

LCTs at a time, and other ships in each echelon had to stand by under threat of enemy air attack while waiting their turn to unload. Under the circumstances, LCT commanders were unwilling to remain at Arawe any longer than their movement orders stated, and, on occasion, cargo holds were only partially cleared before the ships headed back for Finschhafen. The problem grew steadily less acute as Japanese air raids dwindled in number and strength and the reserve supplies of the landing forces reached planned levels.

General Cunningham lost no time in making his position on Arawe Peninsula secure behind a well-dug-in defense line closing off the narrow neck. Engineer landing craft gave the general protection on his open sea flanks, and a series of combat outposts stretching up the coastal trail beyond Lupin airstrip promised adequate warning of any attempt to force his main defenses. The 112th was brought up to strength; Troop A was re-equipped by air drop on the 16th, and, two days later, APDs from Goodenough brought in the 3d Squadron. The cavalry regiment acting as infantry and a reinforcing field artillery battalion seemed quite capable of handling any Japanese units that might come against them.

Pursuing his mission of finding out all that he could about Japanese forces in western New Britain before the BACKHANDER Force landed, Cunningham dispatched an amphibious patrol toward the Itni River on the 17th. Moving in two LCVPs, the cavalry scouts reached a point near Cape Peiho, 20 miles west of Arawe, by dawn on the 18th. There, appearing suddenly from amidst the offshore islets, seven enemy barges attacked the American craft and forced them into shore. Abandoning the boats, the scout-

ing party struggled inland through a mangrove swamp, finally reaching a native village where they were warmly received.

An Australian with the scouts was able to get hold of a canoe and report back to Arawe by the 22d to tell Cunningham that the waters between Cape Merkus and the Itni were alive with enemy barges. The natives confirmed this finding and also said that large concentrations of Japanese troops were located at the mouth of the Itni, Aisega, and Sag-Sag. Special efforts were made to insure that this intelligence reached General Rupertus, and Cunningham sent it out both by radio and an officer messenger who used a torpedo boat returning to Dreger Harbor.

The barges that the 112th's scouts ran up against on the 18th were transporting enemy troops from Cape Bushing to the scene of action at Arawe. As soon as he heard of the Allied landing, General Sakai of the *17th Division* had ordered General Matsuda to dispatch one of his battalions to Cape Merkus by sea. The unit Matsuda selected, the *1st Battalion, 141st Infantry* (less its *1st Company*), landed at the village of Omoi on the night of 18 December, bivouacked, and started overland in the morning, heading for a junction with the Japanese at Didmop. Getting lost repeatedly in the trackless jungle, pausing whenever contact with the Americans seemed imminent, the battalion took eight days to march a straight-line distance of seven miles.

Major Komori, who was designated overall commander of enemy troops in the area, reached Didmop on the 19th, having gathered in the retreating sailors from Umtungalua on his way. For a few days he paused there, organizing his forces, and waiting for *1/141* to arrive. Finally deciding to delay no longer, Komori crossed

the Pulie with his main strength on Christmas Eve and arrived on the edge of the airstrip at dawn. The 112th outposts and patrols were forced back on Umtingalu and, with the troop stationed there, retired into the perimeter. A determined probing attack in company strength was made on the American main line of resistance on the night of the 25th; 12 infiltrators were killed within the cavalrymen's positions before the Japanese were repulsed.

Komori's attack emphasized one of the most successful aspects of the DIRECTOR operation. By the dawn of D-Day for the main DEXTERITY landings, two Japanese infantry battalions that might have fought at the main Allied objective were tied up defending a secondary target. What effect this shift of a thousand enemy troops, most of them combat veterans of the Philippines or China fighting, had on the Cape Gloucester operation is impossible to say with any certainty. It seems probable, however, that the casualties suffered by the 1st Marine Division would have mounted and the seizure of control of western New Britain would have been delayed had the enemy not changed his troop dispositions.

PRELANDING PREPARATIONS⁷

While action at Arawe drew the attention of the Japanese, the BACKHANDER Force made its final preparations for the landings at Cape Gloucester. Rehearsals following the pattern of the Yellow Beach landings, with all assault elements of Combat Team C embarked,

took place at Cape Sudest on 20-21 December. The long months of training bore fruit, and the first waves moved from ship to shore without incident and were smoothly followed to the practice beaches by landing ships carrying supplies and reserve forces.

At Cape Gloucester, Admiral Barbey would again control elements of his amphibious force as Commander, Task Force 76 and fly his flag on the *Conyngham* as headquarters ship for the operation. From Seventh Fleet and Allied Naval Forces, now under Vice Admiral Thomas C. Kinkaid who had relieved Admiral Carpenter on 26 November, would come the escort, covering, and bombardment vessels to support the landings. General Kenney's Fifth Air Force would handle all air support missions except those that could be undertaken by the 1st Division's own squadron of light planes.

The preliminary softening-up of the target was exclusively the province of Kenney's planes and pilots. Air raids were so frequent through the late fall that Japanese soldiers' diaries show little recognition of the fact that air strikes intensified after 18 December, for the condition of the men being attacked was so consistently miserable that the step-up escaped their notice. One ground crewman at the knocked-out airfields noted unhappily that "enemy airplanes flew over our area at will and it seemed as though they were carrying out bombing training."⁸ Japanese interceptors and antiaircraft fire never seriously challenged the daily runs of strafers and bombers.

⁷ Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: *ALAMO G-3 Jnl*; *VII PhibFor AR*; *CTF 76 Dec43 WarD*; *1st MarDiv SAR*, Anx C, Logistics and Supply.

⁸ ATIS CurrTranslation No. 1324, Diary of a ground crewman at Rabaul and Tsurubu, 5Nov-17Dec43, in ATIS CurrTranslations No. 122, dtd 31May44 (ACSI Recs, FRC Alex).

The weight of bombs dropped on targets in the Cape Gloucester vicinity between 1 December and D-Day exceeded 3,200 tons. Over 1,500 individual sorties were flown to deliver the explosives and to search out enemy targets with cannon and machine gun fire. Up until 19 December, the bombers concentrated their attacks on the airfields and their defenses, but then target priority shifted to objectives that might impede the landings and subsequent advance of the Marines. The attacks resulted in substantial destruction of prepared positions spotted by aerial reconnaissance and in the death of scores of Japanese soldiers. The judgment of air historians viewing the campaign was that mass bombing of the invasion areas at Cape Gloucester by the Fifth Air Force virtually eliminated the combat effectiveness of the Japanese defenses.⁹ Hidden by the jungle's impenetrable cover from the probing aerial camera, most of the *Matsuda Force* survived the protracted aerial assault. The damage to defenders' nerves and morale is apparent from contemporary records, however, and the widespread destruction of defensive positions undoubtedly eased the task of Marine attacking forces.

Behind the screen of air activity, the assembly of Barbey's attack force proceeded without major hitch. A complicated schedule of loadings and sailings had to be met that would enable the various echelons to reach the target on time. On the afternoon of the 24th, two LSTs with headquarters and service detachments operating directly under General

Rupertus' command and reserve elements of Combat Team C embarked, left Cape Sudest for Cape Cretin near Finschhafen. At Cretin, the two ships were joined by five others loaded with troops of Combat Team B due to land on D-Day afternoon. At 0100 on Christmas morning, six LSTs of the third echelon sailed from Sudest with men of Combat Teams B and C and BACKHANDER Force supporting elements; at Cape Cretin, an LST carrying men and equipment of 3/1 joined the ships which were scheduled to nose into the Yellow Beaches as soon as the infantry-carrying LCIs of the second echelon landed their cargos.

The main convoy of 9 APDs and 11 LCIs got underway from Cape Sudest at 0600, 25 December. Accompanying the ships and their six escort destroyers was the *Conyngham* with Barbey and Rupertus on board. Not long after the assault troops departed, transports carrying reserve Combat Team A arrived in Oro Bay from Milne, and the 5th Marines and its attached units landed at Cape Sudest to await the call for employment at Cape Gloucester. The 14 LSTs which were to land on D plus one (27 December), bringing in engineer, antiaircraft, and medical units and supplies for BACKHANDER Force, loaded out on Christmas and sailed during the night in trace of the D-Day convoys. Each LST bound for Cape Gloucester was fully loaded with trucks carrying bulk cargo; those ships landing on 26 December carried an average of 150 tons of supplies apiece, and the ones due in the next day 250 tons.

To minimize the risk of sailing poorly charted waters, the five LCIs carrying 2/1's assault troops joined the main con-

⁹ Craven and Cate, *Guadalcanal to Saipan*, p. 311; Dr. Robert F. Futrell, USAF HistDiv, ltr to Head, HistBr, G-3, HQMC, dtd 19Jun62.

voy off Cape Cretin to make the passage through Vitiaz Strait. A small-boat task group, 12 Navy LCTs plus 2 LCVPs and 14 LCMs crewed by amphibian engineers, cut directly through Dampier Strait toward Green Beach. Accompanying the landing craft as escorts for the 85-mile voyage from Cape Cretin to Tauali were an engineer navigation boat, a naval patrol craft, and two SCs; four torpedo boats acted as a covering force to the east flank.

While the Eastern and Western Assault Groups of Barbey's force approached their respective beaches, one possible objective of DEXTERITY operations was occupied by a reinforced boat company of the 592d Engineer Boat and Shore Regiment. On 20 December, General Krueger approved a plan to set up a long-range radar on Long Island, about 80 miles west of Cape Gloucester, after Australian coastwatchers had reported the island free of enemy troops. Acting on an operation plan published only three days before embarkation, the engineer boat group began its shore-to-shore movement from Finschhafen on Christmas afternoon. Preceded by an advance party that landed from torpedo boats, the engineers and an Australian radar station went ashore on the island on the 26th. The lodgment on Long Island removed one target from the list of those that might be hit by 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, held back from employment at Cape Gloucester.¹⁰

¹⁰ General Krueger noted in his comments approving the Long Island operation that the Marine battalion slated for possible seizure of Rooke Island might be the source of a detachment to relieve the engineers on Long. ALAMO CofS memo to Gen Krueger with Krueger's comments, dtd 20Dec43, in *ALAMO G-3 Jnl No. 10*.

STONEFACE TRAIL BLOCK¹¹

Although they occurred simultaneously as complementary operations within the overall BACKHANDER concept, the landings at Green and Yellow Beaches are seen clearer when examined separately. The primary mission of Lieutenant Colonel Masters' 2/1, reinforced, was a defensive one—to land, seize a trail block, and hold it against all comers. The first mission of the rest of General Rupertus' force was offensive in nature—the capture of Cape Gloucester's airfields. Masters' command, code-named the STONEFACE Group, was scheduled to rejoin the rest of the 1st Division once the airfield objective was secured. (See Map 25.)

The LCIs with the STONEFACE Group embarked broke off from the convoy headed for the Yellow Beaches at 0422 on D-Day morning. Accompanied by two escort and bombardment destroyers, the *Reid* and *Smith*, the troop-laden landing craft headed for a rendezvous point about four miles off the New Britain coast opposite Tauali village. Contact with the small-boat group that had made the voyage through Dampier Strait was made later than had been planned, but the transfer of assault troops to LCMs began

¹¹ Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: *1st MarDiv SAR*, Phase II, Part II, Green Beach Landing; CTG 76.3 (ComDesDiv 10) AR—Bombardment and Landing Ops at Tauali (Cape Gloucester), New Britain 26Dec43, dtd 29Dec43 (COA, NHD); CO, Det, 2d ESB Rept to CG, 2d ESB, dtd 20Jan44, Subj: Ops CTF 76 LT 21 (Green Beach), in *ALAMO G-3 Jnl No. 19*; OCE, GHQ, AFP, *Amphibian Engineers Operations—Engineers in the Southwest Pacific 1941-45*, v. IV (Washington: GPO, 1959), hereafter OCE, GHQ, AFP, *Amphibian Engineers*; Hough and Crown, *New Britain Campaign*.

immediately, and the lost time was recovered.

Engineer coxswains, moving in successive groups of four, brought their boats alongside the three LCIs that carried the two assault companies, E and F. The Marines were over the side and headed for the line of departure within 10 minutes. Accompanying the four landing craft that formed the first wave were two other LCMs carrying rocket DUKWs of the 2d Engineer Special Brigade's Support Battery; the rockets were intended for a beach barrage to silence opposition in the few minutes just before the landing.

As the column of LCMs moved lazily toward the line of departure, throttled down to keep from getting ahead of the landing schedule, the troops could hear the sound of naval gunfire at Cape Gloucester, seven miles away. Falling into formation behind the assault craft, two LCIs with most of Companies G and H on board made up the fourth wave. Bringing up the rear with a cargo of guns and vehicles and 575 tons of bulk stores were 12 LCTs organized in waves of three. The ships carried 20-days' supplies and five units of fire for Masters' 1,500-man force; the men themselves carried one unit of fire and a day's rations.

From his headquarters on the *Reid*, the Commander, Western Assault Group, Commander Carroll D. Reynolds, ordered the prelanding supporting fires to begin on schedule. The two destroyers cruising 5,400 yards offshore fired 675 rounds of 5-inch at targets behind the beach and to its flanks as far as Dorf Point on the north and Sag-Sag to the south. After 20 minutes, the ships' fire was lifted and Commander Reynolds radioed a waiting squadron of B-25s to attack; for insurance

the *Reid* fired two star shells as a visual signal. As the medium bombers began making bombing and strafing runs along the long axis of the beach, the first wave of LCMs left the line of departure. The planes were scheduled to cease their bombardment when the landing craft were 500 yards from Green Beach, an event calculated to occur at 0743. At that moment, the engineer DUKWs began firing the first of 240 rockets they arched ashore.¹² Two strafers made a last minute pass at beach targets after the DUKWs opened up but fortunately avoided the plunging rockets.¹³ At 0748, the first LCMs grounded on the beach and dropped their ramps.

The Marines of the assault companies moved quickly across the volcanic sand, mounted the slight bank bordering the beach, and then advanced cautiously into the secondary growth that covered the rising ground beyond. There had been no enemy response from the beach during the bombardment and there was none now that the Americans were ashore. Well-dug trenches and gun pits commanding the seaward approaches had been abandoned, and there was no sign of active Japanese opposition. The second and third waves of LCMs landed five minutes apart, adding their men to the swelling force ashore. At

¹² Oddly enough, this barrage of rockets made little impression on some of the troops it supported; it goes unmentioned in the division action report and escaped the notice completely of at least one officer who witnessed the landing. Maj Theodore R. Galysh ltr to CMC, dtd 16Feb52.

¹³ The engineer brigade commander had suggested to Admiral Barbey "that the last plane in the final strafing run drop a flare to indicate the way was clear for the rocket barrage to start. The reply was that the airmen 'preferred to work on a strictly time basis,' accordingly no signal was given." OCE, GHQ, AFP, *Amphibian Engineers*, p. 170, n. 96(2).

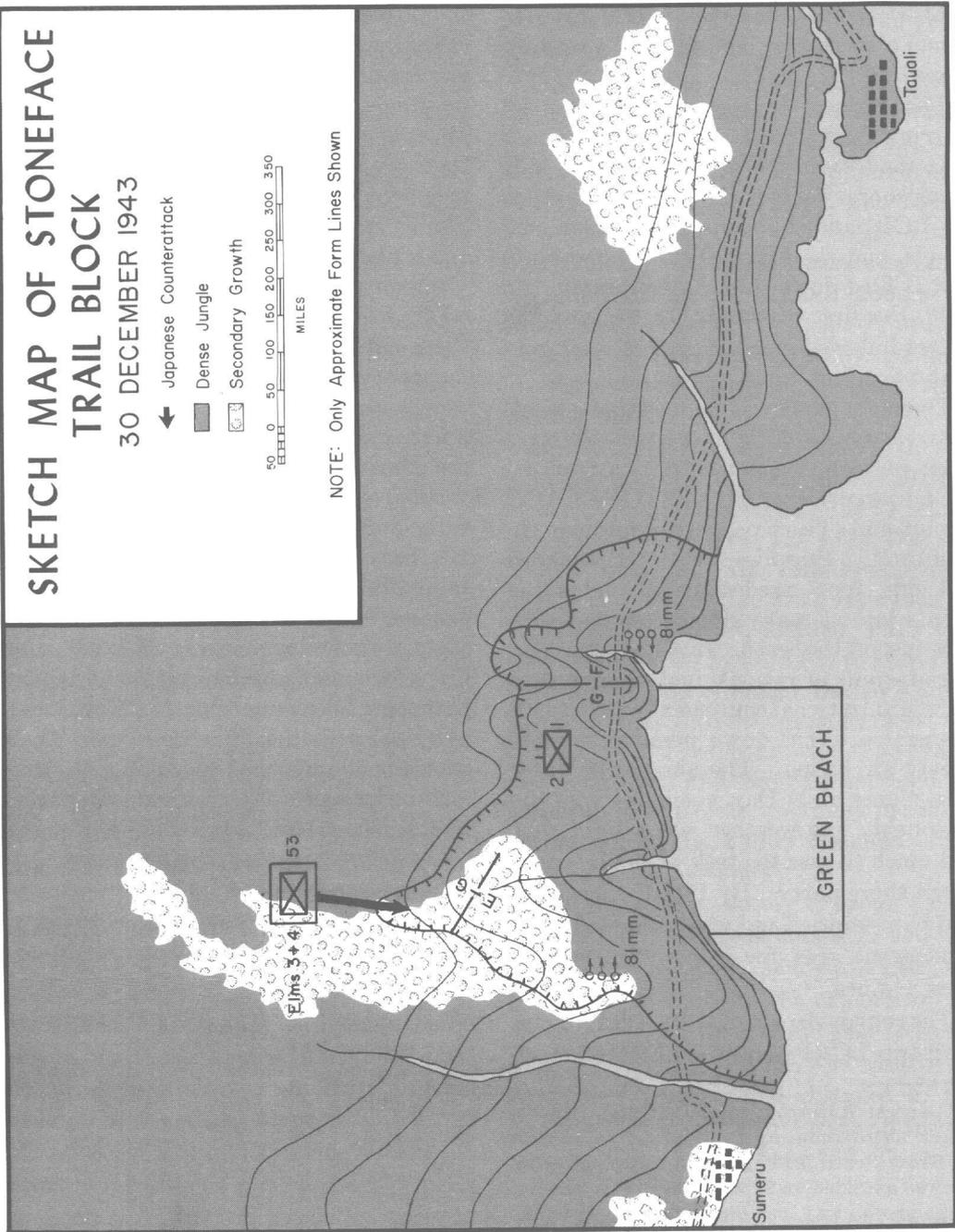
SKETCH MAP OF STONEFACE TRAIL BLOCK

30 DECEMBER 1943

- ← Japanese Counterattack
- Dense Jungle
- Secondary Growth



NOTE: Only Approximate Form Lines Shown



R.F. STIBIL

MAP 25

0754, an amber star cluster was fired to signal a successful landing to the waiting ships.

The engineer LCMs retracted after delivering the assault troops and headed out to a rendezvous point a mile and a half from shore. When the beach was clear, the LCIs landed, dropped their twin bow ramps, and the Marines of Companies G and H filed down into shallow water. At 0830, the first of the LCTs hit, and the others followed in rapid succession as general unloading began.

The shore party was composed of a headquarters under 2/1's operations officer, a labor platoon of 130 men drawn from all the major elements of the STONEFACE Group, and a beach party of amphibian engineers.¹⁴ Supplies were channelled through four predesignated unloading points into as many dumps set up in the area just off the beach. In each dump, similar amounts of rations, fuel, ammunition, and organizational equipment were further segregated to cut down possible losses to enemy air action. The absence of Japanese planes on D-Day, combined with unseasonably fine weather and a light surf, did much to ease the task of the inexperienced shore party. By 1715 the last LCT had been emptied and was assembled in the rendezvous area for the voyage back to New Guinea.

The convoy departed at 1900, leaving behind two LCVPs and four LCMs for off-

¹⁴ General Rupertus asked that an Army engineer shore company be assigned to support the Green Beach landing, and 2/1's operation order was amended on 23 December to include one in the shore party, but the tentative assignment was never completed. CG. BACKHANDER For msg to CG, ALAMO For, dtd 20Dec43, in *ALAMO G-3 Jnl No. 7*; Aux C, 2/1 OpO 3-43, dtd, 23Dec43, in *1st MarDiv SAR, Phase II, Anx D*.

shore defense. The engineer boats anchored inside a reef outcrop about 200 yards from the beach with their stern guns pointing seaward. Lieutenant Colonel Masters gave the job of organizing the beach defenses to the Army engineer detachment commander, Major Rex K. Shaul, and assigned a platoon of LVTs and a platoon of the 1st Marines Weapons Company to his command. Inland, the STONEFACE commander disposed his three rifle companies along a 1,200-yard-long perimeter that ran along the ridges overlooking the beach. At its deepest point, a salient where a causeway led into the Marine lines, the perimeter was 500 yards from shore. The riflemen were carefully dug in by nightfall, and Company H's heavy machine guns were emplaced amidst the foxholes where their fire could be most effective. The battalion weapons company's 81mm mortars were set up to fire in front of any part of the defensive position. In reserve behind each rifle company was a platoon of artillerymen. These provisional units had been formed on Masters' order as soon as it became apparent that Battery H of 3/11 could not find a firing position that was not masked by precipitous ridges.

By nightfall on D-Day, the STONEFACE Group had established a tight perimeter defense encompassing all the objectives assigned it. The main coastal track lay within the Marine lines, denied to enemy use. Probing patrols into the jungle and along the coast did not discover any Japanese troops until dusk, when there was a brief brush with a small enemy group near the village of Sumeru, just north of the beachhead. The Japanese faded away into the jungle when the Marine patrol opened fire.

Lieutenant Colonel Masters was unable to contact General Rupertus directly to report his situation. Mt. Talawe, looming between the two Marine beachheads, proved an impenetrable barrier to the battalion's radios. Since the set of the amphibian engineers was intermittently able to reach ALAMO Force, word of the STONEFACE Group's dispositions eventually reached the division CP on the morning of the 27th. Except for the fact that his force was located in a radio "dead spot" for overland communication,¹⁵ Masters was in excellent shape to accomplish his mission.

ASHORE AT THE YELLOW BEACHES¹⁶

On Christmas morning, a Japanese coastwatcher hiding out in the hills above Cape Ward Hunt on New Guinea spotted the Eastern Assault Group en route to its target. This enemy observer's report of the ships' passage, sightings by a Japanese submarine scouting the area, or, perhaps, the last frantic message from a reconnaissance plane that was shot down shortly after noon while it was skirting the convoy, may one or all have been responsible for Rabaul's deduction that the assault group was headed for Cape Merkus. On the strength of this faulty judgment, the *Eleventh Air Fleet* and *Fourth Air Army*

planned a hot reception for the ships at Arawe on the 26th.¹⁷

The path of the invasion convoy during daylight hours had been plotted to mislead the Japanese. Once night fell, the moonless dark that ALAMO planners had waited for, the ships shifted their course to a more direct route through Vitiaz Strait. The destroyers, transports, landing ships, and escorts steamed along at 12 knots while Admiral Crutchley's cruiser force ranged ahead to take position in gun-fire support areas lying off the Cape Gloucester airfields.

Maintaining the convoy's pace proved to be too much of a strain on the engines of a harbor mine sweeper (YMS) which was scheduled to clear the waters off the Yellow Beaches. The ship broke down finally and fell out at 2120, returning to Cape Cretin; earlier, another YMS had been taken in tow by an APD to keep it in the convoy. As Admiral Barbey's ships began to move into the transport area, the two YMSs that had completed the voyage, two destroyers, and two SCs operated together to locate, clear, and buoy the channel leading to the Yellow Beaches. (See Map IV, Map Section.)

The destroyers, taking a radar fix on the wreck of a Japanese destroyer that was hung up on the reef 7,000 yards offshore, found the entrance to the channel in the darkness. Using their sound gear to locate shoals along the passage, the destroyers gave their bearing and distance to the YMSs which would then "strike off for the shoal as a dog after a bone."¹⁸ The mine

¹⁵ LtCol Robert Hall ltr to CMC, dtd 4Mar52.

¹⁶ Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: *ALAMO G-3 Jnl*; *VII PhibFor ComdHist*; *VII PhibFor AR*; *CTF 76 Dec43 WarD*; *1st MarDiv SAR*, Phase II, Part I, Yellow Beach Landings and Plan Annexes; *1st MarDiv D-3 Jnl*, 24Dec43-29Feb44, hereafter *1st MarDiv D-3 Jnl-I*; *17th DivOps*; Craven and Cate, *Guadalcanal to Saipan*; Hough and Crown, *New Britain Campaign*; Morison, *Breaking the Bismarcks Barrier*.

¹⁷ *SE Area NavOps-III*, pp. 47-48; *SE Area AirOps*, pp. 28-30.

¹⁸ CTU 76.1.42 (CO, USS *Flusser*) AR of Cape Gloucester Op on 26Dec43, dtd 29Dec43 (COA, NHID).

sweepers and a destroyer's whaleboat buoyed the three principal reef obstacles on schedule, and one of the YMSs swept the channel which proved to be free of mines. Immediately, the destroyers moved inside the outlying reefs to deliver close-in fire on the eastern flank of Yellow 2. The SCs, which had also controlled the Arawe landing, proceeded to line of departure and standby stations to handle the waves of landing craft.

Throughout the clearance and marking of the channel, a mounting drumfire of naval bombardment marked the approach of H-Hour (0745). At 0600, the two Australian heavy cruisers of Task Force 74 opened up on targets in the vicinity of the airfields with the first of 730 rounds of 8-inch high explosive fired during the next 90 minutes. The 6-inch guns on the American light cruisers sounded next, firing 2,000 rounds between 0625 and 0727 at Target Hill and the Yellow Beach area. Escort destroyers with the cruiser force and those that had worked with the harbor control unit exploded 875 5-inch shells ashore while the larger ships were firing and, later, in the few moments immediately preceding H-Hour. The ground just inland from the beaches and the hills to the southeast drew most of the destroyer fire. Targets of opportunity were few since no evidence of enemy movement or opposition developed ashore during the Allied bombardment.

From 0700 to 0720, while naval gunfire was concentrated on the beaches and airfields, five squadrons of B-24s dropped 500-pound bombs on the Target Hill area. Then, on schedule, at the call of a command plane aloft, naval gunfire on the beaches lifted and a squadron of B-25s streaked in over Target Hill to let go eight tons of

white phosphorous bombs on its naked crest. Smoke soon obscured the vision of any enemy who might still have been using the hill as an observation post, and three medium bomber squadrons began working over the beaches.

As General Rupertus had feared when he argued against its use,¹⁹ smoke from Target Hill drifted down across the landing beaches pushed on by a gentle southeast breeze. By H-Hour the shoreline had disappeared in a heavy haze, and within another half hour the approach lanes were obscured as far as the line of departure, 3,000 yards out. Coxswains of the leading boat waves handled their craft boldly, however, and the smoke posed no severe problem of control or orientation.

The first four waves of LCVPs assembled in succession as the APDs carrying the assault troops sailed into the transport area, two and three ships at a time. Once the Marines of 1/7 and 3/7 were over the side, the APDs left for positions outside the reef to await the return of their boats. The 12 landing craft in the first wave, 6 for each beach, moved from column into line at the control boat centered on the line of departure. At about 0730, the *SC-981* dropped the wave number flag it was flying, and the assault platoons headed for the smoke-shrouded beaches. Following waves were dispatched at five-minute intervals.

Taking station on the flanks of the first wave as it moved shoreward, two rocket LCIs made ready to fire a stunning barrage onto possible beach defenses to cover

¹⁹ The 1st Division commander was convinced that smoke and dust from exploding fragmentation bombs, rockets, and shells would provide enough concealment for approaching landing craft. *Pollock comments.*



SHORE PARTY MARINES struggle to build a sandbag ramp for LSTs in the surf at Cape Gloucester's Yellow Beaches. (USMC 68999)



105MM HOWITZERS of 4/11, set up in a kunai grass clearing, fire in support of Marines attacking toward Cape Gloucester's airfields. (USMC 69011)

the interval between the last B-25 strafing run and the wave's landing. When the boats were 500 yards out, the LCI rockets began dropping ashore and worked inland as the Marines approached the beach. At 0746 on Yellow 1 and 0748 on Yellow 2, the LCVPs grounded and dropped their ramps.

Charging ashore to the sound of their own shouts, the Marines splashed through knee-deep water onto narrow strands of black sand. There was no enemy response—no sign of human opposition—just a dense wall of jungle vegetation. On many stretches of Yellow 1, the overhanging brush and vines touched the water; there was only a hint of beach. Led by scouts forced to travel machete in one hand, rifle in the other, the assault platoons hacked their way through the tangled mass, won through to the coastal trail, and crossed it into the jungle again. Once they had passed over the thin strip of raised ground back of the beaches, the men encountered the area marked “damp flat” on their maps. It was, as one disgusted Marine remarked, “damp up to your neck.”²⁰

Under the swamp's waters was a profusion of shell and bomb craters and pot-holes, places where a misstep could end in painful injury. An extra obstacle to the terrain's natural difficulty were the hundreds of trees knocked down by the air and naval gunfire bombardment. The roots of many of the trees that remained standing were so weakened that it took only a slight jar to send them crashing. The swamp took its own toll of casualties, dead and injured, before the campaign ended.

²⁰ Hough and Crown, *New Britain Campaign*, p. 48.

Enemy firing first broke out to the west of Yellow 1 where Company I of 3/7 had landed. Confused by the smoke, the LCVPs carrying the company's assault platoons reached shore about 300 yards northwest of the beach's boundary. Once the Marines had chopped through the jungle to reach the coastal trail, they came under long-range machine gun fire issuing from a series of bunkers lying hidden in the brush. The company deployed to take on the Japanese and gauge the extent of the enemy position.

The task of reducing the bunkers fell to 3/1 which was charged with leading the advance up the trail toward the airfields. The men of the 1st Marines' battalion began landing from LCIs on Yellow 1 at 0815, and the last elements were ashore and forming for the advance west by 0847. Lieutenant Colonel Joseph F. Hankins started his men forward on a two-company front 500 yards wide, passing through 3/7, which temporarily held up its advance to the beachhead line. The swamp on his left flank soon forced Hankins to narrow his assault formation to a column of companies. At 1010, the Japanese opened up on Company K in the lead, soon after it had passed through the firing line set up by Company I of 3/7. The ensuing fight was the bitterest struggle on D-Day.

For a short while the course of the battle seemed to turn against the Marines—both the commander and executive officer of Company K were killed; bazooka rockets failed to detonate in the soft sand covering the enemy bunkers; flame throwers malfunctioned when they were brought into play; and antitank and canister shot from 37mm cannon proved ineffective against the log-reinforced dugouts. The

break of fortune came when an LVT which had come up from the beachhead with ammunition tried to crash into the enemy position. The vehicle got hung up between two trees, and the well-protected Japanese broke from cover to attack the cripple, killing its two machine gunners. The driver managed to work the tractor loose and caved in the nearest bunker by running over it. The Marine riflemen took advantage of the LVT's success and cracked the defensive system, killing or scattering the defenders of the four bunkers that had held up the advance.

Medium tanks had been requested for support as soon as it became apparent that 3/1 was up against a fortified position. A platoon of Shermans arrived shortly after Company K won its fight,²¹ and led Company I forward through the ruined emplacements. Only a few snipers were encountered on the way to the 1-1 Line, the first objective on the coastal route to the airfields. Lieutenant Colonel Hankins reported 1-1 secure at 1325 and received orders to hold up there and dig in for the night. The brief but bitter fight for the bunkers cost 3/1 seven Marines killed and seven wounded. The bodies of 25 Japanese lay in and around their shattered defenses.

On the opposite flank of the beachhead, the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines (Lieutenant Colonel John E. Weber), making Combat Team C's main effort, had driven to Target Hill by noon and seized the left sector of the beachhead line. A platoon of Company A flushed and finished off the only

²¹ Maj Hoyt C. Duncan ltr to CMC, dtd 14Mar52. The tank company commander recalls that the tank took part in the last stages of the action against the bunkers. Col Donald J. Robinson ltr to Head, HistBr, G-3, HQMC, dtd 5Jun62.

opposition, the few dazed defenders of two gun positions on Silimati Point. Company B's men, picking their way through the swamp in an area where two feet of mud underlay a like cover of water,²² took the day's prime objective and found ample evidence that the Japanese had used Target Hill as an observation post.

The task of seizing the center of the beachhead was assigned to Lieutenant Colonel Odell M. Conoley's 2d Battalion of the 7th. The unit was ashore and assembled by 0845, though the men on two LCIs that had eased their way into the beach had to wade through neck-deep surf. The sodden condition of the unfortunate Marines that had to breast the water to shore was soon matched by that of many others when 2/7 had its bout with the swamp. The battalion passed through a Japanese supply depot south of the coastal trail and ran into scattered opposition as it advanced into the jungle again. A scout in Company G was the first Marine killed and other casualties occurred as the leading companies struggled through the 900-yard width of the swamp to rising ground. By late afternoon, Conoley could report his battalion had reached dry land and was digging in. LVTs brought up ammunition, and 2/7 got set for counterattacks that irregular but hot enemy fire promised. Both flanks hung open until they were dropped back to the swamp's edge.

The 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, led by Lieutenant Colonel William R. Williams, reached its assigned portion of the beachhead line after threading its way through the swamp barrier and crossing the only

²² CWO Sidney J. Fishel comments on draft of Hough and Crown, *New Britain Campaign*, dtd 14Feb52.

large patch of kunai grass within the planned perimeter. Williams' unit met no serious opposition during its advance, but late in the afternoon, when division ordered a shift to the west to link up with Combat Team B, a small group of enemy troops attempted to infiltrate through the gap that opened. The battalion was recalled to its original positions and dug in along the edge of the kunai grass for night defense.

When the second echelon of LSTs arrived and began unloading on D-Day afternoon, the remaining rifle battalion assigned to the BACKHANDER assault force landed and moved into position. The 1st Battalion, 1st Marines (Lieutenant Colonel Walker A. Reaves) filed up the coastal trail past long lines of trucks waiting to move into the limited dump areas available. The unit's own equipment and combat team supplies, mobile loaded in organic vehicles, followed when traffic would allow. Accompanying the infantrymen when they moved out of the beachhead to the 1-1 Line was the 2d Battalion, 11th Marines (Major Noah P. Wood, Jr.), Combat Team B's direct support pack howitzer battalion. The artillery batteries set up along the coastal trail within the perimeter established by 1/1 and 3/1. General Shepherd and Colonel Pollock visited Colonel Whaling's CP at 1800 to pass on a division attack order for 0700, 27 December.

In contrast to the relative ease with which 2/11 reached its firing site, the two artillery battalions assigned to Combat Team C spent most of the day getting their guns into effective supporting positions. The lighter 75mm howitzers of 1/11 had been loaded in LVTs in anticipation of the difficulties that would be met in the "damp flat." This forethought paid dividends,

since the amphibian tractors were able to move the guns directly from the LVTs to the battery locations which had been picked from maps and aerial photographs. The battalion's preselected positions proved to be in the midst of the swamp, but Lieutenant Colonel Lewis J. Fields directed his commanders to set up their guns around the edges wherever a rise of ground gave firm footing. The LVTs knocked down trees to clear fields of fire, hauled loads of ammunition and equipment to the guns, and helped the tractor prime movers and trucks get across the swamp. Fields' howitzers began registering at 1400,²³ five and a half hours after they landed, and 1/11 was ready to fire in direct support of the 7th Marines all along the perimeter by nightfall.

Lieutenant Colonel Thomas B. Hughes' 4th Battalion's 105mm howitzers needed every bit of assistance they could get to reach the kunai grass patch. LVTs broke a path through the swamp's tangle of trees and undergrowth for the tractors and guns and provided extra pulling power where it was needed. And the need was constant. The progress of each howitzer through the swamp was a major operation which often found the men of the firing section chest deep in water hauling on drag ropes or pushing mired wheels while tractor winches and LVTs in tandem applied full power to keep the guns moving. All supplies and ammunition had to be carried in amphibian tractors, since no truck could negotiate the tortuous trail through the swamp. Despite the incredible difficulties, the first battery was in position and ready to fire at 1330, the second was registered by 1700,

²³ ArtyLiaisonO msg to ArtyO, ALAMO For, dtd 22Jan44, Subj: Rept on Arty in BACKHANDER Op, in ALAMO G-3 Jnl No. 17.

and the third was pulling into the clearing as darkness fell.²⁴

While the division assault troops were consolidating their hold on the beachhead, Lieutenant Colonel Ballance's shore party was coping with the confusion of problems arising from the unloading of equipment, vehicles, and bulk stores brought in by the LSTs. The carefully-thought-out plan of overlapping dumps to be used by each landing ship was adapted to meet the situation posed by the swamp. All supplies had to be crowded on the narrow strip of dry land between beach and swamp, nowhere more than a couple of hundred yards wide. The coastal track was crammed with vehicles almost as soon as the first seven LSTs beached at 0840, and the jam never eased during the rest of the day.

On the beaches themselves, the shore party constructed sandbag causeways out to the LSTs that grounded and dropped their ramps in the water. Although VII Amphibious Force reported that D-Day's "four foot surf around the ramps was of no consequence," and that "thick growth and soft ground behind the beach was the retarding factor"²⁵ in unloading operations, the men that wrestled sandbags in the water had a different opinion. Actually, the slowness of unloading was due to a combination of factors, not the least of which was the reluctance of the drivers of the mobile loaded trucks borrowed from ALAMO Force to chance being left behind on New Britain when the LSTs pulled out. Numerous trucks were abandoned and "stranded on the beach exits for quite some time"²⁶ before Marines could move them to the dumps and get them unloaded.

The first echelon of LSTs retracted at 1330 with about 100 tons of bulk stores still on board in order that the D-Day landing schedule could be kept. As the seven ships in the second echelon beached and started unloading about an hour later, the long-expected Japanese aerial counter-attack materialized. As the enemy planes dove through the gunfire of American fighters covering the beachhead, a squadron of B-25s bound for a routine bombing and strafing mission in the Borgen Bay area flew low over the LSTs. In a tragic mistake of identity, the ships' gunners shot down two of the American planes and badly damaged two others. Compounding the original error, the B-25s that had weathered the LSTs' fire bombed and strafed 1/11's position on Silimati Point, killing one officer and wounding 14 enlisted men.

The enemy planes that hit the beachhead were only a small portion of an attack group of 88 naval fighters and dive bombers dispatched from Rabaul after they had returned from a morning's fruitless raid on Arawe. Most of the Japanese pilots concentrated on the ships offshore and the damage they did was severe, although they suffered heavily in the process. The radar on the fighter director ship, the destroyer *Shaw*, had picked up the enemy when they were about 60 miles away and vectored two P-38 squadrons to intercept, while the escort vessels cleared the reef-restricted waters off the coast and steamed out to sea to get maneuver room. The interceptors missed contact but wheeled quickly to get on the enemy tails, and a vicious dog fight took place all over the sky as the American and Jap-

²⁴ *Ibid.*; LtCol Dale H. Heely ltr to CMC, dtd 1Mar52.

²⁵ *CTF 76 Dec43 WarD*, p. 35.

²⁶ Maj George J. DeBell comment on draft of Hough and Crown, *New Britain Campaign*, ca. Feb52.

anese fighters tangled. Some of the dive bombers evaded the defending fighters to strike at the destroyers. The *Shaw* was badly crippled by near misses, two other ships were damaged, and the *Brownson*, which took two bombs directly back of its stack, sank within a few minutes. One hundred and eight officers and men went down with their ship, but the rest of the crew was rescued while the enemy planes were being driven off.

The toll of lost planes, pilots, and crews was still enough so that the Japanese never again attempted a daylight raid on Cape Gloucester in comparable strength. Just what the exact enemy loss was in the several attacks mounted by Army and Navy pilots on 26 December cannot be discovered. The total was probably more than the 18 planes recalled by the Japanese in postwar years,²⁷ and a good deal less than the 57 planes claimed by American pilots while the heat of battle was on them.²⁸ From 27 December on, Allied air strikes mounted from South Pacific bases kept Rabaul's air garrison too busy flying defensive missions to devote much effort to Cape Gloucester.

By nightfall on D-Day, it was evident that the BACKHANDER Forces' main beachhead on New Britain was secure. General Rupertus had left the *Conyngham* at 0800 and was on the beach before the advance echelon of his command post set up at 1030. The CP location, like so many positions chosen prior to the landing, proved to be too "damp" for effectiveness and was moved to dry land by noon. Troops landed according to plan, and 11,000 men were ashore when the second

²⁷ *SE Area AirOps*, p. 30; *SE Area NavOps—III*, p. 48.

²⁸ 1st MarDiv D-2 Jnl., 26Dec43-26Jan44, entry of 1035 on 27Dec43.

LST echelon retracted at 1800. Although 200 tons of bulk stores returned in these ships to New Guinea, they were sent back on turn-around voyages and the temporary loss was not a vital one. All guns and vehicles on the LSTs had landed. During the day's sporadic fighting, the 1st Division had lost 21 killed and 23 wounded and counted in return 50 enemy dead and a bag of 2 prisoners.

At 1700, after it became evident that the Japanese were warming up to something more effective than harassing fire, particularly on the front of 2/7, Rupertus dispatched a request to ALAMO Force that Combat Team A be sent forward immediately to Cape Gloucester. While it seemed obvious that the troops already ashore could hold the Yellow Beaches perimeter, the task was going to require all of Colonel Frisbie's combat team. The planned employment of 3/7 as Combat Team B reserve could not be made, and Rupertus considered that the 5th Marines was needed to add strength to the airfield drive and to give him a reserve to meet any contingency.

All along the front in both perimeters, the Marines were busy tying in their positions as darkness fell, cutting fire lanes through jungle growth, and laying out trip wires to warn of infiltrators. For a good part of the men in the foxholes and machine gun emplacements, the situation was familiar: Guadalcanal all over again, Americans waiting in the jungles for a Japanese night attack. The thick overhead cover was dripping as the result of an afternoon rain that drenched the beachhead and all that were in it. The dank swamp forest stank, the night air was humid and thick, and the ever present jungle noises mingled with the actual and the imagined sounds of enemy troops readying an assault.

Capture of the Airfields

ENEMY REACTION¹

The D-Day landings on the Yellow Beaches came as a surprise to the Japanese.² To the enemy, the extensive swamp along the north coast between the airfields and Borgen Bay seemed an effective barrier to a large-scale amphibious assault. Generals Sakai and Matsuda hoped and prepared for landings aimed directly at Cape Gloucester's beaches, but actually expected the blow to come elsewhere. Instead of hitting these prepared defenses, the Japanese leaders saw the principal Allied thrust being made against Cape Bushing, to be followed by overland and shore-to-shore advance to the airfields.

As soon as he received word of the actual BACKHANDER landing scheme, the *17th Division* commander ordered General Matsuda to counterattack and annihilate the Allied assault forces "at the water's edge."³ Colonel Kouki Sumiya of the *53d Infantry*, who commanded the 1,400-man airfield defense force,⁴ was

¹ Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: *ADC Intel Documents*; ATIS Item No. 9115, Matsuda For and 141st InfRegt OpOs, 26Dec43-8Jan44, in ATIS Bul No. 721, dtd 14Feb44 (ACSI Recs, FRC Alex); *17th Div Ops*.

² Docu No. 52399, Statement of ex-LtGen Yasushi Sakai in HistDiv, MilIntelSect, GHQ, FEC, Statements of Japanese Officials on WW II, V, III, p. 190 (OCMH).

³ *17th Div Ops*, p. 15.

⁴ ATIS Item No. 9657, MatsudaFor IntelRept No. 3, dtd 23Dec43, in ATIS Bul No. 788, dtd

directed to concentrate his troops against the main beachhead, leaving the Tauali trailblock to the attention of minor elements of his regiment's *1st Battalion*. Matsuda's reserve, the *53d's 2d Battalion* under Major Shinichi Takabe, started moving down the trail from Nakarop to Target Hill shortly after General Sakai's order was received. The leading elements of Takabe's battalion reached the ridges in front of the Marine line late in the afternoon of D-Day. The shipping engineer and antiaircraft units defending Borgen Bay and Hill 660 were directed to hold their positions and support Takabe's counterattack. (See Map 23.)

The strongest combat force available to General Matsuda was Colonel Kenshiro Katayama's *141st Infantry* and its reinforcing units defending the Cape Bushing sector. After the dispatch of the major part of the regiment's *1st Battalion* to Arawe, Colonel Katayama's command amounted to some 1,700 troops,⁵ the majority veteran infantrymen and artillerymen. The *17th Division* operation order of 26 December that directed Matsuda to commit his reserve also called for the *141st Infantry* to move overland from Cape Bushing to help wipe out the Allied beachhead. The elements of the *51st Reconnaissance Regiment* on Rooke Island were ordered to sail for Aisega and march

11Mar44 (ACSI Recs, FRC Alex); *Japanese comments*.

⁵ ATIS Item No. 9657, *op. cit.*

from there to the north coast to join in the fighting.

Abandoning their positions at Cape Bushing, Aisega, and Nigol, most of Katayama's units were underway for an assembly area near Nakarop by the evening of D-Day. After 27 December, only a reinforced rifle platoon remained at Aisega to man the defenses once occupied by a battalion, and a scattering of service troops was all that was left in the 141st's posts along the Itni. The commander of the token defense force at Aisega gloomily predicted in his diary that "we shall surely make Aisega our graveyard," but his guess proved wrong, at least in location.⁶

In a week's time, this platoon, too, was ordered into the battle to contain the advancing Marines.

In the immediate area of the Yellow Beaches on D-Day, most of the Japanese troops that tried to stem the Marine advance came from small detachments of the 1st Shipping Engineers and 1st Debarkation Unit. These enemy soldiers, who had operated the supply depot overrun by 2/7, fell back before Combat Team C's assault platoons until they ran into Major Takabe's battalion moving up to launch a counterattack. By late afternoon of 26 December, enough of Takabe's unit had filed down the trail from Nakarop to the area opposite the center of the Marine perimeter to man a strong firing line.

Just why the position of 2/7 was chosen as the point of attack is not known, although it is logical to assume that General Matsuda considered this segment of the 1st Division's beachhead would be lightly

⁶ Diary of 2dLt Takashiro Sato, 1st Plat, 6th Co, 141st InfRegt in *ADC IntelDocuments*. The diary was found in front of the positions of 3/5 during the fighting around Aogiri Ridge.

held. The swamp to the rear of the thin band of Marine foxholes appeared to isolate the defenders from the beach. Darkness veiled the American position before enemy scouts discovered that both flanks of 2/7 were open.

*HOLDING THE PERIMETER*⁷

The night of D-Day was moonless, and no trace of light penetrated the jungle canopy to reach the men of the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines or the Japanese of the 2d Battalion, 53d Infantry who faced them. Occasionally the adversaries caught a glimpse of the flash of fire at a rifle or machine gun muzzle or the momentary flare when a mortar or artillery shell exploded, but, in the main, the battle was fought by sound. One man, one gun, one group fired and drew a response from the other side aimed at the sound of the firing; then the tempo would pick up sharply and firing would break out all along the front to die away slowly and crop out again at another point. Despite the handicaps of fighting in the pitch-black gloom, Marine fire discipline was good, and Lieutenant Colonel Conoley repeatedly cautioned his company commanders to keep a tight rein on ammunition expenditure. Experience in fighting the Japanese indicated that a headlong assault would be launched at the height of the fire fight.

⁷ Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: *ALAMO For G-3 Jnl No. 11*; Maj Harry A. Stella memo to *ALAMO For G-3*, dtd 5Jan44, Subj: Rept of Observer with CT C, in *ALAMO G-3 Jnl No. 14*; *1st MarDiv SAR*, Phase II, Part I, Yellow Beach Landing; *1st MarDiv D-2 Daily Buls Nos. 1-6*, dtd 27-31-Dec43; *1st MarDiv D-3 Jnl-I*; LtCol William J. Dickinson ltr to CMC, dtd 14Mar52; Hough and Crown, *New Britain Campaign*.

Keeping an adequate reserve of ammunition on 2/7's side of the swamp was a problem handled by the regimental executive officer, Lieutenant Colonel Lewis B. Puller, and his solution for it was carrying parties. LVTs could not be used to haul cargo until daybreak gave the drivers a chance to see the obstacles in their path. In the early evening, files of men from the Regimental Headquarters and Service Company snaked their way through the swamp to Conoley's CP with belted ammunition, bandoliers of rifle clips, and loads of 60mm and 81mm mortar shells. At about 2000, Colonel Frisbie decided to commit Battery D, 1st Special Weapons Battalion as infantry to reinforce 2/7, and Lieutenant Colonel Puller told the battery commander to leave his 37mm guns behind, have each man pick up a load of ammunition at the regimental dump, and then set out across the swamp.

Soon after an officer guide from 2/7 met the ammunition-laden column, a violent storm lashed the beachhead area and all trace of landmarks and trail signs vanished in a solid downpour of wind-driven rain. The men of the antitank battery, each holding to the belt of the Marine ahead of him, spent the night struggling to get through the morass and deliver the vital ammunition. It was 0805 before the guide was able to lead Battery D into 2/7's command post. Lieutenant Colonel Conoley immediately sent the reinforcements to his right flank to plug the gap between the 2d and 3d Battalions.

The Marines of 2/7 had fought with the Japanese all through the wild night-long storm. The drenching rain filled foxholes and emplacements and forced the men to scramble for cover on top of the ground. Rifles and machine guns fouled by mud

and water refused to work, and the fire of battalion and company mortars "laid by guess and by God"⁸ was invaluable in beating back repeated Japanese attacks. When the storm subsided and daylight began to filter through the tree tops, the tempo of battle increased and the weight of the enemy thrusts shifted west toward 2/7's open right flank.

As they arrived at their designated position, the special weapons men of Battery D tangled with the Japanese that had infiltrated the gap between the 7th's battalions. The Marines counterattacked, threw back the enemy troops, and built up a hasty defense line. Company F on the battery's left flank took the brunt of Major Takabe's attack and in a violent, seesaw battle, during which two of its machine guns were lost and recaptured, finally forced the Japanese to withdraw. The estimate of enemy dead in and around the Marine lines was 200-235, but the opportunity to make an accurate count was lost when the action opened anew during the afternoon of 27 December.

The *2d Battalion, 53d Infantry*, reinforced by small engineer and service units, attacked Combat Team C's perimeter repeatedly during the next few days losing more and more of its strength in every futile attempt to penetrate the Marine lines. The gaps that existed on the night of D-Day were closed by dark on the 27th. The 7th Marines' Regimental Weapons Company took over that part of 1/7's defensive sector closest to the beach to enable Lieutenant Colonel Weber to stretch his men thinly around Target Hill and make contact with the 2d Battalion. On the right flank, Company F was relieved in position by Company I of 3/7 and Battery

⁸ Col Odell M. Conoley ltr to CMC, dtd 7Mar52.

D was attached to Lieutenant Colonel Williams' command.

The center of the perimeter continued to be the focus of enemy attacks, and Colonel Frisbie was able to concentrate what few reserves he had in the area of greatest threat. Wherever the fighting reached a peak, a regimental casual detachment of 30-odd men was committed, then pulled out and used again to meet the next emergency.⁹ Pioneers from the shore party manned strong points in the rear of 2/7's lines to provide defense in depth. The Japanese did not discover how sparsely manned the perimeter was to either flank and persisted in their attacks on what became its strongest sector.

In three days of intermittent but intense fighting, the 7th Marines lost 18 men killed, 58 wounded, and 3 missing in action. Surviving records indicate that in the same period the attacking Japanese suffered at least five times as many casualties and that 2/53 was badly crippled, remaining a battalion in name only.

With Combat Team C fully committed just to hold the beachhead it had seized on D-Day, General Rupertus was unable to use 3/7 as he had intended, as a reserve for the 1st Marines advance on the airfields. Neither was Colonel Frisbie in a position to mount an offensive and drive back the Japanese troops attacking his lines. This situation reinforced the opinion that the 1st Division staff had held throughout the latter stages of BACKHANDER planning—the 5th Marines were needed on New Britain. At 2314 on D-Day, Rupertus sent a request to Krueger asking that Combat Team A be sent forward to Cape Gloucester with the advance echelon trans-

ported in nine APDs. The request was repeated several times and sent by different means to insure its receipt at ALAMO Force advance headquarters at Cape Cretin.

Krueger had agreed to release two battalions of the 5th Marines to Rupertus if the Marine general asked for them after he had landed at the objective.¹⁰ At 0751 on 27 December, Krueger sent a liaison officer to Cape Sudest with orders for Combat Team A (less 3/5) to get underway for the Yellow Beaches. At the same time, the ALAMO Force commander sent a radio dispatch to Admiral Barbey informing him of the decision. Bad weather delayed the plane carrying the messenger and played havoc with radio reception so that Barbey received word too late in the afternoon for the APDs to load Marines of 1/5 and 2/5 and still reach the beachhead by dawn on the 28th. Accordingly, the admiral, who did not wish to expose the loaded transports to the chance of daylight air attack, delayed the whole movement 24 hours.

Colonel Selden and his entire combat team stood by all through the morning of 27 December ready to load out. The first troops were already embarked in DUKWs and headed for the APDs offshore when word of the change in orders was passed. On the 28th, while LSTs loaded rear elements of the combat team and all its supplies and equipment, the 1st and 2d Battalions boarded their fast transports and left for the target. At 2100, after a day of hard work, the landing ships followed, setting a course by Cape Cretin to drop off Lieutenant Colonel David S. McDougal's 3d Battalion.

⁹ LtCol Charles S. Nichols, Jr., interviews with HistBr, G-3, HQMC, ca. Jan55.

¹⁰ Pollock comments.

While Combat Team A was en route, Rupertus sent Krueger "an earnest plea"¹¹ that no part of the 5th Marines be held back from employment at Cape Gloucester. The Marine general stated that increasing pressure on the perimeter required a landing team reserve in that area, while the remainder of the combat team was used in the airfield attack. Krueger responded almost immediately that he "had no intention to deprive you of its use"¹² should the battalion be needed and that 3/5 would be sent forward with the remainder of Combat Team A.

On 28 December, while the reinforcements he had requested were loading at Cape Sudest, the 1st Division commander moved his CP to a position behind Combat Team B's front line where he could better direct the advance west. Control of the beachhead defenses was turned over to General Shepherd, whose ADC command group paralleled the organization of the division staff. The 3d Battalion, 5th Marines was slated to report to Shepherd for orders when Combat Team A's LST-borne echelon arrived. With the addition of a sorely-needed maneuver element, the ADC planned an attack toward Borgen Bay to eliminate the Japanese menacing the perimeter.

The steady influx of supplies planned for BACKHANDER operations went on without a major hitch while Combat Team C fought to hold the beachhead and Combat Team B drove forward toward the airfields. Through hard, demanding work, Lieutenant Colonel Ballance's shore party was able to overcome the considerable handicap to its operations posed by the

limited stretch of dry land between sea and swamp. The LST unloading rate improved considerably after 27 December, when it was no longer necessary to handle two echelons daily. As many as 300 dead-weight tons of stores and a full shipload of vehicles were unloaded in under six hours. Ballance's 1,400-man force was able to do its job well despite the fact that the replacement companies and pioneers that made up the bulk of its strength were often committed to hold reserve positions backing up Combat Team C's lines.

Aside from the human workhorses of the beachhead, the shore party Marines, the most important logistical elements were the amphibian tractors. The versatile LVT was the only vehicle capable of negotiating the swamp unaided, and it was used to solve every conceivable cargo and personnel-carrying problem that arose. When it appeared that the tractors used at Arawe might be a maintenance liability at Cape Gloucester, a provisional company using reserve LVTs and crews from both Company A and the tractor battalion's Headquarters and Service Company was organized and loaded out to arrive with Combat Team A.¹³

Almost as useful in their way as the LVTs were the boats of the amphibian engineers, particularly the LCMs which could stand the buffeting of heavy surf more easily than the lighter and smaller LCVPs. The 592d Engineer Boat and Shore Regiment's detachment at the Yellow Beaches, including LCVPs that were carried in on ships' davits on D-Day and LCMs that arrived in tow behind LSTs on the 27th, were used mainly to transport supplies to Combat Team B. The coastal

¹¹ *1st MarDiv D-3 Jnl-I*, entry No. 20 of 28Dec43.

¹² *Ibid.*, entry No. 20 of 29Dec43.

¹³ *1st MarDiv SAR, Aux D, Amphibian Tractors*, pp. 1-2.

road used as the axis of advance by the 1st Marines quickly became a quagmire as the result of frequent rain and the damage caused by traffic far heavier than its bed could stand. Moving directly behind the assault troops, Marine engineers with Seabees following close in their trace attempted to keep the supply route in operation. When road maintenance efforts failed, the Army boatmen gave General Rupertus the assurance of adequate supplies he needed to keep the offensive rolling forward.

*CAPTURE OF HELL'S POINT*¹⁴

Colonel Whaling's combat team spent a quiet first night ashore, its position unchallenged by the Japanese. While the rifle companies of the 7th Marines were hotly engaged repelling counterattacks on 27 December, assault companies of the 1st advanced cautiously but steadily toward Cape Gloucester. A series of phase lines, $\frac{1}{2}$ to $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile apart, marking terrain objectives in the zone of attack, were reached and passed without opposition. (See Map IV, Map Section.)

The narrow coastal corridor forced Whaling to confine his attack formation to a column of companies with 3/1's Company I in the lead. A squad of scouts acting as point was followed by a section of three medium tanks, each machine trailed in turn by a rifle squad to give it covering fire in the event of attack. Support to this advance party was furnished by an-

¹⁴ Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: *1st MarDiv SAR, Phase II, Part I, Yellow Beach Landing*; *1st MarDiv D-3 Jnl-I*; LtCol Donald J. Robinson ltr to Dir, HistDiv, HQMC, dtd 7Aug52, enclosing OpLog of Co A, 1st TkBn; Hough and Crown, *New Britain Campaign*.

other section of tanks and a rifle platoon which preceded the rest of the 3d Battalion. Peeling off the head of 3/1's column, a succession of small combat patrols took position in the swamp to guard the left flank and then fell in to the rear when the main body had passed.

During the day's advance, two belts of enemy defensive positions were overrun and destroyed. When the scouts spotted a pillbox or bunker, they signaled to the tank platoon commander who came forward on foot, located the targets, and then directed the tanks' fire to knock them out. Despite day-long rain that slowed the forward movement, the lack of opposition enabled 3/1 to reach the 4-4 Line, 5,000 yards from the morning's line of departure, by 1350. Division ordered Combat Team B to remain at 4-4 for the night and set up a perimeter defense.

The next day's objective was the final phase line designated before the landing to control the advance on the airfield. This 0-0 Line was plotted along a low, grass-covered ridge leading northeast through the jungle to a promontory, soon dubbed Hell's Point by the Marines, which formed one arm of a crescent-shaped beach. Fifth Air Force pilots had located an extensive system of bunkers and trenches in back of this beach with the heaviest concentration on Hell's Point. Although the enemy positions were obviously sited to oppose a landing, they stretched along 300 yards of the long axis of the coastal corridor and promised to be a formidable obstacle if they were defended.

At the time the 1st Division attack plan for 28 December was laid out, the arrival of the advance echelon of the 5th Marines was expected in the early morning. H-Hour was consequently moved up to

permit the reinforcements to get ashore and started into position to exploit any successes won by 1st Marines assault troops. The starting time and span of air and artillery preparations for the attack were adjusted accordingly. General Krueger sent General Rupertus a dispatch explaining the 24-hour delay of Combat Team A as soon as he knew of it, but the message was received in garbled form and could not be decoded until numerous transmissions regarding corrections had passed between the two headquarters.¹⁵ Confirmation of the 5th Marines arrival finally came in a message received at 0040 on 29 December.

On the 28th, 2/11 culminated a night of harassing and interdiction fire with an hour's heavy shelling of suspected enemy positions immediately to the front of the 4-4 Line. Then at 0900, American A-20s began strafing and bombing targets from the 0-0 Line to the airfields, observing 0-0 as a bomb line beyond which they could attack with no danger to friendly troops. At 1000, when the last of the planes drew off, a further delay in jump-off time was authorized to get additional tanks into position to support the assault.

When the order to attack was finally issued at 1100, the 3d Battalion, 1st Marines moved out in the same formation it had used during the previous day's advance. Company I was again at the head of the battalion column, working this time with a fresh platoon of medium tanks. In an

effort to broaden the regimental frontage, Colonel Whaling had 1/1 simultaneously start a company through the jungle on the left flank in an attempt to reach the open ground along the 0-0 ridge.

The importance of the Marine attack objective was evident to the Japanese, and Colonel Sumiya had no intention of letting it fall without a fight. During the night of 27-28 December, the airfield defense troops who had been held under cover of the jungle on the mountain slopes moved into positions that ran roughly along the 0-0 Line. Waiting for the advancing men of Combat Team B was the major part of the *1st Battalion, 53d Infantry* and elements of the Japanese regiment's 75mm gun company.

Company A of 1/1, which drew the rugged assignment of cutting through the swamp forest, hit Sumiya's defenses first. At about 1145, the Marine unit reached the edge of an extensive clearing in the jungle about 500 yards from the coast. As the scouts and leading squads started to move through the chest-high kunai grass, a fusillade of rifle, machine gun, and mortar fire broke out from enemy positions hidden in the dense undergrowth across the open ground. Falling back quickly to the cover of the jungle on their own side, the Marines replied in kind, and the grass was whipped by a killing cross-fire. It was soon apparent that the Japanese strength was at least equal to Company A's and neither side could gain an advantage.

For four hours the fire fight dragged on. The enemy force, mainly from the *1st Company, 53d Infantry*, held its ground but could not drive the Marines back.

¹⁵ The last correction needed to enable BACKHANDER Force to break the original message was received at 1133 on 29 December well after Combat Team A's advance echelon had landed. *1st MarDiv G-3 Jnl-I*, entry No. 17, dtd 29Dec43.

Company A easily beat off two Japanese counterattacks and an attempt to turn its flank. At 1545, the Marines, who were running low on ammunition, began to disengage and pull back to the 1st Battalion's position for the night. Fire from 2/11 covered the withdrawal and discouraged any Japanese attempt to follow. Clearly the task of overcoming the enemy defenses required an attacking force of greater strength. Next morning when this position was found abandoned by advancing Marines, it contained 41 dead enemy soldiers. The cost to Company A of this hard-fought action was 8 men killed and 16 wounded.

In a sense, the skirmish in the jungle was a grim side show to the main event, the battle for Hell's Point. This Japanese strongpoint of mutually supporting bunkers and trenches was covered by belts of barbed wire and land mines. Hastily cut gun ports enabled enemy crews to train their weapons along the coastal trail to meet the attack. At least three 75mm regimental guns, a 70mm gun, a 20mm machine cannon, and a dozen or more heavy and light machine guns and mortars were brought into play against the Marines. Steady rain and thick foliage cut visibility to 10-20 yards, and Marine riflemen all too frequently stepped into the fire lanes of enemy bunkers before they spotted the Japanese positions. In this kind of blind fighting, tanks proved invaluable and helped hold down infantry casualties that might have soared had the attack been made without the assistance of armor. The support was mutual, however, and each tank's protective rifle squad kept its sides and rear free from suicide attackers.

The fight to capture the beach defense positions was joined about noon when Japanese troops opened fire on the leading platoon of Company I and its spearhead section of tanks. The tanks crushed trenches and bunkers and blasted guns and crews alike, while the infantry shot down the Japanese who tried to flee. When the 75mm guns on two tanks malfunctioned, the advance was halted while tank machine guns poured out covering fire and fresh armor was ordered into the fight.

In its advance and systematic destruction of the enemy positions in its path, Company I had veered to the left of the coastal road. As a new tank platoon lumbered up to the front lines, Lieutenant Colonel Hankins decided to use Company K on a platoon-wide front to cover the 50-yard stretch between beach and road. One section of mediums fought with Company I and another with K. The reduction of Hell's Point was the job of Company K, whose commanding officer later recounted the fight that eliminated the defenses;

I put one squad of the Second Platoon behind each tank and deployed the Third Platoon to set up a skirmish line behind the tanks. We encountered twelve huge bunkers with a minimum of twenty Japs in each. The tanks would fire point blank into the bunkers; if the Japs stayed in the bunkers they were annihilated, if they escaped out the back entrance (actually the front as they were built to defend the beach) the infantry would swarm over the bunker and kill them with rifle fire and grenades. By the time we had knocked out twelve bunkers the Second Platoon, which had originally been behind the tanks, were out of ammunition and had been replaced by the Third Platoon and they too were out or down to a clip of ammunition per man. I called a halt and sent for the First Platoon. By the time the First Platoon arrived and ammunition was resupplied forty-five minutes had elapsed. We

continued the attack and found two more bunkers but the enemy had escaped.¹⁶

The third platoon of Company A, 1st Tank Battalion, to be committed during the day's action was called up and reached Hell's Point about 1630 in time to destroy the last enemy bunker on the point. It was undefended. Apparently, Colonel Sumiya had ordered a general withdrawal of the survivors of the force which had fought the 1st Marines. Combat Team B was able to occupy the entire defensive position and dig in for the night without any harassment from the Japanese. The night's only excitement was furnished by a false alarm of the approach of enemy tanks, which was countered by positioning two platoons of Marine mediums along possible approach routes with mortars ready to fire illuminating shells to help them locate targets.

After the action of 28 December, the Japanese undoubtedly wished they had tanks and plenty of them since their guns proved no match for the American armor. The count of enemy dead reported to division, before darkness stopped the search, was 266.¹⁷ In return, the 3d Battalion, 1st Marines suffered casualties of 9 killed and 36 wounded. With the complete reduction of Hell's Point,¹⁸ the way was open to the BACKHANDER Force's major objective—the Cape Gloucester airdrome.

¹⁶ Maj Hoyt C. Duncan, Jr., ltr to CMC, dtd 14Mar52.

¹⁷ At least one participant in the day's action questioned this total, and, on the basis of a personal count, estimated the enemy loss at a much lower figure—68-88. Maj William W. Wright ltr to CMC, dtd 15Feb52.

¹⁸ General Rupertus later renamed this spot Terzi Point after the commanding officer of Company K, 3/1, who was killed on D-Day—Captain Joseph A. Terzi.

OBJECTIVE SECURED¹⁹

A new landing point, Blue Beach, located about four miles northwest of the beachhead and a few hundred yards behind the 0-0 Line was opened on 28 December. General Rupertus decided to land the assault battalions of the 5th Marines there in order to have them closer to their proposed zone of attack on the 29th. The order detailing the change in landing sites reached Combat Team B while some units were disembarking from their APDs and others were en route to their original destination, Yellow 2. As a result, Colonel Selden, his headquarters, two companies of 1/5, and most of 2/5 reached Blue Beach about 0730, while the rest of the assault echelon landed within the original perimeter. (See Map IV, Map Section.)

General Rupertus was present on Yellow 2 when the first units came ashore, and he got them started toward Blue Beach to rejoin the rest of the combat team.²⁰ The march was made by truck where possible and by foot whenever the condition of the river of mud called a road demanded. The beachmaster reported the last elements of the 5th Marines on their way west by 0935.

While his regiment regrouped behind the 1st Marines' lines, Colonel Selden conferred with Colonel Whaling, receiving a thorough briefing on the combat situation and word that the attack on 29 December

¹⁹ Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: *ALAMO G-3 Jnl Nos. 13-17*; *1st MarDiv SAR*, Phase II, Part I, Yellow Beach Landing; *1st MarDiv D-3 Jnl-I*; BGen John T. Selden ltr to HistDiv, HQMC, dtd 27Jan 51; Hough and Crown, *New Britain Campaign*.

²⁰ LtCol Charles R. Baker comments on draft of Hough and Crown, *New Britain Campaign*, ca. Mar52.

was to be delayed until both the 1st and 5th Marines could join in the advance. General Rupertus and Colonel Pollock reached Whaling's CP shortly after this and outlined the day's operation plan. At 1200, following an air and artillery preparation, Combat Team B, with 1/1 in assault, would drive forward on the right with the coastal road as its axis of advance and Airfield No. 2 as its objective. At the same time on the left flank, Combat Team A, with 2/5 in the lead, would attack through an area in Talawe's foothills believed to contain prepared enemy defensive positions and then strike north toward the airfields.

After the attack order was issued, Selden and Whaling went up to the front lines to establish the left flank of the 1st Marines' position along the 0-0 Line. Selden then took his battalion commanders, Major William H. Barba (1/5) and Lieutenant Colonel Lewis W. Walt (2/5), up to the boundary for a brief inspection of the terrain. Deciding to advance with his assault battalion, Selden accompanied Walt when 2/5 moved to its line of departure 1,200 yards inland. Barba's orders called for his battalion to follow the 2d in attack, keeping contact with the tail of Walt's column.

On its way to the line of departure, the 2d Battalion, 5th found itself wading through a swamp, one that the regimental commander had been assured contained only a few inches of water. Instead Selden found "the water varying in depth from a few inches to 4 and 5 feet, making it quite hard for some of the youngsters who were not much more than 5 feet in height."²¹ The advancing Marines had to move through the swamp and a thick

bordering belt of forest in single file, and progress was unexpectedly slow. Before the leading company was in position to move out from the 0-0 Line, division had had to put off the time of attack several times. When 2/5 finally jumped off at 1500, a good part of the battalion was still in the swamp, and Barba's men were just entering. At dusk, the rear elements of 2/5 were clearing the line of departure as the leading units of 1/5 came out of the forest.

While Barba held up his men to get the companies organized in approach march formation, the 2d Battalion pulled away from the 1st and contact was lost. Patrols sent out in the gathering darkness and unfamiliar terrain were unable to link up, and 1/5's commander, whose radio to regiment was out, decided to hold up where he was for the night. The battalion established an all-around defensive perimeter in the middle of the open grassy area and spent a quiet night without enemy challenge.²²

The terrain forward of Combat Team A's line of departure proved to be much more rugged than it appeared on operation maps. The 2d Battalion column, with Selden and Walt moving close to its head, found the stretches of kunai grass in its path were broken by ridges and bordered by gullies and ravines choked with jungle growth. As 2/5 swung north to move down to Airfield No. 2, it passed through an area of hidden trenches and bunkers all showing signs of recent occupation. There were no enemy troops to be seen. The battalion advanced unchecked and, by 1925, had reached the center of the airstrip and linked up with Combat Team B.

²¹ Selden ltr, *op. cit.*

²² Col William H. Barba ltr to HistDiv, HQMC, dtd 24Mar51.

The only enemy opposition met on 29 December was encountered by the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, shortly after it passed through 3/1's positions on the 0-0 Line. A few scattered rifle shots fired at long range by small groups of Japanese troops did nothing to slow the advance. When the open ground along 0-0 was crossed, Lieutenant Colonel Reaves' assault companies moved as skirmishers through 300-400 yards of jungle. Supporting medium tanks, and half tracks mounting 75mm guns from the Regimental Weapons Company, were forced to stick to the coastal road and kept pace with the infantry while filing around the right flank of the forest barrier. Once they had cleared the trees, the assault troops, tanks, and half tracks joined forces again, ready for a final push to the airfield in sight ahead.

Artillery of 2/11 and 4/11 fired on suspected Japanese positions, and two rocket DUKWs of the amphibian engineers which had driven up to the front lines added 50 rounds to the preparation.²³ As if in honor of the occasion, the rain even stopped for a few brief moments. The advance was anticlimactic, and, at 1755, the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines reached the edge of Airfield No. 2.

As rain started falling and hastened the approach of darkness, 1/1 hurriedly dug in along a perimeter that looped from the coast inland to the east of the airfield. The 3d Battalion, 1st, which had followed the attacking troops in echelon to the left rear, linked up with 1/1 and extended the perimeter farther around the center of the field. When 2/5 came down out of the hills, the battalion was directed to fill in the remaining segment of the night's de-

²³ OCE, GHQ, AFPac, *Amphibian Engineers*, p. 177.

fense line which included all of Airfield No. 2.

Although surviving enemy records do not detail Colonel Sumiya's orders to his troops, prisoner of war interrogations and Japanese actions on 30 December provide a reasonable picture of what transpired on the 29th when the Marines were allowed to seize their objective unopposed. The enemy commander and the surviving members of his reinforced battalion had hidden in the rain forest that blanketed the hills south of the airfield. Conceding to Marine tanks and infantry the ownership of the low, open ground of the airdrome, Sumiya planned to take advantage of the terrain, his most important defensive asset. Moving at night, the remnants of the *1st Battalion, 53d Infantry* units which had fought at Hell's Point plus at least half of the *2d Company* that had not yet been engaged²⁴ occupied the prepared defenses hidden in the dense vegetation on the hillsides and in the cuts that laced the slopes. The most significant feature of the defensive system was Razorback Hill, a high, narrow, north-south ridge with a grass-covered crest that overshadowed both airstrips. To aerial observers and mapmakers, Razorback appeared to be just another kunai patch among many; from the ground it was clearly the key height in the hills bordering the airdrome.

On the morning of 30 December, while two assault companies of 2/5 moved out across Airfield No. 1 to investigate the village area west of the night's positions, Company F in reserve sent out a pair of scouts to locate and guide 1/5 into the

²⁴ ATIS Item No. 9981, Diary of Cpl Ryoichiro Takano, 2d Co, 1/53, 31Oct-29Dec43, in ATIS Bul No. 808, dtd 14Mar44 (ACSI Recs. FRC Alex).



MARINE RIFLEMEN, joined by a stray dog, pause behind a medium tank as they reach the outskirts of the Cape Gloucester airdrome. (USMC 69043)



MEDIUM TANK crosses Suicide Creek to blast Japanese emplacements holding up the Marine advance. (USMC 72283)

perimeter. On the lower portion of Razorback Hill, where the 2d Battalion had passed through abandoned defenses on the 29th, the Marines surprised a group of 12 enemy soldiers just rising from their night's bivouac. The scouts withdrew after an exchange of fire, and a platoon of Company F immediately returned to wipe out what was thought to be a group of stragglers.

As the rifle platoon neared the top of a small knob in a kunai field, a heavy outburst of rifle and machine gun fire met it, coming from positions in the edge of the forest ahead. As the Marines sought cover on the hilltop, the Japanese launched a screaming charge up its sides which was bloodily repulsed. When the enemy troops withdrew, the fires of grenade launchers, mortars, and an artillery piece were added to the outpouring from the Razorback defenses. A radio message requesting support brought prompt response, and Marine mortar fire crashed down on the enemy position while the rest of Company F moved up.

The Japanese soldiers broke from cover and came racing up the hill in a second attempt to close with the Americans, just as a reinforcing platoon maneuvered to extend the firing line. Heavy fire drove the enemy back into the jungle again and scattered more bodies over the slopes. Tanks were called up and, when the first machine arrived, Company F attacked. Using the tank's gunfire and armor like a crowbar, the Marines split open the first line of the defensive system and drove on through, mopping up the Japanese with grenades and automatic rifle fire. By 1130, the hillside position, which had contained over 30 bunkers, was silent and smoking; its defenders were dead and, in many

instances, buried in the ruins of their foxholes, trenches, and emplacements. A count of more than 150 Japanese bodies was reported to division,²⁵ while Company F had lost 13 killed and 19 wounded.

Company F's discovery that the enemy had reoccupied his defensive positions coincided with a similar unpleasant finding by the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, which was marching in column toward the airdrome. The point of the leading company (A) was fired upon by Japanese who had manned defenses located in the jumbled ridges and ravines east of Razorback Hill. Once it came under fire, Company A deployed to continue the advance, and then, as the battalion commander later recounted the action, it:

. . . was pinned down by heavy small arms and machine gun fire from enemy positions to the west, and enemy mortar fire began falling within the First Battalion zone of action. B Company was committed to the right of A Company in order to bring more fire to bear on the enemy and to prevent them from pushing down through to the airfield. The enemy made one sally against A Company's left flank and was repulsed with fire. Preparations were made to assault the enemy position following a mortar barrage. . . . The assault was made on the enemy position which was found to be abandoned—the remaining enemy withdrawing to the south into the hills. The First Battalion then withdrew to the airfield evacuating its dead and wounded, which I believe totaled 18, 6 dead and 12 wounded.²⁶

²⁵ The Commanding Officer, Company F later estimated the dead at a lesser figure, 60 to 70. Maj John B. Doyle, Jr., comments on draft of Hough and Crown, *New Britain Campaign*, dtd 13Mar52. The battalion commander believed that "a more accurate figure would be about one hundred." BGen Lewis W. Walt ltr to HistBr, G-3, HQMC, dtd 13Jun62, hereafter *Walt ltr*.

²⁶ Barba ltr, *op. cit.*

The finishing blow to the Japanese defenses was delivered by Lieutenant Colonel Hankins' battalion. Working forward with medium tanks in support, 3/1 located the remainder of the occupied defenses in the area west of the strongpoints encountered by the 5th Marines. Attacking in the early afternoon along a three-company front, Hankins' men drove the enemy out of their positions, forced them to retreat up a ravine leading to Razorback's summit, and followed so close in pursuit that the Japanese had no chance to develop a defense. At a cost of one Marine killed and four wounded, 3/1 overwhelmed the last effective resistance of Colonel Sumiya's force. Artillery forward observers with the attacking troops brought down fire on the fleeing enemy to speed them on their way.

A vastly enlarged perimeter, including Razorback Hill in the center and reaching well to the west of Airfield No. 1, marked the Marine position on the night of 30 December. The 1st Battalion, 5th Marines took over a sector of the line between 3/1 and 2/5. During the day's fighting, more supporting elements of both combat teams and of the task force reached the airfield area. On the 31st, after the LST-borne echelon of Combat Team A arrived at the Yellow Beaches, the assault battalions' heavy gear and the team's light tank company and artillery battalion (5/11) came up. The American force securing the airdrome, basically four infantry battalions, two artillery battalions, and two tank companies, was far stronger than anything General Matsuda could bring against it.

At noon on 31 December, General Rupertus raised the American flag over Cape Gloucester to mark officially the capture

of the airdrome. At least one unscheduled flag-raising, by Company I, 3/1 on Razorback Hill,²⁷ preceded this event. Undoubtedly, there were others, for combat Marines have a penchant for hoisting the Colors over hard-won heights.

Once the airfields were within Marine lines, General Rupertus radioed General Krueger to offer him the "early New Year gift [of] the complete airdrome of Cape Gloucester."²⁸ The ALAMO Force commander, in turn, made the present to General MacArthur as "won by the skill and gallantry of the First Marine Division brilliantly supported by our air and naval forces."²⁹ Both Army generals sent Rupertus their congratulations; MacArthur's was in eloquent language ending with the phrase: "Your gallant division has maintained the immortal record of the Marine Corps and covered itself with glory."³⁰ Perhaps the best tribute to the men who had seized the BACKHANDER operation's prime objective was written by an Army officer observer attached to Combat Team B when he reported to the ALAMO G-3:

The front line soldier was superb. These men were in splendid physical condition and spilling for a fight. They were like hunters, boring in relentlessly and apparently without fear. I never heard a wounded Marine moan. The aid men, unarmed, were right up in the front lines getting the wounded. Fire discipline was excellent.³¹

²⁷ LtCol George E. Bowdoin ltr to CMC, dtd 10Mar52.

²⁸ Quoted in *1st MarDiv SAR*, Phase II, Part I, p. 13.

²⁹ Quoted in *CTF 76 Dec43 WarD*, p. 43.

³⁰ *1st MarDiv D-3 Jnl-I*, entry No. 9 of 31Dec43.

³¹ Maj J. B. Bonham memo to Col Eddleman, dtd 4Jan44, in *ALAMO G-3 Jnl No. 15*.

*TRAIL BLOCK WITHDRAWN*³²

While the 1st Division's attack up the north coast was developing, the Marines who were to close the back door to the air-drome had a relatively quiet time. Lieutenant Colonel Masters' STONEFACE Group spent the first few days after it landed consolidating its hold on the Tauali beachhead and patrolling vigorously to locate the Japanese. Many of the small enemy detachments encountered cared surprisingly little about security, and 2/1's scouts and reconnaissance patrols were often able to jump the Japanese as they were resting or marching at ease, fire a few telling shots, and escape unscathed. No intelligence that the Marines uncovered indicated that a large enemy force was in the vicinity of the Green Beach perimeter. (See Map 25.)

The direct radio link with division that consistently eluded Masters on D-Day could not be made on the 27th either. On the following day, two engineer LCMs with Marine radio jeeps on board were sent north up the coast to get around the communication barrier posed by the mountains. An enemy 75mm gun firing from the Dorf Point vicinity dropped a few rounds near the boats and prompted them to turn back. The coastal voyage proved unnecessary, however, since the battalion's radios "boomed in"³³ to division receivers once the landing craft were 200 yards offshore. Starting on the 29th, the LCM-borne

radios made contact with the division on a regular daily schedule.

The first inkling that the Japanese would probably attack the trail block was discovered on the 28th. An alert Marine on outpost duty spotted two Japanese observers on the ridge opposite 2/1's lines and dropped them both with his rifle. A patrol checked the bodies and found the men, carrying field glasses and maps, were officers who had apparently been reconnoitering the American position.

Toward nightfall on 29 December, scattered shots and then a growing volume of sustained fire began to strike the Marine defenses, coming from the jungle inland. A heavy downpour fell steadily, adding to the darkness and deadening the men's sense of hearing as they strained to catch the first sign of the attack that was clearly building. Finally, at 0155, the Japanese charged forward along the one route most likely to let them break through the perimeter—a natural causeway that joined the ridgeline defended by 2/1 and the higher ground inland.

At the point the enemy chose to assault, the lines of Company G formed a narrow salient. Japanese mortars and machine guns poured their fire ahead of the attackers, but in vain. The first thrust was beaten back with the help of the battalion's 60mm and 81mm mortars, and Company G's reserve platoon of artillerymen was rushed up to bolster the line. A second Japanese assault carried one of Company H's machine gun positions, but a counterattack by a mixed force of heavy weapons crewmen and artillerymen won it back. After this repulse, the ardor of the enemy troops cooled perceptibly, and two further attacks were blunted by Marine

³² Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: *1st MarDiv SAR*, Phase II, Part II, Green Beach Landing; *1st MarDiv D-3 Jnl-I*; CO, Det, 2d ESB Rept to CG, 2d ESB, dtd 20Jan44, Subj: Ops CTF 76 LT 21 (Green Beach), in *ALAMO G-3 Jnl No. 19*; Maj Theodore R. Galysh ltr to CMC, dtd 16Feb52; OCE, GHQ, AFP, *Amphibian Engineers*; Hough and Crown, *New Britain Campaign*.

³³ LtCol Robert Hall ltr to CMC, dtd 4Mar52.

fire and stopped in front of the lines. Toward dawn, the Japanese fire slacked until, by 0700, it had died away completely. The cost of this victory to 2/1 and its attached units was 6 men killed and 17 wounded.

Mop-up patrols found 89 enemy dead sprawled amongst the Marine positions and in the forest to the front. Five prisoners, all of them dazed and some wounded, were seized. No other wounded Japanese were sighted, and it appeared that the remnants of the attacking force had fled south. The prisoners identified their units as elements of the *3d* and *4th Companies* of *1/53*, and an enemy officer candidate, who surrendered during the day, estimated the attacking strength at 116 men. From intelligence gained later in the battle for western New Britain, it appears that the few men who escaped unhurt from the attack on 2/1 were ordered into the fight to contain the Marines driving southeast toward Borgen Bay.

On New Year's morning, torpedo boats which had patrolled from Grass Point to Cape Bach during the night took 10 of the most seriously wounded Marines and the enemy prisoners back to New Guinea.³⁴ The ammunition supplies depleted during the fight on the 30th were replenished in an air drop by Fifth Air Force bombers on the 3d. Although almost all signs pointed to a virtual abandonment of the west coast by Japanese troops, Lieutenant Colonel Masters could not chance being caught short. Through the week following the enemy assault, there was scattered opposition to Marine patrols but nothing that indicated the presence of large units.

³⁴ ComMTBRons, SeventhFlt (CTG 70.1) WarD, Dec43, dtd 27Jan44 (COA, NHD), entry of 31Dec43.

An enemy artillery piece located about 2,500 yards east of the Tauali beachhead began firing ranging shots on the 31st. While the aim of Japanese gunners was atrocious—all of their rounds fell in the sea—Masters wasted no time getting his own artillery in position to reply. Battery H's crews used block and tackle to manhandle their guns to the top of a precipitous bluff that overhung the beach. On the 1st, when the Marine 75s began firing, the enemy gun fell silent. The pack howitzers then furnished support to the patrols that sought the enemy on all sides of the perimeter.

In response to an order from division, Masters sent a small detachment to Dorf Point on 2 January to guide Company E of 2/5 into the STONEFACE position for an overnight stay. The 5th Marines' company found no evidence of Japanese in any strength during its march from the airdrome. The enemy troops that had retreated from the airfield defenses seized by Combat Teams A and B had avoided the coastal track and used the trail that led over the eastern shoulder of Mt. Talawe. Under the circumstances, there was no longer any need for the trail block at Tauali, and General Rupertus issued orders for 2/1 to secure and rejoin.

The movement of Masters' command began on 5 January, when four loaded LCMs, one towing an LCVP, made the trip from Green to Blue Beach. The passage was a rough one for both crews and passengers. The heaving seas of the monsoon season battered the small craft, but the amphibian engineers proved equal to the feat of seamanship required to bring the boats in safely. On succeeding days, most of them equally rain- and wind-swept, LCMs from the detachment at the

Yellow Beaches and those assigned to the STONEFACE Group shuttled supplies, ammunition, and equipment from the west to the north coast. By the 11th, most of 2/1's bulk stores and heavy gear had been transferred, and the main body of the reinforced battalion marched north toward the airdrome. A small rear-guard working party loaded the last supplies during the early afternoon. At about 1600, when several shots were fired from the jungle south of what had been the Marine lines, the remaining troops embarked. To discourage any venturesome

Japanese who might want to fire on the boats as they withdrew, the LCMs sprayed Green Beach with machine gun fire as a parting present.

The 2d Battalion, 1st Marines rejoined its regiment on the 12th, after spending a wet and thoroughly miserable night in a bivouac area near Airfield No. 1. On 13 January, Masters' battalion occupied positions near the shore within Combat Team B's sector of the airdrome perimeter. With the successful completion of its mission, the STONEFACE Group was dissolved.