



We Were Going to Win, or Die There: With the Marines at Guadalcanal, Tarawa, and Saipan by Roy H. Elrod.

Ed. Fred H. Allson. Denton: Univ. of North Texas Press, 2017. Pp. ix, 289. ISBN 978-1-57441-689-3.
Review by Martha Sloan, Michigan Technological University (masloan@mtu.edu).

We Were Going to Win, or Die There interweaves material from oral history interviews conducted by the Marine Corps History Division with quotations from letters home, annotated by the editor, Fred H. Allson,¹ and backed by a five-page bibliography. Gathered in the center of the book are a detailed map of Tarawa and thirty-one photographs. The result is a lively, readable, yet scholarly account of Roy Elrod's experiences in the Pacific.

Elrod enlisted in the Marine Corps at age twenty-one in 1940, just as the Corps was adding personnel on the eve of the US entry into World War II. After seeing action at Guadalcanal, Tarawa, and Saipan, he retired in 1961 as a lieutenant colonel. He died in December 2016, leaving editor Allison (PhD Texas Tech) to complete the book. The latter, a retired marine officer, is the Marine Corps oral history historian. His efforts have ensured that Elrod's story is told with authenticity and occasional humor.

Elrod was an indifferent college student for two years at Texas A&M, failing courses that he didn't like and excelling in those he did; a son of the South and descendant of four great grandfathers who had fought for the Confederacy, he especially enjoyed military classes and drills. He left school to make money, then entered the Army Air Corps pilot school at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. After a few days, he decided it just wasn't for him and dropped out. Driving home, he spotted a Marine Corps recruiting sign. Though he knew little about marines—"they had something to do with the Banana Wars and ... with ships" (27), four days later, he found himself heading to boot camp in San Diego.

Having fired rifles since he was a boy, he qualified as an expert marksman. At his graduation (Dec. 1940), marine Gunner Henry "Jim" Crowe selected him for his weapons platoon in the 8th Marine Regiment. Mentor and protégé served in combat together until both sustained severe injuries on Saipan.

In an early example of Elrod's ingenuity, he and a friend bought a car and rented it to their buddies or chauffeured them between the base and downtown San Diego, thus covering car payments and the cost of gas. Crowe once asked Elrod to cause a problem before an exercise conducted by a battalion commander Crowe disliked: "so, in the middle of the night, I slipped into the camp and took the sights off all four of the guns and ... brought them back" (53). That battalion failed the exercise and a delighted Crowe tried to promote Elrod to corporal, but lacked any warrants (slots).

By mid-January Elrod's platoon was en route to Samoa. Eight months later, Elrod was a second lieutenant, having excelled at an officer training class. In October 1942, his unit sailed for Guadalcanal to back up the 1st Marine Division. "I soon discovered that worse than the Japanese were the

1. Who sketches the larger strategic background of the Pacific War and explains, among other things, military terms and phrases, including "head."

living conditions on Guadalcanal. We were living really like animals. If it rained, we got wet. If the sun came out, we got dry" (110). Within a week, he had malaria, dysentery, and diarrhea, and was subsisting on starvation rations; his weight fell from 190 to 165 pounds.

In late 1942, the Army relieved the 1st Marine Division. Crowe volunteered Elrod's platoon to support an Army battalion in an attack on a Japanese position. Elrod had to find cooks, clerks, and others to bring his platoon to full strength. About fifty-five minutes before the attack, he marched his men to an Army company area.

When I got there, I found the company commander, a captain with two of his lieutenants. They were in a hole playing cribbage. I said, "Captain, I've come over to reinforce you for the attack." He mumbled something like they weren't sure they were going to be able to take off at H-hour. That told me right away why they had failed to take the ridge in front of them in the first place. When they made that comment, I unsnapped the flap on my pistol.... I said, "If you bastards won't fight, stay the hell out of my sight.... I got hold of the company first sergeant and told him that we were going to at ... H-hour." I said, "Tell your people that every mother's son of them is going up that hill." (128)

After the attack, Elrod and his runner returned to the company area, where

The battalion commander reached over and took off one of his first lieutenant's collar bars and one of his shoulder bars and pinned them on me. I was immediately promoted to first lieutenant, back dated to the first of January. I was also awarded the Silver Star. (129)

In February 1943, the 8th Marines sailed to New Zealand for rest. In late September, Crowe took Elrod to a division commander's meeting, where Elrod was the only officer below the rank of major. Planning centered on a model of an island they later learned was Betio, part of the Tarawa atoll. Discussion centered on reef and tidal problems. When Elrod returned to his unit, he realized the reef could complicate the landing of boats carrying the division's big (37 mm) guns, forcing the men to haul the 910-pound weapons ashore. Hence, he developed rope slings with hooks and had his men practice pulling around the guns, plus 150 pounds of ammunition for each.

During the assault on Betio, the landing boats were, as anticipated, hung up on the reef eight hundred yards off shore. Elrod's men hauled their guns from the boats in chest-high water and dragged them to positions fifty yards inland. The brutal heat of the second day so parched the men that runners had to carry five-gallon water cans to the beach in continuous relays. After this action, Elrod's thirty-six-man platoon, which took eight or ten casualties, went to Hawaii to rest.

The recovery site, which the marines called "Camp Tarawa," was four thousand feet up the western slope of Mauna Kea, not far from Waimea, a village that lacked electricity and dependable water. The twenty thousand men of the 2nd Marine Division soon transformed the godforsaken place into a solid camp with electricity, water, a hospital, and even an ice creamery.

Elrod and a friend managed to secure a seventy-two-hour pass with two of the (scarce) nurses, but he was recalled to learn he had been promoted to captain and placed in charge of a beefed-up platoon with four 75 mm halftracks, an executive officer, and fifty enlisted men. Franklin Roosevelt awarded the 8th Marines Presidential Unit Citations for their valor at Guadalcanal *and* Tarawa; it was one of only two units to receive citations for both battles.

In spring 1944, the marines knew that they would be leaving soon but not their destination. When *Newsweek* showed Saipan with a big red arrow pointing to it, that mystery was solved. Elrod notes that, back at Pearl Harbor,

[I] found out that you could join the Pearl Harbor Officers Club for five dollars, and with your new membership they gave you two bottles of liquor. I joined five times, every day while in Pearl Harbor. I ended up with ten bottles stashed in my halftracks. (202)

Unlike Guadalcanal, a tropical jungle, and Tarawa, a small atoll, Saipan was a large volcanic island with varied terrain. The 8th Marines began their assault on the difficult ridges in the middle of the island on 15 June 1944. On the morning of 2 July, a Japanese round sent shell fragments through Elrod's body. Corpsmen stripped him, administered morphine, and carried him to the beach. Later, aboard a landing craft, he noticed that the unconscious marine lying on the stretcher next to him was turning blue and seemed to be strangling. Elrod put his own finger in the man's mouth, pulled out his tongue, and saw him change color. He held his finger in that position till the landing craft reached a hospital ship hours later.

Elrod was next moved to a Quonset-hut hospital in the Russell Islands. A month or so later, he was able to get out of bed and was transferred (under sedation) to a hospital in Guadalcanal. By mid-October, he had begun five months of hospitalization in California. Doctors had told him from the start he would never walk again (he had no sensation in either leg below the knee). A "profile board" offered him retirement at 100 percent disability. But Elrod was determined to remain a regular Marine Corps officer. The board ruled that, if he could pass the physical in a year's time, he could remain on active duty. He pushed himself hard and managed to pass that physical; he received orders to report to the naval gunfire support school in Coronado. En route, he married his childhood girlfriend Malda, who was a ferry pilot during the war.

After the war, Elrod commanded the Marine Guard Company in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and spent several tours at Quantico, teaching marine officers the basics of combat fighting. After a last tour in Okinawa, he and Malda retired and founded a construction company in Virginia. He had already built six houses while he was in the marines, and the rents they generated more than equaled his marine pay.

In 1994, the couple left their construction business after building hospitals, commercial buildings, and residential subdivisions. Malda suffered a severe stroke on Christmas 2005 and doctors recommended she go into a nursing home. Roy instead made the necessary changes to their home and cared for her himself. After her death in 2008, he drove his Hummer to Winnipeg, Canada, and on to Alaska. He died at home on 17 December 2016.

Combat buffs will enjoy this detailed firsthand account of Roy Elrod's eventful life; serious students of military history will appreciate the provision of detailed footnotes; and young people considering careers as marines will learn much about life in the Corps. Army supporters, however, may be disgruntled.