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Title: Top of the Ladder: Marine Operations in the Northern Solomons

Author: John C. Chapin

Release date: April 27, 2015 [EBook #48808]

Language: English

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\*\*\* START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK TOP OF THE LADDER: MARINE OPERATIONS IN THE NORTHERN SOLOMONS \*\*\*

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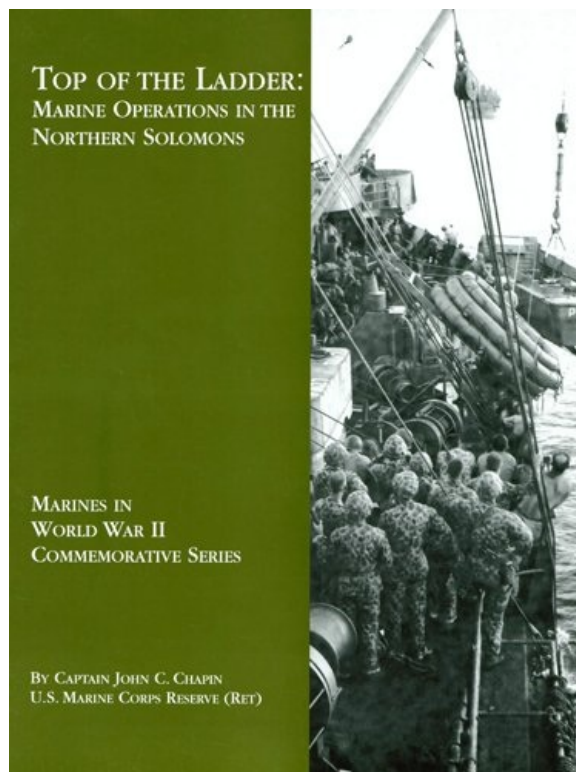
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# TOP OF THE LADDER: MARINE OPERATIONS IN THE NORTHERN SOLOMONS

MARINES IN  
WORLD WAR II  
COMMEMORATIVE SERIES

BY CAPTAIN JOHN C. CHAPIN  
U.S. MARINE CORPS RESERVE (RET)



*Riflemen clad in camouflage dungarees await the lowering of their landing craft from George Clymer (APA 27) for their dash to the beaches in their amphibious assault landing on Bougainville. (National Archives Photo 80-G-55810)*

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*Raiders, up to their hips in water, man a machine gun along a jungle trail. Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 70764*

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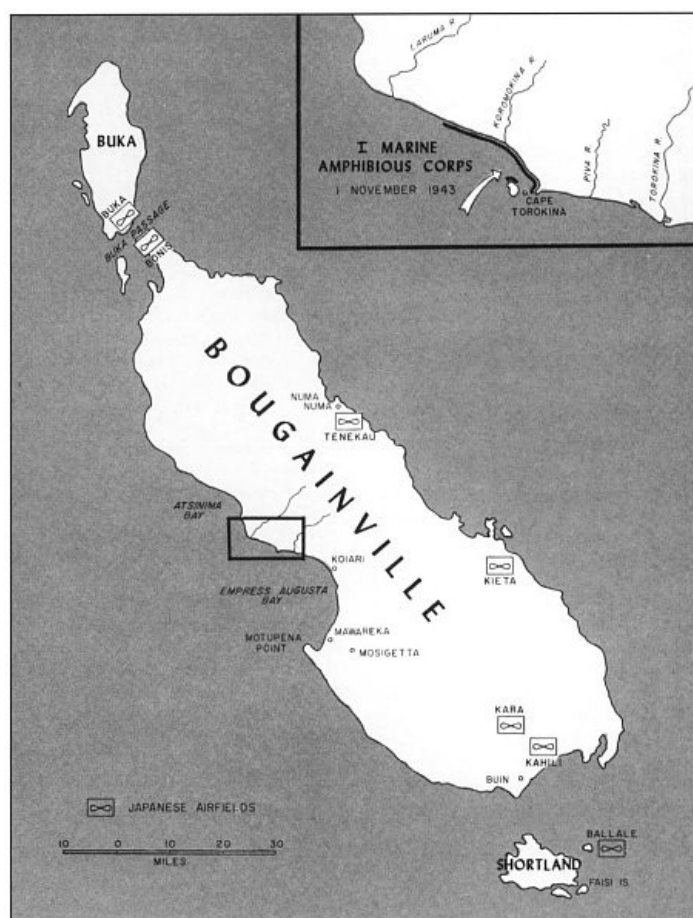
# Top of the Ladder: Marine Operations in the Northern Solomons

by Captain John C. Chapin, USMCR (Ret)

Assault landings began for the men in the blackness of the early hours of the morning. On 1 November 1943, the troops of the 3d Marine Division were awakened before 0400, went to General Quarters at 0500, ate a tense breakfast, and then stood by for the decisive command, "Land the Landing Force." All around them the preinvasion bombardment thundered, as the accompanying destroyers poured their 5-inch shells into the target areas, and spotters in aircraft helped to adjust the fire.

As the sun rose on a bright, clear day, the word came at 0710 for the first LCVPs (Landing Craft, Vehicle and Personnel) to pull away from their transport ships and head for the shore, a 5,000-yard run across Empress Augusta Bay to the beaches of an island called Bougainville.

Almost 7,500 Marines were entering their LCVPs (with Coast Guard crew and coxswains) for an assault on 12 color-coded beaches. Eleven of these extended west from Cape Torokina for 8,000 yards to the Koromokina Lagoon. The 12th was on Puruata Island just offshore from the beaches. The six beaches on the right were assigned to Colonel George W. McHenry's 3d Marines and Lieutenant Colonel Alan Shapley's 2d Raider Regiment (less one battalion). The five on the left and Puruata Island were the objectives of Colonel Edward A. Craig's 9th Marines and Lieutenant Colonel Fred D. Bean's 3d Raider Battalion.



As the men headed for shore, 31 Marine torpedo and scout bombers, covered by fighters, came screaming in from their base at Munda, bombing and strafing to give the beaches a final plastering. At 0726, the first wave touched ground, four minutes ahead of the official H-Hour. As the other waves came in, it was immediately apparent that there was serious trouble in two ways. A high surf was tossing the LCVPs and LCMs (Landing Craft, Medium) around, and they were landing on the wrong beaches, broaching, and smashing into each other in the big waves. By the middle of the morning, 64 LCVPs and 22 LCMs were hulks littering the beaches. Three of the designated beaches had to be abandoned as unusable.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 62751

*Marine riflemen keep their heads down as they get closer to the assault beach on D-Day.*

Major Donald M. Schmuck, commanding a company in the 3d Marines, later recalled how, in the “mad confusion” of the beachhead, his company was landed in the midst of heavy gunfire in the middle of another battalion’s zone on the beach of Torokina. Running his company on the double through the other battalion and the 2d Raiders’ zone across inlets and swamp, Major Schmuck got his men to the right flank of his own battalion where they were to have landed originally. His surprised battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Hector de Zayas, stared at the bedraggled new arrivals exclaiming, “Where have you been?” Major Schmuck pointed back to Cape Torokina and replied, “Ask the Navy!”



*As seen from a beached landing craft, these Marines are under fire while wading in the last few yards to the beach.*

The other trouble came from the Japanese defenders. While the 9th Marines on the left landed unopposed, the 3d Marines on the right met fierce opposition, a deadly crossfire of machine gun and artillery fire. One Japanese 75mm gun, sited on Cape Torokina, was sending heavy enfilade fire against the incoming landing waves. It smashed 14 boats and caused many casualties. The boat group commander’s craft took a direct hit, causing the following boat waves to become disorganized and confused. Machine gun and rifle fire, with 90mm mortar bursts added, covered the shoreline. Companies landed in the wrong places. Dense underbrush, coming right down to the beaches, shrouded the defenders in their 25 bunkers and numerous rifle pits. The commanding officer of the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines, Major Leonard M. “Spike” Mason, was wounded and had

to be evacuated, but not before he shouted to his men, "Get the hell in there and fight!" Nearby, the executive officer of the 2d Raider Regiment, Lieutenant Colonel Joseph J. McCaffery, was directing an assault when he was severely wounded. He died that night.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC)

*Sgt Robert A. Owens was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor.*

In spite of the chaos, the intensive training of the Marines took hold. Individuals and small groups moved in to assault the enemy, reducing bunker after bunker, dropping grenades down their ventilators. For an hour, the situation was in doubt.

The fierce combat led to a wry comment by one captain, Henry Applington II, comparing "steak and eggs served on white tablecloths by stewards ... and three and a half hours and a short boat ride later ... rolling in a ditch trying to kill another human being with a knife."

The devastating fire from the 75mm cannon on Cape Torokina was finally silenced when Sergeant Robert A. Owens, crept up to its bunker, and although wounded, charged in and killed the gun crew and the occupants of the bunker before he himself was killed. A posthumous Medal of Honor was awarded to him for this heroic action which was so crucial to the landing.

Meanwhile, on Puruata Island, just offshore of the landing beaches, the noise was intense; a well-dug-in contingent of Japanese offered stiff resistance to a reinforced company of the 3d Battalion, 2d Raiders. It was midafternoon of D plus one before the defenders in pill boxes, rifle pits, and trees were subdued, and then some of them got away to fight another day. A two-pronged sweep and mop-up by the raiders on D plus 2 found 29 enemy dead of the 70 Japanese estimated to have been on that little island. The raiders lost five killed and 32 wounded.

An hour after the landings on the main beaches a traditional Marine signal was flashed from shore to the command and staff still afloat, "Situation well in hand." This achievement of the riflemen came in spite of the ineffective prelanding fire of the destroyers. The men in front-line combat found that none of the 25 enemy bunkers on the right-hand beaches had been hit. Some of the naval bombardment had begun at a range of over seven miles, and the official Marine history summarized, "The gunfire plan ... had accomplished nothing."

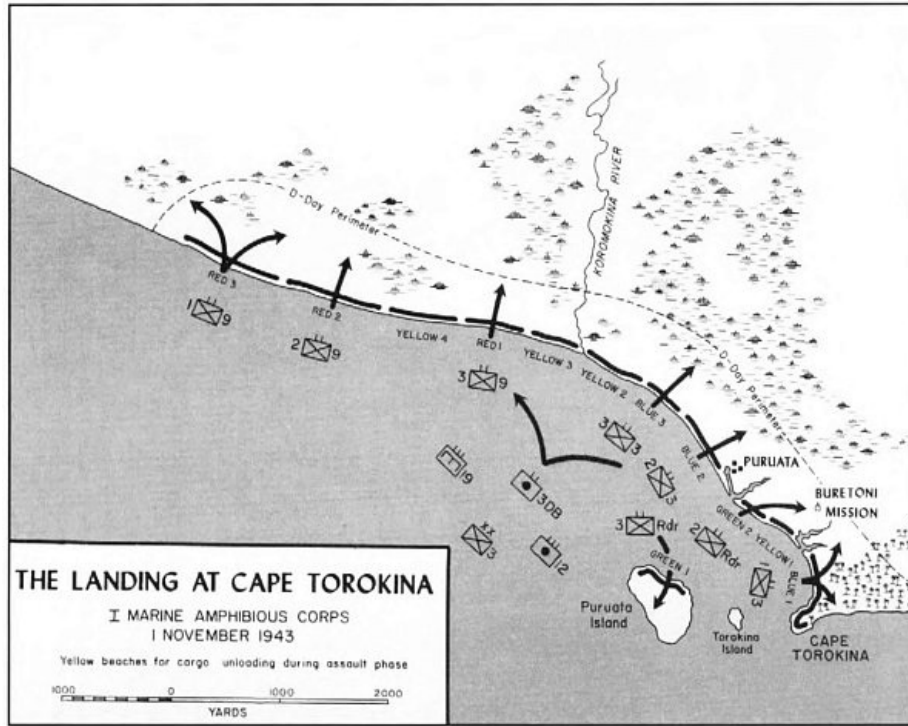
*On a beach, rifles pointing toward the enemy, Marines get ready to fight their way inland.*

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 69782



Unloading supplies and getting them in usable order on the chaotic beaches was a major problem. Seabees, sailors, and Marines all turned to the task, with 40 percent of the entire landing force laboring as the shore

party. They sweated 6,500 tons of supplies ashore.



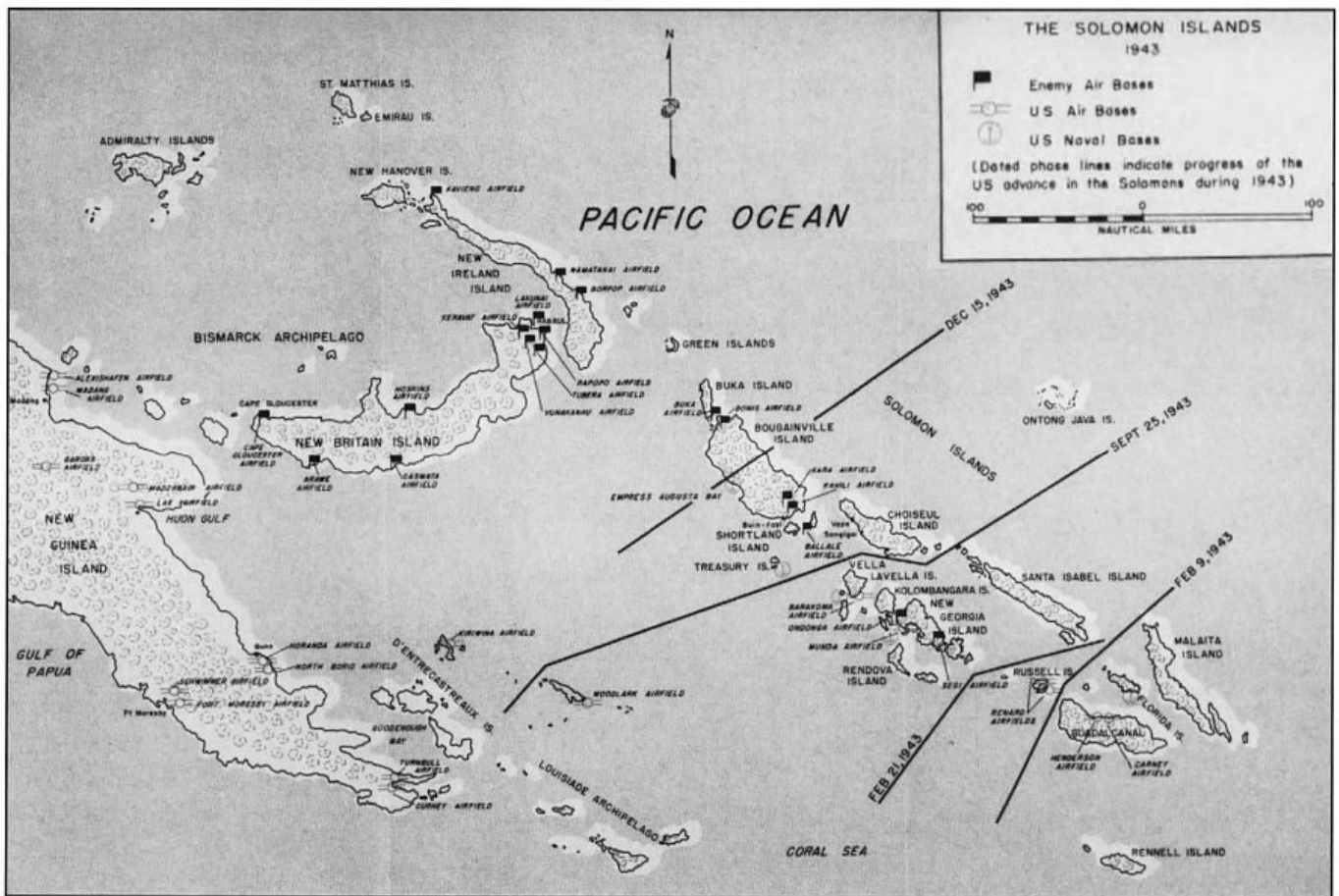
### THE LANDING AT CAPE TOROKINA

I MARINE AMPHIBIOUS CORPS  
1 NOVEMBER 1943

#### Yellow beaches for cargo unloading during assault phase

Simultaneously, the batteries of the 12th Marines were struggling to get their artillery pieces ashore and set to fire. One battery, in support of the 2d Raider Battalion, waded through a lagoon to find firing positions. Amtracs (amphibian tractors), supplemented by rubber boats, were used to ferry the men and ammunition to the beaches. The 90mm anti-aircraft guns of the 3d Defense Battalion were also brought ashore early to defend against the anticipated air attacks.

The Japanese had been quick to respond to this concentration of American ships. Before the first assault boats had hit the beach, a large flight of enemy carrier planes was on its way to attack the Marines and their supporting ships. New Zealand and Marine fighters met them in the air and the covering destroyers put up a hail of anti-aircraft fire, while the transports and cargo ships took evasive action. Successive Japanese flights were beaten off; 26 enemy planes were shot down.



## THE SOLOMON ISLANDS 1943



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 61899

*LtGen Alexander A. Vandegrift was an early commander of IMAC.*

The men in the rifle battalions long remembered the sight. On one occasion, a Marine Corsair was about to pull the trigger on an enemy Zeke ("Zero") fighter set up perfectly in the pilot's sights when a burst of fire from Marine .50-caliber machine guns on the beach, meant for the Zeke, shot the American down. One of the riflemen later recalled that the Marine pilot fell into the ocean and surfaced with a broken leg. "We waded out to get him. He was ticked off—mostly because he missed the Jap."

In spite of all these problems, the assault battalions had, by the end of D-Day, reached their objectives on the Initial Beachhead Line, 600-1,000 yards inland. One enormous unexpected obstacle, however, had now become painfully clear. Available maps were nearly useless, and a large, almost impenetrable swamp, with water three to six feet deep, lay right behind the beaches and made movement inland and lateral contact among the Marine units impossible.

The night of D-Day was typical for the ground troops. By 1800, darkness had set in and the men all knew the iron-clad rule: be in your foxhole and stay there. Anyone moving around out there was a Japanese soldier trying to infiltrate. John A. Monks, Jr., quoted a Marine in his book, *A Ribbon and a Star*:



From seven o'clock in the evening till dawn, with only centipedes and lizards and scorpions and mosquitoes begging to get acquainted—wet, cold, exhausted, but unable to sleep—you lay there and shivered and thought and hated and prayed. But you stayed there. You didn't cough, you didn't snore, you changed your position with the least amount of noise. For it was still great to be alive.

At sea, the transports and cargo ships were withdrawn; there was intelligence that enemy naval forces were on the move.

## Major General Allen H. Turnage, USMC



Allen Hal Turnage was born in Farmville, North Carolina, on 3 January 1891. After attending Horner Military Academy and then the University of North Carolina, at age 22 he was appointed a second lieutenant in the U.S. Marine Corps. Sent to Haiti, he served with the 2d Marine Regiment from 1915 to 1918, becoming a company commander in the Haitian Gendarmerie.

A captain in 1917, Turnage did get to France where he commanded the 5th Marine Brigade Machine Gun Battalion. Home in 1919, he was assigned to the 5th Marines at Quantico and became regimental adjutant and an instructor for the first Field Officers School, 1920-22.

A major in 1927, Turnage had three years with the Pacific fleet, and then he served with the U.S. Electoral Mission in Nicaragua (1932). He came back to Washington, made lieutenant colonel in 1934 and full colonel in 1939. He was director of the Basic School at the Philadelphia Navy Yard, and, in the spring of 1939, he was sent to China to head Marine forces in North China.

In summer of 1941, on the eve of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, he returned to Headquarters in Washington. In 1942, as a brigadier general, he commanded the burgeoning Marine Base and Training Center at New River, North Carolina.

When the 3d Marine Division was formed in September 1942, he was named assistant division commander. In the summer of 1943 Turnage was promoted to major general and selected to head the division. He then led the division on Bougainville and in the liberation of Guam, the first American territory to be recaptured from the enemy.

After the war, he was appointed Assistant Commandant, followed by promotion to lieutenant general and command of FMFPac (Fleet Marine Force, Pacific). He retired 1 January 1948, and died 22 October 1971.

His awards included the Navy Cross, the Navy Distinguished Service Medal, and the Presidential Unit Citation (which his men received for both Guam and Iwo Jima).

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## *Planning the Operation*



Photo courtesy of Cyril J. O'Brien

*LtGen Haruyoshi Hyakutake, commanded the Japanese forces on Bougainville.*

This kind of strong enemy reaction, in the air and at sea, had been expected by American staff officers who had put in long weeks planning the Bougainville operation. Looking at a map of the Solomon Islands chain, it was obvious that this largest island (130 by 30 miles) on the northwest end was a prime objective to cap the long and painful progress northward from the springboard of Guadalcanal at the south end. As Guadalcanal had been the beginning of the island chain, so now Bougainville would mark the top of the ladder in the Northern Solomons. From Bougainville airfields, American planes could neutralize the crucial Japanese base of Rabaul less than 250 miles away on New Britain. From Bougainville, the enemy could defend his massive air-naval complex at Rabaul. "Viewed from either camp, the island was a priority possession."

There were the usual sequences of high level planning conferences, but, on 1 October 1943, Admiral William F. Halsey, Commander, South Pacific Area, notified General Douglas MacArthur, Supreme Allied Commander, Southwest Pacific Area, that the beaches on Empress Augusta Bay in the middle of Bougainville's west coast would be the main objective. This location was selected as the point to strike because with the main Japanese forces 25 miles away at the opposite north and south ends of the island, it would be the point of least opposition. In addition, it provided a natural defensive region once the Marines had landed and their airfields had been gouged out of the swamp and jungle. Finally, the target area would provide a site for a long-range radar installation and an advanced naval base for PT (patrol torpedo) boats.

It promised to be a campaign in a miserable location. And it was. There were centipedes three fingers wide, butterflies as big as little birds, thick and nearly impenetrable jungles, bottomless mangrove swamps, crocodile infested rivers, millions of insects, and heavy daily torrents of rain with enervating humidity.

Major General Allen H. Turnage, the 3d Marine Division commander, summarized these horrors. "Never had men in the Marine Corps had to fight and maintain themselves over such difficult terrain as was encountered on Bougainville."

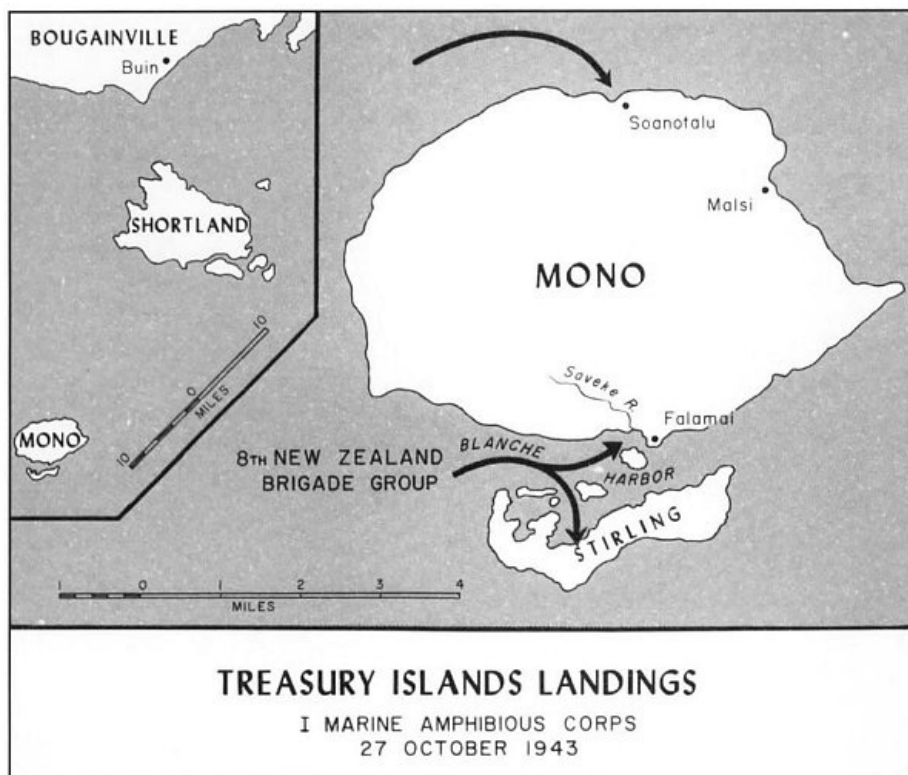
To carry out this operation, Lieutenant General Alexander A. Vandegrift, Commanding General, I Marine Amphibious Corps (IMAC),<sup>A</sup> had in his command for the operation:

- 3d Marine Division
- 1st Marine Parachute Regiment
- 2d Marine Raider Regiment
- 37th Infantry Division, USA (in reserve)

<sup>A</sup> Gen Vandegrift, 1st Marine Division commander on Guadalcanal, relieved MajGen Clayton B. Vogel as IMAC commander in July 1943. He in turn was relieved as IMAC commander by MajGen Charles D. Barrett on 27 September. Gen Vandegrift was on his way home to Washington to become 18th Commandant of the Marine Corps when, on the sudden death of Gen Barrett on 8 October, he was recalled to the Pacific to resume command of IMAC and lead it in the Bougainville operation. He, in turn, was relieved by MajGen Roy S. Geiger on 9 November.

The Marine riflemen in these units were supplemented by a wide range of support: 155mm artillery; motor transport; amphibian tractor; and signal, medical, special weapons, Seabee, and tank battalions. The 3d Division had its own engineers and pioneers in the 19th Marines and artillery in the 12th Marines.

Immediately following Vandegrift's operation order, practice landing exercises were conducted in the New Hebrides and on Guadalcanal and Florida Islands.



**TREASURY ISLANDS LANDINGS**  
**I MARINE AMPHIBIOUS CORPS**  
**27 OCTOBER 1943**

*LtCol Victor H. Krulak was commander of the Choiseul operation.*

Department of Defense Photo (USMC)



The objectives assigned on Bougainville were to seize a substantial beachhead and build airstrips. Then American planes could assure final neutralization of the Japanese airfields at Kahili, Buka, and Bonis airfields at the north and south ends of Bougainville. (By 31 October, American planes had initially rendered the Japanese fields inoperable.) After that would come a massive increase in air operations against Rabaul.

Facing the invading Marines was a formidable enemy force dispersed on the island. At Buin, for instance, there were 21,800 Japanese. Responsible for the defense was an old adversary, Lieutenant General Haruyoshi Hyakutake, commander of the *Seventeenth Army*, and the man the Marines had defeated at Guadalcanal. His main force was the *6th Division*.

Working with the ground U. S. forces were the aviators of Air Solomons: New Zealand fighters, Army Air Force bombers, and the 1st and 2d Marine Aircraft Wings. As early as 15 August fighter planes from VMF-214 (the famous Black Sheep squadron) had strafed the Kahili airfield at the southern end of Bougainville. Now, in October, there were repeated strikes against the Japanese planes at other Bougainville airfields.

At sea, Halsey had designated Rear Admiral Theodore S. Wilkinson as commander of Task Force 31. Under him were Rear Admiral Frederick C. Sherman with the carriers (TF 38) and Rear Admiral Aaron S. "Tip" Merrill with the cruisers and destroyers (TF 39). Their job was to soften up the defenders before the landing and to safeguard the Marine-held beachhead.

## 3d Marine Division

With Japan's initial conquests spread over vast reaches of the Pacific, it quickly became obvious that additional Marine divisions were sorely needed. Accordingly, a letter from the Commandant on 29 August 1942 authorized the formation of the 3d Marine Division.

There was the 3d Marines, which had been activated first on 20 December 1916 at Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic. Deactivated in August 1922, the regiment was again brought to life on 16 June 1942 at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, and strengthened by boots from Parris Island. Its commander, Colonel Oscar R. Cauldwell, soon led to it to Samoa, arriving there in September 1942. Intensive training in jungle tactics and practice landings took place there. Then, in March 1943, it received a substantial number of reinforcing units and became a full-fledged regimental combat team, beefing up its strength to 5,600. Finally, in May 1943, it sailed for New Zealand, where the 3d Marine Division would come together.

Also with World War I roots, the 9th Marines was born 20 November 1917 at Quantico, Virginia, and was sent to Cuba. From there it moved to Texas, before being deactivated at the Philadelphia Navy Yard in April 1919. Reactivated on 12 February 1942 at Camp Elliott, California, under Colonel Lemuel C. Shepherd, Jr., it underwent training at the new Camp Pendleton. Similarly reinforced, by 1 January 1943 it was ready as a regimental combat team with 5,500 men. Movement overseas brought it to New Zealand on 5 February 1943.

The third infantry regiment that would make up the division was the 21st Marines. It was formed from a cadre of well-trained men from the 6th Marines, who had just returned from duty in Iceland. Arriving at Camp Lejeune on 15 July 1942, the cadre was augmented by boots from Parris Island and officers from Quantico. Colonel Daniel E. Campbell assumed command and the training began. Moving to join the other elements, the regiment arrived in New Zealand 11 March 1943.

The reinforcing of the infantry regiments to make them into self-sustaining regimental combat teams drew heavily on their two complementary regiments: the 12th Marines and the 19th Marines. The 12th Marines was a salty old unit, led by Brigadier General Smedley D. Butler in China in the 1920s. Its antecedent was a small provisional contingent sent to protect American interests in China and designated the 12th Regiment (infantry), 4 October 1927. The 12th was reactivated at Camp Elliott on 1 September 1942 for World War II as an artillery regiment under command of Colonel John B. Wilson. Concluding its training, the regiment arrived in New Zealand on 11 March 1943.

The 19th Marines was different. It was made up of Seabees, engineers, bakers, piledrivers, pioneers, paving specialists, and many old timers from the 25th Naval Construction Battalion at the U.S. Naval Advance Base, Port Hueneme, California. It, too, was formed at Camp Elliott and its birthday was 16 September 1942. This was the regiment with pontoons for bridges, power plants, photographic darkrooms, bulldozers, excavators, needles, thread, and water purification machinery. No landing force would dare take an island without them. Colonel Robert M. Montague took command of the unit in New Zealand on 11 March 1943.

The division's first commander was Major General Charles D. Barrett, a veteran of World War I. He assumed command in September 1942, but left a year later to take charge of IMAC and the planning for the Bougainville operation.

His assistant division commander had been Brigadier General Allen H. Turnage, and, upon Barrett's death, he was promoted to major general and given command of the division which he would soon lead at Bougainville.

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## *Diversionsary Landings*

There was another key element in the American plan: diversion. To mislead the enemy on the real objective, Bougainville, the IMAC operations order on 15 October directed the 8th Brigade Group of the 3d New Zealand Division to land on the Treasury Islands, 75 miles southeast of Empress Augusta Bay. There, on 27 October, the New Zealanders, under Brigadier R. A. Row, with 1,900 Marine support troops, went ashore on two small islands.

One was named Mono and the other Sterling. Mono is about four miles wide, north to south, and seven miles long. It looks like a pancake. Sterling, shaped like a hook, is four miles long, narrow in places to 300 yards, but with plenty of room on its margins for airstrips.

In a drizzly overcast, the 29th NZ Battalion (Lieutenant Colonel F. L. H. Davis) and the 36th (Lieutenant Colonel K. B. McKenzie-Muirson) hit Mono at Falami Point, and the 34th (under Lieutenant Colonel R. J. Eyre) struck the beach of Sterling Island off Blanche Harbor. There was light opposition. Help for the assault troops came from LCI (landing craft, infantry) gunboats which knocked out at least one deadly Japanese 40mm twin-mount gun and a couple of enemy bunkers.

A simultaneous landing was then made on the opposite or north side of Mono Island at Soanotalu. This was perhaps the most important landing of all, for there New Zealand soldiers, American Seabees, and U.S. radar specialists would set up a big long-range radar station. 9

The Japanese soon reacted to the Soanotalu landing and hurled themselves against the perimeter. On one occasion, 80-90 Japanese attacked 50 New Zealanders who waited until they saw "the whites of their eyes." They killed 40 of the Japanese and dispersed the rest.

There was unexpected machine gunfire at Sterling. One Seabee bulldozer operator attacked the machine gun with his big blade. An Army corporal, a medic, said he couldn't believe it, "The Seabee ran his dozer over and over the machine gun nest until everything was quiet.... It all began to stink after a couple of days."

Outmanned, the Japanese drew back to higher ground, were hunted down, and killed. Surrender was still not in their book. On 12 November, the New Zealanders could call the Treasuries their own with the radar station in operation. Japanese dead totaled 205, and the brigade took only eight prisoners. The operation had secured the seaside flank of Bougainville, and very soon on Sterling there was an airfield. It began to operate against enemy forces on Bougainville on Christmas Day, 1943.

A second diversion, east of the Treasury Islands and 45 miles from Bougainville, took place on Choiseul Island. Sub-Lieutenant C. W. Seton, Royal Australian Navy and coastwatcher on Choiseul, said the Japanese there appeared worried. The garrison troops were shooting at their own shadows, perhaps because American and Australian patrols had been criss-crossing the 80-miles-long (20-miles-wide) island since September, scouting out the Japanese positions. There were also some 3,500 transient enemy troops on Choiseul, bivouacked and waiting to be shipped the 45 miles north to Buin on Bougainville, where there was already a major Japanese garrison force. Uncertainty about the American threat of invasion somewhere was enough to make the Japanese, especially Vice Admiral Jinichi Kusaka, Commander, Southeast Area Fleet, at Rabaul jittery. It was he who wanted much of the Japanese *Seventeenth Army* concentrated at Buin, for, he thought, the Allies might strike there.

General Vandegrift wanted to be sure that the Japanese were focused on Buin. So, on 20 October, he called in Lieutenant Colonel Robert H. Williams, commanding the 1st Parachute Regiment, and Lieutenant Colonel Victor H. Krulak, commanding its 2d Battalion. Get ashore on Choiseul, the general ordered, and stir up the biggest commotion possible, "Make sure they think the invasion has commenced...."

It was a most unusual raid, 656 men, a handful of native guides, and an Australian coastwatcher with a road map. The Navy took Krulak's reinforced battalion of parachutists to a beach site near a hamlet called Voza. That would be the CP (command post) location for the duration. The troops slipped ashore on 28 October at 0021 and soon had all their gear concealed in the bush.

By daylight, the Marines had established a base on a high jungle plateau in the Voza area. The Japanese soon spotted the intruders, sent a few fighter planes to rake the beach, but that did no harm. They did not see the four small landing craft which Krulak had brought along and hidden among some mangroves with their Navy crews on call.

Krulak then outlined two targets. Eight miles south from their CP at Voza there was a large enemy barge base near the Vagara River. The Australian said some 150 Japanese were there. The other objective was an enemy outpost in the opposite direction, 17 miles north on the Warrior River. Then Krulak took his operations officer, Major Tolson A. Smoak, 17 men, and a few natives as scouts, and headed for the barge basin. On the way, 10 unlucky Japanese were encountered unloading a barge. The Marines opened fire, killing seven of them and sinking the barge. After reconnoitering the main objective, the barge basin, the patrol returned to Voza. 10

The following morning, Krulak sent a patrol near the barge basin to the Vagara River for security and then to wave in his small landing craft bringing up his troops to attack. But, back at Voza, along came a flight of American planes which shot up the Marines and sank one of their vital boats. Now Krulak's attack would have to walk to the village of Sangigai by the Japanese barge basin. To soften up Sangigai, Krulak called in 26 fighters escorting 12 torpedo bombers. They dropped two tons of bombs and it looked for all the world like a real invasion.

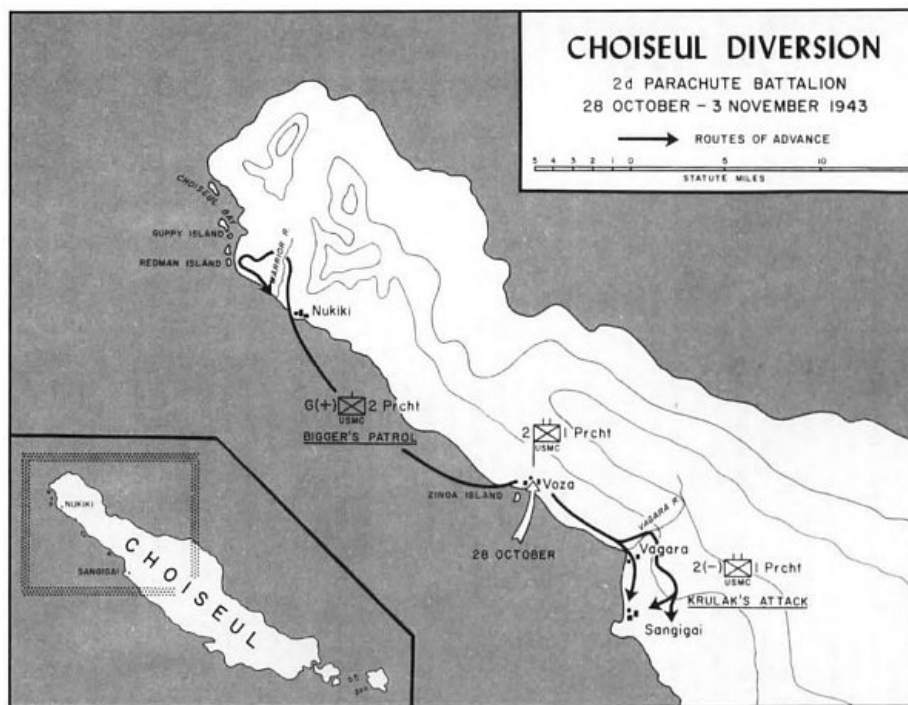
Krulak then sent a company to attack the basin from the beach, and another company with rifles, machine guns, rockets, and mortars to get behind the barge center. It was a pincer and it worked. The Marines attacked at 1400 on 30 October. What the battle didn't destroy, the Marines blew up. The Japanese lost 72 dead; the Marines, 4 killed and 12 wounded.

All was not so well in the other direction. Major Warner T. Bigger, Krulak's executive officer, had been sent

north with 87 Marines toward the big emplacement on Choiseul Bay near the Warrior River. His mission was to destroy, first the emplacement, with Guppy Island, just off shore and fat with supplies, as his secondary target.

Bigger got to the Warrior River, but his landing craft became stuck in the shallows, so he brought them to a nearby cove, hid them in the jungle, and proceeded on foot north to Choiseul Bay. Soon his scouts said that they were lost. It was late in the day so Bigger bivouacked for the night. He sent a patrol back to the Warrior where it found a Japanese force. Slipping stealthily by them, the patrol got back to Voza. This led Krulak to call for fighter cover and PT boats to try to get up and withdraw Bigger.

But Bigger didn't know he was in trouble, and he went ahead and blasted Guppy island with mortars, because he couldn't get to the main enemy emplacement. When Bigger and his men barely got back to the Warrior River, there were no rescue boats, but there were plenty of Japanese. As the men waited tensely, the rescue boats came at the last moment, the very last. Thankfully, the men scrambled on board under enemy fire. Then two PT boats arrived, gun blazing, and provided cover so Bigger's patrol could get back to Voza. One of the PT boats was commanded by Lieutenant John F. Kennedy, USN, later the President of the United States, who took 55 Marines on board when their escape boat sank.



**CHOISEUL DIVERSION**  
**2d PARACHUTE BATTALION**  
**28 OCTOBER-3 NOVEMBER 1943**

Krulak had already used up all his time and luck. The Japanese were now on top of him, their commanders particularly chagrined that they had been fooled, for the big landing had already occurred at Empress Augusta Bay. Krulak had to get out; Coastwatcher Seton said there was not much time. On the night of 3 November, three LCIs rendezvoused off Voza. Krulak gave all his rations to the natives as the Marines boarded the LCIs. They could hear their mines and booby traps exploding to delay the Japanese. Within hours after the departure, a strong Japanese pincer snapped shut around the Voza encampment, but the Marines had gone, having suffered 9 killed, 15 wounded, and 2 missing, but leaving at least 143 enemy dead on Choiseul.

## The Coastwatchers

It was on Bougainville, as well as on other islands of the Solomons chain, that the Australian coastwatchers played their most decisive role in transmitting vital advance warnings to Allied forces in the lower Solomon Islands. Japanese war planes and ships summoned in urgency to smash the beachhead at Guadalcanal had to pass over Bougainville, the big island in the middle of the route from Rabaul.

Paul Mason, short, bespectacled, soft spoken, held an aerie in the south mountains over Buin, and dark, wiry W. J. "Jack" Read watched the ship and aircraft movements of the Japanese in and around Buka in the north. One memorable Mason wireless dispatch: "Twenty-five torpedo bombers headed yours." The message cost the Japanese Imperial Navy every one of those airplanes, save one. Read reported a dozen or so Japanese transports assembling at Buka before their trip to Guadalcanal, with enough troops loaded on board to take the island back. All of the transports were lost or beached under the fierce attack of U.S. warplanes.

In 1941, as the war with Japan commenced, there were 100 coastwatchers in the Solomons. There were 10 times that number as the war ended, later including Americans. Assembled first as a tight group of island veterans in 1939 (although there had been coastwatchers after World War I) under Lieutenant Commander A. Eric Feldt, Royal Australian Navy, their job was to cover about a half million miles of land, sea, and air.

The very first moves of the Japanese on Guadalcanal were observed by coastwatchers in the surrounding hills. The coastwatchers could count the Japanese hammer strokes, almost see the nails. When the Japanese began the airfield (later to be called Henderson Field), the report of the coastwatchers went all the way up the American Joint Chiefs of Staff and across the desk of Admiral Ernest J. King, Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Fleet.

Later, General Alexander A. Vandegrift on Guadalcanal banked heavily on the intelligence coming in from the radios of the coastwatchers. The attacks on the Treasuries and Choiseul were based on the information provided them. On New Georgia, long before Americans decided to take it, a coastwatcher had set up a haven for downed Allied pilots. And if the Americans needed a captured Japanese officer or soldier for interrogation, the local scouts were often able to provide one.

The key to coastwatching was the tele-radio or wireless, good to 600 miles by key, 400 by voice. Cumbersome, heavy, the set took more than a dozen men to carry it—an indication of how much the Allies depended upon the local natives.

The risks were great. Death would come after torture. But Mason recalled the risk was worth it, seeing the sleek, orderly formations heading for Guadalcanal, then limping back home with gaping holes in their hulls. Mason and Read were highly decorated by both the Australians and Americans for their vital services.

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## Battle at Sea

A final part of the planning for the main landing on Bougainville had envisioned the certainty of a Japanese naval sortie to attack the invasion transports. It came very early on the morning of D plus 1. On the enemy side, Japanese destroyer Captain Tameichi Hara, skipper of the *Shigure*, later recalled it was cold, drizzly, and murky, with very limited visibility as his destroyer pulled out of Simpson Harbor, Rabaul. He was a part of the interception force determined to chew up the U.S. invasion troops that had just landed at Empress Augusta Bay. The *Shigure* was one of the six destroyers in the van of the assigned element of the *Southeast Area Fleet*, which included the heavy cruisers *Myoko* and *Haguro*, together with the light cruisers *Agano* and *Sendai*. At 0027, 2 November 1943, he would run abreast of U.S. Task Force 39 under Rear Admiral Merrill, who stood by to bar the enemy approach with four light cruisers and eight destroyers. Among his captains was the daring and determined Arleigh Burke on board the *Charles S. Ausburne* (DD 570) commanding DesDiv (Destroyer Division) 45.

This encounter was crucial to the Bougainville campaign. At Rabaul, Rear Admiral Matsuji Ijuin had told his sailors, "Japan will topple if Bougainville falls."

At 0250, the American ships were in action. Captain Burke (later to become Chief of Naval Operations) closed in on the nearest of the enemy force under Vice Admiral Sentaro Omori. Burke's destroyers fired 25 torpedoes, and then Merrill maneuvered his cruiser to avoid the expected "Long Lance" torpedo response of the Japanese and to put his ships in position to fire with their six-inch guns.

"I shuddered," Hara wrote later, "at the realization that they must have already released their torpedoes. The initiative was in the hands of the enemy. In an instant, I yelled two orders: 'Launch torpedoes! Hard right rudder.'" Not a single Japanese or American torpedo found its mark in the first exchange. Merrill then brought all his guns to bear. The Japanese answered in kind. The Japanese eight-inch gun salvos were either short or ahead. The Americans were luckier. One shell of their first broadside slammed amidships into the cruiser *Sendai* which carried Admiral Ijuin. There was frantic maneuvering to avoid shells, with giant warships, yards apart at times, cutting at speeds of 30 knots. Still *Sendai* managed to avoid eight American torpedoes, even with her rudder jammed. Then a Japanese torpedo caught the U.S. destroyer *Foote* (DD 511) and blew off her stern, leaving her dead in the water.

Samuel Eliot Morison in *Breaking the Bismarck Barrier*, tells how "Merrill maneuvered his cruisers so smartly and kept them at such range that no enemy torpedoes could hit." Admiral Omori showed the same skill and judgement, but he was a blind man. Only the American had radar. Hara afterwards explained, "Japan did not see the enemy, failed to size up the enemy and failed to locate it.... The Japanese fleet was a blind man swinging a stick against a seeing opponent. The Japanese fleet had no advantage at all...."

What Japan had lacked in electronic sight, however, it partially made up with its super-brilliant airplane-dropped flares and naval gunfire star shells. Commander Charles H. Pollow, USN, a former radio officer on the *Denver* (CL 58), recalled the "unblinking star shells that would let you read the fine print in the bible...." The Japanese also had a range advantage in their eight-inch guns, "Sometimes we couldn't touch them...." Three shells hit his *Denver*—not one detonated, but the ship was damaged. *Columbia* (CL 56) also took an eight-inch hole through her armor plate.

Then Merrill confused the enemy ships with smoke so dense that the Japanese believed the Americans were heading one way when they were in fact steaming in another direction. But before Admiral Omori could break away, Burke and his destroyer division of "Little Beavers" was in among them. First the *Sendai* was sent to the bottom with 335 men, then *Hatsukaze*, brushed in an accident with *Myoko*, was finished off by Burke's destroyers and sank with all hands on board—240 men. Damaged were the cruisers *Haguro*, *Myoko*, and destroyers *Shiratsuyu* and *Samidare*. But, most important, the threat to the beachhead had been stopped.

The Americans got off with severe damage to the *Foote* and light damage to the *Denver*, *Spence* (DD 512), and *Columbia*. Hara later wrote, "had they pursued us really hot[ly] ... practically all the Japanese ships would have perished." The Americans had left the fight too soon.

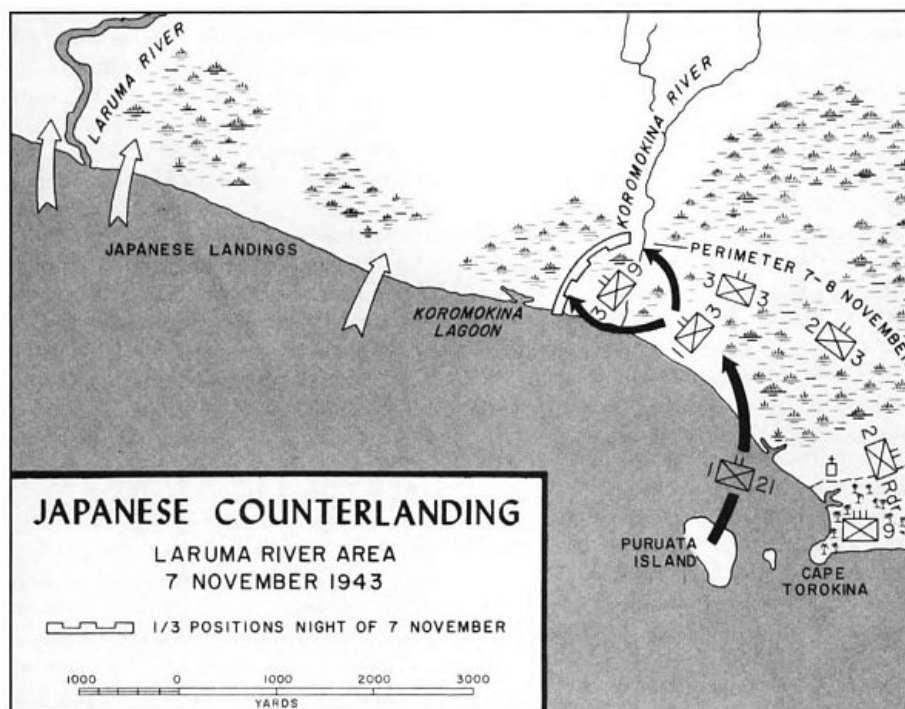
And Admiral Ijuin's prediction that Japan would topple after the loss of Bougainville proved to be accurate, but not because of this loss, particularly. It was just one of the number of defeats which were to doom Japan.

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## Action Ashore: Koromokina

12

Back on Bougainville, following the landing, the days D plus 1 to D plus 5 saw the initiation of Phase II of the operation, involving shifting of units' positions, reorganizing the shambles of supplies, incessant patrols, road building, the beginning of the construction of a fighter airstrip, and the deepening of the beachhead to 2,000 yards.



### JAPANESE COUNTERLANDING LARUMA RIVER AREA 7 NOVEMBER 1943

Then, at dawn on the morning of 7 November (D plus 6), the Japanese struck. Four of their destroyers put ashore 475 men well west of the Marine perimeter, between the Laruma River and the Koromokina Lagoon. They landed in 21 craft: barges, ramped landing boats, even a motor boat, but, to their disadvantage, along too wide a front for coordinating and organizing a strike in unison and immediately. A Marine Corps combat correspondent, Sergeant Cyril J. O'Brien, saw the skinny young Japanese who scampered up the beach with 80-pound packs two-and-a-half miles from the Laruma to near the Koromokina, left flank of the Marines, to join their comrades.

They were eager enough, even to die. A little prayer often in the pockets of the dead voiced the fatalistic wish that "whether I float a corpse under the waters, or sink beneath the grasses of the mountainside, I willingly die for the Emperor."

The first few Japanese ashore near the Laruma, however, did not die. An antitank platoon with the 9th Marines did not fire because the landing craft in the mist looked so much like their own, even to the big white numbers on the prow. Near Koromokina, they seemed to be all over the beach. One outpost platoon, which included Private First Class John F. Perella, 19 years old, was cut off on the beach. Perella swam through the surf 1,000 yards to Marine lines and came with a Navy rescue boat and earned a Silver Star Medal.



Lieutenant Colonel Walter Asmuth, Jr., commanding officer of the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, ordered a company attack, called on mortars and the artillery of the 12th Marines. The Japanese were well equipped with the so-called knee mortars (actually grenade launchers) and Nambu machine guns and fought back fiercely. In that jungle, you could not see, hear, or smell a man five feet away. Private First Class Challis L. Still found a faint trail and settled his machine gun beside it. An ambush was easy. The lead Japanese were close enough to touch when Still opened up. He killed 30 in the column; he was a recipient of the Silver Star Medal.

Yet, the Japanese didn't give way. Ashore only hours, they had already dug strong defenses. Even a Marine double envelopment in water, sometimes up to the waist, did not work. By 1315, the weakened 9th Marines company was relieved by the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines, coming in from the beachhead's right flank.

During darkness on that night of 7 November, enemy infiltrators got through to the hospital. Bullets ripped through tents as surgeons performed operations. The doctors of the 3d Medical Battalion, under Commander Robert R. Callaway, were protected by a makeshift line of cooks, bakers, and stretcher bearers. (As a memorable statistic, less than one percent died of wounds on Bougainville after having arrived at a field hospital.)



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 12756

*PFC Henry Gurke was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor.*

The 1st Battalion was close to the enemy, close enough to exchange shouts. The Japanese yelled "Moline you die" ... and the Marines made earthy references to Premier Tojo's diet. Marine Captain Gordon Warner was fluent in Japanese, so he could quickly reply to the Japanese, even yell believable orders for a bayonet charge. He received the Navy Cross for destroying machine gun nests with a helmet full of hand grenades. He lost a leg in the battle.

Sergeant Herbert J. Thomas gave his life near the Koromokina. His platoon was forced prone by machine gunfire, and Thomas threw a grenade to silence the weapon. The grenade rebounded from jungle vines and the young West Virginian smothered it with his body. He posthumously was awarded the Medal of Honor.

General Turnage saw that reinforcements were needed. The day before (6 November) the first echelon of the 21st Marines had come ashore. Now the battle command was transferred to Lieutenant Colonel Ernest W. Fry, Jr., of the 1st Battalion. With two companies, he was set for a counterattack, but not until after two intense saturations of the Japanese positions by mortars and five batteries of artillery. They slammed into a concentrated area, 300 yards wide and 600 deep, early on 8 November. Light tanks then moved in to support the attack.

When Colonel Fry's advancing companies reached the area where the Japanese had been, there was stillness, desolation, ploughed earth, and uprooted trees. Combat correspondent Alvin Josephy wrote of men

hanging in trees, "Some lay crumpled and twisted beside their shattered weapons, some covered by chunks of jagged logs and jungle earth, [by] a blasted bunker...." In that no-man's land, Colonel Fry and his men walked over and around the bodies of over 250 enemy soldiers. To complete the annihilation of the Japanese landing force, Marine dive bombers from Munda bombed and strafed the survivors on 9 November.

By now, the veteran 148th Infantry, the first unit of the Army's 37th Infantry Division, was coming ashore, seasoned in the Munda campaign on New Georgia. Later, to take over the left flank of the beachhead, would come its other infantry regiments, the 129th on 13 November and the 145th on 19 November. The Army's 135th, 136th, and 140th Field Artillery came ashore, too, and would be invaluable in supporting later advances on the right flank. Major General Robert S. Beightler, USA, was division commander.

## 37th Infantry Division



***Major General Robert S. Beightler,  
USA***

Called the “Buckeye” Division, the 37th was among the very first American troops sent to the Pacific at the beginning of the war.

The 37th was an outfit with a long history and many battle streamers, dating from August 1917, when it was formed at Camp Sheridan, Alabama. It left for overseas in 1918, and took part in five major operations in France before returning in 1919, and facing demobilization that same year.

As an Ohio National Guard unit, the “Buckeye” Division was inducted into federal service in 1940, and by June of 1942, it was heading into the Pacific war, sent to garrison the Fiji Islands. First combat was on New Georgia, which included taking the critical Munda airfield. The 37th joined the 3d Marine Division on Bougainville, and then trained on the island for the campaign on Luzon Island in the Philippines.

Landing with the Sixth Army at Lingayen Gulf, 9 January 1945, the 37th raced inland to Clark Field and Fort Stotsenburg. It entered Manila, and its commander, Major General Robert S. Beightler, accepted the surrender of General Tomoyuki Yamashita. Next came the capture of Baguio and liberation there of 1,300 internees at the Bilibid Prison. The division came home for demobilization in November 1945.

Its commander, Major General Beightler, was born 21 March 1892, and enlisted in the U.S. Army as a private in 1911. Promoted quickly to corporal, sergeant, and then first sergeant of his company, he was then commissioned as a second lieutenant in March 1914. After service on the Mexican border, he took part in five major campaigns in World War I with the famous 42d (Rainbow) Division.



A graduate of Ohio State University, Beightler finished first in his class in the Reserve Officers’ Course of the Command and General Staff School, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, in 1926. After that he served as a member of the War Plans Division of the War Department General Staff (1932-36).

After World War II, he assumed command of the Fifth Service Command at Fort Hayes, Ohio, and then was assigned (1947) to the Personnel Board of the Secretary of War. In 1949, he was sent to the Far East and took over the Marianas-Bonins Command on Guam. In 1950 he was named Deputy Governor of the Ryukyus Command on Okinawa.

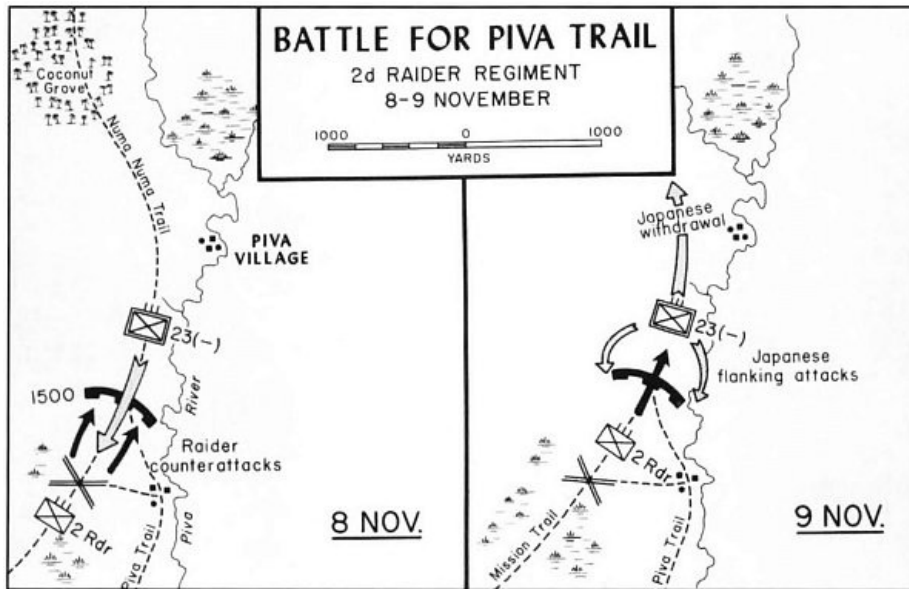
Major General Beightler received the Distinguished Service Cross, the nation’s second highest honor, for his leadership in the Philippine campaign, as well as a Distinguished Service Medal for the New Georgia operation, with an Oak Leaf Cluster as a second award for his outstanding service on Bougainville and then

operation, with an Oak Leaf Cluster as a second award for his outstanding service on Bougainville and then on Luzon in the Philippine Islands. He also wore the Legion of Merit with Oak Leaf Cluster, the Bronze Star with Oak Leaf Cluster, the Silver Star Medal, and the Purple Heart.

He died 12 February 1978.

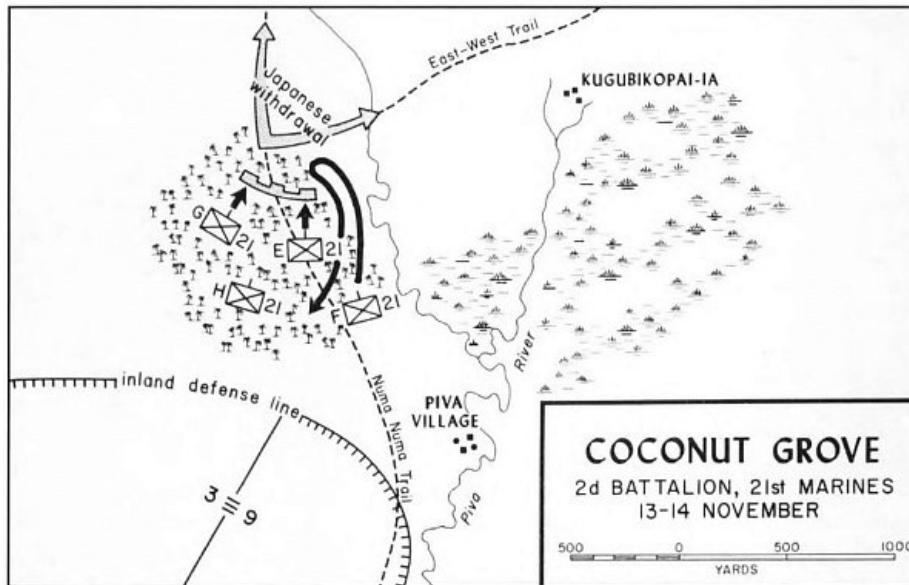
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## *The Battle for Piva Trail*



**BATTLE FOR PIVA TRAIL**  
**2d RAIDER REGIMENT**  
**8-9 NOVEMBER**

Captain Conrad M. Fowler, a company commander in the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, later recalled how an attack down the trails was expected: "They had to come our way to meet us face-to-face. The trails were the only way overland through that rainforest." His company would be there to meet them. He was awarded a Silver Star Medal.



**COCONUT GROVE**  
**2d BATTALION, 21st MARINES**  
**13-14 NOVEMBER**



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 52622

*MajGen Roy S. Geiger assumed command of IMAC on 9 November 1943.*

With just such a Japanese attack anticipated, General Turnage had dispatched a company of the 2d Raider Regiment up the Mission (Piva) trail on D-Day to set up a road block—just up from the old Buretoni Catholic Mission (still in operation today). At first the raiders had little business, and by 4 November elements of the 9th Marines had arrived to join them. The enemy, the *23rd Infantry* up from Buin, struck on 7 November. Their attack was timed to coincide with the Koromokina landings. The raiders held, but “the woods were full of Japs, dead.... The most we had to do was bury them.” 15

At this point General Turnage told Colonel Edward A. Craig, commanding officer of the 9th Marines, to clear the way ahead and advance to the junction of the Piva and Numa-Numa trails. That mission Craig gave to the 2d Raider Regiment under Lieutenant Colonel Alan B. Shapley. The actual attack would be led by Lieutenant Colonel Fred D. Beans, 3d Raider Battalion, just in from Puruata Island and would include elements of the 9th Marines and weapons companies.

The Japanese didn't wait for a Marine attack; they came in on 5 November and threatened to overrun the trailblock. It soon became a matter of brutal small encounters, and battles raged for five days. They were many brave acts. Privates First Class Henry Gurke and Donald G. Probst, with an automatic weapon, were about to be overwhelmed. A grenade plopped in the foxhole between them. To save the critical position and his companion, Gurke thrust Probst aside and threw himself on the grenade and died. He was awarded the Medal of Honor posthumously; Probst, the Silver Star Medal. 16

Mortars and artillery duelled from each side. The Japanese would creep right next to the Marine positions for safety. Marines had to call friendly fire almost into their laps. On the narrow trail, men often had to expose themselves. The Japanese got the worst of it, for suddenly, shortly after noon on 9 November the enemy resistance crumbled. By 1500, the junction of the Piva and Numa-Numa trails was reached and secured. Some 550 Japanese died. There were 19 Marines dead and 32 wounded.

*Adm William F. Halsey (pith helmet) and MajGen Geiger (“fore and aft” cover) watch Army reinforcements come ashore at Bougainville.*

National Archives Photo 127-N-65494



To consolidate the hard-won position, Marine torpedo bombers from Munda blasted the surrounding area on 10 November. This allowed two battalions of the 9th Marines to settle into good defensive positions along the Numa-Numa Trail with, as usual, “aggressive” patrols immediately fanning out. The battle for the Piva Trail had ended victoriously. 17



The key logistical element in this engagement—and nearly all others on Bougainville—was the amtrac. There were vast areas where tanks and half-tracks, much less trucks, simply could not negotiate the bottomless swamps, omnipresent streams, and viscous mud from the daily rains. The amtracs proved amazingly flexible; they moved men, ammunition, rations, water, barbed wire, and even radio jeeps to the front lines where they were most needed. Heading back, they evacuated the wounded to reach the desperately needed medical centers in the rear.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 65162

*A bloody encounter on 14 November at the junction of the Numa-Numa and Piva Trails: Marine infantrymen had been stopped by well dug-in and camouflaged enemy troops. Five Marine tanks rushed up and attacked on a 250-yard front through the jungle.*

Other developments came at this juncture in the campaign. As noted, the 37th Infantry Division was fed into the perimeter. At the top of the command echelon Major General Roy S. Geiger relieved Vandegrift as Commanding General, IMAC, on 9 November and took charge of Marine and Army units in the campaign from an advanced command post on Bougainville.

The Seabees and Marine engineers were hard at work now. Operating dangerously 1,500 yards ahead of the front lines, guarded by a strong combat patrol, they managed to cut two 5,000-foot survey lanes east to west across the front of the perimeter.

## War Dogs



In an interview with Captain Wilcie O'Bannon long after the war, Captain John Monks, Jr., gained an insight into one of the least known aspects of Marine tactics. It was an added asset that the official Marine history called "invaluable": war dogs. O'Bannon, the first patrol leader to have them, related:

One dog was a German Shepherd female, the other was a Doberman male, and they had three men with them. The third man handled the dogs all the time in the platoon area prior to our going on patrol—petting the dogs, talking to them, and being nice to them. The other two handlers—one would go to the head of the column and one would go to the rear with the female messenger dog.... If the dog in front received enemy fire and got away, he could either come back to me or circle to the back of the column. If I needed to send a message I would write it, give it to the handler, and he would pin it on the dog's collar. He would clap his hands and say, "Report," and the dog would be off like a gunshot to go to the third man in the rear who had handled him before the patrol.

The war dogs proved very versatile. They ran telephone wire, detected ambushes, smelled out enemy patrols, and even a few machine gun nests. The dog got GI chow, slept on nice mats and straw, and in mud-filled foxholes. First Lieutenant Clyde Henderson with one of the dog platoons recalled how the speed and intelligence of dogs was crucial in light of the abominable communications in the jungle, where sometimes communications equipment was not much better than yelling.

Under such circumstances, a German Shepherd named "Caesar" made the difference between life and death for at least one company. With all wires cut and no communication, Caesar got through repeatedly to the battalion command post and returned to the lines. One Japanese rifle wound didn't stop him, but a second had Caesar returned to the rear on a stretcher. A memorable letter from Commandant Thomas B. Holcomb described how Caesar another time had saved the life of a Marine when the dog attacked a Japanese about to throw a hand grenade. The Commandant also cited in letters four other dogs for their actions on Bougainville.

Sergeant William O. McDaniel, in the 9th Marines, remembered, "One night, one of the dogs growled and Slim Livesay, a squad leader from Montana, shot and hit a Jap right between the eyes. We found the Jap the next morning, three feet in front of the hole."

One Marine said that what Marines liked most was the security dogs gave at night and the rare chance to sleep in peace. No enemy would slip through the lines with a dog on guard.

There were 52 men and 36 dogs in the K-9 company on Bougainville.

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## The Coconut Grove Battle

On D plus 10, 11 November, a new operation order was issued. "Continue the attack with the 3d Marine Division on the right (east) and the 37th Infantry Division on the left (west)." An Army-Marine artillery group was assembled under IMAC control to provide massed fire, and Marine air would be on call for close support.

The first objective in the renewed push was to seize control of the critical junction of the Numa-Numa Trail and the East-West trail. On 13 November a company of the 21st Marines led off the advance at 0800. At 1100 it was ambushed by a "sizeable" enemy force concealed in a coconut palm grove near the trail junction. The Japanese had won the race to the crossroads, and the situation for the lead Marine company soon became critical. The 2d Battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Eustace R. Smoak, sent up his executive officer, Major Glenn Fissell, with 12th Marines' artillery observers. They reported the situation as all bad. Then Major Fissell was killed. Disdaining flank security, Smoak moved closer to the fight and fed in reinforcing companies. (By now a lateral road across the front of the perimeter had been built.)

The next day tanks were brought up and artillery registered around the battalion. Smoak also called in 18 torpedo bombers. The reorganized riflemen lunged forward again in a renewed attack. The tanks proved an ineffective disaster, causing chaos at one point by firing on fellow Marines on their flank and running over several of their own men. Nevertheless, the Japanese positions were overrun by the end of the day, with the enemy survivors driven off into a swamp. The Marines now commanded the junction of the two vital trails. As a result, the entire beachhead was able to spring forward 1,000 to 1,500 yards, reaching Inland Defense Line D, 5,000 yards from the beach.



Photo courtesy of Cyril J. O'Brien.

*"Marine Drive" constructed by the 53d Naval Construction Battalion enabled casualties to be sent to medical facilities in the rear and supplies to be brought forward easily.*

One important result of this advance was that the two main airstrips could now be built. The airfields would be the work of the Seabees. The 25th, 53d, and 71st Naval Construction Battalions ("Seabees") had landed on D-Day with the assault waves of the 3d Marine Division—to get ready at once to build roads, airfields, and camp areas. (They had a fighter strip operating at Torokina by December). Always close to Marines, the Seabees earned their merit in the eyes of the Leathernecks. Often Marines had to clear the way with fire so a Seabee could do his work. Many would recall the bold Seabee bulldozer driver covering a sputtering machine gun nest with his blade. Marines on the Piva Trail later saw another determined bulldozer operator filling in holes in the tarmac of his burgeoning bomber strip as fast as Japanese artillery could tear it up. Any Marine who returned from the dismal swamps toward the beach would retain the wonderment of the "Marine Drive." It was a two-lane asphalt highway, complete with wide shoulders and drainage ditches. It lay across jungle so dense that the tired men had had to hack their way through it only a week or so before.

Meanwhile, back on the beach, the U.S. Navy had been busy pouring in supplies and men. By D plus 12 it had landed more than 23,000 cargo tons and nearly 34,000 men. Marine fighters overhead provided continuous cover from Japanese air attacks. The Marine 3d Defense Battalion was set up with long-range radar and its anti-aircraft guns to give further protection. (This battalion also had long-range 155mm guns that pounded Japanese attacks against the perimeter.)

By now, the 37th Infantry Division on the left was on firm ground, facing scattered opposition, and able to make substantial advances. It was very different for the 3d Marine Division on the right. Lagoons and swamps were everywhere. The riflemen were in isolated, individual positions, little islands of men perched in what they sarcastically called "dry swamps." This meant the water and/or slimy mud was only shoe-top deep, rather than up to their knees or waists, as it was all around them. This nightmare kind of terrain, combined with heavy, daily, drenching rains, precluded digging foxholes. So their machine guns had to be lashed to tree trunks, while the men huddled miserably in the water and mud. They carried little in their packs, except that a variety of pills was essential to stay in fighting shape in their oppressive, bug-infested environment: salt tablets, sulfa powder, aspirin, iodine, vitamins, atabrine tablets (for suppressing malaria), and insect repellent.

Colonel Frazer West, who at Bougainville commanded a company in the 9th Marines, was interviewed by Monks 45 years later. He still remembered painfully what constantly living in the slimy, swamp water did to the Marines: "With almost no change of clothing, sand rubbing against the skin, stifling heat, and constant immersion in water, jungle rot was a pervasive problem. Men got it on their scalps, under their arms, in their genital areas, just all over. It was a miserable, affliction, and in combat there was very little that could be done to alleviate it. The only thing you could do was with the jungle ulcers. I'd get the corpsman to light a match on a razor blade, split the ulcer open, and squeeze sulfanilamide powder in it. I must have had at one time 30 jungle ulcers on me. This was fairly typical." Corpsmen painted many Marines with skin infections with tincture of merthiolate or a potassium permanganate solution so that they looked like the Picts of long ago who went into battle with their bodies daubed with blue woad.

The Marines who had survived the first two weeks of the campaign were by now battlewise. They intuitively carried out their platoon tactics in jungle fighting whether in offense or defense. They understood their enemy's tactics. And all signs indicated that they were winning.

## Navajo Code Talkers



Marines who heard the urgent combat messages said Navajo sounded sometimes like gurgling water. Whatever the sound, the ancient tongue of an ancient warrior clan confused the Japanese. The Navajo codetalkers were busily engaged on Bougainville, and had already proved their worth on Guadalcanal. The Japanese could never fathom a language committed to sounds.

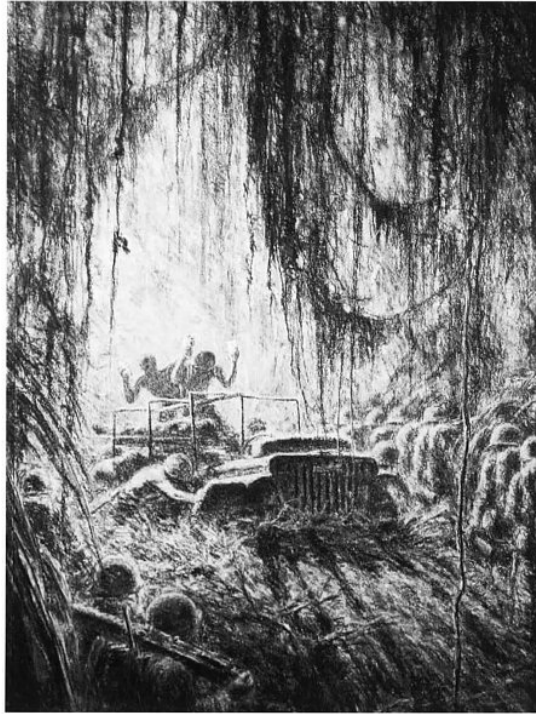
Originally there were many skeptics who disdained the use of the Navajo language as infeasible. Technical Sergeant Philip Johnston, who originally recommended the use of Navajo talkers as a means of safe voice transmissions in combat, convinced a hardheaded colonel by a two-minute Navajo dispatch. Encoding and decoding, the colonel then admitted, would have engaged his team well over an hour.

When the chips were down, time was short, and the message was urgent, Navajos saved the day. Only Indians could talk directly into the radio “mike” without concern for security. They would read the message in English, absorb it mentally, then deliver the words in their native tongue—direct, uncoded, and quickly. You couldn’t fault the Japanese, even other Navajos who weren’t codetalkers, couldn’t understand the codetalkers’ transmissions because they were in a code within the Navajo language.

## 'Corpsman!'

Less than one percent of battle casualties on Bougainville died of wounds after being brought to a field hospital, and during 50 operations conducted as the battle of the Koromokina raged and bullets whipped through surgeons' tents, not a patient was lost.

Painting by Kerr Eby in the Marine Corps Art Collection



Those facts reflect the skill and dedication of the corpsmen, surgeons, and litter bearers who performed in an environment of enormous difficulty. Throughout the fight for the perimeter, the field hospitals were shelled and shaken by bomb blasts, even while surgical operations were being conducted.

Every day there was rain and mud and surgeons practiced their craft with mud to their shoe laces. Corpsmen were shot as they treated the wounded right at the battle scene; others were shot as the Japanese ignored the International Red Cross emblem for ambulances and aid stations.

Bougainville was the first time in combat for the corpsmen assigned to the 3d Marine Division. Two surgeons were with each battalion and, as in all other battles, a corpsman was with each platoon. Aid stations were as close as 30-50 yards behind the lines. The men from the division band were the litter bearers, always on the biting edge of combat.

Many young Marines were not aware until combat just how close they would be to these corpsmen who wore the Marine uniform, and who would undergo every hardship and trial of the man on the line. The corpsman's job required no commands; he was simply always there to patch up the wounded Marine enough to have him survive and get to a field hospital.

Naval officers seldom had command over the corpsman. He was responsible directly to the platoon, company, and battalion to which he was assigned.

Ashore on D-Day with the invading troops, Pharmacist's Mate Second Class Andrew Bernard later remembered setting up his 3d Marines regimental aid station, just inland in the muck off the beach beside the "C" Medical Field Hospital. Later, as action intensified, Bernard saw 15 to 20 wounded Marines waiting at the hospital for care, and commented, "this was when I noticed Dr. Duncan Shepherd.... The flaps of the hospital tent went open, and there was Dr. Shepherd operating away, so calm, so brave, so courageous—as though he was back in the Mayo Clinic, where he had trained."

On 7 December, the Japanese attacked around the Koromokina. The official history of the 3d Marine Division described the scene:

The division hospital, situated near the beach, was subjected to daily air raids, and twice to artillery shelling.... Company E of the 3d Medical Battalion, which was the division hospital under Commander R. R. Callaway, USN, proved that delicate work could be carried on even in combat. During the battle the field hospital was attacked, bullets ripped through the protecting tent, seriously wounding a pharmacist's mate.





Painting by Franklin Boggs in *Men Without Guns* (Philadelphia:/The Blakiston Company, 1945)

Hellzapoppin Ridge was the most intense and miserable of the battles for the corpsmen of Bougainville, according to Pharmacist's Mate First Class Carroll Garnett. He and three other corpsmen were assigned to the forward aid station located at the top of that bloody ridge. The two battalion surgeons were considered indispensable and discouraged from taking undue risks. Regardless, Assistant Battalion Surgeon Lieutenant Edmond A. Utkewicz, USNR, insisted on joining the corpsmen at the forward station and remained there throughout the entire battle. The doctor and his four assistants were often in the open, exposed to fire, and showered with the dust thrown up by mortar explosions.

The corpsmen's routine was: stop the bleeding, apply sulfa powder and battle dressing, shoot syrette of morphine, and administer plasma. The regular aid station was located at the bottom of the ridge where the battalion surgeon, Lieutenant Commander Horace L. Wolf, USNR, checked the wounded again, before sending them off in an ambulance, if available, to a better equipped station or a field hospital.

Corpsmen (and Marines) were in deadly peril atop the ridge. Corpsman John A. Wetteland described volunteers bringing in a wounded paramarine who was still breathing when he and the medical team were hit anew by a shell. One corpsman was killed, another badly wounded, and Wetteland was badly mauled by mortar fragments, though he tried, he said, "to bandage myself."

Dr. Wolf later painted a grim picture of the taut circumstances under which the medics worked:

Several of my brave corpsmen were killed in this action. The regimental band musicians were the litter bearers. I still remember the terrible odor of our dead in the tropical heat. The smell pinched one's nostrils and clung to clothing.... During combat in the swamps, about all one could do to try to purify water to drink was to put two drops of iodine solution in a canteen. Night was the worst, when we could not evacuate our sick and wounded. But, if one could get a ride to the airstrip on the jeep ambulance to put the sick and wounded on evacuation planes, one could see a female (Navy or Army nurses) for the first time in many months.

## *Piva Forks Battle*

The lull after the Coconut Grove fight did not last long. On 18 November, the usual flurry of patrols soon brought back information that the Japanese had set up a road block on both the Numa-Numa Trail and the East-West Trail. 22



National Archives Photo 111-5C-190032

*The 155mm guns of the Marine 3d Defense Battalion provided firepower in support of Marine riflemen holding the Torokina perimeter.*

*Just getting to your assigned position meant slow, tiring slogging through endless mud.*

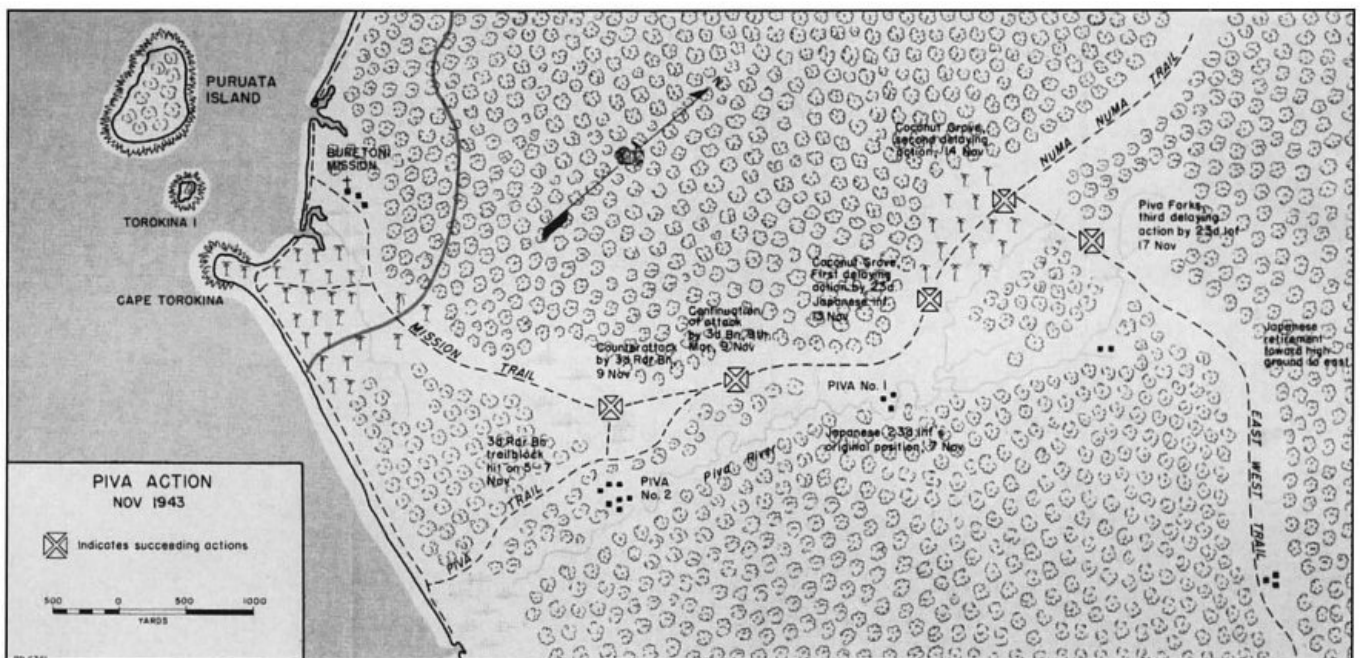
Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 68247



To strike the Numa-Numa position, the 3d Marines sent in its 3d Battalion (Lieutenant Colonel Ralph M. King), to lead the attack. It hit the Japanese flanks, routed them, and set up its own road block on 19 November.

The 2d Battalion of the 3d Marines immediately went after the Japanese block on the East-West Trail between the two forks of the Piva River. After seizing that position, the next objective was a 400-foot ridge that commanded the whole area—and, in fact, provided a view all the way to Empress Augusta Bay. (As the first high ground the Marines had found, it would clearly produce a valuable observation post for directing the artillery fire of the 12th Marines.)





### PIVA ACTION NOV 1943

Lieutenant Colonel Hector de Zayas, commanding the battalion, summoned one of his company commanders and gave a terse order, "I want you to take it." Thus a patrol under First Lieutenant Steve J. Cibik was immediately sent to occupy it. This began a four-day epic, 20-23 November. The Marines got to the top, realized the importance of the vantage point to the Japanese, dug in defensive positions, and got ready for the enemy counterattacks that were sure to come. And they came, and came, and came. There were "fanatical attempts by the Japanese to reoccupy the position" in the form of "wild charges that sometimes carried the Japanese to within a few feet of their foxholes on the crest of the ridge." Cibik called in Marine artillery bursts within 50 yards of his men. The Marines held and were finally relieved, exhausted but proud. Cibik was awarded a Silver Star Medal, and the hill was always known thereafter as "Cibik Ridge."

While the firestorm roared where Cibik stood, the 3d Marines were pursuing its mission of driving the Japanese from the first and nearest of Piva's forks. The 2d Battalion caught up with Cibik, and Lieutenant Colonel de Zayas moved it out down the reverse slope of Cibik Ridge. The Japanese struck hard on 21 November and de Zayas pulled back. Then, in true textbook fashion, the Japanese followed right behind him. The Marines were ready, machine guns in place. One of them killed 74 out of 75 of the enemy attackers within 20-30 yards of the gun.

The 3d Marines was supported by the 9th, and 21st Marines, and the raiders, while the 37th Infantry Division provided roadblocks, patrols, and flank security. Support was also provided by the Army's heavy artillery, the 12th Marines, and the defense battalions. All the troops were now be entering a new phase of the campaign, during which the fight would be more for the hills than for the trails.

Reconnaissance patrols provided a good idea of what was out there, but they also discovered that the enemy was not alert as he could or should be. A Marine rifle company, for instance, came upon a clearing where the Japanese were acting as if no war was on—the troops were lounging, kibitzing, drinking beer. The Marine mortars tore them apart. Another patrol waited until the occupants of a bivouac lined up for chow before cutting them down with mortars in a pandemonium of pots, pans, and tea kettles. (Jungle combat had taught the Marines the wisdom of General Turnage's order: Marines go nowhere without a weapon!)



National Archives Photo 127-N-67228B

*Marine communicators had the difficult task of stringing wire in dense jungle terrain while remaining wary of the enemy.*

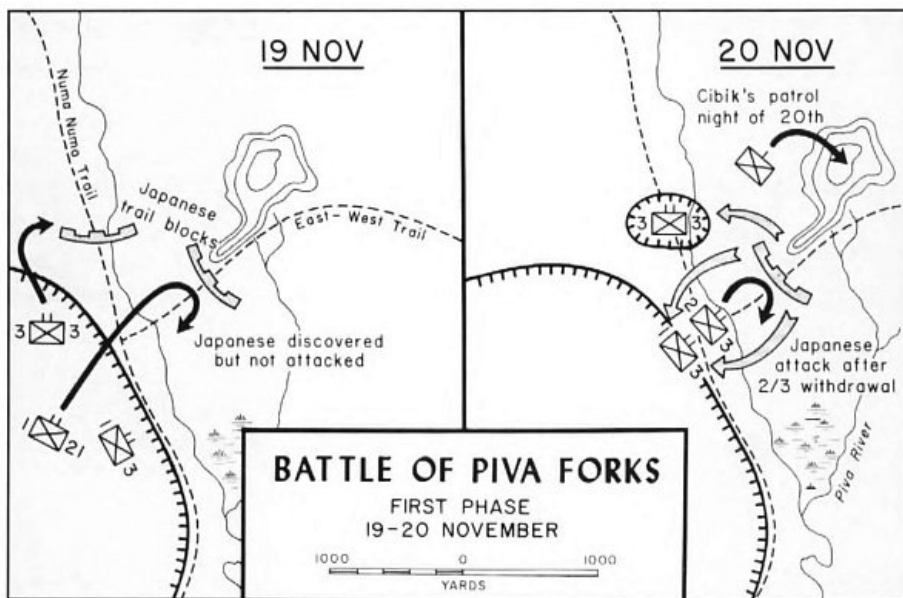
The various, successive objectives for the Marine and Army riflemen were codenamed using the then-current phonetic alphabet: Dog (reached 15 November), Easy (reached 20 November, except for the 9th Marines, slowed by an impassable swamp), Fox (finally reached by the Marines on 28 November) and How (part of it reached by the Army on 23 November since it encountered “no opposition,” and the remainder as a goal for the Marines). Thereafter, the Marines were to press on to the Item and Jig objectives “on orders from Corps Headquarters.”

One account makes clear the overwhelming difficulties facing the Marine battalions: “water slimy and often waist deep, sometimes to the arm pits ... tangles of thorny vines that inflicted painful wounds ... men slept setting up in the water ... sultry heat and stinking muck.”

In spite of this, elaborate plans were made to continue the attack from west to east. The “strongly entrenched” Japanese defenses, with 1,200–1,500 men, were oriented to repel an assault from the south. Accordingly, the artillery observers on Cibik Ridge registered their fire on 23 November, in preparation for a thrust by two battalions of the 3d Marines to try to advance 800 yards beyond the east fork of the Piva River. All available tanks and supporting weapons were moved forward. Marine engineers from the 19th Marines joined Seabees under enemy fire in throwing bridges across the Piva River.

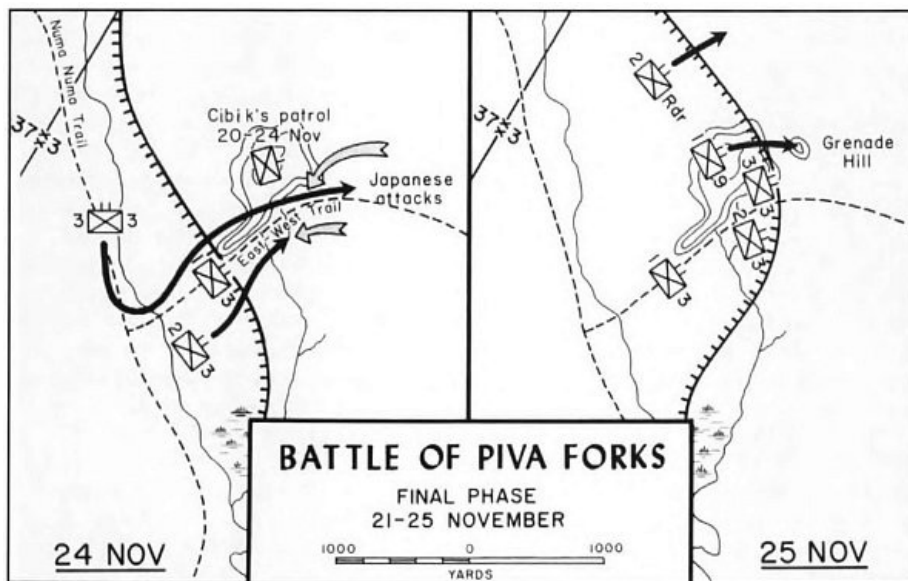
On 23 November, as the night fell like a heavy curtain, seven battalions of artillery lined up, some almost hub-to-hub. There were the Army’s 155s, 105s, mortars, 90mm AA; and the same array of the 12th Marines’ cannons, plus 44 machine guns and even a few Hotchkiss pieces taken from the enemy.

The attack in the morning began with the barrage at 0835, 24 November, Thanksgiving Day; a shuddering burst of flame and thunder, possibly the heaviest such barrage a Marine operation had ever before placed on a target. The shells, 5,600 rounds of them, descended on a narrow 800-foot square box of rain forest, only 100 yards from the Marines, so close that shell splinters and concussion snapped twigs off bushes around them.



**BATTLE OF PIVA FORKS**  
**FIRST PHASE**  
**19-20 NOVEMBER**

Yet, as the two assault battalions moved out, the redoubtable Japanese *23d Infantry* crashed in with their own heavy barrage. Their shells left Marines dead, bleeding, and some drowned in the murky Piva River, “the heaviest casualties of the campaign. Twice the enemy fire walked up and down the attacking Marines with great accuracy.” But the 3d Marines came on with a juggernaut of tanks, flame throwers, and machine gun, mortar, and rifle fire. 24



**BATTLE OF PIVA FORKS**  
**FINAL PHASE**  
**21-25 NOVEMBER**

Where the Army-Marine artillery barrages fell, however, there was desolation. Major Schmuck, a company commander in one of the assault battalions, later remembered:

For 500 yards, the Marines moved in a macabre world of splintered trees and burned-out brush. The very earth was a churned mass of mud and human bodies. The filthy, stinking streams were cesspools of blasted corpses. Over all hung the stench of decaying flesh and powder and smoke which revolted [even] the toughest. The first line of strong points with their grisly occupants was overrun and the 500-yard phase line was reached.

The Japanese were not through. As the Marines moved forward a Nambu machine gun stuttered and the enemy artillery roared, raking the Marine line. A Japanese counterattack hit the Marines’ left flank. It was hand-to-hand and tree-to-tree. One company alone suffered 50 casualties, including all its officers. Still the Marines drove forward, finally halting 1,150 yards from their jump-off point, where resistance suddenly ended. The Japanese *23d Infantry* had been totally destroyed, with 1,107 men dead on the field. The Marines had incurred 115 dead and wounded. The battle for Piva Forks had ended with a dramatic, hard

fought victory which had “broken the back of organized enemy resistance.”



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 78796

*To enable a forward observer to adjust artillery fire, these 3d Defense Battalion Marines used a jury-rigged hoist to lift him to the top of a banyan tree.*

There was one final flourish. It had been, after all, Thanksgiving Day, and a tradition had to be observed. President Franklin D. Roosevelt had decreed that all servicemen should get turkey—one way or another. Out there on the line the men got it by “the other.” Yet, few Marines of that era would give the Old Corps bad marks for hot chow. If they could get it to the frontline troops, they would. A Marine recalled, “The carrying parties did get the turkey to them. Nature won, though, the turkey had spoiled.” Another man was watching the big birds imbedded in rice in five gallon containers, “much like home except for baseball and apple pie.” For some, however, just before the turkey was served, the word came down, “Prepare to move out!” Those men got their turkey and ate it on the trail ... on the way to a new engagement, Hand Grenade Hill.



National Archives Photo 127-N-69394

*Concealed in the heavy jungle growth, these men of Company E, 2d Battalion, 21st Marines, guard a Numa-Numa Trail position in the swamp below Grenade Hill.*

Before that could be assaulted, there was a reorganization on D plus 24. The beat-up 3d Marines was beefed up by the 9th Marines and the 2d Raiders. Since D-Day a total of 2,014 Japanese dead had been counted, but "total enemy casualties must have been at least three times that figure." And as a portent for the future use of Bougainville as a base for massive air strikes against the Japanese, U.S. planes were now able to use the airstrip right by the Torokina beachhead. With the enemy at last driven east of the Torokina River, Marines now occupied the high ground which controlled the site of the forthcoming Piva bomber airstrip.

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## *Hand Grenade Hill*

The lead for the next assault on 25 November was given to the fresh troops of Lieutenant Colonel Carey A. Randall, who had just taken over the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines. They were joined by the 2d Raider Battalion under Major Richard T. Washburn. Randall could almost see his next objective from the prime high ground of Cibik Ridge. Just ahead rose another knoll, like the ridge it would be the devil to take, for the Japanese would hold it like a fortress. It would soon be called "Hand Grenade Hill" for good reason. Two of Randall's companies went at it with Washburn's raiders. But the Japanese gave a good account of themselves. Some 70 of them slowed the Marine attack, but one company got close to the top. The Marines were from five to 50 yards away from the Japanese, battling with small arms, automatic weapons, and hand grenades. The enemy resisted fiercely, and the Marines were thrown back by a shower of hand grenades. One Marine observed that the hill must be the grenade storehouse for the entire Solomon Islands.

It was on Hand Grenade Hill that Lieutenant Howell T. Heflin, big, memorable, one of Alabama's favorites, son of a Methodist minister, snatched up a BAR (Browning Automatic Rifle) and sprayed the Japanese positions. He pried open a way for his platoon almost to the hilltop, but could not hold there. He was awarded the Silver Star Medal, and later he went on to become Chief Justice of the Alabama Supreme Court and then the senior U.S. Senator from Alabama.



National Archives Photo 127-N-71380

*Evacuation of the wounded was always difficult. These men are carrying out a casualty from the fighting on Hill 1000.*

At the end of the action-filled day, the Marines were stalled. In the morning of 26 November surprised scouts found that the Japanese had pulled out in the darkness. Now all of the wet, smelly, churned-up terrain around the Piva Forks, including the strategic ridgeline blocking the East-West Trail, was in Marine hands. 26

There now occurred a shuffling of units which resulted in the following line-up: 148th and 129th Infantry Regiments on line in the 37th Division sector on the left of the perimeter. 9th Marines, 21st Marines, and 3d Marines, running from left to right, in the Marine sector.

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## *The Koiari Raid*

As a kind of final security measure, IMAC was concerned about a last ridge of hills, some 2,000 yards to the front, and really still dominating too much of the perimeter. Accordingly, on 28 November, General Geiger ordered an advance to reach Inland Defense Line Fox. As a preliminary, to protect this general advance from a surprise Japanese attack on the far right flank, a raid was planned to detect any enemy troop movements, destroy their supplies, and disrupt their communications at a place called Koiari, 10 miles down the coast from Cape Torokina. The 1st Parachute Battalion, just in from Vella Levella under Major Richard Fagan, drew the assignment, with a company of the 3d Raider Battalion attached. While it had never made a jump in combat, the parachute battalion had been seasoned in the Guadalcanal campaign.

Carried by a U.S. Navy landing craft, the men in the raid were put ashore at 0400, 29 November, almost in the middle of a Japanese supply dump. Total surprise all around! The Marines hastily dug in, while the enemy responded quickly with a "furious hail" of mortar fire, meanwhile lashing the beachhead with machine gun and rifle fire. Then came the Japanese attacks, and Marine casualties mounted "alarmingly." They would have been worse except for a protective curtain of fire from the 155mm guns of the 3d Defense Battalion back at Cape Torokina. With an estimated 1,200 enemy pressing in on the Marines, it was painfully clear that the raiding group faced disaster. Two attempts to extricate them by their landing craft were halted by heavy Japanese artillery fire. Now the Marines had their backs to the sea and were almost out of ammunition. Then, about 1800, three U.S. destroyers raced in close to the beach, firing all guns. They had come in response to a frantic radio signal from IMAC, where the group's perilous situation was well understood. Now a wall of shell fire from the destroyers and the 155s allowed two rescue craft to dash for the beach and lift off the raiding group safely. With none of the original objectives achieved, the raid had been a costly failure, even though it had left at least 145 Japanese dead.

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## Hellzapoppin Ridge

Now the action shifted to the final targets of the 3d Marine Division: that mass of hills 2,000 yards away. Once captured, they would block the East-West Trail where it crossed the Torokina River, and they would greatly strengthen the Final Inland Defense Line that was the Marines' ultimate objective. A supply base, called Evansville, was built up for the attack in the rear of Hill 600 for the forthcoming attacks.

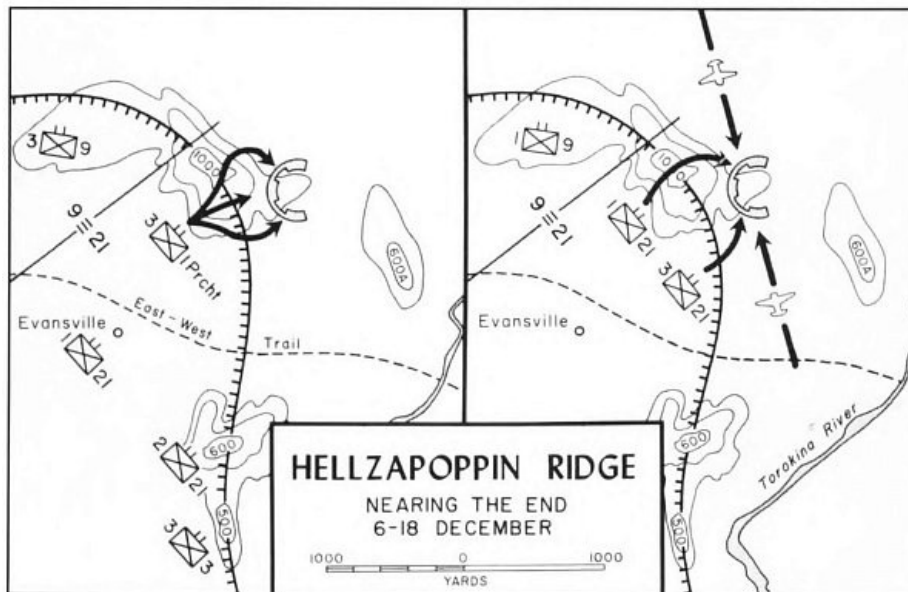
The 1st Marine Parachute Regiment, under Lieutenant Colonel Robert H. Williams, was informed, two days after its arrival on Bougainville, that General Turnage had assigned it to occupy those hills which IMAC felt still dominated much of the Marine ground. That ridgeline included Hill 1000 with its spur soon to be called Hellzapoppin Ridge (named after "Hellzapoppin," a long-running Broadway show), Hill 600, and Hill 600A. To take the terrain Williams got the support of elements of the 3d, 9th, and 21st Marines (which had established on 27 November its own independent outpost on Hill 600). By 5 December, the 1st Parachute Regiment had won a general outpost line that stretched from Hill 1000 to the junction of the East-West Trail and the Torokina River.

Then on 7 December, Major Robert T. Vance on Hill 1000 with his 3d Parachute Battalion walked the ridge spine to locate enemy positions on the adjacent spur that had been abandoned. The spur was fortified by nature: matted jungle for concealment, gullies to impair passage, steep slopes to discourage everything. That particular hump, which would get the apt name of Hellzapoppin Ridge, was some 280 feet high, 40 feet across at the top, and 650 feet long, an ideal position for overall defense.

Jumping off from Hill 1000 on the morning of 9 December to occupy the spur, Vance's men were hit by a fusillade of fire. The Japanese had come back, 235 of them of the *23d Infantry*. The parachutists attacked again and again, without success. Artillery fire was called in, but the Japanese found protective concealment on the reverse slopes. Marine shells burst high in the banyan trees, up and away from the dug-in enemy. As a result, the parachutists were hit hard. "Ill-equipped and under-strength," they were pulled back on 10 December to Hill 1000. Two battalions of the 21st Marines, with a battalion of the 9th Marines guarding their left flank, continued the attack. It would go on for six gruelling days.

Scrambling up the slopes, the new attacking Marines would pass the bodies of the parachutists. John W. Yager, a first lieutenant in the 21st recalled, "The para-Marines made the first contact and had left their dead there. After a few days, they had become very unpleasant reminders of what faced us as we crawled forward, in many instances right next to them."

Sergeant John F. Pelletier, also in the 21st, was a lead scout. Trying to cross the ridge spine over to the Hellzapoppin spur, he found dead paratroopers all over the hill. There were dead Japanese soldiers still hanging from trees, and it seemed to him that no Marine had been able to cross to the crest and live to tell about it.



**HELLZAPOPPIN RIDGE**  
**NEARING THE END**  
**6-18 DECEMBER**

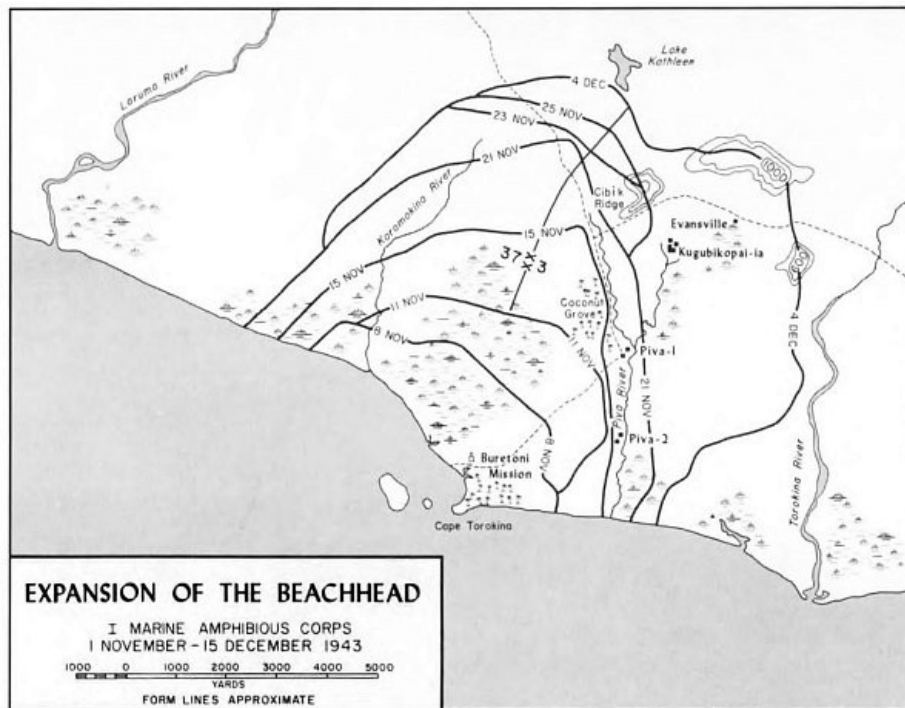
Pelletier described what happened next:

The next morning Sergeant Oliver [my squad leader] told me to advance down the ridge as we were going to secure the point. That point was to become our most costly battle. We moved down the center until we were within 20 feet of the point. The Japs hit us with machine gun, rifle, and mortar fire. They popped out of spider holes. We were in a horseshoe-shaped ambush. We were firing as fast as we could when Sergeant Oliver pulled me back. He gave me the order to pull back up the ridge. He didn't make it.

When artillery fire proved ineffective in battering the Japanese so deeply dug in on Hellzapoppin Ridge, Geiger called on 13 December for air attacks. Six Marine planes had just landed at the newly completed Torokina airstrip. They came in with 100-pound bombs, guided to their targets by smoke shells beyond the



Marine lines. But the Japanese were close, very close. Dozens of the bombs were dropped 75 yards from the Marines. With additional planes, there were four bombing and strafing strikes over several days. A Marine on the ground never forgot the bombers roaring in right over the brush, the ridge, and the heads of the Marines to drop their load, "It seemed right on top of us." (This delivery technique was necessary to put the bombs on the reverse slope among the Japanese.)



**EXPANSION OF THE BEACHHEAD**  
**I MARINE AMPHIBIOUS CORPS**  
**1 NOVEMBER-15 DECEMBER 1943**

Helping to control these early strikes and achieve pinpoint accuracy was Lieutenant Colonel William K. Pottinger, G-3 (Operations Officer) of the Forward Echelon, 1st Marine Aircraft Wing. He had taken a radio out of a grounded plane, moved to the frontlines, and helped control the attacking Marine planes on the spot. (This technique was an improvised forerunner of the finely tuned procedures that Marine dive bombers would use later to achieve remarkable results in close air support of ground troops.)

28

The 3d Marine Division's history was pithy in its evaluation, "It was the air attacks which proved to be the most effective factor in the taking of the ridge ... the most successful examples of close air support thus far in the Pacific War."

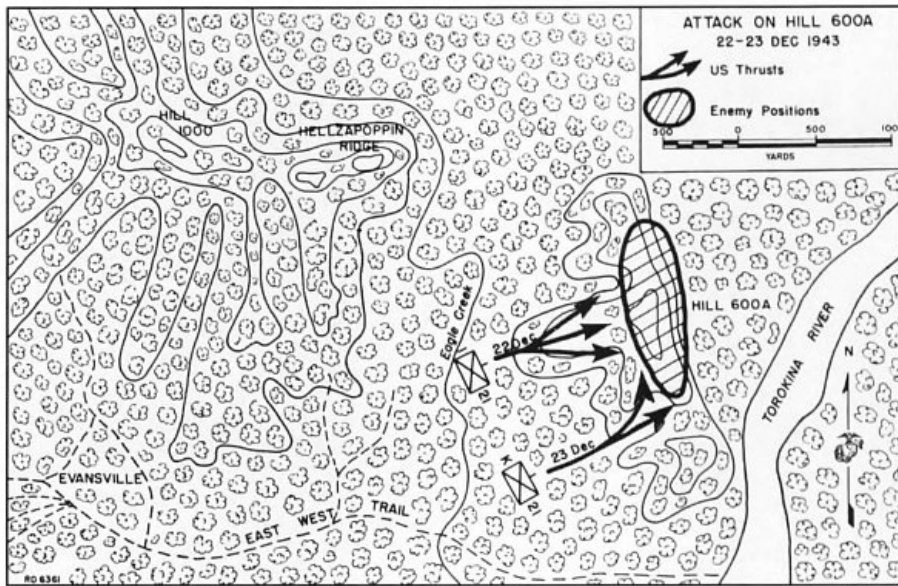
Geiger wasn't through. He had a battery of the Army's 155mm howitzers moved by landing craft to new firing positions near the mouth of the Torokina River. Now the artillery could pour it on the enemy positions on the reverse slopes.

In one of the daily Marine assaults, one company went up the ridge for two attacks against Japanese who would jump into holes they had dug on the reverse slope to escape bombardment. The Japanese finally were tricked when another company, relieving the first one, jumped into the enemy foxholes before their rightful owners. It cost the Japanese heavily to try to return.

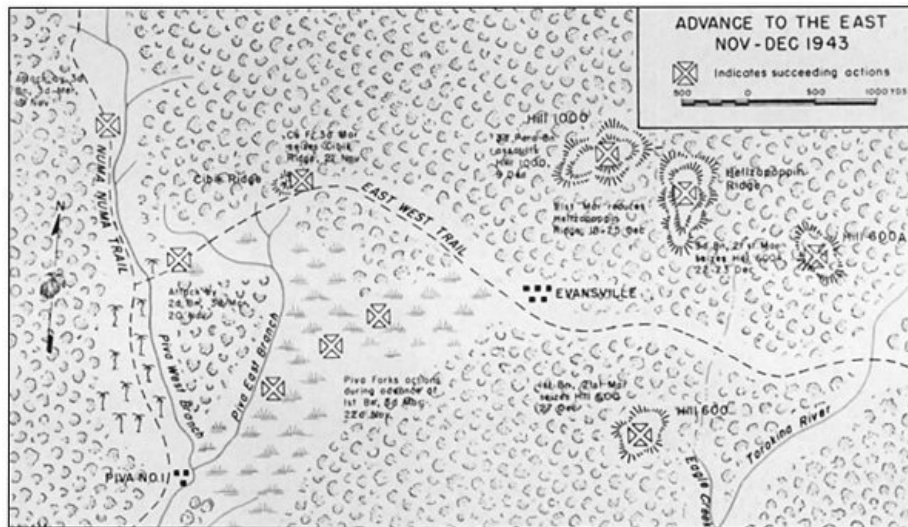
In a final assault on 18 December, the two battalions of the 21st moved from Hill 1000 to the spur in a pincer and double envelopment. But the artillery and bombs had done their work. The Japanese and their fortress were shattered. Stunned defenders were easily eliminated.

Patrick O'Sheel, a Marine combat correspondent, summed up the bitter battle, "No one knows how many Japs were killed. Some 30 bodies were found. Another dozen might have been put together from arms, legs, and torsos." The 21st suffered 12 killed and 23 wounded.

With Hellzapoppin finally behind them, Marines could count what blessings they could find and recount how rotten their holidays were. There had been a Thanksgiving Day spent on the trail while gnawing a drumstick on the way to another engagement at Piva Forks. And now, on 21 December, four days until Christmas, and the troops still had Hill 600A to "square away."



**ATTACK ON HILL 600A  
22-23 DEC 1943**



**ADVANCE TO THE EAST  
NOV-DEC 1943**



Reconnaissance found 14-18 Japanese on that hill, down by the Torokina River. A combat patrol from the 21st Marines moved to drive the Japanese off the knob. It wasn't hard, but it cost the life of one Marine and one was wounded. But IMAC wanted a permanent outpost on the hill, and the 3d Battalion, 21st, drew the assignment. It began with one rifle platoon and a platoon of heavy machine guns on 22 December. Hill 600A was a repeat of past enemy tactics. The Japanese had come back to occupy it. They held against all efforts, even against a two-pronged attack. A full company came up and made three assaults. That didn't help either. Late on the 23d, the Marines held for the night, preparing to mount another attack in the morning. That morning was Christmas Eve, 1943. Scouts went up to look. The Japanese had gone. Christmas wasn't merry, but it was better. For the 3d Marine Division, the war was over on Bougainville.

30



National Archives Photo 80-G-250368

*The Piva airfields (shown here in February 1944 photograph) became key bomber and fighter strips in the aerial offensive against Rabaul.*

The landing force had seized the beachhead, destroyed or overcome the enemy, and won the ground for the vital airfields. Now they prepared to leave, as the airfields were being readied to reduce Rabaul and its environs.

Since 10 December, F4U Vought Corsairs of Marine Fighting Squadron (VMF) 216 (1st Marine Aircraft Wing) had settled on the new strip on Torokina, almost washed by the sea. The fighter planes would be the key to the successful prosecution of the AirSols (Air Solomons) offensive against Rabaul, for, as escorts, they made large-scale bombing raids feasible. Major General Ralph J. Mitchell, USMC, had become head of AirSols on 20 November 1943. By 9 January 1944, both the fighter and bomber aircraft were operating from the Piva strips. Following Bougainville, Mitchell would have twice the airpower and facilities that the Japanese had in all of the Southwest Pacific area.

The campaign had cost the Marines 423 killed and 1,418 wounded. Enemy dead were estimated at 2,458, with only 23 prisoners captured.

It was now time for the 3d Marine Division to go home to Guadalcanal, with a “well done” from Halsey. (In the Admiral’s colorful language, a message to Geiger said, “You have literally succeeded in setting up and opening for business a shop in the Japs’ front yard.”) Now there would be plenty of papayas and Lister bags, as well as a PX, a post office, and some sports and movies. General Turnage was relieved on 28 December by Major General John R. Hodge of the Americal Division, which took over the eastern sector. The 37th Infantry Division kept its responsibility for the western section of the Bougainville perimeter. Admiral Halsey directed the Commanding General, XIV Corps, Major General Oscar W. Griswold, to relieve General Geiger, Commanding General, IMAC. The Army assumed control of the beachhead as of 15 December. The 3d Marines left Bougainville on Christmas Day. The 9th left on 28 December, and had a party with two cans of beer per man. The 21st, last to arrive on the island, was the division’s last rifle regiment to leave, on 9 January 1944.

Every man in those regiments knew full well the crucial role that the supporting battalions had played. The 19th Marines’ pioneers and engineers had labored ceaselessly to build the bridges and trails that brought the vital water, food, and ammunition to the front lines through seemingly impassable swamps, jungle, and water, water everywhere.

*A chaplain reads prayers for the burial of the dead, while their friends bow their heads in sorrow at the losses.*

From the Leach File, MCHC Archives



And the amtracs of the 3d Amphibian Tractor Battalion had proven essential in getting 22,922 tons of those supplies to the riflemen. They were “the most important link in the all-important supply chain.” 31

Working behind the amtracs were the unsung men of the 3d Service Battalion who, under the division quartermaster, Colonel William C. Hall, brought order and efficiency from the original, chaotic pile-up of supplies on the beach. As roads were slowly built, the 6×6 trucks of the 3d Motor Transport Battalion moved the supplies to advance dumps for the amtracs to pick up.

The 12th Marines and Army artillery had given barrage after barrage of preparatory fire—72,643 rounds in all.

The invaluable role of Marine aviation, as previously mentioned, was symbolized by General Turnage’s repeated requests for close air support, 10 strikes in all.

The Seabees, working at a “feverish rate,” had miraculously carved three airfields out of the unbelievable morass that characterized the area. And it was from those bases that the long-range, strategic effects of Bougainville would be felt by the enemy.

The 3d Medical Battalion had taken care of the wounded. With omnipresent corpsmen on the front lines in every battle and aid stations and field hospitals right behind, the riflemen knew they had been well tended.

General Turnage summarized the campaign well, “Seldom have troops experienced a more difficult combination of combat, supply, and evacuation. From its very inception, it was a bold and hazardous operation. Its success was due to the planning of all echelons and the indomitable will, courage, and devotion to duty of all members of all organizations participating.”

Thus it was that the capture of Bougainville marked the top of the ladder, after the long climb up the chain of the Solomon Islands.

## Epilogue

There were, however, two minor land operations to complete the isolation of Rabaul. The first was at Green Island, just 37 miles north of Bougainville. It was a crusty, eight-mile-long (four-mile-wide) oval ring, three islands of sand and coral around a sleepy lagoon, and only 117 miles from Rabaul. To General Douglas MacArthur, it was the last step of the Solomon Islands campaign.

The task of taking the island fell to the 5,800 men of the 3d New Zealand Division under Major General H. E. Barrowclough, less the 8th Brigade which had been used in the Treasuries operation. There was also a contingent of American soldiers, Seabees, and engineers, and cover from AirSol Marine planes under Brigadier General Field Harris. Rear Admiral Wilkinson had Task Force 31, whose warships would wait for targets (although Green Island would get no preinvasion bombardment). The atoll ring was too narrow and bombardment would pose a danger to island inhabitants.

Late in January 1944, 300 men of the 30th New Zealand Battalion and Seabees and engineer specialists went ashore, measured and sized up the island's potential, found spots for an airfield, checked lagoon depths, and sought accommodations for a boat basin.

All of this warned the Japanese, but it was too late for them to do anything. Then, on 14 February, Japanese scout planes warned the 102 defenders on Green Island that a large Allied convoy was on the way, shepherded by destroyers and cruisers. Japanese aircraft from Rabaul and Kavieng attacked the convoy by moonlight, but at 0641, the landing craft had crossed the line of departure unscathed and were almost to the beach. Within two hours, all were ashore, unopposed. Then Japanese dive bombers came roaring in, but the Allied anti-aircraft fire and Marine fighter planes (VMF-212) were enough to prevent hits on the transports or beach supplies. New Zealand patrols got only slight resistance, a few brief firefights. By 19 February, the 33d, 37th, and 93d Seabees were laying an airfield on the island.

By 4 March, a heavy B-24 bomber was able to make an emergency landing on the Green Island strip. Three days later, AirSols planes were staging there giving the strip the name "Green." Soon B-24s were there to strike the vast Japanese base at Truk.

*Heavy, constant artillery support for the riflemen required a regular flow of ammunition. Here shells are being unloaded from a LST (Landing Ship, Tank).*

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 71180 by PFC Philip Scheer



The second operation saw the seizure of Emirau Island. It was well north of Green Island, 75 miles northwest of the New Ireland enemy fortress of Kavieng. Actually, Kavieng had been considered as a target to be invaded by the 3d Marine Division, but higher authorities decided the cost would be too high. Better to let Kavieng die on the vine. Taking Emirau and setting up air and naval bases there would effectively cut off the Solomon Islands and the Bismarck Archipelago from the Japanese. It would be a small investment with big results.

Emirau is an irregularly shaped island in the St. Matthias Group, eight miles long, four miles wide, with much jungle and many hills, but with room for boat basins and airstrips. The natives said there had been no Japanese there since January, and air reconnaissance could find none.

The unit selected for the landing bore a famous name in the lore of the Corps: the 4th Marines. The original regiment had been the storied "China Marines," and had then been part of the desperate defense of Bataan and the subsequent surrender at Corregidor in the Philippines. Now it had been reborn as a new, independent regiment, composed of the tough and battle-hardened veterans of the raider battalions.

The 4th Marines arrived at Emirau shortly after 0600 on 20 March 1944. The Marines and sailors fired a few shots at nothing; then the amphibian tractors opened up, wounding one of the Marines. The Seabees got right to work on the airfields, even before the island was secured. In no time they laid out a 7,000-foot bomber strip and a 5,000-foot stretch for fighters.

All was secured until attention fell on a little neighboring island with a Japanese fuel and ration dump. Destroyers blew it all to debris ... then spied at sea a large canoe escaping with some of the enemy. Hardly bloodthirsty after this placid operation, the destroyer casually pulled in close. The Japanese chose to fire a machine gun. It was folly. The destroyer was forced to respond. The canoe didn't sink and was brought alongside with the body of a Japanese officer and 26 living enlisted men—who may have privately questioned their officer's judgement.



## *Bougainville Finale*

These were small affairs compared to the finale on Bougainville. With the withdrawal of the 3d Marine Division at the end of 1943, after it had successfully fought its way to the final defensive line, the two Army divisions, the 37th Infantry and the Americal, took over and extended the perimeter with only sporadic brushes with the Japanese.

Then, in late February and early March 1944, patrols began making "almost continuous" contact with the enemy. It appeared that the Japanese were concentrating for a serious counterattack. On 8 March, the 145th Infantry (of the 37th) was hit by artillery fire. Then the *6th Division*, parent of the old enemy, the *23d Infantry*, attacked hard. It took five days of "very severe" fighting, with support from a battalion of the 148th Infantry, combined with heavy artillery fire and air strikes, to drive the determined Japanese back. Meanwhile, the 129th Infantry had also been "heavily attacked." The enemy kept coming and coming, and it was a full nine days before there was a lull on 17 March.

On 24 March the Japanese, after reorganizing, launched another series of assaults "with even greater pressure." This time they also threw in three regiments of their *17th Division*. The artillery of both American divisions, guided by Cub spotter planes, fired "the heaviest support mission ever to be put down in the South Pacific Area." That broke the back of the enemy attackers, and the battle finally was over on 25 March.

Major General Griswold, the corps commander, after eight major enemy attacks, wrote in a letter four days later:

I am absolutely convinced that nowhere on earth does there exist a more determined will and offensive spirit in the attack than that the Japs exhibited here. They come in hard, walking on their own dead, usually on a front not to exceed 100 yards. They try to effect a breakthrough which they exploit like water running from a hose. When stopped, they dig in like termites and fight to the death. They crawl up even the most insignificant fold in the ground like ants. And they use all their weapons with spirit and boldness.... Difficult terrain or physical difficulties have no meaning for them.

The Americal Division had advanced along with the 37th in the March-April period with its last action 13-14 April. This ended the serious offensive action for the two Army divisions; the enemy had been driven well out of artillery range of the airstrips, 12,000 yards away.

For Americans this marked the end of the Bougainville saga: a tale of well-trained units, filled with, determined, skillful men, who fought their way to a resounding victory. The 3d Marine Division had led the way in securing a vital island base with the crucial isolation of Rabaul thus ensured.

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The author owes a substantial debt to Cyril J. O'Brien who was a Marine Combat Correspondent on Bougainville. A draft he prepared describing this operation used U.S. Army, Coast Guard, and New Zealand as well as Marine Corps sources, and contained a variety of colorful vignettes and personal interviews, with some photographs not in official USMC files, all gratefully acknowledged.

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## *About the Author*



Captain John C. Chapin earned a bachelor of arts degree with honors in history from Yale University in 1942 and was commissioned later that year. He served as a rifle platoon leader in the 24th Marines, 4th Marine Division, and was wounded in action during assault landings on Roi-Namur and Saipan.

Transferred to duty at the Historical Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, he wrote the first official histories of the 4th and 5th Marine Divisions. Moving to Reserve status at the end of World War II, he earned a master's degree in history at George Washington University with a thesis on "The Marine Occupation of Haiti, 1915-1922."

Now a captain in retired status, he has been a volunteer at the Marine Corps Historical Center for 12 years. During that time he wrote *History of Marine Fighter-Attack (VMFA) Squadron 115*. With support from the Historical Center and the Marine Corps Historical Foundation, he then spent some years researching and interviewing for the writing of a new book, *Uncommon Men: The Sergeants Major of the Marine Corps*, published in 1992 by the White Mane Publishing Company.

Subsequently, he wrote four monographs for this series of historical pamphlets, commemorating the campaigns for the Marshalls, Saipan, Bougainville, and Marine Aviation in the Philippines operations.



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