

Killed in Okinawa

During the Battle for Okinawa, U.S. Marine Corps PFC Jay Welba Whitaker, Jr., was injured and died from his wounds. He was 19 years old.

Jay enlisted in the Marine Corps sometime before October 1943 because he reported to the Marine Corps Base Recruit Depot in San Diego on 1 October and was assigned to the 9th Recruit Battalion, Training Regiment. His basic training and specialty schools likely lasted until the end of the year.

He was sent overseas to the Pacific theater about 1 January 1944 and assigned to the 35th Replacement Battalion, 3rd Marine Division, in advance of his permanent assignment. By April 1944 he had been assigned to Co. M, 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines, 1st Marine Division, but by September 1944, he had been transferred to Co. K where he remained until he died. The 1st Marine Division is the oldest active duty division in the Marine Corps today.

When Jay joined the 1st Marine Division they were heavily involved in the long-running Eastern New Guinea campaign, which lasted from January 1942 until August 1945, and the Battle of New Britain, which lasted from December 1943 until August 1945.



1st Marine Division during the Battle of New Britain; courtesy of Wikipedia

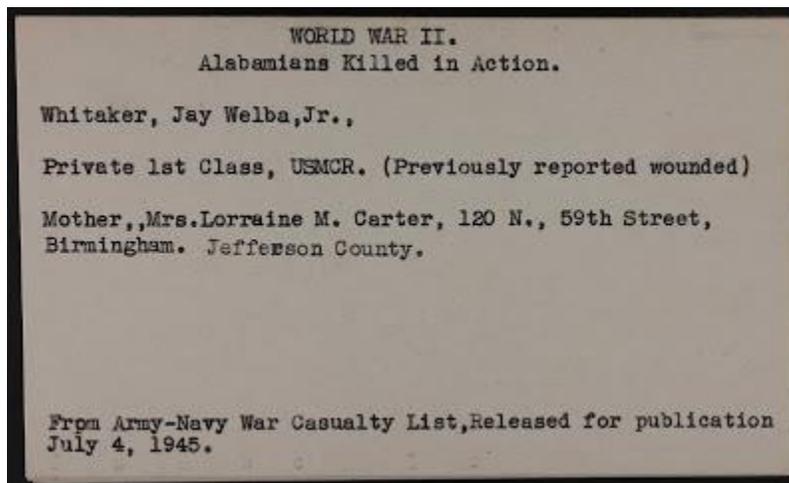
The division fought on New Britain until February 1944 at places named Suicide Creek and Ajar Ridge. Following the battle, they were sent to Pavuvu and Russell Islands for rest and refitting.

The next battle for the division was Peleiu, they landed on 15 September 1944. Their commanding general predicted the fighting would be "...tough but short. It'll be over in 3 or 4 days..." The actual fighting was certainly tough. In the first week alone the division lost 3,946 casualties. It wasn't short either, lasting some three months. 1st Marine Division fought on the island for one month before being relieved. It was some of the bloodiest fighting of the war and the division lost 6,526 casualties before pulling out to rest and refit.



First wave of landing craft approaching Peleiu at the onset of the battle; courtesy of Wikipedia

The final campaign for the division was Okinawa. If Jay would have survived it, he would have returned home after the war, but it was not to be. He was one of the 14,009 battle deaths, succumbing to his wounds while the battle was still raging.



Alabama, WWII Military Dead and Wounded, 1944-1946; courtesy of Ancestry.com

The battle for Okinawa lasted from 1 April through 22 June 1945 -- 82 long days. The battle has been referred to as "typhoon of steel" by the Americans and "rain of steel" by the Japanese. There were intense kamikaze attacks and the sheer number of Allied ships and armored vehicles was mind boggling. The severity of the fighting on an island so close to the Japanese home islands was one of the factors President Truman considered when he gave the okay to drop atomic bombs.

Jay Welba Whitaker, Jr.'s body was returned home and was interred at Forest Hill Cemetery in Birmingham, Alabama. His name is engraved on the [Alabama Hall of Honor](#) at the Alabama Veterans Memorial Park.

My connection to Jay Welba Whitaker, Jr., is convoluted but I thought it was important to tell his story. He was born on 25 November 1925 in Alabama to Jay Welba Whitaker, Sr., and Lorraine Marion Jones. His parents divorced before he was five years old and his mother married Daniel Stuart Carter in 1933 in Bay County, Florida. His first wife, Bessie Bane Beasley, was my 3rd cousin once removed.

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