*Sometimes he and his companions explored further up the coast. Around twenty-five miles north of their camp, they came upon a small graveyard bearing many little white crosses, erected in perfect, neat rows. Draped over each one was a dog tag, one of the two that each soldier was given upon enlistment. These were graves of American soldiers, many from Wisconsin, who had been brutally slaughtered during the Battle of Buna. When their unit landed on this beach, the Japanese immediately took them by surprise, mowing them down with machine guns. Walking through that graveyard and reading their dog tags was a sobering sight. At that moment, the real tragedy of war suddenly hit home.*

*They walked on, coming across several dead Japanese soldiers, the bodies still lying in their trenches. The army put a sign there with a warning:*

*Do Not Touch. Area May Be Booby Trapped*

*Still, soldiers who visited the site earlier took gold teeth and fillings from these corpses. Further exploration brought them to a startling discovery. Immediately in front of them, a well-hidden enemy pillbox materialized out of the dense jungle growth. They never suspected a thing until they were merely inches from it. The Japanese used empty steel drums, filled them with sand, and stacked them up like a fort. Logs and brush placed on the top and sides made it completely invisible. Guns were fired through small, strategically placed slits. The group went inside and saw more bodies of Japanese soldiers lying right where they dropped. Outside, just a few yards out in the ocean, sat the remains of a partially sunken American landing barge.*

*One night it was Ellis’s turn to do guard duty watching the trucks parked in the lot next to the jungle. At the end of his duty, a rotten, putrid, and sickening smell in front of the officer’s tents permeated the air. These tents occupied the choicest location, right along the ocean. Sometime during the night, the high tide washed a dead crocodile ashore. It was huge, twenty feet long, bloated and decomposing. The guards were ordered to get it out of there. They tied a rope to a two and one-half ton, ten-wheel tandem dual GMC truck and gave it full throttle. Wheels churned but the croc didn’t budge. They added a second truck before it would finally move. Dragging it far away from camp to some remote location, they dug a large pit, rolled the carcass in, and piled driftwood over it. Five gallons of diesel fuel was poured over the wood, and the pile was ignited. It burned for three days. After it cooled, the natives arrived and ate it, scooping the flesh and maggots up with their hands, enjoying it like it was candy. Watching them do this made Ellis nauseous and he had to look away. Soon afterward the soldiers covered the rest of it up.
He also observed other strange, fascinating things about the natives. He saw them stand perfectly still chest deep in the ocean and successfully spear fish. Then he watched them eat the catch raw while it was still flopping. Even though native villages were off limits, they could be seen in the distance as the GI’s passed by. Small gardens were spotted beside the houses. They caught glimpses of the women who were wearing skirts, but were bare from the waist up. Mothers carried small babies nursing on their breasts. They were often seen bouncing along with breast milk streaming a brilliant white down their very dark skinned chests. The men were naked except for their small loincloths. All went barefoot. Men and women alike were always chewing Betel nuts. The blood-red betel juice mixed with their saliva and ran out of the corners of their mouths. When they would smile all their teeth were stained red. Drool always slopped down their chins, dripping onto their bare chests, and making them look like they were bleeding.*

*After taking on fuel and water overnight, they travelled up coast to Oro bay supply base and docked. Eventually they were trucked ten more miles north up the coast to their camp. Their new quarters seemed luxurious. Brand new army tents were already waiting for them. Erected between coconut palms, they faced the cleanest, purist white sandy beach Ellis had ever seen. Beyond the tents was a short but steep slope down to the water, where the bottom plunged quickly into deep water. Daily routines soon revolved around leisure time, the highlight of which was swimming butt naked in this South Pacific paradise. They swam in the early morning before breakfast and again at the end of a hard day’s work. Arriving back at camp very hot and sweaty, they peeled off their long green fatigue pants and sticky long-sleeved shirts, and removed their combat boots. This was the only time they could be barefoot, but they had to run quickly across the blazing hot sand. One Sunday morning the ocean looked so inviting that Ellis decided to swim as far as he could. When he finally turned around to head back to shore he was so shocked that he almost panicked. The swim had felt so good that he was way, way out from land. Fortunately he was a strong swimmer and made it back safely.*

*The GI’s soon learned how to surf using their white cotton mattress covers. The technique started by wetting each cover in seawater. Next, they ran down the beach with the open end of the cover facing forward, allowing it to fill with air. Once it was full, they quickly tied it shut. Carrying the cover into the breakers, they jumped up just at the right moment, threw their arms over the air bag, and hung on for a ride up onto the beach sand. Perhaps they invented the surfboards of today. Afterward, the wet covers were hung to dry in the constant tropical breeze, and were always ready by bedtime.*

**About the Author**

Linda Mudry is Ellis’ daughter and resides in Murrysville, Pennsylvania. She holds a bachelors degree in Anthropology from the University of Pittsburgh. She shares her love of the outdoors and the natural world with her father. He introduced her to the Appalachian Trail during her teen years, with a short hike in The Smoky Mountains. Nearly forty years later she embarked on her own adventure, completing all 2,175 miles, from Georgia to Maine. She attributes the lessons she learned there to her ability to write this remarkable tale about the father she so greatly admires. This is her first book.