



A detachment of Marines pause in a jungle clearing for a brief rest during the fighting on Guadalcanal. (Photo courtesy of U.S. Marine Corps History Division)

GUADALCANAL

First Battle of the Matanikau

By Eric Hammel

For the U.S. Marines on Guadalcanal during the first few days following their unopposed landing on Aug. 7, 1942, life was an unpleasant mixture of strange and diverging impressions. Food was scarce from the start, a result of the invasion fleet's abrupt departure in the wake of the Savo Island naval battle. Japanese bombers from Rabaul, 600 miles away, ruled the skies with impunity over the Marines' Lunga Perimeter; there was not even one American fighter to challenge them, and there would be none until the captured, partially completed airfield on the Lunga Plain could be put into operation. On the other hand, there had not yet been any meaningful challenge to the five Marine infantry battalions that

were holding the Lunga Perimeter. And the few prisoners taken had been beaten, chastened men—Okinawan, Korean and Taiwanese labor troops with a few Japanese naval ratings thrown in.

The shock of discovery of what might lie ahead was crystallized on Aug. 13, 1942, when the first of three bleeding Marines arrived at the command post of the 5th Marine Regiment, the unit charged with defending the western half of the Lunga Perimeter. The three were all that remained of a 25-man patrol led by Lieutenant Colonel Frank Goettge, the First Marine Division intelligence officer. The Goettge patrol had been diverted on Aug. 12 from a heavily armed intelligence-gathering mission to an effort to rescue starving Japanese stranded to the west of the Matanikau River. It had either stepped

into a cunning trap or had blundered into an encampment of displaced Japanese naval infantry. In either case, 22 of 25 members of the patrol had gone missing and were presumed killed.

The 1st Marine Division's first offensive operation on Guadalcanal began on Aug. 19, 1942, a week after the annihilation of the Goettge patrol. The action was designed to sweep the coastal area from the mouth of the Matanikau River to Kokumbona Village of the last remnants of the dispersed Japanese Lunga garrison, an estimated 400 poorly armed Imperial Navy infantry, or "rikusentai," naval base personnel, and unarmed laborers who had been without food for nearly two weeks.

Information gleaned from patrol reports

during the week following the Goettge massacre indicated that the Japanese had landed no fresh troops west of the Marine-held Lunga Perimeter. Nevertheless, unbeknownst to the Marines, who had not been able to effectively penetrate the Japanese area, an advance detachment of the fresh Yokosuka 5th Special Naval Landing Force had landed near Kokumbona on the night of Aug. 17. While not large, the force was composed of well-armed rikusentai whose officers organized the combatant elements of the stragglers into ad hoc combat units.

Given the breadth of the new war, the first Matanikau offensive was small potatoes. Given the backgrounds of the men who planned it, and particularly their limited combat experiences during the manpower-starved inter-war years, it was about the biggest land operation undertaken by Marines since 1918.

Captain William Hawkins' Company B, Fifth Marine Regiment, was to cross the mouth of the Matanikau at dawn, Aug. 19, while Co L, 5th Marines, which would cross the river downstream on the evening of Aug. 18, pushed northward along the west bank in order to compress the Japanese in the area between itself and Hawkins' company. In a strangely unconnected maneuver, Co I, 5th Marines, was to land from small boats to seize and hold Kokumbona Village until companies B and L could secure Matanikau Village, reorganize, and fight 3 miles westward to join it.

Co B was no longer the strong 180-man unit that had stormed Beach Red on Aug. 7. A declining diet, the rigors of living in a hot climate, and the onset of exotic disease with annoying or dangerous symptoms had begun to make inroads into every unit in the division. Hawkins' company had lost its share of combat troops. Those Marines who were ill or weakened by the effects of dysentery and strange fevers were held back from the offensive.

Hawkins' company marched out of the Lunga Perimeter along the Government Track late in the afternoon of Aug. 18 and bivouacked in the bush beside the trail. Several enemy fighters were flushed from the underbrush during the approach and sent to the rear under escort. The troops were up for the fight when they left the perimeter, and the discovery along the way of several decomposing, mutilated bodies of islanders raised their ire. Several individual Japanese charged from the undergrowth into the company perimeter during the night, but they were all killed.

Co L, in pretty much the same condition as Co B, left the perimeter at about the



USMC

The temporary resting place of a Marine killed in the fighting at Lunga Point. The remains were later removed to the Division cemetery on Guadalcanal.

same time, guided by Marine Gunner Edward S. "Bill" Rust, a member of the 5th Marines headquarters staff who had been leading patrols into the area for the past two weeks. The troops were traveling light, with neither packs nor ponchos nor any other extraneous gear. It was rough going through some fairly thick growth. By nightfall, the company was safely across the Matanikau River, about 2,000 yards from the beach. Just before sunset, a sniper on a hill a half-mile to the north shot a Marine sergeant through the forehead, killing him in his tracks. Three Japanese were flushed at dusk just as the company was about to establish a defensive perimeter on the west bank of the Matanikau. One was dispatched by a Marine who swung his rifle so hard that the wooden stock shattered on impact with the prisoner's skull. The second man was

knifed to death, and the third simply disappeared after dark.

Co B marched to the river at dawn. As it cleared the last fringe of trees, all hands were stunned to see what appeared to be a Japanese cruiser steam majestically into view. As the warship streaked toward the beach, the Marines could actually see crewmen scurrying about on the decks and superstructure. After several anxious minutes, the vessel turned for deeper water.

Co L moved downhill through a light drizzle from its bivouac in the bush. The company light machine guns and 60 mm mortars were set up in a base of fire and the attack commenced at 0800, right on time. A fair measure of surprise was achieved at the outset as Co L struck the village almost dead center, its two lead platoons heading directly for the beach in the hope of cutting the defending force in two before it could recover.

Co B pressed its attack across the sandbar at the mouth of the river, also at 0800.

Captain Bill Hawkins was caught in the open by the sudden onset of defensive fires and the stock of his submachine gun was splintered by a Japanese bullet before he could get behind some cover.

Private First Class Robert Hollenbeck, a member of the medium machine-gun platoon attached to Co B, found himself tucked up behind a huge banyan tree, looking for targets, when he felt the odd stinging sensation of hundreds of bites from residents of an ant colony he had disturbed. Though Japanese machine guns on the west bank of the river were spitting bullets from every angle, Hollenbeck was too agonized to think of anything but getting rid of the carnivorous ants, which



COURTESY OF ERIC HANMEL

LtCol Frank Goettge

were crawling down his back and into his trousers. He rolled from behind the protective tree into bushes farther back and tore off his clothing to get rid of the insects.

By the time Hollenbeck recovered, the Co B 60 mm mortars had been broken out. The company executive officer, First Lieutenant Walter McIlhenny, established an observation post at the water's edge and, by means of a telephone line run back to the company mortars, directed fire against the Japanese machine gun emplacements.

On the far side of the Japanese holding Co B, a Co L platoon sergeant leading the attack to cut off the Japanese on the east side of the village was killed and several of his men were wounded. The Co L executive officer, Second Lieutenant George Mead, heir to the Mead Paper fortune, ran forward to rally the leaderless platoon, but he was shot to death.

Marine Gunner Bill Rust, who was with the company headquarters, volunteered to take charge of the still leaderless platoon, which had to press its attack if Co L was to join up with Co B. He found only 13 effectives on hand in a small semicircle on the beach. Incoming gunfire

was very heavy, though it seemed to be letting up little by little. Rust ordered the 13 Marines in his position to prepare the way with a barrage of rifle grenades, which was bolstered considerably when Sergeant Benjamin Selvitelle arrived in the village with his light machine-gun section after being ordered to abandon his base of fire to the south. Co B's 60 mm mortars, which were firing from the east bank of the river, were of considerable help in getting Japanese heads down. Gunner Rust directed a scathing fire, then jumped to his feet and yelled "Let's get them!" All hands rose as one and spread out in firm adherence to the tenets of their training, advancing about 75 yards by means of fire-and-move tactics.

A spirited bayonet assault, perhaps the first of its kind by Marines in the Pacific, spontaneously developed as Rust's small group covered the last 75 yards to the river. Private First Class Nicholas Sileo, a Browning Automatic Rifleman, accumulated three wounds—one in the chest, one in the groin, a third through his shooting hand—but he refused to relinquish his weapon. Instead, he fired

with his good hand as his fellow Marines surged past. A corpsman who had become involved in the attack was shot through the heart.

As soon as the small platoon had overcome resistance, Bill Rust ordered all hands to fire into the Japanese bodies, just to be certain, then stood on the exposed bank to yell word of his attack to Co B Marines.

Capt Bill Hawkins did not hear Rust's shouted news, but he was aware that the gunfire holding up Co B had abruptly ceased. He ordered a squad to probe the defenses and, when it met no opposition, ordered the rest of his troops across the river. It was all over but the cleaning up.

In the meantime, Co I moved to take Kokumbona Village.

As the boats neared the objective, Marines spotted three Japanese warships beating up the channel. The ships were executing a turn to port for the run on the beach when one of them fired its main guns. The salvo was high, splashing harmlessly ahead of the tiny flotilla of landing craft. The second salvo was much closer.

Lieutenant Colonel William Whaling, the 5th Marine executive officer, was accompanying Co I as a guide and tactical commander of the three-company mission. His boat was in the lead when the warships opened fire. Whaling tried to steady the frightened coxswain by calling back from his place by the ramp, "When I think he's going to fire, I'll call you. Then you throw this thing full speed into *reverse*. Then run forward with everything you've got."

The play worked three times in a row, although a few near misses splashed seawater on all hands.

The boats were rapidly closing on the beach, and Japanese machine guns were getting the range. The warship was still firing, its rounds getting closer and closer to their countrymen manning machine guns on the beach. Suddenly, a Japanese climbed up on a big rock at the surf line, a large Rising Sun naval battle pennant in his hand. As the Marines looked on, the man frantically waved the battle colors to attract the ship's gunners.

Bill Whaling, a veteran of fighting in France and Pearl Harbor, had been a member of the 1924 U.S. Olympic pistol team. Unable to resist any target so offered, he climbed as high up on the bow ramp as he could, holding his special scoped rifle. When the little boat rose to the crest of the next swell, Whaling sighted in on the frantic flag waver. The boat pitched into the next trough, then slowly rose again. Thoroughly composed, Whaling gently squeezed off a single round and watched approvingly as the flag-waver



COURTESY OF U.S. MARINE CORPS HISTORY DIVISION

Marines do some much-needed bathing on Guadalcanal as a machine gunner keeps a sharp eye on the opposite bank for a possible sniper on patrol, February 1943.



A patrol composed of fighting leathernecks start their trek on a mission at sunset on Guadalcanal, August 1942. (Photo courtesy of U.S. Marine Corps History Division)

was pitched into the sand, “flag and all.”

The Japanese warship came under probing fire from a captured 3-inch coast-defense gun manned by members of Co M, 5th Marines. Twenty rounds were expended, but all fell short. When fire from another of the three ships bracketed the gun emplacement, the Marines beat a hasty retreat. The three warships counter-marched, firing at Marine positions with total impunity, remaining just outside the range of Marine coast defense guns.

Major James Edmundson, a professional airman since 1936, had been in the Pacific since January 1940. He had been on the ground at Hickam Field, Oahu, on Dec. 7, 1941, and had participated as a squadron operations officer and airplane commander at Midway. Since Aug. 13, 1942, he had been commander of 431st Heavy Bombardment Squadron, a component of 11th Heavy Bombardment Group whose previous commander had been lost without a trace on a search mission over the Solomons on Aug 7.

Edmundson and his crew had been at the crude airstrip at Espiritu Santo—code-named “Buttons”—when word came down from Guadalcanal that Japanese cruisers were harassing a Marine offensive operation. Theirs was the only heavy bomber that was ready to go, so they went.

The approach was made at 5,000 feet, the same height from which Edmundson had destroyed a Japanese submarine off

Hawaii during a sea-search mission early in the war.

Observers near Kukum could make out the masts of the three ships and the circling B-17, which dropped bombs as it passed back and forth over the targets. One stick of four bombs passed directly over the fantail of one of the ships, which looked like a light cruiser from the air as well as from the beach. Two of the bombs exploded on the ship and the other two near-missed on either side, likely doing damage below the waterline.

While B-17 crewmen snapped photos from beside a dark pillar of smoke, Major Edmundson continued to circle lazily over the circling victim of his bombardier’s good eye and his own steady hand. When Edmundson had expended all the fuel he dared, he made a low pass over excited, whooping Marines on the beach.

Though Jim Edmundson was given credit for sinking a cruiser, his target was a destroyer, *Hagikaze*, and she survived.

Co I had long since landed at Kokumbona and had sent the meager opposition packing. Bill Whaling soon had the unit marching overland to join the two companies at Matanikau Village.

Companies I and L joined at midday, just as Co B was crossing the river.

Patrols discovered the remains of 65 Japanese.

Marine Gunner Rust, who was accompanying a Co I probe, was on the beach

just to the east of Point Cruz when he and his companions found a leg encased in a Marine legging and a boondocker protruding from the sand. Nearby, an oversized, handless arm was sticking out of the ground, leading Rust to speculate that he had found the remains of either LtCol Frank Goettege or the missing 5th Marines intelligence officer, Capt Wilfred Ringer, both of whom had been very large men. Earlier, as his attack was winding down, Rust had discovered the bullet-riddled body of Corporal William Bainbridge, who had been sent for help by Captain Ringer when the Goettege patrol was ambushed a week earlier; Bainbridge’s decomposing body was interred in the sand by the mouth of the Matanikau.

The officers were about to get the troops started on exhuming the 22 bodies they had located in the area, but an urgent recall order from the 1st Marine Division headquarters prevented the work from even beginning. The attack force boarded landing craft with its four dead and eleven wounded companions and headed for home.

Author’s bio: Eric Hammel is a military historian who has written dozens of books on Marine Corps history, including “Guadalcanal: Starvation Island,” “Islands of Hell: The U.S. Marines in the Western Pacific, 1944-45” and “Chosin: Heroic Ordeal of the Korean War.”



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