



World War II: 75 Years Ago

# Tough Going for Easy Company

**Their situation on Peleliu's Bloody Nose Ridge looked hopeless that night as the Japanese struck**

By Sgt Joseph P. Donahue, USMC

**"E**asy" Company was digging in for the night. Platoon leaders dispersed their men quickly along the crest of the newly won position. Communications were tested. Orders for the night hummed from the command post to the platoon defensive lines just as darkness was settling. It was quiet on the lines.

But they were in dangerous territory. The cliffs and crags of Peleliu's Bloody Nose Ridge, where Japanese cave-dwellers were staging a spectacular defensive fight to the finish, hid draws and passes that broke company lines and harbored enemy infiltrators.

The regiment had suffered severe casualties in the first days of the drive

into the ridge. Easy Co had moved in two days ago to relieve a beleaguered unit of that regiment.

During those two days, Captain Warrick G. Hoops of New York City, company commander, had kept his command post virtually on the front lines.

His order halting the push had been given verbally. But the crest of the hill

was no place for the command post at night. He moved back 75 yards to a tiny plateau overlooking the beach road and the wreckage of Japanese officers' quarters.

"Easy One calling Easy."

Lieutenant Frank J. Miller of Glen Cove, Long Island, N.Y., twice wounded in the ridge fighting, was calling the command post. His right flank was on a ledge high above and to the right of the company nerve center.

"Unable to establish physical contact with Fox Company on right flank," came the disquieting message. "Terrain impossible."

But that wasn't the worst.

"Just detected a Japanese patrol of approximately 30 strong moving along draw in rear of lines," Miller added.

He didn't have to say that the Japanese had spotted the command post.

The bull voice of Capt Hoops clipped out an order.

"Frank," he roared into the phone, "draw back your right flank a little. Cover down with automatic weapon fire and keep me informed."

"Easy" Co had been pinned down the first day in the ridge but today had been different. Rushing, crawling and climbing, they'd pushed 350 yards, up one hill, down another, constantly under sniper and mortar fire of Japanese hidden in the caves and coral ruts of the treacherous terrain. Casualties had been comparatively light, considering the opposition "Easy" Co had beaten down.

They had welcomed the order to halt, and the rations of chow and ammunition that followed. The rough, concrete-like terrain ruled foxholes out, but piled chunks of coral formed a measure of protection. Bearded, dirty and sweaty, they dropped their tired bodies to the sun-baked, uneven ground, squirming for the angle that would be least uncomfortable. They paired off, planning to take turns dozing and watching.

But some 30 prowling Japanese interfered with those plans—particularly insofar as the 25 Marines in the company command post were concerned.

They doubled their defense perimeter. A Browning Automatic Rifle team moved in to support riflemen covering the trail which approached their position from the north and rear. Another trail led west to the beach road. Automatic fire covered that pass, also.

A new password was ordered.

First Lieutenant James Sullivan of San Diego, Calif., the company executive officer, checked his watch. It was 8:30 p.m. Minutes had elapsed since the last flare had broken overhead with a whispered "plop" to illuminate the ridge; its brilliance fading to cast eerie, grotesque

shadows. The ridge was dark and quiet. Stones rattled down the side of the ridge skirting the command post.

"What's the password?" challenged a Marine.

A hand grenade was the only response. It landed between him and two other perimeter guards. There were screams of pain. Someone called, "Corpsman!"

A pharmacist's mate crawled toward the



First Sergeant Francis C. Roberts

injured Marines. He was stabbed by the Japanese who had killed the other three and faked a call for medical aid.

The Japanese patrol had circled the command post and was moving down the trail from the north to hit the Marine position from the rear. It was a typical Japanese infiltration maneuver. They carried nothing but hand grenades and bayonets.

"Why doesn't the BAR open up?" First Sergeant Francis C. Roberts of New Orleans, La., whispered, hardly hearing his own voice above the din of Marine rifle fire. He half knew the answer. A grenade had burst close to where he had

Miller and Gunnery Sergeant William F. Shea of Somerville, Mass., tried to draw Japanese fire away from the besieged area.

Cursing and taunting, they challenged the Japanese to "come up here and fight." But the enemy had their objective spotted. They knew their advantage.

Grenades were landing all along the edge of the plateau. The defenders moved back in search of better cover.

Lt Francis Edward Maybank of Long Island, N.Y., organized his communications men for a withdrawal—to save them and their valuable equipment. But he died with them when two grenades landed in their midst. Two Navy artillery liaison men died in the same blasts.

Calls for corpsmen and stretcher bearers went unanswered. All were casualties.

Capt Hoops, Lt Sullivan, Sgt Roberts and Lt Jay S. Ambrose of Bronxville, N.Y., a mortar officer, found themselves along a single line of defense. The situation looked hopeless.

Their ammunition was low, and the Japanese were closing in toward the stocks of grenades and ammunition which the Marines had been unable to reach when the attack opened.

"How's your ammo?" Lt Ambrose asked Roberts.

Before Roberts could reply that he was down to his last clip, a grenade struck.

"My legs," groaned Ambrose.

"Mine, too," said Capt Hoops. "Not bad, though," he added.

The radio operator was quiet—dead.

Lt Sullivan emptied his pistol in the direction of a moving shadow. There was a scream and a thud. "That's the bastard who threw it," said Sullivan.

Capt Hoops crawled toward the telephone, hoping to contact the battalion

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seen the automatic weapon set in place.

It was tough going for the command post with Japanese grenades landing with deadly effectiveness on its outskirts, and Marines firing at every shadow.

Capt Hoops, still in communication with platoon leaders strung out along the top of the ridge, ordered them to hold their positions against possible frontal attack.

"And don't fire down here," he ordered. "You'd probably hit as many Marines as Japanese. We'll have to fight it out from here."

Above the CP, on their isolated ridge, Lt

commander, Lieutenant Colonel Spencer S. Berger. He made it and asked for more communications men.

Another grenade landed. Lt Sullivan twitched, muttered that he wanted to "check up on something," and crawled out. He never returned.

Both legs badly shattered, Lt Ambrose was unable to move.

"If only we had a machine gun," whispered Roberts to Ambrose. "I'm going to try to get one from the lines."

"Wish I could help you," returned the officer. "It's our only hope."

Roberts dragged the injured lieutenant to the edge of the plateau, rolled him off the ledge to the path toward the beach road. He was out of the danger zone at least temporarily. Later he was carried down the path to the beach road aid station by Corporal Fred N. Ludwigsen of Northport, N.Y., Private First Class Edward McDevitt of Philadelphia, Pa., and PFC Philip J. Robarge of Rice Lake, Wis.

The three had taken part in the defense of the CP. Robarge was slightly wounded.

Roberts crawled back, found Capt Hoops and PFC Joseph A. Rigney of Woodside, N.Y., firing at sounds of crunching coral and rustling underbrush.

Capt Hoops approved the machine-gun suggestion. "It's a gamble," he said, "but it's a chance."

He called to Lt William Goode Hudson Jr., of Birmingham, Ala., holding down the ridge position most accessible to the CP.

"Start a light .30 down here," he said. "We'll meet your man."

Before anyone could move, PFC Rigney was on his way toward Lt Hudson's position. More enemy grenades landed as he made his way along the side of the steep hill.

It was a miracle of instinct that guided his footsteps in the darkness. He met PFC James W. Ojida of North Bangor, N.Y., en route from the lines with the machine gun. Together, they carried the weapon back to the CP area.

By this time the Japanese virtually had moved into the company nerve center. The few surviving Marines defending the position were strung along an incline overlooking the plateau. And the Japanese had taken over the ammunition supply and were tossing Marine hand grenades.

## **Grenades were popping when Roberts tripped the trigger of the machine gun for the first time. He swept the command post area, his grin of triumph widening with every scream that meant a hit.**

Two splashed within 20 yards as the officer and three men struggled to set up the machine gun. The Japanese seemed to know what was going on, but they couldn't locate the position of the gun.

One Japanese came crawling over the coral repeatedly whispering the password.

"You're a day late with that password," replied PFC Rigney, dropping him with rifle fire.

The rough, sharp coral made an unsteady base as Roberts fumbled to set up the tripod. Frantically, he threw it over a

pointed rock, and the gun was set in place. Rigney fed in the first belt of ammunition.

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The Japanese were ducking for cover, but a torrent of bullets cut them down. The machine gun jumped out of its position



**PFC James W. Ojida**



**Cpl John W. Bonin**

"The communications men," he muttered. "Hope your aim was bad on that one, Robbie."

But at that moment a cry came from the path to the beach road. "Wiremen over here," said a voice. And this time the password was given.

The machine gun chattered again, ripping the side of the ridge, spoiling a Japanese ruse that almost had worked.

The gun jammed. It was cleared just as a figure lunged toward the position. A Japanese, carrying a bayonet in one hand and a grenade in the other, was cut in half 4 feet from the hot muzzle of the gun.

The fourth and last belt of ammo was half gone when a flare brightened the terrain. The gun sprayed the north trail again. Not a movement was seen or heard.

Rigney lifted his head above the coral ledge as the flare settled close to the ground.

"They're stacked like cordwood," he shouted, pointing to the CP area where the Japanese had moved in—to stay.

They waited half an hour in silence. There were no more hand grenades; the hush was deathly, nerve-wracking.

It was almost midnight when Capt Hoops called to Lt Hudson to send a BAR team back from the lines to cover the withdrawal of the CP survivors. He didn't know that the only survivors were himself and the other three Marines in the machine gun position.

Cpls John W. Bonin of Spring, Texas, and Willard F. Tenney of Pittsburg, Kan., crawled down the side of the ridge.

The four survivors, Capt Hoops, Sgt Roberts and PFCs Rigney and Ojida, followed Tenney to the front lines while Bonin covered with his automatic weapon. The command post was set up on the front lines for the rest of the night. And the rest of the night was quiet.

At dawn they found Lt Sullivan, badly wounded, more dead than alive. Apparently he had been hit just before he crawled out of the CP the night before. He died aboard a hospital ship.

Lt Ambrose, evacuated by McDevitt, Ludwigsen and Robarge, recovered.

Thirty dead Japanese were found in and around the CP area. One had been killed as he tried to operate the telephone between company and battalion headquarters.

The Japanese defenders of Peleliu's Bloody Nose Ridge had been beaten at their own game. And although it had been tough going for Easy Co, it had this consolation for the loss of the Command Post—the withdrawal was not made until the attackers had been wiped out.

And the "withdrawal" was made to the front lines. 🇺🇸



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