

Turning the Tide

On February 14, 1942, Theodore Rhett Harley of Hartsville was ordered to active duty at Fort McClellan, Alabama. It was a return trip for Harley, a 1940 graduate of Clemson College. The Sonoco Products Company employee had completed his ROTC summer training at the Army base in 1939.

Since then, the world had become engulfed in war and the Japanese were headed toward yet another victory in the Pacific. A week after Harley's call to service, President Roosevelt ordered General Douglas MacArthur to leave the Philippines to avoid his capture by the enemy forces driving down the Bataan Peninsula. Harley, like so many other young men, would form the forces that would turn back the Japanese onslaught and put America back on the offensive.

Ted was the son of Pearl and Theo Harley. He graduated from Hartsville High School in 1936 and traveled to the foothills to enroll at Clemson. As a cadet, he rose to the rank of second lieutenant and was one of the company officers in A Company, 1st Regiment of the Cadet Brigade. A chemistry major, Ted was a member of Alpha Chi Sigma. He participated in ROTC training at Fort McClellan in the summer between his junior and senior years at Clemson. Upon graduation, he was employed as a laboratory chemist by Sonoco in his hometown.



Between his graduation in 1940 and his call to active duty in 1942, the world had undergone an upheaval. Nazi Germany ruled Europe from the North Sea to the Mediterranean. In the Pacific, the Japanese had nearly destroyed the US Pacific Fleet and had then turned their attentions toward Indo-China and the Philippines. They had yet to taste defeat.

In April 1942, Ted Harley was transferred to Indian Town Gap, Pennsylvania. The following month, he shipped out for the Southwest Pacific theater of operations. He was assigned to the 148th Infantry Regiment of the 37th Infantry Division.

As Ted Harley was training and preparing for battle in the Fiji Islands, the Japanese decided to construct an air base at Munda Point on the island of New Georgia in the Solomon Islands chain. The new base would be about 150 miles northwest of the fiercely contested island of Guadalcanal, where American Marines and Army units were battling to hand the Japanese their first battlefield defeat.

Construction on the Munda Point base began in November with the Japanese going to great lengths to camouflage and hide their work. Despite their best efforts, Allied coast watchers and aerial reconnaissance detected the work and identified evidence of a crushed corral runway. The airfield became operational on the first day of December.

Following the end of ground fighting on Guadalcanal, the 148th Infantry Regiment and its parent 37th Infantry Division moved there in April 1943 as a staging ground for an attack on Munda Point. Munda airfield was a principal objective of the Central Solomons Campaign. The 148th was attached to the 43rd Infantry Division and arrived on New Georgia on July 7, 1943. Harley, now promoted to 1st Lieutenant, was a member of the regiment's anti-tank company. In heavy fighting, the 148th attacked Barley Ridge and then assaulted Horseshoe Hill. After fierce combat, the air base was finally seized on August 5.

But Ted Harley did not live to see the victory to which he committed his life. Harley was killed just two days before the base was captured. He was survived by his mother and his sister, Lillian.

With the airfield under American control, its runway was lengthened and facilities improved. The first American aircraft arrived the following week. The Japanese retreat would last for two more years, as thousands more young Americans would contribute their lives to the ultimate victory of freedom over tyranny.

