

Adam McKeown

The Story of Jim Day

You must know that the following is the true story of a Medal of Honor I recently won with the help of a friend.

If you suppose that what you are about to hear is anything less than the truth, then you are a cynic and have lost your taste for heroic deeds. Or else you no longer care to distinguish truth from fiction, which may be a more constructive way of being a cynic. I won't judge. As my accomplice, The Major, continues to toil away in the same Marine Corps where the medal in question was won, the same Marine Corps I left in order to write stories like this one, he is not at liberty say much. I will do the talking.

It is a long story. I have no reason to lie about that. You may even want to read the shorter version of it which appears in the December 1998 edition of *Reader's Digest*, but that story is very different from that one I am about to tell. Mine begins in the summer of 1997. I walked into The Major's office and found him looking glumly at an enormous packet of papers, edges bent, fringed with blue and green tabs, fastened with giant black clips. I recognized at once the abstruse markings on the well-worked-over Headquarters, Marine Corps, routing sheet (yellow and black—the colors with which nature says beware) that told of all the desks over which the thing had passed before arriving at The Major's. The names would mean nothing to you, but believe me when I say the package had visited everyone from the Secretary of the Navy's down to, well, me, Captain Captain: I had seen it the summer before at another office. It was smaller then, but it was still marked "Day" in thick red marker.

So you will not think this coincidence too neat, I should tell you that the United States Marine Corps is an exasperatingly small organization. You run into the same people and things over and over again throughout your career, a fact which I found personally comforting and professionally indispensable. As an officer incapable of remembering acronyms, drill step, names and dates with doctrinal significance, or procedures of any kind, what success I enjoyed in the Marine Corps belonged to my ability to cultivate a network of people willing to talk to me. An adjutant, the junior officer in charge of knowing what is going on and telling everyone about it, I made a point of sitting at my desk as little as possible, and while this arrangement is not unusual for officers, I did more than fritter away my time at the barber shop. Rather, I dropped in on people. I learned names and remembered them, remembered hometowns, sports teams, girlfriends, favorite beers and cigarettes, loves and hates, accents—all the things that amount to intimacy. There was not a shop in the battalion in which I did not know someone, and as an officer's job, when it comes right down to it, is to keep abreast of what enlisted Marines are up to, I considered no knowledge more valuable. If someone won something, stole something, lost something, died, disappeared, or anything else, I could learn the whole story over a cup of coffee. And if there was real trouble, every Marine in the battalion knew at least one person who knew an officer who would try to fix things. The adjutant. I think I was very useful. Wrong-headed adjutants will believe they run battalions, but I did not frequently commit this error. An adjutant is ultimately an attendant lord who functions only as the executive officer wants him to function. Not always a happy arrangement for Captain Captain.

But I think I wander from the story you have agreed to hear. Let me tell you how it ends in case I stray again or forget the important parts. President Clinton hung the Congressional Medal of Honor around the neck of Jim Day on January 20, 1998, nearly fifty-three years after the actions recognized by the award were performed on Okinawa during the long battle for that island. Day was a corporal then but went on to become a major general in the Marine Corps. The President told him "We are profoundly fortunate to count you among our heroes," but Day's story, as Malcolm McConnell's *Reader's Digest* article will tell you, is an especially good one because of how Day's heroism was finally brought to light after so many years and because Day himself passed on just months after receiving the award.

Why don't you take a moment to read Malcolm McConnell's article? It is not vital that you do, but if you are in the periodical room of your library, you should take a look at it. It is an easy read, and it does a better job than this one does of telling war stories.

When The Major dropped the folder marked "Day" into my lap again I was immediately reminded of all that bothered me about it. The paper trail was long and twisted. There had been talk of a Medal of Honor for Jim Day back in 1945, but nobody actually submitted a recommendation after the war, when the story was a matter of personal memory and not hearsay. I say this oversight bothered me, but it did not surprise me. The Marine Corps in which I grew up loses and overlooks things with a rare efficiency. It forgets quickly too. In the time it takes to retire, move somewhere else, get bored, divorce, and drift back to your last duty station full of unlikely sentiments, everyone with whom you worked will have transferred. This is the concomitant to the always-knowing-someone phenomenon. For the same reason you run into people over and over again, the people you know are always leaving, to be forgotten entirely unless they are rediscovered at some other duty station. Most frightening is how these ostensibly opposing phenomena actually cooperate to produce the unsettling impression that nobody is really there at all. I have no doubt that once Jim Day left his unit and the Marine Corps to finish college, his existence as a rifleman on Okinawa was forgotten entirely, or, more properly, it was placed where dreams and childhood sensations are kept until summoned into being by the right word. For this reason, nobody would have thought much about whether or not Jim Day's Medal of Honor recommendation made it through to Washington after the war. That his commanding officer, executive officer, company commander, and platoon commander were all killed during the battle was also a problem.

As I scoured the documents and checked the records, as I pondered what it meant to have one's entire chain of command obliterated, I became increasingly obsessed with the fate of Jim Day's adjutant. He probably perished in anonymity, clipboard in hand, alongside his executive officer, but since there was no record, I held out hope. Adjutants are almost always in charge of award recommendations, or at least they know about them. If the adjutant were yet living he could tell us exactly what happened and, more importantly, whether the documents in our hands were indeed an award recommendation or just a bunch of memories. He could have solved the whole problem, but I could not even find his name. I did, however, learn the identity of Jim Day's personnel officer,

and although a personnel officer is to an adjutant what a census taker is to folk singer, he was alive, and that counted for something.

The personnel officer turned out to be a man in his nineties whose mind was worn down by Alzheimer's disease. Remarkably, though, when I phoned him and asked if he remembered a corporal named Jim Day, his mind traveled back to the languid 1950's. The old man inserted Day into that gray space between memory and fantasy, heard his voice in my own. Captain Captain became young Corporal Day to the remade Chief Warrant Officer of forty, a combat veteran with a handful of children and less than ten years until retirement. His story formed in my mind as he spoke. I saw him at the scuttlebutt dumping out yesterday's coffee, looking up surprised to see me walking through the halls with a check-in sheet. He shook my hand and recounted the events of the intervening five or six years, recalled the battle itself. He pointed above his nearby office door overhung with a sign bearing his name and title in gold upon a scarlet field. He instructed me to drop by if I ever needed anything, anything at all. He told me he would never forget what I did. I thanked him.

But that is getting ahead of things. I did interview many witnesses in order to resubmit Day's award recommendation, but I will say more on that later. What struck me about the old personnel officer's story was how luxurious it must be to have a man like Jim Day in one's memory at all, even if the memory is grafted onto others. My only personal encounter with the history of the Marine Corps came when I laid eyes on the legendary E-tool Smith at an Officers' Club on Okinawa. Smith had taken over as the Commanding General of the Third Marine Division, but his most memorable tour in Asia occurred in Vietnam twenty-five years earlier. Stuck in a fighting hole with the remains of his squad and no ammunition, Smith and his comrades set their e-tools on kill (the e-tool, short for entrenching tool, is a folding shovel that can double as a chopping device, normally for wood, when the blade is positioned perpendicular to the handle). Somehow Smith survived the night, as did the sturdy e-tool, and from that day forward man and shovel were joined in solemn nicknamery. It was after brunch when he rolled into the Lamplighter Room, sat, withdrew a pack of cigarettes from his sock, and smoked. He never said a word.

The reader may have formed some opinions about Captain Captain by now, but it is important in doing so to remember that he was on Jim

Day's side from the very beginning. Captain Captain believed in the big battle and the Marine Corps and all that, only the rules pertaining to the nation's highest honor are very specific, and I was not sure we were following them. The only military decoration governed by law and not policy, a Medal of Honor must be recommended by the Secretary of Defense and approved by the President within five years of the action in question, otherwise the whole package must go through Congress and receive a special waiver of law by law. I argued that the package should go through Congress, not just because the law is designed to prevent high-ranking officers from strong-arming Medals of Honor for their buddies once in a position to do so and not just because the unsigned, undated, copies of whatever we had could only be called an award recommendation in the most generous sense of the term, but because I thought the Congress of the United States of America and the people for whom it spoke might like to know what Jim Day was up to on Okinawa back in 1945. It would have taken considerably more time, but what matters time in the process of immortalizing heroes?

"The Commandant wants to get this done," my boss said. "He's not going to want to hear that."

"So we are to provide the most immediately gratifying rather than the most responsible answer?"

The Major turned anxiously in his chair, the boss smirked. He regarded the tangles and snarls of Captain Capstan as the unfortunate drawbacks of a mostly useful device. "Captain," he would use my name when asking for favors, my pay grade when giving orders, "there has to be a way to show that these documents represent a lost award recommendation, so it's time to stand up, hook-up, and shuffle to the door." He nodded over his nose. "You know the rest."

"Jump right out and shout, Marine Corps?" I did know it. "Aye-aye, sir."

Nothing is so capable of reminding you of where you are as specialized language. I did stand-up, hook-up and, in my own way, shuffle to the door. Besides, proving that something had been lost in the United States Marine Corps seemed an easy enough thing to do. And so I began.

Up every morning in the Okinawa sun, Gonna run, run, run till the runnin's done. From the blurry copies of fifty-year-old carbon paper flimsies with which I had to work, I deduced that Jim Day's troubles began sometime in May of 1945. All trouble in Okinawa, in fact, begins in May, at the

end of the wet season, when the temperature reaches one hundred degrees and remains so, regardless of the time of day or night, for six months. In that salt-stained, coral-dusty blanket of humidity, nothing, not even an I-beam, can survive without a thick coat of paint illegal to use in the contiguous forty-eight states. I do not know what Jim Day looked like that May, but I know that when he raised his arm to volunteer to augment a company preparing for an assault on Sugar Loaf Hill, he was thirsty and, at some point, had taken off his soft cover to let the wind dry the sweat from his hair. The water he drank—or the water he wished for—would have come from a steel barrel and tasted like the heavy petroleum paint protecting it. It would have been the temperature of the air, the temperature of the body.

What Jim Day saw on his Okinawa I do not know either. Today, the demand for space is reclaiming the beach at a dizzying rate. I assume the basic geometry of the island has not changed, though. Like many coral islands, it is squeezed long and thin by ocean currents, and the central ridge rises steeply from the shore plain, which at low tide joins the exposed coral shelves and extends for miles into the sea. From the reefs, the hills climb one or two hundred feet almost straight up and are troubled by dense vegetation, poisonous haboo snakes, and hand-sized cane spiders. Jim Day would have also seen the phantom cuts in the brush along the ridge signifying Japanese machinegun positions.

To see those positions now is unnerving enough. They are still there, though like most traces of the war, they are vanishing, or at least getting buried. While I was on Okinawa, construction of a new tri-modular club (complete with a line-dancing floor) unearthed the body of an anti-something mine. I remember driving past the relic in my disposable car. I only saw its pimply outer curve protruding from the ground, but it reminded me of a Giant Sloth or some such animal with teeth and claws designed for survival in a brutal time far removed from my own. I suppose Jim Day would have been less affected than I. The reefs he saw must have been littered with pieces of shells and bullets and mines. Bodies too. He was probably used to it, or perhaps he was just resigned to it.

But every Marine in every age resigns himself to death. In this regard, if no other, I could relate to Jim Day. The Corps has a fascination with dying that is almost Egyptian in its range and variety. At every formal meal a place setting is turned upside down upon a black cloth to welcome the dead to the table. Most running and marching songs feature a Marine

passing beyond this world into the next. If that chute don't blossom round, I'll be the first one to the ground. I know I'll get to heaven, cause I done my time in hell. There are others. The approach of death is looked upon with a fetishistic eagerness. Marines in their late thirties will proclaim themselves old men and tear up remembering how things used to be. More palpable than anything else is the continuous presence of the illustrious dead. They are the only Marines of whose existence anyone is ever certain, and theirs are the only names never forgotten. Chesty Puller of the five Navy Crosses, Dan Daly who asked those sons of bitches if they wanted to live forever.

Captain Captain's reply to Dan Daly's oft quoted and always implied question was that, yes, he did want to live forever and was that so terribly unreasonable? It was the kind of comment intended to repel those attacks of melancholy that result naturally from so often being around death. A veteran during a time of peace, such as the United States has ever enjoyed, I still lost three friends in four years. Lieutenant Colonel O..., my executive officer (or one of them), whose Cobra helicopter proved as reliable as a government pen. Staff Sergeant W..., whose disposable car crumbled before the unappeasable wrath of a five-ton transport truck and a sleepy driver. And Lieutenant G..., Randy, who in Oklahoma City fulfilled his promise to the Corps, to die when the bombs go off.

It seems I wander again. It is a habit of Captain Captain's, but it proved to be instrumental in the story of this Medal of Honor. The flimsies I had with which to recreate Day's actions, you see, offered precious little in the way of narrative. Each was, literally, a different version of the same (unseen) event as surmised by different people (some unnamed). Day's testimony did not survive, and the only Marine with him during the action was unconscious. I thought about epic tales built upon epic events and then about Captain Captain building his flimsy tale upon flimsies (and why did they have carbon paper and a typewriter on Okinawa during a major offensive? I still cannot imagine what battles actually look like since typewriters and carbon paper are evidently involved in them). I sorted through the fragmentary comments and drew up an account of those three glittering days on Okinawa back in 1945. You may also refer back to Malcolm McConnell's article for clarification on any specific point, but I should tell you that Malcolm McConnell developed his story from Captain Captain's, which went like this:

Day One (morning). Helo Company (as I never really knew the name of Day's company, feel free to chose your favorite from alpha, bravo, charlie—do not pick charlie, as it is overused, delta, echo, foxtrot, gulf, helo—my choice, in memory of my XO, india, juliet—which I would have chosen for another kind of essay, kilo, lima, mike—a boæ, november, oscar, papa—pronounced pa-pa', probably in anticipation of quebec, romeo, sierra, tango, uniform, victor, whiskey, x-ray, yankee, or zulu) was to be the main assault force on a squalid lump of coral inexplicably dubbed Sugar Loaf Hill. They sought augmentees from Ilium Company, from which Idomeneus and Jim Day stoutly volunteered (apparently). Helo Company (reinforced) stepped off.

How they stepped off I cannot imagine. As I have tried to explain, Okinawa looks something like a squashed fedora hat floating in the ocean. From the top of the ridge one has a clear view of the long, exposed coral reefs. I am not Japanese and have no concept of how the world appears from a Japanese perspective, but it seems to me that anyone manning any gun position during any war would be sensitive to the movement of a rifle company toward that position. I do not know how Helo Company (reinforced) got as far as they did walking in the open like that, for God help even the feral pig or tropical bird that wandered between the aiming stakes had Captain Captain's trembling fingers been clutching one of those Japanese guns.

I called a person who was on Okinawa during the battle in order to find out about this "stepping-off" business.

"Hello, this is Captain Calfskin calling from the Pentagon. How are you today, Leatherneck? Good, the reason I am calling, sir, is to check the facts regarding a battle you might have witnessed on Okinawa back in 1945. You know of it? Good."

I never feel so unlike a Marine as when I am talking to men like this Mr. Shepherd, then Sergeant Shepherd, whose voice you are about to hear. He was good. He understood that Captain Captain had no frame of reference for imagining a battle, and he offered what he could, which included, however, nothing that might clarify how Helo Company (reinforced) stepped off.

"Yep, they stepped right off," he said.

"But what about all of those, you know, machineguns?"

"Are you a lawyer?" he asked.

"No." Worse. "An adjutant." Nevertheless.

Day One (evening). The Japanese fired on the assaulting company as it made its way up from the Scemander Plane. Rout and confusion. What was left of the main body returned to the Black Ships, but the part of the wedge Jim Day occupied had advanced further than the rest. They were stuck not behind Japanese lines per se, but they did have a Japanese field of fire to their backs. Slowly the word to withdraw made its way up and down the scattered lines, but it was too late for Jim Day. He sat in a bomb crater with another Marine who was delirious with fever.

That would have been me, I decided, the Captain Captain figure in all this, incapacitated, febrile, a burden.

Day Two. But another issue still vexes me to the point of madness. Did Jim Day sleep that night? There was no one to ask whether he did or did not, or whether he told stories out loud to pass the time. What does one do in the middle of a battle when no guns are fired?

Morning. Day had set up a thirty-caliber machinegun salvaged from a tracked vehicle that had been struck down by one of the sun god's arrows or a perhaps by the bomb that made the crater in which Day sat (the details are especially vague here). He spent much of the night bringing up ammunition from the wreck. At dawn the attack began.

Of the handful of living witnesses to whom Captain Captain spoke, most are clear on the sound of Japanese gunfire in the vicinity of Day's position. The skirmish on the whole occurred in one of those strange interludes of relative quiet that would have made the sound of an isolated firefight so much more frightening. Once the connection between the two—the quiet and the noise—was made, those lonely sounds of guns would go from merely frightening to something I would need a Greek word to express correctly.

Afternoon. Gunfire.

Evening Gunfire, nothing but gunfire.

Anyone familiar with the sound of machineguns—and able to reflect on that sound from a safe distance—finds it a beautiful thing. It is an orchestra not only of varying tempo but also of pitch. Day was on tenor, the thirty, with its solidly metallic na-na-nat, na-na-nat. The Japanese supplied the alto ta-ta-tang of the squad automatic rifles, but their main contribution would have come from Pop-pop-pop-pop-papa san, the fifty-caliber baritone, a weapon so complete it stopped evolving around 1920. The casings alone hold a shot of bourbon, and it is supposed to be an area weapon, not something to be wasted on a point target. That evening, though, Jim Day was both point and area, so he was properly honored

with direct fire from this titanic contraption. The fires did not stop until the morning of the next day.

Day Three. The fighting ended. The Japanese withdrew as another American offensive swept in on the ruins of the first. Day and his comrade were rescued. In the fields of fire in front of his position were counted over one-hundred Japanese soldiers, dead, some within inches of Day's gun barrel. He probably thought he was saving his own life, but he had, in fact, single-handedly held back the Japanese from counterattacking the beachhead.

Day Four. Captain Captain runs the story past Mr. Shepherd in Cleveland who confirms that it must have happened just like that. He calls Augusta, Omaha, and Troy (New York) and receives enthusiastic endorsements for the story's overall probability from the widows and friends of actual witnesses and from those who had heard a similar story recounted by unnamed parties at unspecified points in the past. Captain Captain then strikes the write-up and the statements of witness corroboration upon his boss's desk from whence olives spring forth. He proclaims that those who heard about the unseen events agree that the reconstruction probably departs neither in letter nor in spirit from what presumably took place on Sugar Loaf Hill in 1945. Logic be damned, Captain Captain sings, the flimsies told us the story of heroic deeds in a battle that occurred as a matter of historical record, and so the flimsies must represent an authentic award recommendation. What else could they be? The winds are fair, the seas follow, and smiles are exchanged.

After Jim Day's package was forwarded to the White House for the President's signature, Malcolm McConnell phoned The Major and spoke to him for a few minutes, long enough to conclude that "an Awards Branch investigator found the service records of each witness in the military archives of the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis. And there, in each yellowing folder, lay a carbon copy identical to those in Day's report, corroborating every word."

Jim Day left behind no words to corroborate.

Achilles has his Homer, and Alexander weeps. Oh, Captain Captain, did you really think it was your story to tell?

Some time later I made a call to the widow of the Marine who lay incapacitated beside Jim Day. I cannot explain why I did it. Maybe my conscience spurred me on or maybe I just wanted to make sure everyone

who might have something to say had a chance to say it in a way that was meaningful to them.

The phone rang. An old phone.

“Hella.” An old accent.

“This is Captain Captain, etc.”

“Well, he kept all his records in the upstairs desk drawer but let me look and see.”

Sounds of an old lady trudging away, an upstairs phone (even older) clicking to life, a drawer groaning open, papers shuffling.

“Jim Day. James Day. Day. (Heyday?) Do you see anything like that?”

“Let me see. Hold on.”

A sound. Another voice on another phone.

“Hello.” A younger woman. “Who is this?”

“Me? Captain Captain, etc.” I told her the whole story.

“But mama’s blind. She can’t see anything.”

I asked a question to the voice, the answer to which I knew. Because mama’s country was calling and she was trying to serve, because it brought mama’s husband back to life for a moment, because I was Captain Captain all the way from the Pentagon (etc.), because mama wished she was not blind, because mama needs to believe in the Marine Corps, needs to believe there are Jim Days in bomb craters and Captain Captains reaching back across the decades to pull them out.

Mama took the phone again and said that she did not see anything but that if I left a number she would call back. I left a number. Keep looking, mama.

That night Captain Captain sat up late performing his duty as the officer of the day, contemplating the exposed wires strung across the stuffy room, waiting for the telephone calls from creditors, activists, lawyers, and estranged spouses. This is the Headquarters, United States Marine Corps, duty telephone, after all, the listing you get if you call Washington, D.C. information in a drunken rage and demand to speak to the Marines. But it will end at a few minutes to midnight when the officer of the day must undertake a task so rich in irony that only a French novelist could have dreamt it up. RAISE THE FLAGS ON IWO JIMA. The Daily Routine binder is explicit on this point.

Invariably when one arrives at the Marine Corps Memorial overlooking the city of Washington on the Virginia side a tour bus has just discharged. Without being told to do so, I and the two military police ac-

companying me go into a ceremonial mode. Cigarettes are extinguished, lewd talks curtailed. They carry a box of flags to be flown in somebody's honor over the thirty-foot-high statue of Joe Rosenthal's award winning photograph of Marines raising a flag on Iwo Jima. I tarry with my hands behind my back. The job of the MPs is to hit the bronze representation of the fabled volcanic sands and raise the flags; mine is to mill about smartly on the ground below, displaying my officerly hat and my officerly good teeth, speaking for the Marine Corps if asked to do so. Owing to an accident in the past, the two Marines bring a folding ladder by which to ascend the monument. Still, you will note that in the reenactment I have arranged for you, Captain Captain positions himself so as to catch them should they fall. Behind me, the flash bulbs burst and I hear the misty-eyed murmurs.

"Hey, uh, are you allowed to talk during the ceremony?"

As if on cue I come to life and step down from the monument. "I am."

"My daughter wants to ask you something," says a mother, "Go ahead, ask the man."

"What are you doing?" The little girl points at the monument.

"Well, my love, do you see those Marines busying about at the feet of those redoubtable bronze figures?"

She makes a sound like yes.

"The truth is, they are not paying attention to what they are doing up there, as this is not a real war-ravaged beach but an artist's version of one. I am here to catch them if they slip"

On the monument the MPs attempt to whip free the halyard that has become fouled in Ira Hays' nose. "What is your name?" I ask.

She says it and smiles. "You guys are fantastic," the mother adds.

I agree.

Another voice. "What are you doing?"

"Why, I am raising the flag on Iwo Jima, as you can see."

"You know, my brother was a Marine. Can anyone get a flag flown here? Or just special people? It would mean the world to him."

"The world? The whole world?" He stares widely at me as I ascend the steps of the monument and look down upon him. "If this fantasy would mean the whole world to your brother then who am I to deny him?" I hand the man a card. "Call this number." He takes it. "You have to buy your own flag."

"You guys are super. Semper fi."

Same to you.

The two Marines laugh and teeter toward the edge, running up flag after little flag, saluting each. Later Captain Captain will sign his name certifying that This flag was flown over the Marine Corps Memorial. But he will not sleep once the task is done. In his mind will keep turning over the story he has told. He will be troubled not because he knows it to be a lie but because he suspects it to be true. Jim Day held back a battalion while tending to a very sick man. Whatever he did and with whatever he did it, he did at least that, the work of a giant, more than any timeline-made-flesh or concocted yellow folders will ever equal.

The reader may be asking what role Jim Day played in the resurrection of his old story. The answer is none. It would have been so much easier to reconcile his Marine Corps to mine had he pressured Captain Captain on the telephone, not including the word Retired after invoking his pay grade or saying something to the effect that he did not care one way or the other except that the missus was bugging him. But I heard nothing. He remained what he was, not the old general but the stalwart corporal, peering through a muzzle flash at the infinite night, holding back the ocean with a thirty-caliber machinegun, never saying a word.

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