

## Bushmasters

In June of 1944, the world's attention was riveted on Normandy and the Allied invasion that was destined to liberate France. Half a world away, American forces were engaged in an equally brutal fight to expel the Japanese from New Guinea. George William Butler of Travelers Rest was an officer in the 158<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment battling the Japanese west of Hollandia.

Butler was a vocational agricultural education major and an honors student. He was a member of Future Farmers of America and Alpha Tau Alpha, the national honorary fraternity for agricultural education. He attended ROTC summer training at Clemson in 1941 and was appointed a first lieutenant and the athletics and recreation officer of Company G, 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment as a senior. Butler's Class of 1942 was the first to graduate with the United States at war and he and most of his classmates went immediately into the service. A year later, after he had completed his initial Army training, Butler married the former Gladys Burns of Travelers Rest.



After the attack on Pearl Harbor, the 158<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment had been rushed to Panama to defend the vital Canal Zone. The 158<sup>th</sup> was a separate regiment, meaning it was not assigned to an existing Army division. In Panama, the regiment built training facilities and conducted patrols in the dense jungle—excellent preparation for its later missions. The thick jungle included hazardous plants, insects, and animals, including the venomous Bushmaster snake, which the 158<sup>th</sup> adopted as its mascot. The 158<sup>th</sup> embarked for the Pacific in January 1943. It joined General Walter Krueger's 6<sup>th</sup> Army, part of General Douglas MacArthur's forces. By the end of March, the regiment was assembled in New Guinea.

In December 1943, Butler shipped out to the Southwest Pacific where he was assigned to the 158<sup>th</sup>. By that point in the war, the Bushmasters were at Finschhafen on New Guinea's northeastern tip. The Japanese were to the west, on the northside of the high, jagged Owen Stanley Mountain range. In May 1944, the 158<sup>th</sup> was ordered to Toem, where it relieved the 163<sup>rd</sup> Regimental Combat Team and began an assault on a Japanese airfield northwest of Sarmi, on New Guinea's Pacific coast.

The area was defended by a Japanese division and for several days, the two forces tangled in vicious engagements. On June 11, First Lieutenant Butler volunteered to lead an assault against an enemy of undetermined strength in a well-defended area less than 100 yards from the American defensive line. "Boldly, aggressively, and with complete disregard for his own safety, he led his men in a well-organized and successful attack," according to the citation for Butler's Distinguished Service Cross. Near the end of the fight, while still leading his men and aggressively pursuing the assault, Butler was killed. "The courageous and gallant leadership of First Lieutenant Butler was an inspiration to his men and resulted in the complete destruction of the entrenched enemy." The Distinguished Service Cross is second to only the Medal of Honor and is awarded only for heroism in action against the enemy.

After eliminating the Japanese from New Guinea, the island served as a jumping off point for MacArthur's return to the Philippines and the island-hopping campaign which contributed to the eventual defeat of Japan.

George William Butler was survived by his wife, his parents, and two brothers, one of whom was an Army Air Force aviation cadet. In addition to the Distinguished Service Cross, he was awarded the Purple Heart. After the war, his remains were returned to Travelers Rest and buried in the Locust Hill Baptist Church Cemetery.

