Eastward to Iboki

ARAWE REVISITED [1]

In many respects, Arawe was a sideshow to the main campaign for control of western New Britain. Occasionally, the fighting there was violent, marked by bloody clashes in the enveloping jungle; at other times, days went by with only minor patrol action. General Cunningham had accomplished his major objective when the 112th Cavalry assault troops seized control of Arawe Peninsula. Further operations to clear the Japanese from the area were undertaken primarily to remove a lurking threat to the DIRECTOR Force's position. On the enemy side of the front, Major Komori was determined to hold the Americans back from an objective that they actually did not want—Lupin airfield. (See Map 24.)

Allied press claims of the capture of the grass-choked airstrip, which were broadcast right after Z-Day, considered ground patrolled to be ground controlled. When Komori's *1st Battalion, 81st Infantry* forced the withdrawal of the 112th Cavalry's outposts on 25 December, the Japanese were convinced that they had regained possession of a desirable prize. Komori's primary mission became the denial of the airfield site to the Americans.

The defenses closing off the neck of Arawe Peninsula were the target of repeated small-scale Japanese attacks during the last week of December. The 112th's lines held firm, and the enemy troops reeled back, shaken and hurt, after each unsuccessful effort. The American artillery and mortar fire was particularly galling to the Japanese who were given no rest from punishment even though they broke contact. On the 29th, after eight days of wandering in the jungle, the *1st Battalion, 141st Infantry* reached Komori's positions, and the enemy commander directed the new arrivals to take over the front lines. The depleted companies of *1/81* and the original Merkus garrison were assigned to hold the rear areas of the wide sector from Omoi to the Pulie River which was Komori's defensive responsibility.

With the arrival of *1/141*, the Japanese ceased their attacks on the American positions. Instead, in the jungle about 400–500 yards forward of the 112th's lines, the enemy soldiers constructed a defense in depth, a complex of foxholes, trenches, and weapons emplacements that gave them alternate positions from which to cover approach routes. Patrols of cavalrymen discovered the Japanese were digging in

[1] Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: *ALAMO G–3 Jnl;* 112th CavRegt, HistRept 24Nov43–10Feb44, dtd 10Feb44 (WW II RecsDiv, FRC Alex); Co B, 1st TkBn SAR, 9Jan–12May44, dtd 27May44; *17th Div Ops; Komori Diary;* ATIS Item No. 9773, Diary of unidentified platoon commander, 1st MG Co, 1/141, 21Dec43–16Jan44, in ATIS Bul No. 789, dtd 11Mar44 (ACSI Recs, FRC Alex); Miller, *Reduction of Rabaul;* Hough and Crown, *New Britain Campaign.*

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on the 1st, but were unable to drive them back. Repeatedly, in following days, the Americans attacked the Japanese, but without success. Shifting frequently from hole to hole, using the concealment offered by a thick mat of undergrowth and the shallow connecting trenches they had dug, the men of the *1/141* were quite successful in holding their ground. On 6 January, General Cunningham told General Krueger that "officers and men participating in these operations report they have not seen a single Japanese and that they are unable to locate machine guns firing on them from a distance of 10 to 20 yards." [2]

Cunningham asked that he be sent reinforcements, noting that artillery and mortar fire seemed to have little effect on the hidden Japanese positions. He stated his belief that to continue attacks "along present lines is to play with the enemy's hand." [3] The ALAMO Force commander was asked for tanks to help root out and destroy the defenses that the American soldiers faced. Krueger took immediate steps to answer the request from Arawe, and a Marine tank platoon was underway from Finschhafen on 9 February, together with a company of the 2d Battalion, 158th Infantry.

The only tank unit available for reinforcement of Cunningham's force was Company B, 1st Tank Battalion, which had been left behind because of the limited operating area for armor at Cape Gloucester when the BACKHANDER Force sailed. When the 1st Marine Division commander was informed of the contemplated commitment of some of his armor reserve—and promised that the tanks would be returned to his control when they were required—he suggested that all of Company B be employed. Rupertus noted that the tank company was the smallest self-sustained unit for combat operations.[4] Accordingly, the remainder of Company B boarded an LCT on the 11th and made a stormy overnight passage through rough seas to Arawe.

From 13 to 15 January, while the 112th Cavalry continued pressuring the Japanese with combat patrols, the Marine tankers worked with the two companies of 2/158 which were to make the principal effort against the enemy position. The infantrymen provided a squad to cover each light tank and rehearsed tactics for the assault, while tank and infantry officers made a thorough reconnaissance of the zone of attack. The plan called for two five-tank platoons, each with an infantry company in support, to advance on a 500-yard-wide front on 16 January. The day's objective was 1,000 yards from the line of departure, and within the intervening distance lay all the maze of defenses that the *1st Battalion, 141st Infantry* had held so doggedly for two weeks.

On the morning of the 16th, a squadron of B–24s dropped 136 1,000-pound bombs on the Japanese defenses, and 20 B–25s followed with a heavy strafing and bombing attack.[5] This aerial preparation, coupled with an intensive artillery and 81mm mortar bombardment, paved the way for the assault. The tanks led off and kept moving forward despite soft ground and

[2] CG, US Forces, APO 323, msg to CG, ALAMO Force, APO 712, dtd 6Jan44, Subj: Ops DIRECTOR TF, in *ALAMO G–3 Jnl No. 15.*

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] *1st MarDiv D–3 Jnl—I*, entries nos. 16 and 17 of 8Jan44.

[5] Craven and Cate, *Guadalcanal to Saipan*, p. 335.

bomb craters which caused several machines to bog down until recovery vehicles could pull them free. Working well together, despite incredibly thick vegetation which practically blinded the tank drivers and commanders, the tank-infantry teams churned and shot their way through the enemy position. When a pocket of resistance developed on the right of the line, a section of the reserve tank platoon and a troop of the 112th quickly finished off the holdouts while the advance continued. By 1600, the predetermined objective had been reached, and Cunningham ordered a withdrawal to the peninsula's main line of resistance. Two tanks, one which had thrown a track on a steep slope and another which was hopelessly bogged down in swampy ground, were destroyed by demolitions to prevent their use as enemy strongpoints when the Americans pulled back.

The attack of 16 January accomplished its objective. Komori ordered the remnants of *1/141* to withdraw to the Lupin vicinity where they could "fight to the glorious end to defend the airfield." [6] The few Japanese who did not get the word to retreat were wiped out on the 17th by flame-throwing tanks and a supporting force of cavalrymen. When the battered enemy troops paused to regroup in positions near the airfield, the *Komori Force's* commander made a head count and found that his two understrength battalions and their supporting units had lost 116 killed in action and 117 wounded in three weeks fighting. In addition, 14 men had died of various illnesses and 80 more were sick enough to be unfit for duty. The sick roll promised to grow, for the Japanese were on short rations and the amount of food to be doled out shrank daily. One ineffective airdrop of supplies was received on New Year's Eve,[7] an event that did more to whet appetites than appease them. Primary reliance was placed on supply by barge from Gasmata and by carrying parties using the trail to Iboki. Neither method was satisfactory; the last barge to get through the gantlet of preying torpedo boats and planes reached the Pulie River mouth on 5 February, and the carriers were unequal to the task of keeping up with consumption. The *Komori Force* slowly starved while it held an objective that the Americans showed little sign of wanting.

Mounting doubts about the utility of the airfield he defended plagued Major Komori. American light planes were flying over his positions, and the Lupin garrison reported that they could hear the takeoffs from Arawe Peninsula. The DIRECTOR Force engineers had built an emergency strip for artillery observation planes on 13 January and, with grading and coral surfacing, it soon came into regular use. By 8 February, the disillusioned Japanese commander was reporting to his superiors that the value of Lupin "is so insignificant that it seems the enemy has no intention of using it." He outlined the increasing difficulty of holding his position with dwindling supplies and concluded that his force would soon be cut off and left "with no alternative but self-destruction." [8]

At first, Komori's broad hints that he be allowed to abandon his untenable defenses were answered by orders that he

[6] *Komori Diary*, entry of 17Jan44.

[7] Each man in 1/141 received 16½ ounces of rice, 5 vitamin pills, and a packet of tobacco from this airdrop. ATIS Item No. 9773, *op. cit.*, entry of 1Jan44.

[8] *Komori Diary*, entry of 8Feb44.

continue to "smash the enemy's project for construction of an airfield." [9] The *Komori Force's* supposed exploits in holding Lupin, recognized by two Imperial citations, formed a bright spot in an otherwise dismal picture of withdrawal and defeat of the Japanese forces in western New Britain. Eventually, the *17th Division* had to face the fact that if it did not give Komori permission to pull out and join the general exodus, he and his men would be isolated and destroyed. On 24 February, Komori's radio crackled out the eagerly awaited retirement order and he lost no time quitting Arawe. Passing on the word to his scattered elements to abandon their positions and head north up the track through Didmop, Komori was soon on his way toward a mid-island trail junction at Upmadung and a rendezvous with the *51st Reconnaissance Regiment* which was to cover the *Matsuda Force's* withdrawal. (See Map 29.)

A month of patrol clashes and ambushes had convinced General Cunningham that it was worthwhile to clear the whole Arawe area of Japanese troops. As *1/141* was abandoning its defensive sector near Lupin, an attack force composed of 2/112 and the tanks of Company B was making final preparations to drive them out. On the 27th, when the American force advanced to the airfield and beyond, they found that their quarry had eluded them.

The bloodless attack saw the birth of a new technique of communication between tank crews and the men they supported. Dissatisfied with the radio links they had with the infantry, particularly the close-in supporting squads, the Marine tankers installed field telephones at the rear of their machines through which the riflemen could contact the tank commanders. The improvement in tank-infantry cooperation was immediate, and the innovation proved to be sound enough to have a permanent part in armored support tactics.

In the several weeks before the Japanese withdrew beyond the Pulie River and gave up the airfield, General Cunningham's force suffered a few scattered casualties in patrol actions. The sum of these added little to the official total for the DIRECTOR Force in the campaign, 118 killed, 352 wounded, and 4 missing in action, which was compiled as of 10 February. That date was declared the end of DEXTERITY Operations by General Krueger. It marked the link-up of Australian troops advancing overland from Sio on the Huon Peninsula with the American task force that had seized Saidor; it also was the day when Marine and Army patrols from the BACKHANDER and DIRECTOR Forces were supposed to have met at Gilnit on the Itni River. This event, which actually took place a few days later than ALAMO Force reported it, signified the completion of the "assigned mission of establishing control over the western tip of New Britain." [10]

SOUTHERN PATROLS [11]

The Gilnit meeting between patrols from the two Allied task forces on New

[9] *Ibid.*, entry of 9Feb44.

[10] *DEXTERITY Rept.*

[11] Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: *ALAMO G–3 Jnl; 1st MarDiv SAR*, Phase IV, Extensive Patrolling of Western New Britain-Borgen Bay-Itni River Area and Occupation of Rooke Island; ATIS Item No. 10874, Diary of unidentified member of 51st ReconRegt, 29Dec43–29Mar44, in ATIS Bul No. 939, dtd 20Apr44 (ACSI Recs, FRC Alex), hereafter *51st ReconRegt Diary; 17th Div Ops;* Hough and Crown, *New Britain Campaign.*

Britain was less significant an event than it had appeared it would be during the planning stages of DEXTERITY. Intelligence available before the operation had indicated that only two main routes of withdrawal from Cape Gloucester were available to the Japanese garrison. One of these lay south toward Gilnit and Cape Bushing and the other followed the northern coast. A maze of native trails, most of them narrow and difficult to travel, was known to exist in the jungle waste in the island's interior, but the exact, or even approximate, location of these trails was not known.

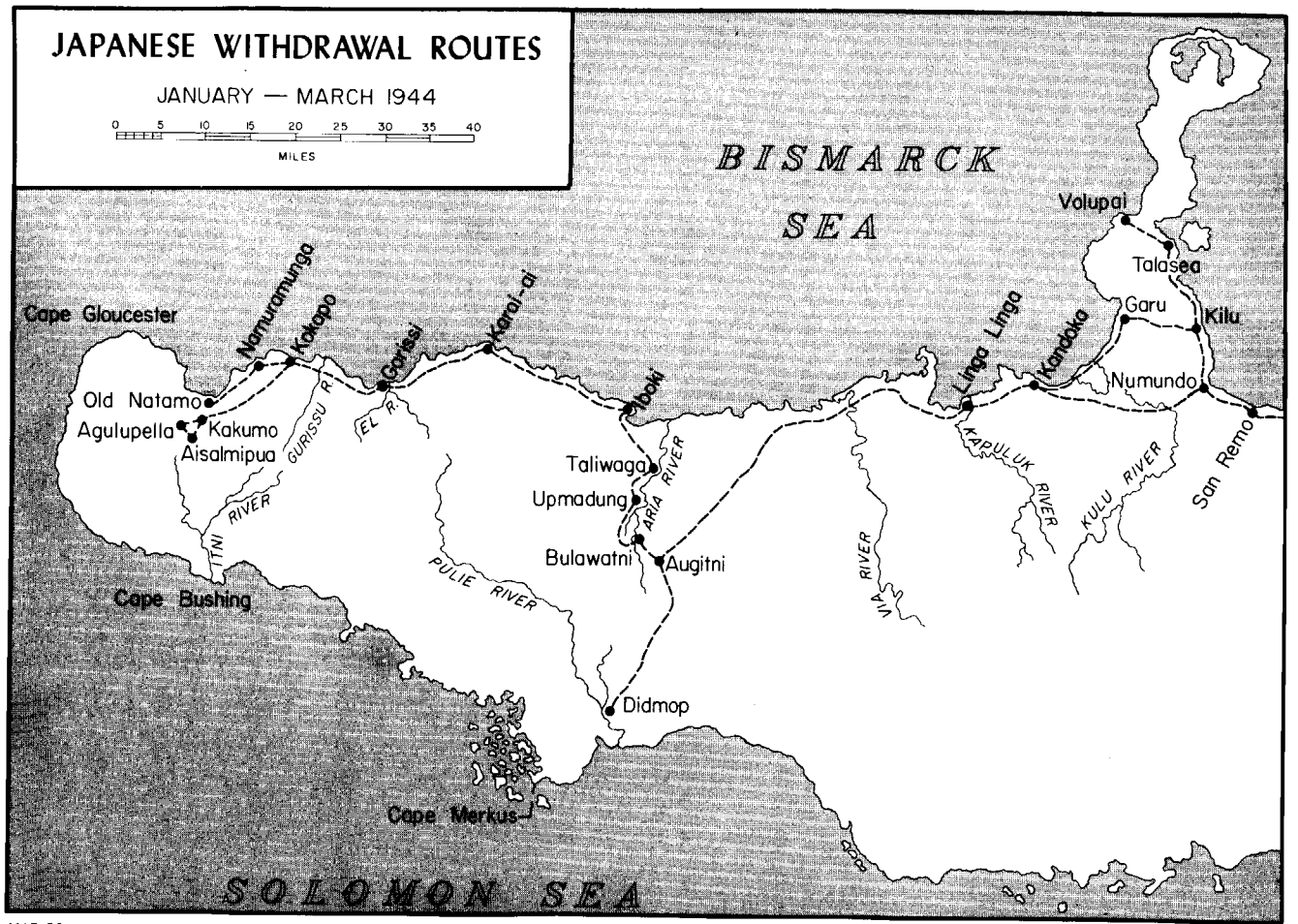
Gradually, as the fighting at Cape Gloucester wore on, the weight of evidence accumulating in the hands of the Allies indicated that the northern trail-net was the only practical withdrawal route for the Japanese. The efficiency of the anti-barge campaign, the rugged nature of the terrain along the southern coast, and the presence of DIRECTOR Force at Arawe combined to give the enemy little chance to use the Cape Bushing area as a jump-off point for further movement east by sea or land. Even though the 1st Division became increasingly sure that the Japanese would retreat by northern routes, it could not neglect the possibility that the trails south to the Itni would be used. Native reports that sizeable bodies of enemy troops were in the Gilnit area continued to come in after the *141st Infantry* was identified in the fighting around the BACKHANDER beachhead. (See Map 23.)

The only certain answer to the question of what the Japanese were doing lay in aggressive patrolling. An Army observer attached to the 1st Division during early January noted that the Marines were "patrol conscious" and that "all units are encouraged to exert the maximum effort in patrolling as it is felt this activity is the best means possible for keeping up morale and alertness." [12] This description fitted the actions of the 1st and 5th Marines closely in the period following the capture of the airdrome. While the ADC group drove forward against the enemy troops holding the Borgen Bay defenses, the Marines guarding the newly won airfields sought the elements of the *53d Infantry* that had scattered after the fall of Razorback Hill.

Combat and reconnaissance patrols made a thorough search of the jungle lowland and foothills bordering the airfield perimeter, driving Japanese stragglers before them and securing the ground. The debris left by the enemy in retreat eventually revealed the main track over Mt. Talawe, but progress along its trace was slow and painstaking. Each branching trail, and there were many, had to be checked before the area of patrol effort could be extended. The primary mission of the BACKHANDER troops was the security of the airfields, and there was no inclination to overlook any Japanese group whose attacks might delay construction progress.

Behind the Marine-manned perimeter and the active screen of patrols, Army aviation engineers labored around the clock to build a runway and hardstands on the site of Airfield No. 2. Work on Airfield No. 1 was abandoned almost as soon as it began, when it became apparent that the field that could be built would not be worth the effort necessary to ready it for use. The Japanese had made no attempt to drain their airstrips or to obtain prac-

[12] Col J. F. Bird memo to Deputy CofS, ALAMO For, dtd 9 Jan44, Subj: Rept on BACKHANDER Ops 1–7Jan44, in *ALAMO G–3 Jnl No. 15.*



MAP 29

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tical gradients, and, as a result, when the 1913th Aviation Engineer Battalion began work on 3 January it was plagued by drainage problems caused by the heavy rains.[13] Often the engineers' bulldozers and graders appeared to be working in an enormous mud trough, as they sought to find firm ground on which to construct the field. A second aviation engineer battalion began work on the runway on 13 January, and a third came in on the 17th to build the necessary hardstands and roads. The only letup in construction activity occurred when a Japanese bomber made a nuisance raid, and the soldiers, like the Marines on the hills above them, headed for a safe place that would still afford them a view of the awesome antiaircraft barrage put up by the 12th Defense Battalion and the Army's 469th Antiaircraft Artillery (Automatic Weapons) Battalion.

The Japanese had realistically concluded that air raids, and these only in irritant strength, were the only means left to them of hindering work on Cape Gloucester airfield. All during the period that the Marines who had seized the airdrome were conducting local patrols to consolidate the perimeter defenses, elements of the *53d Infantry* were holding blocking positions across the trails that led to Borgen Bay from Mt. Talawe and Sag Sag. General Matsuda had charged the *53d* with the task of defending the inland flank of the Japanese troops battling the Marines for Aogiri Ridge and Hill 660. Since American patrols from the airfield did not venture as far as the enemy trail blocks, and the Japanese showed an unusual lack of offensive spirit, there were no significant contacts between the two forces in the vast area south of Mt. Talawe. When the Marines did come over the mountain, the troops they ran into were not men from the badly mauled *53d Infantry* but elements of the fresh *51st Reconnaissance Regiment.*

Colonel Jiro Sato, the reconnaissance unit's commander, had received orders to evacuate Rooke Island soon after D-Day, but it was not until the night of 7 January that he was able to make his move to New Britain. Then, using landing craft that had been carefully hidden from the eager hunting of Allied planes and torpedo boats, most of Sato's 380-man force sailed undetected across Dampier Strait and up the Itni to Nigol. The regiment's rear echelon made the night crossing on the 15th. After he traveled north and reported to Matsuda's headquarters, Sato was given the mission of holding the western trail approaches to Nakarop and reinforcing the *53d Infantry's* position.

On 12 January, the enemy reconnaissance unit set up in the jungle near Aipati village, not far from the junction of the main government track from Sag Sag to Natamo with the trail leading to the airfield. Thus, on 19 January, when a strong patrol from 3/1 reached this spot, it was an outpost of the *3d Company* of the *51st* which it encountered. The Marines took the Japanese by surprise, killing six and driving off the rest, then scouted around long enough to make sure that they had found the main cross-island track before returning to base. The American discovery of this important trail occasioned the dispatch of strong combat patrols from the airfield, but these started too late to run

[13] OCE, GHQ, AFP, *Airfield and Base Development—Engineers in the Southwest Pacific 1941–1945*, v. VI (Washington: GPO, 1951), pp. 193–194.

into anything but rear-guard action by the Japanese.

By 21 January, the *Matsuda Force* was under orders to withdraw from western New Britain. The *17th Division* commander, General Sakai, had recommended the move about mid-January, arguing that the combination of steadily mounting combat losses and the effective throttling of the sea supply route meant the eventual annihilation of all the troops under Matsuda.[14]

The authorities at Rabaul shared Sakai's pessimistic view of the situation, and General Imamura authorized a withdrawal to the Talasea area.[15] The movement was actually underway before the formal order was issued.

When the *51st Reconnaissance Regiment* took up positions guarding the trail complex south of Mt. Talawe, it was replacing part of the *53d Infantry*, mainly detachments of sick and wounded, who were headed east away from the scene of the fighting. On the 16th, General Sakai added to this movement of "forces not having combat strength" by directing General Matsuda to send all such men to the Iboki-Karai-ai sector and to dispatch elements of his command to "occupy key points along the north coast and protect rear supply lines, making these points bases for counterattacks." [16] The units selected, the *65th Brigade Engineers*, the *31st Road Construction Unit*, and two field hospitals, had the mission of improving the coastal track and preparing casualty convalescent stations at Kokopo, Karai-ai, Iboki, Upmadung, Kandoka, and Numundo. (See Map 29.)

On the 21st, the formal withdrawal order was sent to Matsuda, directing him to disengage his units in contact with the Americans and concentrate in the Iboki area prepared for further movement to Talasea. General Sakai's chief of staff understated the case when he commented that "this withdrawal, under present formations and over existing terrain, will be an extremely difficult one." Ominously, he predicted that if the arrangements to send the sick and wounded to the rear proved "too obvious an obstruction to the efficient execution of the withdrawal, unavoidable instances when wounded and sick must be disposed of are to be expected." [17]

General Matsuda set up a schedule of withdrawal that put the *53d Infantry* and *23d Field Artillery* on the trail first, but only as far as the east bank of the Natamo River, where strong defenses were constructed to cover the retreat of the main body. According to plan, all of the *Matsuda Force* would be across the Natamo by 1 February, using trails that converged on a main track which skirted the immediate coastal region until it reached the vicinity of Kokopo. The existence of this track was known to the Allies, but they had no way of pinpointing its loca-

[14] Docu No. 52399, Statement of Ex-LtGen Yasushi Sakai, in HistDiv, MilIntelSec, GHQ, FEC, Statements of Japanese Officials on WW II, v. III, p. 190 (OCMH).

[15] General Imamura's decision was not made as a direct result of General Sakai's recommendation, but rather was a conclusion he reached independently. Imamura thought that he might be able to supply the *Matsuda Force* at Talasea. *Japanese comments.*

[16] AET No. 2026, ATIS AdvEch No. 2, dtd 18Feb44, 17th Div OpO A No. 82, dtd 16Jan44, in *ADC IntelDocuments.*

[17] ATIS Item No. 10452/e, 17th Div CofS Instns, dtd 21Jan44, based on 17th Div OpO A No. 84, in ATIS Bul No. 883, dtd 4Apr44 (ACSI Recs, FRC Alex).

tion until patrols actually walked along its path.

In recognition of the comparative good shape of the *51st Reconnaissance Regiment*, Matsuda designated Sato's unit as rear guard to cover both stages of the enemy withdrawal, the disengagement from contact in western New Britain and defense of the Japanese rear after most of the men had made the exhausting march to Iboki. The *51st* was to take up positions on the Aria River southeast of Iboki, holding open both the track from the coast which swung inland there and the trail overland to Komori's force at Arawe. On 24 January, Sato moved to Nakarop where he got his withdrawal orders, and, four days later, he was marching east at the tail of the Matsuda column.

The reconnaissance troops, like most Japanese combat units, made a deliberate withdrawal. Covering forces, strong enough to hold off sizeable American patrols, set up in ambush at various stages in the retreat. Usually, when action was joined, the Marines attacked to develop the strength and dispositions of the enemy unit opposing them, then pulled back to gather reinforcements, and came on again to wipe out the blocking force. Quite often when the attack was renewed the Japanese had moved on, and the only sensible course for the following troops was a wary, methodical pursuit.

Most of the Marine patrols reported that the Japanese appeared to be retreating south, an observation explained by the fact that many of the feeder trails in the web that cut the cross-island track led south at first, then east, and finally either north toward Kokopo or south again toward Gilnit. The route that much of the *Matsuda Force* was using in retreat actually led off from the trail to Gilnit at a point below the trail junction at Agulupella. Small wonder then that there was a strong disposition on the part of BACKHANDER Force headquarters to scour the southern region for Japanese troops that might be there. Unquestionably, the victorious Marines had the strength to pursue any reasonable course in clearing western New Britain of the enemy. As it happened, the Japanese withdrawal from the southern part of Itni valley was complete. A patrol of platoon strength could probably have scouted the trail to Gilnit and Cape Bushing with safety, once it was past the area of rear guard action straddling the enemy withdrawal route. Not having the benefit of hindsight, the 1st Marine Division gave the task of checking Gilnit to a composite battalion. (See Map 23.)

The assembly of this battalion came at the end of a week of vigorous patrolling, marked by occasional sharp clashes with the enemy rear guard. Units from all three of the 1st Division's infantry regiments converged on Agulupella, the focal point of patrols coming from Sag Sag, the airfield, and the beachhead. As a result of an exchange of positions immediately following the capture of Hill 660, the 5th Marines with 2/1 attached held the beachhead, and the 7th and 1st Marines occupied the airfield perimeter. Units of the 5th made the initial contact with elements of the enemy's rear guard at Natamo Point on 20 January. Thereafter, the reinforced regiment, operating under the ADC's command, stuck close to the northern shore, driving ahead to close off the coastal track. Its sweep along Borgen Bay became the first leg of an advance that was eventually to find it landing in assault on Willaumez Peninsula.

In the center of the island, the first significant contact with the Japanese guarding Matsuda's rear, elements of the *51st Reconnaissance Regiment*, came on 23 January. A composite company of 1/1 following the trail from the airfield ran into an enemy machine gun and a few protecting riflemen, whose fire held up the patrol temporarily until the advance guard drove them off. Then about 1,500 yards of cautious advance later, the same or a similar small group opened up on the Marines again. In the flurry of return fire two of the Japanese were killed and the rest fled. Holding up for the night in his own ambush position close to Mt. Langila, the patrol commander resumed his advance the next day until his lead elements were pinned down by the fire of at least one enemy rifle platoon reinforced with machine guns. The Japanese positions blended so artfully into the shrouding jungle that the Marines had little at which to aim. Though the patrol's return fire was heavy in volume, it had no apparent effect. Action was broken off, almost miraculously with no Marine casualties, and night defensive positions astride the trail were again occupied. On the 25th, the Marine patrol pulled back to await relief; its ammunition pouches were almost empty and the men were short of food. Half of the rations carried for the patrol by an ANGAU-led group of 40 native porters proved to be spoiled.

Company K of 3/1 made the relief on 26 January and moved out immediately toward the cross-island trail. After an uneventful day's march and a night in perimeter defense, Company K moved unchecked through the area where the Japanese had held off the Marines on the 24th. At the trail junction, the men from K ran into elements of a composite company of the 7th Marines which had landed from LCMs at Sag Sag on the 22d.

Travelling east on the government track and searching the surrounding area thoroughly, the 7th Marines' patrol had reached Aipati on the 24th. The next day, the trail junction was occupied, and the company followed the airfield trail for several hundred yards without finding any sign of the Japanese. On the 26th, this patrol pattern was repeated and in addition a platoon was sent half a mile to the south towards Agulupella; neither unit encountered any enemy. A small reconnaissance patrol, four Marines and three natives. moving cautiously along the main track, was ambushed near Niapaua, where trails forked to Nakarop and Agulupella. One of the scouts was killed before the men were able to slip away.

A 7th Marines patrol from Aipati travelled a mile toward Niapaua on the morning of the 27th without seeing any sign of live Japanese. When Company K of 3/1 reached the cross-island track, it borrowed a machine gun platoon from the 7th's composite company and started east to check the ambush site. Late in the afternoon, the scouts preceding the march formation sighted about 50 of the enemy set up on the far side of a stream that cut across the track. Prudently, the company commander held up for the night, ready to drive ahead in the morning. At 0700, 28 January, the Marines attacked and soon broke through the position spotted the day before. A short distance farther on, Company K ran into a storm of rifle, machine gun, and mortar fire that betrayed the presence of a reinforced company dug in across the track. The Japanese, holding high ground that commanded the Marine

position, were able to fend off all attempts to reach them, and the battle lapsed into a stalemated fire fight. After three hours of fruitless exchange, the Marines pulled back out of mortar range, taking 15 casualties with them.

Company K held its ground on the 28th while reinforcements, the rest of the 7th Marines company from Aipati and weapons elements of the 7th sent from the airfield, joined. Major William J. Piper, Jr., executive officer of 3/7, now took command of the combined group. Piper's force found the Japanese position abandoned when it advanced on the 30th and proceeded without hindrance to Niapaua. From there, Piper moved south to Agulupella where he had orders to await the formation of a larger force, designated the Gilnit Group.

Elements of the 5th Marines were also directed to join the enlarged patrol headed for Gilnit. Scouts and combat patrols from 2/1 and 2/5, pressing southwest along the trail behind Aogiri Ridge, encountered Japanese rear guard detachments and drove them off. On the 28th, Company E, 2/5, moved through Magairapua, once Colonel Katayama's headquarters, and then on to Nakarop, where General Matsuda was known to have been located. In both tiny villages and all along the trail between, there were deserted bivouac areas, littered with enemy gear but empty of troops. Matsuda's own quarters was so well camouflaged that its location near the trail was not discovered until several days later.

At Nakarop, Company E was joined by Major Barba's 1/5. Barba had broken off operations along the coast on 28 January and driven through Japanese delaying forces in an effort to reach Niapaua and aid Company K of 3/1 in reducing the trail block it had encountered. On the 29th, a heavily reinforced Company G, 2/5, and a large party of native carriers reached Nakarop from the beachhead. This force, dispatched by the ADC to join the Gilnit Group, plus Barba's battalion with Company E attached, filed into Agulupella on 30 January to unite with Major Piper's command. Lieutenant Colonel Puller was designated by General Rupertus to lead the combined units.

Puller's command, six reinforced rifle companies and headquarters elements, numbered 1,398 Marines, 3 Australian officers, and 150 native carriers. The supply problem posed by its size was staggering and not easily surmounted. So long as the group stayed in the vicinity of Agulupella, native carriers could just barely maintain it by a constant shuttle from the beachhead dumps. The condition of the trails deteriorated steadily as heavy traffic and flooding rains turned the paths into slithery channels of mud. As supply by hand-carry slowed, air drop, both by the division's Piper Cubs and Fifth Air Force B–17s, was instituted to keep Puller's men fed and provided with essential items of equipment.

During the buildup at Agulupella, evidence mounted that the Japanese had not fled south, evidence that soon included the actual withdrawal order dug up in a cache of staff papers found at Matsuda's headquarters, and the 1st Division decided to reduce the size of the Gilnit Group. Accordingly, the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines was detached, and the patrol strength dropped to 384 Marines plus the native carrier group. Puller had units of his command patrolling vigorously throughout the central part of the island while he

waited to build up sufficient reserve supplies to make the march to the south. A further complication arose when scouts discovered that a rain-swollen branch of the Itni near Arigilupua, about three miles from Agulupella, was too wide and deep for fording. Puller sent Company K, 3/1, to outpost Arigilupua while a detachment from the 17th Marines bridged the stream.

Captain George P. Hunt, the Company K commander, was given permission by Puller to reconnoiter the trail to the south, while the Gilnit Group was held up by the bridging operation. Hunt selected a small patrol of 11 men from his unit and set out down the well-defined track. With no enemy to stop him and no heavy equipment to slow him down, Hunt reached Nigol on the Itni in one day's march. Bivouacking for the night, the Marines moved about a mile farther to the river bank opposite Gilnit on the next day and then returned to Nigol. The only Japanese sighted in two days was a sick straggler who was sent back to Agulupella.

Puller received Hunt's report of his findings shortly before the main patrol started out for Gilnit. The bridge at Arigilupua was completed on 6 February, and Puller left with about half of his command immediately, meeting Hunt on the trail. Major Piper, who was serving as patrol executive officer, kept a portion of the unit with him and followed Puller, searching all the side trails and bivouac areas encountered. According to plan, the two elements of the patrol leapfrogged each other, exchanging personnel as necessary, with one group always moving ahead on the principal track while the other checked the jungle to either flank. Weapons crewmen, burdened with heavy loads of mortar and machine gun ammunition and parts, found the going particularly rugged. To all patrol members the trip was unforgettable, if only for the monotony of their steady diet of rain and K rations.

The food situation was dictated by the means of resupply. It had been decided to try to keep the patrol subsisted and equipped entirely by air drop, and the division's light planes were handed the task. The little Cubs, whose peak carrying capacity was two cases of K rations, one held on the observer's lap and the other placed on a desk behind him, flew all day long. Often the pilots logged 10–12 hours in the air, landing, refueling, and taking off again, in a regular pattern from dawn to dusk.[18] All drops were made at villages along the route, Arigilupua, Relmen, and Turitei, according to schedule, with special requests filled as they were received.

One of the items asked for by Puller in an urgent dispatch, several hundred bottles of mosquito lotion, raised a few eyebrows at division headquarters, but the request was filled promptly. The Gilnit Group commander's well-known disdain for the luxuries of campaigning caused the wonder, but the explanation was simple and a lesson in jungle existence. As a patrol member later remarked:

> Hell, the colonel knew what he was about. We were always soaked and everything we owned was likewise, and that lotion made the best damn stuff to start a fire with that you ever saw.[19]

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[18] Capt Richard M. Hunt, "General Rupertus' Improvised Air Force," *Marine Corps Gazette*, v. 33, no. 6 (Jun49), p. 17.

[19] Quoted by LtCol John S. Day in comments on draft of Hough and Crown, *New Britain Campaign*, dtd 7Mar52.

The advance party of the patrol reached the river opposite Gilnit on the 9th, and the main body arrived the following day. Puller sent a small scouting party across the Itni to the patrol objective; again there was no sign of recent enemy occupation. A platoon sent to Cape Bushing encountered no Japanese, but did find ample signs of the area's one-time garrison, the *141st Infantry*. Considerable quantities of weapons, ammunition, and equipment were found in the various enemy camps; surprisingly, there were even some food supplies left behind. Anything that was of use to division intelligence officers, or to ANGAU for distribution to the natives, was set aside; everything else was destroyed.

Puller was ordered to wait in the Gilnit area until he was contacted by the Army patrol dispatched from Arawe. According to the reports the Marines received, the soldiers were held up east of Gilnit by enemy opposition at Attulu Hill, once the *141st Infantry's* command post. Both native and Marine scouts explored the hill and found no Japanese, and Puller radioed division that in his opinion there were no enemy forces in the area to be discovered.

On the 14th, the division made its own contact with Puller when two LCMs with a platoon of 1/7 on board arrived from the airfield. The boats carried some extra supplies for the patrol which was about to set out on its return trip up the track to Agulupella. About midday on 16 February, elements of the Arawe patrol reached Gilnit via the river and met the platoon that Puller had left behind a few hours earlier for that purpose. Its mission fulfilled by the contact with the soldiers, the last Marine unit moved out briskly in the trace of Puller's column, bringing to an effective conclusion 1st Division combat operations in the southern Itni valley.

EASTERN PATROLS [20]

On the maps issued to BACKHANDER troops prior to D-Day, the coastal track that paralleled the shore of Borgen Bay appeared to be the most logical and, in fact, the only practical northern route of withdrawal for the Japanese. By the time enemy resistance collapsed at Hill 660, Marine intelligence officers were reasonably sure that their maps were wrong. Somewhere in the miles of jungle and swamp south and east of the bay were other trails, their existence confirmed by captured papers and the reports of natives and prisoners of war. The names of the villages of Aisalmipua and Kakumo began to crop up as way stations on a frequently used supply route, but the natives could not agree on their location, except to confirm that they lay along a trail from Agulupella to Kokopo. (See Map 29.)

The government track from Sag Sag that ended at the coast a few hundred yards west of Natamo Point was about the only trail that the Allies were sure existed in the Borgen Bay area. They were unaware of the presence of another trail which led to Nakarop from the east side of the point, this one broader, in better shape,

[20] Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: *1st MarDiv SAR*, Phase IV, Extensive Patrolling of Western New Britain-Borgen Bay-Itni River Area and Occupation of Rooke Island; 1st MarDiv D-2 Weekly Repts Nos. 5–10, dtd 29Jan–5Mar44; Col William H. Barba comments on draft of Hough and Crown, *New Britain Campaign*, dtd 17Mar52; Maj John S. Stankus comments on draft of Hough and Crown, *New Britain Campaign*, dtd 13Mar52; Hough and Crown, *New Britain Campaign;* OCE, GHQ, AFP, *Amphibian Engineers.*

and partially corduroyed in its wettest stretches. Still a third important track not recorded on pre-invasion maps ran from the village of Old Natamo east of the Natamo River to Kakumo.

In order to effect their retreat without hindrance, the Japanese had to block the trails that led through Agulupella long enough for the main body of the *Matsuda Force* to get clear and started for Kokopo. In the center of the island, the *51st Reconnaissance Regiment* executed this task with seeming ease, and along the coast the same job was performed well by a rear guard made up of elements of the *53d Infantry*, the *39th Field Antiaircraft Battalion*, and the *11th Company* of *3/141*. The vigorous resistance put up by these latter troops had the effect of clouding the issue of what route the *Matsuda Force* had taken. When they had delayed the Marines as long as was necessary to let the main body of the Japanese escape, the defenders just faded away. Helping the rear guard's withdrawal was the natural caution which characterized the patrol operations of veteran troops in the jungle.

At every natural obstacle along the trails that had to be used for any sizable troop movement, there was the threat of ambush. A sudden burst of fire from a single machine gun or a fusillade of shots from a few well-placed riflemen could be the cause of hours of delay. Much of the time the enemy could not be seen and the terrain stalled attempts to outflank his positions, leaving just the few men at the point of a patrol to reply to the fire that swept the trail clear. Under the circumstances, it took steady nerves, quick reactions, and a considerable amount of quiet courage to be a scout and take the lead on a patrol into enemy-held territory. The situation was ideal for a few determined Japanese, probably no more than 300 by the last few days in January, to hold up the advance of thousands.

The coastal track rimming Borgen Bay looped across the base of Natamo Point, making the narrow, jungle-covered spit of land an excellent site for rear guard action. Inland, the several rivers and numerous streams discharging into the bay helped turn the rain-sodden ground into one of the worst stretches of swampland in western New Britain. The Japanese knew that the Americans would have to advance up the coastal corridor and waited for them in prepared positions.

An enemy map of the point, captured on 3 January, showed machine gun emplacements and rifle pits sufficient to hold a reinforced platoon located there. When a patrol started out to check the point on 20 January, there was a strong possibility that the Japanese might be holding it. Still, the shore of Borgen Bay east of Hill 660, was sprinkled with abandoned positions and these might also be vacant. When the patrol, most of Company A, 1/5, led by regimental scouts, reached the estuary that cut into the base of the point, all doubts were dispelled. Automatic weapons fire lashed across the water and forced the Marines to take cover. For two hours, the patrol's supporting mortars and machine guns sought to silence the enemy guns, but to no avail. Finally, because ammunition was getting low, artillery fire was called down to cover the Marines' withdrawal.

On the 21st, the 75mm howitzers of 1/11 fired on the suspected locations of the enemy weapons, and, on the following morning, a reinforced company tried to attack but could make no headway. A platoon that worked its way through the swamp to come up on the east side of the point

PATROL OF MARINES *seeking Japanese troops retreating from western New Britain files across one of the many jungle streams in the Borgen Bay area.* (*USMC 72282*)

ARMY AMPHIBIAN ENGINEERS *and Marines load Army LCMs at Iboki on 5 March for the overnight run to Talasea.* (*USMC 79887*)

spotted positions that appeared to hold a company and then pulled back. Ten enemy soldiers were killed and several wounded in the day's exchange of fire, most of these when the patrol, on its first approach, caught the crew of a strongpoint unawares. All through the night, artillery harassed the Japanese on the point, and, at 0910 in the morning, a squadron of A–20s appeared from Finschhafen to bomb and strafe ahead of a two-company attack supported by tanks.

The tanks, mediums of Company A, were transported across the bay by LCM to a beach about a thousand yards from the point and then lumbered up to lend supporting fire to the infantry assault. From offshore, a rocket DUKW laid down a barrage on the Japanese positions, and 1/11 fired in advance of the Marine skirmish line. In a series of short, violent fights, the Japanese were killed or driven from their defenses. In late afternoon, when Natamo Point was securely in American hands, the bodies of 30 enemy soldiers were counted in and around the wrecked and smoking gun pits. Some 15–20 machine guns and two 20mm cannons were destroyed in the day's action. A Japanese 75mm gun located somewhere in the jungle to the southeast of the point started firing late in the afternoon, but 48 rounds in reply from a 155mm seacoast artillery battery located in the beachhead silenced the piece.[21]

About half of the hundred-man garrison of Natamo Point fled the Marines' final attack and escaped down the trail to Agulupella or across the Natamo River to the *53d Infantry's* positions on the eastern bank. In a follow-up advance on the 24th, the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines accounted for 10 more of the enemy while clearing the track as far as the river. The explosion of small-arms, mortar, and artillery fire that greeted any attempt to cross brought an effective halt to the day's advance. For five days, the Natamo River marked the limit of the 5th Marines' advance to the east, as the Japanese held on tenaciously.

On 25 January, an attempt to land a rifle platoon, reinforced with a half track and machine guns, in a coconut grove about 300 yards east of the river was repulsed by heavy Japanese fire. Similarly, a lodgement on the east bank of the river could not be held in the face of overwhelming enemy resistance. Before attempting another frontal assault, patrols from 1/5 followed the river south to find a suitable crossing, but the swamps defeated their efforts. On the 27th, Company B followed the corduroyed trail that led to Nakarop from Natamo Point until a strong Japanese rear guard was encountered about 4,000 yards inland. In the resulting fire fight, the Marines had one man killed and three wounded; the enemy lost 15 soldiers but accomplished his mission of holding up the advance. On the 28th, the 1st Battalion, 5th, less Company B which remained to hold the lines along the Natamo, moved out along this trail with the mission of reaching Nakarop. This battalion, spurred on by reports of the action at Niapaua, made quick work of two rather feeble attempts to delay its progress and bivouacked three and a half miles inland, not far from its objective. But the next day's advance disclosed that the Japanese were gone.

Not only had the enemy disappeared from in front of the Marines working along the trails inland, but he had abandoned his positions guarding the Natamo's

[21] Seacoast Consolidated AR, dtd 23Jan44, in 12th DefBn WarD, Jan44.

west bank, too. Scouts who moved 2,000 yards upstream on the 30th, then forded the river, and came down on the opposite bank found the defenses deserted. On the 31st, a patrol crossed the river mouth and proceeded to Old Natamo; three Japanese who were found in a pillbox near the beach were killed, but no one else was sighted. One of Lieutenant Colonel Puller's patrols reached Kakumo on the same day. The natives told the Marines that the last Japanese had left the village heading east the previous day.

In its advance to the Natamo and movement down the trail to Nakarop, the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines had had 6 men killed and 33 wounded. Estimated enemy dead among the rear-guard detachments was close to 75, and the wounded probably reached a similar figure. In military terms, the cost to the Japanese was negligible for the prize gained, time for the main body of the *Matsuda Force* to get well underway for Iboki, Talasea, and, eventually, Rabaul.

The next obvious step for the 1st Marine Division was aggressive pursuit of the retreating Japanese. Patrols of 2/1, attached to the 5th Marines, followed the coastal track as far as Namuramunga, reaching the village, which was seven miles from Old Natamo, on 2 February. Two other patrols of the 1st Marines' battalion cut directly through the jungle from the coast to find the Agulupella-Kakumo-Kokopo trail and establish conclusively the enemy withdrawal route. Only stragglers, sick and wounded men, were encountered by any of the patrols; the Japanese left behind were too weak from hunger to offer any resistance.[22]

On 3 February, General Rupertus conferred with General Krueger at Finschhafen to discuss further actions by the 1st Marine Division. Both field commanders reacted unfavorably to a directive from GHQ that had just arrived ordering a new Final Beachhead Line in western New Britain, one that would include all of Borgen Bay in the defended perimeter. The feeling among the staff at GHQ was that the new line would prevent the Japanese from returning and shelling the landing beaches supporting the growing airfield. Rupertus and Krueger, knowing that their current problem was not the return of the Japanese but the destruction of the troops that had fled, ignored the message, feeling that it was based on premises no longer valid. Instead, Rupertus was given the go-ahead signal for an immediate pursuit of the *Matsuda Force* as far as Iboki and alerted to Krueger's plan of continuing the advance to the Willaumez Peninsula and beyond.[23]

The 5th Marines got the mission of keeping the pressure on the retreating enemy

[22] During these pursuit operations, a platoon of the 12th Defense Battalion's 155mm guns was positioned within the Yellow Beach perimeter to fire as field artillery in support of 1/11. An air observer spotted "five to eight Japanese barges loading personnel at the eastern tip of Borgen Bay. This information was relayed to an OP on Target Hill and thence to the 155mm guns. These barges were taken under fire at maximum range of 19,200 yards. After adjustment and platoon 10 volleys, the air observer reported 'all barges damaged or sunk with many Japs struggling in the water.'" Col Thomas L. Randall comments on draft manuscript, included with MajGen James M. Masters, Sr., ltr to ACofS, G–3, HQMC, dtd 2Jul62.

[23] ALAMO G–3 note on GHQ directive, dtd 2Feb44, in *ALAMO G–3 Jnl No. 19;* MajGen William H. Rupertus ltrs to LtGen Alexander A. Vandegrift, dtd 4Feb44 and 18Feb44 (Vandegrift Personal Correspondence File, HQMC).

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and, if possible, cutting off and destroying some part of the Japanese force. A simultaneous overland and overwater advance was planned with the help of landing craft of the Army amphibian engineers. The division's Cub planes were to scout ahead of the advancing Marines, spotting suitable landing beaches and keeping tabs on the Japanese. The 5th Marines knew where the enemy was heading and the route he was taking, but the jungle shielded the troops from aerial observers. Under the circumstances, when the Japanese might easily be waiting in ambush for their pursuers, the Marine advance had to be both swift and cautious.

Bad weather was a frequent factor in holding up the LCM-borne phases of the 5th Marines' pursuit. Crashing surf denied the forward beaches to landing craft and placed the burden of catching up on the patrols operating along the coastal track. When the seas and the limited number of LCMs available permitted, large elements of Colonel Selden's unit were able to leap-frog the foot patrols and bite off 10- and 15-mile chunks of the coast at a time. Alternately in the lead, as the 5th moved east, were elements of the attached scout platoon from division tanks, men of the regiment's own intelligence section, and, often, a brace of Army scout dogs and their handlers, loaned for the operation. Kokopo, Gorissi, and Karai-ai were occupied in their turn, and in each village the natives told the same story—the Japanese were still ahead. Prisoners seized along the trail in the mop-up of stragglers confirmed the continued head start.

On the 24th, patrols from sea and land reached Iboki, fully expecting to encounter Japanese resistance at this primary supply base. But there were no enemy defending troops to be found, only sick and starving individuals who had fallen behind. The last cohesive unit of the *Matsuda Force*, the *51st Reconnaissance* rear guard, had passed through the village on the 16th.

Despite his disappointment at missing contact and visiting further destruction on the Japanese, Colonel Selden was able to view his regiment's accomplishment with some pride. On short notice, actually less than a day's warning, the 5th had started its 20-day trek and worked out a successful method of operation that made the best use of the men and transportation available. As Selden later summarized the effort, he had:

> . . . 5,000 men on this jaunt of sixty-odd miles over some of the worst jungle terrain in the world. We kept the Nips on the move by having fresh men out every morning. With few exceptions, men were not called upon to make marches on two successive days. After a one-day hike, they either remained at that camp for three or four days or made the next jump by LCMs.
>
> . . . To have accomplished my march four days prior to the deadline without loss or even having a man wounded was, in our estimation, quite a feat.[24]

ALLIED PROGRESS REPORT [25]

As the 5th Marines moved into a staging area at Iboki Plantation, the final arrangements for continuing the 1st Division's advance along New Britain's north coast were being made. General Krueger intended to make a landing on Willaumez

[24] MajGen John T. Selden ltr to HistDiv, HQMC, dtd 7Mar52.

[25] Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: *ALAMO G–3 Jnl;* Craven and Cate, *Guadalcanal to Saipan;* Hough and Crown, *New Britain Campaign;* Miller, *Reduction of Rabaul.*

Peninsula, secure it, and drive on for Cape Hoskins and the Japanese airfield there. The landing craft needed for the pending operation would be a mixed and scant force of Navy LCTs and Army LCMs. Most of the amphibious shipping available to Seventh Fleet was tied up in support of landings in the Admiralties.

The success of DEXTERITY was an influential factor in hastening the schedule of operations designed to isolate Rabaul. On 13 February, General MacArthur issued a directive calling for the seizure of Manus in the Admiralties and Kavieng on New Ireland with a probable target date of 1 April. There was strong sentiment at General Kenney's headquarters to slice the delay time and secure the enemy airfields in the Admiralties ahead of the projected D-Day, if the Japanese garrison appeared to be weak. Intensive aerial scouting convinced the Allied Air Forces leader that a reconnaissance in force into the Admiralties could be risked, and he was able to persuade General MacArthur to order the move. A reinforced squadron of the 1st Cavalry Division made the first exploratory landing on Los Negros Island on 29 February and, in a sense, caught a tiger by the tail. The Japanese garrison, much stronger than aerial reconnaissance had indicated, battled fiercely to throw the cavalrymen off the island. General MacArthur made the decision to reinforce the troops ashore rather than withdraw them, and throughout March, American soldiers in overwhelming strength poured into the Admiralties. The capture of two airfields and an excellent deep-water harbor in the islands had the effect of hastening the tempo of operations in the Southwest Pacific and forging an important link in the chain of Allied bases that ringed Rabaul.

So swift was the pace of advance in early 1944, that the strategic importance of Cape Gloucester's airfield shrank steadily while the engineers were still working to get it ready for use. The airfield site at Saidor, its seizure termed by MacArthur a vital "exploitation of the New Britain landings," [26] turned out to be usable by transports and other heavy aircraft several weeks before the runway at Cape Gloucester was ready for regular traffic. Captain Petras landed General Rupertus' plane on Airfield No. 2 on 28 January, and the first Army transport came down on the field on the 31st. Pierced steel planking was laid the whole length of the runway to overcome the effects of heavy rains, but the site was simply a poor one, and a staggering amount of work and materials would have to be devoted in an effort to make Cape Gloucester into a first-class airfield. The changing strategic situation made this task unnecessary. The 35th Fighter Squadron moved into the field on 13 February, while the aviation engineers were still fighting the cape's unsuitable terrain, and the 80th Squadron followed on the 23d. Within a month, recall orders had been issued for both units so that they might be committed in support of MacArthur's advance west along New Guinea's coast toward the Philippines.

Marine operations following the seizure of Cape Gloucester had strong overtones of an aggressive police of the area. The 1st Division's patrols pressing the retreating enemy toward the east made a clean sweep of stragglers at the same time they were trying to find and destroy elements of the main body of the *Matsuda Force.*

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[26] CinCSWPA msg to CG, ALAMO For, dtd 28Dec43, in *ALAMO G–3 Jnl No. 12.*

The bothersome problem presented by the hulking presence of Rooke Island close inshore to the airfield was taken care of by Company B of the 1st Marines. Landing from LCMs on 12 February, the company patrolled vigorously for a week and confirmed the finding by ALAMO scouts that the Japanese had pulled out. The garrison once considered for Rooke no longer seemed necessary, and the Marines returned to Cape Gloucester on the 20th. By the end of February, New Britain was clear of any effective Japanese force as far east as a line joining Iboki and Arawe.

Talasea and Beyond

RECALL TO RABAUL [1]

The Japanese commanders at Rabaul, General Imamura of *Eighth Area Army* and Admiral Kusaka of *Southeast Area Fleet*, were in an unenviable situation following the loss of Cape Gloucester. They knew that the defensive line toward which the *Matsuda Force* was retreating was untenable. The *17th Division* troops could, and would, undoubtedly, fight doggedly to hold the Allies at bay before Talasea and Cape Hoskins in the north and Gasmata in the south. The enemy's dwindling force of warships and transports could attempt sacrifice runs to keep supplies flowing to the soldiers, and the naval planes of the *Eleventh Air Fleet* could provide weak and sporadic support of the ground action. Not even these few ships and aircraft were to be available, however. The success of the American amphibious assault on Kwajalein prompted the retirement of the *Combined Fleet* from its suddenly vulnerable base at Truk, and the follow-up carrier strike of 16–17 February on Truk decided Admiral Koga to issue recall orders to all Japanese naval aircraft in the Southeast Area.[2]

Enemy interceptors made their last attempt to break up an Allied air attack on Rabaul on 19 February. On the 20th, the fields that ringed Blanche Bay were deserted, "not a single moveable plane remaining" [3] to contest control of the air. The harbor yawned empty too, with the hulks of sunken ships the only reminder of the bustling fleet that had once based there. The Japanese stronghold was forced to rely entirely on its ground garrison for defense. Imamura and Kusaka determined to make that defending force as strong as possible, adding to it every available soldier and sailor on New Britain.

On 23 February, orders to withdraw to Rabaul were received at *17th Division* headquarters at Malalia. General Sakai gladly dropped the plans he had been formulating for holding out against the oncoming Allied troops, for he fully appreciated how isolated and hopeless his fight would have been. In the stead of preparations for a last-ditch defense centered on positions at Cape Hoskins, Sakai began hastily figuring the moves that would get his command back to Rabaul in fighting shape. The *Matsuda Force* was his major problem. The lead section of the weary column of men staggering along towards Talasea was still two weeks' march from the Willaumez Peninsula.

Unless the Allies suddenly broke their pattern of pursuit and surged ahead of the retreating Japanese troops, Sakai could

[1] Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: *Eighth Area Army Ops; 17th DivOps; 51st ReconRegt Diary; Komori Diary*; Hough and Crown, *New Britain Campaign.*

[2] *SE Area Nav Ops—III*, pp. 58–63.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 63.

figure that most of the men en route would reach their objective. Supply dumps located along the withdrawal routes held enough rations to enable the strongest and best-led elements of the *Matsuda Force* to make good their escape. The sick and wounded who fell behind, who lacked the strength to keep up with the main body or even to fend for themselves, were doomed. The kindest fate that might befall them was capture by a Marine patrol. Often the near-naked, emaciated wretches whom the Americans found glassy-eyed and dazed along the trails had not the strength left to survive the trip to the coast. So tangled and rugged was the country through which the enemy columns struggled that scores of stragglers who died a few feet off the track where they had crawled to rest would have lain unnoted but for the unforgettable stench of human remains rotting in the jungle.

The route taken by the defeated Japanese troops after they passed through Iboki headed sharply inland, following the course of the Aria River for 12–14 miles and passing through the native villages of Taliwaga and Upmadung on the west bank and Bulawatni and Augitni on the east. From Augitni, where the trail used by the *Komori Force* to escape Arawe joined, the track headed northeast across mountain slopes and through extensive swamps fed by sluggish, wide, and deep rivers. Hitting the coast at Linga Linga Plantation, a straight-line distance of 35 miles from Iboki, the route crossed the formidable obstacle posed by the Kapaluk River and paralleled the shore to Kandoka at the neck of Willaumez Peninsula. Continuing along the peninsula coast to Garu, the trail then crossed a mountain saddle to the eastern shore at Kilu and turned south to Numundo Plantation. An alternative route from Kandoka to Numundo across the base of the peninsula lay through a 15-mile-wide morass that bulged along the course of the Kulu River. Once the Japanese reached Numundo Plantation, they could follow the coastline trail to the airdrome at Cape Hoskins, to Malalia just beyond, and eventually, with luck, to Rabaul.

The task of keeping the escape route open until the *Matsuda Force* had reached the comparative safety of Malalia was given to two units. The *51st Reconnaissance Regiment* performed the duties of rear guard, insuring the enemy withdrawal from contact, and the *Terunuma Force*, a composite battalion of the *54th Infantry*, held the Talasea area, with orders to defend it against Allied attacks. The delaying actions of Colonel Sato's reconnaissance unit in western New Britain gave General Matsuda the respite he needed to get his command underway to the east. If the *Terunuma Force* carried out its mission equally well, it would hold its positions long enough for the hundreds of survivors of the Cape Gloucester battle to reach the area east of the Willaumez Peninsula. The Japanese commanders considered that they had enough troops in the Cape Hoskins sector to require the Allies to mount a large-scale amphibious operation to take it. And barring such an effort, the *17th Division* was confident that it could pull back to Rabaul with many of its units still in fighting trim. General Sakai estimated that most of his combat troops would reach the stronghold by mid-April and all of the remaining cohesive outfits, including rear-guard detachments, would make it by the middle of May.

Not all the Japanese movement had to be accomplished on foot; there were enough barges available to move a good part of the heavy munitions at Gasmata and Cape Hoskins back to Rabaul. Sick and wounded men, who could not survive a land journey, were given priority in these craft. Some combat units were transported a portion of the way to their goal in overwater jumps from Malalia to Ulamona and then on to Toriu. The first village was a major barge base about 65 miles from Cape Hoskins, and the second, 30 miles farther east, was the terminus of a trail network which led to Rabaul through the mountains of Gazelle Peninsula. The *17th Division* planned that its components would move lightly armed, carrying little reserve ammunition and only a bare subsistence level of rations. If the Allies attempted to cut the retreat route, all available units would concentrate to wipe out the landing force.

Only a few Japanese craft were risked in the dangerous waters west of Willaumez Peninsula, and these were used, on 21 February, to carry *2d Battalion, 53d Infantry* remnants to Volupai, opposite Talasea on Willaumez. The battalion, with reinforcing artillery, was sent on ahead of the main body of the *Matsuda Force* to form the nucleus of a covering force at Ulamona. The barges returned once more to the Aria River before the Marines landed at Iboki and took out General Matsuda, members of his immediate staff, and all the litter patients they could carry. Matsuda was landed at Malalia on the 25th.

Carrying out his orders, Colonel Sato of the *51st Reconnaissance Regiment* saw the last march element of the *Matsuda Force* safely through Upmadung before starting his own unit on the trail. At Augitni, Sato met Major Komori who had brought his troops up from Arawe, and the two groups, both under Sato's command, began moving east on 6 March. On the same date, the leading elements of the *Matsuda Force* column reached the base of Willaumez Peninsula.

VOLUPAI LANDING [4]

The 6th of March was the landing date chosen for the APPEASE Operation—the assault and seizure of the Talasea area of Willaumez Peninsula by the 5th Marines, reinforced. The principal objective included several parts, the government station on the shore of Garua Harbor that gave its title to the whole region, an emergency landing ground nearby, grandly called Talasea Airdrome, and the harbor itself which took its name from Garua Island that formed one of its arms. The landing beach, Red Beach, lay directly across the peninsula from Garua Harbor in the curve of a shallow bay at Volupai. The isthmus connecting the two points, 2½ miles apart, is the narrowest part of the peninsula. (See Map 30.)

Several plantations, one on Garua Island and the others at Volupai on the west coast and Santa Monica, Walindi, and Nu-

[4] Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: 1st MarDiv SAR, APPEASE Op, n.d., hereafter *APPEASE SAR;* ATIS Item No. 10443, Talasea Force Personnel Chart, dtd 4Mar44, in ATIS Bul No. 881, dtd 3Apr44 (ACSI Recs FRC, Alex); OCE, GHQ, AFP, *Amphibian Engineers*; Hough and Crown, *New Britain Campaign;* Col Robert Amory, Jr., AUS, and Capt Ruben M. Waterman, AUS, eds., *Surf and Sand, The Saga of the 553d Engineer Boat and Shore Regiment and 1461st Engineer Maintenance Company 1942–1945* (Andover, Mass.: The Andover Press, Ltd., 1947), hereafter Amory and Waterman, *Surf and Sand.*

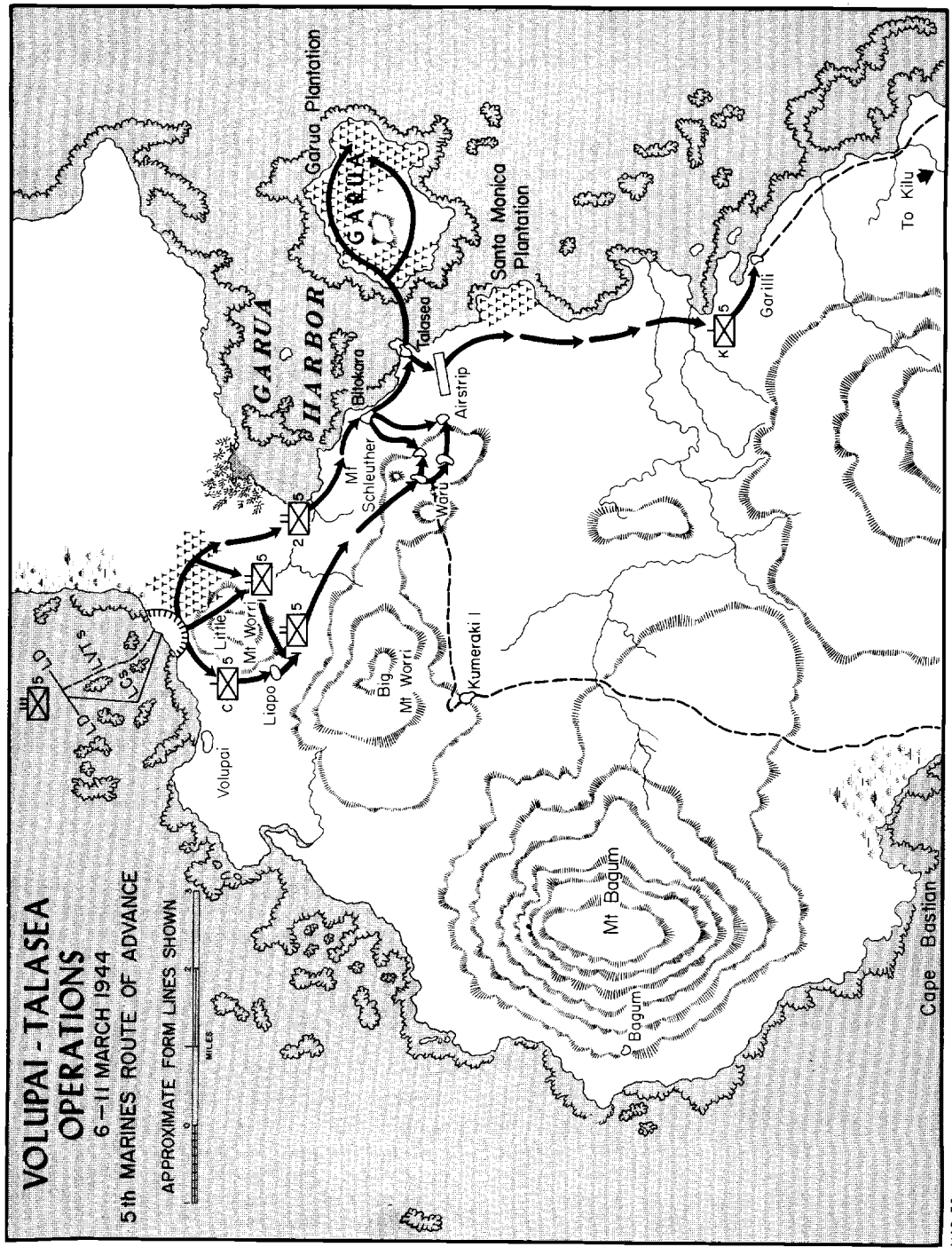
mundo on the eastern shore, had the only easily traveled ground on Willaumez. The terrain of the rest of the peninsula followed the general pattern of New Britain, mountains and high ground inland covered by rain forest, with foothills and coastal flats choked with swamp forest, secondary growth, and sprawling swamps along the course of the many rain-swollen rivers and streams. Above the isthmus between Volupai and Garua Harbor, the peninsula was little used by the natives or the Japanese because of impassable terrain. Below the narrow neck of land, much of it occupied by Volupai Plantation, there were a number of native villages along the coast and on mountain tablelands. A cluster of four called the Waru villages, about 1,500 yards west of Talasea, and Bitokara village, the same distance northwest of the government station, figured as intermediate objectives in 5th Marines' operation plans.

Red Beach was a 350-yard-wide corridor opening to Volupai Plantation, 400 yards inland; on its northern flank the beach was bordered by a swamp, to the south a cliff loomed over the sand. The cliff was part of the northwest slopes of Little Mt. Worri, a 1,360-foot peak that was overshadowed by 300 feet by its neighbor to the south, Big Mt. Worri. The eastern extension of Big Mt. Worri's ridgeline included Mt. Schleuther (1,130 feet) which dominated Bitokara, Talasea, and the Waru Villages. The trail from Volupai to Bitokara, which was to be the 5th Marines' axis of advance, skirted the base of these heights.

The major obstacle to the proposed landing at Volupai was the reef that extended 3,000 yards out from shore. Obviously impractical as the route for assault waves was the tortuous small-boat passage which wound through the coral formations. To make this narrow waterway safe for supply craft and support troops, the first Marines on Red Beach would have to land from LVTs which could ignore the reef and churn straight on to the beach from the line of departure. The 1st Marine Division would provide the tractors, the Seventh Fleet their transport and escort to the target, and the Army amphibian engineers all the rest of the landing craft needed. An Army officer, Lieutenant Colonel Robert Amory, Jr., would command all shipping during the movement to the objective and the landing.

The understrength company of LCVPs and LCMs that had supported BACKHANDER Force since D-Day could handle some portion of the load in the coming operation, but more engineer boats were needed. As early as 4 February, ALAMO Force alerted the Boat Battalion of the 533d Engineer Boat and Shore Regiment to a probable role in the coming operation. The 533d, a unit of the 3d Engineer Special Brigade, was newly arrived in the forward area and as yet untested in combat. Elements of the boat battalion headquarters, a boat company, a shore company, and a maintenance detachment, all under command of Lieutenant Colonel Amory, were detailed to the job. From Goodenough Island, the engineers and their equipment moved to Finschhafen, and, on 27 February, the advance echelon embarked in its own boats for the 85-mile run to Borgen Bay.

The soldier boatmen made their landfall late at night after a day-long passage through choppy seas, but they got no chance to explore the bivouac area, "in the least atrocious of the various swamps


VOLUPAI - TALASEA OPERATIONS
6 – 11 MARCH 1944
5th MARINES ROUTE OF ADVANCE
APPROXIMATE FORM LINES SHOWN
MILES
Volupai
Liapo
Little Mt Worri
Big Mt Worri
Kumeraki I
Mt Bagum
Bagum
Cape Bastian
GARUA HARBOR
GARUA
Garua Plantation
Bilokara
Mt Schleurher
Talasea
Waru
Airstrip
Santa Monica Plantation
Garilli
To Kilu
R.F. STIBIL

MAP 30

available," [5] which had been tentatively set aside for them. "Instead," the unit's history relates, "one of the worst 'rat races' of all times was to occupy every minute of every 24 hours for the next week." [6] This period of furious but ordered activity saw the movement of the 5th Marines and all its reinforcing units to Iboki, together with 20-days' supplies for the nearly 5,000 men of the APPEASE task force. Concurrently, the few dozen landing craft available had to be used to transport the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines to Iboki, where it could take over patrol missions from the 5th and be available as a reserve if the APPEASE operation demanded.

While the landing force assembled at its staging point, scouts tried several times to land on Willaumez Peninsula to determine the location and strength of enemy defending forces. Moving at night in torpedo boats, the men were turned back by high seas on one occasion and on another by a sighting of troops moving in the proposed landing area. Finally, early on 3 March, Australian Flight Lieutenant G. H. Rodney Marsland, who had managed Santa Monica plantation before the war, the 1st Division's chief scout, Lieutenant Bradbeer, and two natives landed near Bagum village about nine miles from Volupai. Setting up in the village, the party sent runners out to contact key natives known to Marsland and discover the Japanese dispositions. After nearly 24 hours ashore, the scouts withdrew with some useful information on the location and size of various enemy detachments, but they had surprisingly received no report of the major enemy concentration in the immediate Talasea area.[7]

Defending Willaumez Peninsula was a garrison of 595 men, some 430 of them concentrated in the vicinity of Talasea. A Japanese muster roll, completed at the same time the BACKHANDER scouts were ashore, agreed very closely with the information that was reported to the 5th Marines at Iboki. Volupai had only a rifle platoon and a machine gun squad to defend the beach, 28 men in all, but the bulk of the enemy force was within easy reinforcing distance. The Japanese, all under Captain Kiyomatsu Terunuma, commander of the *1st Battalion, 54th Infantry*, consisted of most of that unit,[8] plus the *7th Company* of the *2d Battalion, 54th*, the *9th Battery, 23d Field Artillery*, a platoon of machine guns, and a platoon of 90mm mortars. Terunuma's orders were to hold his positions north of Kilu and the Walindi Plantation and not to retreat without permission of the *17th Division* commander.

The 5th Marines had no indication that Red Beach was heavily defended; the natives reported that the area was not fortified, and aerial reconnaissance appeared to confirm this intelligence. Support for the APPEASE landing was therefore not overwhelming, but it was adequate for the job at hand. For three days prior to D-Day, Australian Beaufort squadrons based at Kiriwina Island flew bombing and strafing missions against targets in the Talasea and Cape Hoskins vicinity, and, on D-Day, the RAAF planes were to provide cover for the attack flotilla and to

[5] Amory and Waterman, *Surf and Sand*, p. 77.
[6] *Ibid.*, p. 78.
[7] 1stLt John D. Bradbeer Rept on Talasea Recon, dtd 4Mar44, in PhibRecon PtlRepts, Cape Gloucester and Talasea, 11Oct43–9Mar44.
[8] *Japanese comments.*

blast Red Beach ahead of the assault waves. To make up for the absence of naval gunfire support, the 1st Division came up with its own brand of gunboats—medium tanks in LCMs. Four Shermans were added to the platoon of light tanks attached to the 5th Marines to provide the necessary firepower. Tests of the novel means of shelling the beach were made at Iboki to make sure that the tanks could fire from their seagoing gun platforms. The accuracy of the practice firing with 75mm cannon was nothing to boast about,[9] but the makeshift gunboats proved to be practical.

The operation plan of the 5th Marines called for the 1st Battalion, embarked in LVTs, to land in assault and secure a beachhead line which passed through the edge of Volupai plantation. The 2d Battalion, following directly behind in LCMs and LCVPs, was to pass through the 1st's positions and attack up the trail to Bitokara to seize the Talasea area. Two batteries of 75mm pack howitzers of 2/11 were to follow the assault battalions ashore on 6 March to furnish artillery support for the attack across the peninsula. On D plus 1, the 5th's 3d Battalion and reserve elements of the regiment's reinforcing units would move to Red Beach in landing craft which had returned from Willaumez.

Shortly before the APPEASE operation got underway, the 5th Marines got a new commander, Colonel Oliver P. Smith, who had just reported to the division. Colonel Selden stepped up to division chief of staff, replacing Smith who held the position briefly following his arrival on New Britain. A number of experienced senior officers, including Colonel Amor L. Sims, who had been chief of staff, and Colonel Pollock, the D–3, had returned to the States in February to fill key assignments in the continuing build-up of the Marine Corps for the Pacific War. Two of the 5th's battalions also had comparatively new commanders. Major Gordon D. Gayle, who led 2/5, had taken over when Lieutenant Colonel Walt was promoted to regimental executive officer; Lieutenant Colonel Harold O. Deakin, who had the 3d Battalion, assumed command after the battle for Aogiri Ridge was successfully concluded.

The invasion convoy that assembled off Iboki on 5 March for the 57-mile-long run to Volupai included 38 LCMs, 17 LCVPs, 5 LCTs, and 5 MTBs. Each of the Navy's LCTs carried five tractors of Company B, 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion, and the Marines of 1/5 who would ride them. The torpedo boats were under orders to escort the LCTs, as naval officers were dubious about risking their valuable landing craft in poorly charted waters without adequate communications or proper navigational guides. If anything, the engineer coxswains of Amory's command had more to worry about than the sailors, for their boats were a good bit more thin-skinned than the LCTs, and they would be moving at night through strange waters abounding in coral outcroppings.

Men of the 1st and 2d Battalions, 5th Marines and the regiment's various reinforcing elements began loading their boats at 1300, and, at 2200, the convoy departed, carrying more than 3,000 men and 1,000 tons of equipment. Lieutenant Colonel Amory later categorized his motley convoy as "probably the war's out-

[9] LtCol Rowland L. Hall comments on draft of Hough and Crown, *New Britain Campaign*, dtd 27Mar52.

standing example of overloading small boats," [10] but the movement to the target came off without a major hitch despite heavy rain squalls that struck shortly after midnight and continued for two hours.

There was one mishap en route with potentially serious consequences, but the lack of determined opposition at Red Beach negated its effect. The boat carrying the Army air liaison party attached to the landing force broke down early in the movement, and Major Gayle's boat, which was proceeding independently after a late start, took the crippled craft in tow. Gayle was reluctant to delay his own progress, but considered the liaison group's radios to be of vital importance in contacting supporting air units. As a result of his prudent action, the 2/5 commander arrived off Volupai after his battalion had begun landing, but its executive officer, Major Charles R. Baker, was fully in control.

The convoy of small craft arrived at its appointed place about 3½ miles off the coast at Volupai as dawn was breaking on D-Day. The LCTs closed slowly toward the reef as the Marines looked anxiously skyward for the planes which were supposed to be flashing in to hit the possible enemy positions at Red Beach. None of the RAAF Beauforts appeared, as their fields on Kiriwina were weathered in,[11] and the troops became more and more conscious of their exposure to an unknown enemy waiting on the silent shore. Lieutenant Colonel Amory, from his LCVP at the head of the line of landing craft, radioed Colonel Smith, "Shall we proceed despite air failure," and the landing force commander replied immediately, "Carry on." [12]

At 0825, on Amory's signal, the LCTs lowered their ramps and the LVTs of the first two waves roared into the water and on across the reef. As the tractors started toward the beach, Amory led a boat loaded with navigation buoys and two of the tank gunboats into the coral-free lane that aerial photos showed led to the beach. At the same time, on the opposite (left) flank of the line of departure, the other pair of tanks in LCMs started shoreward, keeping pace with the LVTs for as long as the irregular coral formations would permit. Standing on the bow of his boat, Amory with Flight Lieutenant Marsland at his side, conned the craft through the open water passage while the trailing LCVP dropped buoys to guide the third and succeeding waves of the landing force. The route that had to be used ran 45 degrees to the right of the path the tractors were following over the reefs until it got within 75 yards of the shore, where it "swung sharply to the left to coast six tenths of a mile just barely outside the overhanging trees to the beach at Volupai Plantation." [13]

The tanks opened fire with their machine guns to cover the approach of the

[10] Amory and Waterman, *Sand and Surf*, p. 84. The regiment was fully aware of the overloading but had no alternative. Since there was no follow-up shipping, "resupply could only be accomplished by returning the landing craft used in the assault to Iboki to reload. The Landing Force could, therefore, expect no additional supplies for over 24 hours after landing. The supplies accompanying the Landing Force were increased accordingly." Gen Oliver P. Smith memo to HistBr, G–3, HQMC, dtd 7Jun62.

[11] Craven and Cate, *Guadalcanal to Saipan*, p. 344.

[12] LtCol Robert Amory, Jr., MassNatGrd, ltr to CMC, dtd 25Mar52, including extract from his personal diary for 6Mar44.

[13] *Ibid.*

tractors to the beach, reserving their 75s for any Japanese return fire. The spray of bullets from all the American landing craft, for the LCVPs and the LVTs fired as well, was finally answered by a few scattered shots from the featureless jungle, and then mortar shells began falling amidst the oncoming tractors. At this moment, the assault troops got all the close air support that the 5th Marines received on D-Day, and that from an unexpected source—a Piper Cub circling overhead, with Captain Petras as pilot and Brigadier General David A. D. Ogden, Commanding General, 3d Engineer Special Brigade, as observer. Petras, when he saw the shell bursts, turned his tiny plane in over the tree-tops and started dropping the 25–30 hand grenades he carried on "any of the spots where it looked like there might be some Japs." [14] The results of the impromptu bombing were never checked, but the gallant effort drew considerable praise from the men who witnessed it.

At 0835, the LVTs crawled onto the beach, and the Marines of 1/5's assault platoons clambered over the sides and began advancing cautiously inland. There was little opposition from enemy infantry at first, but mortar rounds continued to fall, with most of them hitting out in the water where the columns of landing boat waves were beginning to thread their way through the buoyed channel. After Lieutenant Colonel Amory waved the tank-LCMs in for a landing, he proceeded out into the narrow passageway to act as control officer to keep the boats from swamping the limited capacity of the beach. After untangling a snarl of landing craft that occurred when the third wave tried to follow the tractors rather than the marked passage, the Army officer spent the morning directing traffic at the corner where the channel turned to parallel the shore.

Major Barba's two assault companies had little difficulty reaching their assigned objective. Company B encountered the only resistance, a small pocket of enemy riflemen it wiped out as it skirted the edge of the swamp that came right up to the northern edge of the Volupai-Bitokara track. Following his orders, Barba established a beachhead perimeter 200 yards inland and dispatched combat patrols to the flanks of his position as he waited for 2/5 to land and pass through his lines.

Immediately after the first tractors touched down on dry land, a reinforced platoon of 1/5 was sent up the slopes of Little Mt. Worri to eliminate an enemy machine gun nest. The existence of the position had been disclosed to the Marsland-Bradbeer scouting party by the natives. When the patrol found the emplacement, which commanded a good field of fire on the beach, it was abandoned. Pushing on through the thick undergrowth, the Marines sighted and engaged a group of enemy soldiers carrying a machine gun down the mountain toward Volupai Plantation.[15] Japanese resistance stiffened appreciably as the 1/5 patrol neared the coconut groves; in the exchange of fire the Marines accounted for a dozen enemy and lost one man killed and another wounded. The patrol leader called for another platoon to help him destroy the position he had developed, but

[14] Maj Theodore A. Petras interview by HistDiv, HQMC, dtd 11Apr50, p. 7.

[15] Col William H. Barba comments on draft of Hough and Crown, *New Britain Campaign*, dtd 24Mar52.

was given orders to hold up where he was until the 2d Battalion arrived on the scene.

The limited area for maneuver directly behind Red Beach and the narrow passage that had to be used to reach the shore slowed unloading appreciably. When Major Gayle reached the seaward end of the channel at 1230, reserve elements of his battalion were still landing, as were the firing batteries of Major Noah P. Wood, Jr.'s 2/11, carried in the LCMs of the last two waves. Company E of 2/5 had already passed through the 1st Battalion's lines at 1100 and run up against the enemy strongpoint located by the 1/5 patrol earlier in the morning.

Three of the medium tanks which had furnished the naval gunfire for the assault landing came up the trail to support Company E in its attack; the fourth tank was bogged down in soft ground at the beach. When the lead Sherman opened fire on the Japanese, it quickly silenced a machine gun that had been holding up the infantry. Then, as the big machine ground ahead on the mud-slickened track, enemy soldiers leaped out of the brush on either flank and attempted to attach magnetic mines to its sides. One man was shot down immediately by covering infantry; the other succeeded in planting his mine and died in its resulting blast, taking with him a Marine who had tried to stop the contact. The mine jammed the tank's turret and momentarily stunned the crew; luckily, the Marines inside also escaped injury from an antitank grenade that hit and penetrated the turret at about the same time. The damaged tank pulled off the trail to let the following armor come through and lead Company E's assault. Later, when the tank attempted to move on up the trail, it exploded a mine that smashed one of its bogie wheels. The presence of land mines resulted in a hurry-up call to division for detectors.

Rooting out the enemy from his trenches and emplacements on the edge of the coconut plantation, the tank-infantry team crushed the opposition and moved ahead with 1/5's 81mm mortars dropping concentrations on any likely obstacle in the way. As Gayle took command of the attack, the Marines had a much clearer idea of what they were going to run up against. At the height of the battle for the enemy position, a map showing the defenses of the Talasea area had been found on the body of a Japanese officer, and, as happened so many times on New Britain, intelligence indoctrination paid off. The document was immediately turned in, not pocketed as a souvenir, and, by 1300, the regimental intelligence section was distributing translated copies.

Once it had passed the Japanese defenses near the beach, the 2d Battalion, with Company E following the track and Company G moving along the mountain slopes on the right flank, made rapid progress through the plantation. At about 1500, five P–39s of the 82d Reconnaissance Squadron at Cape Gloucester flew over the peninsula, but could not locate the Marine front lines, so they dropped their bombs on Cape Hoskins instead.[16] At dusk, Major Gayle ordered his two assault companies to dig in for all-around defense,

[16] 1st MarDiv D–2 Jnl, entry at 1932, 6Mar44. Although this message, which calls the planes P–38s, does not denote the squadron or its location, the operation plan states that four "P–39s" would be on standby at Gloucester. Army Air Forces squadron records at Maxwell Field show that the 82d, which was staging at Cape Gloucester, bombed enemy installations at Cape Hos-

while he set up with his headquarters and reserve in a separate perimeter at the enemy position that had been reduced during the day's fighting. The 2d Battalion, 11th Marines had registered its batteries during the afternoon, and the pack howitzers now fired harassing missions through the night to discourage any counterattacks from forming.

The artillery had taken a beating from the Japanese mortars during the day, as the enemy 90mm shells exploded all over the crowded beach area. Some of the 75s had to set up almost at the water's edge so that they could have an unmasked field of fire. Corpsmen going to the aid of artillerymen who were hit while unloading and moving into position all too often became casualties themselves. During the action on 6 March, the 5th Marines and its supporting elements lost 13 men killed and 71 wounded; 9 of the Marines who died and 29 of those who were wounded were members of 2/11. Fifty of the regiment's seriously wounded men were loaded in an LCM and sent back to Iboki at 1830. The toll of counted enemy dead was 35; if there were Japanese wounded, they were evacuated by the elements of the *Terunuma Force* that had pulled back as 2/5 advanced.

Colonel Smith could count his regiment well established ashore at the end of D-Day. In the next day's attack, he planned to keep pressure on the Japanese, not only along the vital cross-peninsula track, but also in the mountains that overshadowed it. Captain Terunuma, in his turn, was ordering the moves that would stave off the Marine advance and protect the elements of the *Matsuda Force* which were just starting to cross the base of the peninsula.

SECURING TALASEA [17]

To reinforce the shattered remnants of the small Volupai area garrison which had made a hopeless attempt to stem the Marine advance, Terunuma sent his *4th Company*, reinforced with machine guns and mortars, "to check the enemy's attack." [18] At dawn on 7 March, patrols from 2/5 scouting the trail to Bitokara found the Japanese dug in not 50 yards from the Marines' forward foxholes. When Major Gayle's assault company (E) led off the morning's attack, the enemy entrenchments were found deserted. One of the deadly 90mm mortars was captured intact with shellholes from 2/11's fire as close as five feet to its emplacement. Passing swiftly through the abandoned hasty defenses, the 2d Battalion pressed on towards the coast with patrols ranging the foothills that dominated the trail. As Gayle's advance guard neared Mt. Schleuther just before noon, elements of the *4th Company, 54th Infantry* swept the track clear with a deadly concentration of fire. It was soon evident that the Japanese force, which was holding a position on the northwest slopes of the mountain, was too strong to be brushed aside. The pattern of enemy fire, in fact, showed that the Japanese were

kins between 1345 and 1430. The 80th Fighter Squadron, part of Gloucester's regular complement, filled in for the missing RAAF planes and dispatched P–38s over Talasea at 1055, 1110, and 1535; none of the Lightnings attacked ground targets. Dr. Robert F. Futrell, USAF HistDiv, ltr to Head, HistBr, G–3, dtd 19Jun62.

[17] Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: *APPEASE SAR; 17th Div Ops;* Hough and Crown, *New Britain Campaign.*

[18] ATIS Item No. 10,441, Talasea Garrison Unit OpO No. 42, dtd 7Mar44, in ATIS Bul No. 881, dtd 3Apr44 (ACSI Recs, FRC Alex).

moving to outflank the Marines below and cut them off from the rest of the battalion column.

While Company E built up a strong firing line amid the dripping undergrowth along the trail, Major Gayle sent Company F directly up the steep slopes to hit the enemy troops trying to push west. Moving forward behind artillery and mortar supporting fires, the 2d Battalion Marines beat the Japanese to the dominant ground in the area and drove the losers back with heavy casualties. Coming up on the extreme right of Company F's position, a supporting weapons platoon surprised a machine gun crew setting up, wiped out the luckless enemy, and turned the gun on the retreating Japanese. As the firing died away, the bodies of 40 enemy soldiers testified to the fury of the action. For night security, 2/5 organized a perimeter encompassing its holding on Mt. Schleuther and the track to Bitokara.

Colonel Smith's attack on 7 March was to have been a two-pronged affair with 2/5 moving along the main trail and 1/5 heading into the mountain mass toward the village of Liapo behind Little Mt. Worri and then east to the Waru villages, believed to be the center of enemy resistance. The plan depended upon the 3d Battalion's arrival early on D plus 1 to take over defense of the beachhead. Lieutenant Colonel Deakin had orders to board the landing craft returning from Volupai and make a night passage to Red Beach to be on hand at daybreak to relieve the 1st Battalion. General Rupertus, who was present at Iboki, countermanded the order and directed that no boats leave until after dawn on 7 March. The result of this unexpected change of plans, made to lessen the risk in transit through uncharted waters, was that 3/5 arrived at Volupai late in the afternoon.

After it became clear the reserve would be delayed, a reinforced company of the 1st Battalion was started inland for Liapo to pave the way for the next day's operations. When the trail disappeared in a clutter of secondary growth, the company hacked its way onward on a compass course, but ended the tiring advance some distance short of the target. The approach of darkness prompted the isolated Marine unit to set up in perimeter defense. The night passed without incident.

On 8 March, Major Barba's battalion, moving to the east of Little Mt. Worri, started toward Liapo along two separate paths. Unfortunately, a native guide, dressed in cast-off Japanese clothing, leading a column headed by Company B, was mistaken for the enemy by a similar Company A column. In the brief outburst of fire that followed the unexpected encounter, one man was killed and several others wounded. Shortly afterwards, near Liapo, the battalion found the east-west trail it was seeking and joined the company that had spent the night in the jungle. Although it encountered no Japanese opposition as it moved towards its objective during the remainder of the day's advance, 1/5 found the rugged terrain a formidable obstacle. The men climbed and slid through numerous ravines and beat aside the clinging brush that often obscured the trace of the path they were following. At nightfall, Barba's units set up in defense a few hundred yards short of their goal.

Major Gayle's battalion had a hard time with both enemy and terrain on 8 March, but not until it had seized a sizeable chunk of the regiment's primary objective. A

patrol out at daybreak found the last known position of the Japanese manned only by the dead: 12 soldiers, most of them victims of American artillery and mortar fire. Another patrol discovered a sizeable enemy force 500 yards ahead at Bitokara, and Gayle readied a full-strength attack. When the battalion jumped off, with assault platoons converging from the foothills and the track, it found that the Japanese had pulled out again. Bitokara was occupied early in the afternoon, and scouts were dispatched along the shore to Talasea. Again there was plenty of evidence of recent enemy occupation but no opposition. Taking advantage of the situation, Gayle sent Company F to occupy Talasea airdrome nearby.

Scouts who climbed the slopes of Mt. Schleuther, which looked down on Bitokara, soon found where some of the missing Japanese had gone. A well-intrenched enemy force was located on a prominent height that commanded the village, and Gayle made preparations to attack. At 1500, Company E, reinforced with heavy weapons, drove upward against increasing resistance. The fire of a 75mm mountain gun and a 90mm mortar, added to that from rifles and machine guns, stalled the Marines. After an hour's fighting, during which the company sustained 18 casualties, Gayle ordered it to withdraw to Bitokara for the night. When the Japanese began to pepper the village with 75mm rounds, concentrating their shelling on 81mm mortar positions near the battalion command post, Gayle called down artillery on the height. The American howitzers and mortars continued to work over the enemy position all night long.

At 0800 on the 9th, a coordinated attack by companies of both assault battalions was launched to clear Mt. Schleuther and capture the Waru Villages. The artillery and mortar concentrations that preceded the jump-off and the powerful infantry attack that followed hit empty air. One dead soldier and two stragglers were all that was left of the defending force that had fought so hard to hold the hill position on the previous afternoon. The prisoners stated that the main body of the *Terunuma Force* had moved south down the coast on the night of 7 March, leaving a 100-man rear guard to hold off the Marines. This last detachment had taken off in turn after beating back 2/5's attack on the 8th.

Patrols of the 5th Marines searched Garua Island and the entire objective area during the rest of the day and confirmed the fact that the Japanese had departed, leaving their heavy weapons behind. Colonel Smith moved the regimental command post to Bitokara during the afternoon and disposed his 1st Battalion around the Waru villages, the 2d at Talasea and the airdrome, and left the 3d to hold Red Beach. He then informed division that Talasea was secured, and that the 5th Marines would patrol Willaumez Peninsula to clear it of the enemy.

The end of Japanese resistance in the objective area gave the Marines use of an excellent harbor and brought a welcome end to use of Red Beach. Colonel Smith directed that all supply craft would land their cargoes at Talasea from 9 March onward. Marine pioneers and Army shore party engineers were ordered to improve the Volupai-Bitokara track enough to enable them to move all supplies and equipment to Talasea; the job took three days of hard work. The track was deep in mud from the effects of rain and heavy traffic

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as evidenced by three medium tanks trapped in its mire.

Amphibian tractors had again proved to be the only vehicles that could keep up with the Marine advance; 2/5 used the LVTs as mobile dumps to maintain adequate levels of ammunition and rations within effective supporting distance. When the occasion demanded, the tractors were used for casualty evacuation, too. Although the ride back to the beach was a rough one for a wounded man, it was far swifter than the rugged trip that faced him with stretcher bearers struggling through mud.

The cost of the four-day operation to the 5th Marines and its reinforcing units was 17 men killed and 114 wounded. The Japanese lost an estimated 150 men killed and an unknown number wounded. The fighting had been sporadic but sharp, and Captain Terunuma had engaged the Marines just enough to earn the time that the *Matsuda Force* remnants needed to escape. The retirement of the *Terunuma Force* was deliberate; at Garilli, four miles south of Talasea, the Japanese halted and dug in to await the Marines.

MOP-UP PATROLS [19]

When General Sakai issued his withdrawal orders for the various elements of the *17th Division*, he was quite anxious to recover the 1,200-man garrison of Garove Island. Until the Marines landed at Volupai, he was stymied in this wish by *Eighth Area Army's* desire to keep the island in use as a barge relay point. Once the Americans had established themselves on Willaumez Peninsula, Garove was no longer of any value to the Japanese.[20] Resolving to risk some of the few boats and landing craft that he had left to evacuate the garrison, Sakai ordered the *5th Sea Transport Battalion* to load as many men as could crowd aboard the three fishing vessels and the one sampan available and sail for Ulamona. (See Map 31.)

The jam-packed boats, carrying about 700 men, left Garove shortly after midnight on 6 March and reached Ulamona unscathed the next afternoon. On their return voyage that night, the boats were intercepted by American torpedo boats and sunk. Immediately, the commander of the *8th Shipping Engineers*, who was holding three large landing craft in reserve for this purpose at Malalia, sent them directly to the island to bring off the remainder of the garrison. The craft were discovered by torpedo boats and sunk after a running gun battle. Despite these losses, three more landing craft were sent to the island where they picked up 400 men and escaped to Rabaul without encountering any of the deadly torpedo boats or being spotted by Allied aircraft.

The waters around Willaumez Peninsula became increasingly unhealthy for the Japanese as the APPEASE Operation wore on. On the 9th of March, while an LCT carrying supplies to Talasea rounded the northern end of the peninsula, it sighted and shot up four barges lying ill-hidden amidst the overhanging foliage on

[19] Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: *APPEASE SAR; 17th Div Ops; 51st ReconRegt Diary; Komori Diary;* Hough and Crown, *New Britain Campaign.*

[20] The 3d Battalion, 1st Marines was alerted for a possible landing on Garove, but scouts who went ashore there on 7 March discovered signs that a considerable garrison was still present and heavily armed. The 1st Division then abandoned the plan to seize the island, figuring the objective not worth its probable cost in casualties.

the shore. On the same day, LCMs ferrying Marine light tanks, which were a more seaworthy load than the Shermans, encountered a Japanese landing craft and drove it ashore with a torrent of 37mm canister and .30-caliber machine gun fire. The terrier-like torpedo boats were the major killers, however, and, after a patrol base was established in Garua Harbor on 26 March, the northern coast of New Britain as far east as Gazelle Peninsula was soon swept clean of enemy craft.

Before the torpedo boats were out in force, however, the Japanese managed to evacuate a considerable number of men from staging points at Malalia and Ulamona. Except for Colonel Sato's rear guard, most elements of the *17th Division* had reached Cape Hoskins by the end of March. Issuing parties, in the carefully laid-out ration depots along the coastal trail, doled out just enough food to keep the men moving east, and then folded up as the units designated for rear guard at Malalia, Ulamona, and Toriu came marching in.

The only good chance that the Marines at Talasea had of blocking the retreat of General Matsuda's depleted command was canceled out by the skillful delaying action of Captain Terunuma. A reconnaissance patrol discovered the Japanese position at Garilli on the 10th, and its destruction was a part of the mission given Company K, 3/5, when it moved out toward Numundo Plantation on the 11th. The company found that the enemy force had abandoned Garilli but was set up along the coastal trail about three miles farther south. The small-scale battle that ensued was the first of many in the next four days, as the Japanese blocked the Marines every few hundred yards and then withdrew before they could be badly hurt. An enemy 75mm gun, dragged along by its crew, helped defend the successive trail blocks and disrupted a number of attempts to rush the Japanese defenses.

Late on the 16th, Company K reached Kilu village and tangled with the *Terunuma Force* for the last time. As the Marines and the Japanese fought, an LCM carrying Lieutenant Colonel Deakin and an 81mm mortar section came through the fringing reef. The enemy artillery piece fired on the landing craft, but failed to score a hit. The arrival of the 81s appeared to turn the trick. As soon as the mortars started firing, Captain Terunuma's men broke contact and faded away.

On the 18th, Company K reached Numundo, and, on the 25th, the whole 2d Battalion outposted the plantation. Five days later, Major Gayle moved his unit to San Remo Plantation about five miles to the southeast and began patrolling west to the Kulu River and east as far as Buluma, a coastal village halfway to Hoskins airdrome. On the peninsula, 1/5 set up a strong ambush at Garu on the west coast. All units patrolled extensively, making repeated visits to native villages, checking the myriad of side trails leading off the main tracks, and actively seeking out the Japanese. Many stragglers were bagged, but only one organized remnant of the *Matsuda Force* was encountered in two months of searching. The task of destroying this unit, what was left of Colonel Sato's reconnaissance regiment, fell to 2/1.

The 1st Marines had the responsibility of maintaining a patrol base at Iboki and spreading a network of outposts and ambushes through the rugged coastal region. In mid-March, Marine and Army patrols both made the trip between Arawe and the

north coast, discovering and using the trails that the Japanese had followed. Sick and emaciated enemy fugitives were occasionally found, but the signs all pointed to the fact that those who could walk were now east of this once important boundary.

Only a few engineer boats could be spared from resupply activities for patrol work. These LCMs and LCVPs were used to transport strong units, usually reinforced platoons or small companies, to points like Linga Linga Plantation and Kandoka where the Japanese had maintained ration dumps. The lure of food was irresistible for the starving enemy troops stumbling through the jungle, and the Marines took advantage of the certainty that the Japanese would at least scout the vicinity of places where they had counted on finding rations.

Near Kandoka on 26 March, Colonel Sato's advance party ran head-on into a scout platoon from 2/1. The Japanese caught the Marine unit as it was crossing a stream and cut loose in a blaze of rifle and machine gun fire. For three hours, the Americans were pinned down on the stream banks before the arrival of another 2/1 patrol enabled them to withdraw; one Marine was killed and five wounded. Sato, who had several of his own men wounded in the fight, made the decision to bypass Kandoka and cut through the jungle south of the village. He ordered his men to strip themselves of everything but their weapons and ammunition for the push into the swamps at the base of Willaumez. On the 27th, Marine attempts to locate the Japanese column were unsuccessful, but the days of the *51st Reconnaissance Regiment* were numbered.

While the head of Sato's column was nearing Kandoka, the tail was sighted at Linga Linga by one of the 1st Division's Cubs. The pilot, again the busy Captain Petras, was scouting a suitable landing beach for a large 2/1 patrol. After drawing a map that located the Japanese, he dropped it to the patrol and then guided the engineer coxswains into shore at the rear of the enemy positions. This time the Marines missed contact with Sato's force, but with the aid of the landing craft they were able to move freely along the coast as additional sightings pinned down the location of the enemy unit.

On 30 March, a small Marine patrol sighted Sato's rear guard, 73 men accompanied by the redoubtable enemy colonel himself, who was by this time a litter patient. Major Charles H. Brush, 2/1's executive officer, who was commanding patrol activities in the region, reacted quickly to the report of his scouts. Leaving a trail block force at Kandoka, he plunged into the jungle with the rest of the men available, roughly a reinforced platoon, to engage the Japanese. Shortly before Brush reached the scene, a six-man patrol under Sergeant Frank Chilek had intercepted the Sato column and brought it to a halt by sustained rifle fire. When Brush arrived, Chilek's unit was pulled back by his platoon leader, who had come up with a squad of reinforcements, so that the stronger Marine force would have a clear field of fire. The Japanese were wiped out, and, miraculously, not a Marine was harmed in the brief but furious battle. At least 55 Japanese were killed in one 100-yard stretch of trail, including Colonel Sato, who died sword in hand, cut down by Chilek's patrol.

A few elements of the enemy reconnaissance regiment, those near the head of its column, escaped from the battle on 30 March. Without the inspiration of Sato, however, the survivors fell apart as a unit and tried to make their way eastward as individuals and small groups. Most of these men died in the jungle, victims of malnutrition, disease, and the vicious terrain; others were killed or captured by Marine patrols and outposts.

The 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, operating out of its base at San Remo, accounted for many of these stragglers who blundered into ambushes set on the trails that led to Cape Hoskins. Major Komori, who had led the quixotic defense of an airfield no one wanted, was one of those who met his end in a flurry of fire at a 2/5 outpost.

The major, wracked with malaria, had fallen behind his unit, and, accompanied only by his executive officer and two enlisted men, had tried to struggle onward. On 9 April, a Marine outguard killed Komori and two of his party; the sole survivor was wounded and captured. The death of Major Komori brought to a symbolic end the Allied campaign to secure western New Britain.

Conclusion

RELIEF IN PLACE[1]

Navy and Marine Corps leaders were seriously concerned about the retention of the 1st Marine Division in the Southwest Pacific Area and particularly about its employment in a role that did not take full advantage of its training and experience.[2] Veteran amphibious divisions were scarce throughout the Pacific, and officers of the naval service felt that the shore-to-shore operations which General MacArthur had projected for the remainder of 1944 could be handled well by units that had not made a specialty of amphibious assault. In sharp contrast, the capture of the island targets of Admiral Nimitz' Central Pacific drive demanded trained amphibious divisions. To spearhead its long overwater advances and the unavoidable fierce contests to win secure beachheads, the Navy wanted Marine assault troops.

The allocation of troops to seize various Pacific objectives rested with the Joint Chiefs of Staff. In Washington, the Commandant of the Marine Corps worked through Admiral King to get the 1st Marine Division back under naval command and employed to its full amphibious capability.[3] Neither General Vandegrift nor General Rupertus was convinced that pursuit of the remnants of the Japanese garrison of western New Britain was a task that made the best use of the division.[4] General MacArthur was reluctant to release the Marine unit to Pacific Ocean Areas' command, however, until operations to seize Kavieng and further isolate Rabaul were concluded.

During March, at a series of conferences in Washington attended by key representatives of both MacArthur's and Nimitz' staff, the conflicting points of view regarding the relative strength to be employed in the Central and Southwest Pacific offensives were aired. On the 12th, the Joint Chiefs directed CinCSWPA to complete the isolation of Rabaul with a minimum of forces and to bypass Kavieng, while he made his main thrust west along the New Guinea coast toward the Philippines. CinCPOA was ordered to seize positions in the southern Marianas in June and then to move on to the Palaus in Sep-

[1] Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: *GHQ G–3 Jnl*, Mar–Apr-44; Isely and Crowl, *Marines and Amphibious War*.

[2] In a marginal comment to a letter from General Rupertus, informing him that the 1st Marine Division might have to stay on New Britain for a considerable period of time, General Vandegrift noted: "Six months there and it will no longer be a well-trained amphibious division." MajGen William H. Rupertus ltr to LtGen Alexander A. Vandegrift, dtd 4Feb44 (Vandegrift Personal Correspondence File, HQMC).

[3] LtGen Alexander A. Vandegrift ltr to LtGen Holland M. Smith, dtd 15Mar44 (Vandegrift Personal Correspondence File, HQMC).

[4] *Ibid.;* MajGen William H. Rupertus ltr to LtGen Alexander A. Vandegrift, dtd 18Feb44 (Vandegrift Personal Correspondence File, HQMC).

tember. The 1st Marine Division was to be returned to Nimitz' control for employment as an assault division in the Palaus operation.

The JCS left the negotiations regarding the actual redeployment of the 1st Division up to the two senior Pacific commanders. On 31 March, Nimitz radioed MacArthur asking that the division be disengaged as soon as possible and withdrawn to a base in the Solomons. In reply, the general stated that he thought that the division should not be relieved until late June and that when the relief took place it would require extensive use of amphibious equipment since there were no docks at Cape Gloucester. MacArthur indicated that in view of prospective operations in his area such equipment was not available to accomplish the relief.

On 6 April, both Marshall and Nimitz reminded MacArthur of the intended employment of the 1st Marine Division in the Palaus operation, and Nimitz stated that the division would have to be released prior to 1 June in order to "have ample time to prepare for participation in a major amphibious assault."[5] At the same time, Admiral Halsey was asked to determine to what extent his South Pacific Force could support the movement of troops involved. The Pacific Ocean Area's commander pointed out further that the timing and success of operations in the Palaus depended upon the planned use of the 1st Division, and that any delay in the completion of the campaign would "cause corresponding delays in the readiness of the Pacific Fleet"[6] to support MacArthur's operations.

[5] CinCPOA msg to CinCSWPA, dtd 6Apr44, in *GHQ G–3 Jnl*, 9Apr44.

[6] *Ibid.*

The reaction to the messages from Pearl Harbor and Washington was swift. By 8 April, arrangements had been made to relieve the 1st Marine Division with the 40th Infantry Division which was stationed on Guadalcanal. The movement was to be made in two echelons using transports belonging to Halsey's force. To speed the transfer and ease cargo space requirements, the two divisions were directed to exchange in place all equipment that was common to both or could be reasonably substituted therefor. The first elements of the 40th Division to arrive at New Britain would be utilized to relieve the Marines deployed in the Iboki and Talasea areas.

MARINE WITHDRAWAL[7]

Before the Army relief arrived, the 1st Marine Division had begun the inevitable aftermath of a combat operation—a new training cycle. On 17 March, General Rupertus issued a directive to all units at Cape Gloucester outlining a seven-week program of individual and organizational training which laid emphasis on firing practice and tactical exercises from the squad through the regiment. Colonel Smith was ordered to start a similar program for the 5th Marines at Talasea as soon as his situation permitted.

Word of the division's pending departure for the Solomons brought the training schedule to an end, but not before an amphibious reconnaissance school

[7] Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: MIS, GHQ, FEC, Ops of the Allied IntelBu, GHQ, SWPA—v. IV, Intel Series, dtd 19Aug48; 40th InfDiv, Hist of BACKHANDER Op 28Apr–27Nov44, n.d. (WW II Recs Div, FRC Alex); *1st MarDiv Mar–May44 War Ds*; Hough and Crown, *New Britain Campaign.*

graduated a class well-versed in the techniques painstakingly acquired by Lieutenant Bradbeer and the other veteran division scouts. Before the graduates returned to their units, they took part in an actual scouting mission to check the landing beaches and the airdrome on Cape Hoskins. On 13 April, a 16-man patrol landed from LCMs about 5,000 yards west of the enemy airfields and started for the objective. The scouts were split into three parties, one followed the shoreline, another the coastal trail, and the third circled inland.[8] As it approached Cape Hoskins, the center party ran into a Japanese ambush bristling with mortars and machine guns. Despite the enemy fire and a close pursuit, the various elements of the patrol were able to shake loose from contact, get back through the jungle to their rendezvous point, and withdraw without incurring any losses. The next American reconnaissance to Cape Hoskins was made on 7 May, and by the Army, but the Japanese encountered by the Marines, evidently a rear guard, had departed in the general retreat to Rabaul.

Major General Rapp Brush, commanding the 40th Division, flew to Cape Gloucester on 10 April to arrange for the relief in place of the 1st Marine Division by elements of his own unit. The first echelon of the Army division, principally the 185th Infantry and its reinforcing units, reached the cape on 23 April. On the following day, the 1st Marines and detachments from a number of division supporting units boarded the transports that had brought the soldiers and sailed for the South Pacific. The 185th, at the same time, crowded into engineer landing craft at Borgen Bay and sailed for Iboki. Stopping overnight at the plantation, the Army regiment moved on at dawn, leaving behind a platoon to replace a like detachment of the 5th Marines. On the 25th, the soldiers reached Willaumez and the Army commander took over responsibility for the area from Lieutenant Colonel Buse, who had taken command of the 5th Marines when Colonel Smith was promoted and returned to Cape Gloucester to become ADC.[9] The Marine regiment and its attached units boarded the LCMs and LCVPs that had brought their welcome relief force and started back for Cape Gloucester the following evening.

The remainder of the 40th Division arrived on 28 April, and General Rupertus turned over command of the BACKHANDER Force to General Brush. While Captain Petras flew the Marine leader back to the Solomons, the second echelon of the 1st Division loaded its gear and sailed. On 4 May, when the ships that had transported the first echelon returned, the last elements of the division departed. Only one Marine unit, the 12th Defense Battalion, remained at Cape Gloucester, but it too, was relieved later in the month when an antiaircraft artillery group arrived to take its place.[10]

The last group of ships returning to the Solomons joined LSTs carrying Compa-

[8] MajGen Oliver P. Smith ltr to CMC, dtd 31Mar52.

[9] Gen Oliver P. Smith memo to HistBr, G–3, HQMC, dtd 7Jun62.

[10] At one point in the relief of units, General MacArthur intended to retain the 19th Naval Construction Battalion in the Southwest Pacific, but Admiral Nimitz pointed out that the unit, serving as the 3d Battalion, 17th Marines, was organic to the 1st Division. ComSoPac disp to CinCPOA, dtd 14Apr44, and CinCPOA disp to CinCSWPA, dtd 17Apr44, in *GHQ G–3 File*, 18Apr44.

nies A and B, 1st Tank Battalion, and personnel of the division rear echelon who had closed out the Marine supply dumps on New Guinea. Company B had been released from the DIRECTOR Force in mid-April and sent to Finschhafen in anticipation of the 1st Marine Division's withdrawal. Company A, which had the only medium tanks available in the forward area, had been alerted for action in the Admiralties and was actually employed on 22 April as a part of the assault forces at Tanahmerah Bay in the Hollandia operation. A large swamp and a precipitous mountain range immediately behind it prevented the Marine tanks from moving inland, and while the Army infantrymen advanced, the Marines "sat on the beach, fished, and were eventually loaded aboard ship again." [11]

When the 1st Marine Division, reinforced, added up the cost of its four-month campaign on New Britain, the casualty total read 310 men killed or died of wounds and 1,083 wounded in action. The figures could easily have been higher had the operation not been well planned and skillfully executed by veteran troops. When General Rupertus relinquished command of BACKHANDER Force to General Brush, the toll of enemy killed and captured stood at 4,288 and 420, respectively.[12] In postwar calculations, a senior staff officer of *Eighth Area Army* reckoned the Japanese loss in the fighting at Arawe and Cape Gloucester and in the withdrawal to Rabaul at 3,868 killed and died of wounds.[13] It is probable that the actual total of enemy killed lay somewhere between the claim and the recollection.

The 40th Infantry Division had its first clash with the Japanese as soon as it relieved the 1st Division's advance posts. Following his orders from ALAMO Force, General Brush kept pressure on the *17th Division* stragglers and mopped up the few enemy troops that remained alive west of Rabaul. On 7 May, patrols of the 185th Infantry occupied Cape Hoskins airdrome and found the area mined but deserted. In June, a regiment of the 40th relieved the DIRECTOR Force at Arawe, and, in October, units of the division occupied Gasmata. Late in November, the Australian 5th Division relieved the 40th in its positions on New Britain, and the American unit moved west to take part in MacArthur's attack on Leyte.

In its seven months of active patrolling, the 40th Division killed 31 Japanese soldiers and took a mere 18 prisoners, proof enough that the enemy had successfully withdrawn his troops to Rabaul. Close to a thousand enemy were accounted for by natives roaming the jungle that ringed the Japanese stronghold. For self defense, the coastwatchers who manned the observation posts on Gazelle Peninsula and in the jungles to the east had to arm selected natives. An initial air drop of 100 riot guns and ammunition was made on 21 February and proved so worthwhile an idea that it was followed up repeatedly and to such effect that nothing short of all-out enemy retaliation sweeps could have stopped the slaughter. In time, the specter of bushy-haired Melanesians armed with shotgun and knife lying in ambush along every trail put a severe crimp in the aggressiveness of Japanese patrols ranging out from Rabaul.

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[11] Capt Howard R. Taylor ltr to HistDiv HQMC, dtd 6Jul51.

[12] *1st MarDiv Apr44 WarD*, entry of 28Apr44.

[13] *Eighth Area Army Ops*, p. 197.

CAMPAIGN APPRAISAL [14]

Many serious students of the Pacific War have questioned the selection of Cape Gloucester and Arawe as Allied objectives. In most cases, too little heed has been given to the commander's responsibility to approve operations that are within the reasonable capabilities of his forces. Observers who recognize that the men and munitions available to MacArthur and Nimitz were stretched thinly, argue that the Allies might have made bolder use of limited resources. The conclusion is inescapable that such judgments are based on a knowledge of results.

If, in retrospect, the landing at Saidor seems to have been a wiser move than that at Cape Gloucester, it should not be forgotten that the one was contingent upon the success of the other. If now Arawe's seizure appears to have been a fruitless effort, it did not appear so at the time to many responsible and intelligent men. Away from the pressure of war, it is not hard to see that many of the operations undertaken to reduce Rabaul were unnecessary. At the time, however, DEXTERITY objectives were vital in the opinion of the men who chose them.

In many respects, the seizure of Cape Gloucester was a model amphibious operation. The difficulties overcome in landing a large assault force on an obscure beach with numerous off-lying reefs were formidable. Excellent aerial photography by Allied Air Forces enabled Admiral Barbey's staff to prepare accurate navigational charts for the attack force. A careful plan, with adequate emergency safeguards to insure its execution, provided for essential minesweeping and buoying of boat lanes. Landing craft control procedures were well thought out, and a senior naval officer was made responsible for the safe passage of the craft through the reefs and on to the beaches.[15] Coxswains and wave officers were given panoramic sketches built up from maps and photographs to help them identify beaches as they were seen from boats approaching the shore.

Although there was no hitch in the landing operations at Cape Gloucester, and the Navy and Marine Corps worked together with practiced ease, MacArthur's headquarters realized that the problem of who was in overall control at the time of the landing had been left in the air. Naval amphibious doctrine clearly gave this responsibility to the attack force commander, and at the conclusion of DEXTERITY, GHQ adopted this concept of control for future operations in the Southwest Pacific. Landing force commanders would take charge when their troops were firmly established ashore.[16]

What Admiral Barbey called "the old problem of efficient joint planning" [17] was handled well in the preparations for DEXTERITY. The various staffs—ground, naval, and air—at GHQ and at operating forces levels coordinated their planning activities, and the operations, instructions, and plans that were issued reflected concurrent thinking. Conferences between interested commanders were fre-

[14] Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: *DEXTERITY Rept; ALAMO G–3 Jnl; VII PhibFor AR; 1st MarDiv SAR*, all phases and annexes; *APPEASE SAR;* Hough and Crown, *New Britain Campaign.*

[15] *VII PhibFor ComdHist*, p. II–47.

[16] MajGen Stephen J. Chamberlin, USA, memo for CinC, dtd 12Feb44, Subj: OpsInstns for Manus-Kavieng Ops, in *GHQ G–3 Jnl*, 13Feb44.

[17] *VII PhibFor AR*, p. 13.

quent enough to work out solutions to differences regarding objectives, forces available, and timing. The abandonment of Gasmata as a target, the substitution of Arawe, and the diversion of the Gasmata landing force to Saidor were all examples of the flexibility with which changes in the operational situation were met. The 1st Marine Division's strong views on the composition of the BACKHANDER assault force were carefully considered and finally accepted. The decision to cancel parachute troop participation and to strengthen the Marine landing force instead owed a great deal to the Commander, Allied Air Forces and his reluctance to support the air drop as planned.

General Kenney was much more interested in the aerial support that his bombing and attack squadrons could give to DEXTERITY operations than he was in the diversion of transports to a parachute landing. "Gloucesterizing" was an expression that came into use in the Fifth Air Force "to describe the complete obliteration of a target." [18] The word was invented by pilots as a tribute to the thoroughness of the pre-invasion aerial bombardment of Cape Gloucester. Japanese prisoners and captured diaries confirm the devastating effect of the steady hammering by Allied planes. Several hundred enemy troops lost their lives in the bombing and strafing attacks, and most of the permanent installations and fixed defenses near the airdrome were destroyed. Enemy morale skidded downward as antibarge strikes mounted in intensity and effectiveness with the approach of D-day, and the flow of supplies to the garrison of western New Britain dwindled.

The shortage of fire support ships, and the desire to conceal the chosen landing beaches from the enemy, limited naval gunfire preparations to the morning of the actual assault at both Cape Gloucester and Arawe. The featureless blanket of jungle growth crowding to the water's edge showed few targets that were suited to the flat trajectory of naval guns. Most of the ships' bombardment was confined to area fire which showered the airfield, the hills that broke through the jungle, and the ill-defined beaches. Opportunity targets, such as the anti-boat guns that ripped through the rubber boat formation at Arawe, were sure game for destroyers, but such targets were few.

To bridge the gap between the end of naval gunfire and air bombardment of the beaches and the grounding of the first assault wave, ship-launched rockets were called into play. Both Admirals Barbey and Kinkaid were impressed with the potential of the new weapon, but the lack of opposition to the BACKHANDER and DIRECTOR landings deferred an evaluation of its effect against a stoutly-defended shore. There appeared to be little doubt, however, that the rockets would be a welcome and standard addition to amphibious fire support.

The Yellow Beach assault marked the first time that smoke was used to screen a landing operation in the Southwest Pacific. General Rupertus was not in favor of its employment, arguing that the smoke, dust, and flying debris of the preliminary bombardment was enough to becloud the vision of enemy observers on Target Hill.[19] The Marine general anticipated what happened; the smoke laid by bombers drifted lazily across the land-

[18] Craven and Cate, *Guadalcanal to Saipan*, p. 345.

[19] *Pollock comments.*

ing lanes and obscured the beaches. Fortunately, as Admiral Barbey noted, "landing craft were handled boldly and successfully in it," [20] and the smoke cover was not a serious problem. The lack of Japanese opposition must have had a good bit to do with the VII Amphibious Force commander's belief that the smoke was valuable "in protecting landing craft during the later stages of their approach to the beach." [21] If supporting fires to destroy coast defense guns had been needed, ships' gunners and pilots overhead would have been hard put to locate targets in the thick fog of smoke that hid the coast.

The considerable problems, both logistical and tactical, that were presented by the unexpected swamp behind the Yellow Beaches were met with ingenuity and dispatch. Adapting the dump dispersal and ship unloading plan to the limited stretch of dry ground available, the shore party solved a snarl that might have stalled the entire operation. Mobile loading, which was a key feature of the supply plan for BACKHANDER, worked, but not without considerable difficulty. Much of the trouble that arose in the use of pre-loaded trucks came from the employment of inexperienced and ill-disciplined drivers for a job that demanded skill and individual responsibility. In assessing the operation, ALAMO Force commented that there had been a tendency at Cape Gloucester, common to most amphibious operations, to bring in more motor transport than could be efficiently used. The excess vehicles landed tended to clog the limited road net and delay rather than speed unloading operations.

The readiness of Marine pioneers to meet any crisis that cropped up reflected their sound training as the 1st Division's shore party. Rupertus gave the men well-earned praise for meeting the original supply schedules and told Krueger that "I have seen no finer performance of duty on any landing beach by any unit in my career." [22] The contrast with the diligent but slow unloading efforts by improvised and poorly trained shore parties at Tauali and Arawe was marked. Krueger, recognizing that "a highly trained and well equipped shore party is indispensable in any landing operation," used an amphibian engineer shore battalion at Saidor and recommended the use of similar units in any future operations.[23]

The Marine practice of carrying trained replacements into combat as part of the shore party proved itself again at Cape Gloucester. The 300 men that reinforced 2/17 were available as laborers on the beaches and in the dumps at a time when shore party manpower demands were highest. At night, the men joined the pioneers in backing up perimeter defenses and, when the situation demanded, filled in as casualty replacements in hard-hit combat units.

The shore party commander drew attention to the fact that the naval beach party had a good share of the success of unloading operations, noting:

> For the first time a Marine shore party had the benefit of a trained, permanently organized beach party as one of its reinforcing elements. This beach party concept was an innovation of VII Amphibious Force, and its personnel were made avail-

[20] *VII PhibFor AR*, p. 9.
[21] *Ibid.*
[22] MajGen William H. Rupertus ltr to LtGen Walter A. Krueger, dtd 6Jan44, in *ALAMO G–3 Jnl No. 15.*
[23] *DEXTERITY Rept*, Encl 1, p. 3.

> able several weeks in advance of the landing. They lived and trained with the shore party of which they were a part and were lifted to Cape Gloucester with it. Here the means to control effectively the approach and beaching of landing ships and craft was conclusively demonstrated, and the performance of this beach party fully justified the high praise bestowed by Rupertus.[24]

Although the 1st Marine Division had its own shore party, it did not have an organic unit to provide the services of another element of the amphibian engineers, the boat battalion. In a role particularly well adapted to the shore-to-shore operations of the Southwest Pacific Area, the Army-manned small craft proved themselves a valuable addition to the BACKHANDER Force. In an analysis of their worth, the boat group commander at Talasea noted:

> . . . the First Marine Division maintained actual operational command over a substantial fleet of landing craft. The Army unit manning these was as much a part of the Task Force as any battalion in the division. No longer was it necessary to *request* amphibious lift, it could be *ordered*, and it was, not only for logistical support but for tactical landings and continuous patrolling. The increased mobility, freedom of action, [and] general expedition that this lent to the operations eastward to the San Remo Plantation demonstrated what should have been obvious, that a landing force commander should have as complete control over his boats as he does over his trucks and tanks.[25]

If the 1st Marine Division had continued to serve in the Southwest Pacific, it is probable that boat detachments would have been assigned to its command in future operations. In the Central Pacific, where successive objectives were usually widely separated small islands, operational requirements for amphibious craft were met differently. There, after the assault landing, Navy small boat pools left at the target, together with the landing force's organic LVTs and DUKWs, provided the necessary logistical and tactical support. Still, the practical uses of a boat detachment under direct command were not lost on many Marines, and the 1st Division's D–4 at New Britain voiced his conviction that in "any operation of an amphibious nature wherein a rapid seizure will be followed by an operation involving movement from shore to shore the demand for boat companies will continue to exist." [26]

Important as the engineer boats were to the success of BACKHANDER operations, there was an even greater star performer among the amphibious craft, the LVT. It is difficult to imagine what the fighting at Cape Gloucester would have been like without the support of amphibian tractors. The LVTs took so vital a part in combat operations in the swamp behind the beaches that their accomplishments can not be separated from the achievements of the infantry and supporting artillery. Despite their occasional use as fighting vehicles, the tractors were employed primarily in a logistical support role. Most 1st Division officers were so sold on their usefulness in supply and evacuation that they disapproved of a proposal to put a turret on the Buffalo, agreeing with General Rupertus, who said: "If you put a turret or a canopy on a Buffalo you have simply a light tank, lightly armored and quite slow. You lose

[24] *Ballance ltr.*

[25] LtCol Robert Amory, Jr., MassNatGrd, ltr to CMC, dtd 2Apr52.

[26] BGen William S. Fellers ltr to HistDiv, HQMC, dtd 10Apr52.

the cargo carrying capacity." [27] Regardless of the recommendations of the 1st Division, however, the amphibian tank was already in being and had proved its worth in combat in the Central Pacific. At Peleliu, where the division next landed in assault, LVT(A)s formed the first waves.

The armored vehicle that the 1st Division Marines preferred was the medium tank.[28] The Shermans proved their value repeatedly and repaid many times over the labor that the engineers, pioneers, and Seabees expended to get them through difficult terrain to the front lines. Tank-infantry techniques used in the drive to the airfield so impressed the Army liaison officers with the Marine division that they recommended that they be studied in the U.S. and used in training all units destined for the Southwest Pacific.[29] Marine light tanks served well at Cape Gloucester and Arawe, as they had previously in the South Pacific, but once infantry commanders saw what the mediums could do in the jungle, the cry mounted for more of the heavier-gunned and -armored machines. Light tankmen at Arawe could take credit for pioneering in telephone communication between supporting riflemen and armor, a procedure that became standard throughout the Pacific fighting.

The only unit of BACKHANDER Force to be specially cited for its work at Cape Gloucester was the 11th Marines, which received a Naval Unit Commendation emphasizing the regiments' determination to get into position and fire in support of the assault troops regardless of obstacles.[30] An ALAMO Force observer pinpointed the reason for the high and deserved praise of the regiment when he noted that 1st Division Marines were "very artillery conscious. They claim to have the best artillery in existence and use it effectively at every turn." [31] The 75mm pack howitzer lost ground as a supporting weapon at Cape Gloucester despite its excellent record. Against an enemy that dug in deeply and well on every possible occasion, the heavier, more powerful 105mm howitzer spoke with deadlier effect. To do its best job, however, the 105 needed better ammunition, shells with delay fuzes that would penetrate the jungle cover and blast apart the Japanese bunkers, instead of bursting in the tree canopy or the underbrush.

In one respect, artillery employment at Cape Gloucester did not come up to expectations. The inefficient radios used by the aircraft of the division's squadron of light planes prevented effective artillery spotting. But, if infrequent use was made of the Piper Cubs to direct howitzer fire, there was very little else that the planes and pilots did not do. The range of employment of the makeshift but efficient

[27] Quoted in Col Horace O. Cushman, USA, memo to CofS, ALAMO For, dtd 5Jan44, Subj: Rept of LiaisonO with 1st MarDiv, in *ALAMO G–3 Jnl No. 15.*

[28] *Ibid.*

[29] AG 334 (1Feb44) Rept to TAGO, WD, Washington, D.C., dtd 1Feb44, Subj: Rept of LiaisonOs with the 1st MarDiv in the Op to seize the Gloucester Airdrome area on New Britain, in *ALAMO G–3 Jnl No. 20.*

[30] Curiously, the citation for the 11th Marines includes an incident that describes the employment of a 37mm gun at Aogiri Ridge, a weapon that was manned by its regular crew and men of 3/5, not artillerymen. Col Lewis W. Walt ltr to HistDiv, HQMC, dtd 24Apr52. See Appendix I, Unit Commendations.

[31] Col J. F. Bird, USA, memo to DepCofS, ALAMO For, dtd 9Jan44, Subj: Rept on BACKHANDER Op from 1–7Jan44, in *ALAMO G–3 Jnl No. 15.*

outfit was as wide as the aerial supply of the Gilnit patrol and the impromptu close air support at the Volupai landing. In future operations in the Pacific, the 1st Marine Division would have a regularly constituted observation squadron assigned for operational control, but the "do anything" tradition of the division's first air unit survived.

General Rupertus, writing to the Commandant shortly before DEXTERITY was formally secured, observed: "We have learned much, especially [from] our errors at Guadalcanal, and I feel sure that we have profited by them in this operation." [32] Perhaps the most useful lesson learned was an appreciation of the value of battlefield intelligence. Throughout the fighting in western New Britain, enemy documents were turned in that might have been pocketed or thrown away by troops who were not convinced of their worth. The wealth of material that came back from assault units and intelligence teams closely trailing the advance was systematically and rapidly evaluated by translators with the combat teams and put to use immediately at the appropriate level of command. With the exception of the *51st Reconnaissance Regiment*, which appeared unheralded on the scene, the 1st Division's order of battle officers kept accurate track of the *Matsuda Force* and its state of combat efficiency.

The terrain was the major obstacle to the efficient use of the enemy intelligence that was accumulated. Although the Marines knew early in the fighting approximately where the Japanese headquarters were and the general location of the trails that were being used for troop deployment, the information was of limited use. The jungle shrouded everything. Even when the division's Cubs skimmed the treetops, the pilots and observers could spot little through the green carpet below. The Allied Air Forces photographic planes that did such a fine job establishing the shoreline and fringing reefs of the objective area were far less successful when the runs crossed the interior. The jungle gave up few secrets, even to the most skilled photographic interpreters.

The infamous "damp flat" area back of the Yellow Beaches was known to contain standing water in the rainy season, but the probing cameras did not show the swamp that actually existed. This fact, however, may have been a blessing in disguise, since it was probable that the assault landing would have been switched to other beaches if the situation had been known. The Japanese were completely unprepared for a landing in such an unsuitable place, and what might have been a hotly contested fight for a toehold on the shore never materialized. Because it was a veteran unit, with a well-trained shore party, the 1st Marine Division was able to surmount the miserable terrain and get firmly established before the enemy made a serious attempt to dislodge it.

Certainly, any well-trained, well-led, but untried Allied division could have wrested control of western New Britain from the *Matsuda Force;* the preponderance of strength lay too heavily in the Allies' favor for any other conclusion. Just as surely, the 1st Marine Division did the job faster, better, and at less cost by virtue of its combat experience, its familiarity with the jungle and the Japanese, and its battle-tested unit spirit. The tactics the Marines

[32] MajGen William H. Rupertus ltr to LtGen Alexander A. Vandegrift, dtd 4Feb44 (Vandegrift Personal Correspondence File, HQMC).

used were "book" tactics for jungle warfare; their refinements on basic techniques were those of veterans. Fire discipline at night was excellent, patrolling was careful but aggressive, and weapons were always at hand ready to fire. The enemy's captured guns were expertly manned by Marines and turned against their former owners. Small unit leaders were capable of independent action in brush-choked terrain, where the bitterest fighting was often done at close range with an unseen enemy.

The 1st Marine Division was jungle-wise and combat-ready when it landed on New Britain. When it left, four months later, its mission accomplished, it was an even more effective team. Ahead lay a summer of intensive training and then combat again, this time at Peleliu, a bloody step closer to Japan.

PART V

Marine Air Against Rabaul

691-360 O—63——29

Target: Rabaul

The overriding objective of the Allied campaign in the Southwest Pacific was, at first, to capture, and, later, to neutralize Rabaul. Each successive advance during 1943 had its worth valued by the miles it chopped off the distance to this enemy stronghold. To a large extent, the key to the objectives and pace of CARTWHEEL operations was this distance, measured in terms of the range of the fighter plane. No step forward was made beyond the effective reach of land-based fighter cover.

The firm establishment of each new Allied position placed a lethal barrier of interceptors closer to Rabaul and its outguard of satellite bases. Equally as important, the forward airfields provided a home for the fighter escorts and dive bombers which joined with long-range bombers to knock out the enemy's airfields. Protected by mounting numbers of Allied planes, many of them manned by Marines, the areas of friendly territory that saw their last hostile aircraft or vessel grew steadily. Japanese admirals learned from bitter experience that their ships could not sail where their planes could not fly.

By carrying the fight to the enemy, Allied air units played a decisive role in reducing Rabaul to impotency. Although this aerial offensive was closely related to the air actions in direct support of CARTWHEEL's amphibious operations, its importance warrants separate accounting.

OBJECTIVE FOLDER[1]

As they fought their way up the Solomons chain and along the enemy coast of eastern New Guinea, few members of Halsey's and MacArthur's naval and ground forces had time to consider any Japanese position but the one to their immediate front. To these men, Rabaul was little more than a worrisome name, the base of the enemy ships and planes that attacked them. Allied pilots and aircrews, however, got to know the Japanese fortress and its defenders intimately. The sky over St. George's Channel, Blanche Bay, and Gazelle Peninsula was the scene of one of the most bitterly fought campaigns of the Pacific War.

To picture Rabaul as it appeared to the men who battled to reach it, to bomb and strafe it, and to get away alive, requires a description of more than the northern tip of Gazelle Peninsula where the town, its harbor, and its airfields were located. To flyers, the approaches were as familiar as

[1] Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: AlGeographicalSect, SWPA, Terrain Study No. 22, Area Study of Gazelle Peninsula and Rabaul, dtd 6Oct42 and Terrain Study No. 74, Area Study of Gazelle Peninsula, dtd 3Jan44; MID, WD, Survey of Bismarck Archipelago (S30–675), dtd 5Oct43. Documents not otherwise identified in this part are located in the following files of the Archives, Historical Branch, G-3 Division, Headquarters Marine Corps: Unit Historical Reports; Publications; Aviation; Monograph and Comment.

the objective itself, and a strike directed against Rabaul evoked a parade of impressions—long over-water flights; jungle hills slipping by below; the sight of the target—airfield, ship, or town, sometimes all three; the attack and the violent defense; and then the seemingly longer, weary return over land and sea.

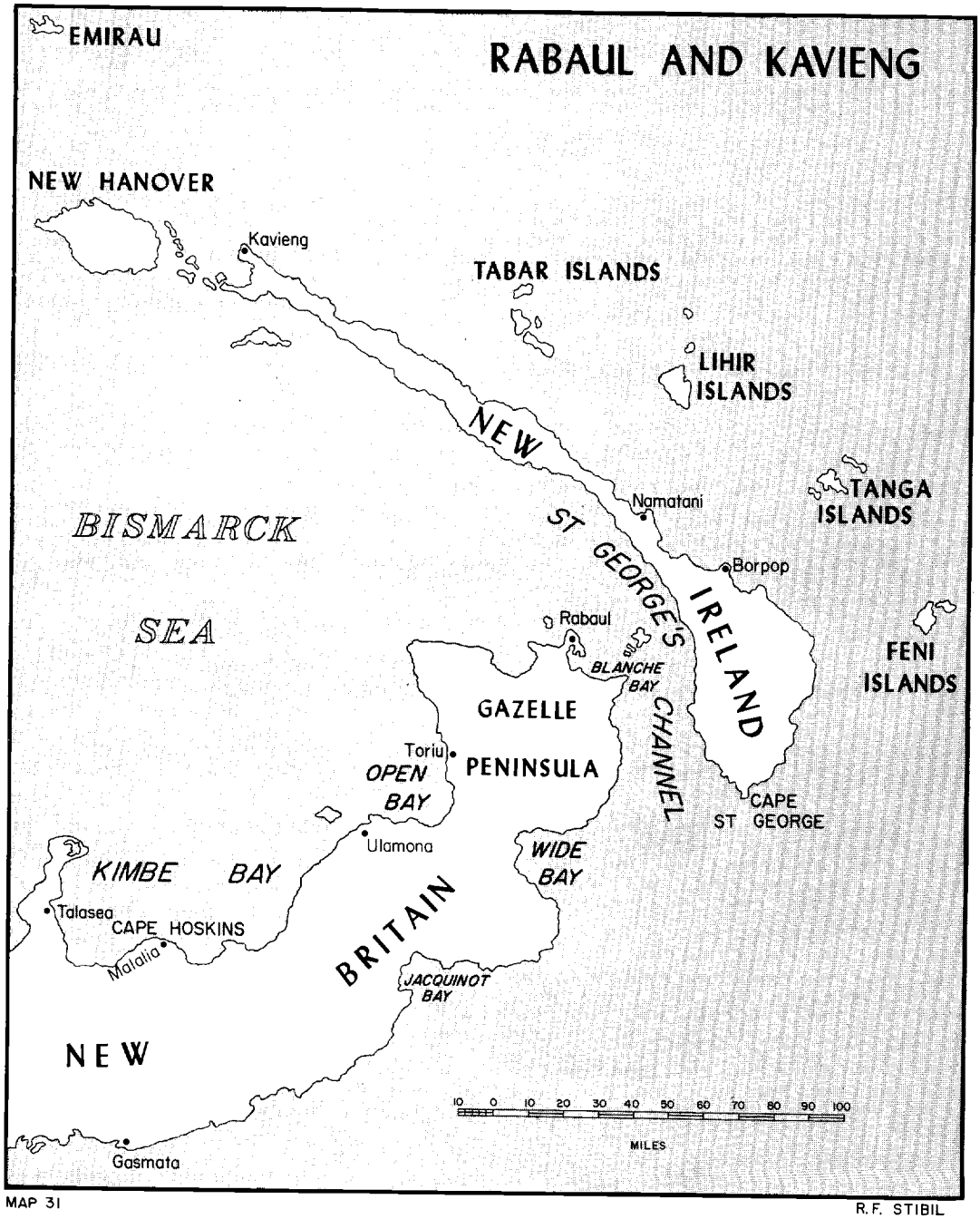
In order to fix Rabaul as an air objective, one should visualize its position in midyear 1943 as the powerful hub of the Japanese airbase system in the Southeast Area. To the west on New Guinea, at Hollandia, Wewak, and Madang, were major airdromes with advance airstrips building on the Huon Peninsula and across Vitiaz Strait at Cape Gloucester. Staging fields in the Admiralty Islands gave enemy pilots a place to set down on the flight from eastern New Guinea to Rabaul. Kavieng's airbase was also a frequent stopover point, not only for planes coming from the west but for those flying south from Truk, home of the *Combined Fleet* and its carriers. Southeast of New Britain in the Solomons lay the important airfields at Buka Passage at one end of Bougainville and at Buin-Kahili and Ballale Island at the other. Forward strips at Vila and Munda in the New Georgia Group marked the limit of Japanese expansion.

Distances in statute miles from Rabaul to the principal bases which guarded it, and to the more important Allied positions from which it was attacked, are as follows:

Truk	795
Guadalcanal	650
Wewak	590
Port Moresby	485
Madang	450
Munda Point	440
Dobodura	390
Lae	385
Admiralties	375
Woodlark	345
Finschhafen	340
Kahili	310
Kiriwina	310
Cape Gloucester	270
Cape Torokina	255
Buka Passage	190
Kavieng	145

The starting point for measuring these distances was a small colonial town that had, in the immediate prewar years, a population of about 850 Europeans, 2,000 Chinese, and 4,000 Melanesians. Quite the most important place in the Australian Mandated Territory of New Guinea, Rabaul was for many years the capital of the mandate. When two volcanic craters near the town erupted in May 1937, the decision was made to shift the government to Lae, but the pace of island life was such that the move had barely begun when the Japanese struck.

The town was located on the shore of Simpson Harbor, the innermost part of Blanche Bay, a hill-encircled expanse six miles long and two and a half wide. One of the finest natural harbors in the Southwest Pacific, the bay is actually the crater of an enormous volcano, with the only breach in its rim the entryway from the sea and St. George's Channel. Two sheer rocks called The Beehives, which rise 174 feet above the water near the entrance to Simpson Harbor, are the only obstacles to navigation within the bay. There is space for at least 20 10,000–15,000-ton vessels, plus a host of smaller craft, to anchor within Simpson's bounds. Separated from this principal anchorage by little Matupi Island is Matupi Harbor, a sheltered stretch guarded on the east and north by a wall of mountains. Just inside the



MAP 31 R.F. STIBIL

headlands, Praed Point and Raluana Point, at the entrance to Blanche Bay are two further protected harbors. Both, Escape Bay in the north by Praed Point and Karavia Bay in the south, are less useful, as their waters are too deep for effective anchorages.

Prominent landmarks, as easily recognizable from the air as The Beehives, are the craters that form a part of the hills surrounding Rabaul. Directly east of Matupi Harbor is Mt. Tavurvur (741 feet), which erupted in 1937, and due north is Rabalankaia Crater (640 feet). These two heights give Crater Peninsula its name, but they are overshadowed by the peninsula's mountainous ridge which has three companion peaks, South Daughter (1,620 feet), The Mother (2,247 feet), and North Daughter (1,768 feet). The town of Rabaul nestled between the foothills of North Daughter and the narrow sandy beaches of Simpson Harbor. Across Blanche Bay from Mt. Tavurvur is its partner in the 1937 eruption, Vulcan Crater (740 feet), which juts out from the western shore to form one arm of Karavia Bay.

In the years of peace, the land to the south and east of Blanche Bay was extensively planted in coconuts. The rich volcanic soil there was fertile, and, like most of the northern third of Gazelle Peninsula, the area was relatively flat. Most of the 100 or so plantations on the peninsula were located here, with a large part of them to be found in the region north of the Warangoi and Keravit Rivers. The only other considerable plantation area along the northern coast lay between Cape Lambert, the westernmost point on Gazelle Peninsula, and Ataliklikun Bay, into which the Keravit River emptied. The majority of the 36,000 natives who were estimated to be on the peninsula lived in or near this northern sector.

The rest of Gazelle Peninsula, which is shaped roughly like a square with 50-mile-long sides, is mountainous, smothered by jungle, and inhospitable to the extreme. Two deep bights, Wide Bay on the east coast and Open Bay on the west, set off the peninsula from the rest of New Britain. Access to Rabaul from this part of the island was possible by a coastal track, broken frequently by swamps and rivers, and a web of trails that cut through the rugged interior. For the most part, these routes were hard going and usable only by men on foot.

The wild, inaccessible nature of the central and southern sectors of Gazelle Peninsula made the contrast with the Rabaul area all the more striking. Even before the war, the mandate government had developed a good road net to serve the various villages, plantations, and missions. The Japanese made extensive improvements and expanded the road system to connect with their troop bivouacs and supply dumps. Many of these installations were invisible from the air, hidden in the patches of jungle that interspersed the plantations and farms. The major Japanese construction work, however, was done on airfields, and the five that they expanded or built from scratch became as familiar to Allied aircrews as their own home bases.

Both of the small fields maintained at Rabaul by the Royal Australian Air Force were enlarged and made into major airdromes by the Japanese. Lakunai airfield and its hardstands and revetments occupied all the available ground on a small peninsula that ran out to Matupi Island. A 4,700-foot coral runway, varying in

width from 425 to 525 feet, began at Simpson Harbor and ended at Matupi Harbor. The sharply rising slopes of Rabalankaia Crater blocked any extension of the field to the northeast and a small creek was a barrier on the northwest.

The other former RAAF base, Vunakanau airfield, was located at an altitude of 1,000 feet on a plateau about 11 miles southwest of Rabaul. Except for two coconut plantations, the plateau was covered by scrub growth and kunai grass. The ground was quite irregular and laced with deep gullies, and the 5,100 x 750-foot runway the enemy built was the practical limit of expansion. Centered on this grass-covered larger strip was a concrete runway, 4,050 feet long and 140 feet wide. Vunakanau became the largest Japanese airdrome at Rabaul, and its straggling network of dispersal lanes and revetments spread over an area of almost two square miles.

The longest airstrip at Rabaul was constructed at Rapopo on the shore of St. George's Channel about 14 miles southeast of the town and a little over 5 miles west of Cape Gazelle, the northeast corner of Gazelle Peninsula. Designed and built as a bomber field, Rapopo was sliced through the center of a coconut plantation that gave it its name. The clearing for the north-south strip ran 6,900 feet from the sea to a river that effectively barred further extension. A coral-surfaced runway began about 1,600 feet from a low, coastal bluff and occupied the full width of the cleared space.

Well inland from the other airfields, 15 miles southeast of Vunakanau and 8 miles southwest of Rapopo, the Japanese built Tobera airfield. Its runway, 5,300 x 700 feet, with a hard-surfaced central strip 4,800 x 400 feet, was situated on a gently sloping plateau that divided the streams which flowed north to the sea from those which ran south to the Warangoi River. Like most of its companion fields, Tobera was constructed in a plantation area with its dispersal lanes and field installations scattered amidst the coconut trees.

The fifth airfield at Rabaul was located on Ataliklikun Bay just north of the Keravat River and 26 miles southwest of Rabaul. Keravat airfield was plagued by drainage problems and had perhaps the poorest location and the greatest engineering problems. By the end of November 1943, the Japanese had been able to grade and surface a 4,800 x 400-foot runway, but Keravat never became fully operational and saw very limited use as an emergency landing ground.

Caught up and deserted by the rush of events was an auxiliary airfield that was started and never finished on Duke of York Island. The island is the largest of a group of 13 islets that stand in St. George's Channel midway between New Britain and New Ireland. The press for additional airstrips on which to locate and, later, to disperse and protect Rabaul's air garrison was met instead by fields on New Ireland.

There were four operational airfields on that narrow, 220-mile-long island with two, Namatami and Borpop, sited about 50 miles northeast of Rabaul on New Ireland's eastern shore. At Kavieng on the island's northern tip and Panapai close by was an extensive airbase, the largest in the Bismarcks outside of Rabaul's immediate environs. Kavieng and Rabaul had been seized at the same time and grew apace with each other until they both, in turn, were relegated to the backwash of the war by the withdrawal of their aerial defenders.

GARRISON FORCES[2]

In January 1942, Rabaul had a small garrison of about 1,350 men, a reinforced Australian infantry battalion. Kavieng had no defenders at all save a few police boys. The towns themselves and the islands on which they stood were ripe for the taking whenever the Japanese got around to the task. In the enemy's war plans, elements of the *Fourth Fleet* that had seized Guam and Wake made up the *Rabaul Invasion Force.* The assault troops at Rabaul would be the *South Seas Detached Force*, an Army brigade that had landed at Guam, reinforced by two companies of the *Maizuru 2d Special Naval Landing Force*, the victors at Wake.[3] The remainder of the *Maizuru 2d* was detailed to occupy Kavieng.

The *Rabaul Invasion Force* rendezvoused at sea north of the Bismarcks on 19 January, and, on the next day, enemy carrier-based bombers and fighters hit both targets. At Rabaul, the defending air force—five RAAF Wirraway observation planes—was quickly shot out of the sky, and the airstrips were bombed. The carrier planes made diversionary raids on Lae, Salamaua, and Madang on the 21st, and then hit Rabaul again on the 22d, knocking out Australian gun positions on North Daughter and at Praed Point.

After this brief preparation, Japanese transports and supporting vessels sailed into Blanche Bay near midnight on 22 January, and the assault troops began a staggered series of landings shortly thereafter. The enemy soldiers stormed ashore at several points along the western beaches of Simpson Harbor and Karavia Bay, while the naval landing force hit Rabaul and Lakunai airfield. The Australians, spread out in small strongpoints along the shore and on the ridge just inland, fought desperately in the darkness but were gradually overwhelmed and forced to pull back. As daylight broke, the 5,000-man Japanese landing force called down naval gunfire and air support to hammer the retreating defenders. At about 1100, the Australian commander, seeing that further resistance would be fruitless, ordered his men to break contact, split up into small parties, and try to escape.

The Japanese harried the Australian troops relentlessly, using planes and destroyers to support infantry pursuit col-

[2] Unless otherwise noted the material in this section is derived from: ATIS, MIS, GHQ, SCAP, Docu No. 17895 (WDI–46), dtd 9May46, Subj: Full Translation of a Rept on the Japanese Invasion of Rabaul, n.d. (COA, NHD); ATIS, MIS, GHQ, FEC, Japanese Monograph No. 140, Outline of SE Area NavAirOps—Pt IV, dtd Jul49, hereafter *SE Area NavAirOps—IV;* Japanese ResearchDiv, MilHistSec, HQUSAF FE, Japanese Monograph No. 142, Outline of SE Area NavAirOps—Pt V (Dec 43–May 44), n.d., hereafter *SE Area NavAirOps—V; Eighth Area ArmyOps; SE Area NavOps—III;* Statement of LtCol H. H. Carr, CO, 2/22 Bn, AIF, App A to AlGeographicalSect, Terrain Study No. 22, *op. cit.*; USSBS, *Interrogation* No. 446, Cdr Takashi Miyazaki, IJN, II, pp. 413–421, hereafter *Miyazaki Interrogation;* USSBS, *Interrogation* No. 479, Capt Minoru Genda, IJN, dtd 28–29Nov45 (USSBS Recs, National Archives); Masatake Okumiya and Jiro Horikoshi with Martin Caidin, *Zero!* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., Inc., 1956), hereafter Okumiya, Horikoshi, and Caidin, *Zero!*; USSBS(Pac), NavAnalysisDiv, Marshalls-Gilberts-New Britain Party, *The Allied Campaign Against Rabaul* (Washington: GPO, 1946), hereafter USSBS, *Campaign Against Rabaul.*

[3] For details of the earlier actions of these Japanese units see Volume I of this series, pp. 75–78, 129–149.

umns. Most of the defenders were eventually trapped and killed or captured on Gazelle Peninsula, but one group of about 250 officers and men stayed a jump ahead of the Japanese, reached Talasea after an exhausting march, and got away safely by boat, landing at Cairns, Queensland, on 28 March. Naturally enough, the fact that they were driven from Rabaul rankled the Australians, but the opportunity for retaliation was still years away.

Flushed with success, the Japanese set about extending their hold throughout the Bismarcks, the Solomons, and eastern New Guinea. Rabaul served as a funnel through which troops, supplies, and equipment poured, at first in a trickle, then in a growing stream until the defeats at Guadalcanal and Buna-Gona checked the two-pronged advance. In the resulting reassessment of their means and objectives, the Japanese reluctantly decided to shift to a holding action in the Solomons in order to concentrate on mounting a sustained offensive on New Guinea. Essential to this enemy decision was the fact that a system of airfields existed between Rabaul and Guadalcanal.

The 650-mile distance from Henderson Field to Vunakanau and Lakunai was a severe handicap to Japanese air operations during the Guadalcanal campaign. The need for intermediate bases was obvious, and enemy engineers carved a succession of airfields from plantations, jungle, and grasslands in the central and northern Solomons during the last few months of 1942. Only Buka, which was operational in October, was completed in time to be of much use in supporting air attacks on the Allied positions on Guadalcanal. Fields at Kahili, Ballale, Vila, and Munda, however, were all in use by the end of February 1943, some as staging and refueling stops and the others as fully operational bases. It was these airfields that furnished Rabaul the shield that the Japanese needed to stave off, blunt, or delay Allied attacks from the South Pacific Area. The task of manning these bases was exclusively the province of the *Eleventh Air Fleet.*

The *Eighth Area Army's* counterpart of Admiral Kusaka's air fleet, the *6th Air Division*, was almost wholly committed to support of operations on New Guinea by the end of 1942. During the bitter fighting in Papua, Japanese air support had been sporadic and sparse, a situation that General Imamura intended to correct. Rapopo Airfield at Rabaul, which became operational in April 1943, was constructed by the Army to accommodate a growing number of planes, and work was begun on a Navy field at Keravat to handle even more. At about this time, the strength of the *6th Air Division* peaked at 300 aircraft of all types. Many of these planes were stationed at Rabaul, but a good part were flying from fields on New Guinea, for Imamura had ordered the *6th* to begin moving to the giant island on 12 April.

On eastern New Guinea, as in the Solomons, airfields closer to the battle scene than those at Rabaul were needed to provide effective air support to Japanese troops. Consequently, two major airbases were developed at Wewak and Madang on the coast northwest of the Huon Peninsula. Despite the heavy use of these fields, the operating efficiency of Army air units dropped steadily in the first part of 1943. The rate at which *6th Air Division* planes were destroyed by Allied pilots and gunners was so great that even an average

monthly flow of 50 replacement aircraft could not keep pace with the losses. In July, Tokyo added the *7th Air Division* from the Netherlands East Indies to *Eighth Area Army's* order of battle and followed through by assigning the *Fourth Air Army* to command and coordinate air operations. By the time the air army's headquarters arrived at Rabaul on 6 August, a move of all Army combat aircraft from the Bismarcks was well underway.

In light of the desperate need of the *Eighteenth Army* on New Guinea for air support, *Imperial General Headquarters* had urged General Imamura to leave the air defense of Rabaul entirely to the Navy and concentrate all his air strength in the *Eighteenth's* sector. After discussing the proposed change with Admiral Kusaka, who would acquire sole responsibility for directing air operations at Rabaul, the general ordered the transfer. By the end of August, *Fourth Air Army's* headquarters was established at Wewak, and all Army aircraft, except a handful of reconnaissance and liaison types, were located on New Guinea.

When the last Japanese Army plane lifted from Rapopo's runway, the crucial period of the Allied aerial campaign against Rabaul was still in the offing. The men, the planes, and the units that would fight the enemy's battle were essentially those which had contested the advance of South Pacific forces up the Solomons chain in a year of furious and costly air actions. In that time, Japanese naval air groups were rotated in and out of Rabaul, and were organized and disbanded there with little apparent regard for a fixed table of organization. Two administrative headquarters, the *25th* and *26th Air Flotillas*, operated under *Eleventh Air Fleet* to control the air groups; for tactical purposes, the flight echelons of the flotillas were organized as the *5th* and *6th Air Attack Forces*. Since the accounts of senior surviving air fleet officers, including Admiral Kusaka, differ considerably in detail on enemy strength and organization, only reasonable approximations can be given for any one period.

In September 1943, on the eve of the Allied air offensive against Rabaul, the *Eleventh Air Fleet* mustered about 300 planes and 10,000 men, including perhaps 1,500 flying personnel. Three fighter groups, the *201st Air Group*, the *204th*, and the *253d*, each with a nominal strength of 50 aircraft and 75 pilots, were the core of the interceptor force. One medium bomber unit, the *705th Air Group*, was present, together with elements of at least two more groups, but heavy losses had reduced them all to skeleton proportions of a bomber group's normal strength of 48 planes and 300 crewmen. There was one combined dive bomber-torpedo bomber outfit, the *582d Air Group*, whose strength was 36 attack aircraft and 150 crewmen. Two reconnaissance groups, the *938th* and *958th*, each with 28 float planes and about 100 flying personnel, completed the air fleet's complement of major units. A few flying boats, some transports assigned to each air group, and headquarters and liaison aircraft were also present.

To keep up with the steady drain of combat and operational losses, Tokyo sent 50 replacement aircraft to Rabaul each month. Approximately one-third of these planes were lost in transit, but the remainder, 80 percent of them fighters, reached their destination after a long overwater flight staged through Truk and Kavieng. Land-based naval air units in quiet sectors of the Pacific were drawn

upon heavily for planes and pilots and received in exchange battle-fatigued veterans from Rabaul.[4] The drain of Japanese naval planes and personnel from the Netherlands Indies grew so serious toward the end of 1943 that the Army's *7th Air Division* had to be returned to the area to plug the gap.

In every possible way, the Japanese tried to ready Rabaul's air garrison for the certain Allied onslaught. Flight operations from the most exposed forward airstrips in the Solomons were sharply curtailed to conserve aircraft and crews. At all airfields, blast pens and dispersal areas were strengthened and expanded, and antiaircraft guns were disposed in depth to cover approaches. Tobera airfield was rushed to completion to lessen the concentration of aircraft at Vunakanau and Lakunai and to provide space for reinforcements from the *Combined Fleet*. Poised at Truk, two carrier air groups with about 300 planes stood ready to join Kusaka's command when the situation worsened enough to demand their commitment. Although the newest Japanese plane models were to be fed in to Rabaul's air defense as they became available, the overwhelming majority of the planes that would rise to meet the Allied attacks would be from one family of fighters, the Zeros.

ENEMY PLANES AND AIRCREWS[5]

During the first nine months of the war, the Allies tried to identify Japanese aircraft as the enemy did, by the year of initial adoption and type. The calendar the Japanese used was peculiarly their own, with the year 2597 corresponding to 1937, and there were a number of different Type 97s in use, among them an Army fighter, an Army medium bomber, a Navy torpedo bomber, and a Navy flying boat. This was the system that gave rise to the name Zero for the Type O Navy fighter plane that was first employed in 1940 during the fighting in China.

By the time of Pearl Harbor, the Zero had replaced its Type 96 predecessor as the standard Japanese carrier fighter. Based on its performance capabilities, enemy intelligence officers were confident that the plane could gain control of the air over any battle area, and that in aerial combat, "one Zero would be the equal of from two to five enemy [Allied] fighter planes, depending upon the type."[6] This assessment, unfortunately, proved to be too close to the truth for the peace of mind of Allied pilots. In a dogfight, the Zero was at its best; at speeds below 300 miles per hour, it could outmaneuver any plane

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[4] USSBS, *Interrogation* No. 360, Capt Hironaka Komoto, IJN, II, p. 288.

[5] Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: IntelServ, USAAF, InfoIntelSummary No. 85, Flight Characteristics of the Japanese Zero Fighter Zeke, dtd Mar43, and No. 40–11, Japanese Aircraft and Armament, dtd Mar44, hereafter as part of a series *USAAF InfoIntelSummary* with appropriate number, subject, and date; AirInfoDiv, CNO, Organization and Rank in the Japanese Army and Navy Air Services (Op–35 AID #A2), dtd Aug43; Technical AirIntelCen, NAS, Anacostia, Japanese Aircraft Performance and Characteristics, TAIC Manual No. 1 (OpNav–16–VT#301), dtd Dec44; *Miyazaki Interrogation;* USSBS (Pac), MilAnalysisDiv, *Japanese Air Power* (Washington; GPO, Jul46); WD, *Handbook on Japanese Military Forces, TM 30–480* (Washington, 1Oct44); Okumiya, Horikoshi, and Caidin, *Zero!*

[6] Okumiya, Horikoshi, and Caidin, *Zero!*, p. 60. All material quoted by permission of the publishers, E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., acting for the copyright holder, Martin Caidin.

that it encountered in 1942. By the end of that year, however, the Zero had officially lost its well-remembered name among the Allies and had become instead, the Zeke.

The name change, part of a new system of enemy aircraft designation, was ordered into effect in the Southwest Pacific in September 1942 and adopted in the South Pacific in December. The Japanese identification method, with all kinds of planes assigned the same type-year, proved too cumbersome for Allied use. In its stead, enemy aircraft were given short, easily pronounced code titles; fighters and floatplanes received masculine names, with feminine names going to bombers, flying boats, and land-based reconnaissance planes. Despite the switch, the name Zero died hard, particularly among Marine pilots and aircrews in Halsey's forces, and it was at least six months before they gave the substitute, Zeke, popular as well as official sanction.[7]

The Zeke was unquestionably the most important enemy plane that fought in the Rabaul aerial campaign. Developed by the Mitsubishi Aircraft Company, the original version of the fighter had two models, one with folding wing tips for carrier use and the other built to operate from land bases. An all-metal, single-engine monoplane, the Zeke had low-set wings tapered to a rounded tip. The pilot sat high in an enclosed cockpit controlling two 7.7mm machine guns synchronized to fire through the propeller and two 20mm cannon fixed in the wings. Performance assets were rapid take-off and high climbing rates, exceptional maneuverability at speeds up to 300 miles per hour, and a total range of 1,580 miles with maximum fuel load and economy speeds. The Zeke's principal liabilities as a combat aircraft, ones it shared with every Japanese military plane, were relatively flimsy construction and a lack of armor protection for pilot, fuel, and oxygen.

Most of the Zekes that defended Rabaul in late 1943 were of a later model than the 1940. The improved planes had the same general appearance but were fitted with racks to carry one 132-pound bomb under each wing and had a more powerful motor that added 15 miles to the former maximum speed of 328 miles per hour at 16,000 feet. Another model of the basic Type O Navy fighter, one with the same engine, armament, and flight performance as the later model Zeke, was the Hamp.[8] Identified at first as a new plane type because of its shorter, blunt-tipped wing, the Hamp was later recognized as a legitimate offspring of the parent Zero. The only other Navy fighter operating out of Rabaul in significant numbers was the Rufe, a slower floatplane version of the Zeke.

The standard enemy land-based naval bomber was the versatile Betty, a 1941 model that was as frequently used on transport, reconnaissance, and torpedo bombing missions as it was for its primary purpose. In the pattern of most enemy medium bombers, the Betty was a twin-engine, mid-wing monoplane with a cigar-shaped fuselage and a transparent nose, cockpit, and tail. Operated by a crew of

[7] Sherrod, *MarAirHist*, p. 135*n*.

[8] This fighter was at first called the Hap, an unsolicited compliment to General Henry H. (Hap) Arnold, Commanding General, Army Air Forces. Soon after word of it reached Washington, there was an abrupt change in nomenclature. Vern Haugland, *The AAF Against Japan* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1948), p. 371.

seven to nine men, the plane could carry a maximum bomb load of 2,200 pounds and was armed with four 7.7mm machine guns, all in single mounts, and a 20mm cannon in its tail turret. The Betty was fast, 276 miles per hour at 15,000 feet, and had a range of 2,110 miles at cruising speed with a normal fuel and bomb load. To achieve this relatively high speed and long range, Mitsubishi Aircraft's designers had sacrificed armor and armament. Much of the plane was built of lightweight magnesium, a very inflammable metal, and in the wing roots and body between were poorly protected fuel and oil tanks. "The result was a highly vulnerable aircraft so prone to burst into flames when hit that Japanese aircrews nicknamed it 'Type 1 Lighter.'" [9]

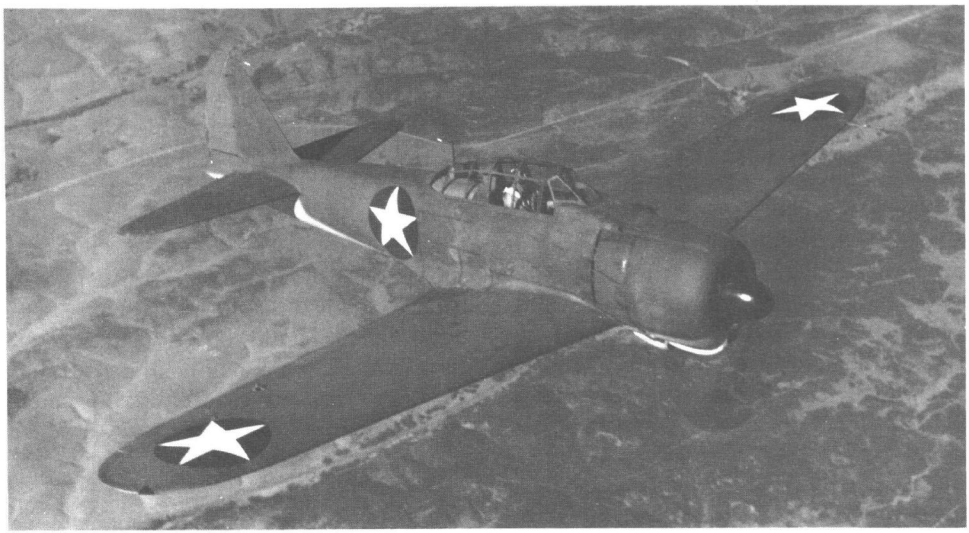
Even more vulnerable to Allied fire than the Betty was the principal dive bomber in the *Eleventh Air Fleet*, the Val. The pilot, who controlled two forward firing 7.7mms in the nose of the monoplane, sat over one unprotected fuel tank and between two others in the wings; the gunner, who manned a flexible-mount 7.7mm in the rear of the cockpit enclosure, was uncomfortably close to the highly explosive oxygen supply. A pair of bomb racks located under each of the plane's distinctive elliptical-shaped wings, and one under the body between the fixed landing gear, enabled the Val to carry one 550- and four 132-pound bombs. The dive bomber's best speed was 254 miles per hour at 13,000 feet, and its normal range at cruising speed with a full bomb load was 1,095 miles. When it flew without escort, the Val was easy game for most Allied fighters.

[9] "Biography of Betty," in *USAAF InfoIntel-Summary* No. 44–21, dtd 10Jul44, p. 3.

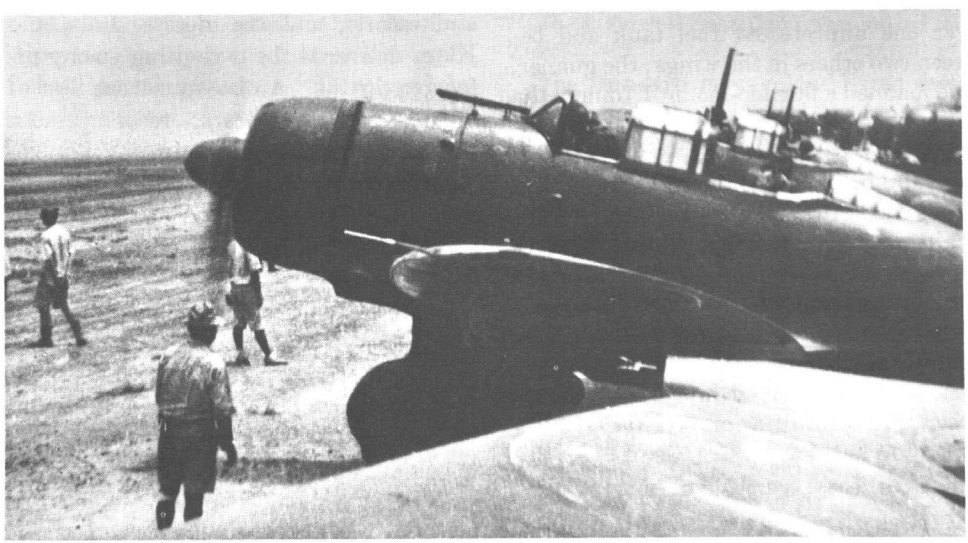
The slowest of the major plane types at Rabaul, and the one with the poorest performance, was a torpedo bomber, the Kate. The plane was as poorly armed as the Val and was almost as inflammable. The two- to three-man crew all sat in a long, enclosed cockpit atop a slim 33-foot body; the wing span of the monoplane, 50 feet, gave it a foreshortened look. One torpedo at 1,760 pounds was its usual load, although a 1,000-pound bomb or two 250-pound bombs could be carried instead. Since it had a weak engine and its lethal cargo was stowed externally, at emergency speed and its best operating altitude, 8,500 feet, the Kate could only make 222 miles per hour.

Aside from those mentioned, many other Japanese Navy aircraft and an occasional Army plane were encountered and engaged by the Allies in aerial attacks on Rabaul. The Zeke fighter family, however, furnished most of the interceptors and escorts, and the Bettys, Vals, and Kates delivered the dwindling enemy offensive thrusts. A once-numerous fleet of Japanese flying boats, reconnaissance planes, and transports fell away into insignificance by October 1943. The feebly armed and unarmed survivors avoided Allied aircraft like a plague, since they were dead birds if caught.

There was no enemy plane that flew from Rabaul that was not a potential flaming death trap to its crew. To meet the specifications outlined by the Japanese Navy, aircraft designers sacrificed safety to achieve maneuverability in fighters and long range in bombers. Heightening the losses suffered by these highly vulnerable planes was the plummeting level of skill of their flying and maintenance personnel.



CAPTURED JAPANESE ZERO, *showing U.S. plane markings, aloft over the San Diego area during test flights.* (*USN 80–G–11475*)



JAPANESE VAL DIVE BOMBERS *are shown armed and ready to take off on a bombing mission in film captured early in 1943.* (*USN 80–G–345598*)

By 1943, the problem of keeping aircraft in forward areas in good operational condition and adequately manned had become acute. The senior staff officer of the *25th Air Flotilla* during the critical period of the battle for Rabaul recalled:

> In the beginning of the war, during 1942, if 100% of the planes were available for an attack one day, the next day 80% would be available, on the third day 50%. In 1943, at any one time, only 50% of the planes were ever available, and on the next day following an all-out operation only 30% would be available. By the end of 1943, only 40% at any one time would be serviceable. In 1942, the low availability was due to lack of supply; from 1943 on, it was due to lack of skill on the part of maintenance personnel and faulty manufacturing methods. Inspection of the aircraft and spare parts, prior to their delivery to Rabaul, was inadequate, and there were many poorly constructed and weak parts discovered. The Japanese tried to increase production so fast that proper examination was impossible.[10]

Japanese naval aviation had begun the war with 2,120 aircraft of all types, including trainers. In April 1943, after 16 months of heavy fighting, the total strength stood at 2,980, which meant that the manufacturers had been able to do little more than keep pace with combat and operational losses. In the succeeding year, the production rate nearly doubled, but losses soared also; there were 6,598 planes on hand in April 1944, but the standard of construction had deteriorated badly.[11]

Even more serious than the sag in the quality of naval aircraft maintenance and production was the steady attrition of experienced flight personnel. The pilots who began the war averaged 800 hours of flying time, and many of them had combat experience in China. Relatively few of these men survived until the end of 1943; a great many died at Coral Sea and Midway and in air battles over Guadalcanal. Others crashed trying to stretch the limited range of Vals and Kates to cover the long stretch between Rabaul and Guadalcanal. The replacements, pilots and aircrews alike, could not hope to match the worth of the men whose places they took.

Two years of flight training and practice had been the prewar requisite to make a man a qualified naval pilot or "observer" (bombardiers, navigators, and gunners). In 1941, the training time was cut about in half. Pilots spent about 60 hours in primary and intermediate trainers, observers spent 44, both in a six-month period. Flight training in combat types, spread over a four-to-six month period, was 100 hours for pilots and 60 hours for observers. Thereafter, 150 hours of tactical flight training was programmed for men in the units to which they were assigned. At Rabaul, however, this phase was spent in combat, and those few who survived 150 hours could count themselves as living on borrowed time.

The majority of flying personnel in the Japanese Navy were warrant officers, petty officers, and naval ratings. Regular and reserve officers selected for pilot and observer training were intended for command billets; they were few in number, and, as combat flight leaders, their losses were disproportionately great. In the Rabaul area by the fall of 1943, a representative Betty unit with 11 planes had only one officer among 23 pilots and one among 38 observers, while all of the 39

[10] *Miyazaki Interrogation*, p. 418.

[11] USSBS, *Interrogation* No. 414, Cdr J. Fukamizu, IJN, II, p. 374, Anx B.

radiomen and mechanics were enlisted men.[12]

An experienced Japanese combat air commander, operations officer at Buin-Kahili during September 1943, characterized these aircrews as personifying:

> . . . Japan's people on the battlefield, for they came from every walk of life. Some of them carried the names of well-known families; some non-commissioned officers were simple laborers. Some were the only sons of their parents. While we maintained strict military discipline on the ground, with proper observance for rank, class, and age, those differences no longer existed when a crew's plane lifted its wheels from the ground.
>
> The enemy cared little about the groups which constituted our aircrews and there existed no discrimination on the part of the pilot who caught our planes in his sights! Our air crews were closely knit, for it mattered not one whit whether an enlisted man or an officer manned the machine guns or cannon. The effect was exactly the same. Unfortunately this feeling of solidarity of our aircrews was unique in the Japanese military organization.[13]

Fighter pilot or bomber crewman, the Japanese naval flyer who fought at Rabaul was aware that he was waging a losing battle. The plane he flew was a torch, waiting only an incendiary bullet to set it alight. The gaping holes in his unit left by the death of veterans were filled by young, inexperienced replacements, more a liability than an asset in combat air operations. Despite the handicaps under which he fought—out-numbered, out-gunned, and out-flown—the enemy flyers fought tenaciously right up to the day when Rabaul was abandoned to its ground defenders.

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[12] ComSoPac, Weekly AirCIntelRepts, 7Feb43–27May44, Rept of 3–9Oct43, hereafter *SoPac ACI Repts.*

[13] Okumiya, Horikoshi, and Caidin, *Zero!*, p. 294.

Approach March

COMAIRSOLS [1]

Even a cursory study of the organizational structure of air command in the South Pacific can produce a headache for the orderly mind. Many officers held two or three billets concurrently, in units of their own service as well as elements of SoPac task forces. The resulting maze of administrative and command channels might appear unworkable, but it functioned smoothly as a result of Admiral Halsey's emphasis on the principle of unity of command. He "insisted that each commander of a task force must have full authority over all components of his force, regardless of service or nationality." [2] Under this tenet, Commander, Aircraft, Solomons (ComAirSols), directed the combat operations of all land-based air in the Solomons during CARTWHEEL.

Rear Admiral Charles P. Mason was the first officer to hold the title ComAirSols; he assumed command on 15 February 1943 at Guadalcanal. Actually, Mason took over a going concern, as he relieved Brigadier General Francis P. Mulcahy, who had controlled all aircraft stationed at the island during the final phase of its defense. Mulcahy, who became Mason's chief of staff, was also Commanding General, 2d Marine Aircraft Wing. The fact that a general headed the staff of an admiral is perhaps the best indication of the multiservice nature of AirSols operations. Since Mason brought only a few officers

[1] Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: *ComSoPac Apr–Oct43 WarDs;* HistDiv, AC/AS Intel, Data pertaining to the ThirteenthAF in the Campaigns of the Lower, Central, and Northern Solomons, 29Mar42–27Sep44 (File 750–01, AF Archives, Maxwell AFB), hereafter *ThirteenthAF Data;* StrikeComd, AirSols, WarDs, 4Apr43–1Jun44, hereafter *StrikeComd WarDs;* Col William O. Brice interview by HistDiv, HQMC, dtd 30Jan45, filed in folder, ComAirSols Repts—Orders—Plans, 1943–44; AvnHistUnit, OP–519B, DCNO(Air), *The Navy's Air War, A Mission Completed,* Lt A. R. Buchanan, USNR, ed. (New York and London: Harper and Brothers [1946]), hereafter Buchanan, *Navy's Air War;* Craven and Cate, *Guadalcanal to Saipan;* SqnLdr J. M. S. Ross, RNZAF, *Royal New Zealand Air Force—Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939–45* (Wellington: War History Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, 1955), hereafter Ross, *RNZAF;* Sherrod, *MarAirHist.*

[2] ComThirdFlt ltr to CominCh, dtd 3Sep44, Subj: Narrative Account—SoPac Campaign (COA, NHD), p. 4. A former chief of staff of AirSols recalls that the command chain was so confused in the beginning that "a Navy squadron commander, land based on Guadalcanal, could not prescribe the hours that the air crews taking care of the planes would work. These hours were prescribed by the CASU [Carrier Aircraft Service Unit] commander whose chain of command ran through a dubious chain of island commanders back to Admiral Halsey. When this was brought to the amazed attention of Admiral Halsey, he immediately issued orders that any air personnel under the operational control of ComAirSols would be under his direct command." LtGen Field Harris ltr to ACofS, G–3, HQMC, dtd 22Oct62.

with him to help run the new command with its enlarged scope of activity, he kept Mulcahy's veteran staff. Experience, not rank, seniority, or service, determined the assignments.

Vice Admiral Aubrey W. Fitch, as Commander, Aircraft, South Pacific (ComAirSoPac), was Admiral Mason's immediate superior. The senior officer retained two areas of flight operations under his direct control; sea search by long range Navy patrol planes and Army bombers, and transport operations by South Pacific Combat Air Transport Command (SCAT). Throughout its long and useful life (November 1942–February 1945), SCAT's complement of Marine and Army transports was headed by MAG–25's commanding officer. SCAT's operations area moved northward with the fighting during 1943, and by August's end, all regularly scheduled flights in SoPac's rear areas were being handled by the Naval Air Transport Service (NATS).[3]

Admiral Fitch, in addition to his immediate concern with the far-ranging sea search and transport operations, coordinated the multitude of air combat and support activities within the whole of Halsey's extensive command area. In administrative and logistical matters, there was a headquarters at Pearl Harbor above ComAirSoPac. Air Force, Pacific Fleet (AirPac) controlled allocation and distribution of Navy and Marine planes, materiel, and aviation personnel throughout the Pacific and was responsible for advance training and combat readiness of squadrons.

Subordinate to ComAirPac, and charged with responsibility for Marine aviation's role in his sphere, was Major General Ross E. Rowell, commanding Marine Aircraft Wings, Pacific (MAWPac). In his training, administrative, and supply capacities, Rowell dealt with a comparable headquarters within Admiral Fitch's command, Marine Aircraft, South Pacific (MASP). With Admiral Halsey's approval, MASP was established on a tentative basis on 21 April 1943 to coordinate the administrative and logistical workload of the 1st and 2d MAWs. For almost a year, until 3 December, when the Commandant of the Marine Corps was finally successful in convincing Admiral King that a separate headquarters was necessary, the 1st Wing commander headed MASP also, using officers and men from the wing headquarters and service squadrons to handle the additional duties. Throughout the period when it was operating without a T/O sanctioned by CominCh, MASP was under Major General Ralph J. Mitchell.

Neither Mitchell's 1st Wing nor Mulcahy's 2d functioned as tactical or operational commands. In common with the higher air headquarters of other American services and that of the Royal New Zealand Air Force (RNZAF) in the South Pacific, the Marine wings and their descending chain of groups and squadrons were primarily concerned with the host of collateral duties necessary to get planes in the air, armed, fueled, and manned for a combat mission. ComAirSols, and the various operational task forces he set up, planned and controlled all sorties against the enemy in the combat area.[4]

[3] ComSoPac Serial 01369, dtd 16Aug43, Subj: Opns of SCAT, in SCAT Statistics and Correspondence, 1942–1944.

[4] The subdivision of the South Pacific into combat, forward, and rear areas is succinctly described in Ross, *RNZAF*, p. 135, as: "the Combat Area in which the Allied forces were in actual contact with the enemy; the Forward

The Army counterpart of MASP was the Thirteenth Air Force which came into being on 14 December 1942.[5] Throughout most of the Guadalcanal campaign, the Army Air Forces units fighting in the South Pacific were nominally part of the Seventh Air Force based in Hawaii. Actually, most of the administrative and logistical support of the AAF squadrons and groups was channeled through the headquarters of Major General Millard F. Harmon, Halsey's senior Army commander and a veteran pilot himself. Harmon was vitally interested in achieving closer control and coordination of these units and strongly urged Washington to authorize formation of a new air force. Adding impetus to his request was the general's feeling, shared at AAF headquarters, that the Navy was not utilizing Army aircraft, particularly heavy bombers, to their fullest combat potential.

While General Harmon "had no intention of capsizing the accepted principle of unity of command," he was interested in "gaining for the AAF full operational control of its own aircraft."[6] He wanted to insure that AAF views on proper employment of its planes and personnel were fully considered. He argued that "no one can build up a force, train it, dispose it, and supply it and be held responsible for its operational effectiveness without some direct contact and influence on operational control."[7] Both Admirals Halsey and Fitch supported General Harmon's request for a separate SoPac command of AAF units, and General Marshall, agreeing, designated them the Thirteenth Air Force. By 13 January, organizational work was far enough along so that headquarters squadrons for the force and its subordinate XIII Fighter and Bomber Commands could be activated. The Thirteenth's commander, Brigadier General Nathan F. Twining, and his staff set up for work close to Admiral Fitch's headquarters on Espiritu Santo.

For much the same reason that the Thirteenth located near ComAirSoPac—to have a strong voice in the employment of its aircraft—the RNZAF assigned a senior liaison officer to Fitch's staff. On 10 March 1943, after the New Zealand War Cabinet had decided to deploy most of the country's operational squadrons in the South Pacific's forward area, a suitable command echelon, No. 1 (Islands) Group under Group Captain Sidney Wallingford, was activated to administer the RNZAF units. At the time, one New Zealand bomber-reconnaissance squadron was flying from Guadalcanal and another from Espiritu Santo, and two fighter squadrons were getting ready to move up from rear area bases. As the RNZAF strength gradually built up during 1943, the New Zealanders took an increasingly prominent role in the drive to isolate Rabaul.

Navy planes, other than those flying from carriers, were administered by Commander, Fleet Aircraft, Noumea, an echelon on a par with MASP, Thirteenth Air

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Area which, although not in contact with the enemy, might be liable to attack, and which was organized for defense and for supporting operations in the Combat Area; and the Rear Area. As the campaign moved north, so did the boundaries of the respective areas."

[5] Dr. Robert F. Futrell, USAF HistDiv, ltr to Head, HistBr, G–3, HQMC, dtd 6Nov62.

[6] Craven and Cate, *Guadalcanal to Saipan*, p. 71.

[7] MajGen Millard F. Harmon, USA, ltr to Gen Henry H. Arnold, USA, dtd 25Nov42, quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 70.

Force, and No. 1 (Islands) Group. Rear Admiral Marc A. Mitscher had the command during the last days of the Guadalcanal campaign and kept it until 4 April 1943, when Admiral Halsey designated him Admiral Mason's relief as ComAirSols. Like Mason, Mitscher brought relatively few staff officers with him and melded them easily into the existing command setup. Another Marine, Brigadier General Field Harris, became AirSols chief of staff to replace General Mulcahy, who went to New Zealand for a short, well-deserved rest before returning to the combat area and his next tactical assignment as ComAir New Georgia.

By the time Mitscher assumed command, AirSols had shaken down into the organizational pattern it was to follow throughout the air offensive against Rabaul—three major functional task forces: fighters; medium and heavy bombers; and light bombers and reconnaissance planes. Each command had its beginning with the mixed bag of aircraft and pilots, crewmen and mechanics, that had defended Guadalcanal as the Cactus Air Force, taking its name from the island's code name. In the urgent haste of getting anyone and everything that could fly and fight to Henderson Field, niceties of squadron and group organization and concerns with service of origin were often forgotten and usually ignored. The Marine command echelons that were on the island controlled all aircraft that were sent up from the rear area and employed them according to function and performance. General Mulcahy was the first island air commander to bring in a full wing operating staff and the first to have enough planes and personnel to warrant its employment.

In the course of the air battles over Guadalcanal and its surrounding seas, two task forces evolved, one composed of fighters and the other of everything else that would fly. Until 16 October 1942, when MAG–14 relieved MAG–23 as the administrative and maintenance agency at Henderson Field, Cactus Air Force was too small to worry about intermediate echelons of tactical command. The 1st MAW commander, General Geiger, and a small operations staff directly controlled all missions. Senior Marine fighter pilots, first Lieutenant Colonel William J. Wallace, then Lieutenant Colonel Harold W. Bauer, acted as fighter commanders, and, in like manner, the most experienced pilots of other aircraft types, regardless of service, helped plan and lead strikes. When most of MAG–23's surviving pilots and aircrews were pulled out of Guadalcanal in October for a rest and a training assignment in the States, Cactus Air Force had grown to a size and complexity that precluded Geiger's direct supervision of all flights.

On the arrival of MAG–14, its commander, Lieutenant Colonel Albert D. Cooley, was named to head an Air Search and Attack Command which would control all bombing, reconnaissance, and rescue operations. Direction of fighter activity, still largely an informal tactical arrangement, remained with Lieutenant Colonel Bauer. After Bauer was reported missing in action on 15 November, Lieutenant Colonel Samuel S. Jack took over as fighter commander. On 28 December, General Mulcahy, now heading Cactus Air, established a Fighter Command and confirmed Jack as its head. When Colonel William O. Brice relieved Lieutenant Colonel Cooley as Commanding Officer of

MAG–14 on 19 December, he also assumed command of Air Search and Attack.

In April, at the time Admiral Mitscher took over AirSols, MAG–14, in its turn, was due for a rest from combat; Lieutenant Colonel Edward J. Pugh's [8] MAG–12 was in line to make the relief as Guadalcanal's top Marine administrative and logistical echelon. Mitscher decided to make MAG–12's commander responsible for running Fighter Command, and brought Marine Colonel Christian F. Schilt up from Admiral Fitch's staff to head a smaller but more easily controlled Air Search and Attack Command. Under Schilt, in what was soon known as Search and Strike Command and, by mid-summer, simply as Strike Command, were all dive and torpedo bombers and short-range reconnaissance planes. The aircraft types assigned to Strike Command insured that it would be primarily composed of Navy and Marine air crews, with a substantial leaven of New Zealanders.

At the same time the new Strike Command was formed, with its headquarters and most of its strength at Henderson Field, the medium and heavy bombers that had served under Cooley and Brice were concentrated under a separate task force at Carney Field near Koli Point. To head this Bomber Command, Admiral Mitscher approved the appointment of the Army's Colonel William A. Matheny. By reason of its assigned aircraft and personnel, Bomber Command was almost wholly an AAF organization, and its commander concurrently led XIII Bomber Command.

During the Allied approach to New Georgia and the first month of operations ashore, Admiral Mitscher continued to command AirSols. On 25 July, Admiral Halsey initiated a practise of rotating the top tactical air command among the various services, and Mitscher was relieved by the Thirteenth Air Force's commander, General Twining. Holding to the joint service nature of AirSols, Twining chose a Navy captain, Charles F. Coe, as his chief of staff and continued the assignments of many Navy and Marine officers who had been a part of Mitscher's command organization.[9] Twining's AirSols bomber chief was still Colonel Matheny, but Fighter Command went to the XIII Fighter Command's Brigadier General Dean C. Strother and Strike Command to Marine Lieutenant Colonel David F. O'Neill.

On their detachment, Admiral Mitscher and General Harris sent a message to Air Sols personnel addressed "to the best air force we know and the one best known to the Japs." [10] The organization they praised was clearly in the ascendency, already a good deal stronger than the *Eleventh Air Fleet* was or could hope to be. Although some of this Allied strength lay in increased allotments of planes and men, even more stemmed from a complete

[8] HqSq–14 Muster Roll, Apr43 (Unit Diary-Sect, RecsBr, PersDept, HQMC).

[9] "General Twining also chose a Marine aviator, Colonel William G. Manley, as his operations officer. Further, RNZAF Air Commodore Sidney Wallingford and his staff were attached to the AirSols staff (by direction of ComAirSoPac, I believe) for operational training, administrative, and logistical liaison with the RNZAF units operating directly under the operational control of AirSols task unit commanders. Thus the AirSols staff was both a joint and a combined air staff, composed of Army, Navy, Marine, and RNZAF officers." VAdm Charles F. Coe ltr to ACofS, G–3, HQMC, dtd 9Oct62.

[10] Quoted in Theodore Taylor, *The Magnificent Mitscher* (New York: W. W. Norton Co., Inc., 1954), p. 161.

reversal of form between opposing fighter aircraft. The fighter plane called the turn in the advance toward Rabaul, and the day of the Zeke had long passed. In its stead stood the Corsair, the Hellcat, and the Lightning.

ALLIED PLANES AND AIRCREWS [11]

One of the more significant events in the history of the air war in the Pacific was a crash landing on 3 June 1942 from which the plane emerged virtually intact. The pilot, a Japanese petty officer, was less fortunate and broke his neck. The plane, a Zero, had had its fuel line punctured by antiaircraft fire during a raid on the U.S. naval base at Dutch Harbor. When the luckless Japanese pilot was unable to get back to his carrier, the *Ryujo*, he attempted a landing on an isolated Aleutian island. Five weeks later, an American scouting party found the plane upside down in a marsh, its pilot dead in the cockpit.

The invaluable find, a new aircraft on its first combat mission, had been built at the Mitsubishi plant only four months before it went down. Returned to the States with careful haste, the plane was completely disassembled by engineers and technicians and rebuilt in its original undamaged condition ready for flight test. At San Diego, in the last months of 1942, the Zeke was skillfully flown against major American fighter aircraft to measure comparative performance and to fathom the Japanese plane's weaknesses. The findings were revealing and reinforced the combat experience of Allied pilots; in essence, they boiled down to one warning: "Never attempt to dog fight Zeke." [12]

While the tests revealed that the enemy fighter could out-maneuver any of its opponents at speeds below 300 miles per hour, they also confirmed defects cited in combat pilots' reports from the Pacific. The Zeke had comparatively poor diving ability, gave sluggish response to controls at high speed, and performed best at medium and low altitudes. The lack of armor for the pilot and the inflammable fuel supply both emphasized the experience of the leading Marine ace at Guadalcanal, Captain Joseph J. Foss, who stated: "If you hit a Zero at the base of its wing, it's just POW! and it disintegrates." [13] The response to these findings was twofold, to accelerate production of new American fighters that could clearly outclass the Zeke, and to emphasize aerial

[11] Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: *USAAF InfoIntel Summary* No. 85, Flight Characteristics of the Japanese Zero Fighter Zeke, dtd Mar43; "Flight Characteristics of the Japanese Type Zero Mk II Fighter Hap," in *USAAF InfoIntelSummary* No. 43–45, dtd 30Sep43; Technical AirIntelCen, NAS, Anacostia, Representative Enemy and Allied Aircraft: Comparative Performance and Statistics, TAIC Manual No. 2 (OpNav–16–V #T302), dtd Oct44; Buchanan, *Navy's Air War*: Ross, *RNZAF*; Wesley Frank Craven and James Lea Cate, eds., *Men and Planes—The Army Air Forces in World War II*, vol. 6 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955); Craven and Cate, *Guadalcanal to Saipan*; Okumiya, Horikoshi, and Caidin, *Zero!*; Sherrod, *MarAirHist*; Ray Wagner, *American Combat Planes* (Garden City, N.Y.: Hanover House, 1960).

[12] *USAAF InfoIntelSummary* No. 85, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

[13] Quoted in "Lessons Learned in Combat with Jap Pilots," in *USAAF InfoIntelSummary* No. 40–43, dtd 10Aug43, p. 3.

combat tactics that took full advantage of the Japanese plane's limitations.

The more important Allied fighters that met the enemy attack as part of Cactus Air Force were the F4F (Grumman Wildcat) flown by the Navy and Marine Corps, and the Army's P–38 (Lockheed Lightning), P–39 (Bell Airacobra), and P–40 (Curtiss Warhawk). After the fighting on Guadalcanal ended, two new American planes began to make their appearance; one, the new standard Navy fighter, the F6F (Grumman Hellcat), and the other—the plane that was to become synonymous with Marine air for the next decade—the F4U (Chance-Vought Corsair). Like all military aircraft, these planes underwent constant modification and improvement, and the various models that fought the Japanese carried a steadily changing array of identifying numbers and letters. In general, it should be remembered that each new version of a basic plane type could do a little more than its predecessor, fly a bit faster, climb higher, or carry a greater pay load or heavier armament.

The system used by the Navy to designate its aircraft gave a letter to denote function, followed by the number of that type made by a particular company, then gave the manufacturer's code and any model numbers and letters: *e.g.*, F4U–1C, the third version (C) of the first model of the fourth fighter (F) manufactured by Chance-Vought (U).[14] The Army Air Forces used a letter function symbol with a number to indicate sequence within a type; letters appended to the number indicated the model: *e.g.*, P–38H, the eighth model (H) of the thirty-eighth fighter (P) accepted by the AAF.[15] While Allied pilots and aircrews were vitally interested in the improved performance indicated by the modification symbols, the basic designations were in more common usage and were employed interchangeably with the colorful names chosen by the manufacturers or the service concerned.

The Wildcat, a stubby, mid-wing monoplane, was the mainstay of Navy and Marine fighter strength for the first 18 months of the war. Slow, when measured against its opponents, the F4F could make about 320 miles per hour at its best altitude, 19,400 feet. With a maximum fuel load, the plane had a total range of 1,100 miles, well under the Zeke's capability; its normal combat range was 770 miles. The Wildcat was sturdily built and was equipped with self-sealing fuel tanks and armor for its vitals so that it could absorb terrific punishment. As one Marine pilot noted, "a Zero can't take two seconds' fire from a Grumman, and a Grumman can sometimes take as high as fifteen minutes' fire from a Zero."[16] As it could take it, the American carrier fighter could also dish it out, and the destructive impact of the fire of its six .50 caliber wing guns blasted hundreds of enemy planes to pieces.

Grumman's successor to the F4F, its production accelerated by the menace of the Zeke, was the F6F Hellcat, which had

[14] *Marine Corps Aircraft 1913–1960—Marine Corps Historical Reference Series No. 20* (Washington: HistBr, G–3 Div, HQMC, 1961) p. 22.

[15] Army aircraft functional symbols were: A (Attack), B (Bombardment), C (Cargo), F (Photographic), L (Liaison), P (Pursuit), and T (Training). The Navy used: B (Bomber), F (Fighter), J (Utility), N (Training), O (Observation), P (Patrol), R (Transport), S (Scout), and T (Torpedo).

[16] Quoted in Sherrod, *MarAirHist*, p. 83.

greater speed, increased range (but still not as much as the Japanese fighter), and improved maneuverability. In high compliment to its performance, the Japanese considered it to be "the only aircraft that could acquit itself with distinction in a fighter-*vs.*-fighter dogfight." [17] In appearance, the Hellcat resembled its predecessor, having the same thick-bodied fuselage and square-tipped wings with a cockpit canopy set high over the fuel tanks between the wing roots. The armament was the same, but the ammunition load was greater, and the F6F was even better protected from enemy fire. The plane could make 375 miles per hour at 17,500 feet, had a climbing rate of 3,500 feet a minute, and a service ceiling of 37,300 feet.

Developed simultaneously with the F6F, the F4U had poor downward visibility (corrected in later models) and a relatively high landing speed, both attributes that made it unattractive as a carrier fighter. While the Navy was hesitant about using the Corsair, the Marines were enthusiastic. The distinctive-looking, gull-winged monoplane was produced in such quantity that all Marine fighter squadrons in the Pacific were equipped with it by July 1943. The powerful Corsair drew a high rating when flown against the captured Zeke in the San Diego tests, with the findings: "Zeke is far inferior to the F4U–1 in level and diving speeds at all altitudes. It is inferior in climb at sea level, and inferior above 20,000 feet . . . Zeke cannot stay with the F4U in high speed climbs." [18] In combat, the disparity of performance proved equally wide; the Japanese called the Corsair "the first single-engine American fighter seriously to challenge the Zero." [19] The F4U's top speed was 417 miles per hour at 20,000 feet; it had a normal range of 1,015 miles with a maximum double that. Armed like the F6F with six wing-mounted .50s, and protected by armor and self-sealing tanks, the Corsair was deadly when flown by an experienced pilot.

Tactics developed to counter the Zeke's maneuverability capitalized on the uniformly high diving performance of American planes, and the mutual protection of two-plane sections fighting as a team and keeping each other's tail clear of enemy attackers. One plane that was singularly proficient in the high speed diving engagement was the AAF's P–38. The two-engined fighter with its distinguishing twin tail booms was designed for high altitude interception and clearly outclassed the Zeke above 20,000 feet, where it could hit maximum speeds just over 400 miles per hour. After making the initial mistake of trying to fight the Zeke on its own terms, Lightning pilots soon learned to fly high out of reach and dive to the attack, firing a nose concentration of four .50s and a 20mm cannon. The plunging dive, launched at the attackers' initiative, carried through Japanese formations and away at speeds that left little chance of being tagged by pursuers. The P–38 was capable of performing a wide variety of tasks and was particularly good as a reconnaissance and photographic plane, since it had a range of 1,500 miles with full tanks and was almost invulnerable to air attack so long as it flew above the Zeke's service ceiling.

[17] Okumiya, Horikoshi, and Caidin, *Zero!*, p. 222.

[18] *USAAF InfoIntelSummary* No. 85, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

[19] Okumiya, Horikoshi, and Caidin, *Zero!*, p. 221.

The Army's utility fighters were the P–39 and P–40, which went through continual redesign and improvement and fought throughout the war, although in gradually decreasing numbers. Both low-wing monoplanes carried the same engine, one that limited effective operations to heights below 15,000 feet. The Airacobra's engine was mounted behind the pilot and the Warhawk's was in the nose; the engine airscoop immediately behind the P–39's cockpit enclosure and the P–40's deep-throated intake under its engine gave each aircraft one of its primary identifying characteristics. Neither plane was particularly fast, the Airacobra could hit 368 miles per hour at maximum efficiency and the Warhawk 350, but both aircraft could out-dive and pull away from the Zeke at lower altitudes. Beyond that accomplishment, Allied pilots (Commonwealth air forces used the P–40 extensively, calling it the Kittyhawk) relied on superior flying skill and wingman protection when jumped by Japanese fighters. The two planes proved to be particularly suited for low-level ground support as strafers and fighter-bombers and saw most use in the latter part of the war in that role. The P–39 delivered a heavy punch with a 37mm gun in its nose firing through a hollow propeller shaft and two .30 and four .50 caliber machine guns in its wings; the P–40 carried the common American fighter armament of six .50s.

When the Lightnings and Corsairs came into common use, the pattern for the AirSols offensive deployed each type at the altitude where it performed best. A typical large-scale raid late in 1943 with bombers at 20,000 feet would have P–39s or P–40s furnishing low cover and P–38s flying at about 30–34,000 feet; between the bombers and the Lightnings would be F4Us in staggered layers of four to eight planes weaving over an area two to four miles wide. No matter where the Japanese attacked, they had to penetrate a screen of fighters operating at maximum efficiency and be ever wary of the escorts waiting to dive on them from above.

One of the mainstays of naval aviation in World War II, the dive bomber, found little favor with the AAF. The Navy's SBD–3, the Douglas Dauntless, was tried out as the A–24 in New Guinea in 1942 and won a verdict of "too slow, too limited in range, and too vulnerable to enemy fighters" from Army pilots.[20] The Army's further development of light bombers tended, thereafter, to concentrate on fighters equipped as bombers. While recognizing the faults of the SBD and working to replace it with a better aircraft, the Navy found it effective as a carrier-borne attack plane, and the Marines were sold on its accuracy against both shipping and point targets ashore. The Dauntless, a single-engine low-wing monoplane with a thick body and a narrow upswept tail, carried a crew of two, a pilot and a radioman-gunner. For defense, the gunner manned a pair of flexible mounted .30s firing to the rear from the cockpit enclosure, and the pilot controlled two .50s fixed in the nose. The dive bomber had a range of 1,345 miles with a 1,000-pound bomb load and 1,580 miles when used as a scout; its best speed was 250 miles per hour at 16,000 feet. Since, like all American combat aircraft, the SBD carried protective armor and self-sealing tanks, it was not nearly as vulnerable to Japanese fighters as was the Val, its enemy counterpart, to Allied hunters.

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[20] Craven and Cate, *Men and Planes, op. cit.*, p. 198.

Unlike the hapless Kate, the American Navy's standard torpedo bomber throughout most of the war was a relatively high performance aircraft. The TBF (Grumman Avenger) had a top speed of 271 miles per hour at 12,000 feet and made only a few miles less when it was carrying its internally stowed torpedo. Fat-bodied, with a long canopied cockpit ending in a power-operated turret for a .50 caliber machine gun, the TBF looked a little like the Wildcat from below. More than one Japanese pilot weak on plane recognition discovered to his sorrow that the difference between the two Grummans included a ventral-mounted .30 caliber machine gun manned by the bombardier. To round off the plane's armament, the pilot at first had a .30 mounted in the engine cowling and, in later modifications, a pair of .50s mounted in the wings. The Avenger's combat range with a 1,760-pound torpedo was 1,215 miles.

In the early stages of the war, the Navy relied on its flying boats for planes that could deliver a heavier bomb load than the carriers' SBDs and TBFs. These patrol bombers, the PBY (Consolidated Catalina), PB2Y (Consolidated Coronado), and PBM (Martin Mariner), were excellent for sea search and anti-submarine work and invaluable in rescuing downed flyers; properly fitted for the job, they made effective cargo and personnel transports. The PBYs, when equipped with radar for night reconnaissance and bombing, were justly famed as the Black Cats, that made darkness a misery for outlying Japanese garrisons and the vessels that tried to supply them. All the flying boats, however, were slow and prime game for enemy fighters and antiaircraft gunners. As a result, in areas where Japanese planes swarmed, better armed and protected Army heavy bombers had to be used for reconnaissance missions, a fact that bothered AAF commanders who felt that their planes should be employed in their primary bombardment function. Eventually, as more aircraft were manufactured, the Navy procured land bombers, and the majority of its patrol planes in the latter stages of the war were land-based.

When the Navy did get four-engine land bombers, it took the AAF's B–24 (Consolidated Liberator) in both a twin-tail (PB4Y) and single-tail (PB4Y–2) version. After 1942, the Liberator gradually succeeded the B–17 (Boeing Flying Fortress) in the South Pacific campaign against Rabaul. The Fortress, aptly named for its guns and armor, could fight its way through to a target and home again, but its practical combat range was less than 800 miles when fully loaded and its bomb capacity was relatively small. General Harmon wanted the B–24 for Halsey's command because it could carry a larger bomb load over a longer distance and still hold its own with Japanese interceptors.

While the Liberator was not quite as strong defensively as the Fortress, it carried ten .50 caliber machine guns in flexible single mounts or paired in power turrets, and its 10-man crew could put up a whale of a battle. With a range of 2,850 miles carrying a 2,500-pound bomb load and 2,000 miles with 8,000 pounds, a speed of 287 miles per hour at 26,700 feet, and a service ceiling of 32,600 feet, the B–24 was also a formidable offensive weapon. One experienced Japanese fighter commander who fought in the Solomons

termed the B–17 and the B–24, "the most difficult" aircraft for Zekes to shoot down.[21]

The AAF was pre-eminent in the medium bombardment field, and two of its bombers, much alike in performance, were used extensively in the Pacific—the B–25 (North American Mitchell) and B–26 (Martin Marauder). Both were twin-engine monoplanes with the same top speed, 285 miles per hour, and a bomb capacity that crept steadily upward during the fighting to reach 4,000 pounds carried over a 1,200-mile range by 1945. Medium bombers specialized in strafing and low-level bombing runs, and, as a result, both planes were flying arsenals with their six-man crews firing as many as 12 .50 caliber machine guns, and, in the B–25's case, often a 75mm nose cannon to boot. The Marauder, a sleek high-wing, needle-like aircraft, was plagued with troubles when it was first introduced and won a reputation as a difficult plane to fly and fight. In contrast, the Mitchell, a twin-tail, mid-wing plane that looked a lot like the Liberator, was a pilots' favorite. It was the B–25, rechristened the PBJ by the Navy, that the Marines adopted and used extensively during the last year of the war.

The Navy and Army used many of the same planes in another category, transports. The majority of the aircraft that were employed were military versions of one prewar commercial model, the Douglas twin-engine DC–3, which could carry a cargo payload of as much as 10,000 pounds or a 6,500-pound passenger load. The Army called this plane the C–47 (Skytrain) and the Navy dubbed it the R4D, but by any name it was the workhorse of the air, dependable and employed everywhere. The four-engine Douglas DC–4, the Army's C–54 (Skymaster), saw limited use by the Navy as the R5D, but, as the larger plane was in limited supply, in its stead the Coronado and Mariner were successfully adapted to haul cargo and passengers. Marine transport squadrons used the R4D, which, unarmed and unarmored, flew at considerable risk in the combat areas of the Pacific.

One aircraft problem, shared by all the services, and never adequately solved until late in the war, was the development of an effective night fighter. Although conventional fighters working with ground searchlights were occasionally able to down night intruders, the score was not impressive. What was needed was a fast plane equipped with radar and capable of reaching high altitudes that could work with ground controllers to find and destroy enemy attackers. For their first night fighter, the Marines reluctantly chose the twin-tail PV–1 (Vega Ventura), which was the best aircraft they could get for the job in October 1942 when the first VMF(N) squadron began forming. The plane had a rated service ceiling of 26,300 feet and a practical one well below that, and the fact that many interceptions would occur above 25,000 feet was well recognized. The Ventura, used by the Navy as a patrol plane, was a twin-engine mid-wing monoplane that could perform adequately as a low-altitude medium bomber; in its night fighter version, the plane carried radar and six .50 caliber machine guns in its nose. The men who crewed the night fighters were highly

[21] LCdr Mitsugu Kofukada, IJN, quoted in Okumiya, Horikoshi, and Caidin, *Zero!*, p. 226.

trained,[22] a description that fitted all of the Allied pilots and aircrews who were fighting in the Pacific at the time of the air offensive against Rabaul.

When the war started, American service pilots, particularly the men in command billets, were veterans of hundreds of hours of flying in all types of aircraft. Fledgling pilots and aircrewmen underwent an extensive training program before they ever joined a squadron, and kept on learning after they reported for duty. With wartime expansion, many easier-paced schedules of prewar years were discarded, but the concept of extensive ground and flight schooling was retained. In many instances in the early part of the war, when American aircraft were no better than on a par with their opponents and often no real match at all, pilot skill was all that could be relied upon. A continuous stream of experienced flying personnel returned to the States from the active war theaters to instruct the men in training and pass on life-saving tips of aerial combat. In the case of Marine trainees, who had only one adversary to get to know, all indoctrination was concentrated on beating the Japanese.

After 1942, most naval pilots were the products of a training system which included pre-flight school for basic instruction and physical conditioning, followed by three months of primary training about equally divided between ground and flight school. Next phase in the program was intermediate training, 14 weeks at Pensacola or Corpus Christi mainly spent flying, at the end of which successful students were designated naval aviators (officers) or naval aviation pilots (enlisted men), the latter group a very small percentage of the whole. At this point, Marine pilots went to Cherry Point or El Toro to begin at least two months of operational training in high performance aircraft of the type they would fly in combat, and Navy pilots reported to naval commands for similar instruction.

The Army Air Forces pilot training program was closely akin to the system used by the Navy with a primary indoctrination course, then basic flying school, followed by advanced school, and completed with transition training to handle combat aircraft. After transition, a new Army pilot, like his Navy and Marine counterpart, had 140–150 hours flying time behind him and the expectation that he would add many more before he met the enemy. The requirements for aircrewmen and mechanics of all the services were met in a manner similar to pilot training: multi-stage courses, tailored to job requirements, concluded with practice work on combat aircraft before assignment to operational units.

Once they had joined a combat squadron, new Allied flying personnel could count on the fact that they would not be expended by unbroken action. Unlike most Japanese flyers, who had to fight until exhaustion hastened their end in battle, Allied pilots and aircrews were given regular respites from the intense strain of combat flying. In Halsey's area, after a Marine squadron fought for four to six weeks under ComAirSols, it moved to the rear area while combat crews were given a week's leave in Sydney or Auckland, and then, after two weeks to a month spent training and absorbing replacements at Efate or Espiritu Santo, the squadron

[22] Sherrod, *MarAirHist*, devotes a chapter (pp. 158–169) to the development, training, and employment of Marine night fighter squadrons which gives an interesting picture of the problems overcome.

went back into action. The benefit of such a program, common to all Allied air units once the first desperate days of understrength, shortage-plagued fighting were over, was incalculable. Although it gave rise to envious and often ribald comment from ground troops, the system of combat air crew rotation to rest centers undeniably saved lives. While it was impossible to give every combat veteran in the South and Southwest Pacific a vacation from war with a taste of civilization and a temperate climate thrown in, it was feasible for flying personnel. The privilege paid off, as it was intended to, in increased operational efficiency and prolonged combat employment of veteran squadrons.

NORTHWEST FROM HENDERSON FIELD [23]

In reconstructing the course of aerial operations during CARTWHEEL, the historian is necessarily struck with the wide disparity between claimed and admitted losses by both sides.[24] Overclaiming was a common fault, and contemporary public accounts as well as many memoirs based on such material are poor sources of relative scores. A reasonably accurate picture of the results of air action can be established, however, by using Allied official reports for Allied losses and captured documents, helped out by postwar assessments, for the toll of damage to the Japanese.

Some of the inflated statistics published by the enemy can be traced to a losing side's natural eagerness to accept the most glowing pilots' victory reports and to an equal reluctance to release news of plummeting strength. Allied commands had less excuse for exaggerated totals, since concerted efforts were made to cross-check claim and counterclaim in order to keep accurate tallys.[25] Most AirSols flyers prided themselves on asking credit for

[23] Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: ComAirPac Analysis of AirOps, Central, South, and SoWesPac, Oct43, dtd 22Nov43, and Nov43, dtd 24Dec43, hereafter *ComAirPac Analysis* with appropriate months; *SoPac ACI Repts; StrikeComd WarDs; ThirteenthAF Data; SE Area NavOps—III; SE Area NavAirOps—IV;* [BuDocks] *Building the Navy's Bases in World War II—History of the Bureau of Yards and Docks and the Civil Engineer Corps,* v. II (Washington, 1947); Buchanan, *Navy's Air War;* Craven and Cate, *Guadalcanal to Saipan;* Morison, *Breaking the Bismarcks Barrier;* Ross, *RNZAF;* Sherrod, *MarAirHist.*

[24] The difficulty of reconciling opposing figures is well illustrated by a ComAirSoPac comparison of Japanese and Allied claims and admissions of losses during four air battles of mid-1943 (*SoPac ACI Rept,* 10–16Oct43, p. 3):

Date	Japanese loss reports		Allied loss reports	
	Own	Allied	Own	Japanese
1 Apr 43	9	57	6	16
6 Jun 43	9	41	7	23
12 Jun 43	7	24	6	26
16 Aug 43	17	27	3	27

[25] The conclusion of the Army's historian of the CARTWHEEL campaign regarding both sides' claims of damage to ships and planes is: "First, Japanese claims were wildly exaggerated whereas American claims were merely exaggerated. Second, Japanese commanders apparently took the claims seriously, so that nonexistent victories often served as the basis for decision. On the other hand, American commanders, taking human frailty into account, evaluated and usually scaled down claims so that decisions were normally based on more realistic estimates of damage." Miller, *Reduction of Rabaul,* p. 232.

nothing but sure kills and observed hits, yet the nature of air warfare is such that a hasty backward glance from a swiftly maneuvering plane was often all the confirmation possible of a claim. Under the circumstances, all manner of targets were "destroyed" several times over. Nowhere was this tendency more pronounced than in air combat, for, as the historian of Marine aviation in the Pacific has cogently observed:

> Nothing is more difficult than an accurate count during an air battle in which several dozen planes are involved; it is very easy for two pilots to claim the same plane at which both are shooting. The smoking plane may get back to its base; it may not even have been actually smoking.[26]

The flashing complexity of a single aerial affray illustrates the difficulty of reconstructing a history containing a succession of such combats. The snarling tangle of interceptors and escorts is, however, only a part of the story, although it is often the part that seizes the imagination and overbalances many popular narrations. A review of air operations lends itself all too easily to a style of telling that places the individual in the forefront, somtimes to the neglect of the group effort. Certainly the highlighted pilot ace and the sharpshooting bomber crew were invaluable, and there is no disposition to downgrade their vital skills and example here, but the larger framework in which they acted will be the theme of this account.

From a Marine aviator's viewpoint, and indeed from that of many other AirSols flyers, 12 March 1943 was the start of a new chapter in the air war against the Japanese. The day marked the debut of the Corsair as a combat plane, as Major William E. Gise led VMF–124's flight echelon up from Espiritu Santo to Henderson Field. There was work for the gull-winged fighters immediately as 12 of the pilots, with only a hasty briefing on Solomons topography, flew escort for a rescue mission to Vella Lavella. Next day, the F4Us made the 600-mile round trip to Bougainville as part of the escort for B–24s attacking shipping at Buin. A similar mission on the 14th ran into about 50 Zekes over Kahili, and the meeting was not a happy one for AirSols. One Corsair was shot down and another lost in a collision with an enemy fighter. Japanese naval pilots also accounted for two of the P–40s flying low, two of the heavy bombers, and the whole top cover, four P–38s. The total enemy loss was three Zekes.

Fortunately, this inauspicious beginning was not a portent of the Corsair's future performance. The Marine pilots were new to the plane, new to combat, and had far less operational flying time, 20 hours on the average,[27] than was the case with men who arrived later in the year as replacements and reinforcements.[28] It took a little while for the F4U and the

[26] Sherrod, *MarAirHist*, p. 201.

[27] Air Technical AnalysisDiv, CNO, Interview with 1stLt Kenneth Walsh, USMC (OpNav–35 #E17), dtd 23Nov43, in MASP Survival and Interviews folder.

[28] Speaking of these later pilots from all the services, the Strike Command operations officer commented: "The efforts of operational training in the various training commands have paid a high dividend. Young pilots who haven't flown much can be given a mission that two years before the war wouldn't have been given to a division of squadron commanders." AirIntelGru, DivNavIntel, CNO, Interview of LCdr H. H. Larsen, USN (OpNav–16–V #E31), dtd 27Feb44, pp. 1–2.

men who flew it to get completely shaken down in combat, but when Admiral Yamamoto launched his *I Go* attacks in early April, the Corsairs were ready and able to meet the best pilots and planes the Japanese could send up. Confidence in the F4U grew as its record of victories mounted, and pilots could say as one veteran did; "The Corsair was a sweet-flying baby if ever I flew one. No longer would we have to fight the Nip's fight, for we could make our own rules." [29] Respected but unregretted, the Marines' Wildcats swiftly passed from the scene, and, by 2 July, all eight of the fighter squadrons under MASP were flying Corsairs.[30]

One of the greatest assets of the F4U was its range; unlike the F4F, the swifter fighter could cover the distance from Guadalcanal to southern Bougainville and return, carrying fuel to spare for air combat. Since it flew best at the altitude where Zekes were wont to intercept, the Corsair eased the lot of the Warhawks and Lightnings, letting each type fly at a height where it was on a par with or superior to the enemy fighter. With adequate escort available, daylight raids by Liberators and Fortresses on targets at Ballale, Buin, and Kahili increased. Fighter sweeps into the northern Solomons were flown regularly.

Japanese airfields closer to Guadalcanal, Munda, and the little-used liaison strip at Vila, were not neglected, however, while the heavy bombers and long-legged fighters ranged beyond the New Georgia Group. Strike Command sent a steady procession of SBDs and TBFs to New Georgia, accompanied by AirSol's usual varied collection of fighters, to keep the enemy runways bomb-cratered and their defending gun crews fearful. Despite the pounding it took, the Japanese kept Munda in use as an emergency strip, and its threat was constant. Any letup in the Allied air attacks and Rabaul's 300-plane garrison could begin staging raids through Munda to hit the swelling complex of fields on Guadalcanal.

Without auxiliary tanks, Navy and Marine dive bombers could not join in attacks on Bougainville targets and return with safety, but torpedo bombers could make the trip and did. The TBFs were used primarily on night harassing missions, hitting shipping and airfield installations by flare light. Enemy attempts at interception, using day fighters and searchlights to locate targets, were even less successful than similar Allied attempts.

Aside from their more common employment as bombers, the Avengers were occasionally used for another type of mission, offensive aerial mining, with results hard to assess. On the night of 20 March, Major John W. Sapp led 42 TBFs from his own VMSB-143 [31] and three Navy squadrons up to Bougainville to mine the waters off Buin-Kahili. While 18 Army heavy bombers dropped clusters of fragmentation bombs on shore targets and attracted the attention of searchlights and antiaircraft, the TBFs slipped down to 1,500 feet and parachuted a pattern of 1,600-pound magnetic mines into the enemy harbor. None of the Avengers was hit, and the entire raiding force got back

[29] Col Gregory Boyington, *Baa! Baa! Black Sheep* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1958), p. 129.

[30] VMF-213 got its new F4Us on 11 March, VMF-121 on 15 April, VMF-112 and -221 on 19 May, VMF-122 on 16 June, VMF-214 on 19 June, and VMF-123 on 2 July.

[31] VMSB-143 was redesignated VMTB-143 on 31 May 1943.

safely. On the following night, 40 torpedo bombers and 21 B–17s and B–24s mounted another mining strike to the same area; again the Japanese went scoreless.

Careful study by the Navy indicates that this mine plant probably claimed two merchantmen and damaged a destroyer, but the results of mining in poorly charted enemy waters can never be completely known. Admiral Halsey was pleased enough with the reported damage to order a resumption of aerial mining in May, and on the 19th, 30 TBFs from VMSB–143 and VT–11, with a supporting flight of six heavy bombers carrying 100-pound fragmentation bombs, sortied for Buin-Kahili. This time enemy antiaircraft ignored the relatively light diversionary attack and concentrated search lights and guns on the TBFs as they parachuted their mines. The Navy and the Marine squadron each lost two planes to the hail of defending fire. On 20 May, four Liberators and four Fortresses with a mixed load of 100- and 300-pound bombs, accompanied 30 mine-laden Avengers to the Shortlands. Surprised by the Allied attack, the Japanese engaged the bombers and devoted little fire to the mining planes; all TBFs returned to base after laying their deadly cargo. The Avenger crews felt themselves lucky to have escaped whole, as the enemy fire was heavy and the mined area was close inshore.

A final mission of the mining program, the target again Buin-Kahili waters, was mounted on 23 May. About midnight on the 22d, while the main striking force was taking off from Guadalcanal, five B–24s hit Kahili's airstrip and defenses, breaking off their attack when a flight of 14 B–17s arrived to hit shore defenses during the mining run. Of 26 TBFs employed, only 20 carried mines, while two Navy and four Marine planes each had a load of four 500-pound bombs. Two of these Marine Avengers served as prowlers, unsuccessfully seeking enemy shipping during the attack, and the remaining bomb-loaded torpedo planes attacked searchlights and antiaircraft positions on offshore islands. The bombing was effective; enemy fire was erratic and probing lights were knocked out almost as soon as they flashed on. No AirSols planes were downed, and all returned without mishap, helped along the way by the flares that a RNZAF Hudson (Lockheed PBO) dropped near Vella Lavella as navigational aids.[32]

One of the mines of this series was credited with causing damage to the enemy light cruiser *Yubari* on 5 July, but otherwise nothing definite was learned of the mission's success. TBFs were not used for mine laying again until after the Bougainville landing, but Strike Command had learned that aerial mining in constricted and heavily defended waters required effective supporting and diversionary attacks. Many Avenger pilots were convinced that, without such support, losses among mine-laying planes would be prohibitive.

The more usual run of Allied air raids on Buin-Kahili and the Shortlands stepped up appreciably after the Seabee-constructed airfields in the Russells opened for business. The advance echelon of Lieutenant Colonel Raymond E. Hopper's MAG–21 landed on Banika on 14 March, the rest of the group arrived on 4 April, and the first of the island's two fields was unofficially christened on the 13th, two days before its completion, when a dam-

[32] CO, StrikeComd, AirSols ltr to ComAirSols, dtd 29May43, Subj: Mine laying in Kahili and Shortland Island Areas.

aged P–38 made an emergency landing. By the time both airstrips were in full operation in late June, MAG–21's three fighter squadrons were being employed primarily as escorts for bombers with interception scrambles limited to the intrusion of an occasional snooper picked up on radar.

Following the enemy's unsuccessful *I Go* attacks of early April, Japanese fighters and bombers steered clear of Guadalcanal in daylight for several weeks. Then on 25 April, a force of 16 Bettys and 20–25 Zekes was spotted southeast of New Georgia by a flight of four Corsairs led by Major Monfurd K. Peyton. The Marine planes, all from VMF–213, were returning to base from a strafing mission at Vila. When the F4Us circled to intercept the bomber formation, they were jumped by enemy fighters, but bore in despite the odds. Five Zekes were gunned down in the resulting affray and two Corsairs and one pilot were lost, but the entire Japanese attack formation was turned back.

While daylight raids were scarce, enemy night attacks on Guadalcanal and Banika, sometimes in formations as large as eight bombers, were frequent. The physical damage done on such visits was meager, but the wear and tear on nerves and tempers was great, and many a fervent wish for an effective night fighter was voiced by troops chased into trenches and dugouts by "Condition Red" alerts. A squadron of the AAF's first night fighters, P–70s, which began operating from Guadalcanal in March was generally ineffective, as the plane could not operate at the heights where enemy bombers flew. Lightnings practiced in night work easily reach the required altitude and occasionally flamed an unwary raider caught in the glare of probing searchlights, but a lack of airborne radar limited the P–38s' effectiveness. Not until late fall, when the first Navy and Marine night fighter squadrons began operating in the South Pacific did the Allies achieve control of the skies over their positions at night as well as in daytime. The dawn-to-dusk mastery of the air by AirSols interceptors was conclusively demonstrated in the bloody repulse of the series of raids which the Japanese launched against Guadalcanal between 7 and 16 June 1943.

Reinforced by 58 fighters and 49 bombers that the *Combined Fleet* transferred from Truk to Rabaul on 10 May, the *Eleventh Air Fleet* sought to check the Allies' aggressive air attacks by hitting at the ultimate source of AirSols offensive strength, its fighters. On 7 June, Admiral Kusaka sent approximately 80 Zekes, a number of them new Hamp models with bombs carried under the wings, flying toward the Russells and spoiling for a fight. Warned by coastwatchers, Fighter Command obliged the enemy naval pilots by sending up more game than they wanted, 104 interceptors, with about half deployed over the shipping at Guadalcanal and the rest stacked in layers between the Russells and New Georgia. For about an hour and a half, Japanese and Allied fighters tangled in a blinding rain storm all over a 50-mile-long battle zone. Finally, after the defenders shot down 23 Zekes, and antiaircraft guns on Banika accounted for a 24th,[33] the raid was turned

[33] Postwar research by Japanese military historians indicates that nine carrier fighters failed to return from this attack and five were heavily damaged. Chief, WarHistOff, DefAgency of Japan, ltr to Head, HistBr, G–3, HQMC, dtd 29Mar63, hereafter *Japanese Air Comments.*

back short of Henderson Field. Allied losses were seven fighters in combat, with all pilots recovered but one, and two planes crashed as a result of the foul weather.

On 12 June, Admiral Kusaka again tried a fighter sweep with about 50 Zekes and experienced the same dismal failure. Intercepted north and west of the Russells by 49 Allied fighters of the 90 scrambled, the Japanese attacking force lost half its strength before it turned back.[34] Five American fighters were downed and one RNZAF P–40; four of the pilots survived to be picked up by rescue amphibians. Coastwatchers reported Japanese bombers had come south past Bougainville during the day, but none showed up in the lower Solomons when the Zekes failed to clear a path.

Despite its heavy losses, a month's allotment of replacement aircraft in two days of combat, the *Eleventh Air Fleet* staged a third big attack on 16 June. Prompted by sightings of large numbers of ships moving into the waters off Guadalcanal during the build-up for the TOENAILS operation, Admiral Kusaka this time sent at least 24 dive bombers along with 70 of his fighters. Amply forewarned by coastwatchers, and vectored into position by New Zealand ground intercept radar, AirSols fighters virtually destroyed the raiding force. Seventy-four of the 104 planes sent aloft by Fighter Command made contact, and no two accounts agree on the exact total of damage, but one thing is certain, the relative score was incredibly high in favor of the defenders. AirSols pilots originally claimed 49 Zekes and 32 Vals; ship and ground antiaircraft fire added 17 planes to that count. Six Allied fighters were destroyed and five pilots were lost. The few bombers that got through to Guadalcanal before they were shot out of the sky damaged one cargo ship sufficiently to force it ashore and set an LST afire. Enemy records are curiously blank regarding this raid; there is no doubt, however, that the number of planes that got back to Rabaul was woefully low. One lucky survivor who returned with tales of substantial Allied shipping losses found no witness to substantiate or dispute his fable.[35]

The *Eleventh Air Fleet* had no time to lick its wounds and recover. Less than a week after the 16 June attack, Marine raiders landed at Segi, heralding the launching of the drive to seize Munda airfield. Reacting to the grave threat posed by Allied seizure of bases in the New Georgia Group, Kusaka threw every plane he had against the attacking forces. To give his subordinate badly needed reinforcements, Admiral Koga ordered the air groups of the *2d Carrier Division* at Truk forward to Kahili. The commitment of 150 additional Zekes, Vals, and Kates to the Solomons air battles, a move that crippled the offensive power of the *Combined Fleet*, precipitated violent air action, but had little overall effect on the outcome of the campaign. The balance of air power was now so overwhelmingly

[34] According to recent Japanese research, "77 Zero fighters took off to engage in the aerial combat on June 12, of which 3 turned back to their base without getting to their destination. Thus, the Japanese lost 6 Zero Fighters and one fighter made an emergency landing." *Ibid.*

[35] Cited in Morison, *Breaking the Bismarcks Barrier*, p. 140. The Japanese War History Office indicates that 13 Vals and 12 Zekes failed to return from this attack. *Japanese Air Comments.*

with AirSols that the final result could not be doubted.

The imbalance was found not only in relative quantity and quality of aircraft, but also in what the enemy *6th Attack Force* commander called the "world of difference between the ability of the Japanese and Americans to construct air bases in the combat theaters." [36] While taking judicious note that most Japanese forward airbases had been built and maintained by "primitive manpower," in contrast to those that seemed to be the product of "mass mechanical invasion on jungle, coral, and rock," the enemy officer made an even more significant assessment, recalling:

> One of the major points which has too often been overlooked in an evaluation of fighting power, but which determined to a large extent the efficiency of air units, was that of hygienic installations. Japanese engineers paid scant attention to this problem, dismissing the pressing matter of mosquito protection by simply rigging mosquito nets in personnel quarters. Sanitary facilities were basically crude and ineffective; certainly they contributed nothing to the morale of ground and air crews.
>
> The Americans, by contrast, swept clean vast areas surrounding their ground installations with advanced mechanical aids. Through exhaustive disinfecting operations, they banished flies and mosquitos from their airbases and paid similar attention to every phase of sanitation and disease.
>
> Some may consider this a prosaic matter, but it was vital to the men forced to live on desert islands and in the midst of jungles swarming with disease and insect life. The inevitable outcome of such neglect was a tremendous difference in the health of the American and Japanese personnel who were assigned to these forward air facilities.[37]

Wracked by disease, starved for proper foods, living in wretched squalor, with AirSols night intruders banishing sleep, Japanese flyers at Kahili were literally wearied to the point where they were often victims of their own poor reactions in combat. The living conditions of mechanics and armorers were considerably worse than those of flight crews, and the numbed senses of maintenance personnel working through the night to patch damaged planes unwittingly caused the deaths of many flyers. Topping the bitter cup of enemy naval aviators was the knowledge that they had slight chance to live if their planes went down any distance from a Japanese base. A gross wastage of veteran pilots and crews occurred because the Japanese had no air-sea rescue apparatus comparable to the extensive Allied setup. The *2d Carrier Division*'s operations officer believed that "naval commanders were so afraid of the possible sacrifices which might be the consequences of attempting to rescue our crews which were shot down that often we abandoned on the open sea those men whom we could obviously have saved." [38] The fault was not entirely with commanders either, as the Japanese staff officer further noted that "our own combat men, the flying mates of

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[36] LCdr Mitsugu Kofukuda, IJN, quoted in Okumiya, Horikosi, and Caidin, *Zero!*, p. 229.

[37] *Ibid.*, p. 230. Commander Kofukuda's comments prompted a former commanding officer of MAG–24 to call attention to the equally high quality of the aircraft maintenance effort which complemented the know-how of airbase construction, and in particular "to the training, leadership, and ingenuity of the Marine ground crews who kept a high percentage of aircraft in operation, to the naval aviation supply system that got the goods to them, and to the designers and manufacturers who produced special handling equipment to reduce the manpower required and above all to speed accomplishment of the tasks." Col Lewis H. Delano ltr to CMC, dtd 27Nov62.

[38] Okumiya, Horikoshi, and Caidin, *Zero!*, p. 312.

the same men who were shot down and adrift at sea, would not, even under orders, take any unnecessary chances to save their lives." [39]

If Japanese flyers "accepted their abandonment stoically," [40] there was no need for such resignation on the part of any Allied aircrewman who survived a crash or bailed out from a plunging wreck. In the vicinity of home fields, small amphibians were quick to the scene of any water landings, racing crash boats for the rescue honors. Hudsons and Venturas were stationed on the return routes of Allied air attack forces to spot downed planes and protect and keep in sight crew survivors. Flying boats, nicknamed Dumbos after a popular cartoon character, a flying elephant, made the pickup under the cover of a heavy fighter escort. Many men who swam or paddled ashore on the various islands owed their lives and freedom to friendly natives who cared for the injured and got the flyers back to the nearest coastwatcher, often after near-incredible adventures dodging enemy searching parties. In the Bougainville vicinity, where the Melanesians were less well disposed toward the colonial government, downed aviators were sometimes turned over to the Japanese, but the coastwatchers were usually able to call upon AirSols for a bombing and strafing mission against any village that actively supported the enemy. The harsh punishment, and the reason for it, were not lost on the offenders.

Bougainville and its offshore islands were by no means neglected during TOENAILS, even though most of the AirSols effort was in direct support of New Georgia operations. Dauntless dive bombers, helped along by 55-gallon belly tanks to increase their range, began joining Buin-Kahili strikes in early June, and they continued to hit such targets when their presence was not more urgently needed by ComAir New Georgia. Mitchells made their first appearance in Bomber Command's array in June, and the medium bombers too had a hand in the reduction of Bougainville installations when General Mulcahy did not put in a call for their support against enemy forces on New Georgia. Most of the missions flown against targets in the northern Solomons hampered Japanese efforts to support their beleaguered troops in the central Solomons.

One such strike, larger than most but still representative of many others, was mounted on 17 July, after aerial reconnaissance had disclosed that a large concentration of shipping lay off Buin. Led in by seven B–24s which bombed from high altitude, an attack force of 37 SBDs and 35 TBFs covered by 114 fighters dove on the enemy vessels with the Corsairs of the escort keeping close company. Zekes rising from Kahili's runways to intercept were shot down by the zooming F4Us almost before the enemy pilots knew what hit them. Surprise seemed to be complete, and AirSols flyers claimed 47 Zekes and five floatplanes, with 41 of the 52 credited to pilots of the four participating Marine fighter squadrons.[41] Excited Avenger and Dauntless crews were sure that they had sunk four destroyers and an oiler; postwar assessment gave

[39] *Ibid.*

[40] *Ibid.*

[41] *Japanese Air Comments.* In this instance, as in others previously cited, the loss figure supplied by the Japanese War History Office—13 Zekes—appears to be too low in relation to the carefully checked contemporary credits to Allied flyers.

them the destroyer *Hatsuyuki* and damage to three others. The Japanese got slim pickings for their heavy losses: one SBD, one TBF, two P–38s, and one F4U.

In case the Japanese did not absorb the lesson that a 192-plane strike taught on the 17th, another equally heavy attack on the same area was made on the 18th, again with considerable damage to enemy shipping. Then, on the evening of the 19th, a Black Cat spotted and trailed an enemy task force near Choiseul, giving the lead to Strike Command which sent six Avengers up from Henderson Field, each carrying a 2,000-pound bomb. Dropping their loads from masthead height, the TBFs sank the destroyer *Yugure* and put a hole in the side of the heavy cruiser *Kumano*. A further attack during darkness by five more Avengers and eight Mitchells failed to score, but another destroyer, the *Kiyoami*, was sent to the bottom after daylight on the 20th by skip-bombing B–25s. Two days later, a shipping strike of 12 B–24s, 16 SBDs, and 18 TBFs covered by 122 fighters caught the seaplane tender *Nisshin* off Bougainville's south coast and sent it to the bottom with all the 24 medium tanks and most of the 600-odd troops it carried.

The ceaseless attacks on targets in the northern Solomons, while the fighting on New Georgia coursed its slow way to an end, left no doubt in Japanese minds of the general area of the next major Allied objective. When Munda airfield finally fell to the XIV Corps in early August, the enemy's only valid reason for continuing the fight in the central Solomons was to win time to strengthen Bougainville defenses.

In August and September, Seabees worked feverishly on the fields at Segi, Munda, the small island of Ondonga six miles northwest of Munda Point, and Barakoma on the east coast of Vella Lavella. As these Allied airbases came into heavy use, the forward fields of the Japanese became untenable. Munda had been rendered impotent by continued strikes mounted from Guadalcanal and Banika, and now Ballale and Kahili were emptied of planes by similar relentless attacks. Japanese auxiliary airstrips on Bougainville at Kara near Kahili, at Tenekau and Kieta on the northeast coast, and at Bonis on the Buka Passage were never finished or were knocked out of action almost as soon as they came into use.

In mid-October, headquarters of Strike Command, Fighter Command, and AirSols all moved to New Georgia, keeping pace with the shorter-ranged aircraft that were crowding into the expanding airdromes on the newly won islands. Bomber Command's Liberators continued to fly from Carney and Koli Point Fields on Guadalcanal, and its Mitchells were based in the Russells. The B–24s and PB4Ys made Buka their special target, and Japanese ships and barges drew a good share of the attention of the heavily gunned B–25s. To handle the enemy bases in southern Bougainville, Strike Command sent about a hundred planes a day in the last two weeks of October to bomb and strafe runways, defending antiaircraft, and whatever else seemed a profitable mark.

Since the SBD–TBF attack formations had abundant fighter cover, most opposition came from the enemy guns ringing the airfields. The tactics developed by Strike Command to deal with antiaircraft fire were calculated to give the Japanese gunners nightmares. As Lieutenant Colonel O'Neill's operations officer, Lieutenant Commander Harold H. Larsen, USN, out-

lined the procedure, the strike setup against Ballale, Kahili, and Kara was:

> . . . to have the dive bombers go down and hit the guns, with as many diving simultaneously as possible. Torpedo planes came down and hit the field with a lot of variations, due to the fact that the Japs soon caught on that the torpedo planes would hit the field and they would come out of their holes after the dive bombers went away and wallop the torpedo planes as they pulled out. So we had little sneakers arranged here and there—some dive bombers would lay up in the air until the SBDs had all gone over, and then come down and hit some of the Japs who got sassy; or they would wait until after the torpedo planes had finished their attacks and come down; or a group of four to six torpedo planes would come down in the center of the torpedo plane attack on the field and hit any guns that happened to open fire.[42]

The air offensive against the remaining Japanese positions in the Solomons, was so extensive in nature by the time of the Bougainville operation that local airbase commanders, or air operations officers as they were usually designated, acted as deputies for ComAirSols in tactical command of all aircraft assigned to their fields. Through local headquarters of the type commands, Fighter, Strike, and Bomber, directions were issued for various missions, with joint operations coordinated by the AirSols operations officer. On the eve of the Empress Augusta Bay landings, local tactical air control had been passed to Commander Air Guadalcanal, except for heavy bomber sorties which were handled by the Air Operations Officer, Koli Point, and to local commands at Banika, Segi, Ondonga, and Barakoma. Fighter and Strike Commands directly controlled all missions originated from Munda's fields.[43]

Perhaps the best way of showing how much the precursor Cactus Air Force of 1942 had grown in a year of steady reinforcement, aircraft improvement, and operational success is to outline AirSols strength at the start of the amphibious campaign in the northern Solomons:

Munda	
VF(N)-75	6 F4U-2*
12th Fighter Sqn	25 P-39
VC-24	24 SBD
VC-38	9 SBD
VC-40	9 SBD
VMSB-144	24 SBD
VMSB-234	10 SBD
VMSB-244	24 SBD
VC-38	9 TBF
VC-40	9 TBF
VMTB-143	10 TBF
VMTB-232	20 TBF
17th Photo Sqn	3 F5A*
Barakoma	
VMF-212	20 F4U
VMF-215	20 F4U
VMF-221	20 F4U
Ondonga	
70th Fighter Sqn	25 P-39
VF-17	36 F4U
No. 15 RNZAF Sqn	21 P-40
No. 17 RNZAF Sqn	21 P-40
Segi	
VF-33	24 F6F
VF-38	12 F6F
VF-40	12 F6F
Russells	
VMF-211	20 F4U
VMF(N)-531	5 PV-1
VB-138	12 PV-1
VB-140	15 PV-1
70th Bomb Sqn	16 B-25
75th Bomb Sqn	16 B-25
390th Bomb Sqn	16 B-25

[42] Larsen interview, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

[43] ComAirSols OPlan No. T1-43, dtd 210ct43, in ComAirSoPac Correspondence; OpOs and Plans folder.

Guadalcanal

44th Fighter Sqn	25 P–38
Reserve (AAF)	10 P–40
Reserve (AAF)	10 P–39
VB–102	15 PB4Y
VB–104	12 PB4Y
5th & 307th Bomb Groups	48 B–24,4 SB–24*
No. 3 RNZAF Sqn	15 PV–1
VP–23	12 PBY5
VP–54	6 PBY5A
VP–71	15 PBY5
VD–1	7 PB4Y (Photo)
17th Photo Sqn	3 F5A*
VS–54	14 SBD3
VS–64	8 OS2U3*
VS–68	8 OS2U3*
SCAT	21 C–47/R4D [44]

[44] *Ibid.*, Annex A. Aircraft not previously identified in the text marked * are: F4U–2, the night fighter version of the Corsair; F5A, the photo-reconnaissance version of the P–38; OS2U3, the Chance-Vought Kingfisher, a single float scout plane; SB–24, a radar-equipped Liberator developed for night bombing. Listed under Guadalcanal are planes actually based at Florida Island which came under control of Commander Air Guadalcanal. Although this operation plan showed two P–38s as being attached to VMF(N)–531, the former commanding officer says that the squadron controlled only its own PV–1s. BGen Frank H. Schwable ltr to HistBr, G–3, HQMC, dtd 7Nov62.

The Japanese considered that the seizure of a foothold at Torokina and the construction of airfields there was the move that "decided the fate of Rabaul." [45] Once Marines were ashore on Bougainville, and Seabees and engineers were at work with bulldozer and grader, the neutralization of the airfields on Gazelle Peninsula was inevitable. Before the Japanese pulled out their air garrison, however, four months of heavy air attacks, begun by SWPA Allied Air Forces, intensified by South and Central Pacific carrier planes, and finished by AirSols, were necessary.

[45] *SE Area NavAirOps*—IV, p. 20.