

# LIFE ON A BULL'S-EYE



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**A tower of thick smoke rises hundreds of feet from a burning oil dump on Puruata. The fire was set just before daybreak when Japanese bombers struck the tiny exposed island off Bougainville.**

By Capt Patrick O'Sheel, USMC

"Honest to God, on this island it's like living on a bull's eye," said Doctor Wimp. He said it as if he were about to cry. His voice was high-pitched with the same fatigue which seemed to be gnawing at his eyes. We passed a number of Marines on the narrow jungle trail and when they greeted him, he had barely enough energy to answer them, pushing the words out in a kind of gasp.

Jesse J. Wimp is a lieutenant in the Navy medical corps, a middle-aged, stocky, energetic man with a booming, infectious laugh. But during our first meeting, on Puruata Island just off Bougainville, he didn't laugh at all. The trail we were travel-

*Puruata Island's Smooth Beach Was Superb For Unloading Materiel, But The Japanese Made It A Hellish Spot To Be*



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**From atop a mast of an LST, a camera catches a flag symbolic of the victory won by American forces at Bougainville. The small LCT pictured is returning from a ferry trip to mainland. The bigger LSTs could not dock at Bougainville.**

ing that morning led to a bomb crater and to the shrapnel-punctured body of a Marine. The doctor's errand was simply to pronounce the man dead, verify the cause of death, and issue instructions concerning disposal of the remains.

Four others had been killed and 21 wounded by Japanese bombs during the night, and the doctor and his corpsmen had scrambled about for hours in the evil darkness, straining to hear the moans of the wounded above the noise, working desperately to stop the blood and get the worst cases back to the tiny pillbox "hospital" for plasma transfusions and emergency operations.

It had been like that for five straight nights. Still other nights of terror had gone before; more were to follow. The daylight hours were better, but there were times when enemy aircraft streaked low across

the water and strafed the tiny island. Guns hidden on the Bougainville mainland had paid their respects with a few salvos of high explosive shells.

Puruata Island—the "bull's-eye"—is a geographical trifle, the sort of place cartoonists have in mind when pondering the affairs of castaways. It lies about 1,000 yards off Cape Torokina on Bougainville, where the Marines landed last Nov. 1, and looks for all the world like a handful of jungle that has been plucked from the mainland and cast adrift on the pale green waters of the Coral Sea. The island stretches a mere 700 yards one way and 400 the other, rimmed to seaward by coral reef and on the mainland side by a white sandy beach.

That beach turned out to be one of the most important in all the South Seas. It was the better one of the only two beaches



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**LSTs could back right up to Puruata's beach to unload vital rations and supplies, but the requirement to unload quickly led to piling up stocks which created inviting targets for Japanese bombers.**



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**Above: Daylight often disclosed casualties. Here, a Navy doctor pronounces a Marine killed during the night by bomb fragments. A few minutes later the doctor and corpsmen shared a garbage pit as a shelter during an air raid.**



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**Puruata became more than a supply depot. It also was a base hospital where the wounded from Bougainville were brought over in Higgins boats for transfer to LSTs.**

in the captured area which were negotiable by the Navy's prime movers, the LSTs. It made Puruata Island the freight yard of the Bougainville offensive—and the favorite target for Japanese bombers.

When Major General Allen H. Turnage, commander of the 3rd Marine Division, referred to the "astonishing success" of the Navy supply system in helping to win the Bougainville campaign, his tribute included the men of Puruata Island. These, in the main, were Marine Pioneers—a unit specially trained in the tasks of unloading ships and establishing supply dumps ashore. From early November to late in January they went about their grueling job with such avidity that they broke all speed records for unloading LST's; then broke their own record several times. The Navy was grateful. Even at sea the LSTs are a relatively sluggish craft (hence the nickname "Large Slow Target"). But when beached during an unloading operation, they are a rare invitation to enemy aircraft—sitting ducks, unable to maneuver for safety. What the Pioneers did on Puruata was as much a victory as any achieved by their comrades fighting in the Bougainville jungle.

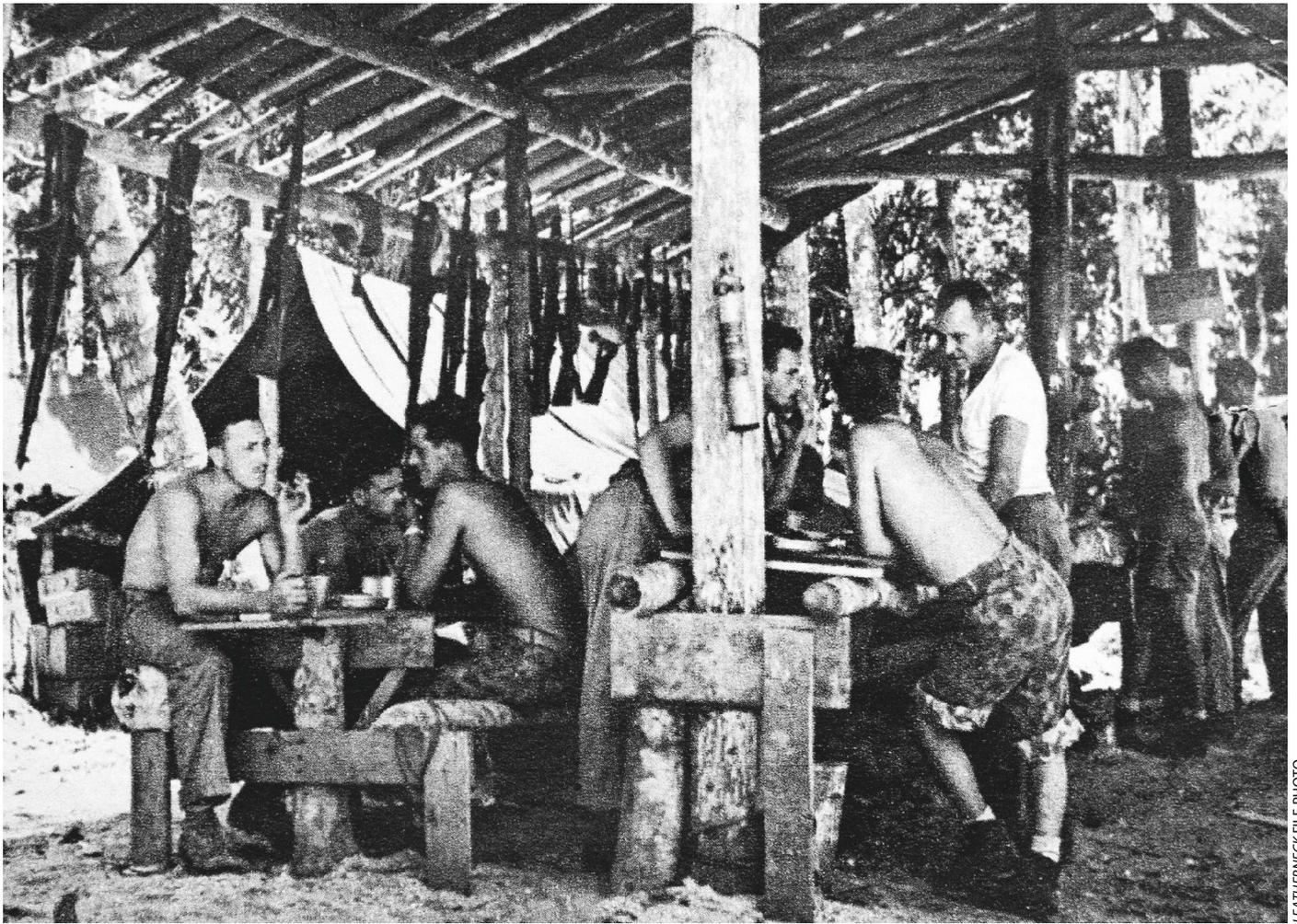
It would have been a staggering assignment just to handle the equipment and supplies needed to maintain the combat troops. On top of this, however, came the vast quantities of machines and materiel used to build the airfields so swiftly created by the Seabees. "And even that's only half of it," said one of the Puruata Marines. "What really hurts is that every damn stick we drag ashore here one day has to be loaded back on tank lighters and LCTs and then shipped over to the mainland." It was a case of "in and out, in and out," he told me, "this is just a stopover!"

And so the men of Puruata fought day and night. From dawn till dusk they wrestled chow and ammunition, fuel and guns, trucks and tanks, and steel mat for landing strips. From dusk till dawn they fought for a few hours of sleep between the wails of the air raid warning sirens and tried to ignore the devil's concert of anti-aircraft fire and falling bombs. Volunteer gunners rushed to man the machine guns mounted on trucks, and volunteer stretcher bearers rose from the safety of their foxholes to hunt the wounded when the enemy bombs hit home. One night the fuel dump was blasted into an inferno; another night an ammunition pile was ignited. And when these things happened, the men of Puruata, their muscles aching from yesterday's labors and their minds fogged and edgy from the night's ordeal, would give that something extra that wins our battles by risking their lives in salvage



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A scene from the deck of an LST provides a striking picture of the unloading operations on tiny 400-by-700-yard Puruata.



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**A Marine mess hall on Puruata was a shelter built by the Japanese who had garrisoned the island before Marines landed. The roof originally was made of large jungle leaves. Note the rifles slung handily on pegs inside the railings.**

work, rolling barrels of oil away from the fire as hoses sprayed over them, manhandling high explosives out of the danger area.

One day when things were quiet, Dr. Wimp was in a talkative mood in his headquarters at the aid station of the Pioneer unit. He had just come back from a beach-combing expedition, his pockets loaded with seashells. He said he was sending them home to Kirksville, Mo., where his three youngsters would get a kick out of using them to decorate the backyard fish pool.

"It's been quiet for three days now," he said. "And for three nights, which is a hell of a lot more important.

"The way things were going, the troops on the front lines actually sympathized with us. It's a fact. I know because I see so many of the battle casualties. They bring them over from the mainland and put them aboard the LSTs going back to rear-base hospitals. They often told me they were just as glad they'd never had to live on Puruata.

"I don't want to see anything like this again. We've had six war neurosis cases, and honest to God, it's amazing we haven't

had more. Days like today are what saves us all from going nuts.

"It isn't being afraid so much, although there isn't a Marine on Puruata who frankly won't admit he's been afraid. It's the strain when you work like hell all day and maybe get strafed, and then you get bounced around half the night by the bombs and the antiaircraft guns. This island sits out here on the water on a moonlight night just begging for bombs, and every one that comes down sounds like it's going to get right in under the covers with you.

"And when there isn't any moon, they come over and drop flares. The other night one of them came all the way down and landed in one of our aid stations. It took so long to come down that a couple of Marines claim they got out a book and started to read by the light of it. I believe them—I don't mean they actually did any reading, but it was something to do to get their minds off the Japanese bombers flying around overhead.

"Maybe I see only the worst of it—me and the corpsmen. Incidentally, all my corpsmen have been commended twice by the generals over on the mainland. For

instance, it seemed pretty bad the night we used up our last bottle of plasma on the last wounded Marine we brought in. I prayed, honest to God, that the [Japanese] would stay away the rest of the night. They didn't, but they dumped their next load in the water. But what I mean is that nobody else knew at the time about that plasma running out.

"And we've shot down seven planes between our antiaircraft and the kids just went out and grabbed a machine gun and started shooting. Hell, it hasn't been one-sided at all really. Just a nightmare. The [Japanese] never stopped us unloading ships and getting the stuff delivered across the way.

"And you know," said the doctor, "you've got to hand it to these crazy Marines. There isn't anything so bad they can't find a wisecrack to fit it. A while ago when we were having our third raid in one night, I heard a kid running for his foxhole and yelling: 'Hang onto your false teeth, boys—they may be dropping sandwiches.'

"Honest to God, the only thing I could think about was how good a sandwich would go right about then!" 