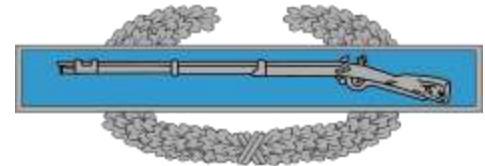




“Obie’s Last Stand”

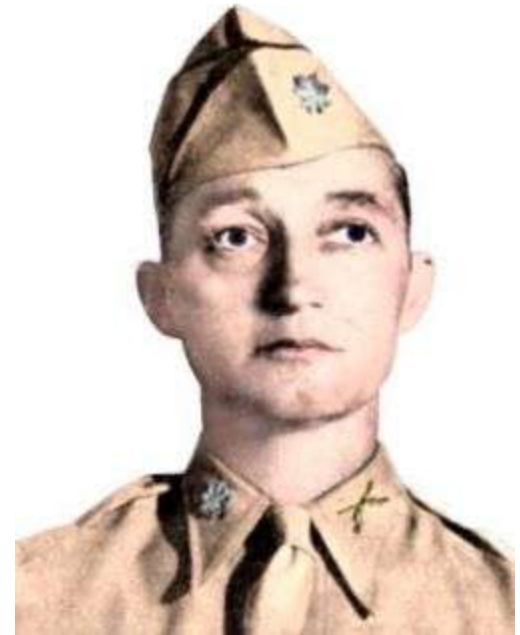
A Study of Leadership Under Fire



Presented by
MAJ Patrick Chaisson
Deputy Commander
New York Army National Guard
Recruiting and Retention Battalion

Lieutenant Colonel William J. O'Brien

- 25 September 1899 – 7 July 1944
- Enlisted in New York State Guard during August 1917
- Joined Company A, 105th Infantry in February 1920
- Commissioned through NYNG OCS in 1926
- Promoted to Captain in May 1939



LTC William J. "Obie" O'Brien

Mobilization



“On October 15, 1940, I was standing on the corner of Dauw Street and River Street in Troy, New York, waiting for a bus to take me to the Troy Armory – purpose to be inducted into the Army. I had just celebrated my eighteenth birthday the previous September. An officer came along and seeing my buck private’s uniform offered me a ride. It was Col. O’Brien {at that time a captain}.”

“The Col. was always concerned for the welfare of his men including myself and everyone else who served under him. The Col. was well liked and respected by everyone.”

-- Private George P. Kelly



Mobilization



Captain William O'Brien bids farewell to his wife and son as he departs for military service, 13 OCT 1940

Company "A" 108th Infantry.
N. Y. N. G.

Troy, N. Y.

INDUCTION INTO THE
MILITARY SERVICE OF
THE UNITED STATES.

Oct. 1, 1940.

Subjects Assembly, Mobilization.

To: Frank Standart

1. Company "A" 108th Infantry N. Y. N. G. assembles on Oct. 15, 1940.
At 8:00 A.M. at the State Armory, Fifteenth Street, Troy,
New York.

2. Report to the Armory ~~as soon as possible~~ on the above
date.

W. M. Brien
Capt. 108th Inf., N.Y.N.G.
Co. A.

Assuming Command

- Promoted to Major in February 1942
- Assigned as Regimental S4 (Supply Officer)
- Promoted to Lieutenant Colonel in April 1943
- Assigned as Battalion Commander, 1st Battalion 105th Infantry, 27th Infantry Division



Preparing for War

HAWAII: Summer 1943

“If you think walking over the golf courses was a job, you should follow Brer Bill around some day. Thirty miles in 14 hours, up hills that rival the Adirondacks ain’t no fun, but one day even the mules quit and the gang had to carry the 81mm mortars and the ammo by hand. We have a good outfit, and I don’t have to snap the whip too often.”

-- LTC William J. O’Brien,
in a letter to his brother



Operation *Forager*

The Invasion of Saipan



- Saipan is a large (44 square mile) island in the Marianas Chain, 2,000 miles from Japan
- US invaded June 15, 1944 (9 days after D-Day in Europe)
- US forces: 2 MARDIV, 4 MARDIV, 27ID
- Japanese Forces: 30,000 (double US intel estimates)

Operations on Saipan

June 21, 1944

“When assault elements of his battalion were held up by intense enemy fire, Colonel O'Brien ordered three tanks to precede the assault companies in an attempt to knock out the strong point.”

“Because of direct enemy fire the tanks' turrets were closed, causing the tanks to lose direction and to fire into our own troops.”



June 21, 1944

“Colonel O'Brien, with complete disregard for his own safety, dashed into full view of the enemy and ran to the leader's tank. By pounding on the tank with his pistol butt to attract the attention of the tank crew and mounting the tank fully exposed to enemy fire, Colonel O'Brien personally directed the assault until the enemy strong point was liquidated.”



June 21, 1944



“When the advance was halted...O’Brien got down from the tank, holstered his .45, walked back to a man who had been mortally wounded, picked him up and carried him back out of range of the enemy’s fire.”

-- Francis A. O’Brien, *Battling for Saipan*

June 28, 1944



“On 28 June 1944, while his battalion was attempting to take a bitterly defended high ridge in the vicinity of Donnay, Colonel O'Brien arranged to capture the ridge by a double envelopment movement of two large combat patrols, he personally to control the maneuver.”

June 28, 1944



“Colonel O'Brien crossed 1,200 yards of sniper-infested underbrush alone to arrive at a point where one of his platoons was being held up by the enemy. Leaving some men to contain the enemy, he led four men into a narrow ravine behind, and killed or drove off all the Japanese manning that strongpoint. In this action he captured five machine guns and one 77mm field piece.”

“Obie’s Ridge”



“We moved forward on a reconnaissance...to meet the battalion commander. Of course, Bill O’Brien was right on top – the old nonchalant Obie, talking a mile a minute with a cigarette dangling from his lips. Obie, with his battalion, had just completed one of those very dangerous maneuvers which, when successful, go down with the great deeds of history.”

-- MAJ Kenneth J. Dolan

Gyokusai

- *Gyokusai* Japanese:
玉碎 honorable suicide
(literally – shattered
jade)
- Also known as a Banzai
Charge
- Massed infantry attack
made in desperation to
avoid surrender and
dishonor



The Saipan *Gyokusai* Attack

- By July 6 US forces held 60% of Saipan and had killed 12,000 Japanese defenders
- Intelligence believed most Japanese dead



- In truth, 5,000 Japanese remained alive and ready to fight for their Emperor

The Saipan *Gyokusai* Attack



- *Gyokusai* commanded by COL Takuji Suzuki
- Japanese too injured to walk committed suicide; all others joined the attack
- 4,500 Japanese struck the 1st and 2nd Battalions, 105th Infantry, at 0200 hours on July 7, 1944

“Obie’s Last Stand”

“On 7 July 1944 his battalion and another battalion were attacked by an overwhelming enemy force estimated at between three and five thousand Japanese.”



“Obie’s Last Stand”



“With bloody hand-to-hand fighting in progress everywhere, their forward positions were finally overrun by the sheer weight of the enemy numbers.”

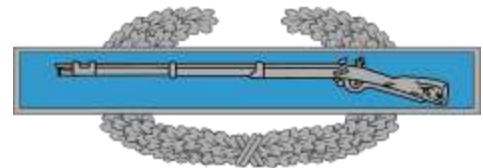
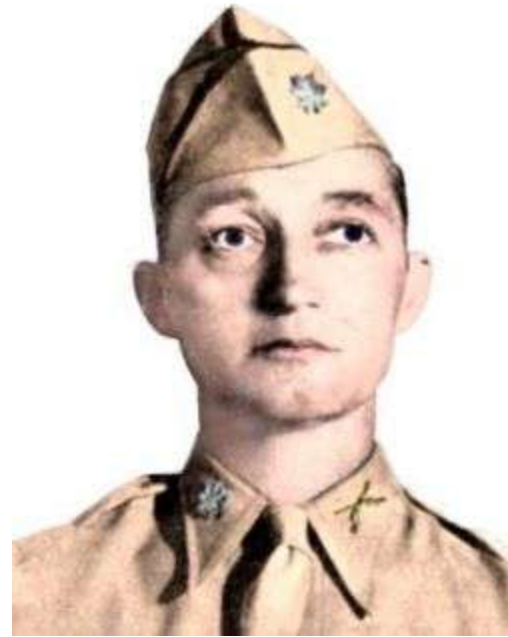


“With many casualties, and ammunition running low, Colonel O'Brien refused to leave the front lines. Striding up and down the lines he fired at the enemy with a pistol in each hand, and his presence there bolstered the spirits of the men, encouraged them in their fight, and sustained them in their heroic stand.”



“Even after he was seriously wounded Colonel O'Brien refused to be evacuated and, after his pistol ammunition was exhausted, he manned a caliber .50 machine gun, mounted on a jeep and continued firing.”

“When last seen alive he was standing upright firing into the Japanese hordes that were then enveloping him. Some time later his body was found surrounded by enemy he had killed.”



Lieutenant Colonel William J. O'Brien



Congressional Medal of Honor

- LTC William J. O'Brien received the Congressional Medal of Honor (posthumously) on May 27, 1945, in a ceremony at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Troy, New York
- He was survived by his wife and son, William J. O'Brien, Jr.



Lieutenant Colonel William J. O'Brien



- LTC William J. O'Brien was buried at St. Peter's Cemetery, Troy, New York
- The Officers' Quarters at Camp Smith, New York, is named in his honor.



Obie's Leadership Attributes

- Personal courage
- Physical stamina
- Care and concern for his Soldiers
- Tactically proficient
- Set the example
- Made sound and timely decisions
- Coolness under stress
- Selfless service



Questions

