of that rough land but heading generally east until, about five miles out, the ridge took a sudden swing to the south. Here we stopped for a short breather. So far, of the Japs, we had seen and heard nothing.

As we rested, Werden scouted ahead before returning in a few minutes with a brief admonition. "Cut the pace to a steady walk," he said. "I'm going on alone for a couple of miles. No need to worry about an ambush. If there's one up ahead, I'll know it before they see me. Give me ten minutes and then come on." He gave us a half wave and took off up the trail on the run. An hour later, still moving steadily south, we rounded a turn in the trail, and there stood Bill Werden.

"Whoa," he said in a low voice. "Company's coming. Jap patrol. They'll be here in about twenty minutes. We got to get ready for them in a hurry."

"Damn!" said Jim Akers, who in Werden's absence had taken the point. "How many?"

"Fifteen, maybe twenty," said Werden. "We'll stop them right here." He pointed to the jungle on one side of the trail. "Good cover in that stuff. Get in there and spread out about three yards apart. Moe, you stick with me."

As our eight comrades eased into the jungle, I followed Werden for a few yards back up the trail, the way we had come, to the spot where it made its sudden turn left.

"There's got to be a way to make their point man stop right here," said Werden. "Right here at this turn in the trail."

I knew what was going through Werden's mind. If the leader of the Jap patrol stopped, the entire patrol would also stop, and,

waiting in our ambush, we would be provided with fixed, not moving targets.

Werden stood there puzzling it out for just a few seconds and suddenly smiled. "Moe," he said, "pull that samurai sword out of there."

Beginning to guess his plan, I seized the hilt and pulled it free of its sheath. For a moment I held that sword and admired it—the long, razor-sharp, shining blade, the slight, artistic curve, the perfect balance.

"Let's have it," said Werden. He took it, held and admired it also a few seconds, and then, just beyond the turn of the trail, plunged its point into the ground. It quivered there, three feet long, a shaft of sunlight streaming through the high jungle canopy flickering off the naked blade.

"There!" said Werden. "That will stop any man in the Jap army. The bastards love those blades more than they love their mothers."

He went quickly back down the trail, peering into the jungle where our men were hidden.

"Good," he said in a voice just loud enough for all to hear. "They won't see you till it's too late. Get those safeties off your weapons. When I whistle, spray the bastards in front of you. Give 'em the whole clip. Don't stop shooting just because they go down. Put in another clip and blast 'em again."

He turned and came rapidly toward me. I had already backed into a thicket of canes and vines. He shoved in a yard or two to my left. "I'll take the lead man, Moe," he said softly, "and the two right behind him. You spray on down the line."

In silence we waited, hearing for a long ten minutes only the rustle of leaves and the steady buzzing of flies. Then, from some distance down the trail, the sound of approaching footsteps—heavy, rapid, emphatic—until, like some pack of jungle animals, the Japs were there.

They were moving fast, those men of that Japanese patrol—not running but walking rapidly and purposefully, close together and single file. These were not the usual run of Japanese troops we had

met and disposed of at Vangunu and Viru. These men were different. They were older, their uniforms a kind of dirty khaki, their leggings old-fashioned and wrapped. Their shoes were not the rubber-soled, split-toed kind, but heavy and hobnailed. Their helmets, more like those of Japanese paratroopers than those of the regular Army rank and file, were clamped tightly on their heads.

They were heavily armed. Three of them carried Nambu light machine guns, each man holding the long, black, ring-grooved barrel in one hand, the butts balanced on their right shoulders. Three men, in addition to their rifles, carried the small but deadly knee mortars; two, right behind the leader, were armed with short-barreled submachine guns of a type I had not seen among Japanese troops before. Every man had, stuck in his belt, three or four grenades that looked like German potato mashers.

They were, all of them, hard-faced, tough, disciplined, determined. It was evident in the way each rifleman carried his weapon, not loosely and carelessly slung, but gripped tightly in one hand and with a long bayonet fixed in place. These men were veterans, professionals, warriors—the samurai. They had bunched up a little there on that narrow trail, hastening to keep up with their grim leader.

That leader: stocky, powerful, heavy-featured—pistol ready in his right hand, samurai sword swinging at his side. Wearing a look of perpetual anger and pride and hate, he pounded along looking neither right nor left, rounded the bend in the trail, and halted as abruptly as if he had run into an impenetrable wall.

"Ka!" His involuntary shout was a loud, husky guttural.

Behind him the whole patrol crashed to a stop, piling into and overrunning one another, the man immediately in front of me nearly driving his bayonet into his comrade just ahead.

Into that momentary chaos on the trail came the sound of Werden's whistle. It was not the whistle of a man whose throat and lips are dry with fear. It was loud, clear, intense. As one man, we reacted—a sudden crash of sound and fury: one hundred rounds of .45-caliber slugs from the tommy guns, sixty rounds of .30-

caliber bullets from the three BARs, sixteen rounds of .30-caliber bullets from the two M-1s. The men of the Jap patrol were slammed on back and side by the force of our lethal blast, nearly all of them dead before they fell, the others catching extra bullets as they crumpled beside the trail.

Our ambush had been a near perfect one. Not quite. A second or so after Werden's whistle, as we fired full bore into the doomed patrol, one more Jap had slid onto the scene. The last man in the patrol, he had apparently gotten a few yards behind and had been running to catch up. Just as we opened fire his momentum took him into the edge of the action. Someone among us had staggered him with a quick shot, but, limping badly, he had dived into the jungle across the trail and disappeared.

Quickly we released our empty clips, rammed new clips into place, and, as the smoke cleared away, examined the bodies on the trail. They were all lifeless, their leader still with that look of hate and anger impressed on his features.

"One got away, Bill," said Jim Akers.

"I saw," said Werden, "I'll get him. You guys search these bastards. Moe, take a look at their point man. He's got a map case." He headed off into the jungle.

Before I tore open the Jap leader's map case, I removed the pistol from the limp fingers of his right hand. It was a beauty. About a .32-caliber, it had a serrated wooden grip and a fine balance. The half loop of the trigger guard was extra large up front, apparently to accommodate a gloved finger. This pistol had been produced for men who fought in colder climes. I held it only a second or two, then put the safety on, released the clip, and stuck clip and pistol into my pack. If we ever got back to Guadalcanal, it would make great trade bait.

About the time I finished searching the leader's map case, I heard off in the jungle the quick rattle of a tommy gun. Werden had finished off the straggler. By then I had also relieved the patrol leader of his samurai sword. He would need it no longer. In a few minutes Werden was back.

He and I and the others in our patrol walked along the line of shattered men making certain that no wounded Jap was left to die alone. Among that first half dozen lying there, where the .45-caliber slugs from the tommy guns had done their deadly work, there was not much blood, not much torn flesh. Along the middle of the line, however, where six or eight men had been hit by the .30-caliber bullets from our three automatic rifles—the BARs—the bodies were badly torn and the trail was slippery with blood. I was already wondering if our old teacher, Gunner Townsend, had not been right all along about the superiority of the BAR.

Now, satisfied that all of the Japs were thoroughly dead, Werden spoke up. "Pull these bastards off into the jungle," he said. "Maybe the Japs will never find them. All they'll know is that they've lost a twenty-man patrol." As we dragged the dead Japanese a few yards off the trail and covered their bodies with branches and leaves, Werden and a couple of others gathered their weapons. Each of us would haul a heavy load on the way back.

When the cleanup job was done and we made ready to head back along the trail, Werden came up to me as I stood beside the samurai sword, still in the fateful spot where he had plunged its point a half hour earlier.

"OK, Moe," he said. "Stick it back in its scabbard. It's done its job." I pulled the sword out of the ground, once again admiring it for a second, and then shoved it into the scabbard hanging from Werden's pack.

"Take the point on the way back, Moe," he said. "I'll scout around to the rear."

I had taken a couple of steps up the trail when there came a sudden command from behind me.

"Wait a minute!" It was Werden. I stopped. He came up to me. "What the hell happened to that Nambu pistol?"

"Hell, I don't know, Bill," I said. "Somebody must have made off with it."

"You bastard, Moe!" Werden was starting to laugh. "I know goddamned well who made off with it." He gave me a sharp rap on

the helmet. "All right. Keep it then! But when you trade it and that sword off to some damned flyboy back on the Canal, I get half the liquor."

Darkness, the total darkness of a jungle night, engulfed us before we were halfway back to the bivouac. We spent the night spread out in the tangled underbrush twenty yards off the trail. Although it was extremely unlikely that the Japanese would surprise us there, we split the watch, half of us always awake, an hour on and an hour off, throughout the long night.

As I sat there cross-legged in the darkness on first watch recalling the events of that violent afternoon, I saw again that Japanese patrol pushing hard along the narrow trail—their grim, fearless leader; their looks of tough, determined, professional pride; their worn weapons and the way they carried them as if each man's rifle or Nambu or knee mortar had become as much a part of him as his leg or his arm.

These men were surely veterans of battle after battle in Manchuria and China, Malaya and Singapore—veterans of hard experience in the business of killing. And an unwelcome, almost annoying thought crept into my mind. Whatever their murderous histories, whatever their killer's intent, they were professionals. It was almost a shame to destroy such men.

Months later I would tell Werden of the fleeting thought that had come to me that night along the Munda trail. He would consider a moment. "The trouble with veterans is they get too sure of themselves. They get to thinking they'll never die. They're setups for surprise."

Next morning we moved out warily with Bill Werden bringing up the rear once again, and since there was now the possibility that we might run into a Jap combat patrol heading our way from Bairoko, the rest of us took turns at the point. By late morning we were back at the bivouac reporting to Colonel Maxim and showing off the weapons we had taken.

We were pleased with ourselves. Especially in those early days and early jungle battles, the Raiders considered themselves the

men at the point for the whole Marine Corps, just as we considered the Marine Corps itself at the point of the great American counterattack up through the central Pacific. For the 4th Raider Battalion, that place at the point had begun in the hills of Camp Pendleton in the fall of 1942.