

# Looking for PFC Whitcomb

By Chuck Tatum

The list of Marines that I'm trying to find includes PFC Charles Whitcomb. Now I haven't a clue left as to the whereabouts of Charles Whitcomb. PFC Whitcomb was an ammo carrier in the squad. The clues were meager at best, the best clue that I had was from his casualty report. This listed his hometown as Chattanooga, Tennessee.

Now Marine casualty reports do list next of kin, but the address section comes blacked out (Freedom of Information Act) so no clues there. The way I found most of the people that I had been seeking is the use of the Bell Telephone Company long distance operators' friendly services.

The casualty report did show his place of birth and former legal residence as Chattanooga, Tennessee. Another point of interest, I had always thought that Lloyd Hurd was the oldest man in our squad. Not so, Whitcomb was born on November 8, 1916, thus making him 29 years of age at the time of the invasion of Iwo Jima. I figure that my good buddy from Chattanooga will so been about 74 years of age. Hell, Whitcomb just might be the oldest Marine in the company.

29 wasn't old, we all know that. Whitcomb was also married, although he never talked much about being married. The casualty report shows a Mrs. Frances D. Whitcomb as his next of kin and a Mrs. Olga W. Thurman as his mother. Whitcomb's place of enlistment was Atlanta,

Georgia. I know his serial number was 934855. I can also tell you that PFC Charles William Whitcomb received multiple wounds on the 12th of March, 1945. That would be D-21 for the battle for Iwo Jima. I know that after his wounds were treated he returned to the front lines and rejoined the company on the 14<sup>th</sup> of March, 1945.

Charles William Whitcomb and I shared the same first and middle names. Whitcomb had curly hair that was always combed back with no part. He was about 5 feet 7 inches and weighed in at 160 lbs. He slept in the 2<sup>nd</sup> bunk on the right of the tent as you entered. Whitcomb was well educated and did a lot of reading, although mostly paperbacks. He always had a good attitude and had the pleasant manners that I had grown to expect from the Marines from the state of Tennessee. Whaley and Whitcomb had the same soft drawl of the south, but of course they were both from Tennessee.

In addition to all of the above, PFC Charles W. Whitcomb won the Bronze Star for his actions on Iwo Jima. Seems that Whitcomb's size came in handy one day. On the 12<sup>th</sup> of March 1945 B Company, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 27<sup>th</sup> Marines had fought hard all day for a meager gain of a hundred yards. This yardage was small, was well worth holding, because if you didn't you would have to win it back tomorrow. The position wasn't a good one to defend, as it ran along the top of a gorge. The Japanese defenders had a ravine that was heaven-sent for them. It was like a present from the devil to the Marines.

This misplaced ravine was in the left part of B Company's sector. The ravine was being used as an avenue for counterattacks against the Marine "defenders". It was one of the times that the Marines were the

defenders and the Japanese became the attackers. The best way to stop a counterattack is to not let it get underway. Don't let the enemy mass for an attack.

PFC Whitcomb was always resourceful and on his own initiative he moved his machine gun to a forward position. Actually it was way ahead of the defending line, but it provided the best field of fire against a counterattack from the ravine area. Trouble was that the position was exposed to constant enemy mortar and small arms fire. The area was so small that there was only room for PFC Whitcomb and his machine gun. Repeated warnings from Sergeant Wendle to take a safer position were disregarded. Whitcomb asked for permission to keep the position. He was so determined to hold it. In fact, he volunteered to continue to man his position. Well, after all he was from the famed "Volunteer State of Tennessee"!

Good thing for B Company PFC Whitcomb's expertise with the air-cooled 30 caliber machine gun stopped a couple of counterattacks before they ever got underway. The night was long and lonely for Charles W. Whitcomb, PFC United States Marine Corps. Under that soft southern drawl, Whitcomb was as tenacious as a bulldog and tougher than a sack of wildcats in heat! The next morning as the cold dawn broke over the devil's rock pile that made up the landscape of Iwo Jima, PFC Whitcomb was still at his defensive position.

The Japanese had been contained. B Company, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion wouldn't have to start in the hole that day, the ground gained at such a terrible cost was still ours. The official wording of the citation went like this:

*Private First Class Charles William Whitcomb's extreme devotion to duty and utter disregard for his personal safety were in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service.*

The day of the citation and the date of his wounds are the same: March 12, 1945. You see the Chattanooga kid had been wounded and still didn't give up his lonely bastion. You see I know a hell of a lot about PFC Charles William Whitcomb. The only thing I don't know is where he is right now (July 17, 1988).

Then on April 11, 1990 I had a conversation with John A. Butler, III. My search for Whitcomb continues. Most writers research a book and then write it, I do it the hard way, I write and research as I go along. As I receive new information I incorporate it into my book. I had tried all of the ways I had available to me to find Charles W. Whitcomb, like checking with former members of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 27<sup>th</sup> Marines at Fifth Marine Division reunions. I have posted notices at reunions, checked Marine Corps records, phone all of the area code long distance operators in the state of Tennessee. I talked to a lot of people with the last name of Whitcomb, but to no avail. No one knew a Charles William Whitcomb that had served in the Marine Corps back in World War II. I had almost given up hope of ever finding any additional information about the Chattanooga Kid when out of the blue, I got a new clue.

I don't know who said it, but "it's a small world!" On April 11, 1990 I was talking to John A. Butler, III on the telephone. He is the eldest son of

the late Lieutenant Colonel John A. Butler. John, like his father, attended the Naval Academy at Annapolis and upon graduation selected the Marine Corps as his branch of the service. Lieutenant Colonel Butler was the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 27<sup>th</sup> Marines commanding officer. The colonel had trained the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion and led it ashore on D-Day, and through the first fifteen days of combat on Iwo Jima on D+14 (March 4, 1945). Colonel Butler lost his life while making a reconnaissance of the front lines.

During our conversation John mentioned that a former member of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 27<sup>th</sup> Marines had contacted him while he was in active service. I asked John who the Marine was and he replied that he was 1<sup>st</sup> Sergeant Charles William Whitcomb, U.S.M.C.! Well, I couldn't believe my ears! After all of this time I had a new lead on Charles Whitcomb! Apparently Whitcomb had seen John A. Butler, III's name on a company roster, and was correct in assuming the Lieutenant was the late Colonel Butler's son. A meeting was arranged and John was able to speak to a Marine who had served under his father!

Whitcomb had related to John that he had met with his father on two occasions. Once, while trying to explain to the colonel why he was late returning to base after a furlough. Whitcomb's explanation apparently wasn't good enough for Colonel Butler, and Whitcomb was sent to the brig for 72 hours! His diet was to consist of bread and water. This is a great way to lose weight, but Whitcomb wasn't overweight! (Piss and Punk is the Marine's slang name for this punishment.)

Their second meeting took place on Iwo Jim, one night when Colonel Butler was checking the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion front lines. A flare shell caught him in the open and Colonel Butler took temporary refuge in the safety of then PFC Whitcomb's foxhole! The Colonel and the PFC talked for a few minutes, man-to-man, Marine-to-Marine. When it was dark again, the Colonel gave Whitcomb a reassuring pat on the back, and was quickly on his way to continue his inspection. Whitcomb said seeing Colonel Butler at the front and at night did his morale a world of good. Moving around the front lines at night on Iwo Jim was dangerous to your health and welfare. Colonel Butler didn't care, he wanted his men to know that he was with them all the way. That was the type of officer Lieutenant Colonel John A. Butler was.

Former Captain John A. Butler, III told me that he figured that Whitcomb was making a career of the Marine Corps. The sad part of this story is that the Captain never heard from Whitcomb again, and that leaves me back at square one. Captain Butler gave me a few new ideas on how to look for PFC, I mean 1<sup>st</sup> Sergeant Charles William Whitcomb, but in the meantime if any of the readers of this book have any information about the Chattanooga Kid, please call me collect!

The following is the report of record awarding PFC Charles William Whitcomb the Bronze Star:

Whitcomb, Charles W. PFC

USMCR 1<sup>st</sup> Bn

IWO JIMA

*BOARD OF DECORATIONS & MEDALS:*

*AWARDED:* Bronze Star Medal by ComGen5thMarDiv file 1740

WRC/cgw Serial Z6908 dtd 23Oct1945. Rec'd DM 20 Nov 1945

For heroic achievement in connection with operations against the enemy while serving with a marine infantry battalion on IWO JIMA, VOLCANO ISLANDS. On 12 March 1945, the company of which Private First Class WHITCOMB was a member after fighting stubbornly all day, managed to gain one hundred yards and consolidated in position for the night along the ground that was particularly vulnerable for an enemy counterattack up a ravine in the left sector of the company lines. Previous to this, Private First Class WHITCOMB alone managed to move his machine gun forward of the front lines to better support the company's attack. His position was such that he commanded the ravine leading to the company line. The position was exposed to the extent that only one man could occupy the spot, which was continually being swept by both enemy mortars and small arms fire. Though ordered to seek a more protected position, he voluntarily requested and received permission to stay with his gun as its present spot. On two separate occasions his vigilance and skillful handling of his gun prevented the enemy from successfully forming in the ravine for counterattack against our position and further enabled the company to return to the ground from which the attack was renewed the following morning. Private First Class WHITCOMB's extreme devotion to duty and utter disregard for his personal safety were in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Naval Services.