ISOLATION OF RABAUL

History of U.S. Marine Corps Operations in World War II

VOLUME II

HISTORICAL BRANCH, G-3 DIVISION, HEADQUARTERS, U.S. MARINE CORPS

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HISTORY OF U.S. MARINE CORPS
OPERATIONS IN WORLD WAR II

VOLUME II

by USMC

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Pearl Harbor to Guadalcanal

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Foreword

This book, the second in a projected five-volume series, continues the comprehensive history of Marine Corps operations in World War II. The story of individual campaigns, once told in separate detail in preliminary monographs, has been largely rewritten and woven together to show events in proper proportion to each other and in correct perspective to the war as a whole. New material, particularly from Japanese sources, which has become available in profusion since the writing of the monographs, has been included to provide fresh insight into the Marine Corps' contribution to the final victory in the Pacific.

The period covered in these pages was a time of transition in the fighting when the Allied offensive gradually shifted into high gear after a grinding start at Guadalcanal. As the situation changed, the make-up of the Fleet Marine Force changed, too. We passed through the era of hit and run and through the time for defensive strategy. Our raider and parachute battalions were absorbed in regular infantry units, the seacoast batteries of our defense battalions became field artillery, and our air squadrons were re-equipped with newer and deadlier planes.

In the converging drives that made the Japanese fortress Rabaul their goal—one under Navy command and the other under Army leadership—Marines played a significant part well out of proportion to their numbers. In those days, as in these, the use of trained amphibious troops in a naval campaign overloaded the scale in our favor.

As one hard-won success followed another in the Solomons and on New Guinea, a progression of airfields wrested from island jungles gave us the means to emasculate Rabaul. While the enemy garrison waited helplessly for an assault that never came, we seized encircling bases that choked the life out of a once-potent stronghold.

Once the front lines passed by Rabaul, other island battles seized the headlines—battles of the great two-pronged advance on Japan, which was made possible in large part by the victories of 1943 in the Southwest Pacific. For thousands of Americans, Australians, and New Zealanders, however, the campaign against Rabaul never ended until the last day of the war. In this unheralded epilogue of blockade and harassment, Marine air units took the lead just as they had in the all-out aerial battle that preceded.

The outstanding aspect of all the operations covered in this volume, one evident in every section of the narrative, was the spirit of cooperation between

different services and national forces. No finer example exists in recent history of the awesome combined power of distinct military forces pursuing a common goal.

DAVID M. SHOUP
GENERAL, U.S. MARINE CORPS
COMMANDANT OF THE MARINE CORPS

Reviewed and approved
16 May 1963

Preface

The Allied campaign to reduce Rabaul was not an uninterrupted series of flawless operations. It had, like most human enterprises, a share of mistakes to match its successes. Since we learn by both errors and accomplishments, the lessons, good and bad, absorbed during the fighting on New Georgia, Bougainville, and New Britain were priceless in value. They undoubtedly saved the lives of many Marines who went on to take part in the Central Pacific drive that culminated in the battle for Okinawa.

Our purpose in publishing this operational history in durable form is to make the Marine Corps record permanently available for study by military personnel and the general public as well as by serious scholars of military history. We have made a conscious effort to be objective in our treatment of the actions of Marines and of the men of other services who fought at their side. We have tried to write with understanding about our former enemies and in this effort have received invaluable help from the Japanese themselves. Few peoples so militant and unyielding in war have been as dispassionate and analytical about their actions in peace.

This volume was planned and outlined by Colonel Charles W. Harrison, former Head, Historical Branch, G–3 Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, working in conjunction with Mr. Henry I. Shaw, Jr., the senior historian on the World War II historical project. Major Douglas T. Kane wrote the narratives of the New Georgia and Bougainville operations, using much of the research material gathered for the monographs prepared by Major John N. Rentz, *Marines in the Central Solomons* and *Bougainville and the Northern Solomons*. The remainder of the narrative was written by Mr. Shaw, who in treating the story of operations at Cape Gloucester and Talasea drew upon the research data assembled for the monograph, *The Campaign on New Britain*, by Lieutenant Colonel Frank O. Hough and Major John A. Crown. The appendices concerning casualties, command and staff, and chronology were prepared by Mr. Benis M. Frank. Colonel Harrison, Major Gerald Fink, Colonel William M. Miller, Major John H. Johnstone, and Colonel Thomas G. Roe, successive heads of the Historical Branch, did most of the final editing of the manuscript. The book was completed under the direction of Colonel Joseph F. Wagner, Jr., present head of the branch.

A number of leading participants in the actions described have commented on preliminary drafts of pertinent portions of the book. Their valuable assistance is gratefully acknowledged. Several senior officers, in particular General

Alexander A. Vandegrift, General Lemuel C. Shepherd, Jr., and Vice Admiral Daniel E. Barbey, made valuable additions to their written comments during personal interviews. General Vandegrift, in addition, made his private correspondence with senior commanders in the Pacific available for use and attribution.

Special thanks are due to the historical agencies of the other services for their critical readings of the draft chapters of this book. Outstanding among the many official historians who measurably assisted the authors were: Dr. John Miller, Jr., Deputy Chief Historian, Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army; Mr. Dean C. Allard, Head, Operational Archives Branch, Naval History Division, Navy Department; and Dr. Robert F. Futrell, Historian, U.S. Air Force Historical Division, Research Studies Institute, Air University, Maxwell Air Force Base.

Chief Warrant Officer Patrick R. Brewer and his successor as Historical Branch Administrative and Production Officer, Second Lieutenant D'Arcy E. Grisier, ably handled the many exacting duties involved in processing the volume from first drafts through final printed form. The many preliminary typescripts and the painstaking task of typing the final manuscript for the printer were done by Mrs. Miriam R. Smallwood. Much of the meticulous work demanded by the index was done by Mrs. Smallwood, Miss Mary E. Walker, and Miss Kay P. Sue.

The maps were drafted by Chief Warrant Officer Brewer and Corporal Robert F. Stibil. Official Defense Department photographs have been used throughout the text.

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MAJOR GENERAL, U.S. MARINE CORPS
ASSISTANT CHIEF OF STAFF, G–2

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Strategic Situation—Spring 1943

Setting the Stage

World War II had the dubious distinction of being the first truly global conflict. The Allied and the Axis Powers clashed on a dozen widely separated fronts and a thousand different battlefields. Six years, lacking only 26 days, passed between the fateful dawn when Nazi tanks rumbled across the Polish border and the solemn moment when the *Enola Gay* released its bomb load over ground zero at Hiroshima. The United States was in this war from the beginning, perhaps not as an active belligerent, but certainly as an open and material supporter of its friends and allies.[1]

Germany was tagged "the predominant member of the Axis Powers" and the Atlantic and European area "the decisive theatre" eight months before the Japanese struck at Pearl Harbor.[2] The stark fact of that surprise attack and its resulting havoc did not alter the basic decision made by the responsible American military and naval chiefs to give priority of men, equipment, and supplies to the campaign against Germany. Their analysis of the situation boiled down to the simple conclusion that Germany was more dangerous to the United States than Japan.

The "Germany-first" decision was made in terms of overall war potential, not solely in terms of fighting men. Indeed, the sobering succession of Allied reverses in the Pacific during the early days of 1942 gave ample evidence of the formidable fighting qualities of Japanese soldiers and seamen. Japan was no pushover; her defeat would require years of all-out effort. However slim the allotment of resources to the Allied troops that faced the Japanese, constant military pressure had to be maintained. Casualties and costs would soar if ever the enemy was allowed time to consolidate his hold on the strategic islands, to dig in and construct defenses in depth.

The United States had the primary responsibility for halting the Japanese advance south and east through the Pacific. The fact that the battleground included thousands of open miles of the world's largest ocean added immeasurably to the logistic problem involved and made mandatory the assignment of amphibious-trained troops to the fighting. In such a situation, the Marine Corps, which had argued and coaxed, sweated and struggled, to develop workable amphibious techniques in the 20's and 30's, soon proved the worth of its findings and training.

[1] See Parts I and II of Volume I of this series for an examination of the extent to which the U.S. was prepared for and participating in World War II prior to 7 December 1941.

[2] Para 13, ABC-1, dtd 23Mar41, quoted in Navy Basic War Plan—Rainbow No. 5, dtd 26May41. The "Rainbow" plans outlined possible courses of action in the event of a multi-nation war, the term deriving from the custom of giving color names (Japan was Orange) to war plans involving one major enemy. Rainbow-5 was the basic American war plan at the time of Pearl Harbor.

A Marine occupied a unique position among American servicemen during World War II. While his country battled a coalition of enemies, and most of his countrymen in arms were fighting halfway across the globe from him, the Marine trained to meet only one enemy—Japan. As the war moved inexorably onward, the men who flocked to join the Corps in unprecedented numbers were literally and consciously signing up to fight the Japanese. This orientation toward a single enemy and towards one theater, the Pacific, colored every Marine's life in and out of battle and had an incalculable but undeniably beneficial effect on the combat efficiency of the Fleet Marine Force (FMF).

A glance back over the first year highlights of the Pacific war will set the stage for the stirring events to follow—for the story of the Marine Corps' vital part in the all-out Allied shift to the offensive.

THE FIRST YEAR OF THE PACIFIC WAR [3]

The homespun philosophy of America furnishes an apt saying that described Japan's plight in World War II: "she bit off more than she could chew." Not only did the Japanese militarists grossly underestimate the staying power and counterpunching ability of the United States and its allies; they also failed to make a realistic appraisal of their own nation's capabilities. Compounding their original error of starting the war, the enemy leaders indulged in some wishful thinking about the invincibility of their fleets and armies.

Certainly the Japanese had cause to view their parade of early victories with chauvinistic pride. There were only a few moments during the first half year of fighting when the Allies were not faced with the alternatives of retreat or defeat. But even then, for every outpost like Guam or Hong Kong where token garrisons had no choice but to lay down their arms, there was a Wake or Bataan where a desperate last-ditch defense was fought. True, the Japanese prevailed on all fronts, but the bitter nature of the fighting should have furnished a clue to the spirit of the defenders and the certainty of retaliation.

In Tokyo, the staff members of *Imperial General Headquarters* ignored or misread the warning signs. Japan had caught the Allies off balance and ill-prepared; she had taken all of her original objectives and held the "Southern Resources Area," the Netherlands Indies and Malaya, in a tight grip. Ostensibly, she now had the means to make herself self-sufficient, and she needed every bit of time and every man she could muster to consolidate her hold on her prize. Her next logical move, and the one called for in original war plans, was to strengthen defenses. A line along which she would make her stand had been picked out: a long, looping arc that ran south from the Kuriles through Wake to the Marshalls and Gilberts and then west to include the Bismarck Archipelago, Timor, Java, Sumatra, Malaya, and Burma. The defense of this perimeter was probably a task beyond Japan's resources, even with the help of the newly seized territories. At the war's end, one

[3] Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: USSBS (Pac), NavAnalysisDiv, *The Campaigns of the Pacific War* (Washington: GPO, 1946), hereafter USSBS *Campaigns;* USSBS (Pac), JapIntelSec, G–2, *Japanese Military and Naval Intelligence Division* (Washington: GPO, Apr46); *The War Reports of General of the Army George C. Marshall—General of the Army H. H. Arnold—Fleet Admiral Ernest J. King* (Philadelphia and New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1947).

senior Japanese officer described this perimeter as "just about the limit, the maximum limit of our capability." [4]

The natural clairvoyance of hindsight similarly aided a number of enemy officers to recognize the fact that Japan had overextended herself by early spring of 1942. At that time, however, the headquarters faction that had authored the original ambitious war plan was still in the saddle and their aggressive philosophy prevailed. Orders went out from Tokyo to continue the advance, to seize further positions that would shield the initial perimeter. It was this decision more than any other taken by *Imperial Headquarters* during the course of the war that hastened the downfall of the Japanese Empire. In less than a year's time, enemy forces were reeling back all across the Pacific, and the reserves that would have bolstered the original perimeter were dissipated in a fruitless effort to continue the offensive.

The new expansionist plans called for the occupation of strategic islands, suitable for air and naval base development, in the North, Central, and South Pacific. The grand prize sought was Midway; it was hoped that a thrust there would bring out the American fleet for a decisive engagement. Closely linked to this projected attack was the movement of an occupation force into the Aleutians to seize Kiska, Attu, and Adak Islands. The two operations would be conducted simultaneously, and both enemy supporting fleets would be available to combine against the American ships. In the south, the objective was to strengthen the Japanese position in the Bismarcks and on New Guinea. Plans were laid to take Port Moresby in southeastern New Guinea and to move outpost garrisons into the Solomons. After the successful conclusion of the Midway operation, the Japanese planned to move against New Caledonia, Fiji, and Samoa, and sever Australia's lifeline to the States.

The enemy timetable for expansion listed the seizure of Port Moresby for early May, followed in a month's time by the attack on Midway. In both cases the carefully selected occupation troops never got a chance to set foot on their objectives. Seen in retrospect, the issue was decided at sea, and the decision was final.

On 7–8 May in the Coral Sea, an American carrier task force intercepted the invasion fleet bound for Port Moresby and was successful in turning it back. In "the first major engagement in naval history in which surface ships did not exchange a single shot," [5] carrier aircraft inflicted all the damage. Each side lost a carrier, each had one severely damaged, but the honors of the field fell justly to the American pilots who forced the Japanese to withdraw. The Port Moresby operation was put off until July, but the outcome of the Battle of Midway ensured a permanent postponement. (See Map I, Map Section.)

Midway could hardly have been called a surprise target. The intelligence available to Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, Commander in Chief, Pacific Fleet (CinCPac), regarding where and when the enemy would strike next was conclusive. When the Japanese carrier attack force approached within launching distance of the atoll on 4 June, it ran into a whirlwind of

[4] USSBS (Pac), NavAnalysisDiv, *Interrogations of Japanese Officials*, 2 vols (Washington: GPO, 1946), Interrogation No. 393, FAdm Osami Nagano, IJN, II, p. 353, hereafter USSBS, *Interrogation* with relevant number and name.

[5] King, *War Reports*, op. cit., p. 523.

American planes. Nimitz had brought up all his available carriers, had added long-range bombers staging from Hawaiian fields, and had given the Midway garrison's Marine Aircraft Group 22 (MAG–22) new planes to meet the enemy threat. The result of these preparations was electrifying; all four of the Japanese carriers were sent to the bottom and the invasion force streaked back for the relative safety of home waters. The Battle of Midway was a disaster from which the Japanese naval air arm never recovered. The battle has frequently been termed *the* decisive engagement of the war in the Pacific and its results were certainly far reaching. The severe and sudden cut in enemy carrier strength put a crimp in all plans for further offensive action.[6]

The immediate reaction of Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, Commander in Chief of the *Combined Fleet*, to the news of his Midway losses was to recall the Aleutian occupation forces. Then, almost immediately, he reversed himself and ordered the operation to continue but with the modification that only the two westernmost targets, Kiska and Attu, would be seized. Perhaps Adak Island was too close to the U.S. base at Dutch Harbor for comfort. Although Yamamoto's exact reasoning in ordering the operation to continue is not known, it is probable that he gave a great deal of weight to the fact that more American territory would be occupied, a definite boost to Japanese morale that would be needed if the truth of the Midway battle leaked out. On 7 June, occupation troops landed on the two bleak islands, there to stay until the Allies could spare the men, supplies, and equipment which were needed to drive them out. Although there was considerable public alarm in the States, especially the Pacific Northwest, over the presence of Japanese in the Aleutians, actually the new enemy bases were not much of a threat. The rugged island chain, cursed with more than a fair share of the world's miserable weather, was no avenue for conquest.

Midway's results went far to redress the balance of naval strength in the Pacific and to give the Allied leaders a chance to launch a limited offensive. The logical target area was the South Pacific, where the Japanese, despite their Coral Sea misadventure, were still planning to take Port Moresby and were continuing their encroachment into the Solomons. The enemy field headquarters for this two-pronged approach to the Australia-United States supply route was Rabaul on New Britain, a prize whose capture dominated Allied planning. But Rabaul was far too ambitious an objective for the summer of 1942, when almost any offensive effort severely strained available resources.

The calculated risk of the first offensive—a "shoe-string" operation—was made at Guadalcanal, a hitherto obscure jungle-clad island in the lower Solomons. The Japanese first moved into the area in April, when they occupied tiny Tulagi and set up a seaplane base and anchorage in the fine natural harbor between that island and neighboring Florida. A stretch of some 20 miles of open water, which was soon to earn the grim name of "Iron Bottom Sound," separated Tulagi from Guadalcanal. The larger island was one of the few places in the Solomons where

[6] See Part V of Volume I of this series for details of the Marine participation in the Midway battle.

terrain favored rapid airfield development, and the Japanese, soon after Midway, began to clear ground and construct a fighter strip along its northern coastal plain.

Guadalcanal's airfield and Tulagi's harbor became prime objectives once Washington okayed the opening offensive in late June. In contrast to the months of meticulous planning that characterized later amphibious operations, this first effort, code-named WATCHTOWER, was surrounded by an aura of haste. The unit picked to do the job was the one most likely to be successful, one which had more of the requisite amphibious training and indoctrination than any other at this stage of the war—the 1st Marine Division (Reinforced). The division was in the process of completing a move to New Zealand, its rear echelon still at sea, when warning orders were received designating it the WATCHTOWER assault force. In less than a month, the division had changed its orientation from routine training to preparation for jungle fighting, had prepared its tactical plans in light of the scanty information available on enemy and terrain, and had unloaded its ships and then reloaded them for combat. A rendezvous was made at sea in the Fiji rehearsal area with the convoy of the 2d Marines, which had been sent out from San Diego to take the place of the 7th Marines, one of the division's regular regiments detailed to Samoa's garrison.

On 7 August, assault elements of the 1st Division landed on Guadalcanal and moved inland according to plan without meeting any opposition. Simultaneously, Marines stormed ashore on Tulagi and its neighboring islets, where the landings were opposed violently. Several days of hard fighting were needed to secure Tulagi's harbor, but when this first battle was over the scene of ground action shifted to Guadalcanal. There, engineers worked feverishly to put the partially completed airstrip in shape to receive friendly fighters. And the Marine defenders desperately needed aerial reinforcement, in fact any kind of reinforcement that they could get, for the Japanese reaction to the Guadalcanal landing was swift and savage.

For six hectic months, during which it often seemed that WATCHTOWER would prove a fiasco, the 1st Division and an all-too-slowly swelling number of Army and Marine reinforcements stood off a series of sharp enemy counterattacks. The Japanese poured thousands of crack troops into the jungles that closed on the Marine perimeter, but never were able to put ashore enough men and equipment at one time to overcome the garrison. From the captured airfield (Henderson Field), a weird and wonderful composite force of Navy, Army, Marine, and New Zealand planes fought the Japanese to a standstill in the air and immeasurably strengthened the Allied hand at sea by attacking enemy transport and surface bombardment groups as they steamed from bases in the upper Solomons to Guadalcanal.

Although Allied naval forces lost heavily in the series of sea battles that were fought for control of Solomons' waters, the American and Australian ships kept coming back on station. The Japanese admirals strove mightily to seize the advantage when it was theirs, but the opportunity faded. By the end of November, enemy losses had increased so sharply

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that capital ships were no longer risked in Iron Bottom Sound.[7]

When the anniversary of Pearl Harbor rolled around, the Japanese situation on Guadalcanal was desperate. A steady parade of men, ships, and planes had been committed to drive out the Americans and every effort had failed. Even the firebrands in *Imperial General Headquarters* were now convinced that Japan had overreached herself. By the year's end, the decision had been made to evacuate Guadalcanal and orders were sent out to consolidate positions on the original perimeter.[8]

GUADALCANAL AND PAPUA[9]

By the time of the Guadalcanal landing the Japanese held effective control of all the Pacific islands they had invaded but one—New Guinea. In March of 1942, the enemy had occupied positions along the northeast coast of the enormous island at Lae and Salamaua, and their local naval superiority gave them the means of moving in wherever else they wished along this virtually undefended coast. Allied air, operating from carriers or staging from Australia through Port Moresby, was the principal deterrent to further Japanese encroachment. When, during the Battle of the Coral Sea, the *Port Moresby Invasion Force* was forced to turn back to Rabaul, the obvious capability of the enemy to attack again prompted the Allies to make a countermove to ward off this threat. In June and July, Australian ground units and fighter squadrons supported by American engineers and antiaircraft artillery moved to Milne Bay on the eastern tip of New Guinea to build and hold an air base that would cover Port Moresby's exposed flank.

The Japanese thwarted a further Allied advance planned for early August when they landed their own troops near Buna Mission on 22 July. Buna was the northern terminus of the Kokoda Trail, a difficult 150-mile route over the Owen Stanley Mountains to Port Moresby. The superior enemy landing force soon fought its way through the light Australian defenses and reached Kokoda village, about 30 miles inland, where it held up. This first move by the Japanese into Papua, the Australian territory which comprised most of the eastern part of New Guinea, was essentially a reconnaissance in force to test the feasibility of an overland drive on Port Moresby. Thousands of enemy reinforcements arrived from Rabaul in August to strengthen the Buna position and add weight to the proposed attack. By 26 August the Japanese were ready, and they jumped off from Kokoda in a determined assault that quickly overpowered the few

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[7] The story of the Navy's bitter struggle for control of the Guadalcanal waters is well told in Samuel E. Morison, *The Struggle for Guadalcanal, August 1942–February 1943—History of United States Naval Operations in World War II*, v. V (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1949).

[8] MilHistSec, G–2, FEC, Japanese Monograph No. 45, IGHQ Army High Command Record, Mid-1941–Aug45, 2d rev. 1952 (OCMH), p. 67, hereafter *IGHQ Army Record*.

[9] Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: *IGHQ Army Record;* Part VI of Volume I of this series; John Miller, Jr., *Guadalcanal: The First Offensive—The War in the Pacific—United States Army in World War II* (Washington: HistDiv, DA, 1949); Samuel Milner, *Victory in Papua—The War in the Pacific—United States Army in World War II* (Washington: OCMH, DA, 1957); Morison, *Struggle for Guadalcanal, op. cit.;* USSBS, *Campaigns.*

Australians who tried to block their advance. The problem of supporting these defending troops was a logistician's nightmare, but it was a nightmare that the Japanese inherited as the distance from the front line to their base at Buna increased.

The enemy troops attacking along the Kokoda Trail were operating with minimal air cover, in fact the Allied air forces were doing their best to cut them off completely from Buna and to sever Buna's supply lines from Rabaul. These Japanese were now making an isolated effort since the secondary operation planned to complement the overland drive had miscarried.

Originally, the enemy operation plan had called for the seizure of Samarai Island, off the eastern tip of New Guinea, as a seaplane base and staging area for an amphibious assault on Port Moresby, timed to coincide with the Kokoda Trail approach. When reconnaissance planes discovered the Allied activity at Milne Bay, the target was shifted to this new base. The Japanese, in a move characteristic of their actions in this period, underestimated their opposition and assigned a grossly inadequate landing force for the operation. On 25 August, about a thousand enemy troops from Kavieng began landing in the bay and immediately made contact with the Australians. A reinforcement of 500 men came in on the 29th, but by that time they were only enough to fill the gaps in the ranks of the first unit. The Milne defense force, a reinforced brigade almost 10,000 strong, first blunted, then smashed the Japanese attack. The dazed survivors were evacuated on the nights of 4–5 September, victims of an Australian victory that did much to hearten Allied morale.

The failure at Milne Bay, coupled with similar disasters on Guadalcanal, prompted *Imperial General Headquarters* to check the overland advance on Port Moresby and concentrate its efforts on achieving success in the lower Solomons. The Japanese troops on the Kokoda Trail had reached a point so close to Port Moresby that "they could see the lights of the city," [10] but it is doubtful if they could have ever reached their objective. An outpouring of Allied troops from Australia into Port Moresby had strengthened the position to the point that preparations were underway to mount an offensive when the enemy fell back with the Australians hot on their heels. Throughout October the pressure was increased until the Japanese position had contracted to a perimeter defense of Buna and Gona (a native village about seven miles north of Buna Mission).

The Australian 7th Division and the American 32d Infantry Division closed on the perimeter. The Australians came overland for the most part, the majority of the Americans by air and sea. The fighting was bitter and protracted in jungle terrain even worse than that encountered by the Marines on Guadalcanal and against a deeply dug-in enemy who had to be gouged out of his bunkers. Gona fell to the Australians on 9 December and Buna Mission to the Americans on 2 January; the last organized resistance was overcome on the 22d, six months to the day after the Japanese had landed in Papua.

On the same day that the Australians drove the Japanese out of Gona, the 1st

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[10] Interrogation of Gen Hitoshi Imamura and LtGen Rimpei Kato, IJA, in USSBS (Pac), NavAnalysisDiv, *The Allied Campaign Against Rabaul* (Washington: GPO, 1946), p. 89.

Marine Division was officially relieved on Guadalcanal, its mission completed. The tide of battle had swept full course to the Allied favor, and strong Army and Marine forces of the XIV Corps were now capable of annihilating the remaining Japanese. When evacuation orders were received from Tokyo, however, the Japanese Navy in a series of high-speed night runs managed to bring off about 13,000 men from the island. On 9 February, Guadalcanal was cleared of enemy units and the campaign was ended. American losses in dead and wounded by ground action were close to 6,500, but more than 23,000 enemy lay dead in the jungles around Henderson Field, victims of combat and disease. The loss of additional thousands of enemy sailors and pilots, hundreds of planes, and more than a score of warships and transports increased the wastage of Japanese strength that marked the fruitless effort to retake Guadalcanal.

With the victories in Papua and on Guadalcanal, the Allies had flung down the gauntlet. The Japanese had to accept the challenge; they had lost the initiative.

JAPANESE STRATEGY [11]

The original impetus for the Japanese move into the Solomons and Eastern New Guinea came from enemy naval officers who felt "that a broad area would have to be occupied in order to secure Rabaul." [12] Although the Navy promoted the advance, the Army accepted the concept readily enough, and both services began to develop outlying bases which would cover the approaches to New Britain. When the Allies struck at Guadalcanal, the Japanese Navy "was willing to stake everything on a decisive fight" [13] to regain the island and turn back the offensive thrust. Army leaders, interested mainly in the war on the Asian mainland and in the spoils of the Netherlands Indies, woke up too late to the realities of the Guadalcanal campaign.

Two months passed before realistic estimates of the strength of Henderson Field's defenders began to figure in enemy reinforcement plans. By the time the Japanese were ready to commit enough men to retake Guadalcanal, the chance for them to reach the island in decisive numbers had passed. The Allies were able to choke off most attempts, and the shattered units that did reach shore were seldom in shape to mount a sustained attack. The situation called for a reevaluation of Japanese strategic objectives in the light of Allied capabilities.

At the year's end, military planners in Tokyo, acting on the discouraging reports from the field, projected accurately the course of Allied action for the next months, pointing out that:

> . . . the enemy plans to attack Rabaul since it is the operational base for Army, Navy, and Air Forces. The enemy will try to accomplish this task in the Solomon Is. Area by driving our units off Guadalcanal Is. and advancing northward on the Solomon Is. In the Eastern New Guinea Area, the enemy will secure the Buna Vicinity and attack the Lae and Salamaua Areas from

[11] Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: MilHistSec, G–2, FEC, Japanese Monograph No. 35, SE AreaOpsRec, Seventeenth Army Ops—Part II (OCMH), hereafter *Seventeenth Army Ops—II;* MilHistSec, G–2, FEC, Japanese Monograph No. 99, SE Area NavOps—Part II (OCMH), hereafter *SE Area NavOps—II; IGHQ Army Record;* USSBS, *Campaigns.*

[12] USSBS, *Interrogation* No. 503, VAdm Shigeru Fukudome, IJN, II, pp. 524–525.

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 526.

> the sea. After penetrating Dampier [Vitiaz] Strait, they will attack Rabaul in joint operations with forces on the Solomon Is. After this, planning to attack the Philippine Is., they will continue operations along the northern coast of New Guinea.[14]

On 3 January, the text of the "Army-Navy Central Agreement on South Pacific Area Operations" was radioed to Rabaul; it laid down Tokyo's newly approved strategy. Although expressed in the bombastic language characteristic of the spirit of the offensive permeating Japanese military documents, the "Agreement" was in fact the outline of a defensive pattern. Key points, mainly airfields and anchorages, were to be occupied or strengthened in the North and Central Solomons and in Eastern New Guinea after the first order of business, the evacuation of the troops on Guadalcanal, had been completed. Some of the names that were to figure prominently in the war news—Lae, Salamaua, Wewak on New Guinea; New Georgia, Bougainville, and Buka in the Solomons—were emphasized in the allotment of defensive sectors. The Japanese Army and Navy had divided the responsibility for base defense along service as well as geographic lines, a factor that was to have considerable influence on the conduct of the fighting.

The enemy naval planners, running true to form, wanted to get the main defenses in the Solomons as far away from their major base at Rabaul as possible. The Army authorities, made cautious by the outcome of the attempt to reinforce Guadalcanal over a long, exposed supply route, were willing to move only major forces into the Northern Solomons. As the Army already had primary responsibility for ground defense of the Bismarcks and New Guinea, the additional task of conducting the defense of Bougainville, Buka, Choiseul, and the Shortland-Treasury Islands was considerable. Since the Navy wanted the New Georgia Group and Santa Isabel included in the defended area, it received operational responsibility for these islands and their garrisons. Land-based naval air squadrons were to operate primarily in the Solomons and Bismarcks, while most Army air units were assigned to the defense of the New Guinea area. The *Combined Fleet*, its main strength concentrated at Truk, stood ready to engage any Allied striking force moving north through the Solomons or west from Hawaii.

One of the fundamental differences between the Japanese and the Allied conduct of the war in the Pacific was pointed up by the high command setup established in the "Agreement." There was no area commander appointed with authority to exercise final control of all defensive measures; consequently, there was no joint staff with the function of preparing and executing an overall defense plan. Instead, the senior Army and Navy commanders in the field were responsible directly to their respective headquarters in Tokyo.[15] This duality of command was a feature of the Japanese military system, and to a great extent it also existed in Tokyo at the heart of the enemy war effort. *Imperial General Headquarters* was only the term used to connote the co-equal existence of the general staffs of the two services. Any order tabbed as coming from the *Headquarters*

[14] *IGHQ Army Record*, p. 71. Although this record was assembled after the war, Japanese defensive actions agreed with the quoted estimate and it very probably represents contemporary thought.

[15] Imamura-Kato Interrogation, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

was simply an Army-Navy agreement. In operation, this system could mean, as one Japanese admiral expressed it, that:

> . . . as far as questions of Army operations are concerned, if the Chief of the Army General Staff says we will do this, that is the end of it; and so far as the Navy operations are concerned, if the Chief of the Naval General Staff says we will do this, that fixes it. . . .[16]

Obviously, decisions involving interservice operations had to be made; stalemate was unacceptable, but the opportunity for unnecessary delay and uncoordinated unilateral action was inherent in the system.

Fortunately for the Japanese, the two commanders at Rabaul got along well together and were determined to cooperate. The single aim of both General Hitoshi Imamura and Vice Admiral Jinichi Kusaka was to hold their portion of Japan's defenses with all the men and material at their disposal. Imamura's command, the *Eighth Area Army*, comprised the *Seventeenth Army* in the Bismarcks and Solomons and the *Eighteenth Army* defending Eastern New Guinea. Both were supported by the *6th Air Division.* Kusaka, as Commander of the *Southeast Area Fleet*, controlled the land-based planes of the *Eleventh Air Fleet* and the ships and ground units of the *Eighth Fleet* which were strung out from New Guinea to New Georgia. Both men expected that the next Allied targets would be found in the area under their control. The choice of the time, place, and strength of those attacks was made, however, by planners in Brisbane, Noumea, Pearl Harbor, and Washington.

[16] USSBS, *Interrogation* No. 379, Adm Mitsumasa Yonai, IJN, II, p. 328.

ALLIED STRATEGY [17]

In World War II the military fortunes of Great Britain and the United States were so closely enmeshed that it was imperative that a workable inter-Allied command system be developed both in the field and at the national level. Meeting in Washington five days after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the political and military leaders of the two major Western powers agreed to adhere to the principle of unity of command in the various theatres of operations. The same basic decision was reached in regard to the higher direction of the military effort of the two nations and of the numerous other Allied powers that they perforce represented. While the concept of a single commander who would control all national forces committed was accepted for limited areas and specific operations, there was no inclination to trust overall command to one man, if indeed such a superman existed. The chosen instrument for the direction of what might

[17] Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: ComSoPac WarDs, Jan–Mar43 (COA, NHD), hereafter *ComSoPac WarDs* with appropriate months; CinCSWPA Plan for the Seizure of the New Britain-New Ireland-New Guinea Areas—ELKTON, dtd 28Feb43 (COA, NHD); FAdm Ernest J. King and Cdr Walter M. Whitehill, *Fleet Admiral King—A Naval Record* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1952), hereafter King and Whitehill, *King's Naval Record;* Richard M. Leighton and Robert W. Coakley, *Global Logistics and Strategy 1940–1943—The War Department—United States Army in World War II* (Washington: OCMH, DA, 1955); Samuel E. Morison, *Breaking the Bismarcks Barrier, 22 July 1942–1 May 1944—History of United States Naval Operations in World War II*, v. VI (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1950), hereafter Morison, *Breaking the Bismarcks Barrier, 22 July 1942–1 May Roosevelt and Hopkins—An Intimate History* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1948).

best be called the Western war effort was the Combined Chiefs of Staff (CCS); its membership, the chiefs of the land, sea, and air services of Great Britain and the United States.

Washington was selected as the site of the new headquarters and Field Marshal Sir John Dill, as the senior on-the-spot representative of the British chiefs, was permanently stationed in the American capital with an executive staff. In order to represent adequately the military views of the United States in CCS discussions, it was necessary that the American chiefs meet regularly and air the problems of their respective services. In short order, a series of inter-service staff agencies came into being to support the deliberations of the American chiefs, and a flexible working organization, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), became the right hand of the President, acting as Commander in Chief.[18]

Admiral Ernest J. King, Chief of Naval Operations and Commander in Chief of the United States Fleet, was the naval representative in the JCS. The Army was represented by two officers, its Chief of Staff, General George C. Marshall, and its senior airman, General Henry H. Arnold, whose opposite numbers on the British Chiefs were the heads of the Imperial General Staff and the Royal Air Force. Through most of the war there was a fourth member of the JCS, Admiral William D. Leahy, who acted as Chief of Staff to the President.

The Combined Chiefs, working directly with Churchill and Roosevelt, established spheres of strategic responsibility best suited to national interests and capabilities. In mid-April, the United States was given responsibility for directing operations in the Pacific from the mainland of Asia to the shores of the Western Hemisphere. This decision had the effect of placing all Allied troops and materiel alloted to the Pacific under control of the Joint Chiefs and of the two men they selected for command.

The JCS divided the Pacific into two areas of command responsibility, one including Australia, the Netherlands Indies, and the Philippines and the other the rest of the ocean and its widely scattered islands. To head the relatively compact Southwest Pacific Area, where most operations could be conducted under cover of land-based air, the JCS chose the colorful commander of the defense of the Philippines—General Douglas MacArthur. The appointment of MacArthur, made with the assent of the Australian government, was announced on 18 April 1942 after the general was spirited out of beleaguered Corregidor; his new title was Supreme Commander, Southwest Pacific Area (CinCSWPA). For Commander in Chief, Pacific Ocean Areas (CinCPOA) the logical choice was Admiral Nimitz; his concurrent command of the Pacific Fleet as CinCPac recognized that the war in his area would be essentially a naval one.

The initial boundary line between the SWPA and POA included all of the Solomon Islands in MacArthur's command; however, the fact that Nimitz' forces were going to mount the first offensive at Guadalcanal made a shift of the line westward a matter of practicality. The new boundary just missed the Russell Islands, ran north to the Equator, turned west to 130° north longitude, then north and west

[18] As a result of a British suggestion at the ARCADIA Conference (23Dec41–14Jan42), the term "combined" was applied thereafter to collaboration between two or more nations, while "joint" was reserved for collaboration between two or more services of the same nation.

again to include the Philippines in the SWPA. The line hugged the tortuous Indochinese, Thai, and Malayan coastlines to Singapore and then cut south between Sumatra and Java to divide the American area of responsibility from the India-Burma sphere of operations, which came under the British Chiefs of Staff.

The JCS issued a directive on 2 July 1942 to govern offensive operations in the Southwest Pacific, setting forth a concept that included three tasks: 1) the seizure and occupation of the Santa Cruz Islands, Tulagi, and adjacent areas; 2) the seizure and occupation of the rest of the Solomons and the northeast coast of New Guinea; and 3) the seizure and occupation of Rabaul and surrounding positions. A subordinate command, the South Pacific Area, was established under Admiral Nimitz and charged with responsibility for executing Task One—the Guadalcanal operation. The post of Commander, South Pacific (ComSoPac) was held first by Vice Admiral Robert L. Ghormley and then by Vice Admiral William F. Halsey. Task One was completed under Halsey with the evacuation of Guadalcanal by the Japanese, but neither Nimitz nor MacArthur considered that he had available the forces or supplies necessary to initiate Task Two immediately. The relatively few Australian and American infantry divisions assigned to the Southwest Pacific were either committed to forward garrisons, still forming and training, or badly in need of rest and rehabilitation as a result of hard campaigning.[19]

Equally as important, though hardly as well publicized as the feats of the fighting troops and ships, were the accomplishments of the service and supply agencies furnishing logistic support to the combat operations. The South and Southwest Pacific are certainly not areas that would be voluntarily chosen for amphibious campaigns. When the fighting started, there was almost a total lack of ports and bases suitable for support of large scale operations. In a surprisingly short time, however, islands like Espiritu Santo and Efate in the New Hebrides and New Caledonia sprouted vast compounds of supplies, tank farms for fuel storage, and a host of vital maintenance, repair, and service facilities. Hardly had the smoke and dust of battle settled before Tulagi was turned over to the engineers, base personnel, and defense troops who quickly converted it into an essential advance naval base. Guadalcanal in its turn underwent extensive development as the Japanese were driven off. A full stride forward in terms of the 2 July JCS directive could be taken only after an adequate stockpile of military materiel had accumulated in the forward dumps and depots of an expansible logistic network.

A good part of the supply and manpower difficulties of the Pacific commanders were traceable directly to the favored apportionment given to the European and North African theaters of operations. The basic war policy of the Western Allies was affirmed by the Combined Chiefs in January at the Casablanca Conference where their outline of action for 1943 emphasized again the primacy of the defeat of Germany. First priority of resources was allotted to the campaign to wipe out the U-Boat threat in the Atlantic; the occupation of Sicily, a stepped-up bomber

[19] CinCPac msg to CominCh, dtd 8Dec42, Subj: Future Ops in the Solomons Sea Area (COA, NHD); CinCSWPA msg C–251 to CofSA, dtd 27Jan43 (WW II RecsDiv, FRC Alex).

offensive against Germany, and "the sending of the greatest volume of supplies possible" to Russia were among the other priority programs. Offensive operations in the Pacific were to be kept within limits that would not jeopardize the chance for a decisive blow against Germany.[20] In their report to the President and Prime Minister, the CCS indicated a number of prospective lines of action in the Pacific, including an advance west from Midway toward the Marianas and Carolines and a drive north from Samoa into the Marshalls. Implicit in these projections of possible offensive action was the successful completion of a campaign to capture or neutralize Rabaul.[21]

In early February, Admiral Halsey was queried by King on his reaction to an operation to seize the Gilbert and Ellice Islands using South Pacific forces. Halsey strongly recommended against it, preferring instead to continue pressure in the Solomons. Admiral Nimitz supported Halsey's opinion, but asked if South Pacific operations could be depended upon to pin down the Japanese Fleet. On 17 February, ComSoPac replied that he believed "that the best way to pin down the Japanese Fleet is to threaten Rabaul," and went on to indicate that he intended to occupy the Russell Islands inside of a week and move into the New Georgia Group "as soon as possible."[22] He soon set early April as his target date for the New Georgia operation, but a re-evaluation of Pacific strategy forced a revision of his plans.

Under terms of the JCS directive of 2 July 1942, General MacArthur had been given responsibility for strategic direction of all operations against Rabaul, including those undertaken by South Pacific forces after completion of Task One. On 28 February 1943, his staff completed a plan (code-named ELKTON) that reflected MacArthur's conviction that the Japanese were now much stronger in the Southwest Pacific than they had been the previous summer. The situation prompted him to submit a new concept of operations calling for a more deliberate advance than had once been contemplated and a substantial increase in all categories of forces.

Under ELKTON, the command position of Admiral Halsey as ComSoPac was an unusual one. The operations contemplated in the Solomons would of necessity get their logistic support from SoPac bases and be executed in the main by SoPac forces. Naval officers were strongly of the opinion that these forces should remain under command of Halsey, but did not question the need for MacArthur to continue to give strategic direction to the overall campaign against Rabaul. Halsey's plan to attack New Georgia in April, tentatively approved by Nimitz, clashed with the sequence of operations thought necessary by SWPA planners. The upshot of the submission of ELKTON to the JCS was that a Pacific Military Conference of representatives of SWPA and POA was called together in Washington to resolve differences and to try to find the additional troops and equipment that MacArthur thought necessary.

En route to Washington, MacArthur's representatives, headed by his chief of staff, Major General Richard K. Sutherland, stopped at Noumea to talk with Halsey and hear his plan for New Georgia.

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[20] CCS 155/1, dtd 19Jan43, Subj: Conduct of the War in 1943 (COA, NHD).

[21] CCS 170/2, dtd 23Jan43, SYMBOL—Final Rept to the President and Prime Minister (COA, NHD).

[22] *ComSoPac Feb43 WarD*, p. 33.

They then flew on to Pearl Harbor where in a round of conferences with Nimitz' staff they learned the views of that commander on ELKTON. On 10 March, the conferees arrived in Washington to begin two weeks of discussion in an atmosphere where the requests from the Pacific could be best assessed against the world-wide commitments of the United States.

The sequence of operations called for in the ELKTON Plan listed the capture of airdromes on the Huon Peninsula of Eastern New Guinea as a necessary preliminary move to closing in on Rabaul. Bomber squadrons operating from fields in the Lae-Salamaua-Finschhafen area would then control the Vitiaz (Dampier) Strait and could neutralize the Japanese strongpoints at Kavieng, New Ireland, and on New Britain, Buka, and Bougainville. With this assistance from SWPA air, SoPac forces would seize and occupy positions in the New Georgia Group. Next would come a simultaneous drive on western New Britain from New Guinea and on Bougainville from the lower Solomons. The two-pronged attack would then converge in the capture of Kavieng, or if the situation seemed favorable, the last step, the capture of Rabaul, would be attempted directly.

General Sutherland and Major General Millard F. Harmon, commander of Army forces in Halsey's area, agreed that in order to accomplish ELKTON as outlined, all the men, ships, and planes asked for would have to be made available.[23] There was no chance that this would be done, since the JCS was already engaged in a reexamination of the resources available for all the strategic undertakings decided on at Casablanca. It was now apparent that there just was not enough to go around to give full coverage to every scheme; forces requested for ELKTON would have to be cut drastically.[24]

The requirements of the heavy bomber offensive against Germany changed one aspect of ELKTON immediately. The planned aerial interdiction of Japanese rearward bases from the Huon Peninsula depended on more long range planes reaching the Southwest Pacific. Since these planes could not be made available, airbases closer to Solomons' objectives within range of medium bombers would have to be taken. Woodlark and Kiriwina Islands in the Solomon Sea east of Papua were agreed upon as suitable objectives. Despite this modification of the ELKTON concept, General Sutherland still considered that the Huon Peninsula operations would have to precede all others; on the other hand, Halsey's Chief of Staff, Captain Miles R. Browning, USN, maintained that the seizure of Woodlark and Kiriwina would allow Halsey to make his move into New Georgia without waiting for the capture of Huon airfields. The varying points of view were presented to the JCS for decision.[25]

The solution arrived at by the JCS was workable and retained elements of both the unity of command concept and that of cooperative action. Subject to the check-rein authority of the JCS, General MacArthur was given overall control of the campaign. Admiral Halsey would have direct command of operations in the Solo-

[23] 4th PMC meeting, dtd 15Mar43, Anx A (COA, NHD).

[24] JCS 238, Memo by the JSP, dtd 16Mar43 (COA, NHD); JSSC 11, Surv of the Present StratSit, dtd 22Mar43 (COA, NHD).

[25] Minutes of the JCS 68th meeting, dtd 21 Mar-43 (COA, NHD).

mons within the scope of MacArthur's general directives. Any Pacific Ocean Area forces not specifically approved by the JCS for inclusion in task forces engaged in ELKTON operations would remain under Admiral Nimitz.

On 28 March 1943, the Joint Chiefs issued a new directive that cancelled that of 2 July 1942 and outlined the new scheme of operations for the campaign against Rabaul. The schedule of tasks now called for establishment of airfields on Woodlark and Kiriwina Islands, to be followed by seizure of bases on Huon Peninsula concurrently with Halsey's move into New Georgia. Western New Britain and southern Bougainville were the next steps toward the goal of Rabaul. The purpose of these operations was set down as "the ultimate seizure of the Bismarck Archipelago." [26]

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[26] JCS 238/5/D, dtd 23Mar43, Directive—Plan for the Seizure of the Solomons Islands-New Guinea-New Britain-New Ireland Area (COA, NHD).

The Opening Moves

AREA OF CONFLICT [1]

Prior to the outbreak of war, the strategic area centered on Rabaul was a slow-paced frontier of Western civilization. Economic development of the Bismarck Archipelago, the Solomon Islands, and Eastern New Guinea was pretty well limited to the cultivation of coconut palms for copra. The coconut plantations, together with a scattering of trading posts, missions, and government stations, housed the relative handful of non-native inhabitants. The islands had little in the way of climate or terrain to attract tourists or anyone else without a surpassing good reason for visiting them. For the most part the area remained as it had been when the first European explorers visited it in the middle of the sixteenth century.

More than 300 years passed before a Western nation thought it worthwhile to lay claim to any of the islands. Then Germany, as part of her belated attempt to build a colonial empire, followed her traders and missionaries into Northeast New Guinea, the Bismarcks, and the Northern Solomons, proclaiming them the protectorate of Kaiser-Wilhelmsland in 1884. Britain countered by establishing her own protectorate over the Southern Solomons and by annexing the rest of Eastern New Guinea. As the Territory of Papua, with a capital at Port Moresby, this latter area was turned over to Australia in 1905. At the outbreak of World War I, the Australians occupied Kaiser-Wilhelmsland and kept it, under a League of Nations mandate following the peace, as the Territory of New Guinea. The mandate capital was established at Rabaul,[2] and the territory divided into government districts of Northeast New Guinea, New Britain, New Ireland, Manus (the Admiralty and Northwest Islands), and Kieta (Buka and Bougainville). South of Bougainville, the Solomons, including the Santa Cruz Islands, formed the British Solomon Islands Protectorate, administered by a resident commissioner at Tulagi.

Each island in the Rabaul strategic sphere, with the exception of a few outlying atolls, has a basic similarity of appearance which holds true regardless of size. High hills and mountains crowd the interior, sending out precipitous spurs and ridges to the coasts. A matted jungle canopy of giant trees covers all but the highest peaks, and the sun touches the ground only along the banks of the numerous streams

[1] Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: MID, WD, Surv of the Solomons Islands (S30-677), 2 vols, dtd 15Mar43, hereafter *Solomons Survey;* MIS, WD, Surv of NE New Guinea and Papua (S30-678), dtd 15Jul43; MID, WD, Surv of Bismarck Archipelago (S30-675), 2 vols, dtd 5Oct43, hereafter *Bismarcks Survey.*

[2] The capital of the New Guinea Territory was transferred to Lae in Northeast New Guinea on 1 December 1941 because of the danger of volcanic activity in the Rabaul area.

that slice the slopes. Where fire or water forces a temporary clearing, the vine and bush barrier of second growth springs up to add to the difficulties of transit. Along the shores most of the low-lying ground is choked with rank second growth, and vast stretches of fetid mangrove swamp mark the mouths of streams and rivers. Easily accessible and well-drained land is at a premium and on most such sites coconut plantations had been established. Years are required to grow the trees and constant attention is needed to prevent the encroachment of jungle. These plantations, together with the few significant reaches of grassland scattered throughout the larger islands, were the potential airfields that figured so prominently in Southwest Pacific planning.

Along with tropical forest and rugged hills, the area shares a common climate—hot, humid, and unhealthy. There is a rainy season around December when the northwest monsoon blows, but the "dry months" of the southeast trade winds, April through October, are wringing wet by temperate zone standards. Although the amount of precipitation varies considerably according to locale, an average rainfall of more than 200 inches in the uplands and 100–150 inches along the coasts is not unusual. The islands lie in the only latitudes in the world where evaporation is greater over land than water.[3] The temperature of the moisture-saturated air stays in a steady range of 75–90 degrees the year around. Constant high heat and humidity sap a man's strength and make him prey to a wide variety of tropical diseases.

[3] G. T. Trewartha, *An Introduction to Climate* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1954), p. 112.

Strange though it may seem, this uninviting area has well over a million inhabitants. The majority are Melanesians, the dominant race in the islands northeast of Australia. Primitive in habit and appearance, these people have dark brown, almost black, skins, small but solidly-built bodies, and frizzled, upstanding mops of hair. The natives of Papua belong to a related but separate race, shorter, darker, and more Negroid in aspect. In the atolls around the periphery of the area there are a few thousand Polynesians, tall, fair, and fine-featured members of the race that occupies the Central Pacific islands. Mixed marriages among these peoples are not uncommon; the Melanesians themselves are thought to be the product of a merging of Papuan and Polynesian strains.

Tribalism is the way of life in the islands; there is no native national spirit or tradition. The frankly paternalistic British and Australian administrations respect the tribal organization and govern through the local chiefs. Almost all the natives live in small villages, their outlook limited to what they can see, feel, or hear. Village garden plots, temporarily wrested from the jungle, grow only enough taro, yams, and sweet potatoes for local needs; fruit and fish supplement an otherwise monotonous and starchy diet. Although Christian missionaries have been moderately successful in gaining converts, the basic religion of these simple people is a natural animism. The diversity of dialects is so great that the traders' jargon of pidgin English is the only universally understood language. By Western standards, the natives live a severely limited life, but this simple existence has the sanction of centuries.

In general, a view of life outside the village is sought and seen only by the laborers who work the coconut plantations and the relatively few natives who serve in the government or police. These men, especially the "police boys," are capable of great personal loyalty to those who can understand and lead them. The evidence for this statement is easily found in the existence of the spy system that operated behind Japanese lines in the Southwest Pacific.

Years before the enemy invaded the New Guinea Territory and drove south toward Port Moresby and Tulagi, the probability of hostile approach through the island screen had been foreseen by the Australians. In 1919, their Navy began to set up a network of observers along the sparsely settled northeastern shores of the continent. As compact and reliable radios were developed, the observer system spread northward into the islands where strategically located officials and planters were recruited and trained to send coded reports of enemy movements. Many of these veteran islanders, famed as the coastwatchers, remained behind when the Japanese advanced, and from vantage points deep in the midst of enemy-controlled waters, sometimes even from enemy-held islands, fed a steady stream of valuable intelligence into Allied hands. The natives who stayed with the coastwatchers were in many cases their eyes and ears in the enemy camp. Though the opportunity for betrayal was great, it was seldom seized.[4]

[4] Cdr Eric A. Feldt, RAN, *The Coastwatchers* (New York & Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1946), p. 4*ff*, hereafter Feldt, *The Coastwatchers*.

While the success of the coastwatching system was a tribute to human courage and resourcefulness, it was equally an acknowledgment of the complex geographic factors making it possible. Each island and island group that figured in the Allied drive on Rabaul has its own peculiar character, and its detailed description is part of the narrative of the operations that concern it. A general sketch of the whole strategic area is needed, however, to set in mind the relationship of these islands to each other.

On the map, New Guinea, the world's second largest island, dominates the sea north of Australia. More than 900,000 natives live in the scattered villages of Papua and Northeast New Guinea, an area roughly the size of California. Lofty mountains, some ranging well above 13,000 feet, form a spine for the Papuan Peninsula which juts out into the Coral Sea. In the bulging midsection of the island near the border of Dutch New Guinea, thousands of square miles of soggy ground and tangled swampland spread out along the wandering courses of torpid rivers coming down out of the highlands. The Huon Peninsula, which harbors near its base and southern flank the airfield sites so prominent in the ELKTON planning, thrusts east toward New Britain, less than 50 miles away across Vitiaz (Dampier) Strait. (See Map I, Map Section.)

The tip of western New Britain, Cape Gloucester, has enough low grassland near the coast to allow airfield development. Thus, from the Cape and from the Huon Peninsula, directly opposite on New Guinea, control could be easily maintained over Dampier Strait, the only entry into the Solomon Sea from the northwest. New

Britain, an elongated and crescent-shaped island, 370 miles long and 40–50 miles wide, is heavily forested and has the usual prominent jumble of mountains and hills ridging its interior. Midway along the coasts, Talasea in the north and Gasmata in the south offer way-point airdrome sites for a drive on Rabaul, which "has by all odds the best natural harbor and base for military operations in the entire New Guinea-New Britain-Solomon Islands area." [5]

Curving to the northwest from the waters off Rabaul's Blanche Bay, scimitar-like New Ireland parallels New Guinea's coastline 300 miles away and closes one side of the Bismarck Sea. The airfields and harbor at Kavieng on the slim island's northern point made the small colonial town a prime strategic objective. The Bismarck Sea is outlined by a staggered arc of islands which swings north from New Hanover off Kavieng to the Saint Matthias group, then west to the Admiralties and on to the atolls known as the Northwest Islands, which dip south toward New Guinea. The native population of the whole area of the Bismarck Archipelago is approximately 150,000, the largest number by far living on New Britain and New Ireland.

Planes based at Rabaul and at airfields on Buka or Bougainville can effectively close off the passage between New Ireland and Buka, the second major gateway to the Solomon Sea. Politically speaking, these two northern islands are part of the New Guinea Territory; geographically, they are one with the rest of the Solomons. The principal islands of the Solomons constitute a double mountain chain running northwest and southeast for about 700 miles between the Bismarcks and the New Hebrides; the width of this central grouping is 100 miles. Several offshoot islands well away from the main chain—Ontong Java atoll to the northeast, Rennell due south of Guadalcanal, and the Santa Cruz group to the southeast—are also considered part of the Solomons.

In all the islands there are some 165,000 natives living in a total land area equivalent to that of West Virginia. The terrain fits the general pattern of the whole strategic area—jungle and hills extremely difficult to traverse which tend to localize land combat and put a premium on air and sea power. The major islands of the northeast chain, Choiseul, Santa Isabel, and Malaita, have few natural military objectives, and the same lack characterizes San Cristobal, the southernmost of the southwest chain. The other large islands of the Solomons, Guadalcanal, New Georgia, and Bougainville, have sizable harbors and airfield sites sufficient to make them logical stopping points in a deliberate advance on Rabaul. Each of these major island objectives has several smaller islands nearby which also class as potential targets: Tulagi and Florida are coupled with Guadalcanal; Vella Lavella and Kolombangara with New Georgia; and Buka and the Shortland-Treasury Islands with Bougainville.

Typical of the smaller island groups in the Solomons is the Russells, which lie 30–35 miles northwest of Cape Esperance on Guadalcanal. The accident of location rather than any considerable strategic advantage made them Admiral Halsey's first objective after Guadalcanal was secured.

[5] *Bismarcks Survey*, p. 1.

SIMPSON HARBOR AND RABAUL *appear in a composite aerial photograph taken during an Allied air raid prior to the Bismarck Sea battle.* (*USAF F23272AC*)

MARINES OF THE 3D RAIDER BATTALION *land from rubber boats on the beach at Pavuvu to take part in the seizure of the Russells.* (*USMC 54468*)

OCCUPATION OF THE RUSSELLS[6]

The Russell group consists of two main islands fringed by a scattering of lesser islets. Pavuvu, the larger island, is very irregular in shape and no more than ten miles across at its widest point. The low land along the shoreline of many of its coves and bays is clear of undergrowth and lined with coconut trees, but these plantings only edge the jungle and mark the steep rise towards the hills of the interior. On the north coast, several deep water bays provide sheltered anchorages which will accomodate large ocean-going vessels. Only a narrow channel separates Pavuvu from its smaller neighbor to the east, Banika, which has unusual terrain for the Solomons. Except in its southwestern portion, where hills rise to 400 feet, the island is low and rolling and suitable for military development. Banika's north coast is cleft by Renard Sound, a deep inlet that provides access to the low ground. (See Map 1.)

In January 1943, when it was evident that the Japanese were losing their fight to regain control of Guadalcanal, the possibility of moving forward to the Russells was given serious consideration at ComSoPac headquarters. To Halsey's staff, the island group seemed a desirable objective and one that could be taken and held with the limited resources available in the South Pacific. A presentation of this concept was made to Admiral Nimitz when he visited Noumea for conferences with Halsey on 23 January. The Pacific Fleet commander gave oral approval to the idea and before the month was out he gave specific authorization for the operation.

The Japanese had not occupied the Russells when they moved into the lower Solomons, but once the decision was made to pull out of Guadalcanal about 300 troops were sent to tiny Baisen Island off Pavuvu's northwest tip, Pepesala Point, to set up a barge-staging base.[7] The enemy unit left when its job was done; the withdrawal was reported on 11 February by a coastwatcher who had been landed in the islands earlier to keep tab on Japanese activity. The prospect of an unopposed landing was cheering to Allied planners, but it resulted in no reduction in assault troop strength for the proposed operation. A healthy respect for Japanese offensive capabilities kept the figure high.

South Pacific Area planners felt that a further "attempt on the part of the enemy to reestablish himself on Guadalcanal was a distinct possibility," and that if this happened the reaction to Allied occupation of the Russells would be violent.[8] The landing force allotted under these circumstances had to be strong enough to

[6] Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: *ComSoPac Jan–Apr43 WarDs*; ComPhibSoPac Rept of Occupation of the Russell Islands (CLEANSLATEOp) 21Feb–17Apr43, dtd 21Apr43; 43d InfDiv FO No. 2, dtd 15Feb43; 3d RdrBn Rept of the Russell Islands (CLEANSLATEOp), dtd 9Apr43; Russell Islands Det. 11th DefBn Jnl; LtCol E. S. Watson, G–3, 43d InfDiv, "Movement of a Task Force by Small Landing Craft," dtd 17Apr43; *Solomons Survey;* Morrison, *Breaking the Bismarcks Barrier.* Documents not otherwise identified are located in the Russell Islands Area Operations File of the Archives, Historical Branch, G–3 Division, Headquarters Marine Corps.

[7] HistSec, G–2, FEC Japanese Monograph No. 48, SE Area NavOps—Part I, n.d. (OCMH), p. 61, hereafter *SE Area NavOps—I.*

[8] CGUSAFISPA 1st Ind, dtd 1May43, to 43d InfDiv Summary of the Occupation of the Russell Islands, dtd 17Apr43, in Watson Rept, *op. cit.*

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sustain a major counterattack. A further consideration in determining the size of the force was the belief that the assault troops would be favorably disposed to take part in future operations against New Georgia.

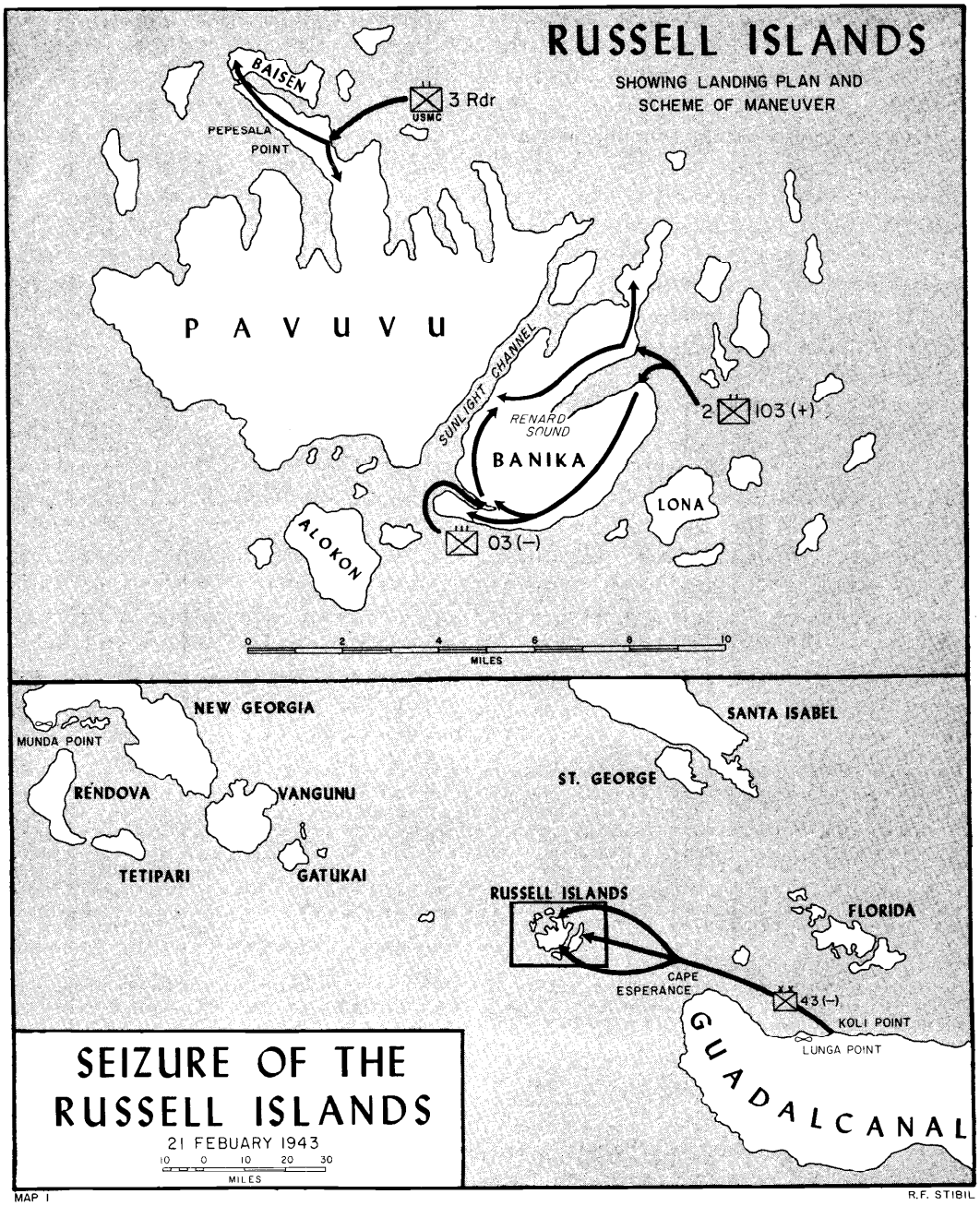
On 7 February, Halsey's directive for CLEANSLATE, the Russells operation, was issued. Named to overall command was Rear Admiral Richmond K. Turner, who headed South Pacific Amphibious Forces. The 43d Infantry Division, less its 172d Regimental Combat Team (RCT), was designated the principal component of the CLEANSLATE occupation force. Major reinforcing units were the Marine 3d Raider Battalion, antiaircraft elements of the Marine 11th Defense Battalion, half of the 35th Naval Construction Battalion, and Acorn 3.[9] Once the acorn unit had an airfield in operation on Banika, MAG–21, then en route to the South Pacific, would move in its fighter squadrons for intercept and escort missions.

The assembly of the CLEANSLATE task force was hard to detect. No ship larger than a destroyer was assigned to transport troops or supplies; most of the workload fell to newly arrived landing ships and craft getting their first offensive test in the South Pacific. While larger vessels brought the 43d Division from New Caledonia to Guadalcanal, the movement was made in normal-sized convoys. Japanese planes located and unsuccessfully attacked one of these convoys near San Cristobal on the 17th, but the enemy pilots saw nothing about the transports to indicate that they were anything more than another reinforcement-replacement group headed for the Guadalcanal garrison. Ships arriving off Koli Point, staging area for the operation, unloaded immediately and cleared the vicinity. Only a cluster of innocuous small vessels, mainly LCTs (landing craft, tank) and LCMs (landing craft, medium), and a screen of destroyers stood by for the run to the Russells.

The projected D-Day for planning purposes was 21 February; four days before, when it was evident that the operation was proceeding on schedule, Admiral Halsey confirmed this date. Late on the 19th loading out began, LCTs first, followed by the smaller craft, and topped off by the destroyer types. Only the APDs (high speed transports) were equipped to hoist on board landing craft, and the destroyers and destroyer mine-sweepers assigned as transports each took a quartet of small boats under tow. Near midnight on 20 February, the strange flotilla got underway. Destroyers were in the van, throttled down to the speed of a dozen squat LCTs that followed in trace, with the rear brought up by a tug-drawn barge loaded with ammunition and barbed wire.

The support given CLEANSLATE was impressive. Bombers from SWPA hit Japanese rearward bases in the Northern Solomons and Bismarcks. Aerial cover over the target and interdiction missions against enemy installations in the Central Solomons were flown by squadrons from Henderson Field, temporarily reinforced by the *Saratoga's* air group. Nearly every combat ship in Halsey's command put to sea, ready to meet a Japanese surface attack; four cruisers and four destroyers steamed up New Georgia Sound (aptly nicknamed "The Slot") as a covering

[9] An acorn was a naval unit designed to construct, operate, and maintain an advanced landplane and seaplane base and to provide facilities for operations.


RUSSELL ISLANDS
SHOWING LANDING PLAN AND
SCHEME OF MANEUVER
BAISEN
3 Rdr
USMC
PEPESALA
POINT
P A V U V U
SUNLIGHT CHANNEL
RENARD
SOUND
BANIKA
2 103 (+)
LONA
ALOKON
III 03 (-)
0 2 4 6 8 10
MILES
NEW GEORGIA
MUNDA POINT
RENDOVA
VANGUNU
TETIPARI
GATUKAI
SANTA ISABEL
ST. GEORGE
RUSSELL ISLANDS
FLORIDA
CAPE
ESPERANCE
43 (-)
KOLI POINT
LUNGA POINT
GUADALCANAL
SEIZURE OF THE
RUSSELL ISLANDS
21 FEBUARY 1943
10 0 10 20 30
MILES
MAP I
R.F. STIBIL

force. The precautions paid off; no enemy scout plane or vessel spotted the task force and the landing was made without opposition.

Reconnaissance parties sent to the Russells several days before the landing had selected suitable beach exits, gun sites, and camp and dump areas. On the morning of the 21st, the Army battalions landing on the two beaches of Banika and the Marine raiders going ashore on Pavuvu's Pepesala Point were met by guides who led them to pre-selected positions. One hour after the waves of assault troops landed from their destroyer transports, the LCTs nosed ashore and began unloading. The first echelon of antiaircraft guns and crews of the 11th Defense Battalion were in position on Banika by noon. The raiders and infantrymen were dug in to meet a counterlanding attempt before nightfall.

Marine antiaircraft gun crews and the Army field artillerymen whom they had retrained for the air defense job[10] were the only ones to see action during the ensuing weeks. On 6 March, the first Japanese attack occurred when a dozen fighters and bombers made a low-level strike on the main islands. Early warning radar was not yet in operation and the first enemy bombing and strafing run caused some casualties before the antiaircraft defenses were manned; at least two enemy raiders were shot down. Sporadic air attacks followed this first effort, but none were of serious import.

The Marine elements of the original CLEANSLATE landing force were only temporarily assigned to the operation. The 11th Defense detachment was used only until the 10th Defense Battalion arrived in the Russells; on 15 March, the new unit began taking over the 11th's battery positions. The changeover was completed by 17 March, and the detachment's gun crews returned to Port Purvis on Florida Island the following night. The 3d Raider Battalion pulled out on 20 March and returned to Espiritu Santo; 43d Division units occupied the raiders' defensive positions.

The withdrawal of the Marines was about the only rearward movement of troops from the Russells during this period. Each day after D-Day, LCTs loaded at Guadalcanal and under cover of darkness made the run to the new forward base; succeeding echelons of Turner's task force arrived at the islands for 50 nights running. By the end of February over 9,000 men were ashore and by 18 April, when responsibility for logistic support and defense of the Russells passed to the commanding general at Guadalcanal, 16,066 men and 48,517 tons of supplies had been brought in by the LCT shuttle. Banika now boasted an operating airfield for MAG–21's three fighter squadrons, a motor torpedo boat base, extensive base defense installations, and the start of a considerable supply handling capacity.

Admiral King in Washington was somewhat dubious of the value of putting so much into the Russells, but Halsey defended his policy as necessary for the protection of the new air base. As far as ComSoPac was concerned, CLEANSLATE was merely the completion of the first stage of his move toward New Georgia, and the troops and supplies stationed there were earmarked for the continued advance up the Solomons chain.

[10] Maj Joseph L. Winecoff ltr to CO, 11th DefBn, dtd 22Feb43.

BATTLE OF THE BISMARCK SEA [11]

While ComSoPac was consolidating his hold on the new Russells airdrome, an event occurred in the Southwest Pacific Area that emphasized dramatically the importance of land-based air in the campaign against Rabaul. On 2–3 March, a Japanese troop convoy headed for Lae at the base of the Huon Peninsula was engaged in a running fight by Australian and American squadrons based on New Guinea. The results of this Battle of the Bismarck Sea were so significant that General MacArthur stated:

> We have achieved a victory of such completeness as to assume the proportions of a major disaster to the enemy. Our decisive success can not fail to have most important results on the enemy's strategic and tactical plans. His campaign, for the time being at least, is completely disrupted.[12]

The convoy was an attempt initiated by *Eighth Area Army* to strengthen its defenses in the Lae-Salamaua area and to insure continued control of both shores of Dampier Strait. Eight transports, varying in size from 500 to 6,800 tons, and eight escort destroyers made the run. On board were approximately 6,000 soldiers of the *51st Division* and 400 replacements for Special Naval Landing Force units.[13] A canopy of fighter planes, both Army and Navy, was provided for overhead protection.

The enemy convoy cleared Rabaul on 1 March, steaming at slow speed along the northern coast of New Britain, partially hidden by lowering skies which made observation difficult. A reconnaissance bomber of MacArthur's Fifth Air Force sighted the ships and escorting fighters, however, and radioed in its find; a flight of B–17s was unable to locate the target when the weather closed. The following morning the convoy was spotted again and this time the Flying Fortresses found their quarry, broke through the screen of planes and antiaircraft fire, and sank one transport, the *51st Division* command ship. Survivors were transferred to two destroyers, which separated from the main convoy and steamed ahead to Lae. Australian and American planes continued to seek out the ships throughout the day, but the continued bad weather helped to foil these attacks and further damage was minor.

Despite the aerial harassment, the Japanese adhered to their original sailing schedule, which was to bring them off Lae about 1700 on 3 March. By early morning of the 3d, the convoy was well within Huon Gulf and also well within range of Allied airbases on New Guinea; for all practical purposes the enemy had sailed into a trap. MacArthur's air commander, Major General George C. Kenney, sprang it with a coordinated attack led by low-level fighter-bombers specially practiced in

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[11] Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: HistSec, G–2, FEC, Japanese Monograph No. 32, SE Area AirOps Nov42–Apr44, n.d. (located at OCMH), hereafter *SE Area AirOps; SE Area NavOps—II;* Wesley F. Craven and James L. Cate (eds), *The Pacific: Guadalcanal to Saipan, August 1942 to July 1944—The Army Air Forces in World War II*, v. IV (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1950), hereafter Craven and Cate, *Guadalcanal to Saipan;* Morison, *Breaking the Bismarcks Barrier.*

[12] Quoted in MajGen Charles A. Willoughby and John Chamberlin, *MacArthur 1941–1951* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1954), p. 112.

[13] USSBS, *Campaigns*, p. 174.

anti-shipping strikes, backed up by medium- and high-level bombers and an escort of fighters. The resulting melee was disastrous for the Japanese. Every transport was burning and in a sinking condition in less than half an hour; two destroyers were sunk and a third heavily damaged. The attacks continued until a fourth destroyer, engaged in rescue operations, was hit that afternoon. Motor torpedo boats reached the scene during the night and finished off one of the cripples, and the next morning the bombers completed the score. After rescuing 3,800 men, four destroyers, all that was left of the original convoy, made it back to Rabaul; fewer than 900 men got through to Lae.

The overwhelming Allied success had, as General MacArthur observed, important results. Not only did the Japanese fail to get a substantial reinforcement through to the Huon Peninsula area, but the transport losses forced them to abandon large-scale reinforcement attempts altogether. Dampier Strait did not belong to the Allies yet, but Kenney's fliers made it clear that the Japanese had no clear title either. Supplies and men slated for enemy garrisons in Eastern New Guinea or the Solomons—for any base within effective range of Allied planes—were now moved forward by destroyers, whose high speed, excellent maneuverability, and antiaircraft guns gave them a measure of protection, or by small craft hugging the island coasts. The Japanese had been decisively defeated, but a battle is not the war, and the sorry record of their defending aircraft prompted an all-out effort to restore at least a parity of airpower in the Rabaul strategic area.

JAPANESE "I" OPERATION [14]

Following the Bismarck Sea debacle, Japanese scout planes reported increased activity in Papua and the lower Solomons. Allied troop and material strength was clearly increasing, and all intelligence pointed to the imminence of offensive operations. Allied air raids and antishipping strikes seriously disrupted enemy defensive preparations and curtailed the movement of reinforcements to forward bases. The Japanese decided that a strong counter-stroke was needed to blunt the Allied air spearhead and to gain a respite for their own defense build-up. Tokyo assigned the task, designated *I Go* ("I" Operation), to Admiral Yamamoto and his *Combined Fleet.*

In order to bolster the strength of Rabaul's *Eleventh Air Fleet*, Yamamoto ordered forward from Truk the planes and pilots from four of the carriers of his *Third Fleet.* On 3 April, the admiral himself flew to Rabaul to take personal command. The combined force available for *I Go* was at least 182 fighters, 81 dive bombers, and 72 medium-range land bombers, plus a few torpedo planes. The 15-day operation was planned to proceed in two phases, the first incorporating a strike against the Solomons and the second, attacks on Allied positions in Papua.

The busy cluster of ships, large and small, in the vicinity of Tulagi and Guadalcanal was the initial *I Go* target. Near noon of 7 April, 67 enemy Val dive bombers with an escort of 110 Zeke fighters

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[14] Unless otherwise noted, material in this section is derived from: HistSec, G–2, FEC, Japanese Monograph No. 122, SE Area NavAirOps—Part III, Nov42–Jun43, n.d. (OCMH), hereafter *SE Area NavAirOps—III; SE Area NavOps—II;* Morison, *Breaking the Bismarcks Barrier.*

took off from staging airfields on Buka and Bougainville to make the attack. Their departure was duly noted and reported to Henderson Field by coastwatchers on Bougainville; at 1400, radar in the Russells picked up the oncoming flights and 76 interceptors, Guadalcanal's typical joint-service mixture, scrambled and tangled with the Zeke escort over The Stot. The Japanese bombers, hiding behind a blanket of heavy black clouds that covered Indispensible Strait between Malaita and Florida, headed for Tulagi. Almost all the ships were out of Tulagi harbor when the raiders struck; only a fleet oiler and a New Zealand corvette were caught in the confined waters. Both were sunk. The attack continued against the rapidly maneuvering vessels in Iron Bottom Sound, but ship and shore antiaircraft fire kept the Vals high and the bombing inaccurate. The destroyer *Aaron Ward*, attempting to protect an LST that had become the focus of enemy attention, was seriously damaged; she later sank under tow. The bombers caused no other significant damage and drew off soon after they loosed their loads. The Zekes scored just as lightly as the Vals, accounting for only seven planes, all of them Marine. The welter of conflicting claims for enemy aircraft shot down was winnowed to an estimate that less than 25 Japanese were lost,[15] a figure that argued well with the highest official enemy report of 24 planes downed.[16]

Aside from the relatively light damage to Allied ships and aircraft, the 7 April attack had one other tangible result for the Japanese. It enabled them to slip reinforcements into Kolombangara by destroyer transport while ComSoPac concentrated his air strength at Guadalcanal to meet further attacks. Similar reinforcement efforts were executed for Western New Britain and the Huon Peninsula under cover of the trio of attacks on New Guinea targets that made up the second phase of *I Go*.

On 11 April, 94 *Third Fleet* carrier planes attacked shipping in Oro Bay, 20 miles southeast of Buna. Fifty Allied fighters fought them off but not before Japanese Val pilots had sunk one merchantman, beached another, and damaged an Australian minesweeper. On the following day, 174 Japanese naval planes, including 43 medium bombers, made a mass attack on the airfields surrounding Port Moresby. While defending fighters took on the Zeke escort, the bombers plowed up the airstrips, but otherwise did little damage. The third *I Go* raid was made on ships and airfields at Milne Bay on 14 April. The Japanese again attacked in overwhelming force, 188 planes; only 24 Australian fighters were available to meet them, but all ships were forewarned and underway, firing their antiaircraft guns to make the enemy pilots shear off. The major result of the attack was the sinking of a merchantman and some minor damage to other shipping. In all three attacks, 5 Allied planes were lost, and the Japanese admitted the loss of 21 aircraft.

On 16 April, Admiral Yamamoto called off the "I" Operation, ordering the remaining *Third Fleet* planes back to Truk. He had been completely misled by the glowing reports of his pilots into believing that *I Go* had been a tremendous success. The total damage claim for the four raids was

[15] CinCPac, Ops in the POA for Apr43 (COA, NHD), p. 14.

[16] Morison, *Breaking the Bismarcks Barrier*, p. 124, indicates that Japanese postwar records confirm the loss of only 12 Vals and 9 Zekes.

staggering: 1 cruiser, 2 destroyers, and 25 assorted transports and cargo vessels sunk, with heavy damage to 2 more transports and several smaller vessels; 134 planes shot out of the air (including 39 probables). Matched against these totals was the actual loss of 1 destroyer, 1 corvette, 2 merchantmen, and less than 20 aircraft. It would seem that the *Third Fleet* pilots had adopted the penchant for reporting "gross exaggeration of damage inflicted" that was rampant in the ranks of the *Eleventh Air Fleet*.[17] Whatever the explanation for pilot error, be it willful exaggeration or wishful thinking, the premature ending of *I Go* without any significant results was chilling to Japanese hopes of delaying Allied offensive preparations.

ALLIED RAIDS [18]

The prime targets of Halsey's pressure tactics in the early months of 1943 were the enemy airfields at Munda on New Georgia and Vila on Kolombangara. The tempo of air raids against these bases increased steadily as Allied strength mounted. Coupled with these air strikes was a limited program of naval bombardment made possible by the fact that SoPac planes and ships had wrested control of the waters immediately north of Guadalcanal from the Japanese. The Japanese could and did risk their warships within range of Henderson Field's bombers, but the need had to be great as in the evacuation of Guadalcanal. The chance for a showdown sea battle still brightened the hopes of enemy naval officers, but there was little desire any longer to seek this critical fight in the confined waters of the lower Solomons. Halsey's cruisers and destroyers had time to get some experience at shore bombardment, thus exposing enemy garrisons to a bit of the bitter medicine dished out by Japanese naval gunners in the darkest days of the struggle for Guadalcanal.

Rear Admiral Walden L. Ainsworth took a cruiser-destroyer force against Munda on 5 January and again on the 24th brought his bombardment group up to New Georgia, this time to shell the field at Vila. On both occasions, fires started by naval gunfire lit up the night and the results of the bombardment were at least spectacular. Follow-up attacks by Allied air caused more damage, according to the Japanese, but neither bombing nor shelling had any lasting effect on the progress of the enemy airbase construction. Admiral Ainsworth noted that, while these air-sea attacks might render the fields unusable for critical periods of time, "the only real answer is to take the field away from them." [19]

Admiral Halsey was in complete agreement with this sentiment; he expected little more from his attack pattern in the Central Solomons than the harassment and delay he achieved. The Japanese became expert at filling in the craters in the runways and dug-in their scattered dumps and shelters to minimize the effect of the Allied raids. Life was mighty unpleasant under the constant round of attacks, however, and the portents were hardly encouraging for the success of Japanese arms.

Another of Ainsworth's shore bombardment groups was underway for New Georgia after dark on 5 March when he received

[17] USSBS, *Interrogation* No. 601, Cdr Ryoske Nomura, IJN, II, p. 532.

[18] Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: *SE Area NavOps—II;* Morison, *Breaking the Bismarcks Barrier.*

[19] CTF 67 Rept of Vila-Stanmore Bombardment 22–24Jan43, dtd 28Jan43 (COA, NHD).

word from Guadalcanal that two enemy ships had left Bougainville headed south earlier in the day. Guadalcanal's seaplane scouts spotted the ships, two destroyers that had just delivered supplies to the Vila base steaming north on a return course. Fire control radar screens pinpointed the location of the targets for ships' batteries, and the enemy vessels were buried in a deluge of shells. Both quickly sank; only 49 crewmen survived to tell their harrowing tale to the garrison on Kolombangara.[20]

The cruiser-destroyer force was slated to hit Munda and Vila again on the night of 7–8 April and was already out of port when Admiral Yamamoto launched his "I" Operation with the assault on Tulagi. The Japanese planes failed to sight the bombardment ships, but the prospect of further enemy attacks prompted Halsey to call off the mission and concentrate his forces. The temporary slackening-off of surface and air raids made necessary by this assemblage of power may have been instrumental in convincing Yamamoto that *I Go* was a success. The enemy admiral had no time to discover his mistake.

On 18 April, two days after Yamamoto ended *I Go*, he left Rabaul with his staff on an inspection trip to Bougainville. As a result of a message intercept, Allied intelligence knew the itinerary of the inspection party and a killer group of Army long-range fighters from Henderson Field met the Japanese planes over their destination, Buin airfield. The execution was swift and sure; a few moments after the interceptors attacked, the staff transports crashed in flames and the enemy's most famous naval commander was dead. Yamamoto died primarily because Nimitz' staff evaluated him as the best man the Japanese had to command their *Combined Fleet;* had he been less competent, less of an inspiration to enemy morale, he might well have lived. His death dealt a telling blow to the spirit of the defenders in the Solomons, and furnished grim warning of the downward course of Japanese fortunes.

[20] USSBS, *Interrogation* No. 138, LCdr Horishi Tokuno, IJN, I, p. 142; Morison, ***Breaking the Bismarcks Barrier***, p. 110, indicates that other sources show there were 174 survivors.

Order of Battle

FLEET MARINE FORCE [1]

By 30 April 1943, the Fleet Marine Force in the Pacific had reached formidable strength in comparison to the few battalions and squadrons that had been its aggregate at the outbreak of war. Over 110,000 Marines and sailors were serving in three divisions, three air wings, and a wide variety of supporting units positioned at Allied bases along a broad, sweeping arc from Midway to Australia. The majority of combat troops were located in the South Pacific under Admiral Halsey's command, where the highest Marine ground echelon was Major General Clayton B. Vogel's I Marine Amphibious Corps (IMAC). The senior Marine aviator, Major General Ralph J. Mitchell, wore two hats as commander of a newly established area headquarters, Marine Aircraft, South Pacific (MASP), and of its principal operating component, the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing (1st MAW). Neither IMAC nor MASP had any substantial tactical function; both commands were organized primarily to serve as administrative and logistical headquarters.

From his command post at Noumea, General Vogel controlled the 2d and 3d Marine Divisions, then in training in New Zealand, as well as a strong body of supporting troops either attached to the divisions or encamped in New Caledonia, the lower Solomons, and the New Hebrides. General Mitchell's units, all temporarily assigned to the 1st Wing, were stationed at airfields from New Zealand to the Russells. Guadalcanal was the focal point of air activity as a steady rotation of squadrons was effected to maintain maximum combat efficiency in the forward areas. Also part of MASP was Headquarters Squadron of the 2d MAW, newly arrived in New Zealand to prepare for a command role in future operations.

In addition to the troops assigned to IMAC and MASP, there was still another sizeable body of FMF units in the South Pacific—those units which were part of the garrisons of American and British Samoa, Wallis Island, and Funafuti in the Ellice Group. American bases on these islands were all included in Major General Charles F. B. Price's Samoan Defense Command. For ground defense, Price

[1] Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: CMC AnRept to SecNav for the Fiscal Year Ending 30Jun43; "Historical Outline of the Development of Fleet Marine Force, Pacific, 1941–1950 (Preliminary)," MS official history written at FMFPac Hq about 1951; Kenneth W. Condit, Gerald Diamond, and Edwin T. Turnbladh, *Marine Corps Ground Training in World War II* (Washington: Hist Br, G-3, HQMC, 1956); 1stLts Robert A. Aurthur and Kenneth Cohlmia, *The Third Marine Division* (Washington: Infantry Journal Press, 1948), hereafter Authur and Cohlmia, *3d MarDivHist;* C. W. Proehl (ed.), *The Fourth Marine Division in World War II* (Washington: Infantry Journal Press, 1946); Robert Sherrod, *History of Marine Corps Aviation in World War II* (Washington: Combat Forces Press, 1952), hereafter Sherrod, *MarAirHist.*

had two rifle regiments, one (3d Marines) under orders to join the 3d Division, and four defense battalions. In special combat training centers were two replacement battalions learning the fundamentals of jungle warfare.[2] Price also had operational control of the squadrons of Marine Aircraft Group 13 (MAG–13), which was administratively part of the 4th Marine Base Defense Aircraft Wing (4th MBDW).

The remaining squadrons of the 4th Wing were stationed in the Central Pacific, on Oahu, and at the outpost islands, Midway, Johnston, and Palmyra, that guarded the approaches to the Pacific Fleet's main base. Ground garrisons for these outposts were furnished by Marine defense battalions administered from a headquarters at Pearl Harbor. The remaining major unit of the FMF in the Pacific, the 1st Marine Division, was in Australia assigned to General MacArthur's command, and just beginning to feel fit again after its ordeal on Guadalcanal.

There was no single headquarters, operational or administrative, for all FMF organizations in the Pacific, although Marine air units did have an administrative headquarters on Oahu—Marine Air Wings, Pacific under Major General Ross E. Rowell. Senior ground commanders, like Vogel and Price, had to consult the Commandant directly on many organizational, administrative, and logistical matters that could well have been handled by a type command at the fleet level. As the FMF grew in size, and its components' missions in complexity, the lack of a higher Marine headquarters to support and coordinate the activities of the air-ground team was to be felt more acutely. The lessons to be learned in the fighting in the Solomons and Bismarcks and on the atolls of the Central Pacific would have to be absorbed before such a headquarters was established.

Most Fleet Marine Force activity in the States was concentrated in a complex of neighboring bases on each coast. In the east, the major ground training center was Camp Lejeune at New River, North Carolina, a site incorporating thousands of acres of tangled, stream-cut forest backing 11 miles of dune-topped beaches. The sprawling Marine Corps Air Station at Cherry Point, less than 40 miles north of Lejeune, controlled a number of smaller airfields scattered throughout the Carolinas. On the west coast, most ground training was carried on at Camp Elliott, a relatively small area just outside San Diego, or at Camp Pendleton, which stretched north from Oceanside for 18 miles along the coastal highway—a vast area of rolling hills, steep-sided canyons and arroyos, and frequent thickets as dense as tropical jungle. A network of air stations and auxiliary fields, the largest being El Toro near Los Angeles, housed the squadrons training for Pacific duty.

These bases, like the Marine Corps itself, were feverishly building at the same time they performed their function of readying men for combat. The 1st Marine Division developed the New River area for amphibious training, and when it shipped out in April 1942 it left behind cadres which

[2] In the fall of 1942, it was decided to season the Marine replacement battalions organized on the east coast of the U.S. in Samoa, where they could receive advanced combat training under climatic conditions and over terrain matching the battle area. Beginning with the 1st Replacement Battalion, which arrived 17 December 1942, seven battalions were trained before the high incidence of filariasis forced a discontinuance of the program in July 1943.

formed the nucleus of the 3d Marines, organized in June. In like manner, the 2d Marine Division, which gave Camps Elliott and Pendleton their baptism as combat training areas, furnished the cadres for most of the units of the 3d Division, which was activated at Elliott on 16 September 1942. The 4th Marine Division was not scheduled for formal activation until August 1943, but its major components were in being by midyear, again by the process of building on a skeleton of veteran officers and enlisted men.

On the air side, the picture of experienced cadres forming the core of new units was much the same as with ground organizations. In contrast to the division and the regiment, however, the Marine aircraft wing and group were essentially task forces shaped to the job at hand and constantly changing their make-up. The 1st MAW, for example, joined a number of squadrons of the 2d Wing during the air battles over Guadalcanal, while the 2d MAW operated largely as a training command in the States. When the 2d Wing left California for the South Pacific in January 1943, its training functions were taken over by Marine Fleet Air, West Coast—a subordinate command of Marine Air Wings, Pacific, in Hawaii. Additional squadrons tentatively assigned to the wings already overseas were in training at every Marine air base in California in 1943.

On the east coast, the 3d MAW was activated in November and its component units grew up with the new airfields then building. Nearly a year's forming and training time was needed before the first of the wing's squadrons was combat ready.[3]

[3] See Appendix E for a location and strength breakdown on the FMF on 30 April 1943.

The overall growth of the Marine Corps matched the rapid swelling of the ranks of the FMF. Although the lion's share of new officers and men ended up in FMF units, thousands of Marines were needed for sea duty, guard assignments, and the supporting establishment. Beginning in February 1943, a steady stream of young women entered the Corps to free men for combat by taking over a host of administrative and technical jobs in non-FMF units. Their performance of duty as Marines "proved highly successful in every way."[4] The enlisted strength of the Marine Corps rose from 222,871 at the start of 1943[5] to 287,621 within six months; on 30 June the number of officers had reached 21,384. Projected total strength for the end of the year was more than 355,000 officers and men,[6] a far cry from the 66,000-man Marine Corps that existed on 7 December 1941.[7]

The second year of fighting saw a cherished tradition of the Marine Corps, its all-volunteer composition, become a war casualty. A Presidential executive order of 5 December 1942 put an end to voluntary enlistment of men of draft age in any of the services. The intent of the directive was to give manpower planners in Washington a greater measure of qualitative control over the influx of men into each service in keeping with the quantitative control already exercised through a quota system. Starting with the intake of February 1943, the recruit depots at

[4] LtGen Keller E. Rockey ltr to CMC, dtd 6Nov55.

[5] M–1 Sec OpDiary 7Dec41–31Dec44, dtd 20Mar45, p. 8.

[6] *Ibid.*

[7] For a location and strength breakdown of the Marine Corps on the eve of WW II, see Volume I, Part I, Chapter 5 of this series.

Parris Island and San Diego saw only a sprinkling of men (mainly draft-exempt 17-year-olds) who did not come in through the Selective Service System. It was still possible, however, for many draftees who anticipated their call-up to enter the service of their choice. The Commandant, Lieutenant General Thomas Holcomb, assigned liaison officers to state governors and draft boards to encourage the deferment of those men who wanted to be Marines until they could fit into the Corps' quota.[8] This program, which was quite successful, resulted in the seeming paradox that most of the draftees in Marine uniforms were still volunteers, in fact if not in name.

The intangible but clearly evident atmosphere of a volunteer outfit was retained by the Marine Corps throughout the war. This spirit was especially evident in the units of the Corps' striking arm—the Fleet Marine Force—where officers and men alike were intolerant of anyone attempting to get by with a marginal performance. The prevailing attitude was that every man had asked to be a Marine and no complaints were expected when the going got a little rough. Each Marine assigned to a unit earmarked for the impending Central Solomons operations seemed quietly determined to equal, even if he could not better, the fighting record of his fellows on Guadalcanal.

THE BATTLE LINES ARE DRAWN[9]

ComSoPac anchored his ELKTON attack against enemy positions in the Solomons on a trio of islands, New Caledonia, Espiritu Santo, and Efate. On each there grew up a complex network of port installations, air bases, supply depots, and salvage and repair facilities geared to operate at a pace that meshed well with Halsey's aggressive offensive philosophy. Like the tactical task forces which actually closed combat with the Japanese, the logistic organizations formed an integrated whole in which the various services cooperated to solve supply and support problems. All units were under orders to "consider themselves as part of the same team rather than Navy, Army, or Marine services in a separate and independent sense. . . ."[10]

The hustling bases in the New Hebrides and at Noumea fed a growing stream of supplies forward to the Guadalcanal area to meet the immediate needs of the garrison and to build a stockpile for future operations. In combat training camps scattered throughout the South Pacific, the interservice exchange and cooperation characteristic of the logistic agencies was repeated. A sense of impending action was high; there was a distinct "get the job done" atmosphere.

At this stage of the war—spring of 1943—no Allied position in either the South or Southwest Pacific could yet be considered a "safe" rear area. As a consequence, large ground garrisons, kept

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[8] Rockey ltr, *op. cit.*

[9] Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: RAdm Charles M. Cooke memo for Pacific Conferees, "Availability of Naval Forces," in notes of 3d PMC Meeting, dtd 13Mar43 (COA, NHD); Army-Navy Central Agreement on SE Area Ops, dtd 22Mar43 in IGHQ NavDirective No. 213, dtd 25Mar43 (OCMH), hereafter *IGHQ Agreement of 22Mar43; Seventeenth Army Ops—II*; *SE Area NavOps—II*: RAdm Worrall R. Carter, *Beans, Bullets and Black Oil* (Washington: NHD, ND, 1953); Morison, *Breaking the Bismarcks Barrier.*

[10] Carter, *Beans, Bullets and Black Oil, op. cit.*, p. 46.

strong in tribute to Japan's offensive capabilities, were immobilized at key points well away from the prospective center of conflict: *e.g.*, Samoa, Fiji, Tonga. Adding to this drain of offensive strength was the slow recovery of battle-tested units from the debilitating effects of sustained jungle warfare. The troops available for an offensive, therefore, were quite limited in view of the considerable job at hand. In all, MacArthur and Halsey could count on having only 14 divisions, both veteran and untried, ready for offensive action by mid-year.[11] Of this total the SoPac share was six divisions, four Army and two Marine.

Although the manpower squeeze brought on by the shipping demands of the two-front war set a low ceiling on Pacific ground forces, Allied plane and ship strength were on the upswing. American war production made the difference. Over 2,000 combat aircraft would be available for the campaign against Rabaul,[12] a fair match for anything the Japanese could put up against them. At sea, the Pacific Fleet was rapidly approaching a position of absolute superiority over the Japanese as new ships of every type, including the carriers and landing craft vital to amphibious operations, reported to CinCPac for duty.[13] The naval elements of Halsey's and MacArthur's area commands, now designated Third Fleet and Seventh Fleet respectively,[14] could be reinforced from Nimitz' mobile striking force as strategic requirements dictated.

Japanese preparations to meet the offensive that they knew was pending in the Solomons began to take shape concurrently with the evacuation of Guadalcanal. The *Southeast Area Fleet* set naval defense troops to building bases on New Georgia, Kolombangara, and Santa Isabel. In March, the first of several reinforcing units from the *Eighth Area Army* was added to the naval forces in the New Georgia Group. On Buka and Bougainville in the Northern Solomons, the *6th Division* was moved in from Truk to provide the bulk of the garrison.

A steady build-up of defenses, with troops and supplies brought in by barge and destroyer, took place despite the incessant and telling attacks of Allied planes and submarines. Enemy air stayed north of New Georgia except for occasional raids on Guadalcanal; enemy combat ships stuck close to Truk and Rabaul waiting for the opportune moment to strike.

Defense of the Solomons took second place in Japanese plans to measures for continued retention of the Lae-Salamaua region of New Guinea. On 22 March, the Army and Navy staffs in Tokyo agreed on a new directive for operations in the Rabaul strategic area, replacing the one that had governed during the Guadalcanal withdrawal. The new order spelled out the primacy of defensive efforts in New Guinea, but its general tenor was the same as that of its predecessor. In emphatic language, the senior commanders in the field, General Imamura and Admiral Kusaka, were enjoined to hold all the positions that their troops then occupied.

Although the Japanese retained a dual command structure in Rabaul under the

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[11] CCS 239/1, dtd 23May43, Subj: Ops in the Pacific and Far East in 1943–44 (COA, NHD).

[12] *Ibid.*

[13] King and Whitehill, *King's Naval Record*, pp. 491–495.

[14] Admiral King established a numbered fleet system on 15 March 1943 with all fleets in the Pacific having odd numbers, those in the Atlantic even.

22 March directive, Imamura and Kusaka were told to cooperate closely and elements of both services were ordered to "literally operate as one unit." [15] In the field, the senior Army or Navy ground commander in an area would take charge of the operations of troops of both services. Until the first Allied assault force attacked, those operations consisted, in the main, of constructing defensive positions skillfully wedded to the terrain. Although Japanese soldiers and sailors were deeply imbued with an offensive spirit, they seemed to have a special affinity for defensive fighting where the pick and shovel often rated equal with the rifle. On New Georgia, South Pacific forces were due to get their first real taste of the burrowing, grudging, step-by-step advance that characterized the later stages of the Pacific War.

[15] *IGHQ Agreement of 22Mar43.*

PART II

TOENAILS Operation

691-360 O—63——4

Objective: New Georgia

BACKGROUND OF MUNDA [1]

Occupation of the Russells, following closely on the heels of the Guadalcanal victory, seemed to whet the appetite of Allied forces in the South Pacific for more action, more show-downs with the Japanese. In Admiral Halsey's New Caledonia headquarters, optimism and enthusiasm ran high. Singleness of purpose and a spirit of camaraderie united all representatives on ComSoPac's staff; and, charged by Halsey's impatience to get on with the war, his staff busied itself planning for the next major offensive in the Solomons. The objective: seizure of the New Georgia Group.[2] (See Map II, Map Section.)

A compact maze of islands separated by shallow, coral-fouled lagoons or narrow reaches of open water, the New Georgia Group lies on a northwest-southeast axis between Bougainville, 110 miles to the northwest, and Guadalcanal, 180 miles to the southeast. Nearly 150 miles long and 40 miles wide, it comprises 12 major islands outlined by many smaller islands and formidable reefs. A dense, forbidding jungle growth covers the rugged terrain and accents the abruptly rising, conical mountains which mark the volcanic origin of the group.

Largest island in the group is its namesake, New Georgia. It is hugged closely on the north by the islands of Wana Wana, Arundel, and Baanga and guarded to the southeast by Vangunu and Gatukai. Standing off to the south are Rendova and Tetipari, with two islands—Vella Lavella and Ganongga—in a line to the northwest. Gizo Island chains Vella Lavella to Wana Wana and blocks the southern end of Vella Gulf. Completing the New Georgia Group is the circular, 5,450-foot mountain peak, Kolombangara, which juts out of the sea between Vella Gulf and Kula Gulf, only a few miles northwest of Arundel.

The group centers on New Georgia. A tortuous, misshapen mass with a spiny ridge of peaks, it lies pointing north in a big inverted **V**, 45 miles in length and 20 miles wide. Its southern coastline is bordered for nearly 20 miles by Roviana

[1] Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: Allied GeographicalSec, GHQ, SWPA, Study of New Georgia Group—Terrain Study No. 54, dtd 26Mar43; IntelSec, SoPacFor, ObjectiveRept 25-13, New Georgia Group, dtd 15Feb43; SoPacFor PhotoInterpretationU Repts Nos. 37-39, 42, 43, and 47, 24Nov-17Dec43; Morison, *Breaking the Bismarcks Barrier;* Maj John N. Rentz, *Marines in the Central Solomons* (Washington: HistBr, G-3, HQMC, 1952), hereafter Rentz, *Marines in the Central Solomons.* Documents not otherwise identified in this part are located in the following files of the Archives, Historical Branch, G-3 Division, Headquarters Marine Corps: Aviation; Monograph and Comment; New Georgia Area Operations; Publications; Unit Historical Reports.

[2] In the succeeding chapters, the term "New Georgia Group" will refer to the entire island group. The term "New Georgia" will refer only to the island of that name.

Lagoon, a coral-laced and treacherous stretch of water varying from one to three miles in width. Only small boats can safely trace a channel between the narrow openings in the reef and around the shallow bars of the lagoon. Viru Harbor, southeast of Roviana, is one of the few easy-access points on the southeast coast. A land-locked anchorage, it has an unobstructed but zigzag channel.

The entire east and northeast side of the island is reef-lined, with Marova and Grassi Lagoons bordering that coast almost as Roviana does on the south. As the coastline turns south at Visuvisu Point—apex of the V—Kula Gulf swells directly into three deep-water anchorages formed by jungle rivers rising in the mountains on the north coast. Rice Anchorage and Enogai Inlet are short and mangrove-lined with deep forest crowding the shores; Bairoko Harbor, deeper and longer, is partially blocked by reefs but is the best anchorage along the gulf. Past Bairoko, Hathorn Sound connects the gulf with the passage through to the south, Diamond Narrows. Only 224 feet wide at its narrowest point and 432 feet across at its widest, the Narrows separates New Georgia from Arundel and is the northern entrance to Roviana Lagoon. Its twisting channel is navigable, however, only by small boats.

The dank, oppressive nature of the island characterized even the life of the New Georgia natives. Theirs was a scrubby existence from small gardens, native fruits, some fishing, and occasional trading. One-time headhunters, they became aggressive sailors who moved from point to point through the lagoons by canoe, avoiding the rugged inland travel. As a result, they were, in 1943, excellent guides to the coastlines of the islands but almost completely ignorant of the interiors.

In November 1942, while still contesting possession of Henderson Field on Guadalcanal, the Japanese sought another airfield which would bring their fighter planes within shorter striking distance of the southern Solomons. They found it at Munda Point on New Georgia, about two-thirds of the way from Rabaul to Guadalcanal. It was a natural selection. Munda Point was relatively flat and could be reached from the sea only through one narrow break in its barrier reef, which was risky even for shallow-draft ships at high tide, or through several openings in the string of islets locking Roviana Lagoon to the island. An overland approach required an arduous jungle trek either from river inlets 10 miles to the north or from points to the east in Roviana. The position of the proposed airfield made an ally of the entire island, utilizing in protection all the reefs and islets which ringed New Georgia and the matted canopy of jungle growth which covered it.

The Japanese came to Munda in force on 13 November 1942. Their transports stopped off Munda reef late that day and, by early morning of the 14th, troops completed debarking by small boats. The occupation unit immediately sent out armed patrols to "subjugate" the natives and inform them of the Japanese intentions. Kolombangara, Rendova, Vangunu, and surrounding smaller islands were visited and quickly put under control. The construction of an airfield began with the arrival of additional troops and engineers on 21 November.

Coastwatcher Donald G. Kennedy at Segi Plantation on the extreme southeastern tip of New Georgia was one of the first

to hear of the occupation. In October, a month previous, when the Japanese first reconnoitered New Georgia, Kennedy organized a band of natives to help him defend his post. When they informed him of the Munda landing, he sent Harry Wickham, a half-native co-worker, to Rendova to watch Munda and report on the progress of the airfield.

Wickham's report of Japanese activity at Munda was investigated immediately by Allied air reconnaissance. The first report, on 24 November, was negative. Photographs clearly showed a plantation area, a small cluster of buildings at Munda, and a similar cluster of buildings at Kokengola Mission north of Munda. There was no activity which could be classed as enemy, no evidence of airfield construction. Allied planes bombed the area anyway. It was a gesture of confidence in Kennedy and Wickham.

Then photo interpreters picked up interest. New buildings began to show up in later photo strips, and a strange white line appeared beneath the plantation trees. On 3 December, SoPac interpreters announced their discovery: a possible landing strip under construction. Two distinct strips, 125 feet wide and about 1,000 feet apart in a direct line with each other, were visible in the prints. One strip was about 175 feet long, the other about 200 feet. Natural camouflage, it was decided, partially shielded the construction. Two days later the field was 2,000 feet long. No trees had been cut down, but piles of either loose earth or coral appeared beneath each tree. New buildings, obviously control towers, had been built adjacent to the field. On 9 December, photos showed the field nearly clear, the trees apparently pulled up and taken away, and the holes filled in with coral. The Japanese, alerted by the continued interest of Allied planes over Munda, had abandoned further camouflage attempts.[3]

By 17 December, after only a month at Munda and despite multiple bombing raids, the enemy had an operational airstrip 4,700 feet long. A series of revetments and a turn-around loop eventually finished the field. An advance echelon of 24 aircraft was moved to Munda upon its completion, but all were destroyed or badly damaged by bombing raids within a week after arrival. Thereafter, the Japanese used the field mainly for servicing planes after raids on Guadalcanal and the Russells, and few pilots dared Allied bombings to tarry at Munda very long. Repair of the strip was easy; bulldozers quickly filled in the holes. Despite the rain of bombs and occasional shellings, the field was never out of operation longer than 48 hours.[4]

New Georgia, the Allies had decided, would be the target of the next offensive in the South Pacific. Munda airfield was the bull's-eye. As a military prize, it held the enemy's hopes for a re-entry into the lower Solomons and the Allied hopes for another step towards Rabaul.

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[3] One of the popular but unverified stories about the camouflage of Munda field is: "The Japanese had spun a web of wire cables between the tops of the palm trees. The trunks were then cut out from under the branches which remained suspended exactly in place, held by the cables." Capt Walter Karig, USNR, and Cdr Eric Purdon, USNR, *Battle Report, Pacific War: Middle Phase* (New York: Rinehart and Company, Inc., 1947), p. 201.

[4] USSBS, *Interrogations* No. 195, LCdr S. Yunoki, IJN, I, p. 192.

NEW GEORGIA RECONNAISSANCE [5]

Halsey had intended to be in New Georgia by mid-April. His planning date scrapped by the JCS and his offensive tied to construction of airfields at Kiriwina and Woodlark, the admiral waited for the go-ahead signal. While waiting, he sent reconnaissance patrols probing the Central Solomons.

Guadalcanal land operations had been plagued by a dearth of information on terrain and topography. New Georgia was likewise unmapped and hydrographic charts were badly out of date. Since aerial photography revealed only thick jungle growth, actual physical scouting by trained men was the only answer. A combat reconnaissance school with experienced Marine and Army personnel and selected coastwatchers as instructors was organized at Guadalcanal, and about 100 men were trained and formed into scouting teams. Halsey found their reports invaluable, and beginning with ELKTON planning, "never made a forward move without their help." [6]

First terrain information on New Georgia had been received from a patrol of six Marines and a ComSoPac staff officer that had prowled Roviana Lagoon and the Munda area in late February, contacting coastwatchers, scouting and mapping trails, and selecting possible landing beaches. Their report helped the admiral reach a decision on hitting the Central Solomons and gave SoPac planners the information for tentative strategy.[7]

On 21 March, a group of Marine scouts drawn from the raider battalions and graduates of the combat reconnaissance school landed by PBY (Catalina flying boat) at Segi Plantation.[8] With Kennedy's natives as guides, the group split into patrols and set out to scout possible landing beaches, landmarks, and motor torpedo boat (MTB) anchorages. Traveling by canoe at night and observing during daylight hours, the patrols checked travel time from point to point, took bearings on channels, scouted enemy dispositions and installations, and sketched crude maps to help fill in the scanty information already available. One group had the mission of "collecting information about the Viru garrison, armament and accessibility to the area, both by way of direct attack up the harbor cliffs and by inland native trails through the jungle," [9] which marked

[5] Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: *ComSoPac Apr–May42 WarDs;* ComPhibFor, SoPacFor WarD, 17–30Jun43; Col William F. Coleman, "Amphibious Recon Patrols," *Marine Corps Gazette*, v. 27, no. 12 (Dec43); Sgt Frank X. Tolbert, "Advance Man," *Leatherneck*, v. 28, no. 3 (Mar45); Feldt, *The Coastwatchers*; Rentz, *Marines in the Central Solomons.*

[6] FAdm William F. Halsey and LCdr Julian Bryan, III, *Admiral Halsey's Story* (New York: Whittlesey House, 1947), p. 158, hereafter Halsey and Bryan, *Halsey's Story.*

[7] A member of that first patrol said that Halsey, after hearing the reports on New Georgia, declared, "Well, gentlemen, we're going to hit that place. I don't know when or how, but we're going to hit it." Maj Clay A. Boyd interview by Maj John N. Rentz, dtd 16Feb51.

[8] The senior member of this patrol group later commented: "I never heard of the 'combat reconnaissance school' and know that I and the other two members of the patrol from the 3d Raider Bn. didn't graduate from it." Col Michael S. Currin ltr to Head, HistBr, G–3, HQMC, dtd 11Oct60, hereafter *Currin ltr.*

[9] Maj Roy D. Batterton, "You Fight by the Book," *Marine Corps Gazette*, v. 33, no. 7 (Jul49), hereafter Batterton, "You Fight by the Book."

it as a possible target in the assault. Other patrols ranged from Roviana Lagoon to Arundel and Kolombangara, along the northern shore of New Georgia from Enogai Inlet to Marova Lagoon, and around the coast of Vangunu. Another patrol contacted the Rendova coastwatcher, Harry Wickham.[10] The missions were virtually the same: to bring back all possible data on the enemy and terrain.

At this early date in the spring of 1943, tentative invasion plans envisioned a divisional landing at Segi Plantation followed by a sweep overland to capture Munda field. The patrol reports confirmed the growing suspicions of the ComSoPac war plans staff: Segi's beaches would not accommodate a large landing force, and a sizable body of troops could not move through untracked jungle to Munda with any hope of success. Another method of attack would have to be developed.

The patrols continued to shuttle back to New Georgia for more information. Coastwatchers A. R. Evans on Kolombangara, Dick Horton and Harry Wickham at Rendova, and Kennedy at Segi played hosts to furtive guests who slipped in by native canoes from submarines, fast destroyers, or PBYs. The patrols searched openings in the barrier reef of Roviana, checked overland trails from Rice Anchorage on the north coast to Zanana Beach on the south in Roviana, and looked for easy access to Munda field. In this connection, Wickham—who had lived on New Georgia most of his life—"was particularly valuable." [11]

The reports on Munda were discouraging. Hathorn Sound had no beaches and shallow landing craft could pass safely only halfway through Diamond Narrows.[12] LSTs might possibly skirt the west shore of Baanga Island to get to Munda, but it would be a hazardous, obstacle-lined trip. Crossing the reef at Munda bar was another risk. Soundings indicated that the opening, through continued coral deposits, had become more shallow and restricted than admittedly outdated reports indicated. A direct assault over Munda bar, the closest entrance to Munda, was patently the most dangerous course and held the least chance of success.

Final assault plans were a concession to the terrain. They provided for landings off-shore from Munda, followed by a troop buildup on New Georgia and then a strong attack on the airfield from all sides. The last reconnaissance patrols went into the New Georgia Group on 13 June. Landing at Segi they took off in log canoes for the four landing spots finally selected: Rendova, Rice Anchorage, Viru Harbor, and Wickham Anchorage. Teams of Marine Corps, Army, and Navy officers studied the designated beaches and sought artillery positions, observation posts, water points, bivouac areas, and interior trails. Some of the patrols skirted Japanese defenses, noting the strength and habits of the enemy, before striking inland for terrain information. When the teams paddled back to Segi, some of the members stayed behind with natives to

[10] *Currin ltr.*

[11] Feldt, *The Coastwatchers*, p. 149.

[12] In the later stages of the campaign, some LSTs made it through the Narrows with 25th Infantry Division troops and equipment on board, but the division's chief of staff remembers the trip as "a tight squeeze w/fast tidal flow—no picnic." MajGen William W. Dick, Jr. USA, ltr to ACofS, G–3, HQMC, dtd 31Oct60, including comments by MajGen David H. Buchanan, USA.

guide the landing parties to the beaches with lights flashed from the shore.

AWAITING ASSAULT [13]

Munda assumed a new role in enemy strategy during the spring of 1943. Instead of the proposed springboard for recapture of Guadalcanal, it became a keystone in Japan's decision to build up the Lae-Salamaua defense line while maintaining the Solomons as delaying positions.

Japanese engineers, after rushing Munda into completion, hurried to Kolombangara to construct another field at Vila Plantation on the southeast shore. Here they did not attempt concealment. The task went ahead despite almost daily bombings and occasional naval bombardments. The enemy now had two strips from which they could stage attacks against Allied positions on Guadalcanal and the Russells; but the air over The Slot was a two-way street, and most of the traffic was from Henderson Field.

Buildup of troop strength in the Vila-Munda area was steady but slow. Air supremacy was still contested, but the initiative was with the Allies. Japanese plans for reinforcing the Central Solomons were slowed by the continual harassment from planes of Commander, Aircraft Solomons (ComAirSols), and the enemy was eventually reduced to scheduling troop transfers "from the end of the month to the beginning of the following month to take advantage of the new moon." [14] Then, too, the transport losses in the Battle of the Bismarck Sea on 3 March and the steadily mounting attrition of naval craft from air attacks was slowly sapping Japanese sea power.

By the end of April, land defenses in the Central Solomons had been strengthened with Army and Navy troops, and additional reinforcements were standing by in the Buin-Shortland area for further transportation. The *8th Combined Special Naval Landing Force (CSNLF)*, which included the *Kure 6th Special Naval Landing Force* and the *Yokosuka 7th SNLF* was the Navy's contribution to the defense of Vila-Munda.[15] After Japan lost the initiative in the Pacific, these amphibious assault troops were changed to defense forces. Named for the naval base at which the unit was formed, an SNLF generally

[13] Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: MilHistSec, G–2, FEC, Japanese Monograph No. 34, Seventeenth Army Ops—Part I (OCMH), hereafter *Seventeenth Army Ops—I*; *SE Area NavOps—II*; CIC, SoPacFor Item No. 635, New Georgia Area DefButai SecretO No. 16, dtd 23Mar43, Item No. 647, Kolombangara Island DefO A No. 5, dtd 2Jul43, Item No. 672, Outline of Disposition of SE Det, dtd 20Jun43, Item No. 690, Kolombangara Island DefTaiO, dtd 1Mar43, Item No. 702, New Georgia DefOpO "A" No. 8, c. late Jun43, Item No. 711, Seventeenth ArmyO No. 244, dtd 27Apr43, Item No. 753, SE DetHq IntelRec No. 2 (Middle June Rept), dtd 24Jun43; SoPacFor POW Interrogation Repts 105 and 106, dtd 9Oct43, and 138 and 140, dtd 24Nov43; USAFISPA OB G–2 Rept No. 27, 17–24Jul43; Rentz, *Marines in the Central Solomons.*

[14] *Seventeenth Army Ops—I*, p. 6.

[15] The total ordnance of the *8th CSNLF* included: 8 140mm coast guns; 8 120mm coast guns; 16 80mm coast guns; 4 120mm AA guns; 8 75mm AA guns; 12 40mm AA guns; 2 75mm mountain (artillery) guns; 2 70mm howitzers; 40 13mm AA machine guns; 38 heavy machine guns; 102 light machine guns. MilIntelDiv, WarDept, Handbook on Japanese Military Forces (TM–E 30–480), dtd 15Sep44, pp. 76, 78; GHQ, SWPA, MilIntelSec, Organization of the Japanese Ground Forces, dtd 22Dec44, p. 299.

included: a headquarters unit; two rifle companies; a heavy weapons company with howitzer, antitank, and machine gun units; an antiaircraft company; a heavy gun or seacoast defense unit; and medical, signal, supply, and engineer troops.

The *Yokosuka 7th* landed at Kolombangara on 23 February with 1,807 men, and was followed on 9 March by the *Kure 6th* with 2,038 men. This unit went into positions between Bairoko and Enogai and around the airfield at Munda. Rear Admiral Minoru Ota, commanding the *8th CSNLF*, assumed responsibility for the defense of the New Georgia sector.

By prior agreement between the *Seventeenth Army* and the *Eighth Fleet*, Army and Navy strength in the Central Solomons was to be about even. After sending the *8th CSNLF* to the New Georgia area, the Navy was determined to hold the Army to its end of the bargain. Following a number of conferences, the Army reinforcements began arriving in late March. The original force at Munda consisted of two companies from the *2d Battalion, 229th Regiment* of the *38th Division* with two antiaircraft battalions for protection for the naval base construction troops. Kolombangara was garrisoned early in 1943 with troops from the *51st Division* including an infantry battalion, an artillery detachment, and engineer and air defense units.

The remainder of the *229th Regiment* at Buin, with supporting troops, began to filter into New Georgia late in April and the *51st Division* troops on Kolombangara were relieved. The *229th* moved to the Munda airfield area, and a battalion from the *13th Infantry Regiment, 6th Division*, took over actual defense of Kolombangara. As opportunities arose, the Japanese moved in more troops.

Guadalcanal had been a well-learned—albeit painful—lesson. The reinforcement of the Vila-Munda area reflected Japan's new strategy:

> Our fundamental policy was to bring the desired number of troops into strategic key points before the enemy offensive, in spite of manifold difficulties; and in event of an enemy offensive, to prevent our supply transportation from being hampered; to throw in our entire sea, land, and air strength at the first sign of an enemy landing to engage it in decisive combat; and to secure completely the strategic key positions linking the Central Solomons, Lae, and Salamaua, which formed our national defense boundary on the southeastern front.[16]

On New Georgia, the Japanese prepared defenses for all eventualities. Munda Point and the airfield vicinity bristled with antiaircraft and artillery weapons. The enemy did not discount the threat of a direct assault over Munda bar and sited some of their armament to cover that approach; but the bulk of the weapons pointed north toward Bairoko—from which an overland attack might come—and toward Laiana Beach on Roviana Lagoon—where an attack seemed logical. The Japanese believed, however, that the next Allied objective was to be Kolombangara in an attempt to attack Munda from the rear; so Vila likewise was prepared to repulse any assault. Increased Allied air activity, the presence of a great number of troop transports in the Guadalcanal area, and increased reconnaissance convinced the enemy that an attack was imminent. Their intelligence reports of about 50 cargo-type airplanes at Henderson Field also prompted speculation on the possibility of airborne operations against Vila-Munda.

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[16] *SE Area NavOps—II*, p. 4.

With both Army and Navy troops occupying identical Central Solomons positions, a more unified command arrangement was sought. Admiral Ota, the senior commander in the area, had been responsible for both Army and Navy land defenses in the Vila-Munda area. On 2 May, however, *Imperial Headquarters* directed that a command post be established in New Georgia, and on 31 May, Major General Noboru Sasaki of the *38th Division* arrived at Kolombangara to head the new *Southeast Detachment*, a joint Army-Navy defense force. Administratively attached to the *Seventeenth Army* but under the operational command of the *Eighth Fleet*, General Sasaki was assigned responsibility for all land defenses in the New Georgia sector and command of all Army troops in the area. Admiral Ota, still in command of Navy troops, was directed to give him fullest cooperation. It was a command structure which crisscrossed Army and Navy channels, but with Sasaki's assignment spelled out, and with Ota's cooperation assured, a unified force was established.

By late June, as Japan waited for an Allied thrust she believed was coming, the defensive positions in the New Georgia Group were set. To obtain greater coordination, General Sasaki divided his defense area into three zones of responsibility: the Central (Munda); the Western (Kolombangara); and the Eastern (Viru-Wickham). The task of defending Munda Point he gave to Colonel Genjiro Hirata and the *229th Regiment*, augmented by two batteries of the *10th Independent Mountain Artillery Regiment*. Air defense would be provided by the *15th Air Defense Unit* which combined the *41st Field Antiaircraft Battalion* (less one battery), the *31st Independent Field Antiaircraft Company*, the *27th Field Machine Cannon Company*, and the *3d Field Searchlight Battalion* (less one battery). One company of the *229th Regiment* was dispatched to Rendova.

To aid Sasaki in the defense of the airfield, Admiral Ota established three seacoast artillery batteries at Munda with 140mm, 120mm, and 80mm guns. Also based there was an antiaircraft machine gun company of the *Kure 6th SNLF*, the *21st Antiaircraft Company* and the *17th* and *131st Pioneers* (labor troops). Ota also sent a rifle company from the *Kure 6th* to Rendova. The remainder of the *Kure 6th*, under Commander Saburo Okumura, was to defend the Bairoko Harbor area. Kolombangara's defense was entrusted to a battalion of the *13th Regiment*, reinforced by a battery of the *10th Independent Mountain Artillery*. Air defense of Vila airstrip rested with the *58th Field Antiaircraft Battalion* (less one battery), the *22d* and the *23d Field Machine Cannon Companies*, and a searchlight battery. The main detachments of the *Yokosuka 7th SNLF* and the *19th Pioneers* were also based on Kolombangara.

Viru Harbor was garrisoned by the *4th Company* of the *229th*, less one platoon which went on to Wickham Anchorage to augment a seacoast defense battery from the *Kure 6th*. To complete the defensive picture, lookout platoons were scattered about the coastline of New Georgia and on some of the small adjacent islets to act as security detachments.

In all, as Sasaki's reinforcement and defense plans raced right down to the wire with Allied offensive preparations, the Japanese had about 5,000 Navy and 5,500

Army troops in the New Georgia-Kolombangara area. Although the *8th CSNLF* was not combat tested, the *229th Regiment* and the *13th Regiment* were another matter. The *229th* had participated in the capture of Hong Kong before taking part in the occupation of Java. Committed to combat again, the regiment had one battalion nearly annihilated on New Guinea and another battalion suffered heavy casualties at Guadalcanal. Reinforced by fresh troops at Rabaul and Bougainville, the survivors had been formed into new battalions to join the *2d Battalion* at New Georgia. The elements of the *13th Regiment*, before being sent to Kolombangara, were part of the *6th Division* which garrisoned the Northern Solomons. One of Japan's oldest divisions, the *6th* was likewise hardened by combat in China before being sent to the Solomon Islands.

SEA OFFENSIVES [17]

Expanding sea and air offensives by the Allies in the late spring of 1943 had a definite bearing on Japan's outlook toward her defenses in the South Pacific. Widening the scope of the war, a large-scale bombing attack in mid-May plastered the Japanese-held atoll of Wake in the Central Pacific. This strike followed a landing in the Aleutians on 11 May by U.S. Army troops covered by naval forces. The enemy believed that the counter-landings in the North Pacific were a direct threat to the Home Islands, and plans for the southeast area were immediately curtailed. About 20 per cent of the troops earmarked for the Solomons and New Guinea were shifted to the northeast area; and Admiral Mineichi Koga, successor to Admiral Yamamoto, pulled his *Combined Fleet* headquarters out of Truk and moved to Tokyo so that he could better control operations throughout the Pacific. His main fleet units, however, remained at Truk.

True to his promise to the JCS at the time of the 28 March directive, Admiral Halsey kept the pressure on the Japanese in the Central Solomons. Under the pounding of bombs and sea bombardments, the Vila-Munda area never had the opportunity to develop past its use as a refueling point for enemy planes. The Allied strikes scored few casualties among the Munda defenders, relatively secure in underground defenses near the airfield, but kept enemy engineers busy repairing the cratered runways. The attacks lowered morale, however, by keeping the Japanese "sleepless and fatigued," [18] and occasional hits were scored on fuel and supply dumps. Prior to May, Munda and Vila had taken nearly 120 bombing raids, and four major naval bombardments had rained shells on the two airfields.

The Tokyo Express—fast destroyers carrying troops and supplies to the New Georgia Group—still steamed on. The Allies found they could not possibly cover all avenues of supply, and that to halt the traffic entirely would require more planes

[17] Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: CinCPac Ops in POA, May43, dtd 15Aug43; CinCPac Ops in POA, Jun43, dtd 6Sep43; ONI, *Combat Narratives, Solomon Islands Campaign: IX—Bombardments of Munda and Vila-Stanmore, January–May 1943* (Washington, 1944), hereinafter cited as ONI, *Combat Narratives IX; SE Area NavOps—II;* Morison, *Breaking the Bismarcks Barrier;* Miller, *Reduction of Rabaul;* Sherrod, *MarAir-Hist.*

[18] USSBS, *Interrogation* No. 224, Cdr Yasumi Doi, IJN, I, p. 210.

and ships than South Pacific forces could muster at this stage of the war. On 6 May, however, the express runs were abruptly, if only temporarily, disrupted. Rear Admiral Walden L. Ainsworth, heading a Third Fleet task force of three cruisers, five destroyers, and three converted destroyer-mine layers, steamed up the gap between Gizo and Wana Wana Islands into the Vella Gulf. As Ainsworth's cruisers and four destroyers blocked the northern entrance to Vella Gulf, the three mine layers escorted by a radar-equipped destroyer laid three rows of mines across the straits between Kolombangara and Gizo. Then the entire force turned for home bases at Guadalcanal. (See Map II, Map Section.)

Dividends were almost immediate. The next night, four Japanese destroyers slipped into Blackett Straits with Vila as their destination. They never reached it. The trap was sprung. Blundering into the mine field, one ship went down almost immediately; two others were badly damaged. The fourth ship stood by to pick up survivors. And that's the way Allied planes, somewhat delayed by adverse weather, found them the next day. The two damaged ships were sunk by bombs, but the fourth ship, heavily bombed and strafed, managed to limp back toward Bougainville. Gleeful coastwatchers radioed the box score to Guadalcanal.

Heartened by the success, the Third Fleet planned another surprise. This time, Vila would be shelled as the northern entrance to Kula Gulf was mined. On the night of 13 May, Admiral Ainsworth led a force of three cruisers and five destroyers in firing runs past Vila, steaming in from the north, while a destroyer and three fast mine layers planted mines off the east coast of Kolombangara. As each of Ainsworth's ships completed her run past Vila, she turned and pumped heavy fire into the Bairoko and Enogai-Rice Anchorage areas.

At the same time, a force of one cruiser and three destroyers plastered Munda on the opposite side of New Georgia. The airfield had not been included in the original bombardment plans, but a last-hour switch in orders—accomplished by dispatch and a message drop from planes to the ships designated—had added that stronghold. Vila was hit by a total of 2,895 six-inch and 4,340 five-inch shells, Munda by 970 six-inch and 1,648 five-inch. The operation was covered by an air strike in the Northern Solomons and additional fighter planes flew cover and reported bombardment results.

The mine-laying did not produce the earlier results. It slowed the Japanese supply chain by forcing it to be more cautious, but it did not halt it. The bombardment was a bigger disappointment. Less than 12 hours after the last shell had been fired, a flight of 26 Japanese fighters staged from Munda-Vila was chasing the attack force back to Guadalcanal. Coastwatchers radioed the warning; 102 Allied aircraft formed a welcoming committee. Seventeen enemy planes were reportedly shot down; 16 of them were claimed by Marine fighters. Five Allied planes and three pilots were lost in the action. The bombardment was the last scheduled before the actual invasion; the results, it was apparent, were not worth the price. A harassing bombardment, CinCPac later advised, was not justified when "all ships were subjected to the hazard of enemy MTB and SS [submarine]

attacks with no prospect of equal opportunity to damage the enemy." [19]

Air activity increased during June. Airfields in the Russells gave the Allies a shorter range to targets in the Northern and Central Solomons, as well as providing another launching area for getting planes into the air to repel attacks. Attracted by the concentration of shipping in the Guadalcanal area, the Japanese tried a new one-two punch of heavy flights of fighters followed by large numbers of bombers, but three major strikes on 7, 12, and 16 June resulted in staggering losses. The enemy had hoped to break even in fighter tolls, which would then give their bombers opportunity to attack unmolested. The maneuver boomeranged. Each time, ComAirSols was able to meet the threat with from 105 to 118 aircraft and in the three strikes, a total of 152 enemy airplanes was claimed. The Allies lost 21.

PREPARING TO STRIKE [20]

The assault of New Georgia, viewed in optimism contagious at the time, seemed an easy assignment despite the inaccessability of Munda. Reconnaissance had virtually pinpointed Japanese strong points, and the combat effectiveness of the Vila-Munda airfields had been reduced considerably by the Allied pounding. Intelligence sources, which later proved remarkably accurate, estimated that there were only about 3,000 Japanese at Munda, with another 500 troops at Bairoko and a detachment of 300 men at Wickham Anchorage and about 100 more at Viru Harbor. The bulk of the forces, estimated at 5,000 to 7,000 troops, was on Kolombangara, together with an additional 3,000 laborers.

Japan's reinforcement ability from points in the Northern Solomons was noted, but there was no ready estimate of the numbers available for quick assignment to combat. Her sea strength in the Solomons was believed to be 6 destroyers, 5 submarines, and 12 transports, with a cruiser, 5 destroyers, 7 submarines, and 25 attack transports at Rabaul. Japanese air strength was put at 89 land-based aircraft in the Solomons with another 262 at Rabaul. While troop estimates were near the actual enemy totals, ComSoPac guesses on air and sea numbers of the enemy were low. The entire *Eighth Fleet* was in the Shortlands area, while a part of the *Combined Fleet* at Truk was committed to lend assistance in Southeast Area operations. The Japanese Navy had 169 land-based planes available for combat from a total of nearly 300 deployed in the Bismarck Archipelago and the Northern Solomons. The *Eighth Area Army* had about 180 aircraft attached directly to it; however, most of these were supporting operations against the Allies in New Guinea.

The target had been marked. Early in June, Admiral Halsey published his orders for the seizure and occupation of New Georgia. The improbable code name TOENAILS masked Halsey's part in the CARTWHEEL offensive. The missions: capture Wickham Anchorage and Viru Harbor as small-craft staging areas; seize Segi Plantation as a possible airfield site; seize Rendova as a base for the neutralization of Munda by artillery fire. Orders for the actual assault of Munda airfield

[19] ONI, *Combat Narratives IX*, p. 74.

[20] Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: ComSoPac OPlan 14–43, dtd 3Jun43; ComThirdFlt OPlan 12–43, dtd 5Jun43; CTF 31 OpO A8–43, dtd 4Jun43; NGOF FO No. 1, dtd 16Jun43 and No. 2, dtd 24Jun43; Rentz, *Marines in the Central Solomons*.

would be issued by ComSoPac after the successful completion of the first phase of TOENAILS.

Task units of the Third Fleet were assigned covering missions which would insure success of the operation by blocking any enemy force attempting to disrupt the landings with a counteroffensive. While one force of destroyers and cruisers moved in to mine the main sea channels around the Shortland Islands, another heavier force of battleships and destroyers was to stage a bombardment of Japanese strong points in the Northern Solomons and Shortlands. Air units of the South Pacific Air Command, under Vice Admiral Aubrey W. Fitch, were assigned strikes against shipping in the Shortlands area and bombing missions on airfields on Bougainville. Carrier air groups were to intercept any enemy ships or aircraft heading for the New Georgia Group. SoPac submarines were to range into the Northern Solomons for interception and early warning of any Japanese force, and destroyer units would provide close-in support for the transport groups engaged in the actual landing operations. Thus, with Admiral Halsey's forces guarding the northern and eastern approaches to New Georgia, and General MacArthur's operations in New Guinea shielding the western flank, the assault forces could proceed with the seizure of TOENAILS objectives.

The Army's 43d Infantry Division, part of Major General Oscar W. Griswold's XIV Corps, was named as the assault and occupation troops. The 2d Marine Aircraft Wing headquarters under Brigadier General Francis P. Mulcahy was assigned to direct tactical air support over the target during the operation. Rear Admiral Turner, commander of amphibious forces in the South Pacific, was given overall responsibility for New Georgia operations. Detailed planning for the actual seizure and occupation of the objectives outlined in Halsey's broad plans would be Turner's job.

To accomplish the TOENAILS missions, Turner divided his command into two units. He would personally direct the larger Western Force in the main landing at Rendova and would be responsible for movement of troops and supplies to the objective and for their protection. The Eastern Force, under the direction of Rear Admiral George H. Fort, would seize Viru, Segi Plantation, and Wickham Anchorage. Admiral Fort would be responsible for movement to these targets and for embarking troops and supplies from the Russells for subsequent operations.

Admiral Turner's ground commander, Major General John H. Hester, headed the New Georgia Occupation Force (NGOF). Its combat units consisted of Hester's own 43d Infantry Division, including the 172d and 169th Regiments and one battalion of the 103d Regiment; the Marine 9th Defense Battalion; the 136th Field Artillery Battalion from the 37th Infantry Division; the 24th Naval Construction Battalion (NCB); Company O of the Marine 4th Raider Battalion; the 1st Commando, Fiji Guerrillas;[21] and assigned service troops.

Fort's Eastern Force would include the 103d RCT (less the battalion with Hester); Companies N, P, and Q from the 4th Raider Battalion; elements of the 70th Coast Artillery (Antiaircraft) Battalion; parts of the 20th NCB; and service units.

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[21] Central Office of Information, *Among Those Present* (London, 1946), pp. 53–56.

The landing force would be headed by Colonel Daniel H. Hundley, commanding the 103d RCT. Selected as ready reserve for the operation was the 1st Marine Raider Regiment (less the 2d, 3d, and 4th Battalions), commanded by Colonel Harry B. Liversedge. The Army's 37th Infantry Division (less the 129th RCT and most of the 148th RCT) would be in general reserve at Guadalcanal, ready to move on five-days' notice.

Execution of the assigned tasks looked easy. Turner's original concept was to seize the southern end of New Georgia simultaneously with Rendova. Artillery based on Rendova and offshore smaller islands would soften Munda field while the buildup of assault forces began. Four days later, it was planned, Munda would be attacked through Roviana Lagoon and over Munda Bar, while Bairoko would be struck either from the Russells or by a force hitting overland from Roviana Lagoon. This maneuver would block reinforcements for the airfield. Capture of Munda would then trigger the next shore-to-shore jump to Kolombangara, the last phase of Operation TOENAILS.

These were the first plans. ComSoPac orders stressed their successful completion with a minimum of forces. It could not be foreseen at the initial planning conferences that, before Munda could be captured and the New Georgia Group occupied, elements of four infantry divisions would be committed and extensive changes in plans would be required. The problems mounted early. Laiana Beach on Roviana Lagoon east of Munda was heavily defended, although the best landing area. The channel through Roviana, scouted from canoes, was too shallow for LCMs. The islands near Rendova originally considered for artillery positions were not within effective 105mm howitzer range of Munda airfield. And coastwatcher reports indicated that the enemy—despite Allied efforts—was slipping reinforcements into the Vila-Munda area. Further, a reconnaissance team reported that a strike at Bairoko from Roviana was impossible within the time limits planned.

The solutions plagued Turner's staff. Zanana Beach, about 5,500 yards east of Laiana, was smaller but virtually undefended, the scouts reported. While it would hold only a few landing craft, the Piraka River mouth 1,000 yards farther east could permit beaching of additional boats. Hester decided on Zanana as his landing beach, and Turner gave his approval. Reaching Zanana would be a problem, however. Landing boats would have to slip through narrow, coral-choked Onaiavisi Entrance that threaded between the small offshore islands and then follow a twisting channel to the beaches. The selection of Zanana was based as much on its undefended nature as on its capability of being reached by LCMs. It had, however, one apparent drawback. The attacking troops would be unloaded at a considerable distance from their objective. (See Map 5.)

The planning problems were unexpectedly magnified by an emergency. An urgent call for assistance by Coastwatcher Kennedy at Segi resulted in the premature commitment of two Marine raider companies and two companies from the 103d RCT on 21 June. Admiral Turner made the decision. The speedup in schedule upset previous planning, but it was deemed necessary. It required a change in basic

strategy, a shuffling of troops, a change in the transport plans—and some around-the-clock supply duty by the Marine 4th Base Depot in the Russells—but the decision retained possession of Segi for the Allies until the actual New Georgia invasion.[22]

General Hester, who would direct the operations ashore, continually faced thorny problems. To deal with the mounting complexities, he delegated the planning for the Rendova landings to a 43d Division staff headed by his assistant division commander, Brigadier General Leonard F. Wing. A second staff, the NGOF staff, completed the New Georgia attack planning. Hester retained command of both staffs. The final assault plans evolved from the best solutions to a multiplicity of problems. In the scheme of maneuver, part of the Western Force would hit at Munda through Onaiavisi Entrance with two regiments landing at Zanana and pivoting to the west in an overland attack with one flank resting on the lagoon. This force, designated the Southern Landing Force, would be commanded initially by General Wing.

Liversedge's raiders—now titled the Northern Landing Group—would strike directly at Bairoko from Kula Gulf. This would be coordinated with the landings at Zanana and would block reinforcements to Munda. It was not expected that the Munda forces would attempt to reinforce the Bairoko defenders. This half of a pincer movement faced one handicap; the area was not as well scouted as that of Roviana Lagoon. The Hester plan of attack envisioned a short campaign during which the Japanese would be caught between a hammering force from the south and a holding force in the north. Thus, the enemy would be pushed back towards an area where, ringed by Allied troops, they could be pounded into submission by aircraft and Rendova-based artillery. To insure success, additional 43d Division artillery (the 192d and the 103d Field Artillery Battalions) was added to the NGOF.

D-Day assignments were set. Troops of the 172d Infantry would seize two small islands guarding the approaches to Rendova and then establish a beachhead on Rendova itself. Through the secured passage, Hester and Wing would funnel the rest of the landing force, with the 103d Infantry given the task of expanding the beachhead and mopping up the island, reported to be lightly defended. Simultaneously, two companies of the 169th Infantry would land on islets flanking Onaiavisi Entrance and a detachment of Fiji guerrillas and Marine raiders would mark the channel with buoys to Zanana Beach and the nearby Piraka River. Four days later, the 172d Infantry would make the Rendova-Zanana move and establish a beachhead for the landing the following day of the 169th Infantry from the Russells. The 169th was to move inland to the north of the 172d, then face to the west. This would put two regiments abreast, ready to launch an attack from a line of departure along the Barike River, some 2,000 yards closer to Munda. Artillery on the offshore islands and Rendova would support the attack. Five days later, it was planned, the 3d Battalion of the 103d Infantry and the eight tanks of the Marine 9th Defense Battalion would cross Munda bar for the final, direct assault on Munda airfield.

[22] The capture of Segi is related in the following chapter.

MARINE CORPS SUPPORT [23]

Marine units which were to participate in the seizure of Munda were fulfilling a number of tasks and training missions prior to the operation. The actual job of pushing the enemy from New Georgia belonged mainly to General Hester's 43d Division; contributions to the campaign by the Marine Corps would be in support of the main effort. The 9th Defense Battalion was given a dual mission of making enemy positions on Munda untenable by artillery fire and of providing antiaircraft protection for the landing forces. The 1st Marine Raider Regiment, at first intended as a reserve element, was thrust into an active role with its mission of wedging a block on Dragons Peninsula between the Munda defenders and reinforcements at Bairoko Harbor.

Colonel Liversedge's raiders were a cocky, confident group which prided itself on being a volunteer unit within a volunteer Corps. Carrying only 60mm mortars and light machine guns as supporting weapons, each battalion was generally organized with four rifle companies, an engineer and demolition platoon, and a headquarters company. Smaller in authorized strength than the regular Marine infantry battalion, the actual strength of the raider battalions varied between 700 and 950. Specially trained for jungle fighting, amphibious raids, and behind-the-lines guerrilla action, the raiders had participated in the Tulagi assault, a hit-and-run raid at Makin Island in the Gilberts, the defense of Midway, and jungle warfare on Guadalcanal. These Marines thus brought to the New Georgia campaign considerable combat experience plus the conviction that the fighting ahead would follow no orderly lines of battle. The vexing problems presented by the jungle in maintaining communications and supply would demand the utmost in courage, ingenuity, and stamina; but the raiders felt up to the task. They were firm in the belief that these difficulties, inextricably complicated by the terrain and enervating climate, could be overcome by their tough physical training, combat experience, and high morale.

At the time of consolidation of the four battalions under one command on 15 March 1943, the raiders were scattered throughout the South Pacific with regimental headquarters and the 2d and 4th Battalions at Espiritu Santo, the 1st at Noumea, and the 3d in the Russells. Upon assignment to the TOENAILS operation, the regiment (less the 2d and 3d Battalions) moved to Guadalcanal, arriving there the first week in June. Here the raiders had only a few days to go over their orders, iron out organizational kinks, and practice as a single unit before the 4th Battalion was abruptly assigned to Kennedy's assistance.

[23] Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: 1st MarRdrRegt WarD 15Mar–30Sep43, dtd 6Oct43; 9th DefBn RecofOps 1–28Jun43, dtd 3Oct43; 9th DefBn Rept on AA Ops 18Jun–18Sep43, hereafter *9th DefBn AA Ops;* 9th DefBn NarrativeHist 1Feb42–14Apr44, dtd 2May44; 4th BaseDep OrgHist 1Apr–31Jul43, dtd 24Aug43; HistSec G–2, SoPacBaseComd, MS Hist of the New Georgia Campaign, 2 vols., *c.* 1947 (OCMH), hereafter *New Georgia Campaign;* LtCol Wilbur J. McNenney, Observers Rept New Georgia Ops to CG, IMAC, dtd 17Jul43; LtCol Wright C. Taylor ltr to CMC, dtd 4Mar52; Col Archie E. O'Neil ltr to CMC, *c.* 1Mar51; LtCol Robert C. Hiatt ltr to CMC, *c.* 26Feb52; Maj Cyril E. Emrich ltr to CO, 10th DefBn, dtd 1Jul43; Maj John L. Zimmerman, *The Guadalcanal Campaign* (Washington: HistDiv, HQMC, 1949); Rentz, *Marines in the Central Solomons;* Sherrod, *MarAirHist.*

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The 9th Defense Battalion commanded by Lieutenant Colonel William J. Scheyer, had particular reason to be proud of its assignment in the TOENAILS operation. With a quick conversion of its seacoast batteries to field artillery units, the 9th would be in an offensive role against the Japanese at Munda and the prospect pleased the entire battalion. One of 14 such highly specialized defense forces scattered from Cuba to New Zealand, the 9th was providing antiaircraft protection for Guadalcanal forces when picked for the New Georgia offensive. Activated early in 1942, the 9th trained extensively in Cuba before arriving at Guadalcanal on 30 November 1942. The battalion was in defensive action almost immediately, and its 90mm batteries bagged a total of 12 enemy aircraft in the following months.

Organizational changes had to be made, however, to get the unit ready for its part in the capture of Munda. In 21 days, the seacoast batteries, augmented by 145 new men, were trained in field artillery fire direction methods and had test-fired newly arrived 155mm pieces. The change from seacoast sights to field artillery sights and different fire commands was only part of the problem, though. As one battalion officer reported:

> Our problem was not one of training but one of obtaining the necessary equipment and ammunition so that a relative calibration could be fired to obtain some idea as to the relative velocity errors of the new weapons in order to mass their fires. We were plagued throughout the operation with this equipment and ammunition problem. When the ammunition did arrive from Noumea, there were 19 different powder lots in a shipment of 25 rounds. Obviously, calibrations could not be conducted with propellents of different powder lots and about all that was accomplished was test firing of the weapons so that the men could be familiar with them.[24]

The battalion, with an assist from its relieving Army unit, the 70th Coast Artillery (Antiaircraft) Battalion, picked up new 90mm antiaircraft guns equipped with power rammers and remote control equipment in exchange for the old guns which were left in position. In addition, power-operated mounts were placed on spare 20mm guns, increasing speed and efficiency over the standard mounts which were pedal-operated. The 9th also borrowed 12 amphibian tractors from the 3d Marine Division, and Griswold's XIV Corps exchanged new trucks and jeeps for old. As the 9th readied itself for its mission, its armament included a platoon of 8 light tanks, 8 155mm guns, 12 90mm guns, 16 40mm guns, 28 20mm guns, and 35 .50 caliber antiaircraft machine guns.

Relieved of its defensive role on Guadalcanal on 17 June, the battalion spent the remaining time in familiarization firing of weapons, gun drills which included reconnaissance, selection, and occupation of positions, and practice landings. Gunners and loaders from the antiaircraft batteries turned riflemen to give the tankmen practice in tank-infantry tactics. The amphibian tractors were test-loaded until a loading arrangement was obtained which would provide enough 40mm, 20mm, and .50 caliber ammunition for all three types of antiaircraft guns to go into action immediately upon landing. The 9th also took advantage of a liberal interpretation of its orders to get more ammunition for the 90mm batteries. Loading orders specified three units of fire were to be carried. Since an Army unit of fire for the 90mm guns was 125 rounds and a Marine unit of

[24] Hiatt ltr, *op. cit.*

fire 300 rounds, the 9th interpreted the orders to mean Marine Corps units of fire and carried the extra ammunition. Despite some misdirected trucks and some confusion as to unmarked dock areas, the eager 9th was aboard ship and waiting hours before the scheduled departure.[25]

In time, elements of the 10th and the 11th Defense Battalions would be called upon to augment the 9th in its mission at Rendova and Munda, but until placed on alert, they continued to assist in the defense of Guadalcanal and the Russells. A fourth unit, the 4th Defense Battalion, which had been in the New Hebrides before going to New Zealand, was soon to be recalled to Guadalcanal for participation in the final phase of the campaign in the Central Solomons. The employment of these battalions as offensive elements instead of defense forces illustrated the change in the character of the war.

Although not carried on the orders as part of the New Georgia Occupation Force, another Marine Corps element was to provide invaluable support to the operation. This was the 4th Base Depot, a supply organization which had been activated at Noumea on 1 April 1943 as the direct result of a logistics logjam in the South Pacific. Prior to the New Georgia operation, the Army had responsibility for unloading all supplies, but as the size of forces in the area grew, the inadequate and limited facilities and the understaffed corps of laborers in the Pacific were strained to maintain a smooth and uninterrupted flow of necessary supplies. Despite the Army's best efforts, the result was a confused backlog of equipment and supplies at New Caledonia and Guadalcanal which almost sidelined the New Georgia operation.

Shipping to the lower Solomons, except for vital aircraft engines and spare parts, motor transport spare parts, rations, and medical supplies, was curtailed for a time, and all other goods were routed to Noumea for transshipping to Guadalcanal on call. Supplies necessary for the New Georgia operation were then plucked from the stockpiles at Noumea and assembled at Guadalcanal. Other war materials were directed to the Southwest Pacific forces, added to the growing dumps in the New Hebrides, or stored in New Zealand.

The 4th Base Depot, under the command of Colonel George F. Stockes, and with personnel gleaned from the 1st, 2d, and 3d Base Depots and the Marine 12th Replacement Battalion, moved with 61 officers and 1,367 men to Guadalcanal to help relieve the congestion. Placed under the command of the XIV Corps, it was ordered by Griswold to relieve the service elements of the 43d Infantry Division in the Russells, and to bring order out of the general confusion. The 4th Base Depot was then to receive and store all supplies for the New Georgia operation and the Russells garrison; maintain a 60-day level of supplies for TOENAILS forces; and handle and load aboard ships all supplies as called for by the 43d Division and supporting troops on New Georgia.

The assignment was insurance that logistical problems would not slow the attack. It was a timely move. Shortly after the 4th Base Depot began working on the jumbled stockpiles of material, the initial phase of TOENAILS began with the Segi Plantation occupation, and the Marines were called upon for supply as-

[25] Emrich ltr, *op. cit.* In order to avoid similar misunderstandings and to facilitate logistical planning, Nimitz' headquarters subsequently published a CinCPac order listing units of fire for all types of weapons.

sistance. By the time the main operations started at Rendova, the depot had the necessary material ready for forward movement, and in the following months it funneled a steady stream of lumber, cement, ammunition, rations (including fresh fruit and meats), clothing, tires, spare parts, gasoline, lubricants, sand bags, tents, engineer equipment, post exchange items, and many other types of supplies into New Georgia.

For Marine Corps aviation units, establishment of an exact date for the start of the New Georgia campaign is difficult. The conflict for air superiority was constant and continuing, not boundaried by beachheads or D-Days. The struggle for undisputed possession of the lower Solomons phased directly into the New Georgia campaign, and it is hard to differentiate between the squadrons which supported the consolidation of the Solomons and those which directly took part in the capture of Munda airfield. In any event, most Marine squadrons then based at Guadalcanal or in the Russells participated in both campaigns, either in part or in whole.

Rear Admiral Marc A. Mitscher, as ComAirSols, had an Allied force of 627 planes with which to support operations in the Central Solomons. It was a composite of Marine, Army, Navy, and New Zealand aircraft, and included 290 fighters, 94 scout bombers, 75 torpedo bombers, 48 heavy bombers, 26 medium bombers, 30 flying boats, 24 seaplanes, and a miscellany of 40 search, rescue, and transport planes.[26]

Although plans for garrisoning New Georgia were still in the tentative stage, a number of Marine squadrons were to be based at Munda airfield following its capture and would become an integral part of the New Georgia Air Force. Prior to the campaign, however, this term was a paper designation for a forward echelon of the 2d Marine Aircraft Wing, attached to the NGOF; its commanding officer, General Mulcahy, would "exercise operational control of aircraft in flight assigned to air cover and support missions in the New Georgia area."[27] Requests for air support strikes would be made to liaison parties with each landing force, and General Mulcahy as ComAir New Georgia would approve, disapprove, or modify. It was, in effect, a fighter-bomber direction center for both air defense and direct support missions. Control of the assigned aircraft would pass to ComAir New Georgia when the planes took off from their home fields.

Available for such tactical air support missions as would be assigned them in the months ahead were seven Marine fighter and four scout bomber squadrons, backed up by three utility squadrons and a photo reconnaissance detachment. For the most part, though, the role of the Marine squadrons in the seizure of Munda is part of the bigger story of how Allied air strength reduced the Japanese stronghold at Rabaul to impotency. This will be related in Part V of this volume.[28]

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[26] ComAirPac to ComSoPac ltr ser 00517 of 4Jun43, quoted in *New Georgia Campaign*, p. 60.

[27] NGOF FO No. 1, *op. cit.*

[28] Stationed in the Solomons in June 1943 were VMF–112, –121, –122, –123, –124, –213, and –221, with several more squadrons due to arrive as replacements later; VMSB–132, –143, –144, and –234; VMJ–152, –153, and –253; and a photographic detachment from VMD–154.

ELKTON Underway

WOODLARK-KIRIWINA [1]

The planned moves of the Allied forces in the Central Solomons—Papuan area in the summer of 1943 resembled pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Each operation in itself did not represent a serious threat to the enemy's defense line, but, as part of a bigger picture, each was important and contributed to the success of all. The pieces fitting together formed a pattern of coordinated, steady advance.

D-Day (30 June) for ELKTON was practically a planning date only. ComSoPac operations began at Segi on 21 June; and Woodlark-Kiriwina landings two days later opened the action by Southwest Pacific forces, well in advance of the date set. The near-concurrent start was a coincidence; a two-pronged attack by Halsey and MacArthur had been postponed three times before 30 June as a mutual D-Day was accepted. A number of factors forced the delay, chief among which was the scarcity of amphibious troops required by the missions of ELKTON. The 43d Division was the early choice as the New Georgia assault force, and that unit was scheduled for extensive ship-to-shore training prior to the operation. In the Southwest Pacific, an entire new command —the VII Amphibious Force (VII PhibFor)—was activated to assemble and train the needed troops.

Marine Corps divisions, whose specialty was such amphibious movements, were not available for assignment to CARTWHEEL operations. Two divisions were undergoing rehabilitation and training; a third was not yet combat-ready; and a fourth was still forming in the States. The result was that Marine raider and defense battalions were at a high premium to augment available Army units for the twin operations of TOENAILS in New Georgia and CHRONICLE at Woodlark-Kiriwina.

A tentative lineup of forces for the planned attacks was made in April. Admiral Halsey made a quick trip to Brisbane on the 18th to meet the general under whom he would be operating, and he and MacArthur quickly came to an agreement based upon mutual respect. MacArthur

[1] Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: VII PhibFor, SWPA, ComdHist 10Jan43–23Dec45, n.d.; MIS, WD, Survey of North East New Guinea and Papua (S30–678), dtd 15Jul43; 12th DefBn WarD, 30Jun–31Jul43, dtd 2Aug43; OCE, USAFPac, *Airfield and Base Development—Engineers in the South West Pacific, 1941–1945*, v. VI (Washington, 1951), *Engineer Supply—Engineers in the South West Pacific, 1941–1945*, v. VII (Washington, 1950), and *Critique—Engineers in the South West Pacific, 1941–1945*, v. VIII (Washington, 1950); Jeter A. Isely and Philip A. Crowl, *The U.S. Marines and Amphibious War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), hereafter Isely and Crowl, *Marines and Amphibious War;* George C. Kenney, *General Kenney Reports* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1949), hereafter Kenney, *Reports*; Morison, *Breaking the Bismarcks Barrier*; Halsey and Bryan, *Halsey's Story*.

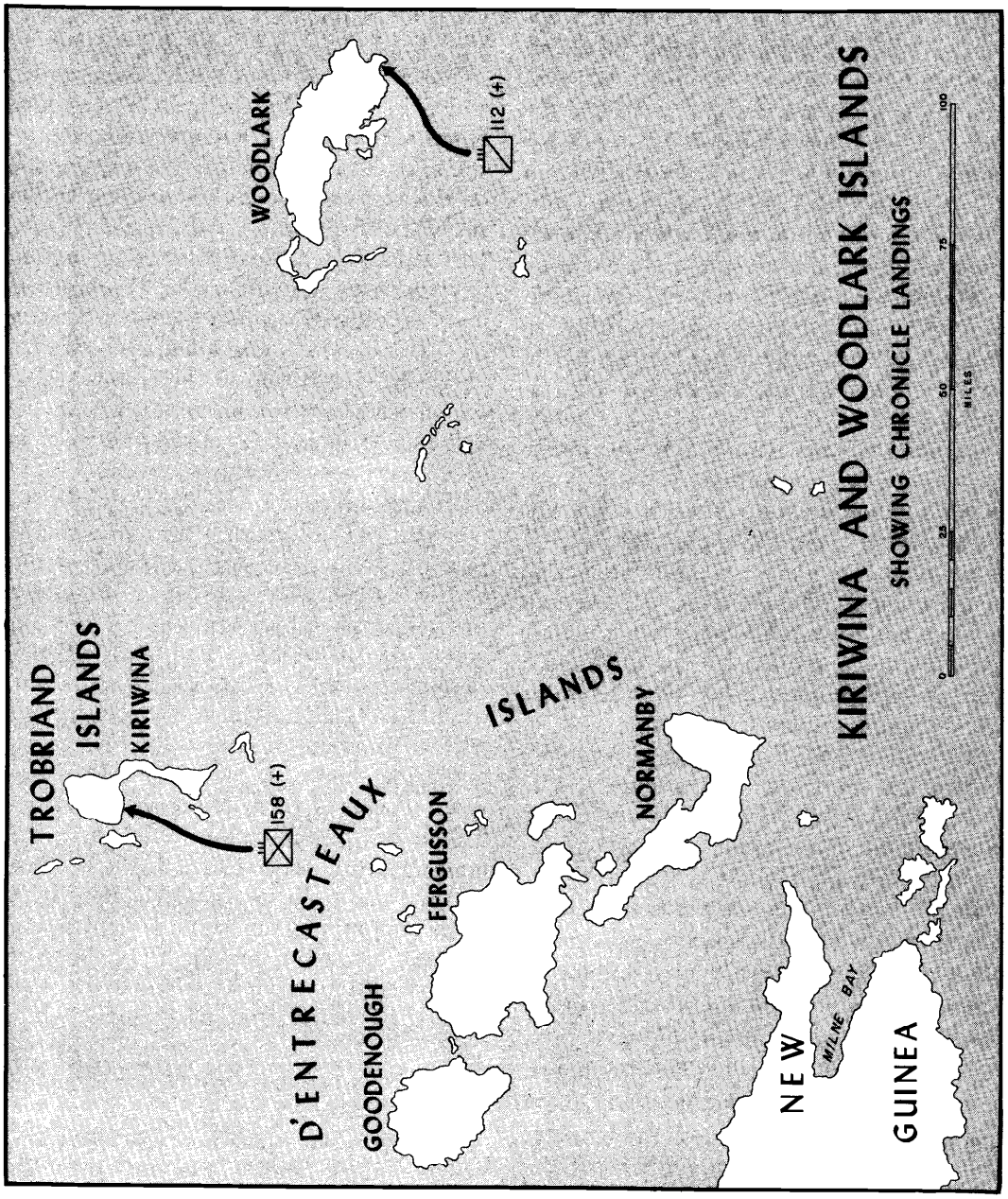
needed some help in his amphibious venture; Halsey offered it. He ordered his Noumea headquarters to assign the 20th NCB (Acorn 5) to Brisbane and to select one combat-ready RCT plus one Marine defense battalion for further transfer to SWPA. Assignment of the Marine unit was easy; the 12th Defense Battalion had arrived in Pearl Harbor in early January and was awaiting further transfer. But the many needs of the expanding South Pacific defense area had left few Army regiments without active assignments. It was finally decided, after a musical-chair shuffle of troops, that the 112th Cavalry (dismounted) on New Caledonia would join the 12th Defense Battalion, Acorn 5, and other naval base and service units in a transfer to SWPA. Here they would serve as the Woodlark defense force. Lieutenant General Walter Krueger's Sixth Army troops would garrison Kiriwina.

MacArthur's targets, Woodlark and Kiriwina Islands, lay in the Coral Sea off the southeastern shore of New Guinea, about 60 miles north and east of the D'Entrecasteaux Islands. Kiriwina, in the Trobriand Group, is about 125 miles directly south of New Britain; Woodlark is about 200 miles southwest of Bougainville. Their designation as future airfield sites to support operations in both New Guinea and the Solomons sent Army engineers scrambling over them to obtain beach and terrain information to supplement native reports and aerial photography. The reconnaissance teams were wary, but prior information was correct—the Japanese had not occupied the islands. (See Map 2.)

Kiriwina, shaped like a bent toadstool, was ringed by an extensive coral reef broken by only a few narrow openings for shallow-draft boats. Twenty-five miles in length, and from two to eight miles wide, the island held about 7,500 natives, had a sub-surface coral base which would support an airstrip, and had many good trails for jeep roads. But there were no good beaches. Woodlark, about 100 miles southeast of Kiriwina, was nearly 44 miles long and from 10 to 20 miles in width. Curved in shape, it held a number of good anchorages tucked within the protected shorter arc. The beaches, however, ran inland only a few hundred yards before bumping into a coral cliff. Sparsely settled, Woodlark was covered with a thick jungle growth and dotted with large outcroppings of coral.

Together, these islands could provide bases for fighter escorts of Lieutenant General George C. Kenney's Allied Air Forces hitting at New Guinea, New Britain, and New Ireland, and for SoPac strikes against the Northern Solomons in subsequent operations. Their capture, the JCS had decided earlier, would provide the first test of the newly formed VII Amphibious Force.

This force had come into being under the direction of Rear Admiral Daniel E. Barbey, who opened his headquarters at Brisbane in mid-January 1943. By April, it was apparent that the task of forming and training an amphibious force was far more difficult than had been supposed at first. An assortment of United States and Australian ships formed the transport division, and Sixth Army troops, recuperating from the hard fighting in the Buna-Gona campaign, were trained in amphibious operations. Practice landings which were sandwiched between troop lifts to New Guinea were never realistic. Few troops, ships, or pieces of heavy


TROBRIAND ISLANDS
KIRIWINA
158 (+)
D'ENTRECASTEAUX ISLANDS
GOODENOUGH
FERGUSSON
NORMANBY
WOODLARK
112 (+)
KIRIWINA AND WOODLARK ISLANDS
SHOWING CHRONICLE LANDINGS
0 25 50 75 100
MILES
NEW GUINEA
MILNE BAY
MAP 2
R.F. STIBIL

equipment could be spared from that operation for practice purposes. With an operational deadline pressing, Admiral Barbey scoured the Southwest Pacific for more ships. Some new LSTs were assigned him; others he borrowed from ComSoPac. The USS *Rigel*, a repair ship with none of the desired command facilities, was pressed into service as a flagship.

MacArthur, in his first conference with Halsey, had tentatively set 15 May as D-Day for the combined operation. Late in April, MacArthur announced that he could not meet this date and directed its postponement to 1 June. It was later changed to 15 June as logistical and shipping problems piled up in the Pacific. On 26 May, the general proposed the 30th of June as D-Day and requested ComSoPac concurrence. This date, MacArthur pointed out, would also coincide with landings by other SWPA forces at Nassau Bay on New Guinea, about 10 miles south of Salamaua. Halsey agreed.

The CHRONICLE forces assembled, Kiriwina's garrison (code-named BY-PRODUCT) at Milne Bay on New Guinea and Woodlark's garrison (code-named LEATHERBACK) at Townsville, Australia. On 21 June, nine days ahead of schedule, the advance echelon of the 112th Cavalry, with heavy bulldozers and operators from the 20th NCB, set off for Woodlark. The next night, troops and equipment were landed. The speedup resulted because the troops were ready, there would be no enemy to oppose the landing, and Barbey's transports would need the extra time to carry two landing forces to their destinations. Kiriwina's advance echelon was landed on the nights of the 23d and the 25th, the last group landing across the reef over a coral causeway 300 yards long and 7 feet high which had been built by combat engineers and natives.

The main landing of the Kiriwina force, which included the 158th RCT, the 46th Engineer Combat Company, and antiaircraft artillery and service troops, was made on the night of the 29th according to the ELKTON schedule. Additional Woodlark advance echelons had been landed on the nights of the 25th and 26th, with the main landing of support elements coming on the 30th, also as scheduled. Woodlark's garrison, in addition to the troops transferred from ComSoPac, included the 404th Engineer Combat Company as well as other service and ordnance troops.

Enemy opposition was neither expected nor received, although a fighter cover of General Kenney's forces provided assurance of success. The landings at Woodlark proceeded smoothly throughout. With a better area in which to land and with experience gained in a last-minute rehearsal, the LEATHERBACK force went ashore with a minimum of effort. The Kiriwina operation, however, left much to be desired. Lack of prior training and insufficient equipment, complicated by poor landing areas, contributed to the confusion. In addition, the island's coral circlet made resupply of the island difficult. Regardless of these handicaps, VII PhibFor carried 12,100 troops to Woodlark and 4,700 to Kiriwina without a casualty, while a total of 42,900 tons of supplies and equipment were unloaded without loss of a ship or landing boat.

For the Marine 12th Defense Battalion, the Woodlark landing was anticlimactic. Organized in San Diego in August 1942 under the command of Colonel William H. Harrison, the battalion trained extensively and test-fired all its armament before moving to Pearl Harbor and further combat

training. The battalion joined the LEATHERBACK force in Australia prior to the operation. Two 90mm antiaircraft batteries went ashore from LCIs on 30 June and the remaining batteries and groups followed them ashore during the next 12 days. The first two 90mm batteries were ready to fire by 1300 on 1 July, and the other units were in firing positions in equally short order once ashore. But the opportunity for combat firing seldom came. It was not until 27 July that a solitary Japanese plane, after making several false attempts, hurried over Woodlark to drop five small bombs. There was no damage, and the plane escaped. After that, only occasional alerts were noted in the 12th Defense Battalion's log. Kiriwina, however, was bombed several times during construction with some damage to equipment and installations and some casualties to the BY-PRODUCT troops.

Construction of the airstrip on Woodlark progressed speedily; the Kiriwina field was slowed by heavy rains and the fact that much of the heavy equipment had seen too much prior service and was deadlined for repair within a few days. On 14 July, Woodlark was declared operational with a strip 150 feet wide and 3,000 feet long available. The first fighter squadron from South Pacific forces arrived on 23 July. The runway at Kiriwina was operational in late July, and on 18 August, a Fifth Air Force fighter squadron arrived on station. Kiriwina staged its first strike against enemy forces on New Guinea in late August, and later was a base for a Fifth Air Force fighter group.

No Allied strike was ever staged from Woodlark's strip, and South Pacific aircraft commanders lost interest almost as soon as it was completed. In fact, after the capture of Munda, Woodlark was turned over to the Fifth Air Force. Kiriwina remained for a time as a fighter plane base, but later the war moved northward toward the Bismarck Archipelago and the Admiralties and left both fields far behind. However, the Woodlark-Kiriwina operation gave needed experience to a new amphibious force and provided a protective buffer to the New Georgia operation which was concurrently underway.

OCCUPATION OF SEGI AND SEIZURE OF VIRU [2]

The man who was to call the shots in the defense of Munda airfield unknowingly tripped the alarm which set the ELKTON plans into action. Major General Sasaki, in his area headquarters at Kolombangara, was irked at Coastwatcher Kennedy at Segi Plantation near Viru Harbor, and—after months of tolerating Kennedy's presence—determined to get rid of him. Sasaki had good reasons: Kennedy's station was the center of resistance on New Georgia, and his air raid warning activities had contributed greatly to the lack of success of Japanese strikes against Guadalcanal. On 17 June, Sasaki sent re-

[2] Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: *New Georgia Campaign;* TF 31 ltr to holders of EasternFor LoadingO 1–43, dtd 22Jun43; TG 31–3 OpO AL 10–43, dtd 21Jun43; TG 31.3 LoadingOs 1–4, dtd 16Jun–7Jul43; 4th RdrBn SAR 10Jun–10Jul43, dtd 14Sep43; 4th RdrBn WarD, 26Feb–31Aug43, hereafter *4th RdrBn WarD; SE Area NavOps–II; Seventeenth Army Ops–I;* Col Michael S. Currin ltr to CMC, dtd 8Feb51; LtCol Anthony Walker ltr to CMC, dtd 23Feb51; Batterton, "You Fight by the Book;" Feldt, *The Coastwatchers;* ONI, *Combat Narratives, Solomon Islands Campaign: X—Operations in the New Georgia, 21Jun–5Aug43* (Washington, 1944), hereafter ONI, *Combat Narratives X;* Rentz, *Marines in the Central Solomons.*

inforcements to the Viru Harbor garrison with orders " to pacify that area." [3] (See Map 3.)

Prior to Sasaki's decision to reinforce Viru, Segi Plantation on the southeast coast of New Georgia had been important only to the Allies. Segi was an ideal entryway into the island. Amphibious patrols had landed here, and the plantation had been a haven for many downed aviators. For the new advance, the Allies planned to build an airstrip here, but Kennedy reported on 18 June that he would not be able to hold this position if he did not get help in a hurry. The Japanese were closing in on him.

Admiral Turner ordered an immediate occupation of Segi. If Kennedy said he needed help, he was to be taken at his word. This determined New Zealander, the former District Officer for Santa Isabel Island across The Slot from New Georgia, was no alarmist. He had moved to Segi Point after the Japanese occupied the Solomons and there he had been completely surrounded by enemy garrisons. But he had held on, and his position 160 miles northwest of Lunga Point had fitted in admirably with the system of air raid warnings. His reports on Japanese flights meant that their arrival over Guadalcanal could be forecast within a minute or two. Kennedy had told the natives of New Georgia that Britain was not going to give up these islands, and the success of the Allies at Guadalcanal and Tulagi gave convincing evidence of this. He continued to live almost openly in the plantation house at Segi. There were no trails leading to his station, and the approach along the beach could be watched. But Kennedy and his natives had been forced to ambush Japanese parties to keep the the position secret. Some enemy had escaped Kennedy's attacks, however, and Sasaki had issued the order which made Kennedy the most wanted man on New Georgia.

Already at Viru Harbor was the *4th Company* of the *1st Battalion, 229th Regiment*, plus a few assorted naval personnel from the *Kure 6th* and *Yokosuka 7th SNLF*, a 3-inch coastal gun, four 80mm guns, eight dual-purpose guns, and a varying number of landing craft. To augment the Viru garrison, Major Masao Hara was to take another infantry company and a machine gun platoon from his *1st Battalion* and comb southeastern New Georgia for the coastwatcher's hideout.[4] When this force came close, Kennedy faded into the hills and radioed:

> Strong enemy patrol has approached very close, and by their numbers and movement, it is believed they will attack. Urgently suggest force be sent to defend Segi.[5]

The message reached Turner at Koli Point, Guadalcanal, during the night of 18–19 June, and the admiral decided to send a force to Segi at once rather than wait until 30 June, the D-Day established by ELKTON plans. Fortunately, the admiral had combat units ready. The destroyer-transports *Dent*, *Waters*, *Schley*, and *Crosby* were standing by in Guadalcanal waters for the operations against New Georgia, and Lieutenant Colonel Mi-

[3] CIC SoPac Item No. 786, 8th CSNLF Operational Rad and TgOs, translated 17Dec43.

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] 4th RdrBn SAR, *op. cit.*, p. 9. Kennedy had good reason for his suspicions. A diary later taken from the body of Second Lieutenant Harumasa Adachi at Viru Harbor indicated that the Japanese had discovered Kennedy's hideout and that an attack was being planned. ICPOA Item No. 598, Translation of Captured Japanese Document, dtd 6Jul43.

chael S. Currin's 4th Marine Raider Battalion, which included personnel who had been to New Georgia on prelanding reconnaissance missions, was also completely combat-ready. With these ships and men, Turner could mount out a force to protect Kennedy and also thrust a toe in the Central Solomons door that the Japanese were trying to slam shut.

Currin's battalion (less Companies N and Q, scheduled to attack Vangunu Island on 30 June) went on board the *Dent* and *Waters* on 20 June for a night run to Kennedy's aid. This force was followed the next night by Companies A and D of the Army's 103d Infantry Regiment. Initially, these units would defend Segi, and then carry out the planned attack on Viru Harbor on 30 June as scheduled. With the exception of raider Company O, previously detached to duty with Turner's Western Force but now returned to Currin, these units were part of Admiral Fort's Eastern Force and were scheduled for use in this area of New Georgia. Thus the landing at Segi on 21 June, which set off the CARTWHEEL operations, amounted only to stepping up the timetable.

All was not smooth sailing for the *Dent* and *Waters*. The natural obstacles which had contributed to Kennedy's security at Segi Point were hazards for these ships. There is deep, sheltered water off Segi, but the channels to this anchorage were uncharted, dismissed on the charts as "foul ground." There are so many reefs and coral outcroppings in these waters that Vangunu appears to be almost a part of the larger island of New Georgia. There is no suitable route to Segi from the north, and only the natives and a few local pilots were acquainted with the passages to the south. Even with a local pilot sighting on Kennedy's bonfire signal on the beach, the transports scraped bottom and rode over reefs. At 0530 on 21 June, the Marines went over the side and into ships' boats for the landing, and by 1030, all supplies had been brought ashore and the transports were picking their way through the coral heads and reefs for a speedy return to Guadalcanal. Currin immediately established defensive positions and sent out patrols, but there was no contact with the enemy. At 0600 on the following day, the two Army companies plus an airfield survey party from Acorn 7 came ashore from the *Schley* and *Crosby*.

Kennedy was grateful that these troops had come to his rescue, but both his pioneer spirit and his scouting routine were pinched by this population influx. For peace and quiet, and to re-establish a schedule of unrestricted movements for his native scouts, he moved across the narrow channel to Vangunu Island. Currin kept contact with the coastwatcher, and, with natives provided by Kennedy, sent out patrols to determine the most suitable means of approach to Viru Harbor. At the same time, Seabees began converting Segi's uneven and muddy terrain into an airstrip. With bulldozers and power shovels, working at night under floodlights, the men had an airstrip ready for limited operations as a fighter base by 10 July. It was the intentions of ComSoPac to have the field capable of servicing 20 planes an hour at first, and then—by 25 September—of basing about 60 light bombers.[6]

[6] ComSoPac ltr ser 00534, dtd 10Jun43, Subj: "Proposed Master Plan for Construction of Airfields and Seaplane Bases in the South Pacific Area, Guadalcanal Island, Koli Point Section," quoted in *New Georgia Campaign*.

BURIAL CEREMONY *at Viru Harbor honors Marines of the 4th Raider Battalion killed in the first American offensive on New Georgia.* (*USMC 57581*)

155MM GUNS *of the 9th Defense Battalion on board an LCT off Rendova's beach as they move to a new firing position.* (*USMC 60658*)

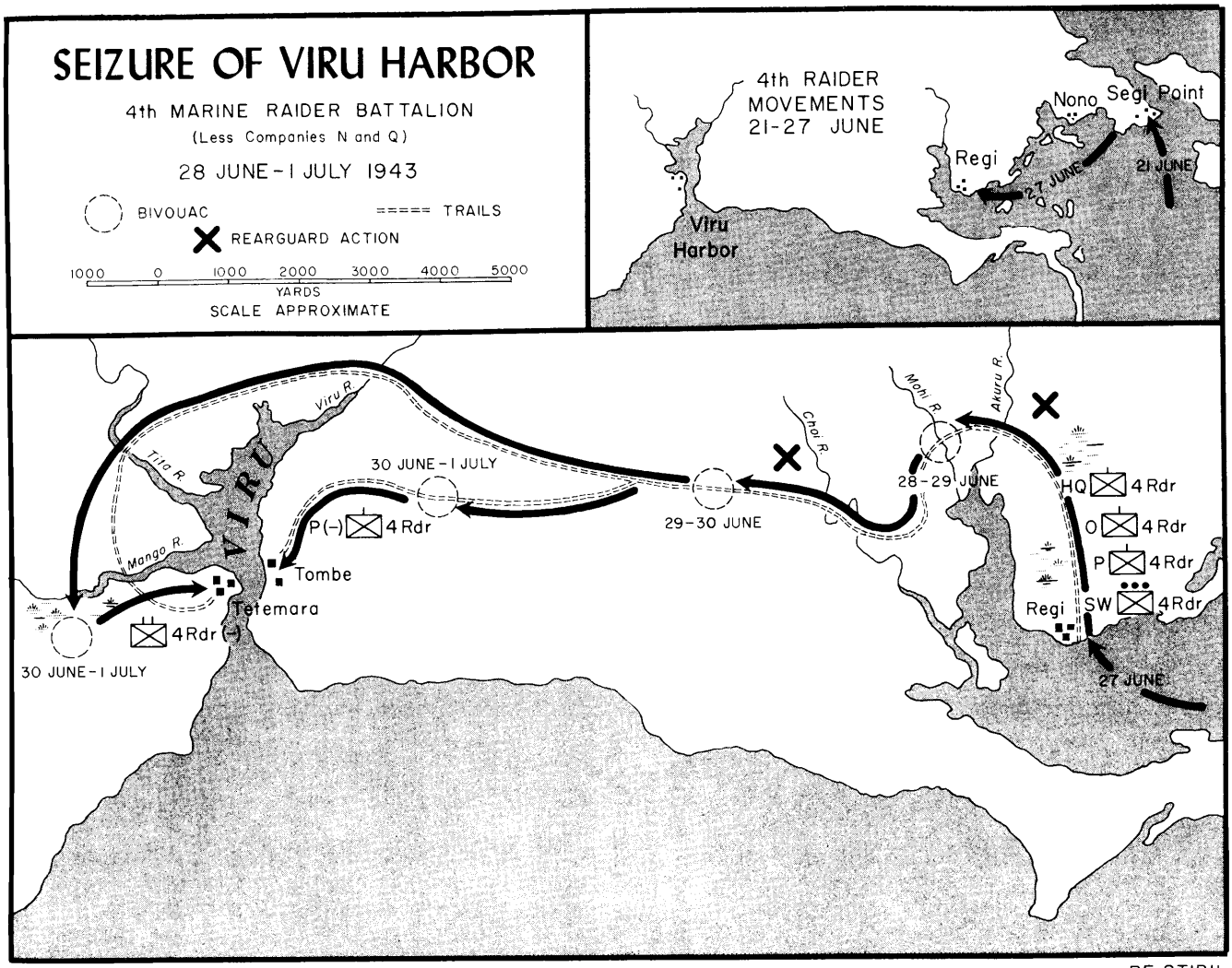
The Allies had plans for Viru Harbor, too. This small, landlocked cove 35 miles from Munda was to be developed into a minor naval base for small craft. The best anchorage on the New Georgia coast, it had an entrance 300 yards wide and 800 yards long, outlined on both sides by coral cliffs. The inner harbor widened, and was fed by three small rivers, the Mango, Tita, and Viru. Previous amphibious patrols had reported the bulk of the Viru defenders to be located on the high headlands on the west side of the harbor at the village Tetemara, with another detachment at Tombe, a village facing Tetemara across the channel. But intelligence reports on the size of the Viru garrison conflicted. Early estimates had ranged from 20 to 100 men; an early-June reconnaissance patrol revised these figures to 200 enemy troops. (See Map 3.)

As Companies A and D of the 103d set up a defense against any further attempts by the Japanese to wipe out Kennedy's station, raider amphibious reconnaissance teams concentrated their attention on finding the most suitable route to Viru. Several times they narrowly missed bumping into Japanese patrols or sentries as the Marines examined a number of small river inlets searching for a beach which would exit to an overland route to the rear of Viru Harbor. While Currin's raiders scouted the area between Segi and the proposed landing site, a member of the staff, Captain Foster C. LaHue, slipped by native canoe through the bay to Hele Islands in Blanche Channel to meet the *Schley* and receive Admiral Fort's orders for the Marines' attack on Viru.

Currin had hoped to land during the night of 27 June at Regi, a village just seven miles from Viru Harbor and considerably west of Segi Plantation. From here his force could move overland to a point east of the Viru River, and there split for attacks down both sides of the inlet to seize the village of Tombe on the east bank and Tetemara on the west. Fort's orders, however, directed only Company P to land on the 28th at Nono village, just a few miles west of Kennedy's station. Currin was then to strike through the jungle to attack Tetemara at 0700 on 30 June, and capture the seacoast guns reported to be in Tetemara. The APDs *Kilty* and *Crosby* would then sail into the harbor and put ashore a 355-man occupation force consisting of Company B of the 103d; one-half of Company D, 20th NCB; Battery E (less one platoon) of the 70th Coast Artillery (Antiaircraft) Battalion; and a naval base unit.

Additional paragraphs of the order gave details concerning the proposed seizure of Wickham Anchorage and the development of Segi Point, but contained no instructions for Company O of the Raiders and that portion of the 4th Raider Battalion headquarters already at Segi.[7] At 1600 that afternoon, Colonel Currin radioed Admiral Fort for permission to land at Regi, to use Company O as well as Company P, and to begin the operation on 27 June rather than 28 June. The raider commander had spent 20 days in this area with amphibious patrols during March and April, and he estimated that even if he started a day earlier he would be hard-pressed to make the D-Day of 30 June at Tombe and Tetemara. An overland trek would mean tortuous trails over ridges, rivers, and swamps, and the hiking distance was considerably more than map

[7] TG 31.3 OpO AL–10, dtd 21Jun43; TF 31 ltr FE25/LI over 0013b, dtd 22Jun43; TG 31.3 LoadingO 1–43, dtd 16Jun43.



MAP 3

RF STIBIL

miles. Besides, the distance in miles was not a realistic indication of the problems the Marines faced in the thick jungle. Currin knew the job would be much too tough for a single company. The enemy situation had changed since Admiral Fort's plans were made, and there was now a larger Japanese force in the Viru area with patrols active at Nono. Currin felt that if his men landed in their rubber boats at Nono they would be "sitting ducks" for the Japanese.[8] Within an hour and a half, Admiral Fort had radioed his approval of the modified plan.

At 2000 on 27 June, the Marines boarded their rubber boats and started paddling the eight miles to Regi, Currin and his staff leading the way in two large Melanesian war canoes. As one Marine described the trip:

> It was a weird moonless night with black rubber boats on black water slipping silently through the many islands of Panga Bay. The trip was uneventful except for one scare. It came just before reaching Regi, while lying offshore waiting for word from native scouts who had gone ahead to make certain no Japanese were in the village. Due to the sudden appearance of a half moon which began to cast a sickly reflection, a small island appeared to be an enemy destroyer.[9]

The scouts came back with an "all clear," and, by 0100, all hands were ashore, and the rubber boats were being towed back to Segi by natives in the war canoes. At dawn, the battalion followed the scouts into the jungle with Company O in the advance guard followed by the headquarters group, and with Company P furnishing the rear guard.

There were many signs of Japanese patrols, but they indicated small scouting parties rather than forces large enough to offer determined opposition. Currin instructed his Marines to meet Japanese harassment with forces no larger than absolutely necessary so that the main column could continue to advance. The Marines would have to fight against time if they were to reach Viru Harbor on schedule and silence the Japanese coastal guns before Admiral Fort's landing forces entered the harbor.

The Marines' battle against the New Georgia jungle began just outside Regi where the force encountered a mangrove swamp two miles wide. There was no suitable way to skirt this obstacle, so the column struck out through it. The first enemy contact was a five-man patrol that came in off a side trail and apparently surprised itself as well as the Marines by stumbling into the rear party of the raider battalion. The 3d Platoon of Company P killed four of these men in a brief skirmish before resuming the march with the rest of the column. At 1115 another enemy group hit the rear guard, and five Marines at the end of the column were cut off from the main body as Company P drove these Japanese off with rifle and machine gun fire. The five men, evading the Japanese but unable to catch up with the column, returned to the landing site and paddled back to Segi in a native canoe they found on the beach.

In all, the force made about six miles the first day. The terrain grew more difficult as the Marines moved deeper inland, and the advance became more of an up-and-down climb than a march. The raiders bivouacked in a tight perimeter, ate their K rations, and huddled under their ponchos throughout the rainy night. Realizing that the slow going would keep him from making his assault on schedule,

[8] *Currin ltr.*

[9] Batterton, "You Fight by the Book," p. 16.

Currin sent two native runners back to Segi with a message for Admiral Fort that the raiders would be a day late in reaching Viru. Kennedy had trouble contacting the Russell Islands, and when this message got through, the landing force was already underway toward Viru Harbor.

On the second day, Currin's force covered seven miles of the difficult terrain, and was forced to make three crossings of the meandering Choi River, now swollen and swift from the heavy tropical rains. At about 1400, just as the rear guard completed its first crossing of the Choi, it drew fire from 30 to 40 Japanese in positions on the right flank of the advance. Captain Anthony Walker, commanding Company P, sent First Lieutenant Devillo W. Brown with a reinforced platoon of 60 men to deal with this enemy force. The Marines located the enemy dug in on the crest of a hill some 300 yards from the trail. The raiders wasted no time. With one squad in position for covering fire, the other two squads went up the ridge by infiltration, firing as they climbed. Eighteen enemy dead were found, but five raiders had been killed and another wounded in the attack.

Burying their dead and carrying the wounded man, Brown's men pushed on to catch Currin's column. The battalion crossed the Choi River again, skirted a large swamp, and then halted for the night just after crossing the Choi for the third time. There Lieutenant Brown and his platoon rejoined the battalion. Colonel Currin tried to report his position to Guadalcanal, but his radio failed him. The battalion commander could only hope that the message he had sent via runner and Kennedy during the previous night would keep the transports from sailing into range of the enemy's 3-inch coastal gun before the raiders could get to Viru and silence that weapon.

As Currin's force moved out on the morning of 30 June with a full day's march remaining between it and its objective, Commander Stanley Leith's Viru Occupation Unit in the *Hopkins*, *Kilty*, and *Crosby* edged toward Viru Harbor and the Japanese gun which Currin's force was to have silenced. Leith, however, had received roundabout word that Currin was going to be a day late in his attack at Viru. Remaining close by in case the Marines were in trouble, the APDs at 0730 came within range of the enemy's 3-inch gun, and the shells began splashing all around the ships.

Leith withdrew to the harbor mouth, where he steamed back and forth until 1000. Then, with Admiral Fort's approval, he withdrew from Viru area and the next day put the landing force ashore at Nono. These troops, under the command of Captain Raymond E. Kinch of Company B, 103d Infantry, would go overland to Viru, as Currin was doing. From Viru, Major Hara reported to General Sasaki at Munda Point that he had repulsed an attempted American landing.[10]

Early on 30 June, the raider battalion reached the trail fork from which one route extended south toward Tombe. Currin had planned to send one platoon against Tombe. The enemy opposition of the previous days, however, and the fact

[10] Hara was, it seems, vague as to his orders. Sasaki, with American troops landing at Rendova, had previously ordered Hara to return to Munda. CIC SoPacFor Item No. 702, New Georgia DefOpO "A" No. 11, dtd 30Jun43.

that enemy patrols working the jungle between Viru and Segi Point could reinforce this village more quickly than they could Tetemara, prompted Currin to increase the size of the force attacking the east side of the harbor. Two platoons from Company P (Lieutenants Brown and Robert J. Popelka) with Captain Walker in command were assigned this mission. The attack at Tombe would be made independently of the assault at Tetemara.

Currin moved on toward Tetemara with a smaller force than he had originally intended. For the men with Currin, this day's march was the worst yet. They met no enemy, but by mid-morning had to ford the Viru River and then struggle through mountainous terrain—rugged jungle ridges along the course of the Tita River which they crossed later in the day. Going was slow for the men weighted down with arms, equipment, and ammunition, and there was but an hour of daylight remaining when they came out of the bush on the bank of the Mango River. Fifty yards wide, deep and swift, the Mango was a formidable obstacle. But the Marines clasped hands and moved out, the human chain snaking the force across the river.

Beyond the Mango, the Marines were caught by darkness and a mangrove swamp. Water, knee-to-waist-deep, hiding twisted, snakelike roots under the surface, trapped the raiders. In a matter of minutes, the column was stalled as men fought to keep contact with each other. However, "tree-light" — phosphorescent wood from dead logs and trees—was provided by the native guides and re-established contact. With each man carrying a piece of this dimly glowing wood, and guiding on the piece carried by the man ahead, the column closed up and moved out. Four hours later, the Marines were out of the swamp and facing the last half-mile of steep slope to the rear of Tetemara Village. Weary raiders struggled up the slick and muddy trail, falling exhausted at the top of the ridge after crawling on their hands and knees the last 100 yards of nearly vertical slope.

On the east side of Viru, Walker's force bivouacked a short distance from Tombe, and at 0900 on the morning of 1 July launched its attack. The surprise assault killed 13 Japanese, scattered the remainder of the small garrison, and carried the position at no loss to the raiders. The firing aroused the enemy across the harbor at Tetemara. When they rushed out in the open, they were bombed and strafed by six planes from VMSB–132 and VB–11. The strike had been requested by the air liaison party at Segi and approved by General Mulcahy in his headquarters at Rendova. It was the first strike logged in the new records of ComAir New Georgia.[11]

Currin's force, moving along the high ground overlooking Tetemara, heard the explosions and firing during the air strike, but the jungle screened the planes from view.[12] Fifteen minutes later, Currin attacked the village. With First Lieutenant Raymond L. Luckel's Company O in the lead, the raiders moved down the slope, then fanned out in an attempt to confine the Japanese to an area bordered by the harbor and the sea. Luckel's machine guns were attached to his assault platoons, and with the help of this additional firepower the advance continued slowly. A few out-

[11] ComAirSols StrikeComd WarD, 2Apr–25Jul43; ComAir New Georgia SAR, 29Jun–13Aug43.

[12] *Currin ltr.*

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guard positions were overrun before the Marines were forced to halt under steady fire from the enemy's main line of defense.

Advance was slow and sporadic, with long periods of silence broken abruptly by a series of short, sharp fire fights lasting only a few minutes each. In an hour, the Marines had gained about 100 yards. Deciding that a buildup for an envelopment around his left flank was developing, Luckel committed his 3d Platoon to that flank, and the advance continued. By 1305, the Marines had reached a low crest of ground from which the terrain sloped away toward Tetemara.

The bottled-up enemy, realizing their predicament, began withdrawing toward the northeast with much frantic yelling. Anticipating a *banzai* charge in an attempt to break through the Marine's left flank, Currin dispatched his slim battalion reserve of the 3d Platoon and two sections of machine guns from Company P to the aid of Company O. The reinforcements arrived just in time. In a matter of minutes, the hopeless rush of the enemy was broken, and the Marines began to move forward against spotty resistance. The 3-inch gun was captured, Tetemara occupied, and the few remaining Japanese flushed out of caves and jungle hiding places. Currin's force counted 48 enemy dead, and captured, in addition to the 3-inch gun, the four 80mm guns and eight dual-purpose guns of the Viru garrison, as well as 16 machine guns, food, clothing, ammunition, and small-boat supplies. Eight Marines were killed in the attack.

Even while the fighting was in progress, three LCTs sailed into the harbor with gasoline, oil, and ammunition for the proposed naval base. They remained safely offshore until Tetemara was secured, and then came in to drop their ramps and unload. Three days later, on 4 July, Company B of the 103d Infantry struggled into Tombe after an enervating march overland from Nono. On 10 July, after a new garrison force came in to hold and develop the Viru area, the raiders returned to their old camp at Guadalcanal.[13] Seizure of Viru had cost the battalion 13 killed and 15 wounded out of an original force of 375 officers and men.

Major Hara's Viru garrison force lost a total of 61 killed and an estimated 100 wounded in the defense of Tombe and Tetemara. Another estimated 170 escaped into the jungle. Hara's force, under orders from the *Southeast Detachment* to return to Munda, marched over the rugged jungle trails and reached the airfield about 19 July, just in time to take part in the final defense of that area.[14]

SECURING VANGUNU [15]

Another side show to the main New Georgia landing in the Munda area was

[13] Because of the length of the Viru Harbor operation, the 4th Raider Battalion missed being available for the Rice Anchorage landing of Liversedge's 1st Marine Raider Regiment. The 4th Raiders' place at Rice Anchorage was taken by the 3d Battalion of the 145th Infantry. Currin's battalion, after a short rest at Guadalcanal, joined the Liversedge force on 18 July.

[14] *SE Area NavOps—II*, p. 34; CIC SoPacFor Item No. 702, New Georgia Defense OpO A No. 44, dtd 19Jul43.

[15] Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: *New Georgia Campaign*; TF 31 ltr, dtd 22Jun43, *op. cit.*; TG 31.3 OpO AL 10–43, *op. cit.*; TG 31.3 LoadingOs 1–4, *op. cit.*; 4th RdrBn SAR, *op. cit.*; Capt James E. Brown ltr to CMC, dtd 6Mar51; Col Lester E. Brown, USA, ltr to Maj John N. Rentz, dtd 19Mar52; RAdm George H. Fort ltr to Maj John N. Rentz, dtd 30Jan52; Maj Earle O. Snell, Jr., ltr to CMC, dtd 16Feb51; ONI, *Combat Narratives X*; Rentz, *Marines in the Central Solomons*.

the taking of Vangunu Island for the purpose of establishing a base along the supply route between the lower Solomons and the main target area. Pre-landing reconnaissance revealed that the island would not be suitable for airfield construction as planned earlier. It could be taken with a relatively small force, however, because it was not heavily defended. Thus, it would be an economical prize for the Allies with the promise of a useful way station at Wickham Anchorage, a sheltered harbor tucked behind coral reefs between Vangunu and neighboring Gatukai Island to the east. (See Map 4.)

An amphibious scouting party sent to Vangunu in mid-June radioed Admiral Turner's headquarters on the 20th, confirming reports that the Japanese had not reinforced the island and that beaches at Oloana Bay on the south side of the island could accommodate the landing of a reinforced battalion. Admiral Fort was then directed to occupy the island with a small force on 30 June. His D-Day landing would not be a complete surprise. Japanese sentries spotted the amphibious patrol and reported "enemy surface forces" in the Wickham area; all units were cautioned to be on the alert.[16]

As his landing force, Fort selected Lieutenant Colonel Lester E. Brown's 2d Battalion, 103d Infantry Regiment; Battery B (90mm), 70th Coast Artillery (Antiaircraft) Battalion; and half of the 20th NCB. To augment Brown's soldiers, Admiral Fort also assigned that portion of the 4th Marine Raider Battalion which had not gone to Segi Point and Viru Harbor under Lieutenant Colonel Currin. The raider battalion's executive officer, Major James R. Clark, commanded these units which included Company N (Captain Earle O. Snell, Jr.), Company Q (Captain William L. Flake), a demolitions platoon, and a headquarters detachment. For added firepower, Battery B (105mm howitzers) of the 152d Field Artillery Battalion, and a special weapons group from Battery E (40mm and .50 caliber antiaircraft guns) of the 70th Coast Artillery Battalion were added to the Wickham Anchorage force.

The plan called for the Marines to land before dawn at Oloana Bay from APDs *Schley* and *McKean*, contact the scouting party still on Vangunu, and establish a beachhead. A first echelon of Army troops would land over this beach 30 minutes later from seven LCIs, followed by a second and final echelon of Army troops landing from seven LSTs at 1000. From Oloana Bay, Brown's force would move inland to widen the beachhead line while Company E, 103d Infantry, reinforced with the battalion's 81mm mortars, skirted along the beach eastward toward Vura Bay, reported as the main enemy base. Native scouts operating from the base of coastwatcher Kennedy near Sergi Point had reported that there were approximately 100 Japanese at this point.

After a rendezvous at Purvis Bay off Florida Island, Fort's transports sailed north beyond the Russell Islands and reached the debarkation area off Oloana Bay at 0230 on 30 June. The scouts had placed markers on the beach and were showing a signal light, but the ships arrived in the midst of such a heavy downpour that these aids could not be spotted. High winds put a bothersome chop on the sea, and the APDs and landing craft pitched and tossed as the Marines groped

[16] CIC SoPacFor Item No. 641, 8th CSNLF RadLog, 4–22June43.

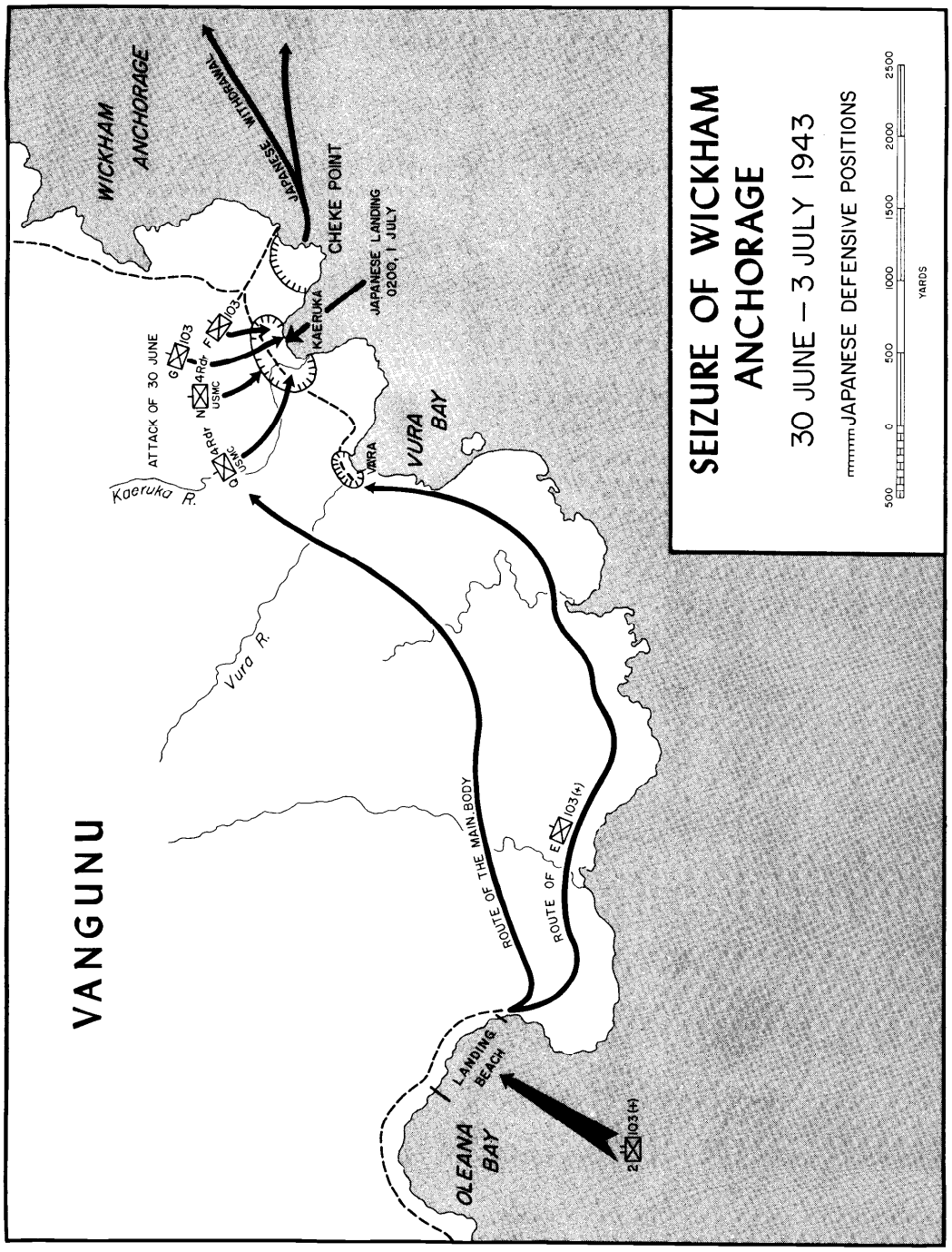
their way over the side to prepare for the "blind" landing. The best radar in the task force was an old model in Admiral Fort's flagship, the destroyer-mine sweeper *Trever*, but it was not able to fix the position of the force accurately in relation to the beach.

Admiral Fort called off the landing until the weather cleared, or until dawn when the beach could be seen, but the APDs either did not receive or misunderstood these orders and went ahead with the landing. The whole operation became a classic example of how not to land troops on a hostile beach. At 0345, while in the midst of debarkation, the APD commanders decided that their ships had not been correctly positioned, so they moved 1,000 yards to the east and continued the operation. The move added to the confusion, since it forced the landing craft to cross paths with the seven LCIs, resulting in thorough dispersion of the landing craft just as they were heading toward the beach. Regaining contact proved impossible and the coxswains had to do the best they could on their own. Not having been given anything but a general course to the beach, they landed in widely separated spots along seven miles of the Vangunu coast. Six boats, but no men, were lost in the pounding surf.[17]

Two boats carrying the 1st and 2d Platoons of Company Q managed to stay together, but they headed in the wrong direction and finally grounded on a reef approximately seven miles west of Oloana Bay. The craft which contained Second Lieutenant James E. Brown's 1st Platoon managed to clear the reef, but in doing so lost its rudder. Marines tied buckets to the ends of lines and then guided the boat by trailing these buckets astern and pulling on the lines like reins. The boat carrying Second Lieutenant Eric S. Holmgrain's 2d Platoon broached to in the surf on the reef. Holmgrain and his men waded and swam nearly two miles to shore and set up a local defense until dawn. Brown remained just off shore with his platoon boated. The next morning, Holmgrain hiked his platoon along the beach toward Oloana Bay while Brown steered along the coast with his buckets. The *McKean* spotted this craft and sent out a sound boat in which Brown finished his trip.

The other scattered Marines met no opposition and were able to regroup at Oloana Bay. There the first waves of soldiers landed in calmer seas at 0700, followed by the remainder of the force within an hour. The amphibious scouts reported to Colonel Brown that the Japanese garrison was not at Vura as expected, but was instead occupying Kaeruka, a small village about 1,000 yards northeast of Vura Bay on another coastal indentation. Colonel Brown immediately issued new orders, designating the mouth of the Kaeruka River as the objective, and just before 0800, the drenched force moved out. Company E retained its original mission of capturing Vura village. There this force would hold up and prepare to give mortar support to the other units attacking

[17] Admiral Fort commented on this passage; "The chief lesson here is *to obey orders!* The APDs acknowledged for this order, and I was amazed to learn later that they had landed the Marines or that the Marines had agreed to land under circumstances that would insure . . . failure. The Army troops in the LCIs obeyed the order—landed in perfect order as planned without any difficulty whatever. The Marines straggling ashore hours later would not have been of much help had there been much resistance." VAdm George H. Fort comments on draft MS, dtd 30ct60.



MAP 4 R F STIBIL

Kaeruka. Companies F and G of the 103d, along with Marine units and eight native guides, would swing inland along a coastwatcher trail, which it was believed had not been discovered by the Japanese, and assemble on high ground some seven miles from the beachhead. This hilly terrain would give the attackers an attack line of departure just east of the Kaeruka River and 700 yards from the village where the Japanese were camped. Artillerymen and Seabees would hold the beachhead at Oloana.

At Vura village, Company E met 16 enemy armed with two light machine guns, but the mortars quickly knocked out this opposition. The company then prepared to support the other attacking force which had to deal with a more difficult march and stronger enemy defenses.

The driving rain had turned the coastwatcher trail to slick mud and the Vura and Kaeruka Rivers into shoulder-deep torrents. Swimmers strung ropes across these streams and the Marines and soldiers then managed to cross, each man pulling himself along the ropes. Brown's force finally reached its line of departure at 1320. By this time all scattered Marine units, including the two platoons which grounded on the reef seven miles from the landing beach, had rejoined their parent companies, much to the gratification of Colonel Brown:

> This in itself was a considerable feat because some of the landing boats had gone ashore far down the coast . . . and the Marines were all heavily laden with weapons and ammunition.[18]

The attack jumped off without preparatory fires. The rain had put all radios out of commission, and Colonel Brown could not contact either Vura for mortar fire or Oloana Bay for artillery support. The Marines, commanded by Major Clark, and the soldiers moved south from their line of departure at 1405. On the right, Company Q (raiders) guided on the meandering Kaeruka River with orders to cross the river farther south to turn the left flank of the enemy. Company N (raiders) in the center drove straight towards the Japanese; and on the left, Company F of the 103d Infantry moved to position for a partial envelopment of the Japanese right. The 103d's Company G, in reserve, stood ready to exploit any weakness in the Japanese defenses and to protect the American flanks.

Off Company Q's right, the Kaeruka River made a 300-yard loop to the east before turning south again to flow 300 or 400 yards into the sea. This long bend in the river partially enclosed the Japanese camp on the coast and made the stream, in effect, a major obstacle facing the Marine companies. Fifteen minutes after the Marines moved from their line of departure, Company Q began to draw fire from enemy riflemen hidden in trees and camouflaged spider traps.[19] As the Marines deployed, they met heavier fire from Japanese positions across the river. At 1445, Major Clark told his raider companies to cross the river, reduce the opposition, and then attack the main enemy positions.

Marines of Company Q struggled down the slippery bank of the river, crossed over and climbed the other side. But the Japanese concentrated so much rifle and machine gun fire on the crossing site that only

[18] L. E. Brown ltr, *op. cit.*

[19] Individual foxholes of kneeling or standing depth covered by "lids" camouflaged to conceal the position from observation even at short range.

one squad of Company N managed to cross before the attack was called off. Contact between the soldiers and Marines was now broken, and while the two Marine companies attempted to tie together, patrols were sent out to re-establish contact with the Army companies.

On the left, soldiers of Company F tried to envelop the right of several Japanese machine guns which they encountered shortly after starting the attack. This maneuver further broke contact between the soldiers and Company N. Colonel Brown then sent Company G to fill the gap. The reserve company moved almost directly south toward the beach meeting only scattered opposition. Although both flanks of the American advance had lost contact with the center unit, this unhandy tactical maneuver split the Japanese force. As Company G moved through the gap between Companies N and F and reached the beach, it placed itself squarely in the enemy rear, and the Japanese opposing the Marines and Company F gave way in disorder.

Resistance in front of Company Q faded, and Company N moved up quickly through the jungle to exploit the confusion of the enemy and drive them to the southwest. The Marine companies, one on each side of the river, then pressed on to the beach below the village of Kaeruka. The soldiers of Company F also reduced the opposition facing them, reaching the beach shortly thereafter. Twelve Marines were killed in the action and 21 wounded; Army casualties numbered 10 killed and 22 wounded. One hundred and twenty Japanese dead were counted.

As Colonel Brown displaced his command post forward from the line of departure, Major Clark established a perimeter defense along the beach east of the river. Company G, the raider demolition platoon, and Company Q dug in facing seaward. Company N tied in on Company Q's right flank extending inland along the east bank of the Kaeruka River. Soldiers of Company F closed the perimeter with a line which faced inland. Patrols were set out to mop up any bypassed enemy, but darkness forced these men back to the perimeter before any contact could be made. Intermittent enemy mortar fire exploded inside the perimeter and along the beach during the early part of the night, and Japanese machine guns harassed the northern portions of the perimeter, but no attempt at penetration was made.

At about 0200, the American force hit a jackpot. Defenders reported three enemy barges approaching the beach. This was evidently a supply run, bringing food and reinforcements to a Japanese garrison which no longer existed. As the barges moved out of the darkness toward the beach area near the junction of the demolitions platoon and Company G, they met an overwhelming reception. A concerted burst of rifle and machine gun fire set the three barges foundering and drifting out of control. The Japanese called out, evidently believing they were being fired upon by friends, and for a time did not return the fire. The barges continued to drift toward the beach, and Company Q added rifle grenades to the small-arms fire that the other units along the beach directed into the landing craft. The Japanese finally returned the fire, and a few enemy soldiers jumped overboard and splashed ashore. The demolitions platoon killed these with hand grenades. One barge sank offshore and the others broached to in the surf. The fight was over in half an hour, and 109 of an esti-

mated 120 Japanese were dead.[20] Two Marines and one soldier were killed.

The choice of beach defense, made in half darkness, without the aid of maps, was particularly fortunate. Unknown to Major Clark, the beach was the only possible landing point in the entire area; and an unsuspecting enemy had picked that night to resupply and reinforce his garrison. The Japanese "had walked blindly into a hornet's nest. For the Marines, it was like filling an inside straight." [21]

The next morning (1 July) patrols searched for the remnants of the Japanese garrison and learned that the main group of Japanese survivors was digging in at Cheke Point, a bulge of shoreline about 500 yards east of the Kaeruka River. Despite the success of the defense the night before, Colonel Brown marched his force back toward Vuru village since he considered it a more suitable defensive area and his troops could be more easily supplied. Moreover, Cheke Point was readily identifiable from the air, and artillery fire from Oloana Bay coupled with air strikes could neutralize the position with considerable saving of lives. A few Japanese harassed the column with long-range fire from machine guns and a 37mm gun, inflicting some casualties, but the enemy made no organized counterattack.

From a new perimeter at Vura, Brown sent out patrols and organized a coordinated attack on Cheke Point. By this time, with the help of Seabees, the 105mm howitzers of the 152d Field Artillery Battalion were in position, and after registering on Cheke Point, fired all day 2 July. In the afternoon, Admiral Fort's flagship added naval gunfire to the pounding. On the morning of the 3d, 18 SBDs from ComAir New Georgia staged a strike on Cheke Point while Brown's force moved forward. Kaeruka was reoccupied without a shot and even Cheke Point was taken with little opposition since the bombardments had forced the Japanese to evacuate the area. Brown's attack killed seven Japanese and destroyed supply and ammunition dumps which had been overlooked earlier.

On 4 July, the Marines, detached from Colonel Brown's force, went back to Oloana Bay on LCIs. There they rested until 8 July when they were sent across to Gatukai Island east of Vangunu to look for some 50 to 100 enemy troops which natives reported were holding that small island. The Marines patrolled Gatukai for two days but did not locate any Japanese, although bivouac areas attested to recent occupation. After one night back at Oloana Bay, the Marines returned to Guadalcanal on 12 July to rejoin the remainder of the battalion which Colonel Currin had just brought back from the operation at Segi Point and Viru Harbor. Casualties within Major Clark's original force of 18 officers and 350 men totaled 14 dead and 26 wounded.

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[20] Five of 11 Japanese who survived this encounter were later killed in the Kaeruka area. Six others who escaped made their way along the coasts of Vangunu and New Georgia to Rice Anchorage on northern New Georgia. There they later met the same demolitions platoon in another action, in which five were killed and one captured. *4th RdrBn WarD.*

[21] Rentz, *Marines in the Central Solomons*, p. 50. Another possible explanation is that the Japanese were collecting scattered outposts. CIC SoPacFor Item 702, New Georgia DefOpO A No. 11, dtd 30 June states: "The Wiekham Butai in large landing barges will collect the lookouts from the West Harbor and North Harbor and the Barike Butai and return to Munda around the north coast of Vangunu and New Georgia Islands."

BEACHHEAD AT RENDOVA [22]

Allied occupation of Segi on 21 June provided the clincher to a Japanese error in judgment: The New Georgia defenders were set to repel an invasion; night and day Allied radio traffic and reports of a troop and transport buildup in the Guadalcanal area had convinced them that an attack was imminent. To intercept such a move, the Japanese assembled their air attack forces at Buin and deployed to defend the Central Solomons. Then, when the occupation of Segi occurred without further immediate buildup, the enemy was positive that the operation was only a limited infiltration, and that the abrupt decline of radio traffic meant a curtailment of further plans. On 26 June the air fleet was ordered to return to Rabaul.

This strategy backfired. A Japanese submarine spotted Turner's task force near Gatukai on the night of the 29th, but, before the Japanese could determine the significance of the submarine's report, Vila and Buin were rocked by naval bombardments and Turner's force was dropping anchor in Rendova Bay. The attacks at Vila and Buin were a diversion only, planned to place striking units in position to protect the Rendova landing. The bombardments were conducted in a driving rain which shielded the retirement of the cruisers and destroyers. Unfortunately, the poor weather also cancelled a Fifth Air Force strike at Rabaul which was supposed to cripple further the Japanese potential to lash back at the New Georgia landings.

The Rendova operation cast the Japanese command in the role of a poor second-guesser:

> The next enemy counter-offensive was estimated in various ways and a series of measures was taken to meet the situation. However, we hardly anticipated that the enemy would first occupy the small islands across from Munda at the time of the invasion of Munda and that they would proceed with their operations under the cover of heavy guns on these islands. Therefore, the landing on Rendova Island completely baffled our forces.[23]

For the Rendova-bound attackers, the movement from Guadalcanal was uneventful. The task force streamed north from Koli Point at 1545 on the 29th. Screened by destroyers, the six transports and two APDs sailed in a double column north of the Russells before turning west and then northwest again to head up Blanche Channel. Shortly before dawn, the same weather front which shielded the bombard-

[22] Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: CinCPac Ops in the POA, Jun43, dtd 6Sep43; IntelSec, SoPacFor Objective Rept 25–13, New Georgia Gru, dtd 15Feb43; SoPacFor PhotoInterpretationU Rept No. 41, dtd 1Dec42, and Rept No. 67, dtd 26Dec42; *New Georgia Campaign;* 3d MarDiv Observers Rept Rendova and Munda (Col George W. McHenry, LtCol John T. L. D. Gabbert, LtCol J. M. Smith, Jr.), dtd 9Sep43; 9th DefBn Rept to ComMarDefGruSols, dtd 24Jun43; 9th DefBn Rept of Ops, dtd 2May44, hereafter *9th DefBn OpsRept*; 9th DefBn Informal CbtRept New Georgia Campaign, dtd 9Sep43; 9th DefBn Narrative Hist 1Feb42–14Apr44, dtd 2May44; *9th DefBn AA Ops*; 9th DefBn OpO 5–43, dtd 24Jun43; *SE Area NavOps—I; SE Area NavOps—II*; Maj Wilson F. Humphreys ltr to CO, 14th DefBn, dtd 25Jul43; LtCol Francis M. McAlister ltr to CG, IMAC, dtd 7Aug43; LtCol Wilbur J. McNenney Rept on New Georgia Ops to CG, IMAC, dtd 17Jul43; LtCol Henry H. Reichner Jr., ltr to CMC, dtd 27Feb51; Capt Michael Taylor ltr to CMC, dtd 9Feb51; LtCol Wright C. Taylor ltr to CMC, dtd 4Mar52; ONI, *Combat Narratives X*; Rentz, *Marines in the Central Solomons*; Sherrod, *MarAirHist.*

[23] *SE Area NavOps—II*, p. 26.

ment forces covered the invasion fleet, and troops aboard the transports had only hazy glimpses of the rain-drenched volcanic peak which identified Rendova. (See Map II, Map Section.)

The invasion site was on the north end of Rendova, a haunch-shaped island nearly 20 miles long and 8 miles wide. Mountainous and densely wooded, Rendova was a fitting counterpart to the other islands in the group. Few of the marshy beaches along its otherwise irregular, steep coastline could be used as landing sites, and most of the shoreline was fouled by coral patches. The island's best anchorage was Rendova Harbor, a cove three-fourths of a mile wide and one and one-half miles long, protected by a barrier of three small islands. The cove had two deep-water entrances and pre-landing reconnaissance teams had designated the eastern of the two as the funnel for the ship-to-shore landing movement.

While the escorting destroyers took up their screening positions—the *Jenkins*, *Gwin*, *Radford*, *Buchanan*, and *Farenholt* echeloned at 1,000 yard intervals to the northwest and the *McCalla*, *Ralph Talbot*, and *Woodworth* blocking Blanche Channel to the east—the transports began unloading. Troops from the *McCawley*, *Algorab*, *Libra*, and *President Adams* were to land on the east beach of the cove; the troops from the *President Hayes* and *President Jackson* would go ashore on the west beach.

At 0640, only minutes after arriving at debarking stations, the transports had landing craft lowered and headed toward the beach 3,000 yards away. Through the slot between the offshore islets, the boated troops could see Rendova Mountain and the relatively flat area of the Lever Brothers plantation at its foot which was the landing area. There was some momentary confusion as the flood of boats hit the entrance; but quickly forming into columns, the landing craft plowed on toward shore. As the boats scraped to a halt, disorganized enemy machine gun and rifle fire from the plantation area greeted the disembarking troops.

This was the first indication that plans had been fouled-up. Companies C and G of the 172d Infantry, scout troops called "Barracudas," were supposed to have landed from the APDs *Dent* and *Waters* an hour earlier, secured the beachhead, and then provided a covering force for the first wave of troops. The enemy resistance, obviously, was evidence that the beachhead had not been taken. The Barracudas, missing the rain-obscured beacon fires, had drifted some 10 miles down the Rendova coast before landing. Then, realizing that they had missed the designated beach, they reembarked and headed upshore toward the cove. They arrived in time to land unopposed over a beach secured by soldiers of the 103d, Seabees of the 24th NCB, and Marines of the 9th Defense Battalion.

The amphibious maneuver was not a classic. The beachhead had not been expanded beyond 15 yards or so, and in this confined space, soldiers, Seabees, and Marines milled about in the midst of a growing mountain of supplies. Only the first wave had been coordinated. After that, eager coxswains rushed back to the transports for additional loads, and the ship-to-shore movement became an uncontrolled race. To add to the confusion, an occasional enemy machine gunner would spray the landing area from the interior of the plantation, drawing in return a flurry of uncontrolled shots from riflemen on shore

and automatic weapons from the landing craft. Eventually, combat patrols were organized, and soldiers of the 103d and 172d began to push inland in skirmish lines, flushing snipers and hidden machine gun nests.

The landing area had not been defended in any great force.[24] Sporadic and desultory fire had been the enemy's only resistance to the invasion. Although warned earlier of the possibility of a landing, the Rendova garrison had gone back to sleep and awoke to find an invasion fleet in its front yard. Too late to defend the harbor in force, most of the garrison fled to the hills to escape later to Munda by canoe. Wet batteries silenced the enemy radios, and contact with Munda could not be made. The first warning the airfield defenders had of the invasion across the channel was a message flashed by lights and flares from a lookout station on a promontory south of the harbor. After inflicting nine casualties, including a face wound to the commander of the 172d Infantry, Colonel David N. M. Ross, the Japanese defenders finally fled the plantation area, leaving 65 dead behind.

The end of ground resistance marked the end of enemy efforts to dislodge the invasion force until the air fleets at Rabaul could get into action. General Sasaki at Munda could offer only slight opposition. Intermittent shellfire began to register in the transport area and around the destroyers shortly after the invasion was launched, but only the *Gwin* was hit. Two veterans of Guadalcanal sea action, the *Buchanan* and the *Farenholt*, took up the challenge and fired shells back at suspected points, meanwhile changing direction and speed so that the Japanese batteries could not register on them. It was estimated that seven guns were silenced, but the destroyer screen and the Japanese continued the sporadic exchange throughout the unloading activities.

It was a frustrating experience for the Munda defenders:

> Because of insufficient preparations and installations, our naval guns could not engage the enemy. Because of the range, the mountain guns were not able to fire against the enemy. Therefore, our unit was in the predicament that the enemy landed in broad daylight while our unit watched helplessly.[25]

While soldiers of the 103d and 172d pressed inland against spotty resistance, the establishment of a base of operations began in the continual downpour of rain. Unenthusiastic infantrymen were organized as working parties to sort and disperse the jumbled piles of ammunition, rations, lubricants, and other materials. The mushrooming dumps of supplies accentuated the fact that an insufficient beach control party and working party had been provided, and that too high a priority had been given to barracks bags,

[24] The original Rendova garrison consisted of 150 members of the *7th Company, 229th Regiment* augmented by 76 men from a *Kure 6th SNLF* signal detachment. In mid-June, 18 unarmed engineers moved to Rendova under orders to complete a torpedo boat base before the end of the month. Total defenders: 224. CIC SoPacFor Item No. 702, New Georgia DefOpO "A" No. 8, late Jun43; USAFISPA G-2 POW Interrogation Rept No. 105, dtd 4Aug43; CIC SoPacFor Item No. 632, 1st New Georgia Area ButaiO No. 3, dtd 5Aug43. The garrison had been weakened by malaria and other sicknesses, however, and probably numbered about 140.

[25] *Seventeenth Army Ops—I*, p. 15. Evidently Sasaki's naval guns and artillery, although unable to register accurately on the invasion fleet, fired at random hoping for a lucky hit.

officers' locker boxes, tents, chairs, and other personal comfort items.[26]

As the unloading continued, cargo-staging areas turned into seas of mud through which trucks churned and skidded. The road through the plantation area soon became a quagmire which caught and held all wheeled vehicles. Tractors were required to extricate them. Culverts, which had been judged strong enough to support heavy traffic, crumbled under the weight of loaded trucks and increased the difficulty of movement. Finally, only the wide-tread prime movers, the amphibian tractors of the 9th Defense Battalion, and the bigger tractors of the Seabees could plow through the mud. All other vehicles stalled, and infantrymen had to hand-carry most supplies to designated dumps, bivouac areas, and gun positions.

Tank lighters were unloaded by soldiers wading through 50 feet of knee-deep water. Later unloading proceeded faster after bulldozers pushed ramps of coral out to the lighters. Cargo was finally shunted to offshore islands in an effort to relieve the congestion, and, with virtually every truck mired down, a message was sent to the ships to delay sending in more vehicles. The mud, however, had convinced observers that future scouting of landing beaches would include engineer as well as tactical reconnaissance.

With the landing well underway, 32 fighter planes from ComAirSols appeared overhead, and troops on the beach and sailors on the ships breathed easier. Their concern was well-founded. Because of the poor weather, General Kenney's Fifth Air Force had been able to hit Rabaul with only 25 bombers in the 5 days prior to the landing, and the Japanese were still able to launch a powerful counterpunch through the air from Rabaul, Buin, Ballale, and Kahili airfields. It was not long in coming. The *Eleventh Air Fleet* at Rabaul dispatched a strike of 26 medium bombers and 8 carrier bombers shortly after dawn. Picking up a fighter escort of 72 planes at Bougainville, the flights swept down on Rendova. Intercepted by the Allied fighter cover, the enemy formations were forced away from the landing area, but in their reckless attempts to strike a crippling blow to the invasion, the Japanese lost 18 bombers and 31 fighters. Two hours of valuable unloading time, however, had been lost by the ships maneuvering to escape the enemy bombing runs.

At 1505, with all the troops unloaded and most of the supplies on the beach, Admiral Turner decided that the attack force had stretched its luck long enough and ordered the return to Guadalcanal. As the ships headed down Blanche Channel, a flight of about 50 Japanese fighters and torpedo bombers swung in over Munda Point and started bombing and strafing runs. The *Farenholt* dodged two torpedos before being bumped by a third—a dud; the *McCalla* was bracketed front and rear while a third torpedo plunged under the ship. The *McCawley* was not as lucky. A solid hit amidships opened a gaping hole, and Turner's flagship came to a dead halt. The admiral transferred his flag to the *Farenholt*, and the *Libra* took the *McCawley* under tow. After sur-

[26] Marine observers, in reports on the Rendova operation, were unanimous in reporting that too much personal gear was unloaded the first day, that it contributed to the confusion on the beach, and that infantrymen were fatigued sorting and carrying it through the mud.

viving another attack by 15 dive bombers, the *McCawley* continued to settle and was abandoned. That night, three more torpedos slammed into the transport and it sank. Believed the victim of an enemy submarine, the *McCawley* actually was sunk by an American MTB which had mistaken her for an enemy ship.

The day's air action cost the Japanese heavily. Determined to stop the invasion, the *Eleventh Air Fleet* flooded the skies with every type of plane available. Despite the waiting interceptors of ComAirSols, the Japanese plunged recklessly toward Rendova. Fighter protection for the bombers was insufficient, however, and each attack resulted in scores of flaming crashes. Claimed kills in the one morning and two afternoon raids totaled 101 enemy planes; Marine squadrons (VMF–121, –122, –213, and –221) reported downing 58 of them. The Allies lost 17 planes, but 8 pilots were fished out of the water by PBYs and torpedo boats. In addition, ComAirSols hit Vila with 16 torpedo bombers and 12 scout bombers in a morning strike, and then bombed Munda with an afternoon strike by 25 medium bombers, 18 scout bombers, and 18 torpedo bombers. These attacks further crippled Vila and Munda, and forced the Japanese to contest the Rendova landing without any close-in points for rearming and refueling.

The same false optimism which had given Admiral Yamamoto a distorted picture of the success of the April *I Go* operation prevailed, though, and surviving enemy pilots reported that they had sunk 2 destroyers and 1 cruiser, damaged 8 transports, set 2 destroyers afire, and downed 50 planes. Their own losses they set at 17 attack bombers and 13 fighters. Despite the seeming top-heavy score reported by the Japanese, they ruefully admitted that ". . . due to tenacious interference by enemy planes, a decisive blow could not be struck against the enemy landing convoy." [27]

That night, the Japanese hastily tried to assemble a strong raiding force in the Shortlands area for a counterlanding on Rendova, but only five of the destroyers made contact at the rendezvous area. Moving south around Vella Lavella, the force arrived off Rendova at about 0130 on 1 July. Ironically, the same rain squalls which resulted in more mud ashore reduced visibility to such an extent that the Japanese ships could not determine the debarkation point and were forced to withdraw.

The abortive naval raid climaxed a confusing day of action that saw many elements of the landing force fill roles never laid out for them in operation plans. Typically, Marines of the 9th Defense Battalion who went ashore early on 30 June to provide antiaircraft protection for the beachhead found themselves instead taking part in its seizure. The unexpected role as infantry was handled competently, and often eagerly, by the Marine gunners.

Prior to the operation, Colonel Scheyer had divided his battalion into four task groups. The special weapons group (Lieutenant Colonel Wright C. Taylor) was to land on 30 June and position eight 40mm weapons on one of the offshore islands, Kokorana. The 20mm guns and .50 caliber machine guns were to be used on Kokorana and Rendova for beach defense and protection for the antiaircraft weapons. The 90mm group, under the direction of Major Mark S. Adams, was to land one battery on 30 June on Kokorana

[27] *SE Area NavOps—II*, p. 29.

for immediate antiaircraft protection, with another two batteries to be landed and emplaced on Rendova on 1 July. Lieutenant Colonel Archie E. O'Neil, in command of the 155mm artillery group, was to land his big guns on the 1st and 2d of July to deliver neutralization fire on Munda airfield positions and to support the eventual assault on the airfield. The tank platoon, under First Lieutenant Robert W. Blake, was to land in later echelons and wait on Rendova for commitment in the final push on Munda.

Initial resistance by the Japanese did not delay execution of the 9th's missions. Quickly organizing the advance parties into combat patrols, the Marines secured Kokorana before starting the job of clearing firing areas for the 90mm battery. Some assistance in unloading was given by Seabees and late-arriving Barracudas. On the east beach of Rendova, Marines seeking possible gun positions frequently found themselves ahead of the front lines engaged in flushing snipers. One patrol of the 9th wiped out a machine gun nest during such a reconnaissance. For the 9th Defense Battalion, this was the first close contact with the enemy, and many Marines took the opportunity to turn infantrymen and help secure the island.

While the beach perimeter was being expanded, Marines selected spots for future battery positions, command posts, fire direction centers, and observation posts. Telephone lines were strung, and fields of fire for the big guns cleared by blasting down palm trees. By the end of the first day ashore, the advance elements of the 9th Defense Battalion were bivouacked on Rendova's beach and along the plantation road. Battery E of the 9th (90mm guns) was in position on Kokorana, and had fired its first shots against a low-flying enemy fighter at 1645. Twelve 40mm guns, eight 20mm guns, and eighteen .50 caliber machine guns were set up along the beaches on both islands, bolstering the defense positions. Only one small hitch had delayed the quick installation of the 90mm battery on Kokorana. The gun director was missing, and members of the battalion had to rummage through scattered piles of material on Rendova's shore until they found it.

The next day, 1 July, troops and supplies in the second echelon of the Western Landing Force began to arrive, and the four LSTs and five LCIs encountered the same unloading problems that had plagued the assault troops. The ships had to approach the island at slow speed, inching along through the shallow water until grounded by mud at considerable distance from shore. Vehicles which attempted to churn through to the beach became bogged and had to be rescued by tractors. The weight of heavy artillery pieces, towed ashore by tractors in tandem, further ruined the road along the beach, and, after the guns were manhandled into position, traffic of any kind over the road was impossible.

While the rain poured on, almost without cessation, most of the personnel ashore were pressed into service again as beach working parties to carry rations, fuel, ammunition, communication gear, and other supplies from the jumbled piles on the beach to dumps inland. Attempts to gain some measure of traction for vehicles in the soft underfooting met with failure. Seabees tried to corduroy the former road with 12-foot coconut logs, but the logs and steel matting they used soon sank under the mud. In addition, areas believed suit-

able for gun positions or bivouac areas became swamps, and dispersion of troops was almost impossible. Soldiers and Marines who attempted to dig foxholes morosely watched their efforts become sunken baths.

Despite the difficulties caused by the rain, by the end of the second day ashore, two guns of Battery A of the Marines' 155mm gun group were in permanent positions on Rendova and had test-fired several rounds at Munda. Battery B of the same group was ashore in a temporary position but had not fired. In addition, two 90mm batteries were in place and all special weapons dug-in nearby for protection. The Marines, unable to dig habitable positions in the mud, built above-ground shelters with coconut logs and sandbags.

Army artillerymen, taking positions on Kokorana, found the island had a solid coral subsurface that held the 155mm howitzers without difficulty. Moreover, since the island was open on the north side, no fields of fire had to be cleared. Soldiers of the 192d Field Artillery Battalion pushed their guns into position, took general aim at Munda some 13,000 yards distant, and began firing registration shots late the second day. While the Army artillerymen and Marines struggled with their heavy guns, ammunition, generators, and radar units, combat patrols of the 43d Division secured over half of Rendova. The stage was being set for the move to New Georgia.

Air activity during the second day was limited. The ComAirSols fighter cover over Rendova intercepted and fought off only one attempted enemy attack. The covering fighters also mounted guard over a strike by 28 torpedo and scout bombers at Vila, which further reduced that field to a nonoperational status. Before returning to Guadalcanal, each fighter plane worked over Munda defenses, strafing possible bivouac areas. General Mulcahy, assuming an active role in the operation, scheduled and directed the strike which helped American forces rout the enemy at Viru Harbor.

The third day ashore, 2 July, promised to be just as wet as the previous two days. While the 103d and 172d Infantry prepared for the move to New Georgia, the Marine 155mm guns and the Army 155mm howitzers continued firing registration missions on Munda airfield. Direct observation was used, with spotters clinging precariously to perches atop palm trees. As yet, no artillery fire control maps were available, so only area targets were selected. The 192d Field Artillery and the Marine group fired with impunity; fears that the Japanese could retaliate with counterbattery fire proved unfounded.

It was at this point, shortly after 1330, that the Japanese air commander at Rabaul, Admiral Kusaka, finally had his inning. His timing was perfect. The ComAirSols fighter cover had reluctantly been withdrawn under threat of bad weather, and the Japanese bombers arrived only a few minutes after the Allied fighters departed. An early-warning radar unit was temporarily out of operation, while its generator was drained of diesel oil mistakenly used in place of white gasoline.

The Japanese flight, variously estimated at from 18 to 25 medium bombers, swung in over the east side of Rendova Mountain, catching the troops in the open on the beach. A bombing pattern that stitched the beachhead from one end to the other quickly dispelled any illusion that these might be friendly planes. There was time only for a shouted, "Condition Red," before troops frantically sought cover. But

GUN CREW *of Battery C, 9th Defense Battalion is revealed in the flash of a 90mm shell fired at Japanese night raiders striking at New Georgia.* (*SC 185876*)

many were caught in the open, an extra dividend to the attractive target of ships, equipment, and supplies jammed into a restricted area. Many of the bomb salvos hit ration and fuel dumps; others exploded ammunition dumps. Highest casualties occurred among the Seabees concentrated on a promontory off the beach. A dynamite dump there was hit, its blast adding to the casualties of the bombing. The peninsula was promptly dubbed "Suicide Point." Further, the clearing station of the 43d Division was hit, which reduced the amount of assistance which could be given. Most of the victims were rushed to ships in the bay for treatment of wounds.

Because of the confusion, early estimates of the number of dead and wounded varied widely. Some men were reported missing, either killed by exploding ammunition or direct hits, or, more probably, removed to ships and hurried to Guadalcanal for treatment. In all, 64 men were killed and another 89 wounded. Seabees in the boat pool and soldiers in the 43d Division bivouac areas sustained the heaviest casualties. In spite of the congestion, damage to materiel on the beach was relatively light. Besides the ammunition and fuel dumps hit, two of the 155mm guns were scarred by bomb fragments, two 40mm guns were damaged, and three amphibian tractors were holed. All were repairable, though, with the exception of one of the tractors.

The attack's success was the result of many factors. For one thing, Army radar units had gone out of commission shortly after landing, and although a Marine radar unit had been landed on 1 July, it was this one that was being drained of diesel fuel. Also, on the day previous, the troops had believed a flight of American medium bombers to be enemy planes and had scrambled for cover. This day they believed the enemy planes to be the same mediums back on station. A third factor was lack of dispersion. Shelters had been dug along the beach, but the troops were now busy handling other materiel, and had not provided other protection. But as a result of the raid, the area became dotted with foxholes—deep foxholes.

By 3 July, the routine of operations ashore was established. Troops of the 43d Division began the shuttle to Zanana Beach on New Georgia, and the big guns of the 9th Defense Battalion and the 192d Field Artillery picked at Munda's defenses, seeking for a hidden strong point, a bivouac area, or a supply or ammunition dump. A 130-foot coast artillery observation tower of 1½-inch angle iron made spotting easier than viewing from a swaying palm tree. Erected on high ground about 200 yards back of General Hester's command post at the foot of Rendova Mountain, the tower provided a central point from which Marine and Army spotters could radio corrections to the artillery fire direction center and then observe the strike of the shells on Munda airfield and its bordering hills across the channel, and on the nearby islands off New Georgia's shore. In time, a system was developed whereby films dropped near the tower by photographic planes were immediately picked up, developed, and then studied for assessment of damage to Munda defenses.

On the night of 3 July, the enemy attempted to follow up its devasting strike of the 2d with an attack from the sea. A Japanese naval force suddenly appeared offshore and spattered the Rendova beachhead area with a bombardment

691-360 O—63——7

which did little or no damage. Allied destroyers and torpedo boats forced the enemy ships to withdraw hastily without accomplishing the hoped-for crippling blow to the invasion troops.

As following echelons of the Western Landing Force unloaded on 4 July, a desperate Japanese command at Rabaul tried once more to knock the invasion force off Rendova. Since the air attack on 2 July represented the only measure of success in their efforts so far, the Japanese repeated the act. The cast and the script remained the same, except for the final curtain. This time the Japanese found themselves holding the wrong end of a Fourth of July Roman candle. From a force of more than 100 planes trying to press home on attack through the ring of Allied interceptor planes, only 16 bombers were able to swing over Rendova Mountain in the repeat performance. But this time, alerted by sound locators and radar, the 9th Defense Battalion antiaircraft batteries were ready, and 12 of the 16 bombers and an escorting fighter were knocked down in flames. The 90mm guns expended a total of only 88 rounds, a feat which the Marines jubilantly proclaimed a record for rounds per plane.

This attack on Rendova was the last daylight assault on the island of any size made by the Japanese air fleet. From this point on, the attacks were made at night. Although the ComAirSols fighter cover still maintained a vigil over Rendova, the focus of the air war shifted to New Georgia as the troops shuttled from the beachhead at Rendova to the beachhead at Zanana. There the second phase of Operation TOENAILS was to begin.

Munda Victory

ASHORE AT ZANANA BEACH[1]

The Allied landings in the Central Solomons and the New Guinea area caused Japanese planners some anxious moments. Plainly, the situation called for prompt action to relieve the pressure on the first defensive lines of Japan's war-flung empire, but the question was: Where should the major effort be directed? To date, all attempts to repulse the landings had proved futile, and prospects for future success didn't look too promising, either. Mindful of earlier basic plans to retain the Central Solomons while holding out in New Guinea, the Japanese commanders at Rabaul scheduled a conference for 4 July to reach a decision.

To General Sasaki and Admiral Ota, ruefully watching the Rendova operations from a well-protected headquarters on Kokengola Hill at Munda airfield, the situation was a bit more pressing and a lot more personal. From observation it was apparent that the troops across the channel had come to stay and were building up for an offensive in strength. When 155mm guns and howitzers began to register on the airfield, the pattern of the campaign became all too clear. Munda was going to need reinforcements, and quickly, if it was to be held.

The two commanders reported their appraisal of the situation, and then took steps to strengthen the airfield defenses as best they could with the troops available. In a series of orders signed jointly by Sasaki and Ota, all eastern New Georgia lookout detachments were recalled on 30 June, and two recently arrived 140mm guns and two smaller mountain guns were ordered rushed overland from Bairoko. In addition, a reserve force, the *12th Company, 229th Regiment*, was alerted to move from Kolombangara to New Georgia.

As the Allied buildup on Rendova continued, however, these defensive measures began to look woefully weak, so the remainder of the *3d Battalion, 229th Regiment*, was ordered to Munda's aid. By Sasaki's own estimate, all defenses must be ready by dusk on 3 July. Meanwhile, the combined Army and SNLF units were exhorted to "maintain alerted conditions throughout the night and guard against enemy landings; if the enemy commences

[1] Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: *ComSoPac Jul43 WarD;* ComThirdFlt Narrative Rept, SoPac Campaign, dtd 3Sep44, hereafter cited as *ThirdFlt Rept;* NGOF (XIV Corps) Narrative Account of the Campaigns in the New Georgia Group, B.S.I., n.d., hereafter *NGOF Account;* History of 43d Infantry Division, World War II, 24Feb41–Jun44, n.d., hereafter *43d InfDivHist;* 43d InfDiv FO Nos. 1–17, 16Jun–25Aug43; *9th DefBn OpsRept;* Combat Infantry, Part Eight: New Georgia, dtd 31Aug44, hereafter *New Georgia Combat; New Georgia Campaign;* ONI, *Combat Narrative X;* Rentz, *Marines in the Central Solomons;* Joseph A. Zimmer, *The History of the 43d Infantry Division, 1941–1945* (Baton Rouge, La.: Army and Navy Publishing Co., 1947), hereafter Zimmer, *43d's History.*

to land, destroy them at the water's edge." On 2 July, the command relationship was changed. Sasaki, as the senior officer, "in response to the conditions in this area," assumed sole command of all New Georgia garrisons. Admiral Ota, relieved of his landing forces, was assigned control of Army and Navy barge and shipping units in the area.[2]

The actual invasion of western New Georgia was not the direct assault on Munda airfield which Sasaki and Ota believed was coming. Instead, in a landing on 30 June which actually preceded the Rendova assault by several hours, soldiers of Companies A and B, 169th Infantry scrambled ashore on the islands that guarded the Onaiavisi Entrance to Roviana Lagoon. Lashed by heavy rain squalls and hampered by the darkness, the soldiers nevertheless managed to make contact with a waiting pre-D-Day amphibious patrol and native scouts. The landing was unopposed, but not uneventful. The mine sweeper *Zane*, which had been used as a transport, went aground on a small island just inside the entrance, and lay exposed as a telltale marker. Her helpless state and the landing area were ignored, however, by Japanese planes striking at the Rendova landing. The ocean tug *Rail*, summoned from Guadalcanal, pulled the *Zane* off the reef late that afternoon.

After securing the entrance islands, the soldiers began the move to Zanana Beach on the shore line of New Georgia. Earlier plans had called for Company O of the 4th Marine Raider Battalion to act as scouts for this phase of the operation, but with the raiders still at Segi and Viru, reconnaissance teams from the Rendova forces were organized. These were later augmented by a company of Fijian and Tonganese scouts, who were aggressive and skilled jungle fighters.[3] (See Map 5.)

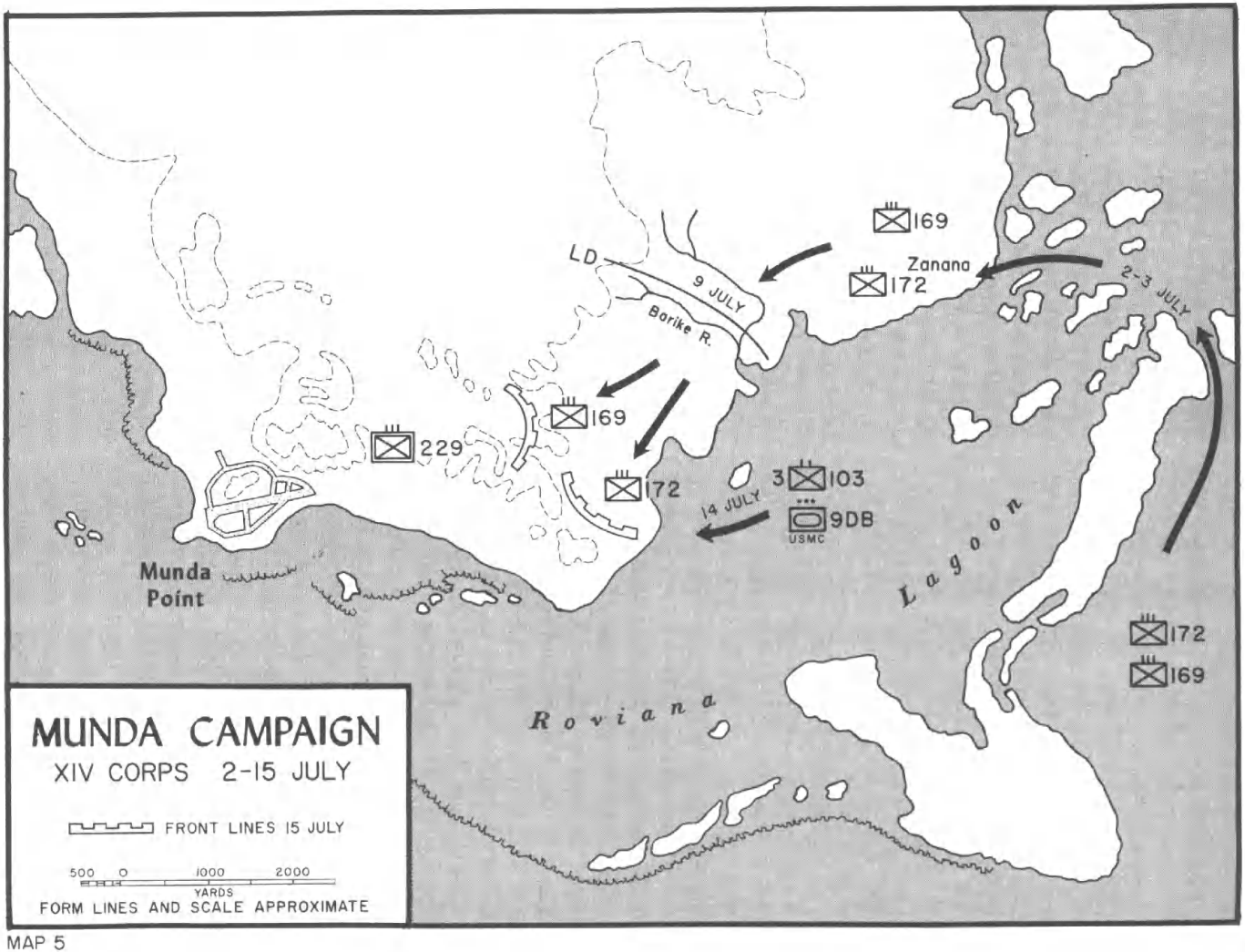
The patrols moved into the area between Zanana and the Barike River, marking water points, trails, coastal roads, possible artillery positions, and all avenues of approach to Munda. They were also ordered to probe Japanese defenses between the airfield and Bairoko Harbor, and to report all barge activity observed. One of the first radioed messages from the patrols reported a successful ambush of a Japanese group and that uniform markings on a dead enemy rifleman indicated that he had been a member of the *229th Regiment*. The ambushed Japanese had been part of the *5th Company, 2d Battalion*, which had been ordered to investigate the Onaiavisi Entrance landings and "drive out the enemy who has landed there and make the area secure."[4] Later the *5th Company* was told to resist stubbornly against this new phase of landings and fight to the last at their present positions. These instructions set the pattern for Japanese resistance in New Georgia.

General Hester received Admiral Halsey's approval to proceed with the New Georgia phase of TOENAILS on 2 July. That night, elements of the 172d's 1st Battalion began the move from Rendova to Zanana Beach. The troop transfer was

[2] CIC SoPacFor Item No. 702, dtd 13Sep43, New Georgia DefOpO A Nos. 11–15, 30Jun–1Jul43.

[3] R. A. Howlett, *The History of the Fiji Military Forces, 1939–1945* (Christchurch, N.Z.: Whitecombe and Toombs, Ltd., 1948), p. 5.

[4] CIC SoPacFor Item No. 705, dtd 9Sep43, New Georgia Defense Butai, 2d Bn Order A No. 141, dtd 30Jun43.


MUNDA CAMPAIGN
XIV CORPS 2-15 JULY
FRONT LINES 15 JULY
500 0 1000 2000
YARDS
FORM LINES AND SCALE APPROXIMATE
LD
9 JULY
Barike R.
169
Zanana
172
2-3 JULY
169
229
172
3
103
14 JULY
9DB
USMC
Munda Point
Lagoon
Roviana
172
169

MAP 5

made in landing craft, which towed additional rubber boats carrying soldiers. Torpedo boats furnished an escort across Blanche Channel, and, at Onaiavisi Entrance, native guides in canoes took over and directed the landing craft through the lagoon to the beachhead. The following day, 3 July, Brigadier General Wing established the 43d Division's forward command post (CP) on New Georgia. A 52-man detail from the 9th Defense Battalion's special weapons group arrived on 4 July and immediately emplaced four 40-mm guns for antiaircraft protection. Four .50 caliber machine guns were sited to protect the antiaircraft positions and to add depth to the firepower of the soldiers.

The Japanese air attack of 4 July at Rendova managed to make targets out of most of the troops that were to participate in the push on Munda airfield. The 172d was still in the process of shuttling troops to Zanana Beach; and the fifth echelon of the NGOF, the remainder of the 169th Infantry and the 136th Field Artillery Battalion carried in 14 LCIs and 4 LSTs, had just arrived at Rendova Harbor. The 169th had remained in the Russells as division reserve during the early part of the operation, and the 136th was detached from the 37th Division on Guadalcanal. The air attack hit as the 169th and 136th were debarking. Unloading activities were abruptly abandoned. Luckily, no ships were hit. But for the new arrivals, the bombing attack following a sea-tossed trip from the Russells was a rough welcome to New Georgia.

Transferring their equipment and supplies to small craft from the Rendova boat pool, the soldiers began the movement to Zanana almost immediately. The 155mm howitzers of the 136th were unloaded on one of the islands guarding Onaiavisi Entrance and positioned to provide artillery support to the troops attacking Munda. Other heavy weapons, the 105mm howitzers of the 169th and 103d Field Artillery Battalions were also emplaced on the offlying islands for additional fire support. By dusk of 5 July, the 172d and the 169th Infantry were ashore on New Georgia, ready to begin the march toward the line of departure along the Barike River. A secondary landing, early on the morning of 5 July by the Northern Landing Group (NLG), commanded by Marine Colonel Liversedge, established a beachhead at Rice Anchorage on the north coast of New Georgia to threaten Sasaki's forces from that direction.[5]

On the 6th, the 172d moved west toward the Barike. Little opposition was encountered. The next day, however, as the 169th Infantry began its move to positions north of the 172d, determined enemy opposition decisively stalled the entire regiment. Stopped short of the Barike, the 169th went into bivouac.

Accounts of the action during the night of 6 July combine fact and fancy. Reports that Japanese riflemen had infiltrated the loose perimeter set up by the 169th's leading battalion caused a panic among the soldiers. Although the regiment had been on Guadalcanal and the Russells prior to New Georgia, the troops evidently were not prepared for jungle combat at night. Soldiers reported the next morning that enemy infiltrators threw grenades, screamed, whistled, shouted invective, and jumped into foxholes to bayo-

[5] The account of the Rice Anchorage landing is related in the following chapter.

net the occupants. After a wild night of grenade bursts, shooting, and screaming, however, no enemy dead were found in the perimeter when dawn came and the soldiers were able to look around. But NGOF casualties were numerous.

The action on the night of 6 July, which started a wave of near hysteria among the troops, seriously impaired the combat efficiency of the 169th Infantry. Despite many later aggressive and determined attacks, the 169th's initial failures along the Barike River were attributed to an apparent lack of combat conditioning and training.[6]

Regardless of speculation as to whether such night attacks were wholly real or in part imagined, there was no denying the end results—the loss of many front-line troops through actual wounds and war neurosis. Later all regiments in the attack were subjected to this type of enemy tactics. In defense against such raids, 43d Division soldiers adopted a policy of joint foxholes for two or more men protected by trip wires with noise makers attached. In addition, a rigid fire plan was adopted which prohibited promiscuous shooting and movement at night and allowed only the outside perimeter to fire or use grenades. These defensive measures restored discipline and stability.

After delaying most of the morning of 7 July in reorganization, the 169th resumed its push toward the Barike. Again the regiment was stopped almost immediately by aggressive enemy resistance. Although the 169th managed to overcome this first enemy opposition, the soldiers had to fight another lengthy action before reaching the low hills east of the river. The 172d, in its zone of action, had pushed to the Barike without too much trouble. When it became apparent that the 169th could not reach the Barike River in time to begin the attack on 8 July as planned, General Hester—with Halsey's approval—ordered the operation delayed one day. The NGOF commander also cancelled that part of his plan that called for a direct assault on the airfield over Munda bar by a battalion of the 103d Infantry with Marine 9th Defense Battalion tanks in support. Mounting evidence that the Japanese held the area in great strength dimmed the prospects for the success of such a thrust.

After another night of infiltrators' attacks, during which soldiers crouched sleepless in foxholes, the advance was resumed the next morning. The 172d moved fairly easily along a coastal trail in a column of battalions. The 169th, struggling through the jungle with an open flank screened only by the Fiji scout company, was echeloned to the right rear. A heavy concentration of mortar and artillery fire on the Japanese position to the immediate front of the 169th broke resistance there; and, aided by a flanking attack by the 172d hitting from the left, the 169th was able to push ahead. Late in the afternoon of the 8th, the fatigued 169th struggled into position on line with the 172d to start the drive toward Munda the following morning.

[6] Commenting on this phase of the campaign, Admiral Halsey said: "The [169th] regiment sent 360 men back to Guadalcanal as 'war nerves' casualties after one day's fighting. General Harmon met them there, promptly returned 300 of them to the combat zone. . . ." Halsey and Bryan, *Halsey's Story*, p. 161. See also Miller, *Reduction of Rabaul*, pp. 108–109, for a description of this action.

NGOF IN ATTACK: ZANANA TO LAIANA [7]

Booming salvos from four destroyers at 0512 on the 9th of July signalled the start of the NGOF attack. The one-hour naval bombardment, which dumped 2,344 five-inch shells on positions in the rear of the enemy lines, was followed by a cannonade by all artillery battalions of the NGOF. The shelling combined the fires of two 155mm howitzer battalions, one 155mm gun battalion, and two 105mm howitzer battalions. In all, the Munda-Barike area was battered by 5,800 rounds of high explosives. Enemy defensive positions, lines of communication, bivouac areas, and command posts were blasted for one hour before the fires were shifted to the area to be assaulted by the ground troops. As artillery lifted, 52 Navy and Marine torpedo bombers and 36 scout bombers struck, dropping high explosive and fragmentation bombs on the area. At 0900, heartened by this extreme concentration of firepower, the 43d Division started its attack toward the NGOF objective—Munda airfield.

After clearing the initial Japanese resistance, the advancing soldiers encountered only snipers and small outposts. Progress, however, was slow. Each new enemy opposition forced deployment and attack. Hidden snipers, pinning down the advance units, held up the regiments for hours. Every step forward was a struggle against a determined enemy and multiple jungle obstacles—dense, vine-choked underbrush, steep ridges, numerous swamps, constant and enervating heat, and almost incessant torrents of rain.

The only maps provided the attacking force were sketches based on aerial photos. The drawings outlined jungle areas with conventional symbols which did not reveal the intricate, abrupt mass of hills, ridges, and swamps—jumbled without pattern—that lay under the thick jungle canopy. Contour lines on the maps were based on scouting reports, and, as 43d Division soldiers discovered, were usually in error. The ridges and hills, bending and twisting in all directions, forced the attacking units to move in one direction, then another. As a result, by the end of the second day of the attack, both regiments had become intermingled and were attacking in virtually a single column. The initial frontage of 1,300 yards had collapsed to almost one-half that distance. In addition, the lines of communication and supply were now stretched over two miles through the jungle from Zanana Beach, an extension exceedingly vulnerable to counterattack from the north, or right, flank.

For the 169th, the advance had been particularly harrowing. Given a zone of action that forced them to cross the meandering Barike River a number of times, the soldiers slowly pressed forward over the steep ridges and through the deep swamps in the upper river region. Fatigued from the initial struggle through the jungle from Zanana, and continually harassed at night by enemy soldiers probing at the exposed right flank, the 169th was a dispirited outfit. After such a

[7] Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: *ThirdFlt Rept;* CTF 31 SAR, Rept of Bombardment of Munda Point, dtd 9Aug43; ComAir New Georgia SAR, 29Jun–13 Aug43, dtd *c.* 1Jan44; *New Georgia Combat; New Georgia Campaign; NGOF Account; 43d InfDivHist*; 9th DefBn Rept of TkOps in the New Georgia Area, dtd 24Aug43, hereafter *9th DefBn TkOps*; ONI, *Combat Narratives X*; Rentz, *Marines in the Central Solomons*; Zimmer, *43d's History.*

disappointing start, the regiment mustered only lethargic attacks against enemy opposition. Wounded soldiers and combat fatigue cases wandered back along the trail to Zanana, draining the front lines of needed strength and creating a serious evacuation problem. Additionally, with the regiment so strung out, troops were needed to carry food, water, and ammunition to the attackers as well as help evacuate the wounded, tasks which further sapped the fighting strength of the outfit.

The pattern of enemy resistance developed by the end of the second day of attack, 10 July, plainly indicated that the Japanese were holding a barrier position in the high ground east of Munda airfield which they would defend in strength. The NGOF offensive—grinding against this line of mutually supporting fortifications of logs and coral, strongly defended by automatic weapons, mortars, and artillery—faltered.

As the NGOF struggled against the jungle and a tenacious enemy, engineers attempted to established a supply route to the front lines by hewing a jeep road out of the matted underbrush. Native guides pointed out a trail which took advantage of as much high ground as possible, but most of the route had to follow the marshy banks of the Barike River and in some instances ran parallel to the front lines. Bridging of the Barike was accomplished in several spots by trestles made of felled timber. Even while constructing the road in the rear of the front lines, however, the engineers were under almost constant attack from bypassed snipers and wandering squads of enemy. Bulldozer operators were a prime target, and engineer casualties mounted as the road clearing proceeded. Metal shields were eventually welded to the tractors to protect the 'dozer operators. Since no heavy graders were available, the jeep road could not be ditched or crowned, and any traffic over the road after a rainstorm usually meant extensive road repairs.[8]

With the need for a closer reinforcing and resupply point made obvious by conditions to the rear of the NGOF front, Hester's staff focused attention on Laiana Beach. Rejected earlier as a landing site because it was deemed too heavily defended and too inaccessible for quick resupply, Laiana now appeared to be the answer to NGOF logistic problems. The beach was some 5,000 yards closer to Munda, and its possession would shorten supply, evacuation, and reinforcement lines as well as put fresh attacking troops considerably closer to the main objective. On 11 July, General Hester ordered the 172d to disengage from the frontal assault and pivot southwest in an attack toward the coast line to secure Laiana Beach. At the same time, the NGOF commander alerted the 3d Battalion, 103d Infantry and the tank platoon of the 9th Defense Battalion to be ready to leave Rendova for Laiana as soon as the 172d reached the coast.

Though the 172d was only a short distance northeast of the beach when directed to attack, the area was not secured until 13 July. Despite near-constant artillery assistance which shredded and blasted the jungle covering from defenses on the sharp hills between the 172d and Laiana, the enemy clung stubbornly to his positions. Repeated air strikes failed to dent the defenses, and the Japanese, apparently aware of NGOF intentions, rained mortar and artillery fire between the 172d and its

[8] *McAllister ltr.*

AVENGER TORPEDO BOMBERS *wing toward New Georgia on 9 July 1943 to strike Munda airfield in support of the 43d Division's attack.* (*USMC 57685*)

MARINE LIGHT TANK, *accompanied by Army infantrymen, moves through the jungle toward the front lines on New Georgia.* (*SC 395877*)

objective. Marine tanks and the 103d Infantry Battalion, scheduled to land on the 12th, were held back. The 172d reached Laiana on the 13th, and, on the following day, landing craft and tank lighters carried the reinforcements ashore. Artillery smoke shells covered the landing activities. Although the infantry hit the shore line without incident, enemy 75mm guns hidden in the jungle fired random shots at the lighters. No hits were scored, and all tanks were put ashore without damage. From his headquarters at Munda, General Sasaki observed the smoke screening this new development; but in his orders for the 14th of July, he erroneously reported that 70 large barges had attempted to land but had been repulsed with the loss of 15 of the barges.[9]

While the 172d held the new beachhead area and waited for the 169th to close the gap between the two regiments and come abreast, the Marine tanks and 3/103 moved into division reserve. A special weapons detail from the 9th Defense Battalion accompanied the infantry to Laiana and set up 40mm, 20mm, and .50 caliber antiaircraft weapons for protection against Japanese strafing and bombing attacks.

In the 169th's zone, strong mortar and artillery fires were placed on Japanese defensive positions in an effort to reestablish forward movement, but the enemy resistance continued. At this time, the regiment—tired and understrength—was opposed by a determined, dug-in enemy to the front and continually harassed by snipers and infiltrators in the rear areas. On the 11th, the 169th's commanding officer and his staff were relieved by Colonel Temple Holland and a staff from the 145th Infantry, 37th Division. The new regimental commander postponed further attacks by the 169th until the next day so that he might have time to reorganize his command.

A new push by the 169th on the 12th, following a rolling artillery barrage, failed to gain ground, however, and a return was made to the line of departure. The following morning, 1,000-pound bombs dropped by 12 scout bombers of ComAir New Georgia further hammered the defenses holding up the 169th's progress. Pilots returning from the strike noted that the target area marked by smoke shells was 600 yards east of the grid coordinates given in the air mission request, an indication of the difficulties the 169th was experiencing in locating its position on the ground. The whole regiment was committed to the attack after the air strike, but only the 3d Battalion on the left managed to gain ground. Successful in seizing the crest of a small knoll about 600 yards to the front, the battalion hung grimly to its position and repelled several strong counterattacks. During the next two days, the 3d Battalion took 101 casualties, dead and wounded. Despite strong enemy pressure, the infantrymen held their position. Barrages fired by supporting artillery units boxed the front and flanks of the salient, and discouraged the development of a large-scale Japanese counterattack.

In an effort to aid the beleaguered 3d Battalion, the 1st Battalion attacked on the 15th toward a dominating rise of ground about 400 yards to its right front. When opposition failed to develop, the attackers clambered to the top of the ridge, only to find deserted pillboxes, abandoned fox-

[9] CIC SoPacFor Item No. 702, dtd 13Sep43, New Georgia DefOpO A No. 36, dtd 14Jul43.

holes, and empty trenches. The Japanese defenders had finally withdrawn.

The victory lifted the spirits of the entire regiment, but more heartening was a glimpse of the NGOF's ultimate objective—Munda airfield. On its coral white runways and taxiways some three miles away could be seen wrecked and burned enemy planes. With new vigor, the 169th took over the enemy positions and prepared to defend the newly won ridgeline.

COUNTERATTACK PREPARATIONS [10]

While General Hester's NGOF fought its way from the Barike to Laiana, General Sasaki's defenders were operating on the simple strategy of trading space for time. Considerably outnumbered, the *229th Regiment* and *8th CSNLF* had nevertheless forced the invading American division to move slowly and cautiously. Sasaki's defensive lines had reduced the NGOF invasion to a groping, stumbling advance—much in contrast to the swift, hard-hitting operation envisaged earlier by the Americans. The Japanese played for time during which reinforcements could arrive.

The plight of the Munda defenders had received immediate attention. General Imamura, commanding the *Eighth Area Army* at Rabaul, on 3 July ordered the New Georgia defense augmented by the remainder of the *13th Regiment* as well as by additional antitank, mountain artillery, engineer, and medical units. In addition, the rear echelons of the *229th Regiment*, which were still in the Shortlands area, were ordered to join their parent unit. A number of large landing barges were also dispatched to New Georgia. Most of the fresh troops were to stop at Kolombangara, but the elements of the *229th*, the antitank units, and most of the engineers were to go directly to Munda.[11] In all, Imamura ordered about 3,000 troops from the Shortlands-Faisi area to the New Georgia Group. More reinforcements were to follow. The joint Army-Navy conference at Rabaul, on 4 July, cemented the understanding between the *Eighth Area Army* and the *Southeast Area Fleet* that the main sea and air effort would be directed against the Central Solomons while the troops already on New Guinea would hold out without additional help for the time being.

Imamura's promised reinforcements started to New Georgia on schedule, but the transports bumped into an Allied destroyer force lurking in Kula Gulf and turned back to the Shortlands to await a better time. The next night, 5–6 July, the transports sailed again, and, although part of the force was ambushed by Allied ships, the Japanese managed to land about 850 troops on Kolombangara.[12] On New Georgia, General Sasaki shoved all available *229th Regiment*, *8th CSNLF*, and *38th Division* support troops into the defense of the airfield in an attempt to hold out as long as possible. His line of forti-

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[10] Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: *New Georgia Campaign;* CIC SoPacFor Item No. 702, dtd 13Sep43, New Georgia DefOpO A Nos. 11–50, 30Jun–23Jul43; *SE Area NavOps—I; SE Area NavOps—II;* Rentz, *Marines in the Central Solomons.*

[11] CIC SoPacFor Item No. 740, dtd 23Sep43, Go Area (Eighth Area Army) OpO No. 35, dtd 3Jul43, and Item No. 838, dtd 11Nov43, Oki (Seventeenth Army) Group OpO No. 270, dtd 4Jul43.

[12] This sea encounter, known as the Battle of Kula Gulf, will be related in connection with the Rice Anchorage landing in the following chapter.

fications, spiked with seacoast and dual-purpose guns, ringed the coastline of Munda Point for some 6,500 yards and then swung inland from Roviana Lagoon for almost 3,000 yards. As NGOF troops were to find out, it was a formidable area to crack.

Sasaki's tactics in the defense of the terrain between the Barike River and his main positions around the airfield were to counterattack continually in the hopes of offsetting any gain which the NGOF might make. Skillfully deploying the forces available, his field commanders ordered one company to hold and threaten a flank of the Allied line while other units slipped to the rear of the attackers to raid and cut communications. This infiltration had the calculated two-fold effect of creating casualties and demoralizing the attacking force. In instances where it became necessary to hold a particular strong point, an ambush squad with orders to fight to the death was left in position.

While part of the Munda defense force wrestled with the advancing Allied units, other engineers and soldiers feverishly built pillboxes, dug trenches, and cleared lanes of fire in defensive lines to the rear. Each time the Japanese gave ground, they fell back to another strong position. Well-camouflaged and protected, the barrier of mutually-supporting positions allowed Sasaki's troops to contest any advance stubbornly. The terrain was an ally, since it hid the Japanese defenses and forced the Allied attackers to battle against the jungle and enemy troops simultaneously. Sasaki had another advantage, too. He was close to Bougainville and the Shortlands, and although reinforcements—mainly machine gun, antitank, and artillery units—dribbled into New Georgia in an unsteady stream, his strength remained nearly constant. Troops from Kolombangara, transported to Munda by barges during the night, were at the front lines the next day.

With the Allied lines inching slowly toward Munda, the Japanese were aware that the only means of re-establishing any type of order in New Georgia depended upon a strong counterattack. Weighing the time element against the danger, the Japanese decided on a delaying action in the Munda area while a counterattacking force struck through the upper Barike River region. As reinforcements arrived at Kolombangara, this counteroffensive was kept in mind. The ground attack would be staged simultaneously with a sea campaign, which would cut Allied supply lines while the air fleets pounded the Allied lines and rear areas on New Georgia.[13]

The *13th Regiment*, which had moved in parcels from the Shortlands, was selected to straighten the lines in New Georgia. On 8 July, Colonel Tomonari was alerted to send the *2d Battalion* to Bairoko Harbor to help Commander Saburo Okumura's *Kure 6th SNLF* defend that area from another but smaller Allied landing force. At the same time, Tomonari was to relinquish command of Kolombangara's defenses to the commander of the *Yokosuka 7th SNLF* and with the remaining two battalions of the *13th Regiment* advance to Munda for the new attack.[14] Okumura, at Bairoko, was to cover the *13th*'s advance from Kolombangara and then defend the Bairoko area without further assistance. Sasaki's orders

[13] CIC SoPacFor Item No. 730, dtd 23Sep43. SE Area ForOpO No. 10, dtd 18Jul43.

[14] CIC SoPacFor Item No. 676, dtd 30Aug43, Kolombangara DefOpO No. 6, dtd 8Jul43.

to Tomonari were for the counterattacking force to move to a bivouac area on a plantation about five miles north of Munda. The *13th* was to remain there until Sasaki deemed that the time was opportune for the attack.

To ensure that the operation would go smoothly, Sasaki established a liaison post at the plantation area and then sent a guide to meet Tomonari at Bairoko. Plans proceeded without a hitch as the first echelon of about 1,300 men moved by barge to Bairoko on 9 July. On the 11th, another 1,200 troops moved across Kula Gulf and a further 1,200 men made the cross-channel journey by barge on the night of the 12th. The movements were postponed several days by naval action in the gulf, but just as soon as they were able to make the crossing, all units of Colonel Tomonari's attacking force, mainly the *1st* and *2d Battalions*, assembled at Bairoko.

In moving into the bivouac area, Tomonari's force abruptly ran into a trail block set up by part of Colonel Liversedge's Northern Landing Group. In a brief but sharp encounter, the American force scattered the *13th Regiment's* leading elements, and reported to Liversedge that a large movement of Japanese reinforcements had been prevented from reaching Munda. Actually, Tomonari had broken off the engagement so as not to disclose the impending counterattack. Instead of staying to slug it out with the NLG, Tomonari withdrew his two battalions, and Sasaki's guides then led the Japanese soldiers toward Munda over another trail. By the morning of the 13th, Tomonari's main elements were at the plantation assembly area.

With two regiments now in position to oppose the landing force hitting toward Munda on the south, Sasaki was confident of his ability to reclaim the initiative. Some of his optimism could have been used by his superiors, however, because Army-Navy disagreements were stalling the progress of further help in the airfield's defense. The Navy, seeking the commitment of an additional Army division in New Georgia, wanted reassurance that Navy installations in Bougainville, the Shortlands, and Rabaul would be protected. The Navy suggested a possible 2,000 troops for the Rice Anchorage area, 3,000 more for Munda airfield, another 2,000 to take over the Roviana Lagoon islands, and an additional 4,000 to be used as an attacking force.

The Army turned thumbs down. The *Eighth Area Army* had no intention of further reinforcing the New Georgia area. To Army planners, there was no way in which the war situation could be altered, and, as a matter of fact, a reappraisal of the situation had convinced them that Bougainville could not be held long if the Allies attacked there. While this difference of opinion existed, General Sasaki would have to make do with the *Southeast Detachment Forces* already at hand and those few scattered rear echelon and support troops which destroyer-transports could rush to Kolombangara for barge transfer to New Georgia.

MARINE TANKS VS. PILLBOXES [15]

The occupation force's struggle to advance on New Georgia was anxiously

[15] Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: *ComSoPac Jul43 WarD; ThirdFlt Rept; 43d InfDivHist; NGOF Account; 9th DefBn TkOps; New Georgia Campaign*; Halsey and Bryan, *Halsey's Story*; Rentz, *Marines in the Central Solomons;* Zimmer, *43d's History.*

watched by the remainder of the NGOF on Rendova and the barrier islands. Artillerymen, executing fire missions, noted that front lines did not move forward. Landing craft coxswains, returning from supply runs to Zanana and Laiana beaches, brought back reports of the fighting and distorted stories of the Japanese infiltration raids. All NGOF units knew that the 172d was stalled in the hills west of Laiana and that the 169th was understrength and fatigued by the struggle through the jungle. Despite the continual and intense pounding by three 155mm and three 105mm gun and howitzer battalions, which seemed to have leveled all aboveground installations, the enemy still seemed as strong as ever and apparently as disposed to continue the fight. Air strikes, which included as many as 70 planes, bombed the enemy defenses without apparent results except to strip foliage from the jungle.

Realization that more Allied troops would be required had come early in the campaign. On 6 July, General Hester had requested, and had been granted, the use of the 148th Infantry (less one battalion with the NLG) as division reserve. The 145th Infantry (also less one battalion with the NLG) was additionally attached to Hester's NGOF. Both regiments were alerted for possible commitment to combat and, prior to 14 July, were moved to Rendova where they would be readily available.

With the addition of two regiments as NGOF reserve, a needed change in the command structure became more apparent. For some time, observers had believed that General Hester's 43d Division staff, split between the two tasks of directing a division in combat and a larger occupation force in a campaign, had been unequal to the job. Moreover, on the 13th, General Griswold of the XIV Corps had some disquieting reports for Admiral Halsey and General Harmon:

> From an observer viewpoint, things are going badly. Forty-three division about to fold up. My opinion is that they will never take Munda. Enemy resistance to date not great. My advice is to set up twenty-fifth division to act with what is left of thirty-seventh division if this operation is to be successful.[16]

Halsey, on 9 July, had directed Harmon to name a corps commander to take command of all ground troops on New Georgia. Now, after Griswold's first-hand report from the front lines, Halsey told Harmon to take whatever steps he thought necessary to straighten out the situation. Griswold and his XIV Corps staff was ordered to assume command of the NGOF and Hester was returned to the command solely of the 43d Division.[17] All ground forces, including those of the 37th Division, now in the NGOF, as well as the 161st Regiment from the 25th Division, were assigned to Griswold's command. The new NGOF leader, requesting a few days for reorganization, promised a prompt, coordinated attack. The command change was effective at midnight, 14 July, a date which happened to coincide with the long-planned relief of Rear Ad-

[16] Griswold disp to Harmon, dtd 13Jul43, quoted in *New Georgia Campaign*, p. III-39.

[17] Among reasons he later cited for recommending the shift in command, General Harmon noted that Admiral Turner "was inclined more and more to take active control of land operations." Turner disagreed strongly with Harmon's recommendation on Hester's relief as NGOF commander, but Harmon convinced Halsey of the necessity for this change. Miller, *Reduction of Rabaul*, pp. 123-124.

miral Turner by Rear Admiral Theodore S. Wilkinson as Commander, III Amphibious Force. Turner returned to Pearl Harbor to take command of amphibious forces in the Central Pacific.

The addition of tanks and a fresh battalion of infantry to the forces at Laiana beach buoyed the hopes of the NGOF that the impetus of the attack could be resumed. The tank platoon of the 9th Marine Defense Battalion had landed on Rendova with its parent unit, but had not been required for seizure of the island. The tanks later moved to Zanana Beach to support an engineer mission shortly after the NGOF began its attack. The marshy ground in the vicinity of the Barike balked attempts to use armor in support of infantry operations, however, so the eight tanks were withheld from action until Laiana was taken. Here, it was reported, the ground was more firm and could support armored operations.

Forward movement of the 172d Infantry in the Laiana area had virtually ceased when the Marine armor arrived. The enemy's defensive line, a series of pillboxes dug into the hill mass rising just forward of the American lines, stubbornly resisted attack. Infantrymen attempting to push ahead were driven back by fierce machine gun fire from the camouflaged positions. In the hopes that a coordinated tank-infantry thrust could crack the defenses, an attack was planned for 15 July.

On the morning of the 15th, three tanks reported to the 2d Battalion, 172d on the left, while another trio of tanks moved toward the 3d Battalion on the right. Tangled underbrush hid stumps and logs that hampered attempts to get into position, and the drivers had to back and turn the machines constantly to move ahead. In the left zone, the first opposition, which came from a log and coral emplacement, was promptly knocked out by 37mm high explosive rounds and machine gun fire. Two grass bivouac shelters were peppered with canister rounds [18] and machine gun fire, and six to eight dead enemy were reported in each by the 172d's infantrymen following the machines.

Further progress was stopped, however, by enemy machine gun and rifle fire which began to pour from other camouflaged positions. The infantrymen sought cover. The Marine tanks, without infantry support, were forced to resort to a deadly game of blind man's bluff. Hit from one direction, the tanks wheeled—only to receive fire from another quarter. By alternating canister with high explosive rounds, the tankers stripped camouflage from emplacements and then blasted each bunker as it was uncovered. Enemy soldiers attempting to flee the positions were killed by machine guns. Opposition gradually ceased, and the infantrymen moved forward. The advance marked the first significant gain in several days.

In the right zone, the other three tanks were also blasting hidden positions which supporting infantrymen marked with tracer bullets. At one time the tanks were under fire from five hidden bunkers and dugouts. Combat was so close in the thick, hilly jungle that in several instances the muzzles of the 37mm guns could not be depressed enough to engage the enemy positions. Continually drummed upon by small-arms fire, and blasted repeatedly by grenade and mortar bursts, the armor withdrew after clearing the enemy from one hill. The 3d Battalion immediately

[18] Short-range 37mm ammunition similar to an over-sized shotgun shell.

occupied the positions and set up defenses. The only casualty suffered by the Marines in the engagement was one driver injured when a hidden log jammed its way through a floor hatch.

On the following day, three tanks with six infantrymen following each machine moved around the base of the hill taken by the 3d Battalion and pushed through the heavy jungle toward the next hill. The tanks raked the underbrush with fire and then pumped explosive shells into the enemy positions. A number of pillboxes, dugouts, and enemy shelters were knocked out. Only rifle and automatic weapons fire opposed the advance, and the infantrymen quickly moved forward. In the 2d Battalion zone on the left flank, defenses on the coast were outflanked by the tanks, which maneuvered along the shore line firing at the blind sides and rear of the bunkers. After nearly 200 yards of progress, the tankmen discovered they were without infantry support and returned to the lines. A second attack was stalled by heavy mortar fire which drove the supporting infantrymen back to their foxholes.

Unprotected by infantry, the tanks kept firing to the front and sides to keep enemy soldiers from attacking. Heavy jungle growth limited visibility to only a few yards and restricted maneuver of the machines. While trying to disengage from the battle, the tanks were rocked by heavy explosions, apparently from magnetic antitank grenades tossed against the machines by enemy soldiers hidden in the dense thicket all about the armor. The rear machine was blasted twice, and each of the other two tanks was damaged slightly by similar explosions. Swiveling and turning, the tanks fired at every movement in the brush, and, by sweeping the jungle with canister and machine gun fire, managed to break clear and crawl back toward friendly lines.

That night, the 3d Battalion, 103d Infantry relieved 2/172 in the left zone and another coordinated tank-infantry attack was scheduled. Working all night, 16–17 July, the Marines had five tanks available for combat. By prior agreement, 30 infantrymen were to accompany each machine and the tanks were not to move unless soldiers supported them. The day's attack had hardly begun, however, before stiff enemy opposition developed. Machine gun and rifle fire spewed from a number of concealed positions, and bullets ricocheted among the infantrymen following the armor. Soldiers, returning the fire, attempted to locate the emplacements so that the tanks' 37mm guns could be directed against the enemy.

As the tanks maneuvered toward the enemy defenses, the lead machine was suddenly sprayed with flame thrower fuel by a Japanese in a camouflaged position. The fuel did not ignite, and the enemy soldier was quickly killed. In such close combat, however, even nearby infantrymen could not protect the tanks from hidden enemy soldiers who suddenly appeared to toss magnetic grenades on the tanks. The third machine, hit by such a missile, took a gaping hole near the hull. Two crewmen were wounded. A hasty look behind them convinced the Marines that the infantrymen had fallen behind, and that protection was gone. Covering each other by fire, the tanks moved back with one of the undamaged vehicles towing the disabled machine.

Although no long gains had been made in the three-day attack, the commitment

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of armor on the extreme left flank of the NGOF front had helped wedge an opening into Sasaki's defenses. A line of pillboxes stretching from Laiana beach northwest for more than 400 yards had been breached. Typical of the defenses was a cluster of seven pillboxes which covered a frontage of only 150 yards, each position defending and supporting the next. Overhead and frontal protection consisted of two thicknesses of coconut logs and three feet of coral. Skillfully camouflaged, with narrow firing slits, the bunkers were virtually a part of the terrain and surrounding jungle.

TOMONARI REPULSED [19]

The Japanese counterattack hit just as the NGOF paused to consolidate its gains, restore contact and communication, and effect a reorganization and reinforcement. Through coincidence or superior combat intelligence, General Sasaki committed the *13th Regiment* at a time when its appearance would provide the greatest shock effect. (See Map 6.)

Following its arrival at Bairoko and the move to the plantation area, the *Tomonari Force* scattered in small groups to reassemble north of the Barike River area. Sasaki's orders to Tomonari were:

> The 13th Regiment will immediately maneuver in the area of the upper reaches of the Barike River; seek out the flank and rear of the main body of the enemy who landed on the beach east of the Barike River and attack, annihilating them on the coast.[20]

To accomplish this task, Colonel Tomonari was to take over the defensive positions in the designated area and establish a base from which attacks could be staged. Colonel Hirata's *229th*, with as much strength as possible, was to coordinate with the *13th* and attack the American left flank.

Despite Sasaki's precautions, however, the *Tomonari Force* was observed moving toward the Barike. On 17 July, the 43d Division Reconnaissance Troop, screening the open right flank of the NGOF, reported that a large body of enemy, numbering from 200 to 300 men, had been observed moving toward the rear of the NGOF. One platoon of the troop attempted to ambush this force but was overrun. Sasaki's admonitions to keep contact notwithstanding, communication between the *Tomonari Force* and the *229th* was broken, and the two counterattacks were never synchronized. On the right flank of Sasaki's units, the *3d Battalion, 229th* was kept off balance by the tank-infantry attacks of the 172d. Farther north, the 169th was in a commanding position and was able to call down artillery fire on any observed group of enemy infantry, and thus effectively forestalled any threat of a push through the center of the line. Only the attack from the upper Barike materialized.

Shortly after dark on the 17th, enemy troops hit almost simultaneously at the rear area and beach installations of the 43d Division. Soldiers helping to evacuate wounded were themselves cut down.

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[19] Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: *New Georgia Campaign; NGOF Account; 43d InfDivHist;* 9th DefBn WarD, Jul43; *SE Area NavOps—I; SE Area NavOps—II;* ONI, *Combat Narratives X;* Rentz, *Marines in the Central Solomons;* Zimmer, *43d's History.*

[20] CIC SoPacFor Item No. 702, dtd 13Sep43, New Georgia DefOpO No. 35, dtd 13Jul43.

In a series of sharp skirmishes, Japanese infiltrators struck at the medical collecting station, the engineer bivouac area, the 43d Division CP, and the beach defenses. For a short time, the fate of the command post was held in one thin telephone line. Although most lines were cut, contact with the artillery units on the adjacent islands was still open over one line, and support was urgently requested. Accurate and destructive artillery fire that virtually ringed the command post was the quick reply. In several instances, concentrations within 150 yards of the CP were requested and received. In a matter of moments, the *Tomonari Force* was scattered, and although the CP area was under attack all during the night, repeated concentrations falling almost within Allied positions kept any large-scale assault from developing.

In the beachhead area, Army service units, the 172d's antitank company, and the 9th Defense Battalion's antiaircraft detachment were also hit. A Marine patrol, investigating the CP situation, returned to report that a body of enemy infantry of near battalion strength was moving between the CP and the beach. Reclaiming two .30 caliber machine guns from an Army supply dump by piecing together parts from a number of guns, half of the 52-man Marine detachment went forward to set up an ambush ahead of the advancing Japanese, while the other half remained behind to man the antiaircraft defenses. The ambush stopped the first enemy attack, and, after the Marines fell back to the beach defenses, the attack was not renewed. The reason was apparent the next morning. Two Marines who volunteered to remain behind at the ambush had effectively stopped the counterattack by repulsing four attempts. Only one of the two Marines survived the attack, which left 18 enemy dead littered about the guns.

The night of 17 July virtually ended all Japanese attempts to regain the initiative. The *Tomonari Force*, in small groups, appeared from time to time in various areas, raiding and infiltrating, but was not an effective threat. Up to the time of the resumption of the NGOF attack, Sasaki still harbored hopes that he could collect his scattered forces for another attempt, but the rapidly-accelerating Allied buildup nullified all his efforts.

CORPS REORGANIZATION AND ATTACK [21]

A number of Army units were close at hand for ready reinforcement of the NGOF lines. These were promptly ordered to New Georgia when the Japanese

[21] Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: *New Georgia Campaign; New Georgia Combat; NGOF Account;* ComAirSols StrikeComd WarD, 2Apr–25Jul43; ComAir New Georgia SAR, 29Jun–13Aug43; 37th InfDiv Rept of Ops in the Munda Campaign, dtd 25Aug43; 37th InfDiv AR 22Jul–5Aug43, n.d.; 37th InfDiv Jnl 22Jul–5Aug43; *43d InfDivHist;* Col Stuart A. Baxter Rept of Ops of the 148th Inf (–3d Bn) in New Georgia 18Jul–5Aug43, n.d.; NarrativeRept CbtActivities of 1/148, dtd 13Sep43; *9th DefBn TkOps;* 10th DefBn AR of TkPlat in New Georgia Campaign, dtd 3Sep43; 11th DefBn WarD, Aug–Sep43, hereafter *11th DefBn WarD; SE Area NavOps—I; SE Area NavOps—II;* MajGen Oscar W. Griswold Rept to LtGen Leslie J. McNair, dtd 21Sep43; Robert F. Karolevitz, ed., *The 25th Division and World War II* (Baton Rouge, La.: Army and Navy Publishing Co., 1947), hereafter Karolevitz, *25th InfDivHist;* Stanley A. Frankel, *The 37th Infantry Division in World War II* (Washington; Infantry Journal Press, 1947), hereafter Frankel, *37th InfDivHist;* Rentz, *Marines in the Central Solomons;* Zimmer, *43d's History.*

counterattacked. The 148th Infantry was on Kokorana when the emergency alerted that unit at 0100 on the 18th; the 1st Battalion, dispatched immediately, came ashore at Zanana fully expecting to find the beach area in enemy hands and the 43d Division CP wiped out. By this time, however, the serious threat had passed and when the regiment was assembled, it began moving to the front lines. Although an advance party was hit by remnants of the *13th Infantry*, the 148th pushed forward aggressively, cleared the opposition, and moved into the rear area of the 169th by nightfall of the 18th.

The 145th Regiment, which already had one battalion in place as reserve for the 43d Division, reached the rear of the 169th lines on the 20th. Upon the arrival the same day of Major General Robert S. Beightler, the 37th Infantry Division assumed responsibility for the sector and the 169th Infantry was relieved. Colonel Holland, who had directed the 169th in its capture of the hills overlooking Munda, returned to command of the 145th. The 169th's 1st and 2d Battalions, tired and badly depleted, departed for Rendova for a needed rest. The 3d Battalion remained on New Georgia as 43d Division reserve.

The arrival of other units also strengthened the NGOF lines. The 161st Infantry, detached from the 25th Division on Guadalcanal, debarked on the 21st. Attached to the 37th Division, the regiment moved into bivouac on the division's right flank. The remainder of the 103d Regiment joined the 3d Battalion on New Georgia on the 21st and 22d of July, and, from that point on, the 103d (less the 1st Battalion still at Segi) fought as a regiment. Additional antiaircraft protection against the periodic Japanese air raids on New Georgia and Rendova was provided by a detachment of 4 officers and 140 men from the Marine 11th Defense Battalion. Alerted early in the campaign for possible commitment, a 90mm battery, augmented by four 40mm guns and four .50 caliber machine guns, was sent to Kokorana Island from Guadalcanal on 18 July.

During the period 18–24 July, while the NGOF swelled in size as fresh regiments poured in, the front lines of the New Georgia Force remained static. At this time, the main positions of the NGOF traced an irregular pattern through the hilly jungle in a northwest direction from Laiana Beach to the steep hills guarding the northern approach to Munda. Into this 4,000-yard front, still about three miles from Munda, General Griswold moved the two divisions with orders to continue the attack on the 25th. In the southern sector, General Hester's 43d Division had the 103d Infantry (Lieutenant Colonel Lester E. Brown) anchored to the coast with the 172d Infantry (Colonel Ross) on the right. In the 37th Division's zone of attack on the north, General Beightler had placed the 145th Infantry (Colonel Holland) on the left flank and the 148th Infantry (Colonel Stuart A. Baxter) on the extreme right flank with the added mission of protecting the right flank and rear of the NGOF. The 161st Infantry (Colonel James M. Dalton) was assigned as the interior unit between the 145th and the 148th. To insure a rapid advance, the frontline units were directed by General Griswold to bypass all strong points, leaving these for the reserve units to eliminate.

Combat action during the period in which the NGOF reorganized and rested was limited. As each front-line unit moved into place, patrols sought to deter-

mine the disposition and strength of the Japanese units to the front. Occasionally, scattered bands of *13th Regiment's* soldiers were encountered, and a number of confused, short skirmishes resulted. Casualties to both sides were light.

The NGOF had one advantage. The ground fighting had been relatively free of air interference, and most of the bombing attacks were by friendly planes on rear area enemy defenses. The Japanese had attempted but failed in several attempts to locate the NGOF front lines for a bombing and strafing attack. Segi, Wickham, and Viru, however, were visited regularly by nocturnal aircraft which the troops—conforming to South Pacific custom—tagged with the euphemisms of "One-Bomb Bill" or "Washing-machine Charlie." Most of the Japanese air attempts, though, appeared to be aimed at Rendova where the bulk of supplies was stockpiled. An alert air cover, helped by antiaircraft batteries, kept enemy planes at a wary distance.

Air support missions requested by General Mulcahy as ComAir New Georgia were generally directed at the easily identifiable targets around Munda field. Close air support for troops fighting in dense jungle had proven impractical with target designation so difficult. Air-ground coordination, struggling against the handicaps of visibility and communications, was not helped by the inaccurate operation maps. Even though gridded, the photo-mosaics were not precise enough for such close work, where a slight error might result in heavy NGOF losses. Then, too, in the fighting where daily progress was measured in 200- or 300-yard gains, the troops were reluctant to withdraw for an air strike. Soldiers reported that when they had pulled back to provide a zone of safety for air strikes or artillery and mortar preparations, the enemy simply moved forward into the abandoned area and waited for the bombing or artillery to lift before moving back into their original positions in time to defend against the expected ground attack.

Requested support missions were flown by Strike Command, ComAirSols. The New Georgia support was in addition to the repeated bombing and strafing strikes at enemy shipping and airfields at Kahili, Ballale, Vila, Enogai-Bairoko, and Bougainville. The planes flew cover for task groups and friendly shipping as well. During the period 30 June to 25 July, the start of the corps offensive in New Georgia, the Strike Command squadrons flew 156 missions involving 3,119 sorties. In addition to more than four million pounds of explosives dropped on enemy installations, the ComAirSols planes counted 24 enemy ships sunk and another 28 damaged. A total of 428 fighter planes and 136 bombers were reported as destroyed by ComAirSols pilots. Strike Command losses in the Central Solomons during the period were 80 planes.

The final push on Munda promised the hardest fighting of the campaign. Between the NGOF and its objective were more than 4,500 yards of low but steep hills, irregular and broken, densely covered with tropical rain forest, and laced with enemy defenses. Reports of the patrols and observation of bunkers already taken indicated that the enemy soldiers were dug in and covered by low, two-level camouflaged coral and log emplacements with deadly interlocking fields of fire. Trenches bulwarked by coconut logs connected the bunkers. NGOF soldiers were

well aware that the enemy would have to be routed from these positions and that resistance until death was standard practice. Further, the soldiers knew that the enemy often abandoned one bunker to man another, and then, after the first bunker had been overrun, returned to defend it again. An area gained in attack during one day had to be cleared of infiltrators the following day.

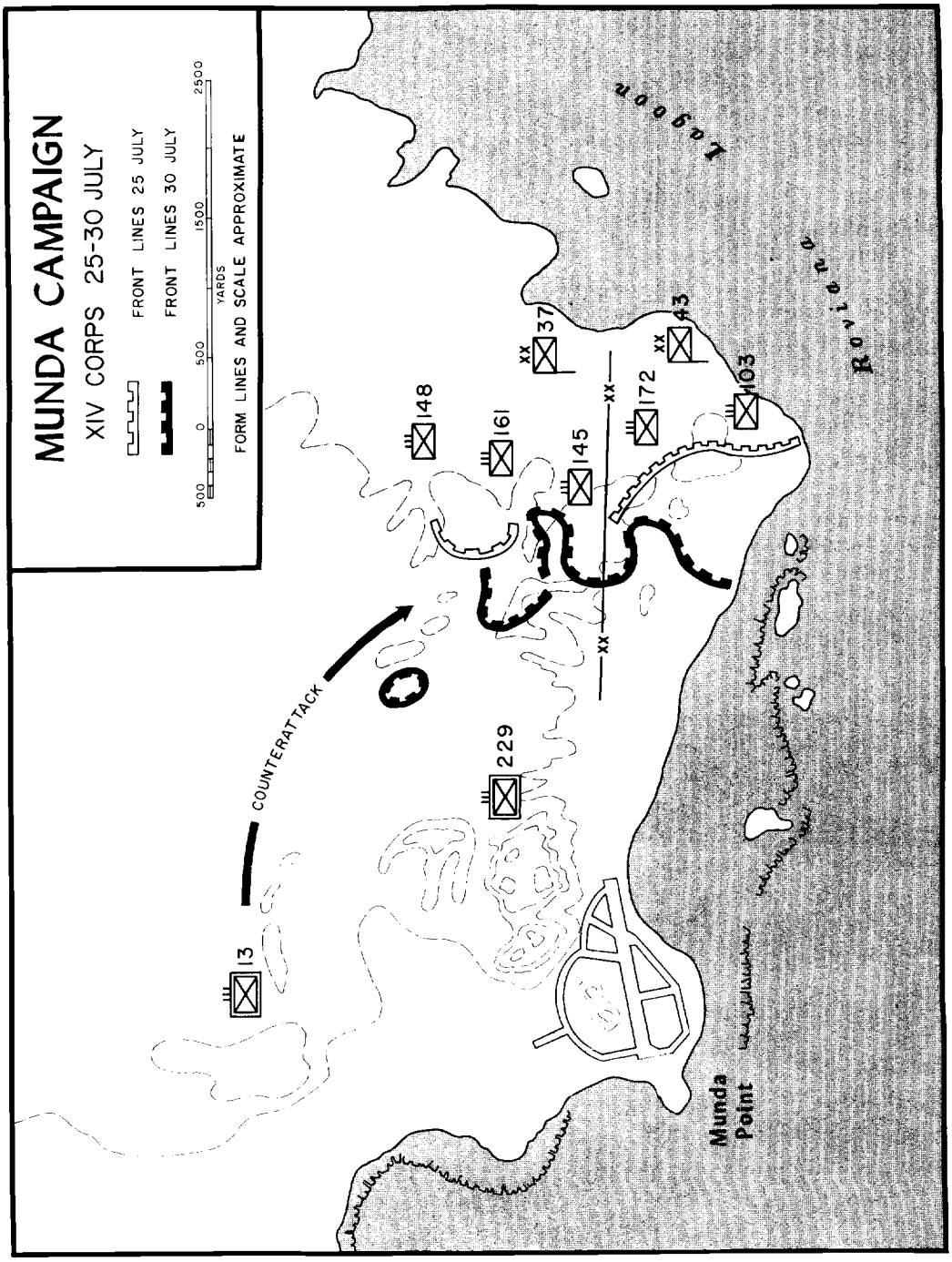
Prior to the 25 July attack by the NGOF, an attempt was made by Marine tanks to crack the hill complex south of Laiana Beach and bring the 43d Division units on a line with the 37th Division. Withdrawn from further engagements in that sector after the 17 July attack, the 9th Defense Battalion tanks were sent into action again on the 24th. An artillery preparation prior to 0700 pounded a 100-yard zone in front of the lines before the armor moved out from the lines of the left battalion of the 172d Infantry. Repulsed by a strongly defended position in that sector, the Marine tanks tried again from the adjoining battalion of the 103d Infantry on the left. Although several pillboxes were knocked out, the tanks were forced to withdraw after one machine was blinded by hits on the periscope. Two other machines sputtered with engine trouble caused by low-octane fuel and overheating. The withdrawal was made under fire, the disabled machine under tow by another.

Another point of tenacious defense was met by the 161st Infantry. Dalton's regiment, attempting to move up to the line of departure, was told that only two pillboxes were to his immediate front. A reinforced platoon, making the initial attack, knocked out the two pillboxes but then uncovered another network of fortifications. A strong company was sent into the area. Two more pillboxes were knocked out, but 12 more were uncovered. At this point, the regiment moved in and knocked out these strong points before discovering more pillboxes. At last, with the 25 July attack impending, the regiment bypassed the fortifications and moved up to the line of departure. But before the pocketed strong point was reduced, "it took the combined efforts of two battalions, 3,000 rounds of 81mm mortar fire, the use of tanks, and the passage of seven day's time." [22]

As General Griswold's NGOF poised for the final make-or-break assault on Munda, his adversary was forced to face the contest with a dwindling stack of chips. XIV Corps intelligence officers estimated that General Sasaki had lost about 2,000 troops, including 1,318 counted dead, of the more than 4,500 which he had available earlier.[23] His biggest gamble had failed—matched and beaten by a larger reserve. The *13th Regiment* had now filtered back toward Munda to take up defensive positions to the northeast. The main units of the *229th Regiment*, which had so bitterly contested the advance of the NGOF from the Barike, had taken steadily mounting casualties. Nearly cut off from the rest of the command by the pressure of the NGOF attack, the *229th* took up final positions in the Munda hills, the battalions and companies considerably intermingled. General Sasaki, hoping to avoid some of the pounding aimed at Kokengola Hill, moved his headquarters from the airfield to the plantation north of it.

[22] 37th InfDiv Ops, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

[23] USAFISPA IntelRept No. 27, dtd 24Jul43.


MUNDA CAMPAIGN
XIV CORPS 25-30 JULY
FRONT LINES 25 JULY
FRONT LINES 30 JULY
500 0 500 1500 2500
YARDS
FORM LINES AND SCALE APPROXIMATE
COUNTERATTACK
13
229
148
161
145
37
43
172
103
Munda Point
Roviana
Lagoon

MAP 6

With the worsening situation in New Georgia came new realization and uneasiness that Japanese positions in Bougainville would be as quickly overrun. A seaplane carrier protected by five destroyers, trying to reach that island on 22 July, was attacked by a force of 16 dive bombers, 18 torpedo bombers (all from VMTB–143), and 16 heavy bombers which stopped the reinforcement effort cold. Only 189 men out of 618 Army personnel aboard the carrier survived. Also lost were 22 tanks, heavy equipment, guns, fuel, and ammunition destined for the Central Solomons defenders. The destroyers, however, managed to land some troops.

Sasaki continued to hope for reinforcements, but the Allied clamp on Kula Gulf was too tight. The only major unit to reach New Georgia was the understrength *230th Regiment*, a remnant from the Guadalcanal withdrawal. Only about 400 men reached Munda, and these were put into the final defense around Kokengola Hill. The pincers movement of the NGOF and the concentrated shelling and bombing counted toward making the Central Solomons situation doubtful, but the blockade of Kula Gulf by Allied destroyer forces, torpedo boats, and night and day air patrols was perhaps the telling factor. "Consequently," the enemy was forced to admit, "the fate of the Munda sector became a matter of time." [24]

General Sasaki, a realist, confessed that the Allies had complete material superiority and that a sustained push by the NGOF would collapse his command. Although he was envious of his opponents' artillery, communication, and large landing boats, he was critical of the NGOF soldier—who, he said, advanced slowly, failing to take advantage of his strength and equipment:

> They awaited the results of several days' bombardments before a squad advanced. Positions were constructed and then strength increased. When we counterattacked at close quarters, they immediately retreated and with their main strength in the rear engaged our pursuing troops with rapid fire. The infantry did not attack in strength, but gradually forced a gap and then infiltrated. Despite the cover provided by tank firepower, the infantry would not come to grips with us and charge. The tanks were slow but were movable pillboxes which could stop and neutralize our fire.[25]

The defense of the airfield had also depleted Sasaki's forces. The Japanese soldier, fatigued and muddy, was forced to fight in some instances on only one rice ball a day. Kept irritated and sleepless by the constant bombardment, the Munda defender was gaunt, weary, and hungry—but still determined. Despite the hardships, morale was high and the Japanese soldier was "prepared to die in honor, if necessary." [26]

The NGOF attack, now corps-size, opened on 25 July when five-inch shells rained upon the Munda area from seven destroyers. At 0630, heavy bombers began dropping 500-pound bombs and followed up with a rain of 120- and 300-pounders. Next came flights of torpedo bombers and scout bombers which dropped 2,000-pound and 1,000-pound bombs. In all, 171 planes took part in the saturation bombing of the area paralleling the entire front lines. Special attention was given to defensive positions in the

[24] *SE Area NavOps—II*, p. 32.

[25] CIC SoPacFor Item No. 877, dtd 2Dec43, SE DetComdRept to Seventeenth Army CofS, late Jul43.

[26] CIC SoPacFor Item No. 1026, dtd 8Feb44, Translated Enemy Diary.

hills near the lagoon and the heavily defended strong point in the center of the Japanese defensive line, which the NGOF troops called Horseshoe Mountain because of its U-shaped appearance. Bibolo Hill, guarding Munda, was also worked over. (See Map 6.)

As the attack began, Japanese air units attempted to retaliate. At 0930, a flight of from 60 to 70 enemy fighters bore down on New Georgia, but the air cover provided by ComAirSols held off the attack. Additional Allied fighter planes, hastily scrambled from Segi's newly completed airstrip, arrived in time to discourage a second attempt by the enemy planes.

NGOF artillery, firing parallel to the front lines, lashed the area to be attacked; and, with this awesome display of firepower to pave the way, the NGOF regiments began to move forward. One Japanese soldier, astounded by the volume of shelling, wondered, "Are they intending to smash Munda with naval and heavy artillery?" [27] In the 43d Division sector, the 9th Defense Battalion tanks were called to rescue troops of 3/103 held up by a strong point. Aided by a flanking movement of the 172d's 2d Battalion, the tanks slashed through the rear of the enemy positions facing the 103d, and the Japanese hastily abandoned their positions to flee toward the next line of hills. Elements of the 103d then pushed toward the relatively clear plantation area between Laiana and Munda. The advance was about 500 yards. The 3d Battalion of the 169th then moved out of reserve positions to fill the gap between the 103d and the 172d.

The main effort of the first day's attack was made in the 37th Division zone. The 145th Infantry, the left flank unit, held its positions in order to straighten the NGOF lines, while the 161st and 148th pressed the attack. Stiff resistance from the defenders of Horseshoe Mountain held the 161st to a slight gain, but the 148th easily advanced about 600 yards against occasional fire from small outposts. By nightfall, the NGOF had pressed itself against the Japanese front lines.

Marine tanks were in support of both divisions the following day. A newly arrived weapon making a first appearance in the fighting, the flame thrower, was combined with tanks from the 9th Defense Battalion to crack a belt of 74 pillboxes on a 600-yard front which faced the 103d and 172d regiments. The day's attack put the 43d Division well into the rear of the Laiana defenses. Farther north, the 145th continued to hold fast while the 161st attempted to crack the resistance to the front. A fresh Marine tank platoon, six of the machines from the 10th Defense Battalion, was committed to action in an attempt to clear the Horseshoe Mountain defenses.

After a five-hour struggle against the thick jungle and steep terrain, a total of 14 pillboxes had been demolished. The tanks, crashing through a thick underbrush tangled by fallen logs and stumps, finally located the enemy fortifications near a large clearing. Infantry support, however, was often pinned down by murderous enemy fire, and the tanks were forced to twist and turn, pivot and backtrack, to keep enemy riflemen from assaulting the machines with magnetic grenades. Three tanks were knocked out and abandoned before the Marine tankers could disengage from the furious fighting. The strong point remained, however, only partially silenced. That night, close-in artillery fire ringed the abandoned tanks so

[27] USAFIPSA IntelRept No. 40, dtd 26Oct43.

that enemy soldiers could not use them as pillboxes.

On the far right, Colonel Baxter's 148th Infantry continued to drive ahead against only slight resistance, advancing another 800 yards the second day. The move, however, put the 37th Division far ahead of the 43d Division. To straighten the lines, the next attack effort would be directed against the enemy in the south. If the 103d and 172d could press past the open south side of the Horseshoe Mountain defenses, the penetration might relieve the pressure on the central portion of the NGOF line.

Marine tanks were to spearhead the 43d Division attack in the south on the 27th, but the advance had hardly started before the lead tank was blasted by an antitank gun. Confusion resulted. The first tank, with casualties among the crew, stalled. As it started again and attempted to back up, it rammed the second tank. A third tank was hit immediately by antitank fire. As a fourth and fifth machine moved up, one was blasted by magnetic mines and the other, after raking the jungle with machine gun fire, was also disabled by a grenade. All machines, however, by mutual fire assistance, managed to limp back to friendly lines. But the day's attack virtually ended the combat efficiency of the 9th Defense Battalion tank platoon. Of the eight machines brought ashore, five had been disabled that day, a sixth had been disabled previously, and two others were under repair. Four tanks were reported deadlined permanently. In addition, the platoon had a number of drivers and crewmen killed or wounded.

Progress along the line on the 27th had been slight, for two localized strong points continued to hold up the advance. The 43d Division still faced a rugged defensive area in the south which repeated tank-infantry assaults had failed to dent, and the 37th Division was hung up against the Horseshoe Mountain line, kingpin of Sasaki's resistance. To XIV Corps observers, it was plain that the capture of either strong point would result in the downfall of the other.

On 28 July, 3/103 followed four Marine tanks into attack on the coast area after a 30-minute mortar and artillery preparation. The attack proved to be the finest example of tank-infantry tactics of the campaign. With the machines guarded and supported by the infantry, the battalion advanced in a series of spurts. For the first time, the tanks were operating over relatively flat and open terrain with dry footing. Enemy opposition began to falter, then dwindled rapidly, as the attackers rushed ahead. Even three direct hits by antitank guns on the lead tank failed to stop the attack. The enemy gun emplacement was overrun a few moments later. Completely routing the enemy in a 500-yard advance, the infantrymen took up defensive positions while the tanks continued to range ahead. One tank was hit, but managed to limp back to the lines. The day's advance had completely broken the Japanese defenses in the south.

In the north, the 161st jumped off in an attack without prior artillery preparation and caught the enemy unawares. In a brief skirmish, the 161st occupied a ridge which had held up the advance for two days. At this time, the attention of the NGOF was suddenly drawn to the right flank where the 148th had abruptly found itself in trouble. As Colonel Baxter ruefully admitted later: "Don't forget, being

too aggressive can often get you into as much hot water as doing nothing." [28]

Baxter's regiment, pushing ahead against weak and scattered opposition, had reached the Munda-Bairoko trail, but in so doing had opened a hole between the 148th and 161st. With two battalions in the attack, the 148th had been unable to plug the gap, and, as at the Barike River earlier, alert Japanese soldiers quickly infiltrated. That night, the rear supply dump of the 148th was under determined attack by an enemy force of considerable size. Support troops managed to beat off a three-sided enemy assault by using ration boxes and supply cartons as barricades, much in the manner of frontier wagon trains under attack by Indians. Elements of the 148th, which had reached as far as Bibolo Hill west of the airfield to confirm indications that the enemy was abandoning that front, now rushed back to the defense of the supply dump. In this instance, the 148th virtually had to fight its way to the rear as about 250 Japanese in small bands with machine guns and mortars, probably remnants of the *Tomonari Force*, harassed the unit for three nights. The 148th reached the supply dump and established contact with the 161st before turning about to resume the attack toward the northern part of Bibolo Hill.

Although the 43d Division, now under the command of Major General John R. Hodge who had relieved General Hester, continued to push forward along the coast in rapidly increasing gains, the center of the NGOF continued to be snagged on the enemy defenses on Horseshoe Mountain. First break in the barrier came on 30 July when the 172d attacked and occupied a small ridge complex southeast of the main defenses. The following day, 31 July, the 169th attacked and completed the reduction of the southern anchor of the Japanese strong point. The advance, however, still failed to break the Horseshoe defenses.

On 1 August, the 43d Division punched through to the outer taxiway of Munda airfield. The move put the Allied force almost in the rear of Sasaki's last strong point, and enemy resistance on Horseshoe Mountain suddenly dissolved. The airfield defenders had at last succumbed to the steady pressure of the NGOF.

The withdrawal had been ordered after the *New Georgia Defense Force* had become steadily weakened by lack of ammunition, food, and additional troops. Although a few destroyers managed to make Kolombangara, practically all Japanese transportation and supply lines had been strangled. On 29 July, an officer courier of the *Eighth Fleet* had arrived at Munda to relay to Sasaki the order to fall back to the line of hills ringing Munda for a last-ditch stand. The airfield was to be defended even at the price of Kolombangara. Reinforcements would come. Following instructions, Sasaki pulled what scattered elements he could find back to his last defense. As the campaign drew to a close, his line was held by the *229th Regiment* on the south part of Bibolo Hill with the undermanned *230th Regiment* on Kokengola Hill. On the extreme left flank were units of Tomonari's *13th Regiment.*[29] Remnants of the *8th CSNLF* were combined with Army units for a last-ditch stand.

At the close of the fighting on 2 August, the 43d Division was perched on the last

[28] Baxter Rept, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

[29] SoPacFor POW InterrogationRept No. 140, dtd 24Nov43.

low row of hills overlooking Munda airfield, and the 37th Division was gradually tightening the lines around the northern part of the airfield. The following day, Hodge's troops captured the southern part of Bibolo Hill while the 37th Division moved cautiously but swiftly through isolated pillbox areas northwest of the field. The 148th, reaching the Munda-Bairoko trail once more, ambushed a large force of enemy fleeing the area. (See Map 7.)

As the two divisions resumed the attack on 4 August, the only opposition facing the 43d Division came from Kokengola Hill in the middle of the airfield. While a rain of artillery and mortar shells blasted the hill, Marine tanks from the 10th and 11th Defense Battalions roamed about the airfield, flushing snipers and blasting rubble-hidden fortifications. The tanks from the 11th Defense Battalion had been hurriedly dispatched to take part in the assault of the airfield after the 9th Battalion's tanks had been deadlined. Alerted on Tulagi since 30 June, the Marine tankers reached New Georgia on 3 August, just in time to join the final attack.

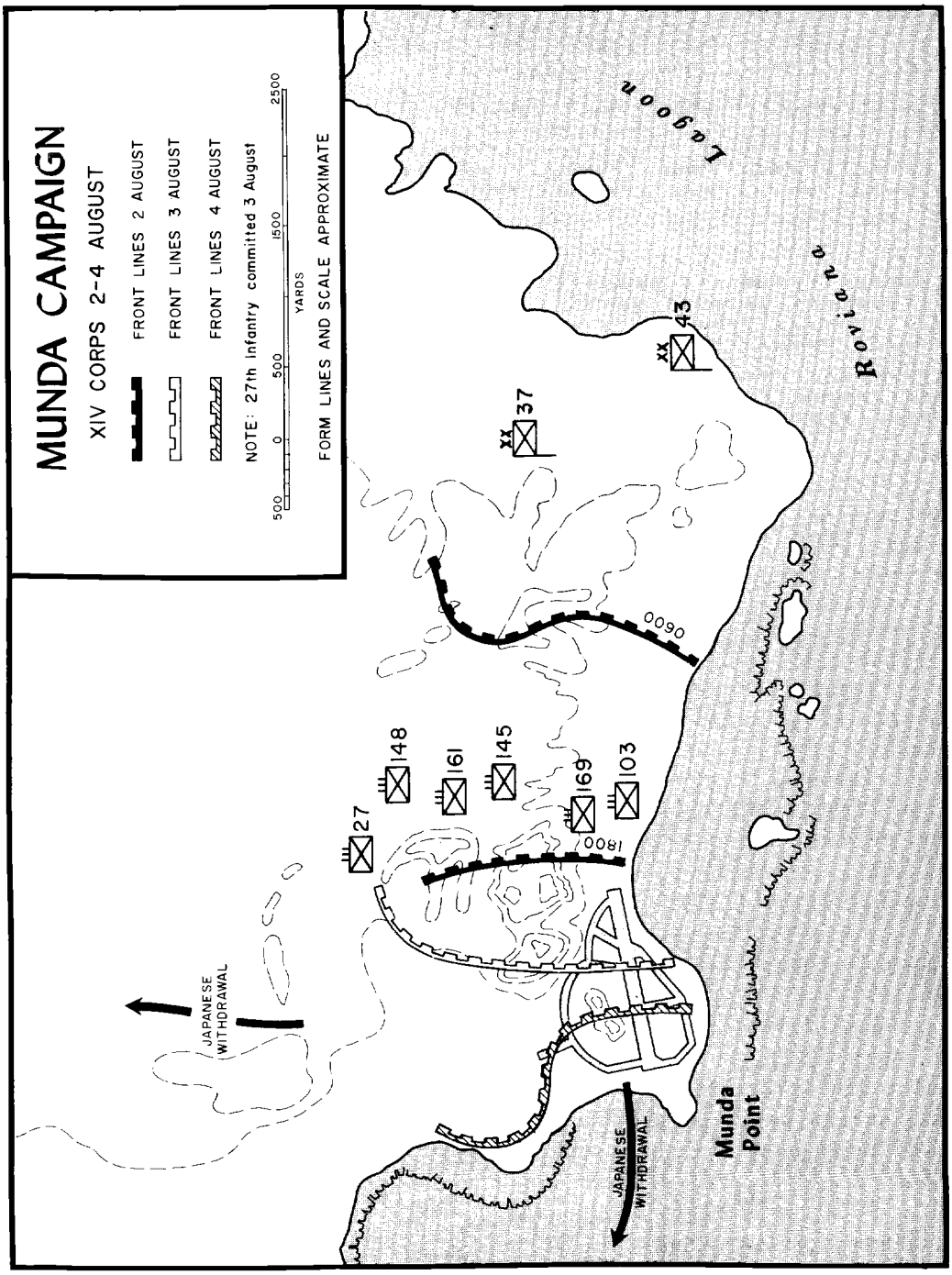
North of Munda, while the 145th mopped up the last shreds of opposition, the 161st and 148th Regiments plunged rapidly through to Diamond Narrows. In that final drive, the 37th Division soldiers staged a slashing, stabbing charge that overwhelmed all outposts. That night, the last shots fired were those sent after Japanese trying to swim to islands across the Narrows.

The following day, 5 August, tanks of the 10th and 11th Defense Battalions—accompanied as a courtesy gesture by the sole remaining operational tank of the 9th Defense Battalion—made five sorties over the airfield. The only fire received was from Kokengola Hill, and this the Marine tanks quickly squelched with 37mm rounds. At 1410, the airfield was officially declared secured, and Allied troops took over the enemy fortifications ringing the war prize which had taken more than a month of bitter combat to obtain. Along the blasted and cratered runways were hulks of 30 enemy airplanes, some still in revetments. All were stripped of armament and instruments. None would ever fly again. Japanese supplies, including tasty tinned foods, beer, *sake*, and rice gave triumphant infantrymen a change from the weary routine of combat rations.

Beach defenses were strengthened the next day, and grimy soldiers bathed, washed clothes, and rested from the tough grind of battle. Patrols, ranging far to the north, reported no opposition. The patrols' only result was the capture of one forlorn Japanese soldier, whom one officer described as typical of the enemy who were thwarted in their attempts to hold their precious airfield: "Injured, tired, sick, no food, dirty torn clothes, little ammunition and a battered rusty rifle." [30] For both victor and vanquished, the campaign had been hard.

The fall of Munda almost coincided with another disaster which heaped additional misery upon the Japanese. In a belated and ill-fated attempt to help Sasaki hold the Central Solomons, the *Seventeenth Army* at Bougainville organized two well-equipped infantry battalions, bolstered by the addition of artillery and automatic weapons. The troops were taken from the *6th* and *38th Divisions*. The reinforcement unit started for New Georgia on the night of 6 August in four destroyers. As the ships steamed through the

[30] 1/148 Rept, *op. cit.*


MUNDA CAMPAIGN
XIV CORPS 2-4 AUGUST
FRONT LINES 2 AUGUST
FRONT LINES 3 AUGUST
FRONT LINES 4 AUGUST
NOTE: 27th Infantry committed 3 August
500 0 500 1500 2500
YARDS
FORM LINES AND SCALE APPROXIMATE
JAPANESE WITHDRAWAL
JAPANESE WITHDRAWAL
27
148
161
145
169
103
1800
0600
XX 37
XX 43
Munda Point
Lagoon
Roviana

MAP 7

north entrance of Vella Gulf trying to make Kolombangara, an ambush set by an Allied force of six destroyers (Commander Frederick Moosbrugger) struck suddenly. In a matter of moments, three of the Japanese destroyers were in flames and sinking. The ambush in Vella Gulf resulted in the loss of 820 Army troops and 700 crew members in a single stroke. It was the last attempt by the Japanese to reinforce the Central Solomons.

Munda's capture was marked by the commitment of the 27th Infantry from Major General J. Lawton Collins' 25th Division. Augmented by division support troops, the regiment joined the NGOF on 2 August and took over the mission of guarding supply and communication lines along the 37th Division's right flank. After Munda was taken, the 161st Infantry reverted to 25th Division control and joined the 27th Infantry in a new push toward Kula Gulf.

With hardly a pause at the airfield, the two regiments pivoted north to complete the rout of all enemy forces in the area between Diamond Narrows and Bairoko Harbor. Only spotty resistance was encountered, for increased barge activity revealed that the Japanese were feverishly trying to evacuate the scattered remnants of the New Georgia garrison. After two weeks of locating and eliminating Japanese positions north of Munda, the 27th Infantry declared its zone secured. The 161st, meanwhile, had advanced toward Bairoko after knocking out enemy strong points on two jungle peaks. The final ground action on New Georgia came on 25 August, when the 161st Infantry combined with Liversedge's force to attack the harbor area from three sides—only to find that the Japanese had just completed evacuation of the area. All organized enemy resistance on the island was ended.

RENDOVA: FINAL PHASE [31]

During the period that NGOF soldiers slogged their way through jungle mud on the way to the airfield, the Rendova force settled into a routine of firing artillery missions and combatting enemy air raids. After the initial units of General Hester's force departed for New Georgia, the harbor at Rendova became the focal point for all reinforcements, supplies, and equipment moving into the Central Solomons.

During July, daily transport shuttles from the rear echelons on Guadalcanal poured a total of 25,556 Army, 1,547 Navy, and 1,645 Marine troops into Rendova for eventual commitment in New Georgia. Additionally, the beaches at Rendova and its offshore islands became piled high with rations, oil and lubricants, ammunition, vehicles, and other freight, all of which found its way to the NGOF.

This bustling point of entry—with troops unloading and stockpiles of material lining the beaches—was a tempting target to the Japanese. The Rendova air patrol of 32 fighter planes constantly flying an umbrella over the island drained the resources of ComAirSols, but, at the same time, was a successful deterrent to enemy attacks. During the New Georgia campaign, only three enemy hits were

[31] Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: 9th DefBn Rept to ComMarDefGruSols, dtd 5Jul43; *9th DefBn OpRept; 9th DefBn AA Ops.;* 9th DefBn Informal CbtRept New Georgia Campaign, dtd 9Sep43; 9th DefBn Narrative Hist 1Feb42–14Feb44, dtd 2May44; 155mm Gun Gru, 9th DefBn Work Sheets, 18Jun–21Jul43, dtd 13Oct 43; *11th DefBn WarD;* ONI, *Combat Narratives X.*

registered on ships in the harbor by bombers or torpedo bombers, and only one horizontal bombing attack was able to close on Rendova during the daylight hours when the fighter umbrella was on station.

Playing a major role in the defense of the harbor, the 90mm batteries and the Special Weapons Group of the 9th Defense Battalion shot down a total of 24 enemy planes during the month of July. For the Marine antiaircraft crews, the defense of Rendova was virtually an around-the-clock operation which was a deadly contest of skill between enemy and defender. The Japanese tried all methods of attack, including hitting the target area with planes from various directions and altitudes simultaneously. Since large areas of the search radar screens were blocked by mountains on New Georgia, this approach route became the favorite of the Japanese pilots. Warnings for attacks from this direction were so short as to be almost useless, so Marines were forced to keep at least one 90mm battery manned continually with fire control radars constantly in operation. The Marines found that early in the campaign the enemy pilots dropped their bomb loads as soon as they were fired upon or pinpointed by searchlights. Later attacks, however, were pressed home with determination, and only well-directed shooting deterred them.

Marines also had a prominent part in the artillery support of the NGOF. After registering on Munda field prior to the NGOF overland attack, the Marine 155mm guns began a systematic leveling of all known enemy installations and bivouac areas. Since the exact location of the NGOF front lines was ill-defined most of the time, the Marine group left the close-support firing missions to Army 105mm units which were much nearer to the combat. The Marine guns were directed instead against rear installations, supply and reinforcement routes, and targets of opportunity.

Most of the firing missions were requested by NGOF headquarters with corrections directed by aerial observers or spotters at the 43d Division observation post. The Marine group had notable success interdicting supply dumps, bivouac areas, and enemy positions in the immediate vicinity of Munda field. Cooperation between air spotters from the 192d Field Artillery Battalion and the 155mm Group of the 9th Defense Battalion reached such a high state of efficiency that missions were fired with a minimum of time and adjustment. The Marines were occasionally rewarded by the sight of towering columns of smoke, indicating that a supply or ammunition dump had been hit.

Ammunition problems plagued the 155-mm batteries. On the 13th of July, just as the NGOF stalled against General Sasaki's defenses, an ammunition restriction was placed on the Marine batteries and the number of rounds expended dropped abruptly. After four days of limited firing, all shooting was stopped entirely while the NGOF reorganized in New Georgia. The only mission fired during this interval was on 20 July in answer to an emergency request to keep Japanese troops from moving back into an area which had been shelled and neutralized previously. The ammunition limitation resulted from powder becoming wet and unserviceable in containers broken from much handling. Further compounding the difficulties was the fact that during the period of ammunition scarcity, 11 miscel-

laneous lots of powder were used which resulted in varying initial velocities. Marines could only guess from one shot to another whether the shell would be over the target or fall short. When the powder situation was remedied and the 43d and 37th Divisions began the final drive for Munda, the Marine gunners, now experienced field artillerymen, returned to firing accurate missions.

After the fall of Munda, the 9th Defense Battalion began the move to New Georgia to help defend the newly won prize. Antiaircraft batteries were placed around the airfield and 155mm gun positions established on offshore islands and at Diamond Narrows. The 9th was relieved on Rendova by the Marine 11th Defense Battalion, which moved to that island from Guadalcanal to take part in the final stages of the Central Solomons fighting.

Although the capture of Munda was essentially an Army operation and the number of Marines participating was proportionately small, the contributions of the Marine Corps tanks, artillery, and antiaircraft units were essential to the success of the operation. Their exploits are an integral part of the story of the campaign. A handful of Marine tanks spearheaded most of the successful attacks; and even though handicapped by the rugged terrain, the armored vehicles were usually the factor which tipped the balance to the Americans' favor. Victory at Munda was won by inter-service teamwork — one of the frequent examples of coordinated Army, Navy, and Marine Corps effort in World War II.