

The President of the United States of America takes pride in presenting the Medal of Honor to

Major HENRY ALEXIUS COURTNEY JUNIOR

“Hero of Sugar Loaf Hill”

Born

January 6, 1916, St. Louis Co., Duluth, Minnesota

Entered Service

February, 1940, St. Louis Co., Duluth, Minnesota

U.S. Marine Corps Reserve

Second Battalion, Twenty Second Marines

Sixth Marine Division. **World War II**

Died

May 14, 1945 while serving as Executive Officer.

Sugar Loaf Hill. Okinawa Shima, Ryukyu Islands.



Early Years:

Henry Courtney was born to Henry A. Courtney Sr. and Florence E. He had one brother, John G., Washington D. C.; two sisters, Mrs. Benjamin Storey, St. Paul, MN and Mrs. Joseph C. Bean, Darien, CT.

He attended Duluth Central High school, graduated from the University of Minnesota, and attained a law degree from Loyola University in Chicago, Illinois. He was a member of the Minnesota and Illinois Bar. Before going into active military service he was associated with the law firm of Courtney & Courtney in Duluth. Henry was known as “Bob” to family and friends.

The War Years:

Henry Courtney had barely qualified to practice law when he was called to active duty as a Commissioned Second Lieutenant in the Marine Corps Reserve, February 1940. He organized Company C of the Marine Corps Reserve in Duluth. In March of that year he was placed in command of the Duluth unit of the Marine Corps Reserve which was mobilized and sent to San Diego for training. He then served in Iceland for 10 months between 1941 and 1942. While Courtney was stationed in Iceland, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor.

From August of 1942 to June 1943 he served on Guadalcanal Solomon Islands, where he was assigned to the staff of the Twenty Second Marine Regiment, Sixth Marine Division. He participated in the first U.S. offensive invasion of the Solomon Islands in World War II, commanding a company of the First Marine Division.

He taught in the Marine School at Quantico just before leaving for Okinawa.

His next and last battle was on Sugar Loaf Hill, Okinawa, Japan. His Citation from the president tells of the action and “conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity of the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty.”

Courtney is nearly forgotten except by those who knew him during his short life and by the few living marines who followed him up the slopes of Sugar Loaf Hill. Only 15 of the original 46 who bravely followed Courtney lived to tell us about it.

Lt. John Fitzgerald, executive officer of Easy Company, described Courtney as “A big man with a slightly dour look, an impression enhanced by his quiet reserved nature he was an exceedingly devout Catholic.” Father Kelly became a good, true friend of Courtney. Courtney had indicated to his friend an interest in the priesthood.

From the book “*Killing Ground on Okinawa*” written by James H. Hallas: He had interviewed some of the survivors, a few of their remarks were: “Those who were less than enamored referred to him as Smiley, in a less than enthusiastic tribute to his serious demeanor. He was unlike most executive officers who generally stayed back to take care of “beans and bullets.” Courtney had a reputation as a “sort of a rover”, recalled a fellow officer.

Courtney had suffered a slight shrapnel wound in the right thigh on the 9th of May. Regardless of his wound he stayed with his battalion. He also spent the night with the frontline troops after “G” company’s bloodletting on 12 May, apparently feeling his presence might help steady the men.

An eyewitness account: “He led his men by example rather than by command. He pushed ahead with unrelenting aggressiveness, hurling grenades into cave openings, having devastating effects on the enemy.” One of the survivors recalled Courtney’s words, “Take all the grenades you can carry and when you get over the top throw them and dig in.” The gallant words of Major Courtney will go down in history of the Marine Corps, “I want volunteers for a Bonzai of our own. If it works, we’ll take the top of the hill tomorrow.”

On the 15th of May, 1945 Major Henry A. Courtney was killed when a shell severed his jugular vein. The Major’s remains were buried at the cemetery dedicated by the Sixth Marine Division. His body was brought home to his family and reburied at Calvary Cemetery in Duluth on March 29 1949.

Major Courtney was also decorated with the following:

Two Purple Hearts

Presidential Unit Citation (ribbon bar with gold star)

American Defense Service Medal

European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign Medal

Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Medal

Victory Medal of World War II

The Gold Star.

Post War

Sugar Loaf Hill is no more than 50 feet high. Yet, the brutal struggle to secure this hellish rise cost the 6th Marine Division 2,662 casualties and ranked among the bloodiest of battles. The fight for Sugar Loaf Hill has largely been forgotten outside the Corps. It should not be! It became the decisive campaign of World War II. Sugar Loaf Hill is squatted on a shell blasted plateau like a trash heap, it's rocky slopes were barren, honeycombed with caves and tunnels that the enemy would use with skill and advantage. Okinawa, barely the size of Rhode Island, sixty-seven miles long and 18 miles wide at its widest point, is located only 350 nautical miles from the Japanese homeland. It is a powerful tribute to those who fought and died there in the spring of 1945.

Weeks after May, 1945 the place looked like a garbage dump. Litter of the battle remained strewn on the torn and battered hill. Helmets, discarded ammunition, paper, clothing, letters and pictures of loved ones. To a disinterested observer it was just so much assorted "rubbish" littering the ground, but to the marines, this was and is "Hallowed Ground".

In 1993 the Okinawans began work to develop the area. Bulldozers working around Sugar Loaf Hill unearthed human remains, old canteens, and various rusted pieces of equipment. The narrow gauge railroad bed is now a four lane highway. A new water tower was proposed to be placed at the top of the hill. At this point an Okinawan artist came forward with a suggestion for a park-like setting for a peace monument and history display at Sugar Loaf Hill. In 1994 their city fathers approved the park.

Charlie Hill, The Horse Shoe Ridge, Half Moon, Motobu Peninsula, Ishikaw Isthmus, Naha and Conica Hill are remote spots on which men died in battle 71 years ago that are now covered with fast food franchises, outlet stores, pawnshops and used car lots. The irony of it brings to mind the line that Shakespeare wrote, "In thy faint slumbers I by thee have watched and heard thee murmur tales of Iron wars."

The Sixth Marine Division have dedicated a cemetery to Courtney on Okinawa near where they stormed ashore Easter Sunday. There are 1697 brave souls buried at this site. The Sixth Marine Division was later honored with a Presidential Unit Citation, the highest unit award conferred by the United States, for their actions on Okinawa. Not very many of the brave souls that fought against the enemy are alive today. But, neither time nor even death itself can sever the blood bonds between the men who have fought so bravely. Again, as Shakespeare wrote, "We few, we happy few, we band of brothers; for he today that sheds his blood with me Shall be my brother."

In 1955 an Escort Vessel was built for the U.S. Navy at Bay City, Michigan. It was named in Major Courtney's honor. The statement of dedication presented at the launching stated, "Major Henry A. Courtney, Jr. once described by his Commanding General as Marine Corps' greatest hero, died on Okinawa Island 10 years ago last May. But his name soon will be in active duty again with the U.S. Armed Forces."

A news release in 1956 stated, "Okinawa Camp to honor Courtney." "A U.S. Marine Corps base on Okinawa has been renamed in honor of Major Henry a. Courtney Jr., Duluth World War II Congressional Medal of Honor Recipient."

Duluth news release in 2006. "Marine's display gets makeover. A new memorial for Medal of Honor Recipient"

The following books refer to the Battle on Sugar Loaf Hill and many accounts regarding Courtney's heroic actions:

"Killing Ground on Okinawa" The battle of sugar Loaf Hill. Written by James H. Hallas

"Goodbye Darkness" by William R. Manchester

"Once a Marine" by Robert B. Asprey

"The Conquest of Okinawa" An account of the Sixth Marine Division by Phillips D. Carleton

Many other books and Periodicals were written of the gallant men who fought on Sugar Loaf Hill.

Major Henry A. Courtney stands among them as a symbol of the bravery of the defenders of our nation.



Compiled by Royleen Newman

Greysolon Daughters of Liberty Chapter NSDAR