

# EB Sledge's Contribution to the fight for humanity in the Second World War

Posted on September 15, 2018

## Introduction

Eugene Bondurant Sledge, commonly known as E. B. Sledge, served as a United States Marine during the Pacific War and later became a biology professor in Alabama. His memoir, *With the Old Breed: At Peleliu and Okinawa*, is one of the most widely read firsthand accounts of infantry combat in the Second World War. The original essay correctly identifies the book as a primary source based on Sledge's personal experiences, but several details require clarification. Sledge did not begin as a professor and then get referred for military training. He enlisted in the Marine Corps during the war, trained as a 60 mm mortarman, served with Company K, Third Battalion, Fifth Marine Regiment, First Marine Division, and pursued an academic career after returning home.

Sledge participated in the battles of Peleliu in 1944 and Okinawa in 1945. During combat, he recorded brief notes in a pocket-sized New Testament because keeping a conventional diary was restricted. Those notes later helped him reconstruct experiences that remained vivid for decades. *With the Old Breed* was first published in 1981, not written and published as a complete book in 1944. Its importance lies in the way Sledge bears witness to the physical and moral destruction of war from the viewpoint of an ordinary enlisted Marine rather than a general, politician, or distant historian.

The title of the essay describes Sledge's contribution as a fight for humanity. He was unquestionably fighting as a Marine against Japanese forces, not serving as a neutral peace activist. His larger contribution to humanity came through the honesty of his testimony. He showed courage and loyalty to fellow Marines while also refusing to romanticize combat. By documenting fear, exhaustion, cruelty, grief, and the struggle to retain moral limits, he helped later readers understand both the necessity felt by combatants and the terrible human cost of war.

## Discussion

### Sledge's Path to the Marine Corps

Sledge was born in Mobile, Alabama, in 1923. He grew up with an interest in nature and science, but the attack on Pearl Harbor and the entry of the United States into the war shaped his generation. He initially entered an officer-training program but became impatient with the prospect of remaining in college while others fought. He left the program and enlisted in the Marines. This decision placed him

within one of the most demanding branches of American military service and eventually in the Pacific campaigns that defined his memoir.

Training prepared recruits to operate weapons, follow orders, endure physical hardship, and function as a unit. It could not fully prepare them for the sensory and emotional reality of combat. Sledge entered war with patriotic assumptions but gradually acquired a more complicated understanding. He did not abandon loyalty to his country or comrades. Instead, experience taught him that courage can coexist with terror and that victory does not make suffering clean or morally simple.

## *With the Old Breed* as Primary Evidence

The memoir provides primary evidence because Sledge personally witnessed and participated in the events he describes. It records the perspective of one Marine within a particular company and cannot represent every participant. Memory, later reflection, and the passage of time shaped the final narrative. Nevertheless, the notes he made during service and the specificity of his observations give the account exceptional value. (Sledge, *With the Old Breed*)

Sledge focuses on details that official histories often compress: the weight of equipment, thirst, insects, rain, mud, heat, fear, waiting, smell, exhaustion, and the loss of individual friends. Strategic accounts explain objectives, troop movements, and casualty totals. His memoir explains what those decisions felt like to a young person on the ground. The two forms of history should be used together. Personal testimony humanizes strategy, while broader evidence places personal experience within the campaign.

## Peleliu

The battle of Peleliu began in September 1944. American planners expected a relatively short operation, but Japanese defenses were built into caves, ridges, and fortified positions. The island's coral terrain, intense heat, limited water, and exposed approaches created severe hardship. Sledge and other Marines crossed beaches under fire and then fought through a landscape in which the enemy could remain concealed in interconnected defensive positions.

The original essay correctly emphasizes the coral and heat. These were not minor inconveniences. Coral made digging difficult, reflected heat, damaged equipment, and offered limited protection. Water could become dangerously scarce or contaminated. Marines carried ammunition and mortar components while attempting to avoid artillery, machine guns, and snipers. The physical environment became another enemy.

Peleliu also taught Sledge that the official language of military operations could not describe individual loss. A hill or ridge might be presented as an objective on a map, but taking it required repeated exposure to death. Friends disappeared from the unit through injury or death, and

replacements arrived without shared history. The company remained an organization, yet its human composition changed continuously.

## The Incident Involving Gold Teeth

The original essay recalls Sledge witnessing Marines attempting to remove gold teeth from Japanese bodies and, in one disturbing episode, from a severely wounded man. This material is central to the memoir because it demonstrates how combat can erode moral restraint. Sledge was horrified and was warned by a more experienced Marine not to participate. The episode does not mean that all Marines behaved the same way. It reveals that cruelty became possible within a setting where the enemy had been dehumanized and death had become ordinary.

Sledge's willingness to describe misconduct by his own side strengthens the memoir. He does not use Japanese brutality to excuse every American action. Nor does he portray himself as morally untouched. He records anger, hatred, and impulses shaped by combat. His moral contribution lies in showing how war pressures people toward actions they might once have considered unthinkable.

The essay's earlier criticism that Sledge is biased because he complains about Marines while not fully explaining Japanese enmity misunderstands the purpose of memoir. Sledge writes from limited personal experience, not as a neutral investigator of every Japanese policy. He describes Japanese resistance, attacks, treatment of bodies, and the fear the enemy inspired. At the same time, his responsibility as a witness includes examining the conduct he observed most closely—his own and that of nearby Marines.

## Brotherhood Within Company K

Combat created a powerful bond among Marines. Sledge repeatedly emphasizes that men endured danger because their comrades depended on them. Abstract patriotism may motivate enlistment, but immediate survival often depends on loyalty to the small group. A mortarman had to trust ammunition carriers, riflemen, corporals, officers, and fellow crew members. Abandoning a position could expose friends.

This brotherhood did not make war desirable. It was a humane relationship developed inside an inhumane environment. Sledge's respect for veterans of the "Old Breed" came from their competence, endurance, and protection of less experienced Marines. Older Marines taught practical lessons and sometimes reinforced moral boundaries. The warning against removing teeth was one example of a veteran preventing a younger man from crossing a line.

## Okinawa

Sledge later fought on Okinawa, where rain and mud replaced much of Peleliu's coral heat. The battle began in April 1945 and became one of the bloodiest campaigns of the Pacific War. Japanese forces used fortified defensive lines, caves, artillery, and local terrain. American forces faced prolonged combat while civilians were caught within the battle zone.

The original essay accurately describes mud, bodies, flies, waste, and poor sanitation. Heavy rain turned ground into deep mud, filled shell holes, slowed movement, and made ordinary hygiene extremely difficult. Corpses could not always be removed quickly, and the smells of decomposition, explosives, waste, and wet equipment became part of daily existence. Sledge's biological training later gave him a language for nature, but during Okinawa the environment often appeared corrupted by human violence.

Foot problems, infection, fatigue, and exposure added to combat injury. Latrines were difficult to maintain under fire and in flooded ground. Men ate and slept near contamination because tactical conditions limited choice. Sledge's account demonstrates that military casualties include more than gunshot wounds. Disease, stress, malnutrition, and environmental exposure affect fighting capacity and long-term health.

## Civilians in the Battle

Okinawan civilians experienced displacement, fear, injury, hunger, and death. Japanese military control, American bombardment, propaganda, and the collapse of civil order placed families in impossible circumstances. Some civilians were used or pressured by military forces, while others hid in caves or attempted to cross battle lines. Sledge saw enough suffering to recognize that the war extended far beyond uniformed soldiers.

The original essay states that civilians lived without harmony and experienced mental torture. That idea should be made more precise. They faced acute trauma, loss, coercion, and uncertainty. Many could not know which movement would be safe. The destruction of homes and communities continued after the shooting ended. A humane history must include these civilian experiences rather than treating islands only as military objectives.

## The Environment and War

Sledge's later profession as a biologist makes his attention to the environment especially meaningful. The memoir describes landscapes transformed by artillery, bulldozers, bodies, fuel, waste, and destroyed vegetation. War damages the relationship between people and place because land becomes cover, obstacle, target, grave, and resource.

The original essay says war destroyed the good relationship between humanity and the environment. Sledge's descriptions support this interpretation, though the relationship was not always peaceful before combat. What changes is the scale and speed of destruction. A coral island, ridge, farm, or village becomes valuable according to tactical position rather than ecological or community meaning.

## Fear and Courage

Sledge does not present courage as the absence of fear. Marines were frightened by artillery, infiltration, snipers, and the possibility of being wounded or killed. Courage involved continuing to perform duties while afraid. Men also experienced moments of collapse, numbness, anger, and exhaustion. The memoir resists the idea that a soldier must display one unchanging heroic emotion.

This honesty contributes to humanity by making veterans' psychological experience understandable. Combat trauma is not a sign that a person lacked strength. The nervous system responds to repeated threat, death, and helplessness. Sledge struggled to explain the war after returning home and found that writing became one way to organize memory.

## Hatred and Dehumanization

The Pacific War was marked by intense racial propaganda and mutual brutality. Marines often viewed Japanese soldiers as a collective enemy rather than as individuals, while Japanese military ideology demanded resistance and could portray surrender as dishonor. These beliefs intensified fear and reduced opportunities for mercy.

Sledge records the hatred without celebrating it. He understood that survival sometimes required lethal force, yet he also recognized that dehumanization threatened the moral character of the survivor. The enemy's conduct did not remove the need to examine one's own. This tension is one of the memoir's most important contributions.

## Faith and Moral Survival

Sledge carried a New Testament and used its margins to record notes. Faith did not provide easy explanations for the destruction he witnessed. The memoir presents moments of prayer, gratitude, doubt, and moral struggle. Religion functioned less as proof that one side was pure than as a language through which individuals tried to retain meaning.

Moral survival required more than physical survival. A Marine could return alive while carrying guilt, grief, and memories of actions witnessed or committed. Sledge's later work suggests that healing involved family, study, teaching, nature, and eventually testimony. He did not erase the past; he learned to speak about it.

## From Marine to Biologist and Professor

After the war, Sledge studied science, earned advanced degrees, and became a professor of biology at the University of Montevallo. This later life is important because it shows that his identity was not permanently limited to combat. He taught students, studied organisms, and contributed through education. His movement from battlefield destruction to biological study creates a meaningful contrast. (Sledge, China Marine)

Interest in nature may also have helped him reconnect with order and life. The same person who had seen landscapes filled with corpses later taught about living systems. His academic career does not cancel trauma, but it demonstrates the possibility of building a productive life after war.

## Writing as a Contribution to Humanity

Sledge's greatest public contribution was preserving an enlisted Marine's experience without turning it into propaganda. He honored courage and comradeship while documenting cruelty and waste. Readers encounter no simple message that war is glorious or that soldiers are merely victims. They encounter human beings making choices under extreme pressure.

The memoir supports peace not because Sledge claims that no war can ever be necessary, but because he makes the cost impossible to ignore. Political leaders and citizens who consider military action should understand what abstract decisions require from individuals. Victory has meaning, but it is purchased through bodies, families, landscapes, and memories.

## Conclusion

E. B. Sledge served as a Marine mortarman with Company K during the battles of Peleliu and Okinawa. He endured coral heat, mud, artillery, disease, death, and the loss of friends. His account describes both the courage of Marines and the moral damage produced when enemies are dehumanized. The incidents involving mutilation, corpses, civilian suffering, and environmental destruction are horrifying because he refuses to conceal them.

Sledge's contribution to humanity should not be described simply as fighting for peace. He fought a war as a loyal Marine. His broader contribution came through witness. *With the Old Breed* allows later generations to understand how combat tests brotherhood, faith, fear, dignity, and moral limits. It also restores individuality to soldiers whose experiences might otherwise disappear within casualty statistics.

After the war, Sledge became a biologist and professor, showing that a veteran could build a life devoted to learning after surviving destruction. His memoir remains fascinating and painful because it joins military history with moral reflection. Its final lesson is not that courage makes war clean. It is

that peace should be valued by people who understand exactly what war asks human beings to endure.

## Works Cited

Sledge, Eugene B. *With the Old Breed: At Peleliu and Okinawa*. Oxford University Press, 1990.

Sledge, Eugene B. *China Marine: An Infantryman's Life after World War II*. University of Alabama Press, 2002.