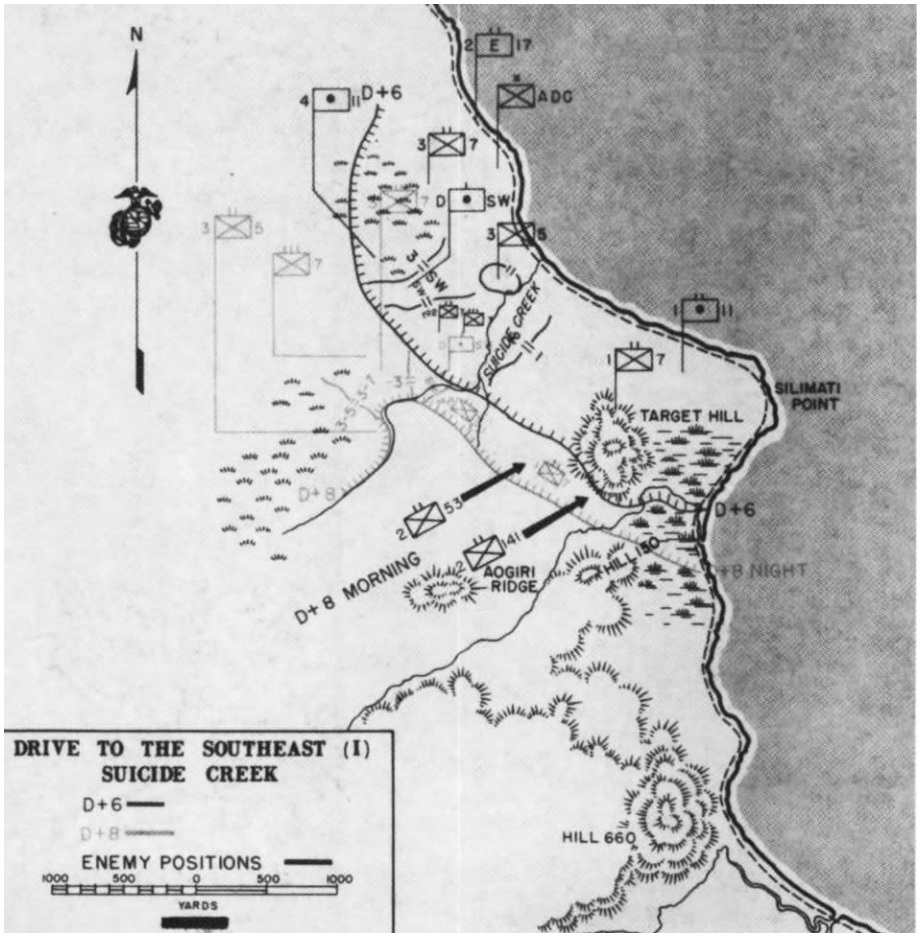
Department of Defense (USMC) photo 72292

*Target Hill, where the Marines repulsed a Japanese counterattack on the night of 2-3 January, dominates the Yellow Beaches, the site of the main landings on 26 December.*

During the afternoon of 3 January, a trio of Sherman tanks reached the creek only to discover that the bank dropped off too sharply for them to negotiate. The engineers sent for a bulldozer, which arrived, lowered its blade, and began gouging at the lip of the embankment. Realizing the danger if tanks succeeded in crossing the creek, the Japanese opened fire on the bulldozer, wounding the driver. A volunteer climbed onto the exposed driver's seat and took over until he, too, was wounded. Another Marine stepped forward, but instead of climbing onto the machine, he walked alongside, using its bulk for cover as he manipulated the controls with a shovel and an axe handle. By dark, he had finished the job of converting the impassable bank into a readily negotiated ramp.

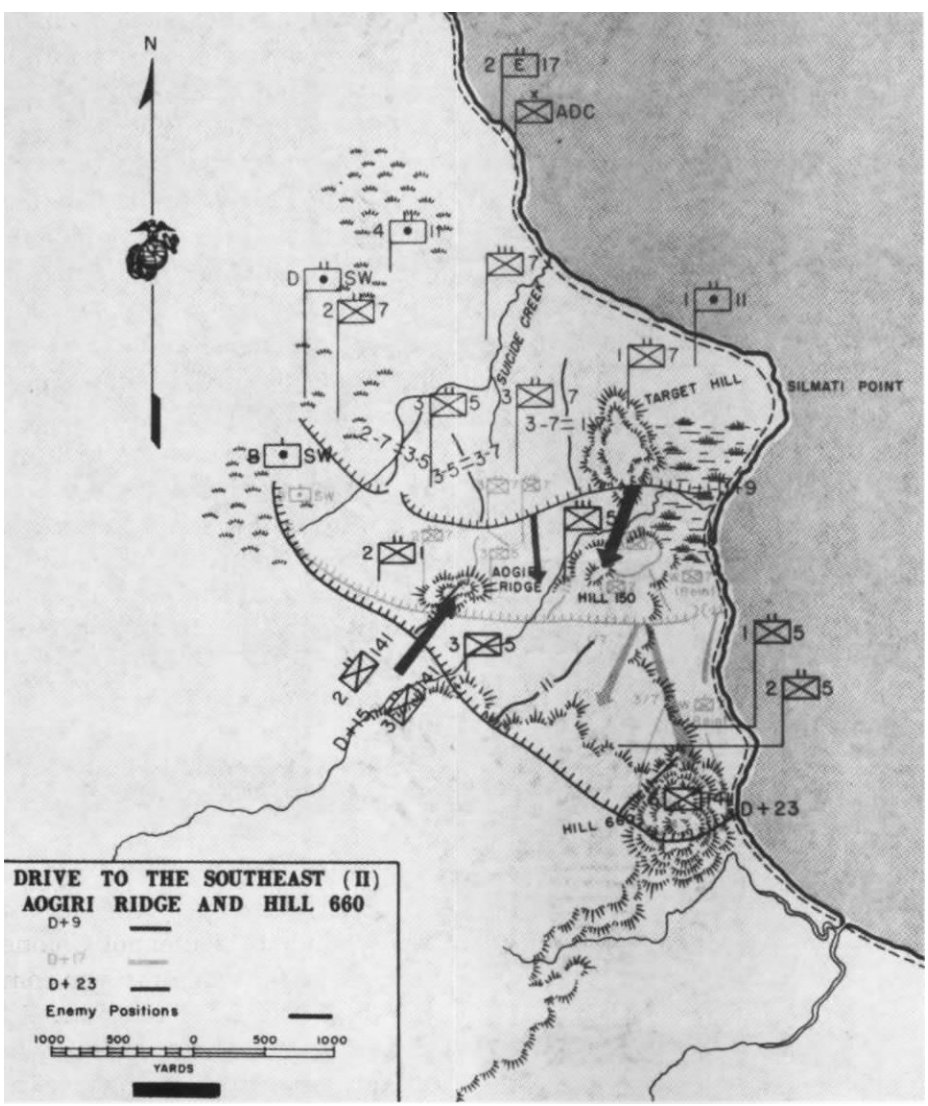



On the morning of 4 January, the first tank clanked down the ramp and across the stream. As the Sherman emerged on the other side, Marine riflemen cut down two Japanese soldiers trying to detonate magnetic mines against its sides. Other medium tanks followed, also accompanied by infantry, and broke open the bunkers that barred the way. The 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, and the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, surged onward past the creek, squeezing out the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, which crossed in the wake of those two units to come abreast of them on the far right of the line that closed in on the jungle concealing Aogiri Ridge. The 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, thereupon joined the southward advance, tying in with the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, to present a four-battalion front that included the 2d Battalion and 3d Battalions, 7th Marines.

Once across Suicide Creek, the Marines groped for Aogiri Ridge, which for a time simply seemed to be another name for Hill 150, a terrain feature that appeared on American maps. The advance rapidly overran the hill, but Japanese resistance in the vicinity did not diminish. On 7 January, enemy fire wounded Lieutenant Colonel David S. MacDougal, commanding officer of the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines. His executive officer, Major Joseph Skoczylas, took over until he, too, was wounded. Lieutenant Colonel Lewis B. Puller, temporarily in command of the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, assumed responsibility for both battalions until the arrival on

Department of Defense (USMC) photo 72283

*From Hell's Point, athwart the route to the airfields, to Suicide Creek near the Yellow Beaches, medium tanks and infantry team up to shatter the enemy's log and earthen bunkers.*




the morning of 8 January of Lieutenant Colonel Lewis W. Walt, recently assigned as executive officer of the 5th Marines, who took over the regiment's 3d Battalion.

Upon assuming command of the battalion, Walt continued the previous day's attack. As his Marines braved savage fire and thick jungle, they began moving up a rapidly steepening slope. As night approached, the battalion formed a perimeter and dug in. Random Japanese fire and sudden skirmishes punctuated the darkness. The nature of the terrain and the determined resistance convinced Walt that he had found Aogiri Ridge.

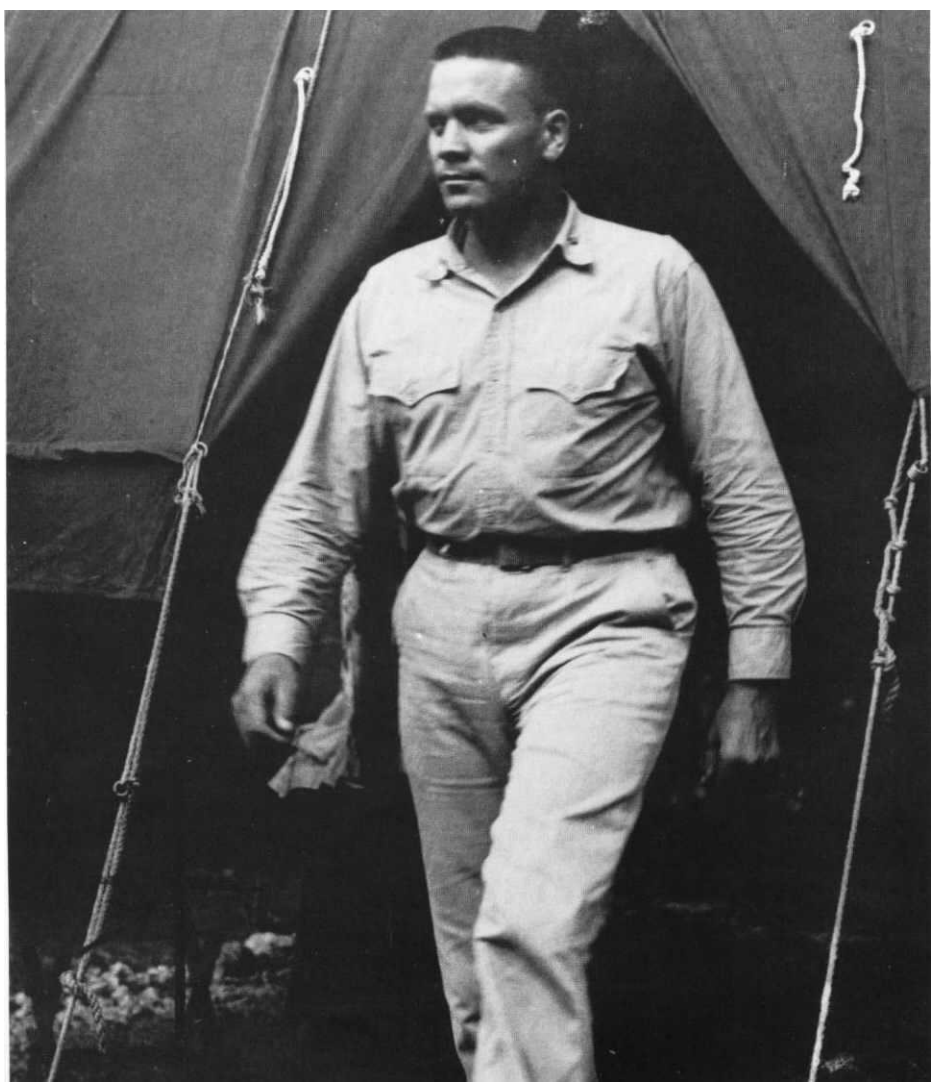
Walt's battalion needed the shock action and firepower of tanks, but drenching rain, mud, and rampaging streams stopped the armored vehicles. The heaviest weapon that the Marines managed to bring forward was a single 37mm gun, manhandled into position on the afternoon of 9 January, While the 11th Marines hammered the crest of Aogiri Ridge, the 1st and 3d Battalions, 7th Marines, probed the flanks of the position and Walt's 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, pushed ahead in the center, seizing a narrow segment of the slope, its apex just short of the crest. By dusk, said the 1st Marine Division's special action report, Walt's men had "reached the limit of their physical endurance and morale was low. It was a question of whether or not they could hold their hard-earned gains." The crew of the 37mm gun opened fire in support of the afternoon's final attack, but after just three rounds, four of the nine men handling the weapon were killed or wounded. Walt called for volunteers; when no one responded, he and his runner crawled to the gun and began pushing the weapon up the incline. Twice more the gun barked, cutting a swath through the undergrowth, and a third round of canister destroyed a machine gun.

Other Marines then took over from Walt and the runner, with new volunteers replacing those cut down by the enemy. The improvised crew kept firing canister rounds every few yards until they had wrestled the weapon to the crest. There the Marines dug in, as close as ten yards to the bunkers the Japanese had built on the crest and reverse slope.

At 0115 on the morning of 10 January, the Japanese emerged from their positions and charged through a curtain of rain, shouting and firing as they came. The Marines clinging to Aogiri Ridge broke up this attack and three others that followed, firing off almost all their ammunition in doing so. A carrying party scaled the muddy slope with belts and clips for the machine guns and rifles, but there barely was time to distribute the ammunition before the Japanese launched the fifth attack of the morning. Marine artillery tore into the enemy, as forward observers, their vision obstructed by rain and jungle, adjusted fire by sound more than by sight, moving 105mm concentrations to within 50 yards of the Marine infantrymen. A Japanese officer emerged from the darkness and ran almost to Walt's foxhole before fragments from a shell bursting in the trees overhead cut him down. This proved to be the high-water mark of the counterattack against Aogiri Ridge, for the Japanese tide receded as the daylight grew brighter. At 0800, when the Marines moved forward, they did not encounter even one living Japanese on the terrain feature they renamed Walt's Ridge in honor of their commander, who received the Navy Cross for his inspirational leadership.

*LtCol Lewis W. Walt earned the Navy Cross leading an attack up Aogiri Ridge, renamed Walt's Ridge in his honor.*

Department of Defense (USMC) photo 977113



One Japanese stronghold in the vicinity of Aogiri Ridge still survived, a supply dump located along a trail linking the ridge to Hill 150. On 11 January, Lieutenant Colonel Weber's 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, supported by a pair of half-tracks and a platoon of light tanks, eliminated this pocket in four hours of fighting. Fifteen days of combat since the landings on 26 December, had cost the division 180 killed and 636 wounded in action.

The next objective, Hill 660, lay at the left of General Shepherd's zone of action, just inland of the coastal track. The 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, commanded since 9 January by Lieutenant Colonel Henry W. Buse, Jr., got the assignment of seizing the hill. In preparation for Buse's attack, Captain Joseph W. Buckley, commander of the Weapons Company, 7th Marines, set up a task force to bypass Hill 660 and block the coastal trail beyond that objective. Buckley's group—two platoons of infantry, a platoon of 37mm guns, two light tanks, two half-tracks mounting 75mm guns, a platoon of pioneers from the 17th Marines with a bulldozer, and one of the Army's rocket-firing DUKWs—pushed through the mud and set up a roadblock athwart the line of retreat from Hill 660. The Japanese directed long-range plunging fire against Buckley's command as it advanced roughly one mile along the trail. Because of their flat trajectory, his 75mm and 37mm guns

Department of Defense (USMC) photo 71520

*Advancing past Hill 660, a task force under Capt Joseph W. Buckley cuts the line of retreat for the Japanese defenders. The 37mm gun in the emplacement on the right and the half-track mounted 75mm gun on the left drove the attacking enemy back with heavy casualties.*

could not destroy the enemy's automatic weapons, but the Marines succeeded in forcing the hostile gunners to keep their heads down. As they advanced, Buckley's men unreeled telephone wire to maintain contact with higher headquarters. Once the roadblock was in place and camouflaged, the captain requested that a truck bring hot meals for his men. When the vehicle bogged down, he sent the bulldozer to push it free.

After aerial bombardment and preparatory artillery fire, Buse's battalion started up the hill at about 0930 on 13 January. His supporting tanks could not negotiate the ravines that scarred the hillside. Indeed, the going became so steep that riflemen sometimes had to sling arms, seize handholds among the vines, and pull themselves up-

*Gaunt, weary, hollow-eyed, machine gunner PFC George C. Miller carries his weapon to the rear after 19 days of heavy fighting while beating back the Japanese counterattack at Hill 660. This moving photograph was taken by Marine Corps combat photographer Sgt Robert R. Brenner.*

Department of Defense (USMC) photo 72273

ward. The Japanese suddenly opened fire from hurriedly dug trenches at the crest, pinning down the Marines climbing toward them until mortar fire silenced the enemy weapons, which lacked overhead cover. Buse's riflemen followed closely behind the mortar barrage, scattering the defenders, some of whom tried to escape along the coastal trail, where Buckley's task force waited to cut them down.

Apparently delayed by torrential rain, the Japanese did not counterattack Hill 660 until 16 January. Roughly two companies of Katayama's troops stormed up the southwestern slope only to be slaughtered by mortar, artillery, and small-arms fire. Many of those lucky enough to survive tried to break through Buckley's roadblock, where 48 of the enemy perished.

With the capture of Hill 660, the nature of the campaign changed. The assault phase had captured its objective and eliminated the possibility of a Japanese counterattack against the airfield complex. Next, the Marines would repulse the Japanese who harassed the secondary beachhead at Cape Merkus and secure the mountainous, jungle-covered interior of Cape Gloucester, south of the airfields and between the Green and Yellow Beaches.

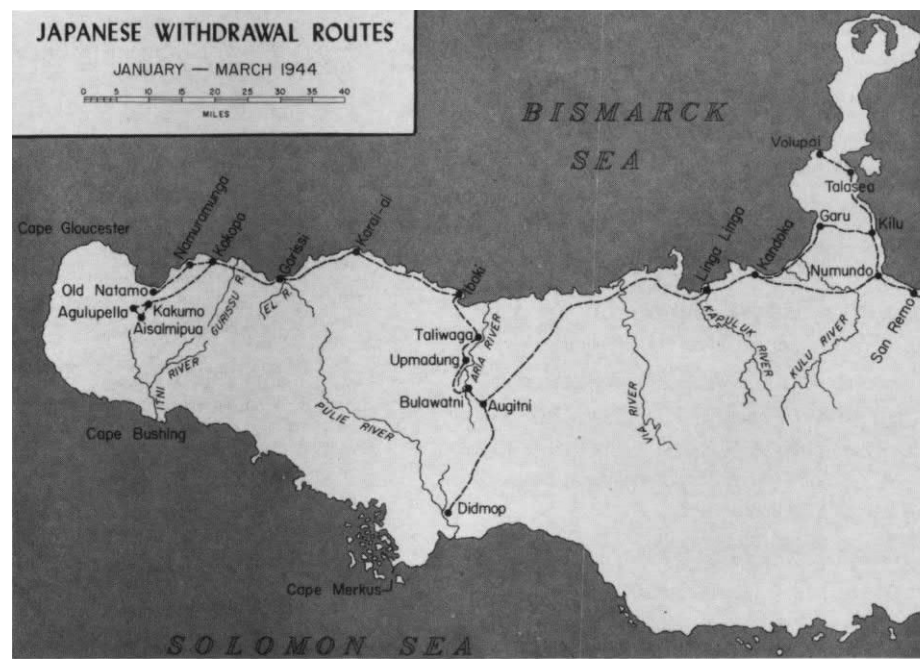
## *The Mopping-up Begins in the West*

At Cape Merkus on the south coast of western New Britain, the fighting proved desultory in comparison to the violent struggle in the vicinity of Cape Gloucester. The Japanese in the south remained content to take advantage of the dense jungle and contain the 112th Cavalry on the Cape Merkus peninsula. Major Shinjiro Komori, the Japanese commander there, believed that the landing force intended to capture an abandoned airfield at Cape Merkus, an installation that did not figure in American plans. A series of concealed bunkers, boasting integrated fields of fire, held the lightly armed cavalrymen in check, as the defenders directed harassing fire at the beachhead.

Because the cavalry unit lacked heavy weapons, a call went out for those of the 1st Marine Division's tanks that had remained behind at Finschhafen, New Guinea, because armor enough was already churning up the mud of Cape Gloucester. Company B, 1st Marine Tank Battalion, with 18 M5A1 light tanks mounting 37mm guns, and the 2d Battalion, 158th Infantry, arrived at Cape Merkus, moved into position by 15 January and attacked on the following day. A squadron of Army Air Forces B-24s dropped 1,000-pound bombs on the jungle-covered defenses, B-25s followed up, and mortars and artillery joined in the bombardment, after which two platoons of tanks, ten vehicles in all, and two companies of infantry surged forward. Some of the tanks bogged down in the rain-soaked soil, and tank retrievers had to pull them free. Despite mud and nearly impenetrable thickets, the tank-infantry teams found and destroyed most of the bunkers. Having eliminated the source of harassing fire, the troops pulled back after destroying a tank immobilized by a thrown track so that the enemy could not use it as a pillbox. Another tank, trapped in a crater, also was earmarked for destruction, but Army engineers managed to free it and bring it back.

The attack on 16 January broke the back of Japanese resistance. Komori ordered a retreat to the vicinity of the airstrip, but the 112th Cavalry launched an attack that caught the slowly moving defenders and inflicted further casualties. By the time the enemy dug in to defend the airfield, which the Americans had no intention of seizing, Komori's men had suffered 116 killed, 117 wounded, 14 dead of disease, and another 80 too ill to fight. The Japanese hung on despite sickness and starvation, until 24 February, when Komori received orders to join in a general retreat by *Matsuda Force.*

Across the island, after the victories at Walt's Ridge and Hill 660, the 5th Marines concentrated on seizing control of the shores of Bor-



gen Bay, immediately to the east. Major Barba's 1st Battalion followed the coastal trail until 20 January, when the column collided with a Japanese stronghold at Natamo Point. Translations of documents captured earlier in the fighting revealed that at least one platoon, supported by automatic weapons had dug in there. Artillery and air strikes failed to suppress the Japanese fire, demonstrating that the captured papers were sadly out of date, since at least a company—armed with 20mm, 37mm, and 75mm weapons—checked the advance. Marine reinforcements, including medium tanks, arrived in landing craft on 23 January, and that afternoon, supported by artillery and a rocket-firing DUKW, Companies C and D overran Natamo Point. The battalion commander then dispatched patrols inland along the west bank of the Natamo River to outflank the strong positions on the east bank near the mouth of the stream. While the Marines were executing this maneuver, the Japanese abandoned their prepared defenses and retreated eastward.

Success at Cape Gloucester and Borgen Bay enabled the 5th Marines to probe the trails leading inland toward the village of Magairapua, where Katayama once had his headquarters, and beyond. Elements of the regiment's 1st and 2d Battalions and of the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines—temporarily attached to the 5th Marines—led the way into the interior as one element in an effort to trap the enemy troops still in western New Britain.

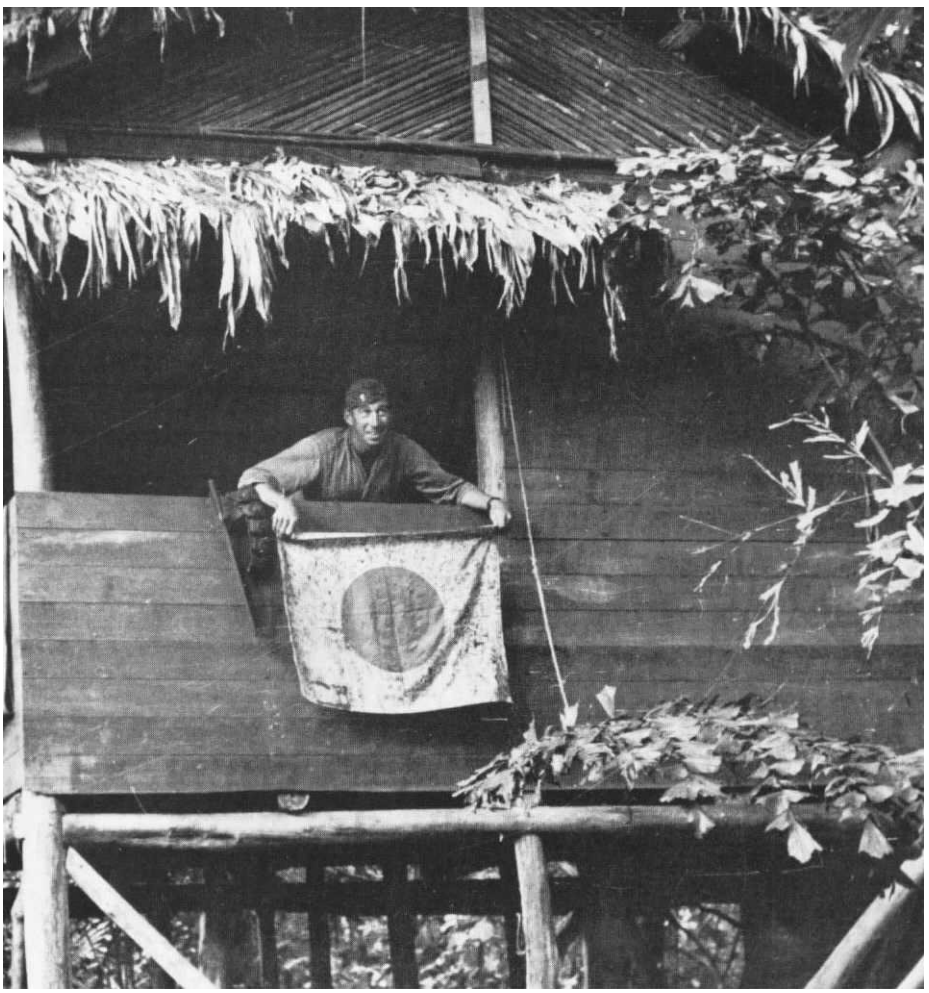
In another part of this effort, Company L, 1st Marines, led by Captain Ronald J. Slay, pursued the Japanese retreating from Cape Gloucester toward Mount Talawe. Slay and his Marines crossed the mountain's eastern slope, threaded their away through a cluster of lesser outcroppings like Mount

Department of Defense (USMC) photo 75970

*Maj William H. Barba's 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, prepares to outflank the Japanese defenses along the Natamo River.*

*An officer of Maj Gordon D. Gayle's 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, displays a captured Japanese flag from a window of the structure that served as the headquarters of MajGen Iwao Matsuda.*

Department of Defense (USA) photo SC 188246



Department of Defense (USMC) photo 77642

*The capture of Matsuda's headquarters provides Marine intelligence with a harvest of documents, which the enemy buried rather than burned, presumably to avoid smoke that might attract artillery fire or air strikes.*

Langila, and in the saddle between Mounts Talawe and Tangi encountered four unoccupied bunkers situated to defend the junction of the track they had been following with another trail running east and west. The company had found the main east-west route from Sag Sag on the coast to the village of Agulupella and ultimately to Natamo Point on the northern coast.

To exploit the discovery, a composite patrol from the 1st Marines, under the command of Captain Nickolai Stevenson, pushed south along that trail Slay had followed, while a composite company from the 7th Marines, under Captain Preston S. Parish, landed at Sag Sag on the west coast and advanced along the east-west track. An Australian reserve officer, William G. Wiedeman, who had been an Episcopal missionary at Sag Sag, served as Parish's guide and contact with the native populace. When determined opposition stopped Stevenson short of the trail junction near Mount Talawe, Captain George P. Hunt's Company K, 1st Marines, renewed the attack.

On 28 January, Hunt concluded he had brought the Japanese to bay and attacked. For three hours that afternoon, his Marines tried unsuccessfully to break though a line of bunkers concealed by jungle growth, losing 15 killed or wounded. When Hunt withdrew beyond reach of the Japanese mortars that had scourged his company during the action, the enemy emerged from cover and attempted to pursue, a bold but foolish move that exposed the troops to deadly fire that cleared the way for an advance to the trail junction. Hunt and Parish joined forces and probed farther, only to be stopped by a Japanese ambush. At this point, Major William J. Piper, Jr., the executive officer of the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, assumed command, renewed the pursuit on 30 January, and discovered the enemy had fled. Shortly afterward Piper's combined patrol made contact with those dispatched inland by the 5th Marines.

Department of Defense (USMC) photo 77436

*LtCol Lewis H. Puller, left, and Maj William J. Piper discuss the route of a patrol from the village of Agulupella to Gilnit on the Itni River, a two-week operation.*

Thus far, a vigorous pursuit along the coast and on the inland trails had failed to ensnare the Japanese. The Marines captured Matsuda's abandoned headquarters in the shadow of Mount Talawe and a cache of documents that the enemy buried rather than burned, perhaps because smoke would almost certainly bring air strikes or artillery fire, but the Japanese general and his troops escaped. Where had *Matsuda Force* gone?

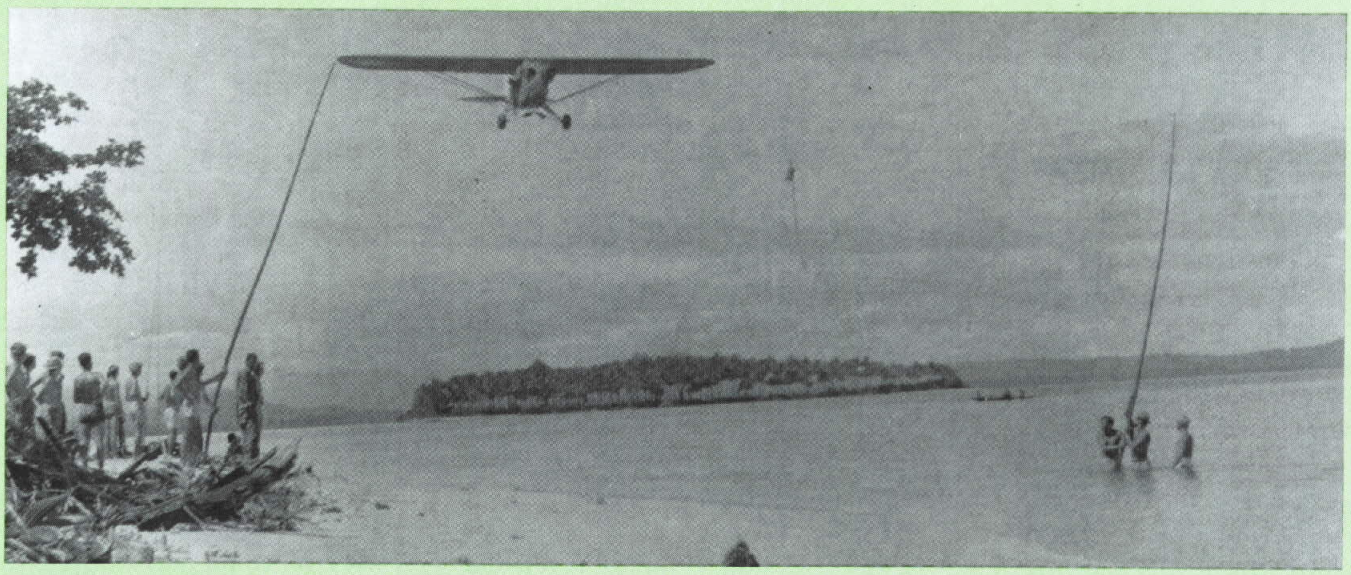
Since a trail net led from the vicinity of Mount Talawe to the south, General Shepherd concluded that Matsuda was headed in that direction. The assistant division commander therefore organized a composite battalion of six reinforced rifle companies, some 3,900 officers and men in all, which General Rupertus entrusted to Lieutenant Colonel Puller. This patrol was to advance from Agulupella on the east-west track, down the so-called Government Trail all the way to Gilnit, a village on the Itni River, inland of Cape Bushing on New Britain's southern coast. Before Puller could set out, information discovered at Matsuda's former headquarters and translated revealed that the enemy actually was retreating to the northeast. As a result, Rupertus detached the recently arrived 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, and reduced Puller's force from almost 4,000 to fewer than 400, still too many to be supplied by the 150 native bearers assigned to the column for the march through the jungle to Gilnit.

*Marine patrols, such as Puller's trek to Gilnit, depended on bearers recruited from the villages of western New Britain who were thoroughly familiar with the local trail net.*

Department of Defense (USMC) photo 72836.

During the trek, Puller's Marines depended heavily on supplies dropped from airplanes. Piper Cubs capable at best of carrying two cases of rations in addition to the pilot and observer, deposited their loads at villages along the way, and Fifth Air Force B-17s dropped cargo by the ton. Supplies delivered from the sky made the patrol possible but did little to ameliorate the discomfort of the Marines slogging through the mud.

Despite this assistance from the air, the march to Gilnit taxed the ingenuity of the Marines involved and hardened them for future action. This toughening-up seemed especially desirable to Puller, who had led many a patrol during the American intervention in Nicaragua, 1927-1933. The division's supply clerks, aware of the officer's disdain for creature comforts, were startled by requisitions from the patrol for hundreds of bottles of insect repellent.



Department of Defense (USMC) photo 86249

*A Piper Cub of the 1st Marine Division's improvised air force snags a message from a patrol on New Britain's north coast.*

# An Improvised Air Force

At Cape Gloucester, the 1st Marine Division had an air force of its own consisting of Piper L-4 Cubs and Stinson L-5s provided by the Army. The improvised air force traced its origins to the summer of 1943, before the division plunged into the green inferno of New Britain. Lieutenant Colonel Kenneth H. Weir, the division's air officer, and Captain Theodore A. Petras, the personal pilot of Major General Alexander A. Vandegrift, then the division commander, concocted a plan for acquiring light aircraft mainly for artillery spotting. The assistant division commander at that time, Brigadier General Rupertus, had seen Army troops making use of Piper Cubs on maneuvers, and he promptly presented the plan to General MacArthur, the theater commander, who promised to give the division twelve light airplanes in time for the next operation.

When the 1st Marine Division arrived at Goodenough Island, off the southwestern tip of New Guinea, to begin preparing for further combat, Rupertus, now a major general and Vandegrift's successor as division commander, directed Petras and another pilot, First Lieutenant R. F. Murphy, to organize an aviation unit from among the Marines of the division. A call went out for volunteers with aviation experience; some sixty candidates stepped forward, and 12 qualified as pilots in the new Air Liaison Unit. The dozen Piper Cubs arrived as promised; six proved to be in excellent condition, three needed repair, and another three were fit only for cannibalization to provide parts to keep the others flying. The nine flyable planes practiced a variety of tasks during two months of training at Goodenough Island. The airmen acquired experience in artillery spotting, radio communications, and snagging messages, hung in a container trailing a pennant to help the pilot see it, from a line strung between two poles.

The division's air force landed at Cape Gloucester from LSTs on D-Day, reassembled their aircraft, and commenced operating. The radios installed in the L-4s proved too balky for artillery spotting, so the group concentrated on courier flights, visual and photographic reconnaissance, and delivering small amounts of cargo. As a light transport, a Piper Cub could drop a case of dry rations, for example, with pinpoint accuracy from an altitude of 200 feet. Occasionally, the light planes became attack aircraft when pilots or observers tossed hand grenades into Japanese positions.

Before the Marines pulled out of New Britain, two Army pilots, flying Stinson L-5s, faster and more powerful than the L-4s, joined the division's air arm. One airplane of each type was damaged beyond repair in crashes, but the pilots and passengers survived. All the Marine volunteers received the Air Medal for their contribution, but a specially trained squadron arrived from the United States and replaced them prior to the next operation, the assault on Peleliu.

Puller had his reasons, however. According to one veteran of the Gilnit operation, "We were always soaked and everything we owned was likewise, and that lotion made the best damned stuff to start a fire with that your ever saw."

As Puller's Marines pushed toward Gilnit on the Itni River, they killed perhaps 75 Japanese and captured one straggler, along with some weapons and odds and ends of equipment. An abandoned pack contained an American flag, probably captured by a soldier of the *141st Infantry* during Japan's conquest of the Philippines. After reaching Gilnit, the patrol fanned out but encountered no opposition. Puller's Marines made contact with an Army patrol from the Cape Merkus beachhead and then headed toward the north coast, beginning on 16 February.

To the west, Company B, 1st Marines, boarded landing craft on 12 February and crossed the Dampier Strait to occupy Rooke Island, some fifteen miles from the coast of New Britain. The division's intelligence specialists concluded correctly that the garrison had departed. Indeed, the transfer began on 6 December 1943, roughly three weeks before the landings at Cape Gloucester, when Colonel Jiro Sato and half of his 500-man *51st Reconnaissance Regiment*, sailed off to Cape Bushing. Sato then led his command up the Itni River and joined the main body of the *Matsuda Force* east of Mount Talawe. Instead of committing Sato's troops to the defense of Hill 660, Matsuda directed him to delay the elements of the 5th Marines and 1st Marines that were converging over the inland trail net. Sato succeeded in checking the Hunt patrol on 28 January and buying time for Matsuda's retreat, not to the south, but, as the documents captured at the general's abandoned headquarters confirmed, along the northern coast, with the *51st Reconnaissance Regiment* initially serving as the rear guard.

Once the Marines realized what Matsuda had in mind, cutting the line of retreat assumed the highest priority, as demonstrated by the withdrawal of the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, from the Puller patrol on the very eve of the march toward

*On 12 February 1944, infantrymen of Company B, from LtCol Walker A. Reaves's 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, advance inland on Rooke Island, west of New Britain, but find that the Japanese have withdrawn.*

Department of Defense (USMC) photo 79181

Gilnit. As early as 3 February, Rupertus concluded that the Japanese could no longer mount a counterattack on the airfields and began devoting all his energy and resources to destroying the retreating Japanese. The division commander chose Selden's 5th Marines, now restored to three-battalion strength, to conduct the pursuit. While Petras and his light aircraft scouted the coastal track, landing craft stood ready to embark elements of the regiment and position them to cut off and destroy the *Matsuda Force*. Bad weather hampered Selden's Marines; clouds concealed the enemy from aerial observation, and a boiling surf ruled out landings over certain beaches. With about 5,000 Marines, and some Army dog handlers and their animals, the colonel rotated his battalions, sending out fresh troops each day and using 10 LCMs in attempts to leapfrog the retreating Japanese. "With few exceptions, men were not called upon to make marches on two successive days," Selden recalled. "After a one-day hike, they either remained at that camp for three or four days or made the next jump by LCMs." At any point along the coastal track, the enemy might have concealed himself in the dense jungle and sprung a deadly ambush, but he did not. Selden, for instance, expected a battle for the Japanese supply point at Iboki Point, but the enemy faded away. Instead of encountering resistance by a determined and skillful rear guard, the 5th Marines found only stragglers, some of them sick or wounded. Nevertheless, the regimental commander could take pride in maintaining unremitting pressure on the retreating enemy "without loss or even having a man wounded" and occupying Iboki Point on 24 February.

Meanwhile, American amphibious forces had seized Kwajalein and Eniwetok Atolls in the Marshall Islands, as the Central Pacific offensive gathered momentum. Further to complicate Japanese strategy, carrier strikes proved that Truk had become too vulnerable to continue serving as a major naval base. The enemy, conscious of the threat to his inner perimeter that was developing to the north, decided to pull back his fleet units from Truk and his aircraft from Rabaul. On 19 February—just two days after the Americans invaded Eniwetok—Japanese fighters at Rabaul took off for the last time to challenge an American air raid. When the bombers returned on the following day, not a single operational Japanese fighter remained at the airfields there.

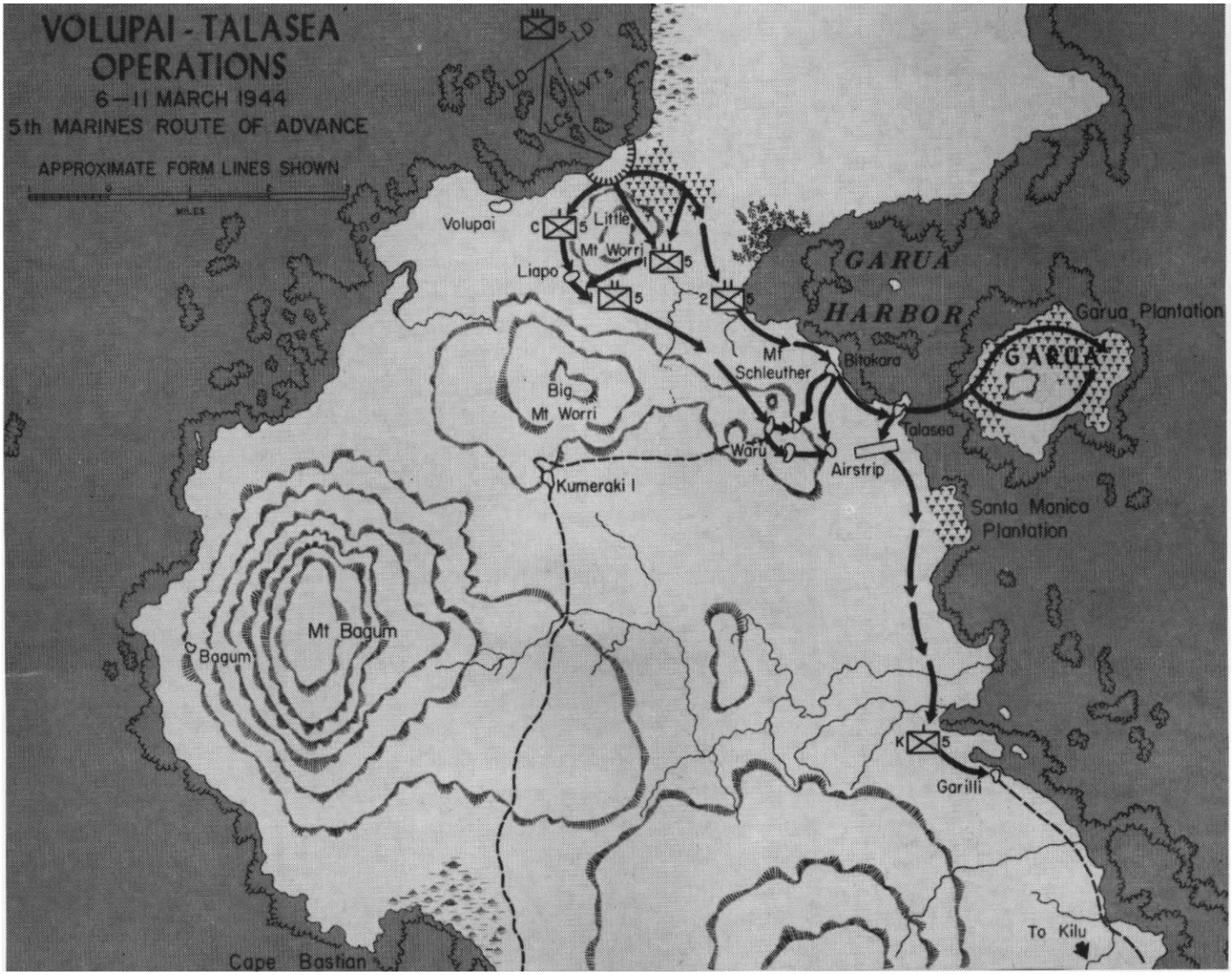
The defense of Rabaul now depended exclusively on ground forces. Lieutenant General Yusashi Sakai, in command of the *17th Division*, received orders to scrap his plan to dig in near Cape Hoskins and instead proceed to Rabaul. The general believed that supplies enough had been positioned along the trail net to enable at least the most vigorous of Matsuda's troops to stay ahead of the Marines and reach the fortress. The remaining self-propelled barges could carry heavy equipment and those troops most needed to defend Rabaul, as well as the sick and wounded. The retreat, however, promised to be an ordeal for the Japanese. Selden had already demonstrated how swiftly the Marines could move, taking advantage of American control of the skies and the coastal waters, and a two-week march separated the nearest of Matsuda's soldiers from their destination. Attrition would be heavy, but those who could contribute the least to the defense of Rabaul seemed the likeliest to fall by the wayside.

The Japanese forces retreating to Rabaul included the defenders of Cape Merkus, where a stalemate had prevailed after the limited American attack on 16 January had sent Komori's troops reeling back beyond the airstrip. At Augitni, a village east of the Aria River southwest of Iboki Point, Komori reported to Colonel Sato of the *51st Reconnaissance Regiment*, which had concluded the rear-guard action that enabled the Matsuda Force to cross the stream and take the trail through Augitni to Linga Linga and eastward along the coast. When the two commands met, Sato broke out a supply of sake he had been carrying, and the officers exchanged toasts well into the night.

Meanwhile, Captain Kiyomatsu Terunuma organized a task force built around the *1st Battalion, 54th Infantry*, and prepared to defend the Talasea area near the base of the Willaumez Peninsula against a possible landing by the pursuing Marines. The *Terunuma Force* had the mission of holding out long enough for *Matsuda Force* to slip past on the way to Rabaul. On 6 March, the leading elements of Matsuda's column reached the base of the Willaumez Peninsula, and Komori, leading the way for Sato's rear guard, started from Augitni toward Linga Linga.

## The Landings at Volupai

By coincidence, 6 March was the day chosen for the reinforced 5th Marines, now commanded by Colonel Oliver P. Smith, to land on the west coast of the Willaumez Peninsula midway between base and tip. The intelligence section of division headquarters believed that Japanese strength between Talasea, the site of a crude airstrip, and Cape Hoskins, across Kimbe Bay from Willaumez Peninsula, equaled that of the Smith's command, but that most of the enemy troops defended Cape Hoskins. The intelligence estimate proved correct, for Sakai had been preparing a last-




ditch defense of Cape Hoskins, when word arrived to retreat all the way to Rabaul.

To discover the extent of Japanese preparations in the immediate vicinity of Volupai, a reconnaissance team landed from a torpedo boat at Bagum, a village about nine miles from Red Beach, the site chosen for the assault landing. Flight Lieutenant G. H. Rodney Marsland of the Royal Australian Air Force, First Lieutenant John D. Bradbeer —the division's chief scout, who had participated in three similar reconnaissance patrols of the Cape Gloucester area before the 26 December invasion—and two native bearers remained ashore for 24 hours and learned that Red Beach was lightly defended. Their sources, principally natives who had worked at a plantation that Marsland had operated in the area before the war, confirmed Marine estimates of Terunuma's aggregate force—some 600 men, two thirds of them located near Talasea, armed with mortars and artillery.

Bristol Beauforts of the Royal Australian Air Force based at Kiriwina Island bombed the Volupai-Talasea region for three days and then conducted a last-minute strike to compensate for the absence of naval gunfire. Smith's force, designated Landing Team A, loaded into a small flotilla of landing craft, escorted by torpedo boats, and set out from Iboki Point. Lieutenant Colonel Robert Amory, Jr., an Army officer in command of an engineer boat unit, took command of the collection of small craft, some of them manned by his soldiers and the others by sailors. A storm buffeted the formation, and after the seas grew calm, the boat carrying the Army air liaison party broke down. Major Gordon D. Gayle, the new commander of the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, who already was behind schedule, risked further delay by taking the disabled craft in tow. Gayle felt that Combat Team A's need for the liaison party's radio equipment justified his action.

At 0835 on 6 March, the first of the amphibian tractors carrying the assault troops clawed their way onto Red Beach. During the movement shoreward, Sherman tanks in Army LCMs opened fire with ma-

chine guns and stood ready to direct their 75mm weapons against any Japanese gunner who might oppose the landing. Aside from hard-to-pinpoint small-arms fire, the opposition consisted mainly of barrages from mortars, screened by the terrain from the flat-trajectory cannon of the tanks. When Japanese mortar shells began bursting among the approaching landing craft, Captain Theodore A. Petras, at the controls of one of the division's Piper Cubs, dived low over the mortar positions and dropped hand grenades from the supply he carried on all his flights. Natives had warned Marsland and Bradbeer of a machine-gun nest dominating the beach from the slopes of Little Mount Worri, but the men of the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, leading the way, found it abandoned and encountered no serious opposition as they dug in to protect the beachhead.

Meanwhile, Gayle's Marines pressed their attack, with four medium tanks supporting Company E as it tried to push farther inland. One of the Shermans bogged down almost immediately in the soft sand of Red Beach, but the other three continued in column. The tank in the lead lost momentum on a muddy rise, and two Japanese soldiers carrying land mines burst from cover to attack it. Riflemen of Company E cut down one of them, but the other detonated his mine against the vehicle, killing himself and a Marine who tried to stop him. The explosion jammed the turret and stunned the crewmen, who were further shaken, but not wounded, when an antitank grenade exploded against the armor. The damaged Sherman got out of the way; when the other two tanks had passed, it returned to the trail only to hit a mine that disabled it.

Despite the loss of two tanks, one temporarily immobilized on the beach and the other out of action permanently, Gayle's battalion continued its advance. During the fighting on the approaches to the Volupai coconut plantation, the body of a Japanese soldier yielded a map showing enemy dispositions around Talasea. By mid-afternoon, Smith's regimental intelligence section was disseminating the information, which proved valuable in future operations.

*At Volupai, as on Cape Gloucester, sand, mud, and land mines—sometimes carried by Japanese soldiers who detonated them against the sides of the vehicle—could immobilize even the Sherman M4 medium tank.*

Department of Defense (USMC) photo 79868

While Company E of Gayle's battalion followed the trail toward the plantation, Company G kept pace, crossing the western shoulder of Little Mount Worri. Five Army Air Forces P-39s from Airfield No. 2 at Cape Gloucester arrived overhead to support Gayle's attack, but the pilots could not locate the troops below and instead bombed Cape Hoskins, where there was no danger of hitting the Marines. Even without the aerial attack, the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, overran the plantation by dusk and dug in for the night; the unit counted the bodies of 35 Japanese killed during the day's fighting.

On D-Day, Combat Team A lost 13 killed and 71 wounded, with artillery batteries rather than rifle companies suffering the greater number of casualties. The 2d Battalion, 11th Marines, set up its 75mm pack howitzers on the open beach, exposed to fire from the 90mm mortars upon which Petras had ineffectually showered his hand grenades. Some of the corpsmen at Red Beach, who went to the assistance of wounded artillerymen, became casualties themselves. Nine of the Marines killed on 6 March were members of the artillery unit, along with 29 of the wounded. Nevertheless, the gunners succeeded in registering their fires in the afternoon and harassing the enemy throughout the night.

While the Marines prepared to renew the attack on the second day, Terunuma deployed his troops to oppose them and keep open the line of retreat of the *Matsuda Force*. In doing so, the Japanese commander fell back from his prepared positions on the fringes of Volupai Plantation—including the mortar pits that had raised such havoc with the 2d Battalion, 11th Marines—and dug in on the northwest slopes of Mount Schleuther, overlooking the trail leading from the plantation to

Bitokara village on the coast. As soon as he realized what the enemy had in mind, Gayle sent Company F uphill to thwart the Japanese plan, while Company E remained on the trail and built up a base of fire. On the right flank of the maneuver element, Company F, the weapons platoon burst from the undergrowth and surprised Japanese machine gunners setting up their weapon, killing them and turning the gun against the enemy. The advance of Company F caught the Japanese in mid-deployment and drove them back after killing some 40 of them. Gayle's battalion established a nighttime perimeter that extended from Mount Schleuther to the trail and embraced a portion of both.

The action on 7 March represented a departure from plan. Smith had intended that both Barba and Gayle attack, with the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, commanded since 12 January by Lieutenant Colonel Harold O. Deakin, assuming responsibility for the defense of the beachhead. The landing craft that had carried the assault troops departed from Red Beach during D-Day, some of them carrying the seriously wounded, in order to pick up the 3d Battalion at Iboki Point and bring it to Volupai. The day was waning by the time enough landing craft were on hand for Deakin's battalion. For the reinforcements to arrive in time for an attack on the morning of 7 March would require a dangerous nighttime approach to Volupai, through uncharted waters studded with sharp outcroppings of coral that could lay open the hull of a landing craft. Rupertus decided that the risks of such a move outweighed the advantages and canceled it at the last moment. No boat started the return voyage to Red Beach until after dawn on 7 March, delaying the arrival of Deakin's battalion until late afternoon. On that day, therefore, Barba's 1st Battalion had only enough time to send Company C a short distance inland on a trail that passed to the right of Little Mount Worri, en route to the village of Liappo. When the trail petered out among the trees and vines, the Marines hacked their way forward until they ran out of daylight short of their objective.

On 8 March, the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, resumed the advance, Companies A and B moving on parallel paths leading east of Little Mount Worri. Members of Company A, peering through dense undergrowth, saw a figure in a Japanese uniform and opened fire. The person was not a Japanese, however, but a native wearing clothing discarded by the enemy and serving as a guide for Company B. The first shots triggered an exchange of fire that wounded the guide, killed one Marine, and wounded a number of others. Afterward, the advance resumed, but once again the formidable terrain—muddy ravines choked with brush and vines—slowed the Marines, and the sun set with the battalion still on the trail.

Meanwhile, Gayle's 2d Battalion probed deeper into Terunuma's defenses. Patrols ranged ahead on the morning of 8 March and found the Japanese dug in at Bitokara Mission, but the enemy fell back before the Marines could storm the position. Gayle's troops occupied Bitokara and pushed as far as Talasea, taking over the abandoned airstrip. Other patrols from this battalion started up the steep slopes of Mount Schleuther and collided with Terunuma's main strength. Fire from small arms, a 90mm mortar, and a 75mm field gun killed or wounded 18 Marines. Rather than press his attack in the gathering darkness, Gayle pulled back from the mountain and dug in at Bitokara Mission so artillery and mortars could hammer the defenses throughout the night, but he left one company to defend the Talasea airstrip.

*Cpl Robert J. Hallahan, a member of the 1st Marine Division band, examines the shattered remains of a Japanese 75mm gun used in the defense of Mount Schleuther and rigged as a booby trap when the enemy withdrew.*

Department of Defense (USA) photo SC 260915

Department of Defense (USMC) photo 69985

*Marines struggle to winch a tractor, and the 105mm howitzer it is towing, out of the mud of New Britain. The trails linking Volupai and Talasea proved as impassable for heavy vehicles as those on Cape Gloucester.*

On the morning of 9 March, Company G of Gayle's battalion advanced up Mount Schleuther while Companies B and C from Barba's command cleared the villages around the base. Company G expected to encounter intense opposition during its part of the coordinated attack, but Terunuma had decamped from the mountain top, leaving behind one dead, two stragglers, and an artillery piece. The enemy, however, had festooned the abandoned 75mm gun with vines that served as trip wires for a booby trap. When the Marines hacked at the vines to examine the weapon more closely, they released the firing pin and detonated a round in the chamber. Since the Japanese gun crew had plugged the bore before fleeing, the resulting explosion ruptured the breech block and wounded one of Gayle's men.

Besides yielding the dominant terrain, Terunuma chose not to defend any of the villages clustered at the base of the mountain. The 5th Marines thus opened a route across the Willaumez Peninsula to support further operations against Matsuda's line of retreat. Since 6 March, Colonel Smith's force had killed an estimated 150 Japanese at the cost of 17 Marines killed and 114 wounded, most of the casualties suffered on the first day. The final phase of the fighting that began on Red Beach consisted of securing Garua Island, abandoned by the Japanese, for American use, a task finished on 9 March.

The results of the action at the base of the Willaumez Peninsula proved mixed. The grass airstrip at Talasea lacked the length to accommodate fighters, but the division's liaison planes made extensive use of it, landing on either side of the carcass of a Japanese aircraft until the wreckage could be hauled away. The trail net, essentially a web of muddy paths, required long hours of hard work by Company F, 17th Marines, and Army engineers, who used a 10-ton wrecker to recover three Sherman tanks that had become mired during the fighting. By 10 March, the trails could support a further advance. Two days later, elements of Deakin's 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, having moved inland from the beachhead, provided a guard of honor as Colonel Smith and his executive officer, Lieutenant Colonel Henry W. Buse, raised over Bitokara the same flag that had flown over Airfield No. 2 at Cape Gloucester.

## *Final Combat and Relief*

The flotilla of Army LCMs and Navy LCTs that supported the Volupai landings inflicted further damage on Japanese coastal traffic, already hard hit by air strikes. On 9 March, a convoy of landing craft carrying supplies around the tip of the peninsula for delivery to the advancing Marines at Talasea spotted four enemy barges, beached and sloppily camouflaged. An LCT took the barges under fire from its 20mm cannon and machine guns, destroying one of the Japanese craft. Later that day, two LCMs used the 37mm gun of the Marine light tank that each was carrying, to fire upon another barge beached on the peninsula.

The enemy tried to make the best possible use of the dwindling number of barges, but the bulk of Matsuda's troops moved overland, screened by Terunuma's men during the transit of the base of the Willaumez Peninsula. About a hundred Japanese dug in at Garilli, but by the time Company K of Deakin's 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, attacked on 11 March, the enemy had fallen back to a new trail block about three miles distant. For four days, the Marines fought a succession of sharp actions, as the Japanese retreated a few hundred yards at a time, dragging with them a 75mm gun that anchored each of the

blocking positions. On 16 March, Deakin himself joined Company K, arriving in an LCM that also carried a section of 81mm mortars. The Japanese turned their cannon seaward to deal with this threat but failed to hit the landing craft. Shortly after the Marine mortars landed and went into action, Terunuma's men again withdrew, but this time they simply faded away, since the bulk of *Matsuda Force* had escaped to the east.

Having secured the Red Beach-Garua Bay-Talasea area, the 5th Marines dispatched patrols southward to the base of the Willaumez Peninsula, capturing only the occasional straggler and confirming the departure of the main body of Matsuda's command. The 1st Marine Division established a comfortable headquarters, training sites, a hospital that utilized captured stocks of Japanese medicine, and a rest area that featured swimming off the Garua beaches and bathing in hot springs ashore. The Navy built a base on the Willaumez Peninsula for torpedo boats that harried the surviving Japanese barges. Unfortunately, on 27 March, the second day the base was operating, Allied aircraft mistook two of the boats for Japanese craft and attacked, killing five sailors and wounding 18.

One of the courses taught at the new Garua training center sought to produce amphibious scouts for the division's future operations. The school's headquarters decided that a reconnaissance of Cape Hoskins would serve as a suitable graduation exercise, since aerial observers had seen no sign of enemy activity there. On 13 April, Second Lieutenant Richard R. Breen, accompanied by Lieutenant Marsland of the Royal Australian Air Force, embarked with 16 trainees, two native guides, and a rifle platoon from the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, in a pair of LCMs. While two instructors stood by in one of the landing craft, the platoon established a trail block, and the future scouts advanced toward the Cape Hoskins airfield, no longer used by the Japanese. En route to the objective, however, the patrol encountered fire from small arms and mortars, but the Marines had apparently learned their lessons well, for they succeeded in breaking off the action and escaped without suffering casualties.

Meanwhile, the Japanese retreat continued. Komori's troops, blazing the trail for Sato's command from Augitni to the northern coast, encountered a disheartening number of hungry stragglers as they marched toward a supply depot at Kandoka, roughly 10 miles west of the Willaumez Peninsula. Crossing the Kuhu River, Komori's soldiers came under ineffectual fire from an American landing craft. The rain-swollen Via River, broader than the Kuhu, proved a more serious obstacle, requiring a detour lasting two days to reach a point where the stream narrowed. Komori's provisions ran out on 17 March, forcing the soldiers to subsist on taro, birds and fish, and vegetables from village garden plots, supplemented by some welcome coconuts gathered from a plantation at Linga Linga. After losing additional time and a dozen lives crossing yet another river, the Kapaluk, Komori's troops straggled into Kandoka on the 24th, only to discover that the food and other supplies had been carried off toward Rabaul. Despite this crushing disappointment, Komori pressed on, his men continuing to live off the land as best they could. Five more men drowned in the fast-moving waters of the Kulu River, and a native hired as a guide defected. Already weakened physically, Komori came down with an attack of malaria, but he forced himself to continue.

The survivors struggled onward toward Cape Hoskins and ultimately Rabaul. On 9 April, Easter Sunday, four half-starved Japanese wandered onto the San Remo Plantation, where Gayle's battal-

*Before the building of a rest area at Garua Bay, with its hot springs and bathing beaches, these Marines relax in one of the crystal clear streams running into the sea from New Britain's mountainous interior.*

Department of Defense (USMC) photo 78381

ion had bivouacked after pursuing the enemy eastward from the Willaumez Peninsula. The Marine unit was preparing to pass in review for the regimental commander later that day, when a sentry saw the intruders and opened fire. The ensuing skirmish killed three of the enemy. One of the dead proved to be Major Komori; his pack contained a rusty revolver and a diary describing the sufferings of his command.

Colonel Sato, with the rest of the rear guard for the *Matsuda Force*, set out from Augitni on 7 March, one day after Komori, who sent back word on the 19th that patrols from the 5th Marines had fanned out from the Willaumez Peninsula, where the reinforced regiment had landed almost two weeks earlier. When Sato reached Linga Linga and came across a bivouac abandoned by a Marine patrol, his force had dwindled to just 250 men, less than half the number that started out. He received a shock the following day when American landing craft appeared as his men prepared to cross the Kapaluk River. He immediately set up a perimeter to beat back the expected attack, but the boats were carrying elements of the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, under Major Charles H. Brush, Jr. A patrol from Brush's Company F landed on a beach beyond Kandoka, the former site of a Japanese supply cache, and dispatched one platoon, led by First Lieutenant William C. Schleip, westward along the coastal track, even as Sato, aware only of the general location of the landing, groped eastward toward the village. On 26 March, the two collided, the Japanese surprising the Marines in the act of crossing a small stream and pinning them down for some three hours until the approach of reinforcements from Company F forced the enemy to break off the action, take to the jungle, and bypass Kandoka.

As the head of Sato's column disappeared in the jungle, one of the division's light airplanes, scouting landing sites for Brush's battalion, sighted the tail near Linga Linga. The pilot, Captain Petras, turned over the controls to Brigadier General Earl C. Long, also a pilot, sketched the location of the Japanese, and dropped the map to one of the troop-laden landing craft. Petras then led the way to an undefended beach, where Brush's Marines waded ashore and set out in pursuit of Sato. On 30 March, Second Lieutenant Richard B. Watkins, at the head of an eight-man patrol, spotted a pair of Japanese, their rifles slung, who turned out to be members of a 73-man patrol, far too many for Watkins to handle.

Once the enemy column had moved off, Watkins and his men hurried to Kandoka, where he reported to Major Brush and obtained mortars and machine guns before again taking to the trail. Brush followed, bringing a reinforced rifle platoon to increase the Marine firepower. Meanwhile, the Japanese encountered yet another Marine patrol, this one led by Sergeant Frank Chliek, which took up a position on high ground that commanded the trail. When they heard Chliek's group open fire, Watkins and Brush hurried to its aid; the resulting slaughter killed 55 Japanese, including Colonel Sato, who died sword in hand, but the Marines did not suffer even one casualty.

On 9 April, the 3d Battalion, 1st Marines, under Lieutenant Colonel Hankins, replaced Brush's 1st Battalion and continued the search for enemy stragglers. The bulk of the *Matsuda Force*, and whatever supplies it could transport, had by this time retreated to Cape Hoskins and beyond, and Army troops were taking over from the Marines. Almost four months had elapsed since the landing at Cape Gloucester; clearly the time had come for the amphibious troops to move on to an operation that would make better use of their specialized training and equipment. The final action fought by the Leathernecks took place on 22 April, when an ambush sprung by the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, killed 20 Japanese and resulted in the last Marine fatality of the campaign. In seizing western New Britain as part of the isolation of Rabaul, the division suffered 310 killed in action and 1,083 wounded, roughly one-fourth the estimated Japanese casualties.

Early in February 1944, after the capture of the Cape Gloucester airfields but before the landing at Volupai, General Rupertus, warned that his 1st Marine Division might remain on New Britain indefinitely. Having the unit tied down for an extended period alarmed the recently appointed Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Vandegrift. "Six months there," he remarked, referring to an extended commitment in New Britain, "and it will no longer be a well-trained amphibious division." Vandegrift urged Admiral Ernest J. King, the Chief of Naval Operations, to help pry the division from MacArthur's grasp so it could again undertake amphibious operations. Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, Commander in Chief, Pacific Ocean Areas, wanted the division for the impending invasion of the Palau Islands, the capture of which would protect the flank of MacArthur's advance to the Philippines. In order to obtain the Marines, Nimitz made the Army's 40th Infantry Division available to MacArthur, in effect swapping a division capable of taking over the New Britain campaign for one that could spearhead the amphibious offensive against Japan. MacArthur, however, briefly retained control of one component of the Marine division—Company A,

1st Tank Battalion. That unit's medium tanks landed on 22 April at Hollandia on the northern coast of New Guinea, but a swamp just beyond the beachhead prevented the Shermans from supporting the advance inland.

The commanding general of the Army's 40th Infantry Division, Major General Rapp Brush, arrived at New Britain on 10 April to arrange for the relief. His advance echelon arrived on the 23d and the remainder of the division five days later. The 1st Marine Division departed in two echelons on 6 April and 4 May. Left behind was the 12th Defense Battalion, which continued to provide antiaircraft defense for the Cape Gloucester airfields until relieved by an Army unit late in May.

In a campaign lasting four months, the 1st Marine Division had plunged into the unforgiving jungle and overwhelmed a determined and resolute enemy, capturing the Cape Gloucester airfields and driving the Japanese from western New Britain. A number of factors helped the Marines defeat nature and the Japanese. Allied control of the air and the sea provided mobility and disrupted the coastal barge traffic upon which the enemy had to depend for the movement of large quantities of supplies, especially badly needed medicines, during the retreat to Rabaul. Warships and landing craft armed with rockets—supplemented by such improvisations as tanks or rocket-equipped amphibian trucks firing from landing craft—supported the landings, but the size of the island and the lack of fixed coastal defenses limited the effectiveness of the various forms of naval gunfire. Using superior engineering skills, the Marines defied swamp and undergrowth to bring forward tanks that crushed enemy emplacements and added to the already formidable American firepower. Although photo analysis, an art that improved rapidly, misinterpreted the nature of the damp flat, Marine intelligence made excellent use of captured Japanese documents throughout the campaign. In the last analysis, the courage and endurance of the average Marine made victory possible, as he braved discomfort, disease, and violent death during his time in the green inferno.

## New Weapons in the Division's Arsenal

During the period of rehabilitation following the Guadalcanal campaign, the 1st Marine Division received two new weapons—the M4 medium tank, nicknamed the Sherman in honor of William Tecumseh Sherman whose Union troops marched from Atlanta to the sea, and the M-1 rifle. The new rifle, designed by John C. Garand, a civilian employee of the Springfield Armory in Massachusetts, was a semi-automatic, gas-operated weapon, weighing 9.5 pounds and using an eight-round clip. Although less accurate at longer range than the former standard rifle, the M-1903, which snipers continued to use, the M-1 could lay down a deadly volume of fire at the comparatively short ranges typical of jungle warfare.

In addition, the division received the M4A1, an early version of the Sherman tank, which MacArthur valued so highly that he borrowed a company of them from the 1st Marine Division for the Hollandia operation. The model used by the Marines weighed 34 tons, mounted a 75mm gun, and had frontal armor some three inches thick. Although a more formidable weapon than the 16-ton light tank, with a 37mm gun, the medium tank had certain shortcomings. A high silhouette made it a comparatively easy target for Japanese gunners, who fortunately did not have a truly deadly antitank weapon, and narrow treads provided poor traction in the mud of New Britain.

*Marine infantrymen, some of them using the M1 rifle for the first time in combat, and a Sherman tank form a deadly team in the comparatively open country near the Cape Gloucester airfields.*

Department of Defense (USMC) photo 69146

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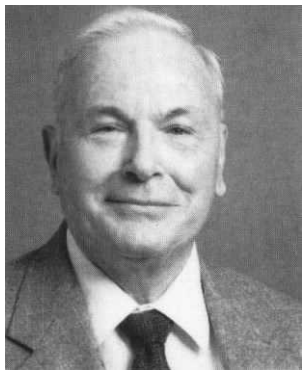
Of the Marine Corps oral history interviews of participants in the New Britain fighting, the most valuable were with Generals Lemuel C. Shepherd, Jr., and Edwin A. Pollock and Lieutenant Generals Henry W. Buse, Lewis J. Fields, Robert B. Luckey, and John N. McLaughlin.

Almost three dozen collections of personal papers deal in one way or another with the campaign, some of them providing narratives of varying length and others photographs or maps. The most enlightening commentary came from the papers of Major Sherwood Moran, USMCR, before the war a missionary in Japan and during the fighting an intelligence specialist with the 1st Marine Division, who discussed everything from coping with the weather to understanding the motivation of the Japanese soldier.

# About the Author



Bernard C. Nalty served as a civilian member of the Historical Branch, G-3 Division, HQMC, from October 1956 to September 1961. In collaboration with Henry I. Shaw, Jr., and Edwin T. Turnbladh, he wrote *Central Pacific Drive*, volume 3 of the *History of U.S. Marine Corps Operations in World War II*, and he also completed a number of short historical studies, some of which appeared as articles in *Leatherneck* or *Marine Corps Gazette*. He joined the history office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1961, transferring in 1964 to the Air Force history program, from which he retired in January 1994.


**WORLD WAR II**



**THIS PAMPHLET HISTORY,** one in a series devoted to U.S. Marines in the World War II era, is published for the education and training of Marines by the History and Museums Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, Washington, D.C., as a part of the U.S. Department of Defense observance of the 50th anniversary of victory in that war.

Editorial costs of preparing this pamphlet have been defrayed in part by a bequest from the estate of Emilie H. Watts, in memory of her late husband, Thomas M. Watts, who served as a Marine and was the recipient of a Purple Heart.

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Building 58, Washington Navy Yard
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**1994**
PCN 190 003128 00


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