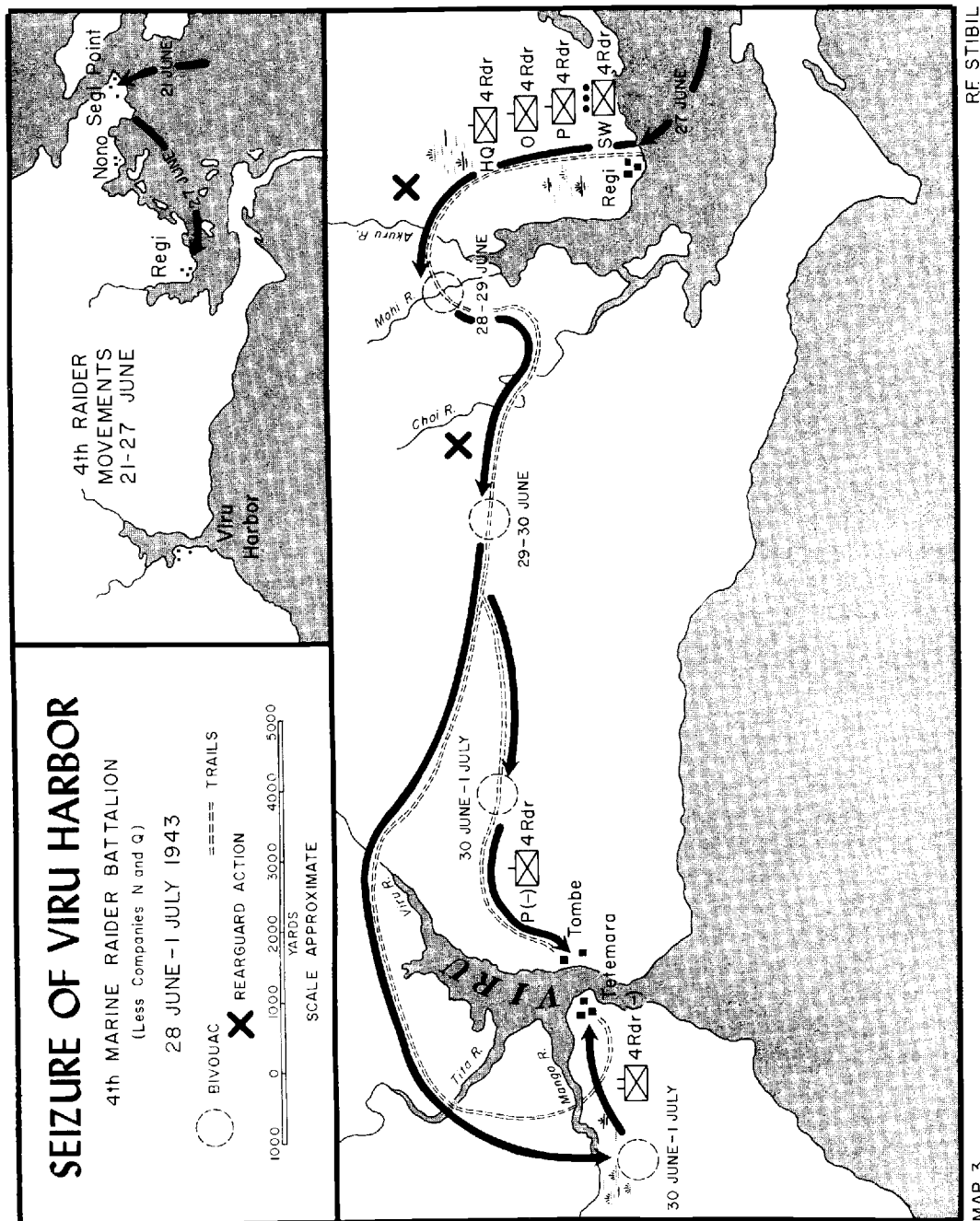




miles. Besides, the distance in miles was not a realistic indication of the problems the Marines faced in the thick jungle. Currin knew the job would be much too tough for a single company. The enemy situation had changed since Admiral Fort's plans were made, and there was now a larger Japanese force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

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

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

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

There were many signs of Japanese patrols, but they indicated small scouting

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

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

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

⁸ Currin *ltr.*

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

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

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

Burying their dead and carrying the wounded man, Brown's men pushed on to catch Currin's column. The battalion crossed the Choi River again, skirted a large swamp, and then halted for the night just after crossing the Choi for the third time. There Lieutenant Brown and his platoon rejoined the battalion. Colonel Currin tried to report his position to Guadalcanal, but his radio failed him. The battalion commander could only hope that the message he had sent via runner and Kennedy during the previous night

would keep the transports from sailing into range of the enemy's 3-inch coastal gun before the raiders could get to Viru and silence that weapon.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Beyond the Mango, the Marines were caught by darkness and a mangrove swamp. Water, knee-to-waist-deep, hiding twisted, snakelike roots under the surface, trapped the raiders. In a matter of minutes, the column was stalled as men fought to keep contact with each other. However, "tree-light" — phosphorescent wood from dead logs and trees—was provided by the native guides and re-established contact. With each man carrying a piece of this dimly glowing wood, and guiding on the piece carried by the man ahead, the column closed up and moved

out. Four hours later, the Marines were out of the swamp and facing the last half-mile of steep slope to the rear of Tetemara Village. Weary raiders struggled up the slick and muddy trail, falling exhausted at the top of the ridge after crawling on their hands and knees the last 100 yards of nearly vertical slope.

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

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

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

¹² *Currin ltr.*

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

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

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

Even while the fighting was in progress, three LCTs sailed into the harbor with gasoline, oil, and ammunition for the proposed naval base. They remained safely offshore until Tetemara was secured, and then came in to drop their ramps and un-

load. Three days later, on 4 July, Company B of the 103d Infantry struggled into Tombe after an enervating march overland from Nono. On 10 July, after a new garrison force came in to hold and develop the Viru area, the raiders returned to their old camp at Guadalcanal.¹³ Seizure of Viru had cost the battalion 13 killed and 15 wounded out of an original force of 375 officers and men.

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

SECURING VANGUNU¹⁵

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

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

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

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

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

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

As his landing force, Fort selected Lieutenant Colonel Lester E. Brown's 2d Battalion, 103d Infantry Regiment; Battery B (90mm), 70th Coast Artillery (Antiaircraft) Battalion; and half of the 20th NCB. To augment Brown's soldiers, Admiral Fort also assigned that portion of the 4th Marine Raider Battalion which had not gone to Segi Point and Viru Harbor under Lieutenant Colonel Currin. The raider battalion's executive officer, Major

James R. Clark, commanded these units which included Company N (Captain Earle O. Snell, Jr.), Company Q (Captain William L. Flake), a demolitions platoon, and a headquarters detachment. For added firepower, Battery B (105mm howitzers) of the 152d Field Artillery Battalion, and a special weapons group from Battery E (40mm and .50 caliber anti-aircraft guns) of the 70th Coast Artillery Battalion were added to the Wickham Anchorage force.

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

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

¹⁶ CIC SoPacFor Item No. 641, 8th CSNLF RadLog, 4-22June43.

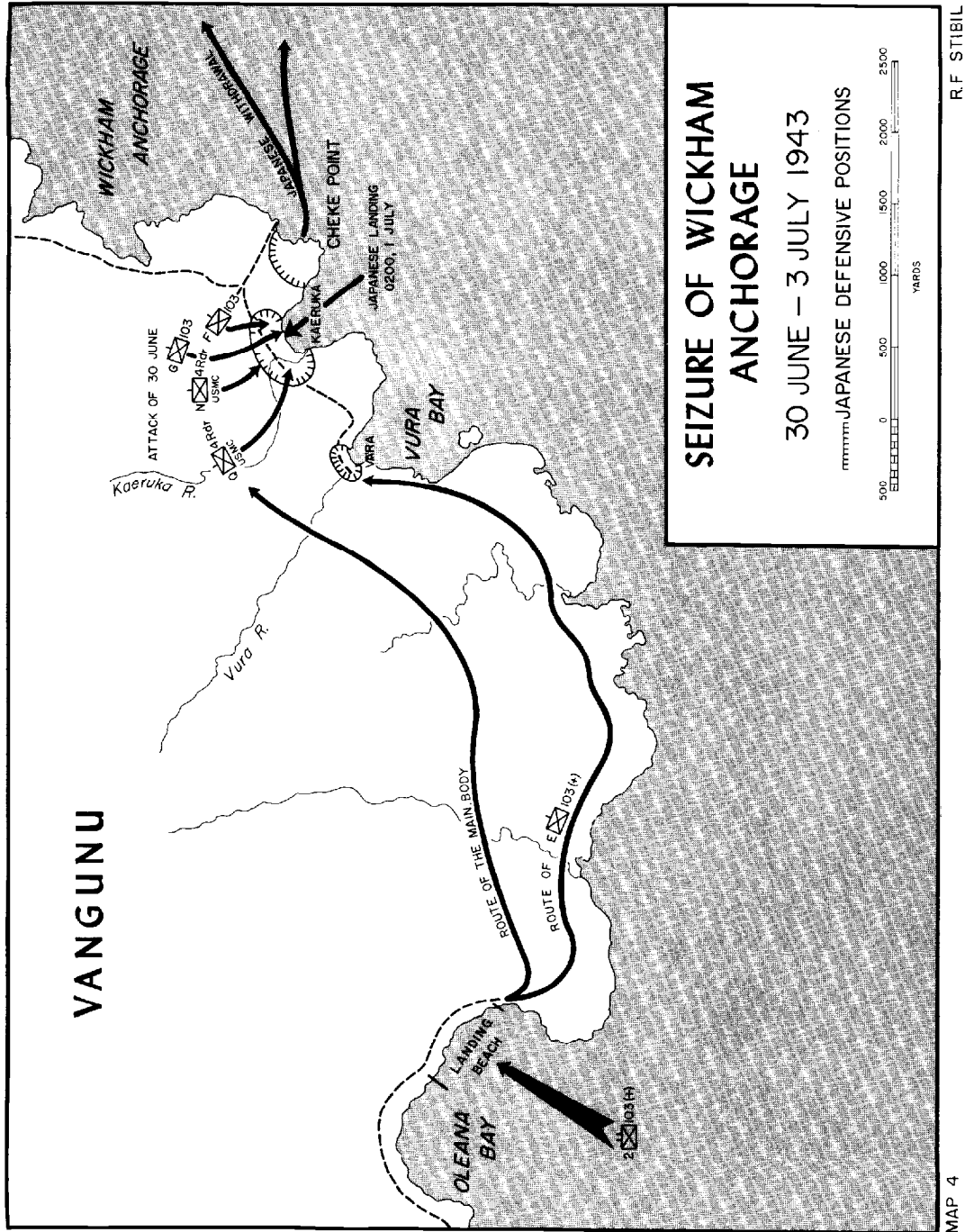
their way over the side to prepare for the "blind" landing. The best radar in the task force was an old model in Admiral Fort's flagship, the destroyer - mine sweeper *Trever*, but it was not able to fix the position of the force accurately in relation to the beach.

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

¹⁷ Admiral Fort commented on this passage; "The chief lesson here is *to obey orders!* The APDs acknowledged for this order, and I was amazed to learn later that they had landed the Marines or that the Marines had agreed to land under circumstances that would insure . . . failure. The Army troops in the LCIs obeyed the order—landed in perfect order as planned without any difficulty whatever. The Marines straggling ashore hours later would not have been of much help had there been much resistance." VAdm George H. Fort comments on draft MS, dtd 30Oct60.

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

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



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

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

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

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

The attack jumped off without preparatory fires. The rain had put all radios out of commission, and Colonel Brown could

not contact either Vura for mortar fire or Oloana Bay for artillery support. The Marines, commanded by Major Clark, and the soldiers moved south from their line of departure at 1405. On the right, Company Q (raiders) guided on the meandering Kaeruka River with orders to cross the river farther south to turn the left flank of the enemy. Company N (raiders) in the center drove straight towards the Japanese; and on the left, Company F of the 103d Infantry moved to position for a partial envelopment of the Japanese right. The 103d's Company G, in reserve, stood ready to exploit any weakness in the Japanese defenses and to protect the American flanks.

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

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

¹⁸ L. E. Brown ltr, *op. cit.*

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

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

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

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

As Colonel Brown displaced his command post forward from the line of departure, Major Clark established a perimeter defense along the beach east of the

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

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

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

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

The next morning (1 July) patrols searched for the remnants of the Japanese garrison and learned that the main group of Japanese survivors was digging in at Cheke Point, a bulge of shoreline about 500 yards east of the Kaeruka River. Despite the success of the defense the night before, Colonel Brown marched his force back toward Vuru village since he considered it a more suitable defensive area and his troops could be more easily supplied. Moreover, Cheke Point was readily identifiable from the air, and artillery fire from Oloana Bay coupled with air strikes could neutralize the position with considerable

saving of lives. A few Japanese harassed the column with long-range fire from machine guns and a 37mm gun, inflicting some casualties, but the enemy made no organized counterattack.

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

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

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

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

*BEACHHEAD AT RENDOVA*²²

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

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

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

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

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

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

²³ *SE Area NavOps—II*, p. 26.

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

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

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

At 0640, only minutes after arriving at debarking stations, the transports had landing craft lowered and headed toward the beach 3,000 yards away. Through the slot between the offshore islets, the boated troops could see Rendova Mountain and the relatively flat area of the Lever Broth-

ers plantation at its foot which was the landing area. There was some momentary confusion as the flood of boats hit the entrance; but quickly forming into columns, the landing craft plowed on toward shore. As the boats scraped to a halt, disorganized enemy machine gun and rifle fire from the plantation area greeted the disembarking troops.

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

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

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

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

The end of ground resistance marked the end of enemy efforts to dislodge the in-

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

It was a frustrating experience for the Munda defenders:

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

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

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

²⁵ *Seventeenth Army Ops—1*, p. 15. Evidently Sasaki's naval guns and artillery, although unable to register accurately on the invasion fleet, fired at random hoping for a lucky hit.

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

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

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

With the landing well underway, 32 fighter planes from ComAirSols appeared overhead, and troops on the beach and

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

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

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

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

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

The same false optimism which had given Admiral Yamamoto a distorted picture of the success of the April *I Go* operation prevailed, though, and surviving enemy pilots reported that they had sunk 2 destroyers and 1 cruiser, damaged 8 transports, set 2 destroyers afire, and downed 50 planes. Their own losses they set at 17 attack bombers and 13 fighters. Despite the seeming top-heavy score reported by

the Japanese, they ruefully admitted that "... due to tenacious interference by enemy planes, a decisive blow could not be struck against the enemy landing convoy."²⁷

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

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

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

²⁷ *SE Area NavOps—II*, p. 29.

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

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

While the beach perimeter was being expanded, Marines selected spots for future battery positions, command posts, fire direction centers, and observation posts. Telephone lines were strung, and fields of fire for the big guns cleared by blasting down palm trees. By the end of the first day ashore, the advance elements of the 9th Defense Battalion were bivouacked on Rendova's beach and along the plantation road. Battery E of the 9th (90mm guns) was in position on Kokorana, and had

fired its first shots against a low-flying enemy fighter at 1645. Twelve 40mm guns, eight 20mm guns, and eighteen .50 caliber machine guns were set up along the beaches on both islands, bolstering the defense positions. Only one small hitch had delayed the quick installation of the 90mm battery on Kokorana. The gun director was missing, and members of the battalion had to rummage through scattered piles of material on Rendova's shore until they found it.

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

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

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

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

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

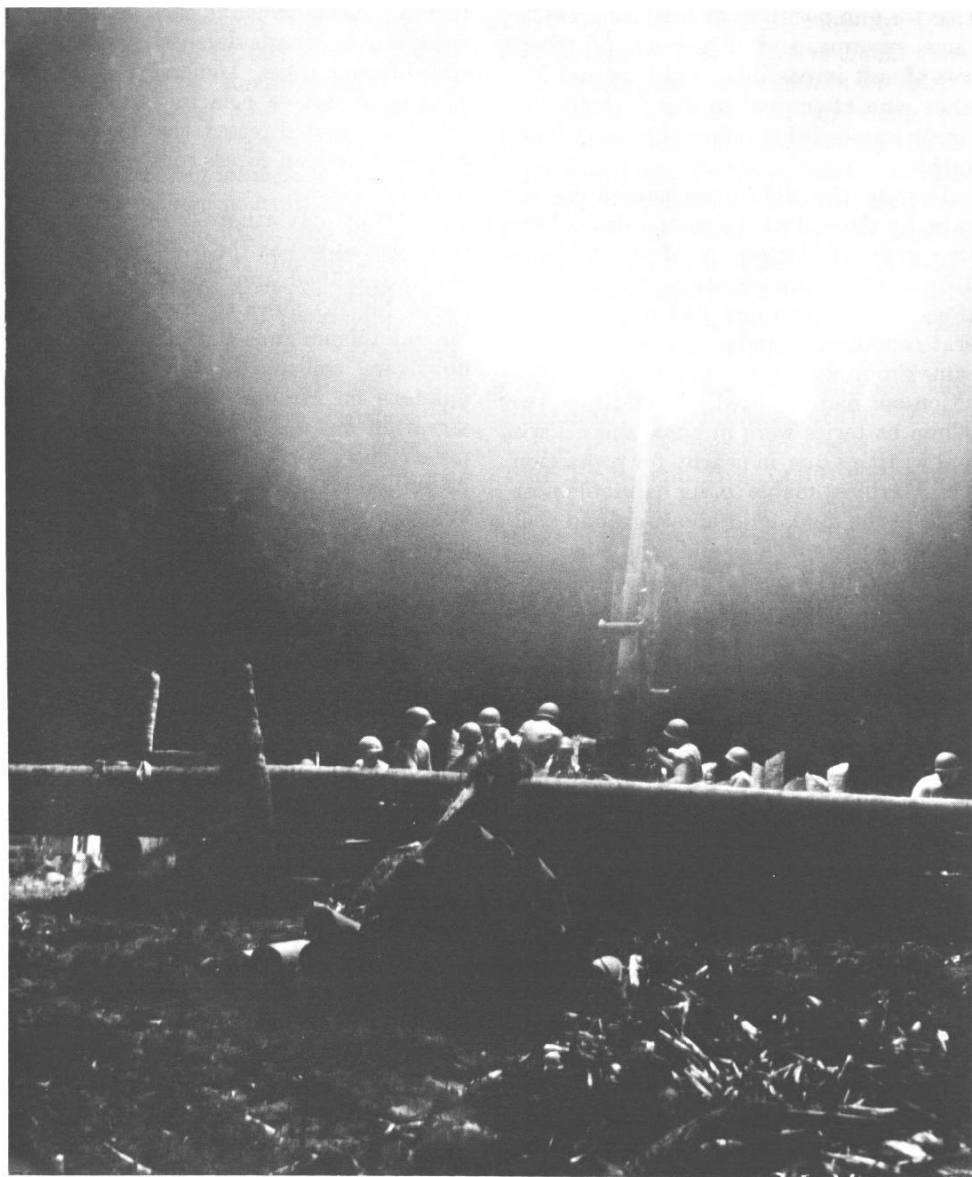
Air activity during the second day was limited. The ComAirSols fighter cover over Rendova intercepted and fought off only one attempted enemy attack. The covering fighters also mounted guard over a strike by 28 torpedo and scout bombers at Vila, which further reduced that field to a nonoperational status. Before re-

turning to Guadalcanal, each fighter plane worked over Munda defenses, strafing possible bivouac areas. General Mulcahy, assuming an active role in the operation, scheduled and directed the strike which helped American forces rout the enemy at Viru Harbor.

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

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

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



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

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

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

The attack's success was the result of many factors. For one thing, Army radar units had gone out of commission shortly after landing, and although a Marine radar unit had been landed on 1 July, it was this one that was being drained of diesel fuel. Also, on the day previous, the troops

had believed a flight of American medium bombers to be enemy planes and had scrambled for cover. This day they believed the enemy planes to be the same mediums back on station. A third factor was lack of dispersion. Shelters had been dug along the beach, but the troops were now busy handling other materiel, and had not provided other protection. But as a result of the raid, the area became dotted with foxholes—deep foxholes.

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

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

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

As following echelons of the Western Landing Force unloaded on 4 July, a desperate Japanese command at Rabaul tried once more to knock the invasion force off Rendova. Since the air attack on 2 July represented the only measure of success in their efforts so far, the Japanese repeated the act. The cast and the script remained the same, except for the final curtain. This time the Japanese found themselves holding the wrong end of a Fourth of July Roman candle. From a force of more than 100 planes trying to press home on attack through the ring of Allied interceptor planes, only 16 bombers were able to swing over Rendova Mountain in the repeat per-

formance. But this time, alerted by sound locators and radar, the 9th Defense Battalion antiaircraft batteries were ready, and 12 of the 16 bombers and an escorting fighter were knocked down in flames. The 90mm guns expended a total of only 88 rounds, a feat which the Marines jubilantly proclaimed a record for rounds per plane.

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

Munda Victory

ASHORE AT ZANANA BEACH¹

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

To General Sasaki and Admiral Ota, ruefully watching the Rendova operations

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

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

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

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

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

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

After securing the entrance islands, the soldiers began the move to Zanana Beach on the shore line of New Georgia. Earlier plans had called for Company O of the 4th Marine Raider Battalion to act as scouts for this phase of the operation, but with

the raiders still at Segi and Viru, reconnaissance teams from the Rendova forces were organized. These were later augmented by a company of Fijian and Tonganese scouts, who were aggressive and skilled jungle fighters.³ (See Map 5.)

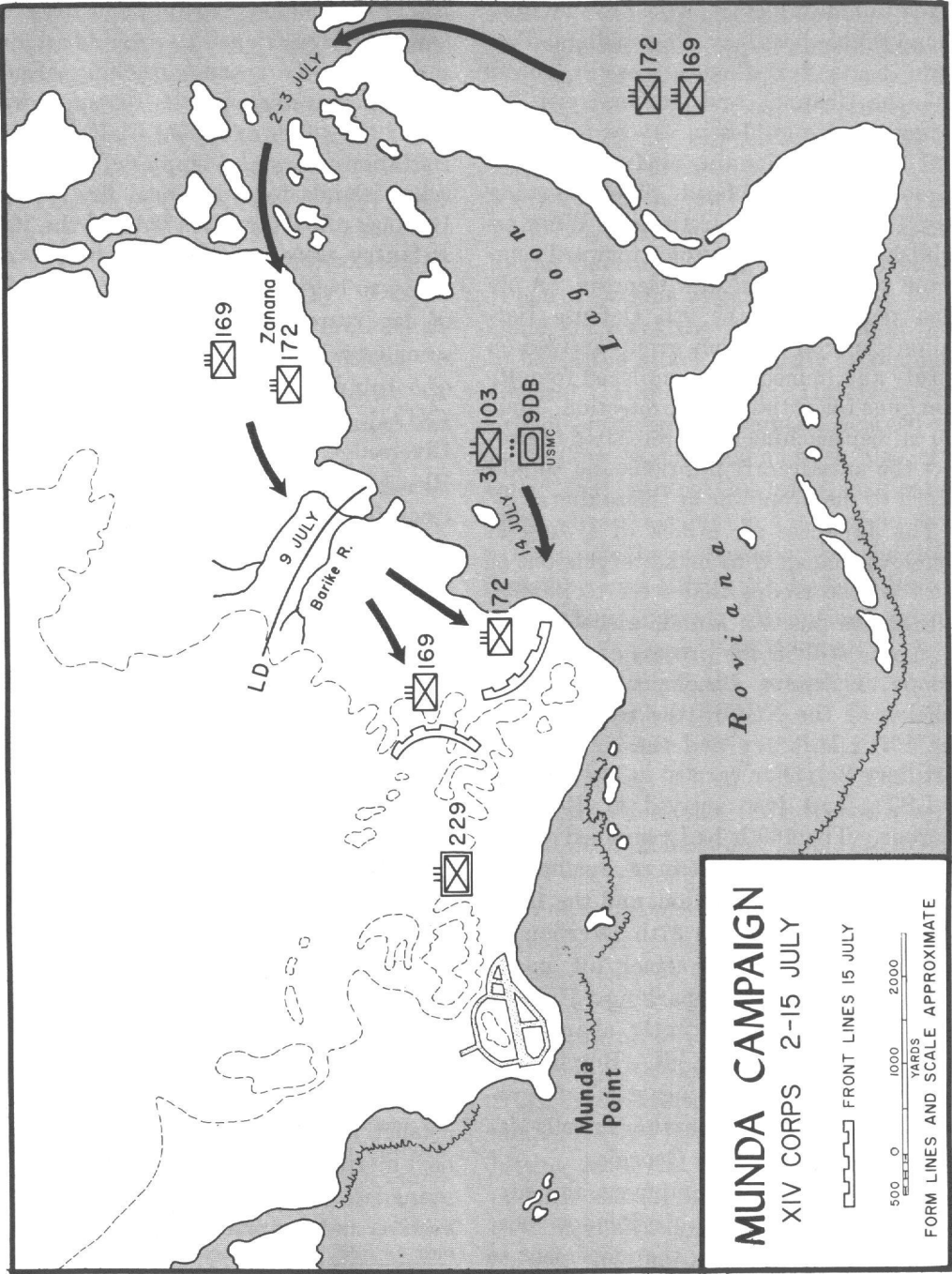
The patrols moved into the area between Zanana and the Barike River, marking water points, trails, coastal roads, possible artillery positions, and all avenues of approach to Munda. They were also ordered to probe Japanese defenses between the airfield and Bairoko Harbor, and to report all barge activity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

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

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

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

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



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

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

Transferring their equipment and supplies to small craft from the Rendova boat pool, the soldiers began the movement to Zanana almost immediately. The 155mm howitzers of the 136th were unloaded on

one of the islands guarding Onaiavisi Entrance and positioned to provide artillery support to the troops attacking Munda. Other heavy weapons, the 105mm howitzers of the 169th and 103d Field Artillery Battalions were also emplaced on the off-lying islands for additional fire support. By dusk of 5 July, the 172d and the 169th Infantry were ashore on New Georgia, ready to begin the march toward the line of departure along the Barike River. A secondary landing, early on the morning of 5 July by the Northern Landing Group (NLG), commanded by Marine Colonel Liversedge, established a beachhead at Rice Anchorage on the north coast of New Georgia to threaten Sasaki's forces from that direction.⁵

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

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

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

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

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

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

After delaying most of the morning of 7 July in reorganization, the 169th re-

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

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

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

*NGOF IN ATTACK: ZANANA
TO LAIANA*⁷

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

After clearing the initial Japanese resistance, the advancing soldiers encountered only snipers and small outposts. Progress, however, was slow. Each new enemy opposition forced deployment and attack. Hidden snipers, pinning down the

advance units, held up the regiments for hours. Every step forward was a struggle against a determined enemy and multiple jungle obstacles—dense, vine-choked underbrush, steep ridges, numerous swamps, constant and enervating heat, and almost incessant torrents of rain.

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

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

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

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

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

As the NGOF struggled against the jungle and a tenacious enemy, engineers attempted to establish a supply route to the front lines by hewing a jeep road out of the matted underbrush. Native guides pointed out a trail which took advantage of as much high ground as possible, but most of the route had to follow the marshy banks of the Barike River and in some instances ran parallel to the front lines. Bridging of the Barike was accomplished in several spots by trestles made of felled timber. Even while constructing the road in the rear of the front lines, however, the engineers were under almost constant attack from bypassed snipers and wandering squads of enemy. Bulldozer operators were a prime target, and engineer casualties mounted as the road clearing proceeded. Metal shields were eventually

welded to the tractors to protect the 'dozer operators. Since no heavy graders were available, the jeep road could not be ditched or crowned, and any traffic over the road after a rainstorm usually meant extensive road repairs.⁸

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

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

⁸ *McAllister ltr.*



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



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

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

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

In the 169th's zone, strong mortar and artillery fires were placed on Japanese defensive positions in an effort to reestablish forward movement, but the enemy resistance continued. At this time, the regiment—tired and understrength—was opposed by a determined, dug-in enemy to the front and continually harassed by snipers and infiltrators in the rear areas. On the 11th, the 169th's commanding officer and his staff were relieved by Colonel

Temple Holland and a staff from the 145th Infantry, 37th Division. The new regimental commander postponed further attacks by the 169th until the next day so that he might have time to reorganize his command.

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

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

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

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

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

COUNTERATTACK PREPARATIONS ¹⁰

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

The plight of the Munda defenders had received immediate attention. General Imamura, commanding the *Eighth Area Army* at Rabaul, on 3 July ordered the New Georgia defense augmented by the remainder of the 13th Regiment as well as by additional antitank, mountain artillery, engineer, and medical units. In addition,

the rear echelons of the 229th Regiment, which were still in the Shortlands area, were ordered to join their parent unit. A number of large landing barges were also dispatched to New Georgia. Most of the fresh troops were to stop at Kolombangara, but the elements of the 229th, the anti-tank units, and most of the engineers were to go directly to Munda.¹¹ In all, Imamura ordered about 3,000 troops from the Shortlands-Faisi area to the New Georgia Group. More reinforcements were to follow. The joint Army-Navy conference at Rabaul, on 4 July, cemented the understanding between the *Eighth Area Army* and the *Southeast Area Fleet* that the main sea and air effort would be directed against the Central Solomons while the troops already on New Guinea would hold out without additional help for the time being.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

an unsteady stream, his strength remained nearly constant. Troops from Kolombangara, transported to Munda by barges during the night, were at the front lines the next day.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

With two regiments now in position to oppose the landing force hitting toward Munda on the south, Sasaki was confident

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

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

MARINE TANKS VS. PILLBOXES¹⁵

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

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

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

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

With the addition of two regiments as NGOF reserve, a needed change in the command structure became more apparent. For some time, observers had believed that General Hester's 43d Division staff, split between the two tasks of directing a division in combat and a larger occupation

force in a campaign, had been unequal to the job. Moreover, on the 13th, General Griswold of the XIV Corps had some disquieting reports for Admiral Halsey and General Harmon:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

On the morning of the 15th, three tanks reported to the 2d Battalion, 172d on the left, while another trio of tanks moved toward the 3d Battalion on the right. Tangled underbrush hid stumps and logs that hampered attempts to get into position, and the drivers had to back and turn the machines constantly to move ahead. In the left zone, the first opposition, which

came from a log and coral emplacement, was promptly knocked out by 37mm high explosive rounds and machine gun fire. Two grass bivouac shelters were peppered with canister rounds¹⁸ and machine gun fire, and six to eight dead enemy were reported in each by the 172d's infantrymen following the machines.

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

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

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

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

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

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

ment in the brush, and, by sweeping the jungle with canister and machine gun fire, managed to break clear and crawl back toward friendly lines.

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

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

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

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

*TOMONARI REPULSED*¹⁹

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

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

The 13th Regiment will immediately maneuver in the area of the upper reaches of the Barike River; seek out the flank and rear of the main body of the enemy who

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

landed on the beach east of the Barike River and attack, annihilating them on the coast.²⁰

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

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

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

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

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

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

by repulsing four attempts. Only one of the two Marines survived the attack, which left 18 enemy dead littered about the guns.

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

*CORPS REORGANIZATION AND ATTACK*²¹

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

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

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

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

The arrival of other units also strengthened the NGOF lines. The 161st Infantry, detached from the 25th Division on Guadalcanal, debarked on the 21st. Attached to the 37th Division, the regiment moved into bivouac on the division's right flank. The remainder of the 103d Regiment joined the 3d Battalion on New Georgia on the 21st and 22d of July, and, from that point on, the 103d (less the 1st Battalion still at Segi) fought as a regiment. Additional antiaircraft protection against the periodic Japanese air raids on New Geor-

gia and Rendova was provided by a detachment of 4 officers and 140 men from the Marine 11th Defense Battalion. Alerted early in the campaign for possible commitment, a 90mm battery, augmented by four 40mm guns and four .50 caliber machine guns, was sent to Kokorana Island from Guadalcanal on 18 July.

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

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

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

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

Air support missions requested by General Mulcahy as ComAir New Georgia were generally directed at the easily identifiable targets around Munda field. Close air support for troops fighting in dense jungle had proven impractical with target designation so difficult. Air-ground coordination, struggling against the handicaps of visibility and communications, was not helped by the inaccurate operation maps. Even though gridded, the photo-mosaics were not precise enough for such close work, where a slight error might result in heavy NGOF losses. Then, too, in the fighting where daily progress was measured in 200- or 300-yard gains, the troops were reluctant to withdraw for an air strike. Soldiers reported

that when they had pulled back to provide a zone of safety for air strikes or artillery and mortar preparations, the enemy simply moved forward into the abandoned area and waited for the bombing or artillery to lift before moving back into their original positions in time to defend against the expected ground attack.

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

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

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

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

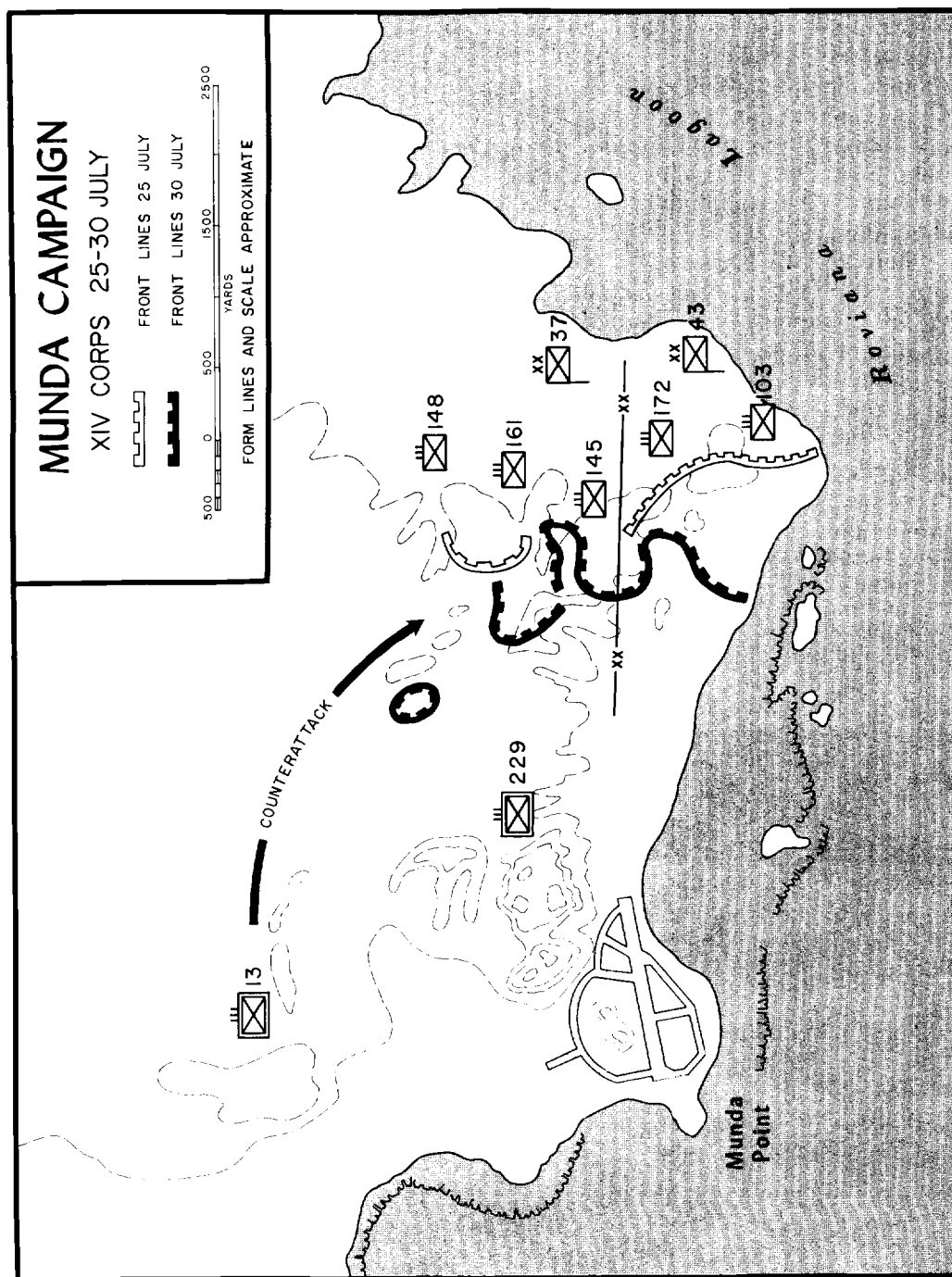
Another point of tenacious defense was met by the 161st Infantry. Dalton's regiment, attempting to move up to the line of departure, was told that only two pillboxes were to his immediate front. A reinforced platoon, making the initial attack, knocked out the two pillboxes but

then uncovered another network of fortifications. A strong company was sent into the area. Two more pillboxes were knocked out, but 12 more were uncovered. At this point, the regiment moved in and knocked out these strong points before discovering more pillboxes. At last, with the 25 July attack impending, the regiment bypassed the fortifications and moved up to the line of departure. But before the pocketed strong point was reduced, "it took the combined efforts of two battalions, 3,000 rounds of 81mm mortar fire, the use of tanks, and the passage of seven day's time."²²

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

²² 37th InfDiv Ops, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

²³ USAFISPA IntelRept No. 27, dtd 24Jul43.



MAP 6

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

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

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

failing to take advantage of his strength and equipment:

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

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

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

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

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

²⁴ *SE Area NavOps—II*, p. 32.

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

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

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

The main effort of the first day's attack was made in the 37th Division zone. The 145th Infantry, the left flank unit, held

its positions in order to straighten the NGOF lines, while the 161st and 148th pressed the attack. Stiff resistance from the defenders of Horseshoe Mountain held the 161st to a slight gain, but the 148th easily advanced about 600 yards against occasional fire from small outposts. By nightfall, the NGOF had pressed itself against the Japanese front lines.

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

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

²⁷ USAFIPSA IntelRept No. 40, dtd 26Oct43.

that enemy soldiers could not use them as pillboxes.

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

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

Progress along the line on the 27th had been slight, for two localized strong points continued to hold up the advance. The

43d Division still faced a rugged defensive area in the south which repeated tank-infantry assaults had failed to dent, and the 37th Division was hung up against the Horseshoe Mountain line, kingpin of Sasaki's resistance. To XIV Corps observers, it was plain that the capture of either strong point would result in the downfall of the other.

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

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

too aggressive can often get you into as much hot water as doing nothing.”²⁸

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

Although the 43d Division, now under the command of Major General John R. Hodge who had relieved General Hester, continued to push forward along the coast in rapidly increasing gains, the center of the NGOF continued to be snagged on the enemy defenses on Horseshoe Mountain. First break in the barrier came on 30 July when the 172d attacked and occupied a small ridge complex southeast of the main

defenses. The following day, 31 July, the 169th attacked and completed the reduction of the southern anchor of the Japanese strong point. The advance, however, still failed to break the Horseshoe defenses.

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

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

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

²⁸ Baxter Rept, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

²⁹ SoPacFor POW Interrogation Rept No. 140, dtd 24Nov43.

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

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

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

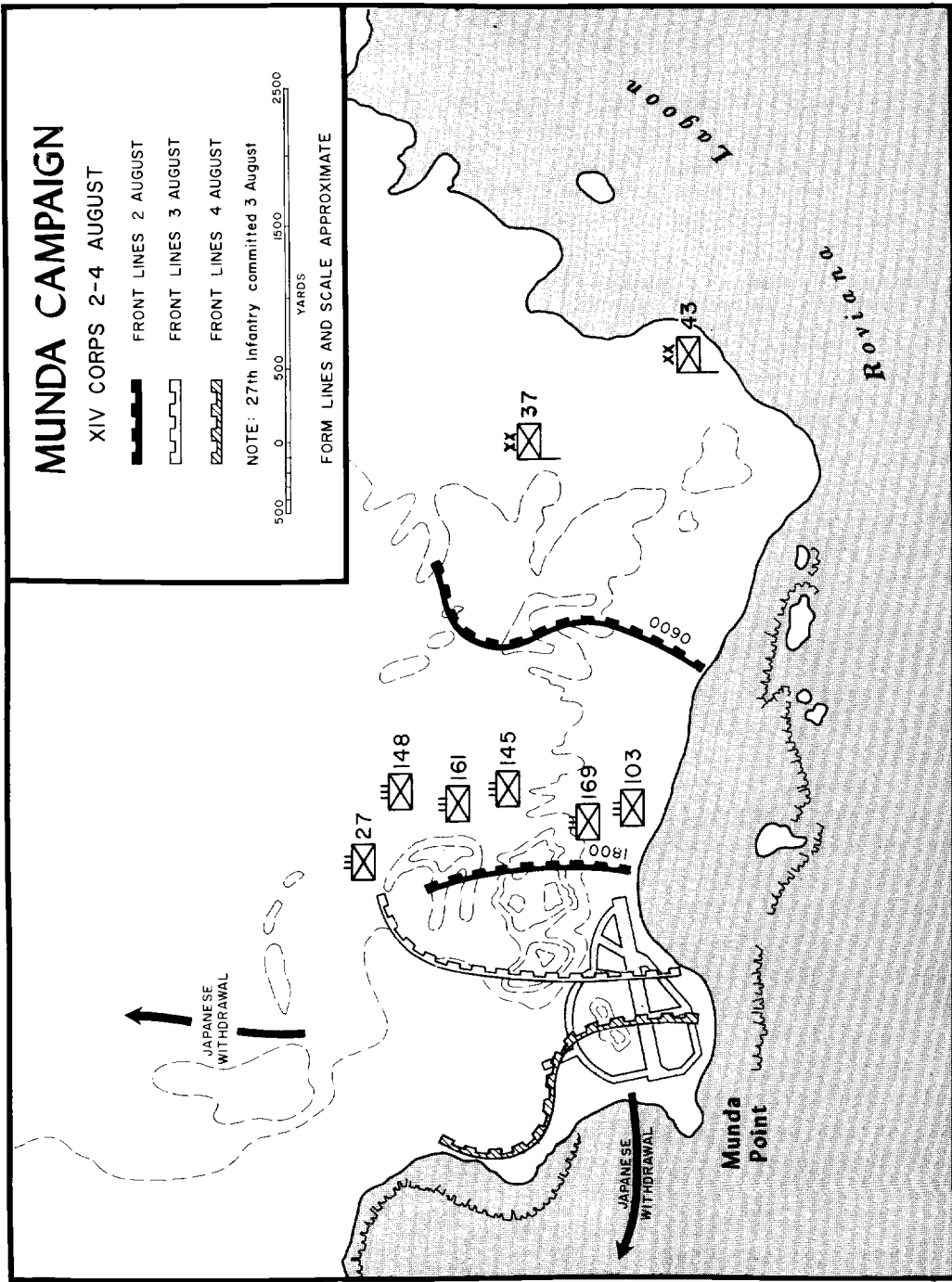
The following day, 5 August, tanks of the 10th and 11th Defense Battalions—accompanied as a courtesy gesture by the sole remaining operational tank of the 9th Defense Battalion—made five sorties over the airfield. The only fire received was from Kokengola Hill, and this the

Marine tanks quickly squelched with 37mm rounds. At 1410, the airfield was officially declared secured, and Allied troops took over the enemy fortifications ringing the war prize which had taken more than a month of bitter combat to obtain. Along the blasted and cratered runways were hulks of 30 enemy airplanes, some still in revetments. All were stripped of armament and instruments. None would ever fly again. Japanese supplies, including tasty tinned foods, beer, *sake*, and rice gave triumphant infantrymen a change from the weary routine of combat rations.

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

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

³⁰ 1/148 Rept, *op. cit.*



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

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

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

uation of the area. All organized enemy resistance on the island was ended.

*RENOVA: FINAL PHASE*³¹

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

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

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

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

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

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

Marines also had a prominent part in the artillery support of the NGOF. After registering on Munda field prior to the NGOF overland attack, the Marine 155mm guns began a systematic leveling of all known enemy installations and bivouac areas. Since the exact location of the NGOF front lines was ill-defined most of the time, the Marine group left the close-

support firing missions to Army 105mm units which were much nearer to the combat. The Marine guns were directed instead against rear installations, supply and reinforcement routes, and targets of opportunity.

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

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

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

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

final stages of the Central Solomons fighting.

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