



Islands of the Damned

R.V. Burgin

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One of the real-life heroes featured in HBO(r)'s *The Pacific* tells his own true story.

R.V. Burgin reveals his experiences as a Marine at war in the Pacific Theater, where Company K confronted snipers, ambushes along narrow jungle trails, abandoned corpses of hara-kiri victims, and howling banzai attacks as they island-hopped from one bloody battle to the next. During his two years of service, Burgin rose from a green private to a seasoned sergeant, and earned a Bronze Star for his valor at Okinawa.

With unforgettable drama and an understated elegance, Burgin's gripping narrative chronicles the waning days of World War II, bringing to life the hell that was the Pacific War.

Islands of the Damned Details

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From Reader Review Islands of the Damned for online ebook

Andres says

I read this while reading E.B. Sledge's *With the Old Breed* and watching the HBO miniseries *The Pacific*. The author of this book is featured in both, and his experiences are worth the read. The before, during, and after of joining the Marines, training, fighting, and going home will be familiar to anyone who has read any of the memoirs dealing with this area and time, but it's the details and unique point of view of the same events that will reward the reader.

Burgin basically wants to tell his story and succeeds, laying everything out simply and directly. He tells of the horror of fighting on New Britain, Peleliu, and Okinawa, the discomforts of Pavuvu, the wonders of Australia, and his life before and after the war. This is a great read for anyone interested in the subject, especially since there aren't too many first person memoirs from soldiers who fought these particular battles.

One other thing I liked about the book is that it showed just how much artistic license the HBO miniseries took with the facts. I really liked that the miniseries was made but showing untrue things for dramatic affect sometimes isn't for the better. It's a minor squabble but at the end, Burgin doesn't ride along with Sledge and Snafu on the train going home: he left long before they did and in fact flew home once he reached the states. My hope is that the movie version inspires people to read about what actually happened.

Chuck says

I found this book fascinating. A ninety year old ex-marine tells the story of his combat experience in the Pacific and interweaves a pleasant story of meeting his future wife in Australia. It is different in that it also spares no words about combat and some of the truth about how soldiers from each side were engaged in activities that would be outside the lines in our current politically correct world. The story is simple told, but gives a fascinating account of the day to day endurance and commitment of a mortar squad of U. S. Marines. The book is eloquently summarized in the last paragraph when the author states, "What sticks with me now is not so much the pain and terror and sorrow of the war, though I remember that well enough. What really sticks with me is the honor I had of defending my country, and of serving in the company of these men. They were good marines, the finest, every one of them. You can't say anything better about a man. Semper fi!"

Jeff says

My biggest take away from this was to avoid friendly fire.

Janine Spendlove says

I picked this book up at the WWII Museum in NOLA, and I extremely glad I did. Really, this thing was a page turner & made me truly in awe of my Marine predecessors. I could never have done what they did. If you want to read pretty much the BEST personal account of a war, this is it. He speaks plainly, doesn't try to

airbrush anything at all. Amazing book. Amazing man.

James says

R.V. Burgin was the squad leader of Eugene Sledge, the Marine infantryman who wrote "With the Old Breed" and 'China Marine' - when I read Sledge's memoir, his admiration for Burgin was striking. Reading Burgin's account of the same history, it's clear that respect was mutual.

At the same time, Burgin was a very different kind of person. While Sledge fought with courage and distinction but was deeply disturbed by having to kill people and by seeing others killed around him, Burgin, while a good and decent person, fought equally well but adjusted comparatively easily and was less haunted afterward, though his war followed him home too. It's a good illustration of the varied impact of combat, and other traumatic situations, on different people, without that being a reflection on their bravery, character, or strength.

Dachokie says

Reads like a grandfather telling a story ..., July 14, 2010

The HBO miniseries "The Pacific" has stoked interest in the Pacific Theatre of World War II, but more importantly, it has introduced many to some of the finest accounts of combat ever put on paper (E.B. Sledge's "With the Old Breed" and Robert Leckie's "Helmet for My Pillow"). R.V. Burgin's "Islands of the Damned" is a fine companion to the above-mentioned books. What makes Burgin's book worth the read is simple ... he's one of the dwindling number of World War II Marines alive that can still tell his story.

My first introduction to R.V. Burgin was while watching the prologue to each episode of "The Pacific" that included brief but somber interviews with nameless grandfatherly men telling us what they experienced during the war. One gentleman in particular spoke of Peleliu in a stern and quiet manner that I found particularly mesmerizing. It wasn't until the end of the 10th and final episode that he was finally named: R.V. Burgin. He'd been portrayed in the series all along, as E.B. Sledge's sergeant and had more prominent roles in the final few episodes. When the credits revealed his "Islands of the Damned" as contributing to the miniseries, I had to buy it.

More often than not, the fighting in the Pacific takes a back seat to the glory of Allied soldiers liberating historic European cities. However, the Pacific theatre arguably includes some of the most savage and intense combat of the entire war, including the Eastern Front. R.V. Burgin's personal account of his war experience echoes the brutal nature of the Pacific War as well as the misery the Marines endured and the bond that kept them together through it all. His story starts from childhood and carries on through the war to his current life in Texas (a perspective that the Leckie and Sledge books do not offer). His book reads exactly like he spoke in "The Pacific" prologues ... short, simple and effective sentences with no superfluous artistic drama added ... not that any is needed. Reading Burgin's book created an aura of sitting on a couch and listening to my grandfather tell stories of his youth. We're not only presented with the chaos, death and misery on places like Peleliu and Okinawa; we get a glimpse of his experience before and after the combat, aboard troopships and on the infamous island of Pavuvu. A major presence throughout the book is that of Florence, the woman he met while on leave in Australia (before he shipped off to Peleliu) who would become his wife after the war. The angst and pain experienced during a two-year courtship that ultimately depended on Burgin surviving

Peleliu and Okinawa adds a point-of-view not common in many of the memoirs I've read. Additionally, I was left with the impression that Burgin's wartime experience had a less traumatizing effect on his life after the war (unlike E.B. Sledge), but then again, different people process horrible events in different ways.

"Islands of the Damned" is a lot like the books that veterans of Easy Company wrote following "Band of Brothers" in that Burgin adds clarity and a different perspective to the miniseries storyline (such as Burgin being wounded on Okinawa). His recollection of events are presented clearly and in a humble fashion ... even the action on Okinawa that earned him a Bronze Star is somewhat downplayed. As with most of these World War II veterans' recollections, the credit is always given to the men serving with them ... Burgin upholds this tradition. I see value in most veteran's memoirs, especially now that so few are left to tell us about their role in such an amazing historical event ... R.V. Burgin's story is definitely one that holds value.

Marijan says

Sje?anja jednog od veterana ameri?kih marinaca iz rata na pacifiku. za razliku od Sledge-a koji je još ljut nakon svih tih desetlje?a, za razliku od Leckiea koji je uvi?ek pokušavao dati široku sliku, Burgin pri?a smireno, matter-of-factly, bez pretjeranih emocija, o onom što je sam vido? i proživio. za one koje zanima, svakako vrijedno ?itanja.

Peter says

There is, somewhere, a whole library filled with memoirs of Marines in the Pacific island campaigns of WWII. R. V. Burgin's 2010 contribution *Islands of the Damned: A Marine at War in the Pacific* is a late entry. Burgin, a corporal, was a fire team leader in the mortar section of K/5/3—K Company, Third Battalion, Fifth Marine Regiment, First Marine Division; His ammo carrier was E.B. Sledge, author of the 1981 *With the Old Breed at Peleliu and Okinawa*, one of the earliest and best of the genre.

Burgin and the K/5/3 first fought at Cape Gloucester on New Britain Island, part of Papua New Guinea. Following a restful training period on Pavuvu Island in the Palau Island chain —shared with deep mud, heavy rains, land crabs and mosquitos, and jungle K/5/3—K/5/3 went on to its next venue on Peleliu, also in the Palaus. This was an ill-starred battle that should not have happened. Its objective was to protect MacArthur's right flank, but he changed his strategy and skipped some of Japan's major fortifications, particularly Truk and Rabaul. Peleliu no longer had significant strategic value. Still, why waste a good invasion plan? And so it goes . . .

The only good news was that Peleliu would be an easy engagement—water depth would not be a problem for the invaders, as it was at Tarawa; Japanese defensive forces were relatively light, unlike Okinawa; a three-day event at worst. Well, Murphy was not only an optimist, he could multitask: the unnecessary Battle for Peleliu was a protracted 10-week slog. Of the 28,000 men wading ashore, 10,700 (40 percent) became casualties (2,300 dead, 8,400 wounded); this was the highest casualty rate of any amphibious action in the war. Burgin's description of the period is vivid and disheartening. During the action his company experienced two murders of Marines who had gone crazy at times that threatened the safety of the unit; it was the only way to quiet them. One knows that such things must have happened, but this sort of "friendly fire" is not usually discussed so openly.

The next—and last—island battle was on Okinawa. Okinawa was one of the most distant of Japan's Home Islands and was. Therefore, the most heavily defended. About 800,000 U. S. soldiers under the Tenth Army (which included the Marines) invaded the island. Of these, about 13 percent became casualties—there were over 20,000 deaths and 26,000 psychiatric cases included among the casualties. Peleliu remained the most bloody battle in proportion to troops engaged, but Okinawa was by far the bloodiest in terms of absolute numbers. And that leaves out the 140,000 Okinawan natives, all Japanese citizens, who died, many by suicide. Okinawa was a death factory!

Okinawa is the battle most often depicted in books about the Pacific island campaign, perhaps because of the large number of people involved. While the landing was without contact, the struggle to get the Japanese fortifications cleared out was remarkably painful.

To my surprise, this book matched the contributions of William Manchester's *Goodbye, Darkness*, a poem of war, and E.B. Sledge's *With the Old Breed at Peleliu and Okinawa*.

Four Stars.

Mike Harbert says

A Solid Memoir of WWII in the Pacific

RV Burgin gives a unique perspective on the U.S. Marine campaigns on New Britain, Peleliu, and Okinawa. Most of the book focuses on the Fifth Marines and their fight on Peleliu - a truly horrific battle that is frequently only mentioned in passing, taking a secondary position behind the more famous battles of Guadalcanal, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa.

For those who have read E.B. Sledge's "With the Old Breed" - Burgin was Sledge's squad/section leader. Burgin is not as eloquent (nor as visceral) as Sledge, but his story is important to understanding and appreciating both the impact of brutal close quarters combat on the mind and body, and the unbearable burden of leading men in combat as an NCO.

I definitely recommend this book in the same manner as Robert Leckie's "Helmet For My Pillow," William Manchester's "Goodbye Darkness," and Eugene Sledge's "With the Old Breed".

We need to read, study, and appreciate this period of history and the stories and sacrifices of men like Burgin and his comrades.

Charlie Newfell says

A good personal recollection. Reads like someone telling a story, with the personal details, but without the bigger picture. Most of the WWII books are either historical, written at some distance by professionals or the personal recollections like this written by non-professional writers. Really makes you appreciate the really exceptional books by Eugene Sledge, a soldier who lived through these battles and then wrote about them wonderfully as a professional author.

Erin says

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It sounds horrible, but I didn't set out to read Islands of the Damned. Truth is it was one of those right time right place selections, the kind of thing that more or less falls into one's lap. I'd just watched The Pacific for the umpteenth time and got it into my head to do a little background reading. With the Old Breed and Helmet for My Pillow were first on my list, but unfortunately neither was available at my local library. A quick search for other titles on similar topics turned up several pieces including Battleground Pacific and Red Blood, Black Sand, but it was Burgin's name that jumped from the catalogue screen which is how the audio edition of his memoir ended up accompanying me home.

A friend of mine was moving so I listened to much of the book the following weekend as I repeatedly traversed the stretch of freeway that bisects Camp Pendleton. Traffic was slow, stop-and-go most of the way, and I was thankful for the distraction Burgin's work afforded. Alone in my SUV, I was able to focus on Sean Runnette's narration, but I soon found myself at odds with the sedate tone of Burgin's prose and frustrated by the lack of intensity presented his audience. The comparison isn't fair, but the book didn't pack the punch of Leckie or Sledge's recollections and the end result made it much harder for this particular reader to remain engaged in the account.

I don't argue the value of the material and I like the sense of perspective Islands of the Damned offers alongside With the Old Breed, but as a standalone I felt the memoir challenging. It isn't as comprehensive as other titles and relies heavily on singular interpretation. The author's voice is mild and he has a tendency to repeat his favorite personal anecdotes. I felt his romance with Florence Risely heartwarming and I was stuck by his memories of Captain Andrew 'Ack-Ack' Haldane and First Lieutenant Edward 'Hillbilly' Jones, but I prefer those accounts that delve into the complex psychology of life on the front lines and that was not a topic Burgin felt the need to explore length.

I'm glad to have experienced Islands of the Damned, but I'm not ashamed to admit I struggled with it. I went in with an expectation it didn't achieve and though I'd certainly recommend the title to those interested in WWII's Pacific Theater, I can't claim it my favorite Marine Corps memoir of the period.

Edward Linstrom says

Pacific campaigns of the USMC.

I originally read The Pacific because I appreciate history and it was the campaign my Dad fought as a Marine in WW2. I liked R.V. Burgin and a few other men from that book and wanted to know more. So when I saw he had written a book, I had to give it a shot.

The Pacific is a good read, skip the tv show read the book instead , but Islands of the Damned is more personal. Like R.V. Burgin, my Dad didn't talk of the war either, at least not the nitty gritty of it.

Philip Hollenback says

Well, Mr. Burgin certainly seems to have a high opinion of himself. This book is not as good as *With the Old Breed: At Peleliu and Okinawa*, and it doesn't help that Burgin kind of dismisses Sledge (the author of that book) in his writing.

Also, either Burgin took extremely comprehensive notes 70 years ago, or he has an amazing memory... or he just made up a lot of the interactions in the book.

This book is worth reading for another perspective on being a Marine in the Pacific in WWII, but I wouldn't recommend reading it unless you've first read Sledge's book.

Bon Tom says

I'm starting to realize why I like these war testimonials so much. In short, it's condensed human experience. It's the worst of us, it's the best of us. It's all in there. And it always makes me wonder, what would I do in their place? Would I go "asiatic", as they say in this book (hilarious:), crapping my pants at the very thought of showing my nose out of a foxhole, or would I go stoically, methodically completing my duty like the author of this book? The bravery of those people is beyond the scope of our daily experience. That's why it's almost unbelievable human beings are capable of such feats. I certainly can't imagine I'd be able to pull it off, but who knows. But I'd probably remember how someone, somewhere did manage to keep his sanity, listening bullets ripping the air inches from his head, coldly thinking "Those sons of bitches are still trying to kill me".

Headraline says

Not quite as intense as Eugene Sledge's testimony -though maybe I might be biased because I got my hands on that one first, so I knew what to expect this time- but still a very powerful read. A bit more "individualistic", more like an autobiography of sorts than a war memorial; as in it doesn't just drop you on the scene of war, and it doesn't stop at the war.

Also, it's fuzzier on the details and a bit more "mitigated" on some things, in comparison... possibly because of a difference on views and characters (or possibly editors).

Still, it was amazing to recognise happenings and little details that occurred with both men there to see, and how the two different accounts matched the same events, despite describing them with different eyes.

It really brings you in on these mostly untold stories; and it gave me even more awareness and respect of the times and lives described.
