Marine engineers moved to the end of the field which was not being hit and continued to work. The other tenants, though, anxious to avoid repeated artillery shelling, vacated the area.

By the time that Inland Defense Line F had been occupied on 28 November, clearing of the projected bomber and fighter strips was well underway. The work was speeded by the arrival on the 26th of November of the 36th Naval Construction Battalion which brought all its equipment and went to work almost full time on the Piva fields. Meanwhile, the Torokina strip had been unexpectedly put into operation. About noon on the 24th, Seabees and engineers working on the airstrip were amazed to see a Marine scout-bomber preparing to land on the rough runway. Quickly clearing the strip of all heavy engineering equipment, the construction workers stood by while the Marine pilot brought his plane into a bumpy but successful landing. The emergency landing of the plane, damaged in a raid over Buka, initiated operations on the new strip.

Admiral Halsey, whose cheerful messages delighted the South Pacific Forces all through the long climb up the Solomons ladder, provided a fitting note of congratulations on the completion of the fighter strip:

> In smashing through swamp, jungle, and Japs to build that air strip, your men have proven there is neither bull nor dozing at Torokina. . . . A well done to them all. Halsey.[15]

The advance naval base and boat pool, which had been underway since the first landings, was also rushed toward completion during the month of November. This gave the III Amphibious Force torpedo boats a wider range, and these ubiquitous craft then prowled along the Bougainville coast as far north as Buka and as far south as the Shortlands in protective patrols.

The Torokina strip was finally declared operational on 10 December, just one month after the initial construction was started. At dawn on the 10th, Marine Fighter Squadron 216, with 17 fighter planes, 6 scout bombers, and 1 cargo plane, landed as the first echelon. The following day, 11 December, three Marine torpedo bombers landed and these were joined six days later by four aircraft from an Army Air Forces squadron. The first direct air support mission was flown on 13 December with Hellzapoppin Ridge as the target, while combat air patrols began flying from the former plantation site on 10 December, the day that the planes arrived. Later in the month, additional flights including night fighter patrols, began operations from the Torokina strip.

After the completion of the first field, work was rushed on the Piva bomber field, and early in December another full-strength naval construction battalion, the 77th, arrived to help with the job. As the network of roads throughout the perimeter was completed, the 71st and 53d Seabees also went to work on the airfields. The Piva bomber field received its first planes on 19 December, and was completely operational on 30 December. The Piva fighter field, delayed by lack of matting, was operational on 9 January, after the main units of the 3d Marine Division were withdrawn from the island.

With the opening of three Allied airfields on Bougainville, the Japanese capability to threaten the Allied position on

[15] ComSoPac msg to CG, IMAC, in *3d MarDiv Jnl*, 13Dec43.

Cape Torokina from the air was virtually eliminated. The tactical importance of these airstrips was demonstrated in the quick support given the ground troops in the attack on Hellzapoppin Ridge, but the advantage was strategic as well as tactical. The Torokina airfields brought Allied air power to within 220 miles of Rabaul and allowed fighter aircraft to escort bombers on air strikes against Japanese bases on New Britain and New Ireland. The completion of the three fields on Bougainville, and a fourth field at Stirling Island in the Treasurys, marked the successful achievement of the primary aim of the Bougainville operation.

The constant pressure which the expanding air strength of the Allies exerted upon the Japanese installations was reflected in the attempts which the enemy made to delay the Torokina airstrips. During the first 26 days of operation at Torokina, the beachhead had 90 enemy alerts. The vigilance of the ComAirNorSols fighter cover and the accuracy of the Marine 3d Defense Battalion's antiaircraft fire was indicated by the fact that bombs were dropped during only 22 of these alerts. Casualties from enemy air action up to 26 November were 24 killed and 96 wounded. Damage was restricted mainly to the boat pool and supply stocks on Puruata Island.

During the time that the 3d Marine Division remained on the island, the Japanese managed to bomb the perimeter only five more times, and the interval between alerts grew increasingly lengthy. For the entire period 1 November to 28 December, there were 136 enemy air alerts with bombs dropped during only 27 of these alerts. The total casualties in enemy air raids were 28 killed, 136 wounded, and 10 missing.

JAPANESE COUNTERATTACKS, MARCH 1944[16]

Several weeks after the 3d Marine Division departed Bougainville, the XIV Corps became aware of gradually increasing enemy activity around the area of the Torokina River and the right sector of the beachhead now being held by the Americal Division. Immediate offensive efforts were directed toward the Torokina sector, and aggressive patrols by the Americal Division erased the threat to the perimeter by driving the Japanese out of prepared positions along the coast near the Torokina River. The bunkers and pillboxes encountered were destroyed. The perimeter, however, was not extended to cover this area.

The following month, Japanese patrol action was more aggressive, and throughout February the entire perimeter was subjected to a number of sharp probing attacks by small groups of enemy soldiers. The two frontline divisions, keenly aware that the perimeter might soon be tested by another determined Japanese attack, prepared extensive defenses to meet it. Fortifications in depth were constructed, and the entire front was mined and wired where possible.

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[16] Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: *ThirdFlt NarrRept;* XIV Corps, History of TA Operation Mar44, dtd 21Apr44 (Bougainville AreaOpFile, HistBr, HQMC); 37th InfDiv G-2 Periodic Repts, n.d. (Bougainville AreaOpFile, HistBr, HQMC); 37th InfDiv OpRept—Bougainville, 6Nov43–30Apr44, n.d. (WW II RecsDiv, FRC Alex); *3d MarDefBn SAR;* LtCol Edward H. Forney ltr to CMC, dtd 7Jun48; LtCol John G. Bouker ltr to CMC, dtd 24Jun48; Rentz, *Bougainville and the Northern Solomons;* Miller, *Reduction of Rabaul.*

The Japanese, after being forced to withdraw from the heights around the Torokina River late in December, began planning the counterstroke about the middle of January. Determined to end the Allied possession of the Cape Torokina area, the enemy readied the entire *6th Division*, plus a number of special battalions from the *Seventeenth Army*. This force began training for the operation while support troops started building roads toward the Cape Torokina area from Mawareka. This offensive was to be a joint Army-Navy effort, but when Truk Island in the Central Pacific was hit by a large Allied carrier force on 16 February 1944, the remainder of the naval air strength at Rabaul was dispatched to Truk. The *Seventeenth Army* then carried on the operation alone.

As expected by Allied intelligence officers, the trail net from Mosigetta-Mawareka was the main route of travel, and a rough road was completed during the early part of the year. This route had its share of troubles, though. Sections of the road were washed out by rains, and swollen rivers carried away the hasty bridges thrown across them by the Japanese engineers. Additionally, the Japanese activity along this road was a prime target for repeated aerial attacks from patrolling Allied planes. Japanese barge movements along the coast were so harassed by Allied torpedo boats, LCI gunboats, and patrol planes that only a few of the barges remained afloat by March. In the end, the enemy force was required to move overland through the jungle, tugging and pulling artillery and supplies behind.

The Japanese offensive, known as the *Ta* operation, included elements from five infantry regiments—the *13th*, *23d*, *45th*, *53d*, and the *81st*—and two artillery regiments. The attack force numbered about 11,700 troops out of a total force of some 15,400. The general plan of the *Ta* operation was a simultaneous attack on the Allied perimeter from the northwest, north, and east, while the artillery units pounded the objective from positions east of the Torokina River. The attack opened on 8 March with a simultaneous shelling of the Torokina and Piva airstrips and a sudden thrust at the 37th Division lines near Lake Kathleen in the center of the perimeter.

The Army division held its positions against light probing attacks and waited for the all-out assault. The following day three battalions from the *13th* and *23d Infantry* slashed at 37th Division positions in an effort to penetrate the Army lines and obtain high ground where they could emplace artillery weapons to threaten the airfields. The 145th Infantry bore the brunt of these attacks, and by the 12th of March had made three counterattacks to dislodge the enemy forces and restore the lines. During these bitter struggles, the entire enemy force was virtually annihilated; 37th Infantry Division troops counted 1,173 dead Japanese in the area after the attacks.

While this fight raged, another strong Japanese force suddenly assaulted the Americal Division in the area of the upper Torokina River. The action here was considerably less violent but more protracted than in the 37th Division area, and the Japanese forces were not driven back until the 29th of March. The enemy in this area suffered 541 casualties.

In sharp contrast to the weeks of November and December, the main enemy

thrusts during the March counterattack continued in the perimeter sector held by the 37th Division. After the staggering repulse near the center of the perimeter, the Japanese forces moved toward the Laruma area, where four more determined attacks were launched against the Army positions. A coordinated attack in two places on the northwest side of the perimeter on the 13th and 14th was repulsed by the 129th Infantry, and more than 300 Japanese were killed. On the 17th of March, the Japanese struck another blow at the 37th Division positions and were met by a tank-infantry counterattack that killed another 195 enemy.

The sixth and final attack against the XIV Corps perimeter was launched on the 24th of March. Japanese fanaticism carried the attack as far as one of the battalion command posts of the 129th Infantry before the penetration was sealed off. Another 200 Japanese perished in this last attack. The following day, XIV Corps artillery shelled the retreating Japanese, and the last bid by the enemy to retake the Cape Torokina area was over. Admiral Halsey, describing the "Ta" operation later, reported:

> The attack came against positions that had been carefully prepared in depth, with well-prepared fields of fire and manned by well-disciplined, healthy, and ready-to-go troops of the 37th and Americal Division. Some damage was done by enemy artillery but the damage did not prevent aerial operations. The Japanese infantry attacks were savage, suicidal, and somewhat stupid. They were mowed down without mercy and the attack was actually broken up by the killing of a sufficient number of Japanese to render them ineffective. At this writing, over 10,000 Japanese have been buried by our forces on Bougainville. The remainder can probably manage to keep alive but their potential effectiveness and heavy weapons have been destroyed.[17]

The XIV Corps estimated that more than 6,843 Japanese had died in the futile charges against the strong Allied positions from 8 to 25 March. These casualty figures compare favorably with Japanese records which indicate that the *Ta* attack force lost 2,389 killed and 3,060 wounded. In addition, various supporting units under direct control of the *Seventeenth Army* suffered casualties of about 3,000 killed and 4,000 wounded.[18]

At the time of the attack against the XIV Corps perimeter, the Antiaircraft and Special Weapons Groups of the Marine 3d Defense Battalion were operating under the tactical control of Antiaircraft Command, Torokina, an XIV Corps grouping of all air defense weapons. For some time, enemy activity over the beachhead had been restricted because of the almost complete dominance of Allied aircraft. As a result, the Marine weapons were seldom fired. When the Japanese attack was launched, the 90mm batteries were employed as field artillery.

The Marine batteries were usually registered by an Army fire direction center on various targets beyond the range of light artillery units and adjusted by aerial observers. Most of the firing missions were targets of opportunity and night harassing registrations on enemy bivouac and supply areas. The Marine weapons fired a total of 4,951 rounds of ammunition in 61 artillery missions.[19]

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[17] *ThirdFlt NarrRept*, p. 12.

[18] *Seventeenth Army Ops—II*, p. 111.

[19] CO, 3d DefBn SAR Covering Employment of Guns in Direct Ground Fire Missions, 14Mar–15Apr44, dtd 15Apr44 (Bougainville AreaOps-File, HistBr, HQMC).

On the 13th of March, two 90mm guns from the Marine unit were moved toward the northwest side of the perimeter with the mission of direct fire on a number of enemy field pieces and other installations located on a ridge of hills extending in front of the 129th Infantry. Emplacement of the guns in suitable positions for such restricted fire was difficult, but both guns were eventually employed against limited targets of opportunity. The guns were later used to greater advantage to support the soldiers in local counterattacks against the Japanese forces.

The 155mm seacoast defense guns of the Marine battalion were also used as field artillery in defense of the perimeter. The Marine battery was called upon for 129 firing missions in general support of the Army defenses and was usually employed against long-range area targets. The big guns fired 6,860 rounds, or 515 tons of explosives, against enemy positions.

In addition, two of the 40mm guns from the Special Weapons Group were moved into the front lines in the Americal Division sector for close support. There were few suitable targets for the guns in the slow action in this area, and only two or three bunkers were hit by direct fire. One weapon, however, fired over 1,000 rounds in countermortar fire and to strip obstructing foliage from enemy positions. Targets being scarce, the guns were sometimes used as sniping weapons against individual Japanese.[20]

The defense battalion was the last Marine Corps ground unit withdrawn from Bougainville. It departed Cape Torokina on 21 June, nearly eight months after the initial landings of the battalion on 1 November with the assault waves. The withdrawal came one week after Admiral Halsey's South Pacific Command was turned over to Vice Admiral John H. Newton and all the Solomon Islands were annexed as part of General MacArthur's Southwest Pacific Command. The South Pacific campaign against the Japanese was virtually ended. Ultimately, the Cape Torokina area was occupied by Australian forces which, by the end of the war, were closing slowly on Numa Numa and the last remnants of the Bougainville defenders.

CONCLUSIONS

In an analysis of the operations against the Japanese in the Northern Solomons, three points of strategic importance are apparent. The first of these is that despite the risk inherent in attacking deep into enemy-held territory, the Allied forces successfully executed such a venture. Diversionary and subsidiary actions were so timed and executed that the Japanese were deceived as to the intentions and objective of the final attack. The South Pacific forces also gambled and won on the premise that the ever-increasing superiority of Allied air and sea power would counterbalance the vulnerability of extended supply lines attendant upon an operation so close to Rabaul.

Another point is that, although the operations in Bougainville and the Treasurys were planned, directed, and executed by South Pacific Forces, the campaign was partially a maneuver to provide flank security for the advance of the Southwest Pacific Forces along the northern coast of New Guinea. The need to strike at a point which would insure this flank security was the factor which resulted in the selection

[20] 3d DefBn Memo No. 6–44, dtd 1Apr44 (Bougainville Area OpsFile, HistBr, HQMC).

of Cape Torokina as the I Marine Amphibious Corps objective.

The third point is that the Bougainville campaign was wholly successful, with a minimum of lives lost and materiel expended. Seizure of a shallow but broad beachhead by Marine units and the expansion of this perimeter with the subsequent and continued arrival of Army reinforcements was an economical employment of both amphibious troops and infantry.

The operations in the Northern Solomons knocked the Japanese off-balance. The only enemy activity was a day-to-day reaction to Allied moves. After 15 December, Allied air superiority south of Rabaul was unchallenged, and the Japanese cancelled further naval operations in the latitude of the Bougainville operation. There were other considerations, however. The enemy was pressed by additional Allied moves in the Central Pacific, the loss of the Gilbert Islands, and the continued advance of General MacArthur's forces in the Southwest Pacific. The success at Bougainville, however, led to the eventual collapse of the enemy's defensive positions in the Bismarcks.

> The Bougainville campaign was intended to accomplish the destruction of enemy air strength in the Bismarcks; not only was this accomplished but the by-products of the campaign were so extensive that the subsequent operations at Green Island and Emirau were accomplished virtually without enemy opposition, and the entire enemy offensive potential in the Bismarcks area was destroyed. In the matter of ultimate achievement and importance in the Pacific War, the Bougainville operation was successful beyond our greatest hopes.[21]

By tactical considerations, the planning of the Northern Solomons campaign was daring, yet sound. The diversionary landing on Choiseul and the operations in the Treasurys were conceived to mislead the Japanese, and these maneuvers served as the screen behind which the I Marine Amphibious Corps moved toward the actual point of attack. The surprise achieved by the landings at Empress Augusta Bay is evidence of astute, farsighted thinking behind these operations.

The tactical stroke which decided the success of the Bougainville operation was the selection of the Cape Torokina beaches as the landing site. To pick a landing area lashed by turbulent surf, with tangled jungle and dismal swamps immediately inland, was a tactical decision which the Japanese did not believe the Allied forces would make. Amphibious patrols had failed to scout the exact beaches chosen and general knowledge of the area was unfavorable. Despite these disadvantages, the shoreline at Cape Torokina was picked because the Japanese had decided not to defend such an unlikely area in strength.

When the I Marine Amphibious Corps was relieved by XIV Corps on 15 December, General Geiger's Marine forces could leave the island confident that the beachhead was firmly anchored along the prescribed lines and that the mission was complete. Advance naval base facilities were installed and functioning; one fighter strip was in operation and another underway, and a bomber field was nearly complete. Equally as important, a road net capable of carrying all anticipated traffic was constructed or nearly finished throughout the beachhead. This last achievement, as much as the rapid completion of airfields, insured the continued existence of the Cape Torokina perimeter against Japanese attacks.

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[21] *ThirdFlt NarrRept*, p. 12.

That the operations ashore were successful though faced by three formidable obstacles—Japanese forces, deep swamps, and dense jungle—is a tribute to the cooperation of the Marine Corps, Army, and Navy units assigned to the I Marine Amphibious Corps.

For the 3d Marine Division, which formed the bulk of the IMAC forces initially, the months of hard fighting established skills and practices which lasted throughout the Pacific campaign. The Marines of General Turnage's division first experienced the difficulties of maintaining supply and evacuation while under enemy fire at Cape Torokina. If there had been any misgivings about committing an untested division to such a task, these were dispelled by the manner in which the Marines conducted the operation. After the campaign, General Turnage wrote: "From its very inception it was a bold and hazardous operation. Its success was due to the planning of all echelons and the indomitable will, courage, and devotion to duty of all members of all organizations participating." [22]

By the time of the Piva Forks battle, the 3d Division Marine was a combat-wise and skilled jungle fighter capable of swift movement through swamps and effective employment of his weapons. By the end of the campaign, the Marine was a veteran soldier, capable of offering a critical appraisal of his own weapons and tactics as well as those of his opponent.

This increased fighting skill was reflected by mounting coordination between all combat units, with lessening casualties. In this respect, the 3d Medical Battalion achieved a remarkable record of rescue operations which, despite the complexities of evacuation, resulted in less than one percent of the battle casualties dying of wounds. Aid stations were located as close to the front lines as possible. Wounded Marines were given emergency treatment minutes after being hit. The casualties were removed by amtracs to hospitals in the rear, or, in the case of seriously wounded Marines, to more extensive facilities at Vella Lavella. The hospitals on the beach were subjected to air raids and shelling, but the treatment of wounded continued despite these handicaps.

Disease incidence was low, except for malaria which had already been contracted elsewhere. The construction work on the airfields and roads resulted in the draining of many adjacent swamps which aided the malaria control. There were no cases of malaria which could be traced to local infection, and dysentery and diarrhea were practically nonexistent—a rare testimonial to the sanitary regulations observed from the start of the operation. Before the campaign, many preventive measures were taken. Lectures and demonstrations which stressed the value of clothing, repellents, bug spray, and head and mosquito nets were part of the pre-operation training. Their effect and the discipline of the Marines is reflected in the fact that few men were evacuated because of illness.

The Marines learned that, with few exceptions, jungle tactics were a common sense application of standard tactical principles and methods to this type of terrain. Control of troops was difficult but could be accomplished by the "contact imminent" formation described earlier. During most of the fighting, command posts were situated as close to the front lines as

[22] *3d MarDiv CombatRept, p.* 12.

possible—sometimes as near as 75 yards. Although this close proximity sometimes forced the command post to defend itself against enemy attacks, Marine officers felt that such a location provided more security. Additionally, this close contact allowed rapid relay of information with resultant quick action. The command post was usually in two echelons—the battle or forward CP with the commanding officer and the operations and intelligence officers, and the rear command post manned by the executive officer and the supply and communications officers.

Defense in the jungle usually took the form of a thinly-stretched perimeter with a reserve in the center. Organization of the positions was seldom complete. Sometimes a double-apron fence of barbed wire blocked some avenue of approach, but usually a few strands of booby-trapped wire sufficed. The Marines took a lesson from the Japanese and cleared fields of fire by removing only a few obstructing branches from trees and underbrush.

As the fighting moved through the jungles, the Marines found that the automatic rifle (BAR) was the most effective weapon for close combat. Light and capable of being fired instantly, the BAR was considered superior to the light machine gun for most occasions. The machine gun, however, had its adherents because of its mobility and low silhouette. These rapid-fire weapons and the highly regarded M–1 rifle were used most of the time in jungle attacks. The .30 caliber carbine most Marines dismissed as too light in hitting power, too rust-prone, and too similar in sound to a Japanese weapon. The heavy machine gun was too heavy and too high for jungle work except for sustained firing in a defensive position.

Supporting weapons such as the 37mm antitank gun and the 75mm pack howitzer were effective in the dense foliage, but these guns were difficult to manhandle into position and could not keep up with the advance in a rapidly changing tactical situation. The 81mm mortars, augmented by the lighter 60mm tubes, provided most of the close support fires. These weapons achieved good results on troops in the open, but were too light for emplaced bunkers. The Marines were supported on two occasions by an Army unit with chemical mortars (4.2 inch), and these were found to be extremely effective against pillboxes and covered positions.

Several attempts were made to use flame throwers in stubborn areas, and these weapons had a demoralizing effect on the Japanese. Many bunkers were evacuated by the enemy before the weapons could be fired against the position. The flame throwers quickly snuffed out the lives of the Japanese remaining in their emplacements. Ignition of the fuel was difficult in the jungle, but Marines solved this by tossing incendiary grenades against a bunker and then spraying the position with fuel. The 2.36-inch antitank bazooka was used on enemy emplacements on Hellzapoppin Ridge, but the crews were unable to get close enough for effective work. The experimental rockets, which were used in the latter stages of the campaign, were highly inaccurate against small area targets and revealed the positions of the Marines.

The Japanese proved to be as formidable an enemy as the Marines expected. The Japanese defenses were well-placed and skillfully concealed and camouflaged. Expenditure of ammunition was small and fire from the bunkers was deadly. Foxholes were cleverly camouflaged and only

narrow, inconspicuous lanes of fire were cleared. Fire was limited to short range. Most Marines were killed within 10 yards of enemy positions. In such actions, the rate of the wounded to the dead was high, and the majority of bullet wounds were in the lower extremities. This reflected the Japanese tendency to keep firing lanes low to the ground.

Grenades were used extensively, both by hand and from launchers. The concussion of these enemy grenades was great but fragmentation was poor. The Japanese weapon most feared by the Marines was the 90mm mortar which the enemy employed with great skill. The enemy shell contained an explosive with a high velocity of reaction which resulted in a concussion of tremendous force. The sound of this blast was almost as terrifying as the actual burst. One Marine regiment, assessing the effect of this weapon against the Marines, estimated that at least one-fifth of all battle casualties were inflicted either by the blast concussion or fragments from this enemy shell.

The Japanese, however, displayed what the Marines believed was amazing ineptness in the tactical use of artillery. The gunnery was excellent, and fire from the light and heavy artillery pieces was accurately placed on road junctions, observations points, front lines, and supply dumps. But the placement of firing batteries was so poor that, almost without exception, the Japanese positions were detected and destroyed within hours after firing was started. The enemy fired concentrations of short duration, but, despite this, the muzzle blasts of the weapons were detected and the positions shelled by counterbattery fire.

The enemy may have lacked shells because of the difficulty of supply through the jungle, but "there is no reasonable explanation for the Japanese repeatedly placing their guns on the forward slopes of hills under our observation and then firing them even at twilight or night when the muzzle flashes of the guns fixed their positions as surely as if they had turned a spotlight on them." [23]

As for the artillery support offered by the 12th Marines (and later the 37th Division units), the 3d Marine Division stinted no praise in reporting that the accurate artillery fire was the dominant factor in driving the Japanese forces out of the Torokina area. At least half of the enemy casualties were the direct result of artillery shelling. The preattack bombardment fired before the Battle of Piva Forks was devastating evidence of the force of sustained shelling. The Marines, aware that the all-around defensive system of the Japanese discouraged flank attacks, depended upon the fires of the supporting artillery to pave the way for the infantry to close with the enemy. This infantry-artillery cooperation was one of the highlights of the Bougainville campaign. A total of 72,643 rounds were fired by Marine artillery units in support of the attacks by the IMAC forces.

The greatest advance in supporting arms techniques was in aviation. Prior to the operation, the Marines had a tendency to regard close air support as a risk. The infantrymen wanted and needed direct support from the air, but their faith as well as their persons had been shaken on occasion by air support being too close. Ground troops felt insecure with only smoke to mark their front lines and targets, and airmen were hesitant to bomb after it became known that the Japanese

[23] *Ibid*, p. 145.

shot white smoke into the Marine lines to deceive the airmen into bombing their own people. Since it was known from the New Georgia campaign that the enemy troops tended to close in against the front lines to wait out a bombing attack, preparations for close air support at Bougainville started with the idea of developing techniques which would result in maximum accuracy at minimum distance from Marine lines.

Prior to the operation, three air liaison parties were organized and trained. In addition, each battalion and regiment sent a representative to the training school so that each infantry command post would have a man available to direct the close support missions. The pre-strike briefings by both the strike operations officer and a ground officer familiar with the terrain was another innovation. How well this system succeeded is demonstrated by the fact that in 10 missions requested by forces on Bougainville, the only casualties to ground troops were from bombs inexplicably dropped 600 yards from a well-marked target. The other nine strikes were highly successful and in two instances were made within 75 yards of the front lines without harm to the infantry.

Before the Cape Torokina operation, air support was employed mostly against targets beyond the reach of artillery. The Bougainville fighting showed that air could be employed as close to friendly troops and as accurately as artillery, and that it was an additional weapon which could be used to surprise and overwhelm the enemy. Much credit for developing this technique should go to Lieutenant Colonel John T. L. D. Gabbert, the 3d Division Air Officer, and the ground and flying officers who worked with him.

The work of the amphibian tractor companies is another highlight of the operation. Throughout the campaign, these machines proved invaluable. Had it not been for the amtracs, the supply problem would have been insurmountable. The 3d Amphibian Tractor Battalion transported an estimated 22,992 tons of rations, ammunition, weapons, organizational gear, medical supplies, packs, gasoline, and vehicles, as well as reinforcements and casualties. A total of 124 amtracs were landed, but the demand was so great and jungle treks so difficult that only a few were in operating order at any one time. These, however, did yeoman work, and the list of the duties and jobs performed by these versatile machines varied from rescuing downed aviators from the sea to conducting scouting trips along the front lines. The appreciation and affection felt by the Marines for these lumbering lifesavers is best expressed by this comment:

> Not once but all through the campaign the amphibian tractor bridged the vital gap between life and death, available rations and gnawing hunger, victory and defeat. They roamed their triumphant way over the beachhead. They ruined roads, tore down communication lines, revealed our combat positions to the enemy—but everywhere they were welcome.[24]

Not to be overlooked in an analysis of the campaign is the contribution to the success of the Cape Torokina operation by the 19th Marines. The Marine pioneers and engineers, with a Seabee unit attached, landed with the assault waves on D-Day and for some time functioned as shore party personnel before being released to

[24] John Monks, Jr., and John Falter, *A Ribbon and a Star, The Third Marines at Bougainville* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1945), p. 65.

perform the construction missions assigned. Only one trail to the interior existed at the time of landing; in slightly more than two weeks a rough but passable road connected all units along the perimeter. This provided a vitally necessary supply and reinforcement route for further advances.

One of the reasons the Marines gained and held the perimeter was this ability to construct quickly the necessary roads, airfields, and supply facilities. Engineering units and Seabees of the I Marine Amphibious Corps built and maintained 25 miles of high-speed roads as well as a network of lesser roads within the space of two months. This work was in addition to that on two fighter strips and a bomber field. The Japanese had not developed the Cape Torokina area and therefore could not defend it when the Marines landed. After the IMAC beachhead was established, the Japanese employed a few crude pieces of engineering equipment in an attempt to construct roads from the Buin area toward Empress Augusta Bay. The project was larger than the equipment available. The attacking force for the *Ta* operation had to struggle more than 50 miles through jungle, swamps, and rivers tugging artillery, ammunition, and rations over rough jungle trails. XIV Corps was able to meet this threat over IMAC-constructed roads, which permitted reinforcements to rush to the perimeter at high speed.[25]

The solution of the logistics muddle, which started on D-Day and continued for several weeks, was another accomplishment which marked the Bougainville campaign. With the exception of the unexpected accumulation of supplies and equipment which nearly smothered the beaches early in the operation, logistical planning proved to be as sound as conditions permitted. An advance base at Vella Lavella for a source of quick supply to augment the short loads carried ashore on D-Day proved to be unnecessary in the light of later events. The III Amphibious Force lost a minimum of ships during the Bougainville operation, a stroke of good fortune that accrued as a result of air domination by the Allies. This permitted direct and continued supply from Guadalcanal. More than 45,000 troops and 60,000 tons of cargo were unloaded in the period 1 November–15 December, with no operational losses. With the exception of the first two echelons, all supplies were unloaded and the ships had departed before nightfall.

The lack of an organized shore party for the sole purpose of directing and controlling the flow of supplies over the beachhead was partially solved by the assignment of combat troops for this duty. Luckily, the enemy situation during the early stages at Cape Torokina was such that nearly 40 percent of the landing force could be diverted to solving the problem of beach logistics. This led to many complaints by assault units, which—despite only nominal opposition by the Japanese during the landing stages—protested the loss of combat strength at such a time.

It is to General Vandegrift's credit that quick unloading was assured by the assignment of infantrymen to the task of cargo handling. This, however, was a temporary measure to meet an existing problem and would have been unfeasible in future operations where opposition was more determined. His action, though, was an indication of the growing awareness that

[25] Col Ion M. Bethel ltr to CMC, dtd 16Jul48 (Bougainville Monograph Comment File, HistBr, HQMC).

beach logistics was a vital command responsibility. It is interesting to note that after the Bougainville operation a number of units recommended that the shore party be augmented by additional troops or personnel not essential to operations elsewhere. Later in the war, combat leaders realized that nothing was more essential than an uninterrupted flow of supplies to the assault units, and that the complicated task of beach logistics must be handled by a trained shore party organization and not an assigned labor force of inexperienced personnel.

The Bougainville operation was no strategic campaign in the sense of the employment of thousands of men and a myriad of equipment requiring months of tactical and logistical maneuver. As compared with the huge forces employed in later operations, it was a series of skirmishes between forces rarely larger than a battalion. Yet, with all due sense of proportion, the principal engagements have the right to be called battles, from the fierceness and bravery with which they were contested and the important benefits resulting from their favorable outcome.[26]

The campaign for the Northern Solomons ended as the Bougainville operation drew to a close. The end of the Solomons chain had been reached, and new operations were already being planned for the combined forces of the Southwest and South Pacific commands. The general missions of the campaign had been accomplished. Rabaul was neutralized from airfields on Bougainville, and the victory won by Marines and soldiers at Cape Torokina allowed other Allied forces to continue the attack against the Japanese at other points.

The final accolade to the Bougainville forces is contained in the message General Vandegrift sent his successor, General Geiger, when the Marine forces returned to Guadalcanal:

> I want to congratulate you on the splendid work that you and your staff and the Corps did on Bougainville. The spectacular attack on Tarawa has kind of put Bougainville off the front page; but those of us who know the constant strain, danger, and hardship of continuous jungle warfare realize what was accomplished by your outfit during the two months you were there.[27]

[26] *HistDiv Acct*, p. 1.

[27] LtGen Alexander A. Vandergrift ltr to MajGen Roy S. Geiger, dtd 29Jan44 (Vandegrift Personal Correspondence File, HistBr, HQMC).

PART IV

The New Britain Campaign

691-360 O—63——20

New Britain Prelude

GHQ AND ALAMO PLANS[1]

By late November, the parallel drives of South and Southwest Pacific forces envisaged in ELKTON plans had reached the stage where General MacArthur was ready to move into New Britain, with the main target the enemy airfields at Cape Gloucester on the island's western tip. The timing of the attack depended largely upon the availability of assault and resupply shipping, and the completion of Allied airfields on Bougainville and in the Markham-Ramu River valley at the foot of the Huon Peninsula. Complete control of the Vitiaz Strait, the prize sought in the pending operation, would give the Allies a clear shot at the Japanese bases on the New Guinea coast and a secure approach route to the Philippines.

The airstrips building within the IMAC perimeter on Bougainville provided the means for a heightened bomber offensive against Rabaul—raids which could count on strong fighter protection. With the completion of Torokina Field expected in early December, and the first of the Piva Field bomber runways ready by the month's end, SoPac planes could throw up an air barrier against enemy counterattacks on landings on western New Britain. In like manner, the new Markham-Ramu valley fields increased the potential of American and Australian air to choke off raids by the Japanese *Fourth Air Army* based at Madang and Wewak and points west on the New Guinea coast.

While men of the Australian 9th Division drove the Japanese garrison of Finschhafen back along the shore of the Huon Peninsula toward Sio, other Australians of the 7th Division fought north through the Markham-Ramu uplands, keeping the pressure on the retreating enemy defenders. Behind the assault troops, engineers worked feverishly to complete airfields at Lae and Finschhafen, and at Nadzab and Gusap in the valley. Completion schedules were slowed by the seemingly endless rain of the New Guinea region, and the most forward strip, that at Finschhafen, could not be readied for its complement of fighters before 17 December. An all-weather road building from Lae to Nadzab, key to the heavy duty supply of the valley air bases, was not slated to be fully

[1] Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: GHQ, SWPA G-3 Jnl and File, Sep43-May44, hereafter *GHQ G-3 Jnl;* ALAMO Force G-3 Jnl and File 23Jul43-10Feb 44, in 20 parts, hereafter *ALAMO G-3 Jnl* with part number; ALAMO Force Rept of the DEXTERITY Operation, 15Dec43-10Feb44, n.d., hereafter *DEXTERITY Rept* (all in WW II Recs Div, FRC Alex); USSBS, MilAnalysisDiv, *Employment of Forces under the Southwest Pacific Command* (Washington, Feb47); Craven and Cate, *Guadalcanal to Saipan;* Miller, *Reduction of Rabaul.* Where location citations for documentary sources for this part are missing, the material is in the New Britain Area Operations File, New Britain Monograph and Comment File, or Unit Historical Report File of the Historical Branch, G-3, HQMC.

operational until the 15th. Prior to that date, all troops and equipment were airlifted into the valley by transports of the Allied Air Forces.

Until the new forward bases were ready to support attacks on the next SWPA objectives, all the shipping available to Admiral Barbey's VII Amphibious Force was tied up moving troops and supplies forward from depots at Townsville, Port Moresby, and Milne Bay. The landing craft and ships essential to a move across Vitiaz Strait against Cape Gloucester could not be released for rehearsal and loading until 21 November at the earliest.

These factors, coupled with the desire of planners to execute the movement to the target during the dark of the moon, combined to set D-Day back several times. The target date first projected for Cape Gloucester was 15 November; the date finally agreed upon was 26 December. In both cases, provision for a preliminary landing on the south coast of New Britain was also made, the advance in scheduling here being made from 9 November to 15 December. Altogether, the planning for the operation was characterized by change, not only in landing dates, but also in the targets selected and the forces involved.

General MacArthur chose to organize his troops for the operations on New Guinea and against Rabaul into two task forces. The headquarters of one, New Guinea Force, under Australian General Sir Thomas A. Blamey, conducted the Papuan campaign and directed the offensive operations on the Huon Peninsula. The first operation of the other, New Britain Force, led by Lieutenant General Walter Krueger, USA, was the seizure of Woodlark and Kiriwina. Krueger's command, known as ALAMO Force after July, was next charged with the execution of DEXTERITY (the seizure of Western New Britain).

Technically, Blamey, serving as Commander, Allied Land Forces, had operational control of the national contingents assigned to his command. This assignment included the U.S. Sixth Army, led by Krueger, the Australian Military Forces, also led by Blamey, and the Royal Netherlands East Indies Army. Actually, most of the troops in Sixth Army were assigned to ALAMO Force, which MacArthur kept directly under his General Headquarters (GHQ). The effect of this organizational setup was to make New Guinea Force an Australian command to which American troops were infrequently assigned and to fix ALAMO Force as an American command with very few Australian units.

In contrast to the situation on land, no separate national task forces were created at sea or in the air. At a comparable level with Blamey, directly under MacArthur were two American officers, Vice Admiral Arthur S. Carpender, who led Allied Naval Forces, and Lieutenant General George C. Kenney, who headed Allied Air Forces. Each man was also a national contingent commander in his own force; Carpender had the Seventh Fleet and Kenney the Fifth Air Force. The Dutch and Australian air and naval forces reported to the Allied commanders for orders.

At this time, amphibious operations in the Southwest Pacific, unlike those in Halsey's area where naval command doctrine prevailed, were not conducted under unified command lower than the GHQ level. Control was effected by cooperation and coordination of landing and sup-

port forces. Neither amphibious force nor landing force commander had sole charge during the crucial period of the landing itself; the one had responsibility for movement to the target, the other for operations ashore. This deficiency in the control pattern, which was recognized as a critical "weakness" by MacArthur's G-3, Major General Stephen J. Chamberlin, was not remedied until after DEXTERITY was officially declared successful and secured.[2]

Despite its complexity, the command setup in the Southwest Pacific had one indisputable virtue—it worked. And it worked with a dispatch that matched the efforts of Halsey's South Pacific headquarters. Both GHQ and ALAMO Force displayed a tendency to spell out tactical schemes to operating forces, but this was a practice more annoying to the commanders concerned than harmful. Since frequent staff conferences between cooperating forces and the several echelons of command was the rule in planning phases, the scheme of maneuver ordered was inevitably one acceptable to the men who had to make it work. In like manner, differences regarding the strength of assault and support forces were resolved before operations began. When, at various points in the evolution of DEXTERITY plans, the differences of opinion were strong, the resolution was predominantly in favor of the assault forces.[3]

The GHQ procedure in planning an operation was to sketch an outline plan, including forces required and objectives, and then to circulate it to the Allied commands concerned for study, comment, and correction. In the case of DEXTERITY, the principal work on this first plan was done by Lieutenant Colonel Donald W. Fuller, one of the three Marines who were assigned to MacArthur's headquarters as liaison officers shortly after the 1st Division left Guadalcanal. With the others, Lieutenant Colonels Robert O. Bowen and Frederick L. Wieseman, Fuller soon became a working member of the GHQ staff. He summarized the planning sequence at this stage by recalling:

> The routine was then to let all services study the outline plan for a prescribed period and then hold a conference in GHQ. The commanders concerned [including General MacArthur], the General Staff, and Technical Services GHQ then discussed the plan and, if any objections were made, they were resolved at that time. After everyone appeared happy, the plan was filed. It was never issued formally but merely handed out for comment. The next step was the issuance of orders which were called "operations instructions." This was actually the only directive issued to conduct an operation . . . never while I was there was any command ever directed to conduct an operation in accordance with General MacArthur's outline plan.[4]

On 6 May, ALAMO Force had received a warning order from GHQ which set a future task for it of occupying western New Britain by combined airborne and amphibious operations. Engrossed as it then was in preparations for the Woodlark-Kiriwina landings, General Krueger's headquarters had little time for ad-

[2] S.J.C. memo for CinC, dtd 12Feb44. Subj: OpsInstns for Manus-Kavieng Ops, in *GHQ G-3 Jnl*, 13Feb44.

[3] "In all these operations General MacArthur gave General Krueger responsibility for coordinating ground, air, and naval planning. This gave the ground force commander a preeminent position." Dr. John Miller, Jr., OCMH, ltr to Head, HistBr, G-3, HQMC, dtd 9May62.

[4] Col Donald W. Fuller ltr to HistDiv, HQMC, dtd 28Jan52.

vance planning, but, as the weeks wore on toward summer, attention focused on the target date in November. Although the assault troops were not yet formally named, there was no doubt that they would be drawn from the 1st Marine Division, and the division sent some of its staff officers to Brisbane in June to help formulate the original plans. These Marines served with Sixth Army's staff in the Australian city, the location of MacArthur's headquarters as well as those of the principal Allied commands. In the forward area, at Port Moresby in the case of GHQ, and Milne Bay for Krueger's task force, were advance headquarters closer to the scene of combat. Members of the Sixth Army staff were detailed to additional duty as the ALAMO Force staff, and the traffic between Brisbane and New Guinea was heavy. After the initial GHQ outline plan was circulated on 19 July, ALAMO planners were not long in coming up with an alternate scheme of their own.

Conference discussions tended to veer toward the ALAMO proposals which differed mainly in urging that more forward staging areas be used that would place troops nearer the targets selected and thus conserve shipping. A second outline plan circulated on 21 August was closer to the ALAMO concept and named the units which would furnish the assault elements: 1st Marine Division; 32d Infantry Division; 503d Parachute Infantry Regiment. By mid-September, preparations for the operation were far enough along so that detailed planning could be undertaken. MacArthur's operations instructions to cover DEXTERITY were published on the 22d; six days later, an ALAMO Force draft plan was sent to GHQ for approval.

After a summer of discussion, refinement, and change, General Krueger's plan called for seizure of a foothold on New Britain's south shore at Lindenhafen Plantation on 14 November and subsequent operations to neutralize the nearby Japanese base at Gasmata. Once the Gasmata effort was well underway, the main DEXTERITY landings would take place at Cape Gloucester with the immediate objective the enemy airfields there. The eventual goal of the operation was the seizure of control of Western New Britain to a general line including Talasea on the north coast's Willaumez Peninsula and Gasmata in the south.

The assault force chosen for the Gasmata operation (LAZARETTO) was the 126th Infantry,[5] reinforced as an RCT with other 32d Division units and Sixth Army troops. To carry out operations against Cape Gloucester (BACKHANDER), General Krueger designated the 1st Marine Division, reinforced by the 503d Parachute Infantry. In ALAMO Force reserve for all DEXTERITY operations was the remainder of the 32d Division. While the 32d was a unit of the Sixth Army assigned to ALAMO, both the Marine and parachute units were assigned from GHQ Reserve, which came immediately under MacArthur's control.

The basic scheme of maneuver proposed for BACKHANDER called for a landing by the 7th Marines (less one of its battal-

[5] The assault force initially selected was the 5th Marines, reinforced as an RCT, with additional supporting units from the Sixth Army, all under the command of Brigadier General Lemuel C. Shepherd, Jr., ADC of the 1st Marine Division. General Shepherd and his staff completed preliminary plans for the operation on board ship en route from Melbourne to Milne Bay, but found on arrival that the 126th Infantry had been designated the assault element instead. Gen Lemuel C. Shepherd, Jr., ltr to CMC, dtd 20Aug62, hereafter *Shepherd ltr.*

ions), organized as Combat Team C, on north shore beaches between the cape and Borgen Bay. Simultaneously, the remaining battalion of the 7th, suitably reinforced, would land near Tauali just south of the cape to block the trail leading to the airfields. Shortly after the Marines landed, the 503d was to jump into a drop zone near the airfields and join the assault on enemy defenses. The 1st Marines, organized as Combat Team B, would be in immediate reserve for the operation with Combat Team A (the 5th Marines) on call subject to ALAMO Force approval. The intent of the operation plan was to use as few combat troops as possible and still accomplish handily the mission assigned.

On 14 October, GHQ returned the ALAMO plan approved and directed that Combat Team B be staged well forward along the New Guinea coast, at Oro Bay or Finschhafen rather than Milne Bay, if it developed that Allied Air Forces could provide adequate daylight cover over loading operations. Similarly, authorization was given to increase the strength of the assault forces if late intelligence of the enemy garrison developed the need. In order to conserve operating time and get more value out of the shipping available, maximum use was ordered made of Oro Bay as a supply point for BACKHANDER.

After considering the ALAMO Force plan, Admiral Carpender agreed to use two of his overworked transports together with all the LSTs, LCIs, and smaller amphibious craft available to Seventh Fleet to support the operation. Close on the heels of this commitment, Admiral Barbey protested the exposure of his priceless transports to enemy attack and proposed instead "to restrict the assault ships to those which could discharge their troops directly to the beaches," in order "to reduce the turn-around time and thereby reduce the hazards from air attack." [6] The matter was brought to MacArthur's attention, but he refused to specify the equipment to be used; however, he did relay to General Krueger his intention that all "troops and supplies that you wished landed must be landed and in such order as you consider necessary." [7] The Seventh Fleet commander then made arrangements to borrow six APDs from Third Fleet in return for extending the loan period of four APDs then being used by Halsey in South Pacific operations. Once replacement ships were obtained, the attack transports were scratched from the task organization of assault shipping.

When the first ALAMO plan for DEXTERITY was being prepared, the probable enemy garrison in the target area was estimated at being between 3,000 and 4,000 men. Toward the end of October, the evidence assembled by coastwatchers, scouts, and other intelligence agencies pointed strongly to a sharp increase in the number of defenders, particularly in the Cape Gloucester vicinity. Krueger's order of battle officers now considered that there were as many as 6,300 troops to oppose the landings and probably no less than 4,100. In order to counter this new strength, it seemed imperative to the commanders concerned that the BACKHANDER landing force be reinforced.

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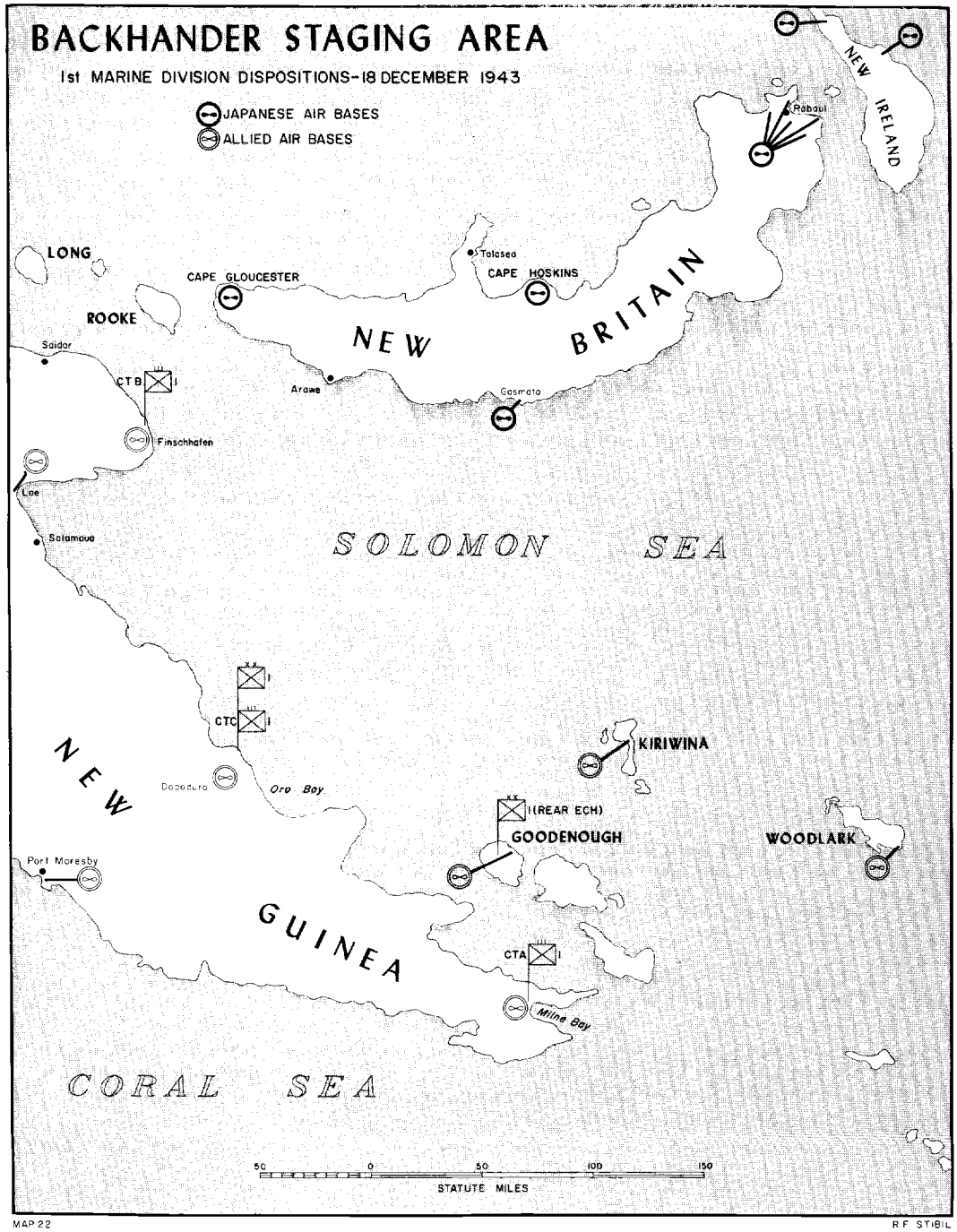
[6] VAdm Daniel E. Barbey ltr to ACofS, G-3, HQMC, dtd 10May62, hereafter *Barbey ltr*. Admiral Barbey argued against the use of the transports after General Kenney said that he could not provide adequate air cover for the Gasmata operation.

[7] CofS, GHQSWPA ltr to CG, ALAMO For, dtd 18Oct43, in *ALAMO G-3 Jnl No. 3*.



MAP 22 R F STIBIL

On 2 November, during a conference at 1st Marine Division headquarters attended by the division commander, Major General William H. Rupertus, Admiral Barbey, and Colonel Clyde D. Eddleman, Krueger's G-3, the matter was considered at length. Under existing plans, the ratio of assault troops to defenders would be 1.8 to 1 if the 503d landed and only 1.3 to 1 if weather prevented the drop. If an additional Marine battalion landing team was committed, the ratio would rise to 2 to 1 (or 1.7 to 1 without paratroops), a balance closer to the clear superiority experience demanded for an attacking force. Eddleman recommended to Krueger that a landing team of Combat Team B be employed at Tanali and that all of Combat Team C land east of the airfield. General Rupertus seconded this finding with proposals for several alternative landing schemes, one favoring the change endorsed by Eddleman. Conclusively, the ALAMO staff came up with a new estimate of the situation on 5 November that recommended an additional battalion be employed. A query from ALAMO headquarters to GHQ at Brisbane brought a quick reply that Krueger had full authority to use the battalion if he so desired.

In addition to getting a sufficient number of assault troops ashore at BACKHANDER, Krueger's staff was gravely concerned about the possible need for reinforcement. To meet this contingency, they recommended that shipping to lift the remainder of Combat Team B to the target be available at its staging area on D-Day. The same requirement was stated for Combat Team A, then at Milne Bay and the unit of the 1st Division farthest from Cape Gloucester. Admiral Barbey was prepared to furnish the ships required, using LCIs to move Combat Team B and transports to shift Combat Team A to Oro Bay, where it could move on, should it prove necessary, in APDs and LCIs. Many of the vessels Barbey designated would have to do double duty; first at Gasmata, then at Gloucester.

With amphibious shipping heavily committed until late November to support Huon Peninsula operations, the time for rehearsal, training, and reoutfitting before DEXTERITY got underway was woefully short. The lapse of six days then figured between LAZARETTO and BACKHANDER landings gave planners little leeway, and tight scheduling for maximum shipping use made no provision for losses at Gasmata. Under the circumstances, General Krueger asked General MacArthur for permission to set back the landing date for LAZARETTO to 2 December. At the same time, in consideration of the delay in the completion of the Huon airfields and the increased demand for shipping, Krueger suggested a BACKHANDER D-Day of 26 December. MacArthur approved deferral of the landing dates for the two operations and eventually decided upon 15 and 26 December after additional changes in forces and objectives.

Even while the date for LAZARETTO was being altered, the need for undertaking the operation at all was being seriously questioned, particularly by Allied Air Forces.[8] Kenney's staff was swinging strongly to the opinion that the forward airstrip planned for the Linden-

[8] Major General Ennis C. Whitehead, Commander, Advanced Echelon, Fifth Air Force thought that the whole New Britain operation was unnecessary. See his letter to General Kenney, dtd 11Nov43, quoted in Craven and Cate, *Guadalcanal to Saipan*, pp. 329–330.

hafen Plantation beachhead was not necessary to future air operations. Reinforcing this conclusion was the fact that long-range fighter planes would be in short supply until February 1944. Replacement and reinforcement aircraft scheduled to arrive in the Southwest Pacific had been delayed, and, in November, Kenney had to curtail daylight strikes on Rabaul to conserve the few planes he had. The Allied air commander could promise fighter cover over the initial landings at Gasmata, but nothing thereafter. The assault troops would have to rely on antiaircraft fire to fend off Japanese attacks. Perhaps the most disquieting news was that the enemy was building up his garrison at Gasmata, apparently anticipating an Allied attack.

With General Kenney reluctant to regard LAZARETTO as an essential operation and unable to provide aerial cover after it began, the Gasmata area lost its appeal as a target. On 19 November, following a conference with air, naval, and landing force representatives, the ALAMO Force G-3 concluded that carrying through the operation would mean "that we can expect to take considerable casualties and have extensive damage to supplies and equipment as a result of enemy bombing operations subsequent to the landing." [9] An alternative objective, one closer to Allied bases, less vulnerable to enemy air attack, and more lightly defended, was sought.

Generals Krueger and Kenney and Admiral Barbey met on 21 November to decide on a new objective. They chose the Arawe Islands area off the south coast of New Britain, 90 miles closer to Cape Gloucester than Gasmata. Kenney's staff had considered placing a radar station at Arawe before the LAZARETTO project clouded and still was interested in the area as a site for early-warning radar guarding the approaches from Rabaul. The conferees agreed that Arawe would also be a good location for a motor torpedo boat base from which enemy barge traffic along the coast could be blocked. There is evidence that the Commander, Motor Torpedo Boats of the Seventh Fleet was less convinced of the need for this new base, but his objections were evidently not heeded at this time.[10] A powerful argument in favor of the choice was the denial of the site to the Japanese as a staging point through which reinforcements could be fed into the Cape Gloucester area. Then, too, the diversionary effect of the attack might draw off defenders from the main objective.[11]

General MacArthur quickly approved the findings of his field commanders and confirmed the landing date they asked for, 15 December.[12] On 22 November, amend-

[9] ALAMO G-3 memo to CofS, dtd 19Nov43, Subj: Rept of Conference, in *ALAMO G-3 Jnl No. 4.*

[10] Morison, *Breaking the Bismarcks Barrier*, p. 372; ALAMO ForEngr memo of conference with Cdr Mumma, dtd 5Dec43, Subj: PT Boat Requirements DIRECTOR in *ALAMO G-3 Jnl No. 5.*

[11] "The determining factor in the selection of Arawe was a statement by Kenney that he could supply air protection for the assault from his air bases on New Guinea. . . ." *Barbey ltr.*

[12] Once Arawe's landing date was set, the final decision on D-Day at Cape Gloucester could be made. At a meeting at General Krueger's headquarters on Goodenough early in December, General MacArthur suggested 21 December, but approved the 26th "so that the assault craft used in the Arawe landing could return in time for a brief training period with the 1st Marine Division before the BACKHANDER operation." RAdm Charles Adair ltr to Head, HistBr, G-3, dtd 1Jun62.

ed operations instructions for DEXTERITY were issued by GHQ cancelling LAZARETTO and substituting for it the DIRECTOR (Arawe) operation. An immediate benefit of the switch was a gain in shipping available for BACKHANDER and an increase in the number of troops ready for further operations. The suspected enemy garrison at Arawe was far weaker than that known to be at Gasmata, and the mission assigned the landing force was less demanding in men and materiel resources.

The LAZARETTO task force built around the 126th Infantry was dissolved and its elements returned to ALAMO Force reserve. A new task force, half the strength of its predecessor, was formed using troops released from garrison duties on Woodlark and Kiriwina. Named to command the DIRECTOR Force, which centered on the 112th Cavalry, was Brigadier General Julian W. Cunningham, who had commanded the regiment during the occupation of Woodlark.

The abandonment of LAZARETTO gave GHQ planners a welcome bonus of combat troops available for further DEXTERITY operations. Once the Japanese threat at Cape Gloucester was contained and both flanks of Vitiaz Strait were in Allied hands, the seizure of Saidor on the north New Guinea coast could follow swiftly. An outline plan for the Saidor operation issued on 11 December mentioned that either an RCT of the 1st Marine or the 32d Infantry Divisions might be the assault element. Within a week, changes in the composition of the BACKHANDER Force had narrowed the choice to an Army unit.

On 17 December, impressed by the evident success of DIRECTOR operations, General MacArthur ordered preparations for the capture of Saidor to get underway with a target date on or soon after 2 January. Many of the supporting ships and planes employed during the initial landings at BACKHANDER would again see service at the new objective. ALAMO Force issued its field order for Saidor on the 22d, assigning the 126th Infantry (Reinforced) the role of assault troops. Krueger saved invaluable preparation time by organizing a task force which was essentially the same as the one which had trained for LAZARETTO.

One aspect of the BACKHANDER plan of operations—the air drop of the 503d Parachute Infantry—gathered opposition from all quarters as the time of the landing grew nearer. Krueger's staff was never too enthusiastic about the inclusion of the paratroopers in the assault troops, but followed the outline put forward by GHQ. Rupertus was much less happy with the idea of having a substantial part of his force liable to be cancelled out by weathered-in fields or drop zones at the most critical stage of the operation.[13] On 8 December, Allied Air Forces added its opposition to the use of the 503d with Kenney's director of operations stating that "ComAAF does not desire to participate in the planned employment of paratroops for DEXTERITY."[14] The air commander understood that a time-consuming plane shuttle with a series of drops

[13] MajGen William H. Rupertus ltr to LtGen Alexander A. Vandegrift, dtd 7Dec43 (Vandegrift Personal Correspondence File, HQMC). Rather graphically, General Rupertus noted "if the weather is bad, then the jumper boys won't be there to help me & I'll be on the beach with a measly C. T.!"

[14] DirOps, AAF Check Sheet to G-3, GHQ, dtd 8Dec43, in *GHQ G-3 Jnl*, 8Dec43.

was planned, a maneuver which would greatly increase the chance of transports being caught by the expected Japanese aerial counterattack on D-Day. In addition to this consideration, Kenney found that the troop carriers needed to lift the 503d would crowd a heavy bomber group off the runways at Dobodura, the loading point for the air drop. The displaced bombers would then have to operate from fields at Port Moresby, where heavy weather over the Owen Stanley Mountains could keep them from supporting the operation.

The stage was set for the change which took place on 14 December at Goodenough Island where MacArthur and Krueger were present to see the DIRECTOR Force off to its target. The two generals attended a briefing on the landing plans of the 1st Marine Division where Colonel Edwin A. Pollock, the division's operations officer, forcefully stated his belief that the drop of the parachute regiment should be eliminated in favor of the D-Day landing of the rest of Combat Team B to give the division a preponderance of strength over the enemy defenders. Pollock's exposition may have swung the balance against use of the paratroops,[15] or the decision may have already been assured;[16] in either event, the order went out the next day over Krueger's signature changing the field order for BACKHANDER. The seizure of Cape Gloucester was now to be an operation conducted by a unit whose components had trained and fought together.

[15] LtCol Frank O. Hough and Maj John A. Crown, *The Campaign on New Britain* (Washington: HistBr, HQMC, 1952), p. 19, hereafter Hough and Crown, *New Britain Campaign*.

[16] MajGen Clyde D. Eddleman, USA, ltr to HistBr, G-3, HQMC, dtd 28Apr52.

TRAINING AND STAGING BACKHANDER FORCE[17]

For effective planning of DEXTERITY operations, General Krueger and the Allied Forces commanders had to strike a balance between the flexibility necessary to exploit changing situations and the exact scheduling required for effective employment of troops, ships, and supplies. The changes wrought in ALAMO Force plans were keyed, therefore, to the physical location of troops in staging and training areas, to the contents and replenishment potential of forward area depots, and to the number and type of amphibious craft available. Throughout the later stages of the planning for BACKHANDER, the variations in scheme of maneuver and number of troops employed were based upon a constant factor, the readiness of the 1st Marine Division for combat.

When the division left Guadalcanal on 9 December 1942, many of its men were walking hospital cases wracked by malarial fevers or victims of a host of other jungle diseases. All the Marines were bone tired after months under constant combat strain and a rest was called for. No more

[17] Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: *ALAMO G-3 Jnl*; VII PhibFor ComdHist 10Jan43-23Dec45, n.d., hereafter *VII PhibFor ComdHist*; VII PhibFor Rept on Cape Gloucester Op, dtd 3Feb44, hereafter *VII PhibFor AR*; CTF 76 (VII PhibFor) WarD, Aug43, n.d. (COA, NHD), hereafter *CTF 76 Aug43 WarD* and following appropriate months; *CTF 76 Sep-Dec43 WarDs;* 1st MarDiv SAR Cape Gloucester Op, Phase I, Planning and Training, n.d., hereafter *1st MarDiv SAR* with appropriate phase or annex; 1st MarDiv WarD, Oct43, n.d., hereafter *1st MarDiv WarD* with appropriate month; *1st MarDiv Nov43 WarD;* Hough and Crown, *New Britain Campaign.*

perfect tonic could have been chosen than Australia.

Melbourne, where the division arrived on 12 January, became a second home to the men of the 1st. Fond memories of the city and of the warm reception its people gave the Marines were often called to mind in later years by those who served there. Rewarded in a hundred ways by its release from the jungles of the Solomons and a return to civilization, the 1st Division slowly worked its way back to health and battle fitness. Although at first as many as 7,500 men at a time were down with malaria or recovering from its ravages,[18] the number dwindled as climate and suppressive drugs took effect.

A training program, purposely slow-starting, was begun on 18 January with emphasis during its initial phases on the reorganization and reequipment of units and the drill and physical conditioning of individuals. By the end of March, practice in small-unit tactics was the order of the day. Through April, May, and June, all men qualified with their new basic weapon, the M–1 rifle, a semi-automatic which replaced the bolt-action Springfield M–1903 carried by American servicemen since the decade before World War I. Nostalgia for the old, reliable '03 was widespread, but the increased firepower of the M–1 could not be denied.

In April and May, battalions of the 5th and 7th Marines practiced assault landings on the beaches of Port Philip Bay near Melbourne. One of the two ships used was a converted Australian passenger liner and the other was the only American attack transport (APA) in the Southwest Pacific. Sent over from Halsey's area, the APA was assigned to Barbey's command to give him at least one of the Navy's newest transports for training purposes.[19] With the help of the experienced Marines, VII Amphibious Force officers worked out a series of standing operating procedures during the exercises which would hold for future training and combat usage.

While it was in Australia, the 1st Division had no opportunity to use the variety of specialized amphibious shipping that had come into use since its landing on Guadalcanal. Most LSTs and LCIs were sent forward to Papuan waters as soon as they arrived from the States; the LCTs, which were shipped out in sections, joined the ocean-going ships as soon as they were welded together. In the combat zone, the landing ships were urgently needed to support the operations of New Guinea and ALAMO Forces. The Marines' chance to familiarize themselves with the new equipment would come in the forward area where GHQ planned to send the division after it completed a summer of intensive field training in the broken country around Melbourne.

As a necessary preliminary to effective large unit training and operations, the division was organized into combat and landing teams on 25 May. Many of the supporting unit attachments were the same as those in regimental and battalion em-

[18] Col John E. Linch comments on draft of Hough and Crown, *New Britain Campaign*, dtd 11Apr52.

[19] Commenting on the state of this APA, the *Henry T. Allen*, Admiral Barbey noted: "It was not the newest, but if not the oldest, it was in the worst condition. It arrived in our area in need of an overhaul so extensive that Australian yards were reluctant to undertake it. It leaked oil so badly that it never could be used in the combat zone throughout the campaign. It was used as an administrative flagship in the rear areas." *Barbey ltr.*

barkation groups already in existence. In terms of the general order outlining the assignments, the combat team was described as "the normal major tactical unit of the division," and the landing team was "regarded essentially as an embarkation team rather than a tactical unit." [20] Many of the reinforcing units in the battalion embarkation groups would revert to regimental control on landing, and, similarly, the division expected to regain control very soon after landing of supporting headquarters and reserve elements included within regimental embarkation groups.

In mid-summer, while 1st Division units were either in the midst of combat team exercises, preparing to take the field, or squaring away after return, a Sixth Army inspection team made a through survey for General Krueger of the Marine organization. The Army officers came away much impressed, noting:

> [This division] is well equipped, has a high morale, a splendid esprit and approximately 75% of its personnel have had combat experience. The average age of its enlisted personnel is well below that in Army divisions. . . . At the present time, the combat efficiency of this division is considered to be excellent. In continuous operations, this condition would probably exist for two months before declining. With rest and replacements between operations, it is believed that a better than satisfactory combat rating could be maintained over a period of six months.[21]

The inspection team expressed some concern about the substantial incidence of malaria in the division's ranks, but made its finding of combat efficiency "Excellent" despite this. The very apparent high morale was attributed to the 1st's experienced leadership, as all the division staff, all regimental and battalion, company and battery commanders had served on Guadalcanal.[22] This pattern of veteran leadership was evident down through all ranks of the division with a good part of the infantry squads and artillery firing sections led by combat-wise NCOs.

The first echelons of the division to move northward to join ALAMO Force were the engineer and pioneer battalions of the 17th Marines. On 24 August, the engineers (1/17) sailed from Melbourne for Goodenough Island to begin construction of the division's major staging area. The pioneer battalion (2/17) moved by rail to Brisbane, "where it drew engineering supplies, transportation, and equipment of the regiment, and stood by to load this material on board ship if a wharf labor shortage developed." [23] It departed for Goodenough on 11 September. The 19th Naval Construction Battalion, which served as the 3d Battalion, 17th Marines, was working at the big U.S. Army Services of Supply (USASOS) base at Cairns, north of Townsville, and remained there under Army control until the end of October.

The formal movement orders were issued to the division on 31 August, setting forth the priority of movement of units and the amount and type of individual

[20] 1st MarDiv GO No. 83, dtd 25May43, in *ALAMO G-3 Jnl No. 1.*

[21] Rept of Inspection 1st MarDiv by Sixth Army Inspection Team, 9–13Aug43, dtd 2Sep43, Anx 1, p. 11. "On 22 August, General Krueger himself arrived in Melbourne for a two-day inspection of the division and upon his departure commented favorably on the observations he had made." *Shepherd ltr.*

[22] Rept of Sixth Army Inspection, dtd 2Sep43, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

[23] BGen Robert G. Ballance ltr to ACofS, G-3, HQMC, dtd 14Jun62, hereafter *Ballance ltr.*

and organizational equipment that should be taken. In general, 40-days' rations, quartermaster, and medical supplies were to be loaded, as well as a month's supply of individual and organizational equipment and 10 units of fire for all weapons. Reserve stocks of all classes of supply, and any material not available on first requisition to USASOS, were to be forwarded to the division's resupply points. The troops themselves were to take only the clothing and equipment necessary to "live and fight," [24] storing service greens and other personal gear in sea bags and locker boxes for the better day when the pending operation would be over and a hoped-for return to Australia the reward for success.

The division's main movement began on 19 September when Combat Team C finished loading ship and sailed from Melbourne in a convoy of three Liberty ships; its destination was Cape Sudest near Oro Bay. Three more convoys carrying the remainder of the division cleared Melbourne over the next several weeks, with the last Libertys pulling out with the rear echelons of division headquarters and Combat Team B on 10 October. The 18 ships used, hastily converted from cargo carriers, were far from ideal troop transports. Galleys, showers, and heads had to be improvised on weather decks, and the holds were so crowded that many men preferred "to sleep topside, fashioning out of ponchos and shelter halves and stray pieces of line rude and flimsy canvas housing." [25] Happily, the voyage had an end before the objectionable living conditions became a health hazard.

After its move, General Rupertus' command was dispersed in three staging areas that corresponded, in nearness to the target, with the roles the combat teams were scheduled to play in BACKHANDER operations. Encamped at Cape Sudest was the main assault force, Colonel Julian N. Frisbe's 7th Marines, suitably reinforced as Combat Team C. At Milne Bay, farthest from Cape Gloucester, was Combat Team A, centered on Colonel John T. Selden's 5th Marines; Selden's troops, scheduled for a time to be the assault force at Gasmata, were now ticketed as reserves for Gloucester. On Goodenough Island, Combat Team B, under Colonel William J. Whaling, and the remainder of the division moved into camps the 17th Marines had wrested from the jungle. On 21 October, ALAMO Force Headquarters joined the division on Goodenough, moving up from Milne Bay in keeping with General Krueger's desire to keep close to the scene of combat. (See Map 22.)

Each division element, immediately after arrival in its new location, unloaded ship and turned to setting up a tent camp. Before long, combat training was again underway at Oro Bay and Goodenough with emphasis on jungle operations, a species of warfare all too familiar to Guadalcanal veterans. At Milne Bay, Combat Team A had to clear and construct its own camp area while providing 800–900-man working parties daily to help build roads and dumps in the base's supply complex. Colonel Selden rotated the major labor demand among his battalions, giving them all a chance to work as a whole to finish their living area and get a

[24] 1st MarDiv AdminO 4–43, dtd 7Sep43, in *1st MarDiv Oct43 WarD.*

[25] George McMillan, *The Old Breed, A History of the First Marine Division in World War II* (Washington: Infantry Journal Press, 1949), p. 162, hereafter McMillan, *The Old Breed.*

start on jungle conditioning and combat training.[26]

On 1 November, with the arrival of the Seabees of 3/17 at Goodenough, the organic units of the 1st Division were all assembled in the forward area. The Japanese attempted a lively welcome by sending bombers and scout planes over Oro Bay and Goodenough throughout the staging period; these raids, seldom made in any strength or pursued with resolution, caused no casualties or damage in Marine compounds and only slight damage to adjoining Army units. The enemy effort had nothing but nuisance value as far as stemming preparations for future operations was concerned, but it did give the Japanese a pretty fair idea of the Allied buildup along the New Guinea coast.

In order to give the troops assigned to DEXTERITY adequate opportunity to familiarize themselves with the landing craft they were to use, Admiral Barbey had to devise a system that would allow him to use a small number of craft to train a large number of men. There was no time to fit the construction of an amphibious training base on New Guinea, similar to those in Australia, into support plans for the move against New Britain. Five months was the lowest estimate of the time necessary to complete such an undertaking, and the men, materials, and ships necessary to support it could not be spared from current operations. On 16 August, Barbey recommended the establishment of a mobile training unit consisting of enough landing craft and supporting auxiliaries to perform the amphibious training mission in the forward area. Carpender and MacArthur both concurred in the recommendation, and the mobile group was organized with headquarters at Milne Bay.

Marines from all three 1st Division staging areas made their practice landings on the beaches of Taupota Bay, a jungled site on the north shore of New Guinea in the lee of the D'Entrecasteux Islands. At Taupota there was opportunity to put ashore enough troops, vehicles, and supplies to test landing and unloading techniques. On 22 October, 1/1 in two APDs and two LSTs lifted from Goodenough to the practice beaches. There the assault troops went ashore in LCVPs from the destroyer-transports and were followed by landing ships with a full deck-load of vehicles plus 40 tons of bulk stores. Since all of the division pioneers were attached to the 7th Marines at Cape Sudest, there was no experienced nucleus for the shore party. One LST took three hours to unload, the other four and a half, prompting VII Amphibious Force to observe that "unloading parties provided were quite inadequate and very little appreciation was shown for the necessity of getting the craft off the beach as quickly as possible." [27]

The critique of the faults of this landing, together with a more comprehensive application of the newly promulgated Division Shore Party SOP,[28] enabled 2/1, using the same ships and landing scheme

[26] 2/5 Record of Events, 16Sep43–9May44, entry of 20Oct44.

[27] *CTF 76 Oct43 WarD*, p. 22.

[28] When General Shepherd reported as ADC of the 1st Division, he found the Shore Party SOP to be "woefully deficient." With General Rupertus' approval, he prepared a new SOP based on that of the 3d Marine Division which he "had helped prepare under the direction of Major General Charles D. Barrett, who had made a study of the deficiencies noted during the Guadacanal landing and subsequent developments in this important phase of a landing operation." *Shepherd ltr.*

two days later, to halve unloading time. On 28 and 31 October, the 7th Marines mounting out from Oro Bay and Cape Sudest was able to land all infantry battalions and supporting elements in the pattern of assault waves coming from APDs, followed by LCIs with support troops, and LSTs with vehicles and bulk cargo. The unloading time per LST was cut to less than an hour by means of adequate troop labor details and the application of cargo handling techniques developed in training for the landings. Combat Team A was able to profit from this experience when the reinforced 5th Marines' battalions made a series of trouble-free practice landings from LSTs and LCIs between 14 and 30 November.[29]

During the amphibious training period, Marine assault troops landed as they would at Cape Gloucester in ships' boats, LCVPs and LCMs. No serious obstacles existed off the chosen beaches which could bar landing craft from nosing ashore, and the amphibian tractors organic to the 1st Division were reserved for logistical duties. That role promised to be quite important to the success of the operation. Extensive tests in the jungles that fringed the staging areas showed that the LVT could negotiate terrain, particularly swamp forest, that was an absolute barrier to other tracked vehicles, even the invaluable bulldozer. The cargo space of 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion's standard LVT(1) Alligator could hold 4,500 pounds, and that of the few newer, larger LVT(2) Buffaloes that were received a few days before embarkation could contain 6,500 pounds.[30] The tests also revealed that the LVT was a splendid trail breaker for tractors, a fact that had immediate application in the plans for employment of artillery at Cape Gloucester.

In Combat Team C's Oro Bay training area, Alligators were used successfully to smash a path through the jungle for 4/11's prime movers and the 105mm howitzers they towed. To distribute the weapons' weight over a large area, truck wheels were mounted hub to hub with the howitzer wheels.[31] The one-ton trucks assigned to haul 1/11's 75mm pack howitzers proved unequal to the task of following in the LVTs' rugged trace, and the 11th Marines' commander, Colonel Robert H. Pepper, took immediate steps to secure light tractors from the Army as supplementary prime movers for his three pack battalions.[32] The potential of the LVTs was firmly demonstrated to the ALAMO Force artillery officer who watched them work in a swampy area of Goodenough on 4 December. He reported to the ALAMO chief of staff:

> Performance was impressive. Knocked over trees up to 8" in diameter and broke a trail through the densest undergrowth. The branches, trunks, and brush formed a natural matting capable of supporting tractors and guns. I believe that with a limited amount of pioneer work practically any jungle country can be traversed with artillery drawn by tractors if preceded by two LVTs.[33]

As this demonstration was being conducted, the movements to final staging areas had begun. On 3 December, a detachment of Combat Team B left Good-

[29] *Ballance ltr.*

[30] ONI 226, Allied Landing Craft and Ships, dtd 7Apr44 and Supplement No. 1, *ca.* Jun45.

[31] LtCol Joe B. Russell ltr to CMC, dtd 14Mar 52.

[32] Col Louis A. Ennis comments on draft of Hough and Crown, *New Britain Campaign*, dtd 17Apr52.

[33] ALAMO ArtyO memo to CofS, dtd 4Dec43, in *ALAMO G-3 Jnl No. 5.*

enough for Cape Cretin near Finschhafen, followed on the 11th by the rest of the 1st Marines and its attached units. From this point nearest to the target area, the landing team assigned the role of taking and holding the trail block at Tauali, the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, and the rest of the combat team destined to follow the 7th Marines across the main beaches, would mount in separate convoys for D-Day landings. Accompanying Combat Team B was the Assistant Division Commander, Brigadier General Lemuel C. Shepherd, Jr., and his staff.

Between 7 and 18 December, all elements of the division that would land with or under command of Combat Team C during the initial phase of BACKHANDER, moved from Goodenough to Cape Sudest. General Rupertus, the task force commander, shifted his CP to Oro Bay at this time, leaving only the division rear echelon on Goodenough. Colonel Selden's Combat Team A at Milne Bay made ready to sail for Cape Sudest on D minus one (25 December) to be in position as division reserve to answer a call for reinforcements. The team was to move from Milne in transports and transfer at the Oro Bay staging area to landing ships for further movement to Cape Cretin. ALAMO Force placed a hold order on the commitment of one 5th Marines battalion (3/5) so that it might be used to seize either Rooke or Long Islands as the site for a sentinel radar guarding the overwater approaches to the main objective from the northwest. Besides this tentative mission, another possible employment of the battalion was as part of the reserve in support of the assault units of the 1st Division.

The major part of the BACKHANDER Force assembled in the staging area for the assault phase of the operation was organic to the 1st Marine Division. One unit, in fact, was peculiarly the division's own, its air liaison detachment. Impressed by the need of a light plane squadron to handle reconnaissance and air spotting, the division commander's personal pilot, Captain Theodore A. Petras, and the division air officer, Lieutenant Colonel Kenneth H. Wier, had recommended in early summer of 1943 that such a unit be formed within the division. General Vandegrift agreed and was able to persuade General MacArthur to provide the division with 12 Army L-4 Piper Cubs. When General Rupertus took over the 1st's command, he endorsed the idea fully and directed Petras to organize the unit and run its training program.

Volunteers with flying experience were called for and 60 men applied; from this group, 12 pilots, 1 officer and 11 enlisted men, were selected. Mechanics for the Cubs were similarly chosen and the maintenance men who kept up Petras' transport served as their instructors. For two and a half months before D-Day, the makeshift air force worked intensively to reawake flying skills and to learn with the artillery suitable techniques for air spotting of targets. The most serious problem faced was the lack of adequate air-ground communication; the radios available were unreliable and a system of visual signals was developed. For movement to Cape Gloucester, the planes were dismantled and loaded on board LSTs scheduled to arrive on D-Day.[34]

In addition to the force of light planes, General Rupertus also had a pool of land-

[34]Hough and Crown, *New Britain Campaign*, App V, "The Cape Gloucester Air Force," pp. 202-203.

ing craft under his direct command, both elements which would give him greater flexibility in meeting combat emergencies or in taking advantage of sudden changes of fortune that might affect the Japanese defenders. The boat crews were not sailors, however, but Army amphibian engineers, members of a provisional boat battalion of the 592d Engineer Boat and Shore Regiment. The engineers, manning LCVPs and LCMs, were products of a special training program in the States through which the Army anticipated and met some of the problems that arose in conducting amphibious operations. Used in strength first in the Lae-Finschhafen campaign, the engineers were prepared to move supplies of troops from ship to shore or shore to shore, to act as a shore party, to man beach defenses, and, in sum, to make themselves generally useful.[35] At Cape Gloucester, since the Marines had their own shore party, the amphibian engineers provided only a part of their services, but these were of inestimable value.

A more usual attachment to BACKHANDER Force in Marine experience was the assignment of Colonel William H. Harrison's 12th Defense Battalion to the operation. The rapid-firing 40mm guns of the battalion's Special Weapons Group would augment the fire against low-level attackers put up by Battery A of the division's 1st Special Weapons Battalion. The searchlight battery and the 12th's 90mm Group would guard the beachhead from bombers making their runs above the reach of automatic weapons. A platoon of 155mm guns from the Seacoast Artillery Group was to come in with the light antiaircraft elements of the battalion,[36] while the remainder of Harrison's artillery would arrive with the garrison force.

BACKHANDER LANDING AND SUPPORT PLANS[37]

Throughout the evolution of BACKHANDER plans, the 1st Marine Division expressed its determination to preserve its tactical integrity as a unit and to place "an overwhelming force on the beach against a determined enemy."[38] The operation plan that finally governed the Cape Gloucester assault mirrored this concept of the division's most efficient employment.

The tasks set General Rupertus' force were threefold: to land in the Borgen Bay-Tauali areas, establish beachheads, and capture the Cape Gloucester airfields; to construct heavy duty landing strips at Gloucester as soon as possible and assist Commander, Allied Air Forces in establishing fighter sector, air warning, and radio navigational facilities; and to extend control over western New Britain to include the general line Itni River-Borgen

[35] BGen William F. Heavey, USA, *Down Ramp! The Story of the Army Amphibian Engineers* (Washington: Infantry Journal Press, 1947), *passim*.

[36] Col Thomas L. Randall comments on draft manuscript, included in MajGen James M. Masters, Sr., ltr to ACofS, G-3, HQMC, dtd 2Jul62.

[37] Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: *ALAMO G-3 Jnl*; CTF 76 OPlan 3Z-43, dtd 20Dec43 (COA, NHD); *VII PhibFor ComdHist; VII PhibFor AR*; BACKHANDER For OpO 2-43, dtd 14Nov43; BACKHANDER For AdminO 2-43, dtd 14Nov43; *1st MarDiv SAR*, Phase I, Planning and Training, and Phase II, Landing and Seizure of Cape Gloucester Airfield; Hough and Crown, *New Britain Campaign*, App IV, "The Shore Party;" Craven and Cate, *Guadalcanal to Saipan*.

[38] MajGen Edwin A. Pollock comments on draft of Hough and Crown, *New Britain Campaign*, dtd 27Feb52, hereafter *Pollock comments*.

Bay, with patrols to investigate the possibility of developing an overland supply route to Gilnit village on the Itni. Within the airfield defense perimeter BACKHANDER Force was to establish, construction priority was assigned facilities to accomodate an Allied fighter-interceptor group.

Basically, the scheme of maneuver developed to capture Cape Gloucester called for simultaneous landings east and west of the airfields, each site about seven miles from the point of the cape itself. On Green Beach near Tauali, Lieutenant Colonel James M. Masters, Sr., would land his battalion, 2/1, and its attached units, seize a limited beachhead, organize it for defense, and hold it against enemy forces attempting to use the coastal trail to reach the airfields or to withdraw from them. On the opposite side of the cape, on a pair of beaches (Yellow 1 and 2) near Silimati Point, Colonel Frisbie's 1st and 3d Battalions, 7th Marines would land in assault followed by 2/7, with the mission of seizing a beachhead, organizing it for defense, and covering the landing of the rest of the assault force.

Shortly after H-Hour, 3/1 would begin landing behind 3/7 on the westernmost beach, Yellow 1. Once ashore, the battalion, resting its right on the coast, would attack west on a 500-yard front to seize the first of a series of phase lines designated to guide the attack toward the airfields. During the afternoon of D-Day, the remainder of Colonel Whaling's combat team would land, assemble just outside the right flank of the beachhead perimeter behind 3/1, and prepare to attack west on order.

After landing, Combat Teams B and C were to retain a number of the units assigned to them under direct command, but a large portion of their strength was to revert to control of the force commander. The combat teams kept their close-in supporting weapons, tanks, and antitank guns, but lost their artillery and antiaircraft guns to the force. Each team also kept its attached engineer company, its scout platoon, and its detachments from the division medical and service battalions. Since its primary mission was defense of a beachhead perimeter in tangled jungle terrain, Combat Team C could not make best use of some of its attachments. Accordingly, the force shore party was reinforced by the military police, motor transport, and amphibian tractor units once assigned to Colonel Frisbie's command. Similar attached units with Combat Team B remained under Colonel Whaling's control to support the advance up the coastal road.

In planning the disposition and employment of field artillery, Colonel Pepper's 11th Marines' staff picked out the one open area of any extent within the chosen beachhead, a patch of kunai grass on the right flank with a good all-around field of fire, as the post-landing position of 4/11. The 4th Battalion's 105mm howitzers, in direct support of Combat Team B, could reach the airfield but also could fire on counterattacking enemy anywhere along the perimeter and its approaches. With the only good artillery position inside the beachhead going to 4/11, the 75mm pack howitzers of the 1st Battalion landing in direct support of Combat Team C were left to "fend for themselves in an area that appeared fairly open with only scattered growth" near Silimati Point. [39] Both

[39] LtCol Robert B. Luckey, "Cannon, Mud, and Japs," *Marine Corps Gazette*, v. 28, no. 10 (Oct 44), p. 51, hereafter Luckey, "Cannon, Mud, and Japs."

artillery battalions were assigned a platoon of LVTs to help them reach and maintain their firing positions in what was expected to be very rugged terrain. The 75mm packs of 2/11, sailing and landing with Combat Team B, were to set up in what seemed a suitable area just off the coastal road outside the perimeter. While the field artillery landing on the Yellow Beaches would revert from combat team to 11th Marines' control, Lieutenant Colonel Masters on Green Beach was to keep command of Battery H of 3/11 as an integral part of his landing team. The 12th Defense Battalion's Seacoast Artillery Group commander was to coordinate the fire of all weapons used against seaborne targets.

The antiaircraft units assigned to BACKHANDER Force were to come under Colonel Harrison of the 12th Defense Battalion as senior antiaircraft officer. Initially, he would also control air raid warning throughout the force, but this service would become a function of the Allied Air Forces' Fighter Sector Commander, as soon as this officer landed and had his radar and communications in operation. The sector commander controlled all airborne Allied fighter units assigned to protect the Cape Gloucester area and, in addition, could order antiaircraft fire withheld, suspended, or put up in special defensive patterns through Harrison's fire direction center.

The engineer plan for BACKHANDER operations gave primary responsibility for tactical support to Colonel Harold E. Rosecrans' 17th Marines, with airfield repair and construction assigned to a base engineers group built around two Army engineer aviation battalions. In addition to the usual combat engineer tasks of construction, demolition, and repair, the lettered companies of 1/17, attached to combat teams, provided flamethrower teams to work with infantry against enemy fortifications. Colonel Rosecrans' regimental Headquarters and Service Company, 1/17 (less Companies A, B, and C), and 3/17 formed a combat engineer group which was responsible for water supply, for construction, repair, and maintenance of roads, bridges, and ship landing facilities, and for any other construction task assigned. Through contacts made by officials of the Australia-New Guinea Administrative Unit (ANGAU) accompanying the task force, it was hoped that maximum use could be made of native labor in all engineer missions.

The 17th Marines' 2d Battalion, the division's pioneers, formed the backbone of the shore party. Reinforced by two companies of replacements and the transport and traffic control units drawn from Combat Team C, the shore party under Lieutenant Colonel Robert G. Ballance was responsible for the smooth and effective unloading of all task force supplies. In order to expedite the job of getting bulk stores off LSTs, a system of overlapping dumps was planned, with each beached LST sending its cargo to its own class dumps, sharing with other ships only those on the flanks of its unloading area. Most of the supplies were mobile loaded on trucks to be run off LSTs to the dumps. In order to make mobile loading work, General Krueger's headquarters assigned 500 reconditioned 2½-ton trucks to temporary use of BACKHANDER Force, with the drivers recruited from an Army artillery battalion not actively committed to ALAMO operations. The trucks were to make a round trip circuit from LST to dump and return with the ships to the staging areas. All tractors and trucks or-

ganic to 1st Marine Division units, that were not needed for tactical purposes in the early stages of the landing, were to report to the shore party for use in moving supplies.

Assault troops headed for Cape Gloucester were to carry 20-days' replenishment supplies of all types as well as three units of fire for task force weapons. The garrison troops would bring in 30-days' supplies, three units of fire for ground weapons, and five units of fire for antiaircraft guns. In order to insure a smooth flow of supplies to Cape Gloucester, and the eventual maintenance of a 30-day level there, the 1st Division established a control system for loading and resupply. At Cape Sudest on Oro Bay, the main supply base for BACKHANDER operations, an officer from the division quartermaster's office acted as forwarding officer, his main duty to insure the movement of essential materiel to the combat zone. Supplies and personnel needed at the objective were to be funnelled through a regulating officer, who established priorities for loading and movement, and a transport quartermaster, who planned and supervised the actual loading.

Admiral Barbey's allocation of shipping to lift the BACKHANDER Force made the LST the main resupply vessel. With mobile loading of most bulk stores, a practiced shore party, and a dump plan that promised swift clearance of ships' cargo space, the amphibious force commander felt that he could risk the vulnerable LSTs in the combat area. The schedule of arrival and departure of the hulking landing ships, often dubbed Large Slow Targets by crew and passengers, was kept tight to lessen exposure to enemy air attack. Since the logistic requirements of shore-to-shore operations meant that many vessels would make repeated trips to the Yellow Beaches, the speed of unloading promised to pick up as shore party and ships' crews became more experienced.

The LST had a prominent part, too, in the medical evacuation plan for BACKHANDER. The flow of casualties during the first days of the operation would be from landing force units through the evacuation station run by the naval element of the shore party. Men hit during fighting immediately after H-Hour would be sent out by the first landing craft available to APDs riding offshore; once landing ships had beached, the wounded would be carried on board over the ramps into special areas set aside for casualty treatment. Medical officers and corpsmen from Seventh Fleet were assigned to all ships used as transports for the assault forces. To give the best possible care to the seriously wounded on the return voyage to New Guinea, Army surgical-medical teams were present on one LST of every supply echelon. At Cape Sudest, an LST equipped as an 88-bed hospital ship was ready to receive casualties from Cape Gloucester and pass them on to base hospitals ashore when their condition warranted. As soon as the combat situation permitted, casualties requiring less than a month's bed care and rest would be kept at Cape Gloucester in garrison force hospitals.

The total of shipping assigned to BACKHANDER support was not impressive in comparison to the large number of vessels needed to land and protect a division in the Central Pacific. There was no need, however, for massive invasion armadas. Because of the wider range of objectives that the large islands of the southern Pacific gave them, MacArthur and Halsey seldom had to send their assault

troops against heavily fortified Japanese positions. This fortunate circumstance shaved the requirement for naval gunfire support ships, or at least gave the operations against Central Pacific fortress islands a higher priority of assignment. Similarly, the availability of land-based Allied air in significant force made the use of carrier planes wasteful when the naval pilots could be better employed against other targets.[40]

In total, Admiral Barbey as Commander, VII Amphibious Force assigned himself as Commander, Task Force 76, the BACKHANDER Attack Force, 9 APDs, 23 LSTs, 19 LCIs, 12 LCTs, and 14 LCMs to transport, land, and maintain the assault and garrison troops. The LCTs and LCMs plus five LCIs were assigned to the Western Assault Group (Green Beach) under Commander Carroll D. Reynolds; the rest of the LCIs, the APDs, and the LSTs were part of the Eastern Assault Group scheduled for the Yellow Beaches. Admiral Barbey commanded the ships at the main landing as well as the naval phases of the whole operation.

For fire support duties, Commander Reynolds had two destroyers and two rocket-equipped amphibious trucks (DUKWs) carried in LCMs. To cover the landings on the eastern side of Cape Gloucester, Barbey had 12 destroyers in addition to his flagship and two rocket-firing LCIs.[41] Escorting and supporting the attack force would be TF 74 under Vice Admiral V. A. C. Crutchley, RN, who had two Australian and two American cruisers with eight destroyers. The bombardment plan called for TF 74 to guard the approach of the main convoy against surface attack, to shell the airfield area before and immediately after the landing, and to retire westward when released by Barbey to take part in further operations.

All air units supporting the Cape Gloucester landings came under Brigadier General Frederick A. Smith, Jr.'s 1st Air Task Force with headquarters at Dobodura. From first light on D-Day, a squadron of fighters would escort the Eastern Assault Group to the target, with three squadrons successively covering the landings, and a fifth screening the planned retirement in midafternoon. Several destroyers in the attack force, including the *Conyngham*, had the special communications equipment and trained personnel to act as fighter director ships. During the time the main convoy was in the Cape Gloucester area, fighter control would remain afloat. Bomber control was a function of the Army's 1st Air Liaison Party, part of BACKHANDER Force, which was to land with General Rupertus' headquarters, establish contact with Dobodura, and direct aerial support of ground operations.

[40] Commenting on the predominence of naval support given the Central Pacific, Admiral Barbey noted that his sailors characterized the situation as "never had and won't get," but quoted Admiral Nimitz in a contemporary comment as saying: "When conflicts in timing and allocation exist, due weight should be accorded to the fact that operations in the Central Pacific promise at this time a more rapid advance toward Japan and her vital lines of communication; the earlier acquisition of bases closer to the Japanese homeland; and, of greatest importance, are more likely to precipitate a decisive engagement with the Japanese fleet." *Barbey ltr.*

[41] These LCIs were improvised support ships using Army surplus 4.5-inch rockets; techniques for their employment were worked out by practice in the vicinity of Milne Bay. VAdm Daniel E. Barbey interview by HistBr, G-3, HQMC, dtd 22May62.

In the hour immediately preceding H-Hour, high-level bombing by five squadrons of B–24s would hit defensive positions back of the Yellow Beaches while destroyers shelled the same target area. When naval gunfire was lifted, three squadrons of B–25s would streak across the coast bombing and strafing the immediate beach area, while a fourth squadron blanketed a prominent hill behind the beaches with white phosphorus bombs. At the same time, across the cape, another medium bomber squadron was slated to bomb and strafe Green Beach defenses before 2/1's landing craft touched down.

On overhead standby during the initial landings would be four squadrons of attack aircraft; if they were not called down, these A–20s would hit targets south and east of the airdrome before returning to base. Later on D-Day morning, both a heavy and a medium bomb group would attack enemy bases and routes of approach along the southern coast. Nine squadrons of B–24s and four of B–25s that took part in the morning missions were to refuel and rearm immediately after landing at their home fields on New Guinea, and strike again in the afternoon at enemy installations west of the beachhead.

As the time of the main landings at Cape Gloucester neared, the Japanese defenders of New Britain were increasingly alert to the probability of Allied attack. The enemy commanders at Rabaul, however, could only guess where and in what strength the assault would come. Cape Gloucester's airfields seemed a logical main target but so did Gasmata's, and there were a number of lesser bases on both coasts that had to be considered and defended. The terrain of the island itself may perhaps have played the largest part in determining the ALAMO Force objectives and *Eighth Area Army's* countermoves.

The Enemy: Terrain and Troops

THE OBJECTIVE [1]

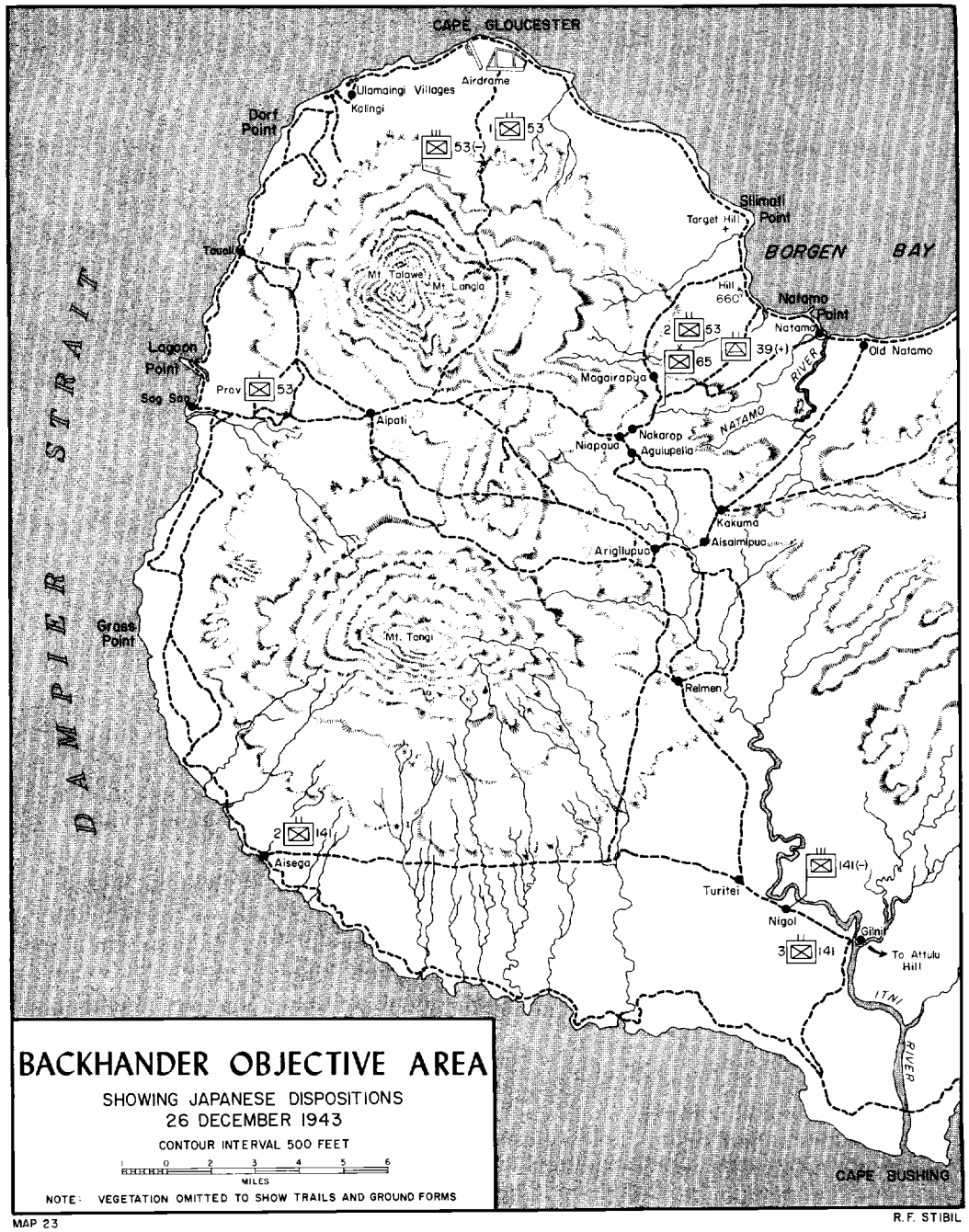
Two narrow straits, Vitiaz (Dampier) and St. George's Channel, join the Bismarck and Solomon Seas. Between them lies New Britain, a 350-mile-long island that forms a crescent-shaped link between New Guinea's Huon Peninsula and New Ireland. In width New Britain varies between 20 and 60 miles, narrowing toward Cape Gloucester in the west, and in the northeast joining Gazelle Peninsula to the trunk of the island. Jutting out from the northern shore for a distance of 30 miles is the narrow Willaumez Peninsula, a natural barrier to coast-hugging small boat traffic. Japanese troop and supply craft bound to and from Rabaul frequently avoided Willaumez by making night runs across the open sea to Garove, largest of the Witu Islands group, standing some 40 miles northwest of the peninsula. (See Map III, Map Section.)

There is a fringing reef along most of New Britain's 1,000-mile coast with occasional breaks that open the shore to the sea. Beyond the reef fringing the north and southwest coasts, barrier reef formations abound. Numerous islets crop up among these reefs, many of them jungled with hilly spines, copies in miniature of the vegetation and terrain of New Britain. Prominent among these islands is the Arawe group, which clusters thickly about the Cape Merkus peninsula, a crooked finger of land lying half-way between Cape Gloucester and Gasmata.

Fourteen miles off the coast of New Britain at Grass Point, its western tip, is Rooke or Umboi Island. Rooke, like so many islands in the Southwest Pacific, is no more than the crest of a mountain range rising steeply from the sea; its bulk splits Vitiaz Strait into two parts. The reef-studded channel between Rooke and New Britain is known as Dampier Strait, a name that the Japanese applied to both Vitiaz and Dampier without distinction. In 1943, hydrographic information available to the Allies about this area was sketchy and unreliable, enough so that Barbey would not risk his larger ships in Dampier's waters. The approach route chosen to Cape Gloucester skirted Rooke on the west and passed between that island and smaller Tolokiwa to the north, offering a safer passage as well as one less likely to be discovered by the enemy.

The coastline of western New Britain is generally regular in outline, with a series of gentle capes and shallow bays marking its length. On the south shore, the most prominent land projection is tipped by

[1] Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: MID, WD, Surv of Bismarck Archipelago (S30-675), dtd 5Oct43; Allied Geographical Sect, SWPA, Terrain Handbook No. 7—New Guinea—Cape Gloucester, dtd 24Sep43; Sixth Army G-2, Terrain Est Cape Gloucester Area, dtd 15Aug43; Hough and Crown, *New Britain Campaign*, App II, Capt Levi T. Burcham, "The Vegetation of New Britain and its Effect on Military Operations."



MAP 23 R.F. STIBIL

Cape Merkus, and on the north the deepest cut forms Borgen Bay. For a mile and a half on each side of Cape Gloucester there is no fringing reef, and large ships can lie close inshore in the immediate vicinity of the cape. Throughout the area there is a firm beach of black volcanic sand strewn with large stones. Bordering the beach is a 5–10-foot red clay embankment; during normal high tides water covers the beach to the bank. In heavy weather a deep swell and high-breaking surf made the approaches dangerous and unloading operations impracticable. (See Map IV, Map Section.)

The only other areas near Cape Gloucester where a significant break occurs in the offshore reefs are at Tauali on the shore of Dampier Strait and on both sides of a small, unnamed cape a mile and a half northwest of Silimati Point. These beaches exposed by gaps in the reef were the ones chosen for the BACKHANDER assault.

Just north of the village of Tauali the reef fades away for a stretch of 400 yards, and the usual black sand beach is backed by a three-foot bank. Inland, the coastal flat is narrow and covered with secondary growth, and the ground rises sharply to bluffs overlooking the shore. The beach itself is 8–10-feet wide at high water, when the three-foot depth is located 10–15-feet offshore; at low tide, the same depth is found 40 feet from shore.

The reef around Silimati Point narrows and disappears about a half mile from the point, and for a thousand yards the beach is free of close-in obstacles. After the reef crops out again for a few hundred yards, there is another half-mile of open beach. BACKHANDER Force's Yellow Beach 1 was plotted in on this second stretch of black sand, which is quite narrow and overhung with jungle growth. Yellow 2 was planned for the sector nearest Silimati Point where the beach varies in width between 30 and 60 feet. Both beaches fall away steeply underwater, a six-foot depth being 20 feet out at low water and 25 at high. Barrier reef formations in the area are scattered and far enough offshore to give large landing ships access to the beaches.

Behind the Yellow Beaches is an area that was labeled on Marine operation maps as "damp flat" and discussed in intelligence studies as being covered at times by storm water. Forewarned, landing force commanders were prepared to encounter the area's reddish brown volcanic soil as sticky mud and even for a good deal of standing water, but no one was quite ready for the swamp that stood just back of the low embankment behind the beaches. Fortunately, the plans laid to counter known terrain problems proved adaptable to meeting the graver situation posed by the unexpected obstacle.

The reason intelligence officers did not detect the presence of the swamp was the concealment trees and undergrowth afforded against the probing aerial camera. One 1st Marine Division officer, a forester in peacetime, wrote a good description of the vegetation that covers much of the beachhead area and the ground to both flanks; he called it "the dank, steaming tropical jungle of the fiction writer," the "swamp forest" which is:

> . . . characterized by widely spaced trees of very irregular height, the tallest being upwards of 100 feet high. Quite commonly these trees have widely spreading buttress roots, which give a fluted appearance to the bottom of the trunk. Wide spacing and irregular height of the mature trees permit a

> moderately dense to very dense undergrowth of varying heights. Both undergrowth and mature trees are generally thickly matted with lianas, vines, and lawyer cane. . . .
>
> Cover and concealment are complete in swamp forest. Ground observation usually is restricted to a few yards. Movement of troops or vehicles is very difficult. Flooded areas virtually preclude movement during the wet season. Large areas of swamp forest occur in the Cape Gloucester-Borgen Bay area: the vegetation behind the landing beaches is a strip of swamp forest which extends nearly to the airdrome area on the west, as well as eastward around Borgen Bay.[2]

The coastal flat west of the beachhead widens back of Cape Gloucester to two miles of gently rolling ground covered by kunai grass and then narrows as it nears Dorf Point. One of the few major areas of New Britain not covered by jungle growth, the grassland was the site of a prewar emergency landing strip used by the planes of an island-hopping commercial line. The Japanese moved in during December 1942 and began building a new runway diagonally across the trace of the old; in April 1943, a second airstrip was started about 1,000 feet southeast of the original one. A small stream emptying into the sea east of Cape Gloucester separated the two. By October, Allied air attacks and the demand for Japanese planes to garrison existing bases had combined to arrest development of the airfields. Kunai grass had laid claim to one and was encroaching on the other in December 1943.

Southeast of the airfields the ground rises gradually then steeply toward the twin volcanic cones of Mt. Talawe (6,600 feet). Ten miles to the south, Mt. Tangi (5,600 feet) breaks the horizon, and close to Talawe, along a ridge connecting the two mountains, three smaller peaks are readily identifiable. The middle of these lesser heights, Mt. Langila (3,800 feet), is a dormant volcano from which a wispy plume of steam issues steadily; the other mountains are all extinct volcanoes. The whole complex of high ground is deeply cut by ravines, many the path of streams coursing downhill to the sea. On the southern and western slopes, ridge spurs reach out to the shore of Dampier Strait; on the north, the foothills of Mt. Talawe edge the coastal flat; and on the east, those of Mt. Tangi form one side of the broad Itni River valley.

The vegetation covering the mountains is tropical rain forest, common to all New Britain at elevations of 500 feet and above. Here the tallest trees, usually 125 to 150 feet high, form virtually a complete canopy underneath which the crowns of a second layer of smaller trees crowd. Frequently there is:

> . . . an understory of brush and young trees beneath these, ranging up to twenty or thirty feet tall. Sometimes there is a fairly complete ground cover of ferns and herbs up to about two feet in height. The actual interior of such a forest is relatively open except for occasional small tangles of climbing bamboos, rattan palms, or lianas. . . .
>
> Complete cover and concealment from air observation is afforded. Ground observation is limited—a standing man can be observed at about 50 yards; a prone man usually will be concealed at 10 yards. Foot troops can move through rain forest with little difficulty and require practically no trail cutting. Physical character of the terrain—spur ridges, deep stream channels, or the like—may make travel difficult, but the vegetation itself offers little hindrance. . . .[3]

[2] Burcham, *op. cit.*, p. 192.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 193.

One other type of jungle vegetation, secondary growth, is frequently found in western New Britain, particularly in the vicinity of native villages. Because of the local practice of abandoning garden patches of bushy vegetables and fruits after one year's cultivation, wild plants in tangled profusion quickly reclaim the temporary clearings. Wide areas of secondary growth, all of them a formidable barrier to troop movement, occur in the regions most heavily settled by the natives.

In prewar years, about 3,000 Melanesians inhabited New Britain west of the Itni River; the only Caucasians who lived there were three missionaries, a Catholic priest who ran a mission at Kalingi near Dorf Point, and a Church of England couple who served a mission at Sag-Sag, three miles south of Tauali. The native villages were in four main groups, two near the missions and the others on the eastern slopes of the mountains, one clustered near the mouth of the Itni and the second fanned out along the upper reaches of the river.

The trail network connecting the villages is the only practical means of penetrating the interior, and the frequent ridges and streams cutting the tracks on the mountainsides limit travel to men on foot. No waterway connects the coasts, and of all the rivers and streams in western New Britain, only the Itni is navigable; the others are shallow and fordable through all their length. On the Itni, native canoes can reach Relmen, 14 air miles from the river's mouth, and small landing craft can reach a point about two-and-a half miles above Gilnit.

The location of the various trails had an important effect on the progress of the fighting at Cape Gloucester. The layout was such that the Japanese could feed reinforcements into the combat zone or withdraw their troops from contact almost at will. A coastal track, usable by motor vehicles between the airfields and Silimati Point, bordered the entire objective area. From Tauali east across the saddle between Mts. Talawe and Tangi, a cross-island trail led to Natamo on Borgen Bay. Joining this track was another, running over the shoulder of Talawe to the airfields, and a second which led southeast then south, eventually reaching Gilnit. A most important trail, its existence unknown to Allied intelligence, linked the area picked for the BACKHANDER beachhead to the Tauali-Natamo track.

The climate of western New Britain is what might be expected of a region of jungle-covered mountains and swamps. At all times during the year, the humidity is high, and the daytime temperature range hovers around 90 degrees; at night the temperature seldom drops below 72 degrees. The annual rainfall usually totals 150–200 inches and much of this, an average of 30 inches a month, comes during the period of the northwest monsoon, mid-December to mid-February. In this wettest season, rain may fall almost every day and squalls with torrential downpours are frequent. The northwest winds are strong and fairly steady, making the sea rough and the surf heavy. The dry season at Cape Gloucester occurs during the summer months when the prevailing southeast winds vent most of their force on the south slopes of the mountains. The periods between the two seasons, and the period of the southeast monsoon itself, are times of comparatively calm weather.

The campaign to seize control of western New Britain would be fought in the worst possible weather of the year. Low-lying terrain would disappear beneath a

cover of standing water, and, on the higher ground, the trees, the undergrowth, and the land itself would become and remain, rainsoaked. The prospect was that attacker and defender alike, mired in combat in the dripping jungle, would curse the day they set foot on the island.

JAPANESE DEFENSES [4]

While, at times during the war, Japanese planners at *Imperial General Headquarters* seemed unreasonably optimistic in the face of repeated setbacks, that mood vanished when Tokyo appraised the strategic situation in late September 1943. The Army and Navy headquarters staffs conceded that the Allied forces were strong enough to break through the outpost cordon of defenses in the Central and Southwest Pacific and reach the inner perimeter of island bases in western New Guinea, the Marianas, Palaus, and Philippines. To stave off that event, enemy commanders of the garrisons manning the barrier positions were ordered to "do their utmost to hold out as long as possible." [5] With the time thus gained, the Japanese intended to strengthen the fortifications and reinforce the defending troops of the islands that directly barred the approaches to Japan.

In Rabaul, the decision that the *Eighth Area Army's* zone of responsibility was outside the vital inner perimeter came as no shock. General Imamura believed that the Allied advance was inevitable, but that its force could be blunted considerably. Reinforcements were dispatched to threatened bases in the northern Solomons, the Bismarcks, and eastern New Guinea, but there was a strong inclination to keep back a substantial force at Rabaul itself. In the eyes of the Japanese, Rabaul was an objective that could not be bypassed, and in estimating Allied intentions, Imamura's staff considered its major problem to be a decision whether:

> . . . the enemy will attempt to capture Rabaul immediately after the occupation of the Dampier Strait Area and Bougainville island or the enemy will invade Rabaul after isolating our forces there by severing our line of communications in the rear through the occupation of the Admiralty Islands and New Ireland, especially the Kavieng sector of the latter. However, in view of the absolute superiority of the enemy naval and air strength and the value of Rabaul from both the political and strategic viewpoint, it is more probable that the enemy will take the shortest course for capturing this valuable base, presumably in February or March of next year (1944).[6]

The Japanese shared, along with this conviction that Rabaul would be attacked, a feeling that its defenses could be held against Allied landing forces. Intelli-

[4] Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: MilHistSec, GHQ, FEC, Japanese Monograph No. 127, Army Southeast Area OpsRec Part IV, Eighth Area Army Ops, rev. ed., dtd Jul49 and Japanese Monograph No. 128, Army Southeast Area OpsRec Part IV Supplement, 17th DivOps in Western New Britain, dtd Jul49 (OCMH), hereafter *Eighth Area Army Ops* and *17th Div Ops; 1st MarDiv SAR*, Anx A, Intelligence; IntelSec, ADC Hq, 1st MarDiv, Documents and POW Repts Folder, n.d., hereafter *ADC IntelDocuments;* Takushiro Hattori, *Dai Toa Senso Zenshi* [*The Complete History of the Greater East Asia War*], 4 vols. (Tokyo: Masu Publishing Company, 1953—MS translation at OCMH), hereafter Hattori, *Complete War History*; Hough and Crown, *New Britain Campaign.*

[5] "Army-Navy Central Agreement on Central and South Pacific Area Operations," with IGHQ Army Dept Directive No. 1652, dtd 30Sep43, in HistDiv, MilIntelSec, GHQ, FEC, IGHQ Army Directives, v. III (OCMH).

[6] *Eighth Area Army Ops*, pp. 85–86. Although this document was compiled after the war, it is contemporary in tone and content.

gence and operations officers on both sides felt a struggle to take the base would require extensive assault forces and a bitter, costly battle. What the enemy failed to appreciate, however, was that predominant Allied air and naval strength made the seizure of Rabaul unnecessary if an encompassing ring of less important bases was captured.

Even if the Japanese had been willing to denude Rabaul's defenses to reinforce outlying positions, the problems of transferring troops and equipment were formidable. The sea was the only feasible supply route, but its use was dangerous. Allied fighters and bombers vied with torpedo boats to cut down enemy barge and destroyer traffic in the forward area, and the losses suffered by the Japanese crippled their plans to meet the expected attacks. Personnel losses were heavy, but even more damaging was the destruction of supplies and the means of transporting them. In general, the closer to the Vitiaz Strait enemy troops were stationed, the more likely they were to be scantily equipped, poorly clothed, and on short rations.

The barge traffic from Rabaul to New Guinea was largely responsible for the buildup of Japanese positions in western New Britain. Aside from the Cape Gloucester airfields and the defenses that grew up around them, enemy installations west of Gasmata and Willaumez Peninsula were mainly way stations on the coast-hugging barge route forced upon the Japanese by Allied attacks. The miscellaneous collection of motor sailers, launches, and landing craft, that were collectively known as barges, found shelter from probing aircraft wherever a gap in the fringing reef, a narrow beach, and overhanging foliage combined to give them a chance to escape detection.

On the south coast west of Cape Merkus, the principal enemy barge hideouts were located at Cape Bushing, where the Itni River emptied into the sea, and near the villages of Aisega, Sag-Sag, and Ulamaingi. Before the Allies seized control of the Huon Peninsula, a steady traffic passed through these points to Rooke Island, and then on to New Guinea. Routes along the north coast, less vulnerable to attack and therefore more heavily travelled, crossed the open sea, stopping at Garove Island, or followed the coast around Willaumez Peninsula. In succession west from Willaumez, the major barge stations were Iboki, Karai-ai, Kokopo, and Natamo. (See Map 29.)

Elements of the *1st* and *8th Shipping Engineer Regiments* manned and maintained the boats used along the coastal barge routes, mainly standard Japanese landing craft. Most of the vessels that followed the Rabaul-Garove-New Guinea course were larger, deeper-draft coastal schooners and fishing trawlers handled by crews of the *5th Sea Transport Battalion.* Although Japanese destroyers were occasionally called upon for emergency, high-speed movement of troops and priority cargoes, the burden of supply fell upon shipping manned by soldiers. Detachments of the *1st Debarkation Unit* acted as shore party at the barge bases near Cape Gloucester, while a variety of service units performed that mission at other points. The shipping engineers and other troops concerned with moving personnel and supplies were all armed and able to act as infantry.

In May 1943, General Imamura sent the *65th Brigade* from Rabaul to take over the defense of western New Britain. The *65th*, which had earned an Imperial citation for its part in the capture of Bataan,

was down to a strength of one two-battalion infantry regiment and supporting signal, engineer, and medical troops when it reached New Britain. Only the *141st Infantry* came from the Philippines; the *142d Infantry*, once part of the brigade, remained there, and the *122d Infantry* was sent to the Marshalls. In addition to regimental headquarters and signal companies, the *141st* had an antitank company equipped with six 37mm guns and an artillery company armed with four 75mm mountain guns. Each infantry battalion of the regiment had a headquarters and supply train, three rifle companies, a heavy machine gun company, and a gun platoon manning two 70mm howitzers. (See Map 23.)

Throughout the summer, the *65th Brigade's* main concern was keeping the supply lines to New Guinea open. Most of the units attached to it were companies or smaller elements of service organizations concerned with the barge traffic, airfield construction and operation, or the logistical support of the garrison. One type of unit, however, antiaircraft troops, added significantly to defensive firepower, both against Allied aircraft and ground forces. Each of the *39th Field Antiaircraft Battalion's* three firing batteries had four 75mm guns that could be used against ground targets. The *28th* and *30th Machine Cannon Companies* both had eight dual-purpose 20mm guns and six heavy machine guns.

The *Eighth Area Army's* interest in the defense of western New Britain picked up considerably as the situation in the Salamaua area worsened. On 5 September, a new command, the *Matsuda Force* which took its name from its commander, Major General Iwao Matsuda, took over the *65th Brigade*, the various shipping engineer and debarkation units, and a number of troops of the *51st Division*.[7] The main body of the *51st* was fighting the Australians on New Guinea, but the division's rear echelon units as well as the survivors of transport sinkings were present on New Britain, Garove, and Rooke Islands. Of particular value to Matsuda's force as combat troops were two companies of the *115th Infantry* and a smaller detachment of the *66th Infantry*, two provisional infantry companies formed from artillery and engineer elements of the division, and about half of the *51st Reconnaissance Regiment*.[8]

General Matsuda was an infantry officer with considerable experience in the Army's shipping transportation department. He had commanded an infantry regiment in China and an infantry group in Manchuria before taking over the *4th Shipping Command* in February 1943. The command, an administrative headquarters geared to handle shipping activities, moved from Japan to Rabaul by way of eastern New Guinea, arriving in New Britain in early August. On 29 October, when Matsuda was also appointed to command the *65th Brigade*, he formed a composite headquarters for the *Matsuda Force* by merging the staffs and headquarters of the brigade and the shipping command.[9]

About a month after Matsuda established his command post near Kalingi mission at Cape Gloucester, his force came

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[7] Chief, WarHistOff, DefAgency of Japan, ltr to Head, HistBr, G-3, HQMC, dtd 20Jun62, hereafter *Japanese Comments*.

[8] ATIS 1328, 141st InfRegt OpO A. No. 11, ?Dec43, in ATIS Current Translations No. 122, dtd 31May44 (ACSI Recs, FRC Alex).

[9] Docu No. 59881, MilServRec of Ex-LtGen Iwao Matsuda, in HistDiv, MilIntelSec, GHQ, FEC, Personal History Statements, 2 vols (OCMH); *Japanese Comments*.

under the *17th Division*. The division, newly arrived in Rabaul from China, was commanded by Lieutenant General Yasushi Sakai. Originally, the *17th* had been slated to reinforce the garrison of northern Bougainville, but General Imamura changed its mission when he was assured by the *Southeast Area Fleet* that it could keep another large body of men supplied in western New Britain. On 5 October, the *Eighth Area Army* commander added the *Matsuda Force* and the Gasmata garrison to General Sakai's command and ordered him to assume responsibility for defense of New Britain west of a line joining Commodore Bay and Vahsel Harbor. Division headquarters was established at Malalia near Cape Hoskins to the east of Williaumez Peninsula.

The first echelon of the *17th Division* left Shanghai on 24 September, arriving at Rabaul on 4–5 October. Three more convoy groups were to bring the remainder of the division, but shipping losses and the mounting danger of attack by Allied planes and submarines combined to cancel the sailing of the last convoy, which was to have lifted a number of service troops and 3,000 infantry replacements. The second and third convoys which departed from Shanghai late in October lost one ship to submarines while passing through the Ryukyu Islands, had another damaged by B-24s south of Truk, and lost a third to a mine off Kavieng. Total casualties from the three attacks were 1,173 men killed and wounded.[10]

The main strength of the *17th Division's 53d Infantry Regiment* and the regimental headquarters and *3d Battalion, 23d Field Artillery* were assigned to General Matsuda's command to reinforce the defenses in the immediate vicinity of Cape Gloucester. Also coming under *Matsuda Force* was the *1st Battalion, 81st Infantry* which was ordered to Cape Merkus. The *3d Battalion, 53d Infantry* and the *6th Company* of the *2d Battalion* were detached from the regiment to serve on Bougainville as was the rest of the *81st Infantry*, a battalion of the *54th Infantry*, and one of the *23d Field Artillery*. The remaining units of the *54th* and *23d* were distributed between Gasmata, Malalia, and Talasea.

With a battalion and a rifle company stripped from its strength, the *53d Infantry* was little stronger than the *141st*. Regimental headquarters and supporting companies in both units were the same, with the *53d* having in addition a platoon of 90mm mortars. The *1st Battalion* of the *53d* had four rifle companies, but the commitment of the *6th Company* on Bougainville pared the *2d Battalion* to three. *Eighth Area Army* kept control of two rifle companies, the 70mm howitzers, and most of the heavy machine guns of the *1st Battalion, 81st Infantry*, leaving the reinforcements for Cape Merkus at a strength of a headquarters and two rifle companies plus a machine gun platoon.

Japanese destroyers were used to transport the *17th Division* troops to western New Britain with most units landing at Karai-ai and carrying on by barge or trail to Cape Gloucester. The waters along the south coast were too close to Allied bases to risk destroyers there, so the skeleton battalion headed for the Arawe area had to march overland to its post. Since the *1st Battalion, 81st Infantry* had been on board the transport torpedoed during the move from China, it had to be reorganized

[10] *17th Div Ops*, pp. 4–5. This source does not provide a casualty breakdown.

and refitted in Rabaul. It was early December before the battalion landed at Iboki, terminus of a cross-island trail to Cape Merkus.

While the last of the *17th Division* reinforcements were moving into position in western New Britain, General Matsuda took steps to increase his combat strength by organizing a third battalion for the *141st Infantry*. The existing two battalions of the regiment furnished the men for the headquarters, one rifle company, and most of the machine gun company; the men of the *66th* and *115th Infantry* detachments formed the remaining two rifle companies and a platoon of machine guns. The new unit began organizing on 12 December and was formally joined to the regiment on the 20th.

The deployment of Matsuda's forces, as the time of the expected Allied assault approached, reflected the importance the Japanese general attached to the various objectives in his defensive area. Holding the vital airfield sector was the *1st Battalion, 53d Infantry*, reinforced by the regiment's 37mm and 75mm guns and a miscellany of service troops. Beach defenses, mainly bunkers connected by rifle trenches, were scattered along the shore on either side of Cape Gloucester. The heaviest concentration was located back of the most logical site for a large-scale landing attempt, a stretch of beach three miles southeast of the cape that led directly into the grasslands. In the foothills of Mt. Talawe, hidden by the lush vegetation, was a bunker-trench complex that commanded the airstrips.

Knowing what lay behind the beaches near Silimati Point, the Japanese paid scant attention to their defense. Just to the south, however, a strong force built around elements of the *1st Shipping Engineers* and the *39th Field Antiaircraft Battalion* held the sector where the trail net from the interior reached the coast. Matsuda's scheme of defense depended upon retaining possession of the trails to move his limited manpower to meet Allied attacks. Two small hills which dominate the area served as focal points for enemy defenses. One, a 450-foot height called Target Hill by the Allies, stands out starkly above the swamp forest, its open, grass-covered crown in sharp contrast to the surrounding sea of trees. A mile and a half south of Target Hill, Hill 660 rises out of the jungle with a cover of tangled growth that blends easily with its environs.

Across the island, in the vicinity of Cape Bushing, was the defensive sector assigned to the *141st Infantry*. The *1st Battalion* was located near the mouth of the Itni, the *2d* occupied defenses at Aisega, and the newly formed *3d* was in reserve at the regimental headquarters at Nigol, a village on the Itni about three miles above Gilnit. Farther down the coast at Cape Merkus the defending force was composed of a platoon of naval personnel manning a communication relay station [11] and two provisional infantry companies formed from elements of the *51st Division*.

The garrisons of Rooke and Garove Islands were also part of the *Matsuda Force*. On Garove, the principal unit was the *5th Sea Transport Battalion* with an antiaircraft battery and shipping service units attached. The headquarters and two companies of the *51st Reconnaissance Regiment* were still on Rooke on D-Day, but, prior to 26 December, a reinforcing 75mm gun battery and about half of the regi-

[11] *SE Area NavOps—III*, p. 39.

ment's cavalrymen were sent to New Britain to bolster the *141st Infantry's* defenses.

In November, General Matsuda moved his headquarters from Kalingi to a concealed position in the rain forest near Nakarop, a village on the main cross-island trail about seven miles inland from Borgen Bay and a thousand feet about sea level on Talawe's lower slopes. Close by the new *Matsuda Force* command post, the general stationed the *2d Battalion, 53d Infantry* as general reserve, ready to move by the mountain trails to the airfields, to Cape Bushing, or to Target Hill as the situation demanded.

By mid-December, the effective strength of Matsuda's command, including all classes of troops in the area west of an Iboki-Arawe boundary, stood close to 10,500 men. The figure represents 9,500 that Matsuda reported to General Sakai on 1 December, plus an estimate of the combined strength of the *17th Division* units—*1st Battalion, 81st Infantry; 3d Battalion, 23d Field Artillery; 2d Field Hospital*—that reported from Rabaul later in the month. Roughly half of the total force was located in positions within effective supporting range of Cape Gloucester.

The enemy leaders were well aware that the Allies had the strength to take western New Britain, but the Japanese were determined to make a bloody fight for its possession. On 12 December, in a message addressed to all the officers in his command, General Sakai warned that a landing was imminent and that in meeting the Allied assault force each man was to observe the principle of "certain death warfare to the utmost, in such a way that not even the slightest disgrace will adhere to your name." [12]

KNOWLEDGE OF THE ENEMY [13]

Aerial reconnaissance kept the Japanese informed of concentrations of Allied landing craft off the coast of New Guinea, but the traffic was so heavy that no clear picture emerged as to when a move was coming against western New Britain. False alarms were frequent as the end of 1943 approached, but all the reports of pilots of the *Eleventh Air Fleet* at Rabaul and the *Fourth Air Army* at Wewak could do was confirm the estimate that a large-scale landing was in the offing. Even more unsettling to the Japanese commanders was the knowledge that Allied scouting parties had landed repeatedly in the territory defended by the *Matsuda Force* and departed with valuable intelligence.

General Krueger, confronted by a serious lack of information about the terrain, beach conditions, and defenses of possible ALAMO Force objectives, had formed a group of scouts whose job it was to land behind enemy lines and find the answers to vital questions that plagued intelligence officers. The ALAMO Scouts, who operated directly under Krueger, were a composite force of Australians with

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[12] 141st InfRegt Bul, dtd 12Dec43, in ATIS Enemy Publication No. 257, 141st InfRegt Buls and Related Papers, dtd 27Dec44. (ACSI Recs, FRC Alex).

[13] Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: MIS, GHQ, FEC, Ops of the AlliedIntelBu, GHQ, SWPA—v. IV, Intel Series, dtd 19Aug48; *1st MarDiv SAR*, Anx A, Intelligence; 1st MarDiv AmphibRecon PtlRepts, Cape Gloucester and Talasea, 11Oct43–9Mar44, hereafter *1st MarDiv PtlRepts;* Feldt, *Coastwatchers;* Hough and Crown, *New Britain Campaign.*

experience in the islands, American intelligence personnel, and natives of proven loyalty and dependability. In preparing for BACKHANDER operations, a number of the 1st Marine Division's own scouts, led by First Lieutenant John D. Bradbeer, took part in pre-D-Day reconnaissance on New Britain with men from the ALAMO Scouts.

Usually, the scouting parties travelled to their objective by torpedo boat, landed in rubber boats, and moved inland to establish a patrol base well off the regular tracks. Fanning out from this point, the scouts contacted the local populace and tried to observe enemy dispositions. When the mission was accomplished, or, as often happened, the Japanese got wind of the presence of the scouts and started to hunt them down, the torpedo boats returned and took off the party. Occasionally, the reconnaissance was an assignment to spot-check preferred beaches and their defenses, a mission in which success depended upon the scouts' ability to obtain essential information quickly and accurately.

Three Australian officers were particularly concerned with the scouting in western New Britain—Major John V. Mather, AIF, who had served with the 1st Marine Division on Guadalcanal and had been a labor contractor in the Solomons, Sub-Lieutenant Andrew Kirkwell-Smith, RANVR, who had been a coastwatcher at Cape Gloucester before the Japanese came, and Sub-Lieutenant William G. Wiedeman, RANVR, who had been the Anglican missionary at Sag-Sag. The local knowledge of these men was invaluable to division intelligence, as was their understanding of the natives and their ability to teach others how to live and operate successfully in the jungles of New Britain.

The first party with American scouts to go ashore in the objective area was led by Bradbeer and Kirkwell-Smith. After it landed near Grass Point on 24 September, the nine-man patrol operated two weeks in the region south of Mt. Tangi looking for a trail that was supposed to wind south around the mountain and go over the saddle between Tangi and Talawe. Although the search was unsuccessful, the party brought back much useful information, particularly the welcome news that the natives were at odds with the Japanese. In July, the enemy had cleared all the inhabitants from the coastal villages and those near the airfields, forcing an exodus to the interior. Since that time, the natives had noticed that many of the Japanese were sickly and on short rations, so much so that the soldiers had begun to raid the village gardens for food. The scouts retraced their steps to the coast and left the island on 6 October after they received word that enemy patrols were looking for them.

In mid-October, a small Australian-led party, most of its personnel borrowed from the coastwatcher organization, landed on Rooke Island. In two weeks ashore, the scouts found little evidence of a large enemy garrison and pulled out undetected. A month later, a planned 24-hour patrol, led by First Lieutenant Robert B. Firm of the 5th Marines R-2 Section, went ashore below Dorf Point to check possible landing beaches in the vicinity. The enemy was too active to make any move inland feasible, but Firm was able to determine that the beach was not usable before he had to order his men back into the rubber boats.

Since Admiral Carpender did not want to risk torpedo boats north of Cape Gloucester, it proved impossible to make

a reconnaissance of the main beaches near Silimati Point. An ALAMO Scout party did land at Arawe, however, on the night of 8–9 December and concluded that few Japanese were present to hinder the projected assault there. On the night of 21–22 December, Bradbeer and First Lieutenant Joseph A. Fournier of 2/1 led two parties ashore to check the beaches near Tauali. The Marine scouts confirmed the selection of Green Beach as the best that could be found for the landing; no enemy forces were encountered. Coming away from New Britain the torpedo boat transporting the scouts attacked some Japanese barges; in the exchange of fire, three American crewmen were wounded and an engine was knocked out, but the boat got back to base safely.[14]

The ALAMO Scouts were not the only group to penetrate the Japanese defenses on New Britain. As usual, the coastwatchers were there, a constant irritant to the enemy. One station set up inland from Cape Orford was in operation through the summer, giving warning of flights from Rabaul and passing on information of the Japanese forces. On 30 August, General Kenney requested that a series of air spotting stations be established across the base of Gazelle Peninsula. General MacArthur agreed and his G–2 ordered the coastwatcher directorate, Allied Intelligence Bureau, to have the spotters in position by November. Sixteen coastwatchers and 27 natives landed from a U.S. submarine on 28 September and separated into five parties to take their posts in the rain forest cover on the island's mountainous spine.

The Japanese managed to capture one of the parties, but the others kept free of searching patrols, sending their reports of enemy flights directly to fighter controls at Woodlark and Dobodura that alerted interceptors at Nadzab's fighter strips. The location of the chain of observers promised 30 to 60 minutes' advance warning of Japanese attacks on Cape Gloucester, time enough for Allied fighters to rendezvous at the most favorable altitude and meet the raiders.

The reports of scouts and coastwatchers were only a portion of the intelligence sifted to get accurate information about New Britain and its defenders. Japanese documents and prisoners taken on New Guinea and Bougainville proved a fruitful source of order of battle data, and at MacArthur's, Krueger's, and Rupertus' levels of command there was a constant re-evaluation of the strength of the defending force in western New Britain. In light of the difficulty of piecing together the various scattered segments of news, the picture of its opponents that the 1st Marine Division was able to assemble was a remarkably good one.

When the BACKHANDER Force operation plan was issued on 14 November, the intelligence estimate of enemy strength west of Arawe on New Britain and on Rooke and Garove was 7,071 men. The total moved steadily upward as elements of the *17th Division* were identified as part of the garrison. On 9 December, the various Allied headquarters published minimum-maximum enemy strength figures for western New Britain that differed considerably. While MacArthur's and Blamey's intelligence officers were content to count only the sure identifications, there was little disposition at Krueger's or Rupertus' command posts to ignore signs, however slight, of Japanese units that might dilute the superiority of attackers

[14] McMillan, *The Old Breed*, p. 168.

over the defenders. Where GHQ and Allied Land Forces found a strength range of 4,000–5,000, ALAMO Force had 5,668–9,344, and the 1st Marine Division figured 7,416–9,816 enemy were present.[15] The final division estimate before the Arawe landing placed the lowest strength at 8,400 and the highest at 12,076.[16] Although the division's educated guess proved to be high, the figures were reasonable in view of the information available.

A scattering of evidence indicated that the *65th* might have been raised from brigade to division status, providing a basis for a belief that at least one other of its regiments besides the *141st Infantry* was present. Accordingly, the *142d Infantry*, which could not be accounted for elsewhere, was added to the order of battle. Similarly, additional companies of units known to be at Cape Gloucester in some strength were counted present if they failed to turn up in other sectors. In the absence of more exact figures, Japanese tables of organization were used as the basis for strength estimates, with 20 percent deducted for losses of all types. Acting to counterbalance the inflated totals was the fact that the presence of the remnants of the *51st Division*, including the *51st Reconnaissance Regiment*, went undetected.

The location of the various elements of the *Matsuda Force* remained a worrisome problem to Allied intelligence officers. The *17th Division* reinforcements arrived so close to D-Day that their defensive assignments were unknown, and it was not clear just what combat units occupied the located defenses. Confusing the situation further was the fact that Japanese place names on western New Britain were a far cry from the names found on prewar Australian maps.

While the enemy accepted and used most of the native place names in western New Britain, the result of such use was often an unrecognizable title. Allied POW interrogators and the translators of Japanese documents had to judge how native speech had been rendered in Japanese and then, in turning the result into English, to try to come close to the original. And often this transition involved the additional problem of considering how differently native dialects would be set down by persons used to Australian and American speech. Intelligence officers, at least, became well acquainted with the Japanese name for Cape Gloucester, translated interchangeably as Tuluvu or Tsurubu. Other names could not be identified. The headquarters of General Matsuda appeared as Egaroppu when translated, a fact that prevented its recognition as Nakarop on prewar maps.[17] And there were puzzling references to villages that could not be plotted anywhere along known trails.

On the whole, however, the maps available to BACKHANDER Force were useful, if not precisely accurate. A German survey of the island, made prior to the first World War, was the base on which later maps were constructed. On these, the trails along the coast were plotted with some care, but the location of trails crossing the interior were at best approximations. As western New Britain attracted Allied attention as a possible objective, repeated aerial photographic missions were flown over it in an effort to improve knowledge

[15] ALAMO Force G–2 PeriodicRept No. 18, dtd 9Dec43, in *ALAMO G–3 Jnl No. 6.*

[16] 1st MarDiv D–2 Sect, Enemy O/B Estimate, dtd 13Dec43.

[17] In the text, the names used by BACKHANDER Force for locations on New Britain have been used.

of its terrain. When MacArthur's cartographers were ready to draft operation maps in October 1943, the aerial photographs gave them a clear picture of coastline and offshore reefs, terrain in the few open areas, and prominent heights, but the jungle trees gave up little of the secrets that lay beneath their branches. Information needed to plot inland trails, villages, and streams was often taken from old maps and charts and from the memories of islanders who had visited or lived on New Britain.

The map most often used by planners and combat troops was drawn in a scale of 1:20,000 with a thousand-yard military grid superimposed. On the back of each of the seven sheets it took to cover the coast from Borgen Bay to Cape Bach and the interior to include Mt. Talawe was the photo mosaic used in making that segment. Two other maps frequently used by higher headquarters were also printed in quantity; one covered the immediate objective area in a one-mile scale and the other showed all of New Britain at an inch to every four miles. To help troop leaders visualize the terrain where they would be fighting, the 1st Division's relief mapping section modeled the ground forms of the Yellow Beach, Green Beach, and airfield areas in several small scales. Copies of these relief maps were then moulded and distributed to division units and other elements of the landing force.

While Marine intelligence officers worked hard to assemble information on the enemy and the objective in order to brief assault troops, they devoted as much attention to the problem of procuring information after the landing. Deliberate and repeated stress was given in all division training to the need for passing along promptly any enemy papers or material that were found. Emphasis was laid, through demonstrations and review of combat experience, on the fact that the most insignificant appearing document might provide the key that would shorten the battle and save lives. The Marines were reminded of the importance of taking prisoners and of the ordinary Japanese soldier's willingness to cooperate with his captors in providing military information once he had surrendered.

To process the flow of intelligence on D-Day and after, the intelligence sections of combat teams and division were set up to give a quick evaluation to captured enemy maps, diaries, and orders. Information of immediate use to Marine commanders was to be extracted and the documents passed on to the ALAMO Force headquarters for definitive translation. In the same manner, prisoners were to be interrogated as soon as possible after capture to extract what intelligence they had of use to BACKHANDER Force, and then shipped out for further questioning in New Guinea. To help speed the search for useful information in enemy documents, ten Nisei were borrowed from Sixth Army to augment the division's own language section.

One other source of up-to-date information of the enemy was available before D-Day—the DIRECTOR operation. If the Arawe assault had its hoped-for diversionary effect, Japanese troops would be drawn off from the area of the main landings. Any contact General Cunningham's cavalrymen had with elements of the *Matsuda Force* promised intelligence of value to the Marines who were headed for Cape Gloucester. Exact answers to questions about the enemy's ability and will to fight and his dispositions to meet Allied attack could only be found ashore on New Britain.

DEXTERITY Landings

ARAWE—Z-DAY TO D-DAY [1]

The focal point of DIRECTOR operations was a boot-shaped peninsula with Cape Merkus as its heel. Lying offshore from the boot's sole are three islands, Ausak, Arawe, and Pilelo, which bound Arawe Harbor, an anchorage used by coastal shipping before the war. The beach chosen for the main Allied assault is about 1,000 yards due north of the cape on the harbor's shore. Behind the beach, designated Orange Beach by planners, the ground slopes up sharply through a break in the cliffs that line the peninsula's western and southern coasts. Most of the north shore of the peninsula and its bulbous toe are taken up by mangrove swamp, which occurs frequently in this part of New Britain; the high ground is occupied by the coconut trees of Amalut Plantation. (See Map 24.)

Between Cape Merkus and Sipul village, about 30 miles to the west, is a trackless region of swamp and jungle, a formidable barrier to movement. From the cape east, the coastal trail springs up again, forking at the Pulie River with one path leading cross island to Iboki and the other continuing along the shore until it disappears in dense rain forest. Four miles east of the neck of Arawe Peninsula (to give it the name used by Allied forces) is Lupin village, the site of a small prewar emergency landing ground. Unused by the Japanese, the airstrip was choked with kunai grass in December 1943.

The most practical way to travel along New Britain's south coast is by boat, a fact that played the most important part in the selection of Arawe as an ALAMO Force target. Once General Cunningham's landing force was ashore on Arawe Peninsula, it could put an end to enemy barge traffic and sever the supply and reinforcement route to Cape Gloucester. Since the Arawe-Iboki trail was known to be difficult and little-used—hardly more than a footpath—Allied planners thought it unlikely that the Japanese could move enough troops overland to threaten seriously Cunningham's position. The proven hunting ability of Allied planes and torpedo boats made remote the prospect of any large-scale enemy movement by sea against Arawe.

In planning DIRECTOR operations, General Cunningham was hampered by a lack of intelligence of both terrain and enemy dispositions. To meet the situation as he understood it, he planned two subsidiary landings before making the assault

[1] Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: *ALAMO G-3 Jnl;* CTF 76 OPlan No. 3A-43, dtd 10Dec43; ComVIIPhibFor (CTF 76) Rept of Arawe Op, dtd 10Jan44; 112th CavRegt HistRept 24Nov43-10Feb44, dtd 10Feb44; *17th Div Ops; SE Area NavOps-III;* MilIntelSect, GHQ, FEC, Japanese Monograph No. 142, Outline of SE Area NavAirOps, Part V (Dec43-May44), n.d., hereafter *SE Area NavAirOps-V;* Craven and Cate, *Guadalcanal to Saipan;* Miller, *Reduction of Rabaul;* Hough and Crown, *New Britain Campaign.*

on Arawe Peninsula. The object of one landing was the seizure of a reported Japanese radio station and defensive position on Pilelo Island which commanded the best passages into Arawe Harbor. The second landing was designed to put a blocking force across the coastal trail just east of the foot of the peninsula. In both instances, General Cunningham strove for surprise, planning predawn assaults without air or ships' gunfire support. The troops were to land from rubber boats instead of powered landing craft.

For the main landing, both air strikes and naval bombardment were scheduled to cover assault waves in LVTs and following waves in LCVPs and LCMs. The amphibian tractors were to be manned by Marines of the 1st Division and the landing craft by Army engineers of the 2d Engineer Special Brigade. So little sure knowledge existed of reef conditions in and around Arawe Harbor that Admiral Barbey, who commanded the attack force, asked that ALAMO Force make LVTs available to carry the first waves ashore. The amphibian engineers and their boats were detailed to DIRECTOR Force to provide General Cunningham with a boat pool after the initial landings had been made.

On 30 November, General Krueger directed General Rupertus to assign 29 LVTs and their crews to DIRECTOR Force plus the Marines needed to operate 10 new armored Buffalo amtracs to be provided by the Army. The ALAMO Force commander pointed out that the tractors would be returned to division control before D-Day. The choice of the unit to fill the assignment logically fell on Company A, 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion. The company was part of the reserve combat team of the division and had had more experience handling the new Buffaloes than any other battalion unit.[2]

Plans called for the DIRECTOR assault troops to be carried to the objective in fast ships, vessels that could unload quickly and promptly leave the area. Later echelons carrying reinforcements and supplies would use LCTs shuttling from Finschhafen. Admiral Barbey was reluctant to risk any of his LSTs at Arawe with the BACKHANDER Operation so close at hand. He did approve, however, the use of the *Carter Hall*, a landing ship dock (LSD) which had just arrived in the Southwest Pacific, and of the Austrialian transport *Westralia* to move the men, amphibious craft, and supplies involved in the main landing. Two APDs were assigned to transport Troops A and B, 1st Squadron, 112th Cavalry, chosen to make the two rubber boat landings.

General Cunningham issued his formal field order for the seizure of positions in the Arawe area on 4 December; the assault troops had been alerted to their mission earlier as they assembled at Goodenough from Woodlark and Kiriwina. In addition to the task of securing Arawe Peninsula and the islands forming Arawe Harbor, the cavalrymen were to outpost the trail leading to the Pulie River and patrol vigorously to guard against enemy attacks. As soon as the task force position was consolidated, Cunningham was to send an amphibious patrol to the Itni River and Gilnit to check the possibility of overland contact with the Marines at Cape Gloucester.

The torpedo boat base called for in GHQ, Seventh Fleet, and ALAMO Force plans for Arawe remained a vague affair

[2] *1st MarDiv SAR*, Anx D, Amphibian Tractors, p. 1.

at the operating level despite the definite language directing its establishment. In conferences with General Cunningham on 5 December, the fleet's motor torpedo boat commander, Lieutenant Commander Morton C. Mumma, stated that he would assign two boats based at Dreger Harbor on New Guinea to patrol east of Arawe each night after the landing. The boats would report to the task force intelligence officer for briefing on arrival and be available for special missions on request, but they would return to Dreger with dawn. The only naval installations Mumma asked for at Arawe were emergency fueling facilities. In addition to the torpedo boats hovering near Arawe, he said another pair from Dreger would hunt barges nightly between Tauali and Sag-Sag and two others from Kiriwina would scout the vicinity of Gasmata. No boats would patrol the sector from Arawe west to the Itni because of the poorly charted reefs and shallows among the offshore islands.

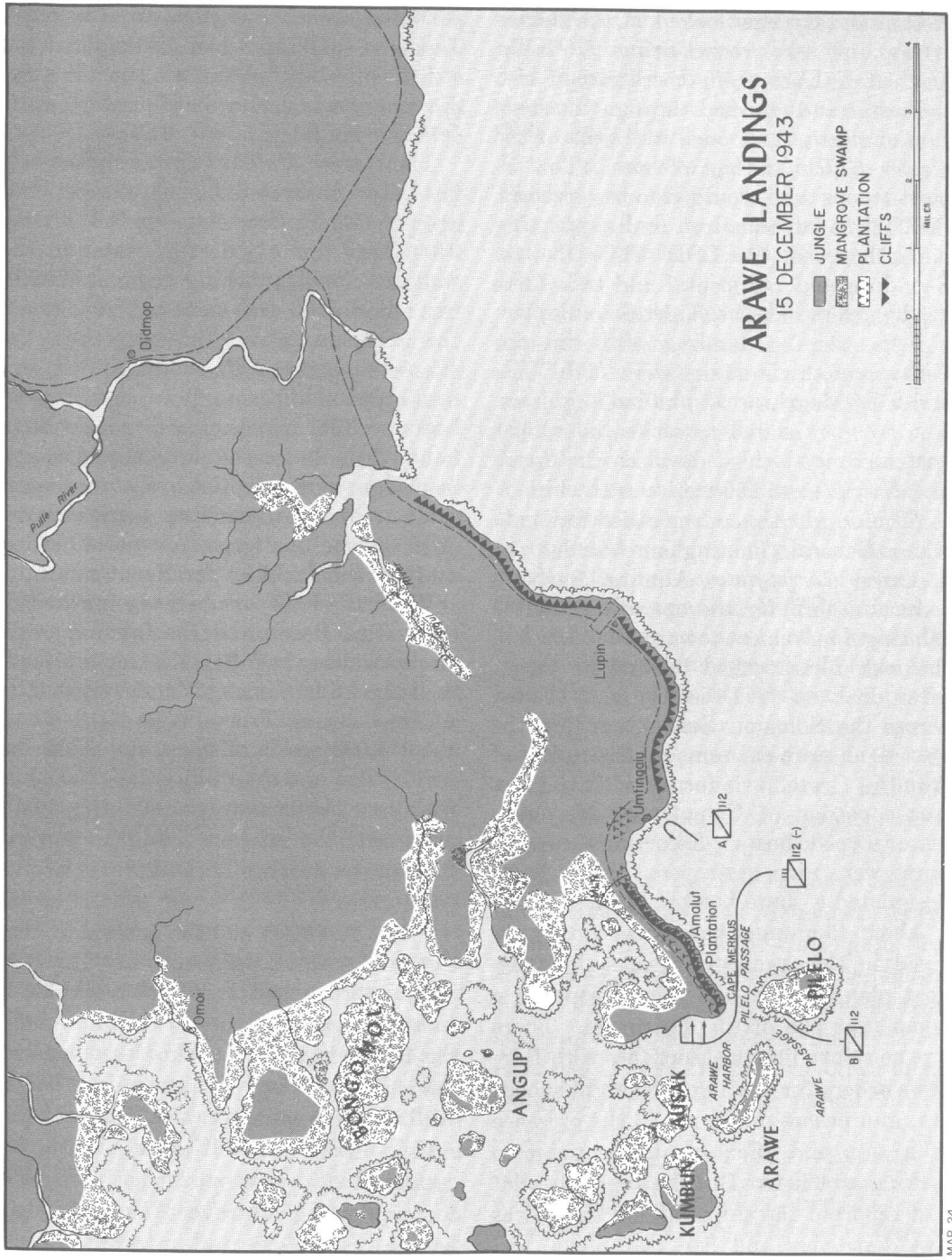
The *Carter Hall* loaded Marine tractors and crewmen at Milne Bay on 5 December, as the *Westralia* picked up a company-size task group from the Boat Battalion, 592d Boat and Shore Regiment. At Goodenough the two larger ships were joined by the APDs *Sands* and *Humphreys*, and the 112th's assault troops came on board to take part in two practice landings, one a full-scale rehearsal of the operation. The results of the training showed that boat wave timing was off, that some junior leaders were not sure of themselves in the unfamiliar amphibious role, and that unit commanders did not always have control of their men—all faults that could be corrected with further rehearsal. Time was too short for more practice, however, as Z-Day (15 December) was approaching fast and the ships and men had to make last-minute preparations for the assault.

When the DIRECTOR operation was decided upon, the Japanese defenders of Arawe were calculated at 100–150 men with the only identified units a naval antiaircraft platoon and a small radio detachment. On 5 December, reconnaissance planes sighted 12–14 enemy barges at Kumbum Island near Arawe and four more along the peninsula's shore. Although it was conceded that these craft might be taking part in a routine supply run, ALAMO intelligence officers felt it was "prudent to assume the enemy at Arawe now has at least 500 [men] and considerable reinforcement potential." [3] General Cunningham asked General Krueger for reinforcements to meet the added threat. On 10 December, a battalion of the 158th Infantry, a non-divisional regiment, was alerted as reserve for DIRECTOR.

Cunningham also asked that a 90mm gun battery be assigned to his force to supplement the antiaircraft fire of the two batteries of automatic weapons he already had. Although the strength of the Japanese ground garrison at Arawe and its defensive potential were perplexing questions, there was little doubt in the minds of Allied commanders that the enemy air reaction to the landing would be swift and powerful. The few heavy antiaircraft guns available were already committed to other operations, however, and Cunningham's force had to rely on machine guns and 20mm and 40mm cannon for aerial defense.

Loading for the Arawe landings got underway at Goodenough during the afternoon of 13 December. As Generals Mac-

[3] ALAMO For G-2 PeriodicRept No. 18, 1–8Dec43, dtd 9Dec43, in *ALAMO G-3 Jnl No. 6.*



MAP 24

R.F. STIBIL

Arthur and Krueger looked on, the Marine LVTs and two rocket-firing DUKWs, manned by Army engineers, drove into the water and churned through the stern gate and into the flooded well deck of the *Carter Hall* standing offshore. The assault troops who would ride the tractors, the 112th's 2d Squadron and supporting units, boarded the LSD while the 1st Squadron and regimental and task force headquarters rode the *Westralia*. Replacing the regular landing craft on the Australian ship's davits were 16 LCVPs and 2 LCMs of the amphibian engineers. The troopers slated to make the rubber boat landings bedded down on the *Sands* and *Humphreys*, 150 men to each ship.

At midnight, the convoy sailed for Buna where General Cunningham boarded the destroyer *Conyngham*, Admiral Barbey's command ship for the operation. After feinting a movement toward Finschhafen, the task force turned toward its target after dusk on 14 December and headed across the Solomon Sea. Guarding the west flank were cruisers and destroyers of Admiral Crutchley's force and to the east was a cordon of Commander Mumma's motor torpedo boats. Escorting the transports were nine destroyers, five of them designated a shore bombardment unit.

About 15 minutes before the convoy arrived in the transport area, a Japanese float plane scouted the ships, dropping a bomb near one of the destroyers. There was no return fire, in accordance with Barbey's orders for dealing with night snoopers; gun flashes might reveal the presence of a ship and offer an aiming point to lurking attackers. But the Japanese pilot had reported the ships he had sighted as five destroyers and five transports, and Admiral Kusaka at Rabaul ordered planes of the *Eleventh Air Fleet* to attack. A Japanese submarine had also sighted the Allied ships late on the 14th, but its report did not reach enemy headquarters until after the landing.

The *Carter Hall* began taking on ballast before it arrived in the transport area about five miles from Orange Beach. By 0400 there was 4½ feet of water in the well deck and launching began. Within ten minutes all the vehicles had cleared the LSD. At about the same time, the *Westralia* lowered its landing craft and men began clambering down nets into the boats, while winches and rope slings handled the 40 tons of supplies and equipment figured as essential to sustain the assault troops in their first hours ashore. At 0500, the two large transports headed away in the darkness for New Guinea.

While the LVTs made ready for the run to Orange Beach and the landing craft circled waiting to follow the tractors' lead, the surprise landings got underway. The APDs carrying Troops A and B hove to about 1,000 yards offshore, unloaded the cavalrymen and their boats, and started to withdraw immediately. As they had practiced, the soldiers paddled toward their target beaches in three waves of five boats each.

Troop A, which had the mission of cutting the coastal road near Umtingalu village, never reached its objective. At 0522, enemy automatic weapons cut loose from the featureless black outline that marked the shore, raking the oncoming boats. Within a few minutes, only three of the rubber craft were still afloat. From its position 3,000 yards out from Umtingalu, the supporting destroyer *Shaw* had difficulty seeing if the soldiers struggling in the water were in its line of fire. At 0542,

when the *Shaw* finally had a clear shot, two salvos of 5-inch high explosive shell were all that was needed to silence the enemy guns. The abortive landing attempt cost the 112th Cavalry 12 men killed, 17 wounded, and 4 missing in action.

When the Japanese fired on Troop A's boats, Troop B abandoned its original landing plan for Pilelo and headed for the nearest beach on the island. Moving quickly inland after they landed, the cavalrymen isolated the small enemy garrison in caves near Winguru village and wiped them out after a fight at close quarters with bazookas, flame throwers, and grenades called into use. The troop lost one man and accounted for seven defenders in seizing its objective.

While the subsidiary landings were taking place, a column of Marine amphibian tractors started on the 5,000-yard run to Orange Beach. The armored Buffaloes in the lead, traveling at six knots, soon outdistanced the Alligators which were hard put to make 4½ knots. One of the control boats for the main landing, the *SC-742*, spotted the LVTs moving into Pilelo Passage well ahead of schedule and headed them off. The Buffaloes then circled off Cape Merkus waiting for the Alligators to catch up. Meanwhile, the slower tractors had gotten off course and had to be herded back into the prescribed boat lane. The upshot of the confusion was that the landing was delayed 40 minutes.

The pre-H-Hour destroyer bombardment was extended when it became clear that the LVTs were falling behind schedule, but the cease fire was sounded on board the ships at 0641 to conserve ammunition for antiaircraft defense. When the 5-inch shells stopped falling, the standby control boat, *SC-981*, began firing a spread of rockets on Cape Merkus to cover the movement of the landing vehicles through Pilelo Passage. At 0710, the DIRECTOR Force air support officer on the *Conyngham* called down a waiting squadron of B-25s to strafe and bomb the beach. Shortly thereafter, behind a barrage of rockets fired by the engineer DUKWs and *SC-742*, the assault troops of 2/112 landed.[4]

The bombardment silenced what little opposition there was at the beach, and the squadron moved inland cautiously but easily. Two of the Marine amtracs in the first wave were able to negotiate the steep bank behind Orange Beach and accompany the soldiers to their destination, the narrow neck of the peninsula. When enemy machine guns firing from the edges of the mangrove swamp pinned down the troopers, the armored Buffaloes crushed the defenders' positions and silenced the guns. By mid-afternoon the 2d Squadron was digging in on its objective. A pocket of Japanese riflemen left behind by the assault troops was eliminated by the 112th's Headquarters Troop, and the peninsula was cleared of enemy forces by nightfall.

Survivors of the 120 Japanese soldiers and sailors who had defended Arawe Peninsula, Pilelo, and Umtingalu had withdrawn from contact with the landing force. The Army units, detachments from two temporary companies of the *51st Division*, one of infantrymen, the other of artillerymen, rejoined their parent unit in

[4] Contemporary reports differ considerably on the exact time of the landing, but it appears that 0728, the time reported by the LVT commander, is correct. Co A, 1st PhibTracBn Rept of PhibTrac Ops in Arawe Landing, dtd 27Dec43, in *ALAMO G-3 Jnl No. 12.*

positions near the Pulie River at Didmop.[5] The naval coastal antiaircraft platoon that had repulsed the landing attempt at Umtingalu, abandoned its guns and took off in precipitate retreat north up the overland trail. Coming south along the same trail, hurrying as best the jungle, rain, and frequent swollen streams would allow, was Major Shinjiro Komori's *1st Battalion, 81st Infantry.* Komori had arrived within earshot of the preliminary bombardment at Arawe, but was still four days' forced march from the Pulie River, illustrating the difficulties of moving a large body of men through the center of New Britain.[6]

Intensive Japanese ground opposition to the Allied landing was yet to come, but, as expected, the aerial counterattack came on the heels of the landing. At 0855, after one flight of enemy planes had engaged the covering P-38 squadron and led it in a snarling dogfight away from the target, 30–40 naval fighters and bombers struck at the beachhead. From the Japanese point of view, the time of attack was auspicious. The only heavy antiaircraft guns left in Arawe waters were those on the *Conyngham*; all the other escort, control, and bombardment vessels had departed moments before. The first follow-up echelon of five LCTs, accompanied by seven engineer-manned LCMs, had just moved into Arawe Harbor to unload. The fire of machine guns and 20mm cannon mounted on ships, LVTs, trucks, landing craft, and beach proved more than enough to beat off the attack. The total of serious damage was one LCVP blown up and a few men wounded.

Throughout the day the attacks continued, but Allied fighter squadrons were able to turn away most of the enemy planes. The vivid imaginations of the Japanese pilots supplied them with the damage that they were unable to inflict during their attacks, and Rabaul heard tales of many sunken transports and landing craft and damaged cruisers and destroyers.

Returning again and again during the next week, the Japanese planes, mostly carrier aircraft stationed at Rabaul, attempted to wipe out the Allied beachhead. Their effort was unsuccessful, although one LCT echelon arriving late on the 16th was under almost continuous air attack while it was at Arawe and had an escort coastal transport sunk, and an escort minesweeper and seven LCTs badly damaged. This was the high point of the enemy strikes; defending fighters and antiaircraft automatic weapons fire whittled down the attacker's strength at a rate of three, four, or five planes a day, losses the Japanese could ill afford. As the fourth week of December began, large-scale air raids tapered off to night bombing runs and hit-and-run daylight missions by small numbers of enemy planes.

The frequent air attacks on Z-Day and the days immediately following severely disrupted the unloading process. An inexperienced shore party and a short-handed naval beach party, worked to exhaustion, were unable to move supplies from ships to dumps smoothly; congestion on Orange Beach was constant. The beach itself proved capable of handling only two

[5] ATIS Item No. 8159, Merkus Garrison Intel Rept. dtd 10Dec43, in ATIS Bul No. 614, dtd 8Jan 44 (ACSI Recs, FRC Alex). Prior to D-Day, the infantry company at Arawe was designated the *10th Company, 3d Battalion, 141st Infantry,* but the association with the regiment at Cape Gloucester was strictly a paper matter.

[6] ATIS Item No. 11249, Diary of Major Komori, 16Oct43–31Mar44, in ATIS Bul No. 999, dtd 6May44 (ACSI Recs, FRC Alex), hereafter *Komori Diary.*

TROOPERS OF THE 112TH CAVALRY *wade ashore at Arawe as Marine LVTs carry in supplies on 15 December 1943.* (*SC 187063*)

MOVING OFF THE RAMP *of a Coast Guard-manned landing craft, Marines move ashore on D-Day at Cape Gloucester.* (*USN 80–G–44371*)