

The Prayer Switchboard

By Grace Case

In 1944, when I learned that my only brother, Jim Kilby, had volunteered to join the Marines, I began to worry. War hadn't broken our family circle—not yet. He was 26 years old, a carpenter, married and the father of two little girls.

Vividly, I remember the hot September night when our whole family gathered at the depot in Geneseo, Ill., to tell him goodbye. He was headed first to Chicago. The train was late. Oh, how I wished that all the goodbyes at bus stations and train depots could end! Like so many others, I yearned for peace in the world.

My brother, five years younger than me, had a great sense of humor. On that night he spieled off a little jingle he had written the week before:

I coined a word and called it “squoze.”
It went with “squeeze”—
like “freeze” and “froze,”
And “these” and “those,” and “peas” and “pose,”
And “wheeze” and “whoas”—
So now I'll close—
And goes—
And blows my nose.

We laughed. It was better than crying.

At dusk on that humid September evening, we finally heard the whistle of the train and felt its reverberation along the tracks.

I looked at his parents in their mature years; then at his young wife, Marcella, so deeply concerned about her husband's safety; and then at his two little daughters, Virginia and Judy.

Jim was the only one who smiled as he said goodbye. So began his time of service. It seemed like forever as we waited for his first letter. When it arrived, it said only that he was in the South Pacific. Letters were censored. His mother, Edith Kilby, sent him a poem she had written:

The Prayer Switchboard

I sometimes wonder
How God up there in heaven
Has time to sort out all the prayers

That float up day and night
For Jim Kilby, one Marine.
So many prayers from his parents,
His young wife, his two daughters,
His sisters, and nieces and nephews—
Just so many prayers.
Surely God must have a prayer switchboard
To keep track.
“Watch over him,” the messages cry.
“Bring him home.”
“Watch over Daddy.”
“Keep Uncle Jim safe.”
God must shake His head in wonder,
“That Kilby Marine feller's quite a guy!”

When my brother came home in 1945, the story could be told.

He received boot at the Marine Recruit Depot at San Diego, Calif.,—nine weeks of roughing it at Camp Pendleton, Oceanside, Calif.

Then, on Dec. 14, 1944, he and his buddies boarded ship at San Francisco for “points west.”

On Jan. 1, 1945, they arrived on Puruva, a little island in the Russell group. There they joined the 1st Marine Division as replacements.

Jim was attached to a machine-gun platoon in L Company. The last of February, they boarded ship, this time for 30 days. Miserable time. Rough water. On April 1, Easter Sunday, they were awakened at 3 a.m. Beefsteak for breakfast. At daylight, the first wave went ashore. He was in the 10th wave and went ashore at 8 a.m.

Calm sea. Everything quiet. The old hands couldn't understand it. No opposition whatsoever. Where were they? Why didn't they open up?

There was nothing but birds singing and goats bleating. Everything was quiet, Jim thought, as quiet as that first Easter morning when the two Marys made their way to the empty tomb of Jesus on Resurrection Day.

If they had only known that on the other end of Okinawa, another division of Marines and an Army division were encountering plenty of opposition.

But Jim and his company walked upright, straight to their rendezvous area, to receive orders. Everything remained quiet where they were. For 30 days they performed little reconnaissance patrols—rounding up civilians, capturing small enemy patrols, opening and closing caves and tombs. They encountered no resistance other than a few snipers.

Time passed. Jim waited and watched with his buddies. He thought about his family back home. Sleep was hard to get—50 percent alert, an hour on, an hour off.

Then, on May 4, the weather was cloudy, chilly and damp. The company to their left moved out through the valley, seeking to come abreast of their position.

And all Okinawa came alive! The peaceful countryside turned into hell and fire! Rifles, mortars, machine guns—everything the enemy had—was concentrated on that one company, in that one valley.

A drizzle started, chilly—it was miserable on the ground. Everyone dreaded seeing the night come with the enemy out there in the dark. Surprisingly, the word came for 25 percent alert for the night—half-hour on watch, half-hour off.

So, in his foxhole, fast becoming drenched in rain and mud, Jim covered up with his poncho as well as he could and went to sleep.

Suddenly he was awakened, thinking someone had stumbled on him in the dark. He was about to tell the fellow what he'd done and where he could go when he felt the enemy bayonet in his chest.

The Japanese soldier kept pushing.

Why didn't he pull the trigger? He couldn't miss with the thing stuck in his chest. Reflex muscles moved Jim. He shoved hard as he reached for the rifle. He knocked the Japanese soldier down, jerking the bayonet from his chest, and landed on top of him, wrestling for his weapon.

At that instant, he felt a hot stinging blow from behind and fell over a small bank behind the lines. Another enemy soldier had taken a swipe at his behind with his bayonet and cut a gash 6 inches long and a half-inch deep.

Good thing he'd jumped! He looked back and heard a welcome sound—a tommy gun from his squad leader got the two who had worked on him.

Jim was through. That was the closest he ever

got to the real fighting. He was flown to a U.S. hospital in Washington state.

The surgeon who attended him was amazed. "You should be dead, Kilby! Bayonet in your heart. I don't understand it. What could have saved you?"

Jim reached in his uniform's back pocket and handed him the soiled, much-folded paper he had received from his mother. "Here's the reason."

The surgeon read "The Prayer Switchboard" and slowly shook his head.

His summation: bayonet wound, left chest and buttock. Chest wound, 6 inches deep, no complications. Six months in hospital, recuperating. Received purple heart on Guam.

My brother died years later at the age of 56. ❖