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THE OPERATIONS OF THE 103RD INFANTRY
(43RD INFANTRY DIVISION) NEW GEORGIA,
SOLOMON ISLANDS, 30 JUNE - 5 AUGUST 1943
(NORTHERN SOLOMONS CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Regt. S-1)

Type of operation described: REGIMENT IN AMPHIBIOUS ATTACK.

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THE OPERATIONS OF THE 103RD INFANTRY
(43RD INFANTRY DIVISION) NEW GEORGIA,
SOLOMON ISLANDS, 30 JUNE - 5 AUGUST 1943
(NORTHERN SOLOMONS CAMPAIGN)

INTRODUCTION

During the spring of 1943, plans were made by the high command of the South Pacific to renew the attacks on Japanese held bases in the South Pacific. At this time we find upon study of the location of American Forces in this area that the long series of island to island offensives which was to mark the war with Japan had only begun.

By the first of February the enemy had received his first major setback in this area with the conquest by American Forces of the island of Guadalcanal. The capture of this island after a bitter struggle had given the American Forces an all important air base from which to conduct continued air attacks on Japanese installations and a jumping off point from which to conduct further amphibious assaults.

On 21 February, troops of the 43rd Division had seized the Russell Islands which lie approximately 45 miles northwest of Guadalcanal. The landings on this small group of islands were unopposed, the enemy having withdrawn a short time previous. The nature of the terrain on these islands was not such as would allow the construction of a very large air base at this time but it did serve initially as an outpost and as a fighter base from which fighter escorts could take off to rendezvous with bombers based at Guadalcanal. The construction of this fighter strip was started soon after the landing of ground troops was accomplished. (1)

In accordance with plans to continue these attacks on

enemy held bases in this area, the island of New Georgia, and more specifically, the Munda airfield, was selected as the next major objective. The reason for selecting this particular objective was quite evident in that the capture of such an airfield would move our bomber bases forward, and in addition, would be one more step in driving the enemy toward his homeland in Japan. The 43rd Infantry Division which included the 103rd, 169th, and 172nd Infantry Regiments was selected as the unit which was to play the major role in the accomplishment of this mission. It is with the 103rd Infantry of this Division that this monograph is concerned.

THE GENERAL SITUATION

Japanese defenses on the New Georgia Islands consisted of a series of outposts stationed on the small islands which surround New Georgia proper, and still others posted at various points on New Georgia itself. In the vicinity of Munda Airfield extensive defenses had been constructed and carefully camouflaged. During the period which intervened between the occupation of these positions by the Japanese and the attack by American forces, profuse jungle growth had completed the already thorough job of camouflaging these positions. Enemy defensive positions included numerous pillboxes along the entire shoreline supplemented by positions in depth constructed on the high ground overlooking Lambetti Plantation and Munda Airfield.

At the time of receipt of the order by the 43rd Division we find the 172nd Infantry on Guadalcanal with the remainder of the Division in a semi-permanent bivouac on the Russell Islands 50 miles to the northwest. Strenuous amphibious training was being conducted at this time by all elements of

the Division. Landing craft used for this training were LCI's (Landing Craft Infantry). This was the first time this new type craft had been seen by troops of this Division. (See Map "A")

On June 18th the Division order for the attack on New Georgia was issued. 30 June 1943 was designated as D-Day. (2)

THE DIVISION PLAN

(SEE MAP "B")

The Division plan for the attack on New Georgia called for an initial landing on Rendova Island by the main force consisting of the 169th Infantry, the 172nd Infantry and the 3rd Battalion, 103rd Infantry plus all supporting artillery; the seizure of this island after mopping up the enemy outpost believed to be stationed there; and the preparation for the attack on the New Georgia mainland. The mission of the 103rd Infantry was multiple in nature and included the following:

1. Landing of one (1) Battalion with Companies N and Q, 4th Marine Raider Battalion attached, at Oliana Bay, Vangunu Island, which lies to the southeast of New Georgia proper, destroying enemy in that area and the establishment of defensive positions.

2. Landing one (1) Battalion as Division reserve on Rendova Island with the Division main body.

3. Landing one (1) reinforced company at Viru Harbor to seize and defend this position.

4. Landing the balance of the Regiment, consisting of the Regimental companies and the 1st Battalion (minus) at Segi Point, on the southeastern tip of New Georgia Island, and the occupation and defense of this area.

(2) Personal knowledge

All landings were to be made simultaneously on the morning of 30 June. (3)

THE REGIMENTAL PLAN

(SEE MAP "B")

In conformance with the Division order, the Regimental Operations Order was issued assigning the missions of the Regiment as follows;

1. 2nd Battalion with Companies N and Q, 4th Marine Raider Battalion, attached, to land at 0300, 30 June, at Oliana Bay, Vangunu Island; destroy enemy positions there and organize for the defense.

2. 3rd Battalion to land on Rendova Island with the Division main body, protect the Division left (south) flank and constitute the Division reserve.

3. 1st Battalion (less Co. B reinforced) to land at Segi Point, New Georgia and occupy defensive positions.

4. Co. B (reinforced) to land at Viru Harbor, conduct an attack coordinated with Co. "P", 4th Marine Raider Battalion on enemy installations at this point and occupy defensive positions. (4)

THE ATTACK ON NEW GEORGIA

(SEE MAP "C")

OLIANA BAY: At 0700, after some delay due to uncertainty as to the identification of the landing site, the 2nd Battalion with Companies N and Q, 4th Marine Raider Battalion attached, landed at Oliana Bay and immediately took up the march toward Vura Village with Co. "E" reinforced, leading. Here the first contact with the enemy was made by Co. "E" and after a brief

(3) A-1 p. 21-22 (4) Personal Knowledge

which was destroyed

skirmish the enemy was driven from the village toward Cheke Point. Meanwhile the balance of the force had by-passed the enemy position to the left and moved to a point to the northwest of the peninsula which was known as Cheke Point. At this point, in coordination with a simultaneous attack by Company "E" from the south, the enemy was driven back to previously prepared positions on Cheke Point. During the night, in an attempt to reinforce this position, the enemy landed four (4) barges, each containing approximately 40 men, in the vicinity of Cheke Point. Two of these barges, however, landed near our positions and were destroyed.

Naval and air bombardment on Cheke Point was requested for the morning of 2 July, but did not materialize and bitter fighting continued throughout the day. In the afternoon of 3 July Naval fire was placed on the enemy position. This was followed by an air attack on 4 July. Following the advantage gained by the shock of the air bombardment our forces were soon able to move in and complete the destruction of the enemy positions, capturing considerable quantities of ordnance material and other supplies. (5)

Following this engagement the 2nd Battalion established defensive positions in this area and conducted numerous patrols but no further contact with the enemy was made.

VIRU HARBOR: (SEE MAP "B") Shortly before daylight on 30 July, Company "B" reinforced arrived at the entrance to Viru Harbor aboard two APD's. As they approached the harbor, however they were brought under fire of enemy coastal guns.

(5) Personal statement by then Captain Ollie A. Hood, Commanding Company "G", given on 7 February 1948

ob 1 2
The plan for the attack on this enemy position called for a land assault by Marine elements coordinated by means of signal flares with the landing of Company "B". It became apparent by noon that the Marine elements had not as yet reached the objective and "B" Company was ordered to return to Segi Point. Upon reporting to Commanding Officer 103rd Infantry, "B" Company received new orders which included a landing at the Choi River and an overland march to the enemy position. The landing at Choi River was made without incident on the morning of 1 July and the march toward Viru Harbor began. Three days later after a tedious trek through dense jungle, the force reached the objective. Meanwhile the Marine force had reached Viru Harbor and had reduced enemy installations there. "B" Company relieved the Marine elements at this point and immediately set up positions for its defense. (6)

SEGI POINT: (SEE MAP "B") Due to intelligence reports of changing enemy troop concentrations on New Georgia it was felt that the enemy might attempt to occupy Segi Point. In view of this possibility, the 103rd Infantry was ordered to dispatch one Company to this point. Company "A", reinforced, aboard two APD's sailed out of the Russell Islands on 21 June 1943, landing at Segi Point at 0730, 22 June to reinforce a small Marine force stationed at this point. No contact with the enemy was made. (7)

At 0800, 30 June, the 103rd Infantry, less the 2nd and 3rd Battalions and less Companies "A" and "B", landed at Segi Point and assumed control of defenses in that area. The task of moving equipment and supplies back from the beach and into

- (6) Personal Knowledge
- (7) A-3

the dense jungle was immediately undertaken. Initially, it was necessary to clear jungle trails leading back from the beach over a very steep hill which began at approximately 200 yards from the water's edge. Communications were established with the 2nd Battalion at Vangunu and with Division Headquarters which had landed at Rendova after a brief skirmish.(8)

RENDOVA ISLAND: (SEE MAP "B") At 0630, 30 June, elements of the main body of the Division landed on Rendova and after a brief fire fight destroyed a Japanese outpost. It was estimated that 60 Japanese had been killed and what was later estimated at 50 others driven into the interior. The 3rd Battalion, 103rd Infantry, in Division reserve, landed on Rendova Island on 1 July. Though numerous patrols were dispatched in the Battalion zone no contact with the enemy was made by this unit, with the exception of a small outpost which was quickly destroyed. (9)

NEW GEORGIA ISLAND: Immediately upon completion of the occupation of Rendova Island a Division reconnaissance party was organized and set out for the mainland of New Georgia. The mission of this group was to locate suitable landing sites and water supply points. The party was equipped with radio which was used in making periodic reports. Based upon these reports, Zanana Beach was selected as the original landing site. The orders of the Division Commander directed that the 172nd and 169th Infantry Regiments land at the selected site, and immediately advance inland toward the Barike River, the latter having been selected as the line of departure. (SEE MAP "D") The

(8) A-3
(9) A-3

two (2) regiments were to cross the line of departure with the 169th Infantry on the north and the 172nd Infantry on the south. (10)

Initial landings at Zanana Beach, the selected site, were made by elements of the 172nd Infantry during hours of darkness on 3 July. The initial landings were unopposed and were followed by the remaining Battalions of the 172nd Infantry and those of the 169th Infantry. All elements immediately took up the march to the Barika River. No enemy opposition was encountered with the exception of one enemy strongpoint which was encountered by the leading element of the 169th Infantry on 6 July. This strongpoint was not finally reduced until noon on 8 July. (11)

By 0630 on 9 July the line of departure was crossed and the advance continued without any opposition excepting that provided by the extremely dense jungle terrain. The advance continued during 9 July with the enemy offering only minor opposition by way of delaying actions. The march on Munda continued. (12)

During 10 July, however, enemy resistance increased and it became apparent that the enemy's main line of defense was being reached. Lines of communication by this time had become greatly extended considering that the only means of supply was by carrying parties. The number of men required to maintain supply over such difficult terrain became so large that means of shortening the supply lines were sought. This meant the establishment of a new beachhead along the route of advance. On 11 July, to accomplish this end, elements of the 172nd Infantry were ordered to shift their attack to the

(10) A-1, p. 25

(11,12) A-1, p. 27

south in order to secure a beachhead at Lalana after driving the enemy from positions in this area. Two days of heavy fighting ensued against well emplaced enemy positions. Preliminary reconnaissance at Ilangana Point had indicated approximately two Battalions in position there. During the afternoon of 13 July, the 172nd Infantry secured the desired beachhead. In shifting its main attack to the south, the 172nd Infantry became greatly extended and a 600 yard gap existed between Regiments, through which enemy harassing patrols operated. (13)

Let us now return to the 103rd Infantry. The third Battalion which was still occupying defensive positions on Rendova was alerted and with one Platoon of tanks attached landed on the newly established beachhead at Lalana at 0900 on 14 July and was immediately placed in Division reserve. On the following day this Battalion was placed under the control of the Commanding Officer, 172nd Infantry. (14)

On 15 July due to the casualties which had been suffered by the 172nd Infantry, Company "L", 103rd Infantry, was committed to the line by the Commanding Officer of the 172nd Infantry. By 18 July, the 172nd Infantry, which was still on the left flank of the Division, its left flank now touching the shore line, had become seriously reduced in strength and overextended by its continued attacks and Company "K", 103rd Infantry, was committed. On 19 July, Company "I" was committed and the remaining elements of the 2nd Battalion, 172nd Infantry were relieved. The Commanding Officer, 3rd Battalion, 103rd Infantry, at this point assumed command of his Battalion.

(13) A-1, p. 28
(14) A-3

The route of advance of the Battalion generally followed the coast with its left flank touching the coast in the vicinity of Laiana. (15) The line occupied by the 3rd Battalion, 103rd Infantry, ran generally east and west about 200 yards north of Ilangana Point. On 19 July an attack was ordered against enemy strongpoints which were holding up the left or shore flank of the Battalion. In this attack three Officers were killed and casualties generally were high throughout the Battalion. Though some gains were made, it was necessary, due to the heavy casualties, to withdraw to the original line for the purpose of reorganization. (16)

20 July witnessed a repetition of the previous days attack. A slight gain was again made, this time, however, by committing all available personnel, the line was held.

Meanwhile on 14 July the movement of the balance of the Regiment (less the 1st Battalion) to the New Georgia area began with the arrival of the Commanding Officer and Staff on that date followed by the Regimental Companies on 16 July. On 21 July the Headquarters and Regimental Companies moved to New Georgia Island and the Regiment assumed control of its 3rd Battalion. On this date it was found that the 3rd Battalion had turned to the right, following the coastline. (see Map "D") A check made of the strength of the Battalion revealed that it had been reduced to an average of approximately 60 men per Rifle Company.

The 2nd Battalion, after having staged at a small island near Rendova arrived at Laiana Beach at 1237, 22 July and went into an assembly area prior to being committed. Before

(15) A-3
(16) Personal Knowledge

leaving Vangunu Island the 2nd Battalion had been relieved of its defensive mission by Company "C". At 1000 on 23 July the 2nd Battalion was committed, relieving the 1st Battalion, 172nd Infantry. (See Map "D") At this time we now find the Regiment, less the 1st Battalion, at New Georgia; the first Battalion less Companies "B" and "C" at Segi Point; Company "C" at Vangunu and Company "B" at Viru Harbor. (17)

On 23 and 24 July the Regiment made repeated attacks against enemy installations but to little avail.

Attack not shown

On 25 July, preceded by artillery preparations the Regiment again attacked. Company "E" finding a soft spot in the enemy defenses continued to advance until their contacts on both flanks were completely broken and they found themselves 800 yards in front of the line held by the balance of the Regiment. At this point attempts were made to consolidate the gain by pushing troops out to contact this Company but due to terrific resistance, these attempts failed. At 1500 Company "E" was forced to withdraw, taking only minor casualties. At the close of 25 July little gain had been made. On this date the 3rd Battalion, 169th Infantry was placed under control of the Commanding Officer, 103rd Infantry and was committed on the right flank of the Regiment and in contact with the 172nd Infantry. In attempting to neutralize enemy positions by Artillery, this fire was often brought to within 100 yards of our own troops. On one occasion, on this date, troops were moved back to allow artillery fire on an enemy position. The Japanese sensed such tactics however, and, leaving their positions, occupied those which our troops had temporarily vacated. As soon as the fire had ceased, they

(17) A-3

quickly reoccupied their previous positions. (18)

26 July brought the first real gain for several days. With the use of the combined efforts of a Platoon of tanks, and Artillery support, a gain of about 800 yards was made. (See Map "D") In consideration of the type of terrain, enemy installations and the reduced strength of attacking elements this was looked upon at this time as a major gain. Feelings ran high and the attack of the morrow was eagerly awaited in the hopes that it might provide a major break through and that the objective might soon be taken. The 27th dawned and passed however and still the Japanese defenses held. Little gain had been made against the increasing enemy resistance. (19)

The dawn of the following day, 28 July, revealed that the left or coastal flank which was occupied by elements of the 103rd Infantry had fallen somewhat to rear of the general pattern of the line held by the Division. Enemy defenses along the coast had been established with a view toward repelling an attack from the sea. However, the nature of their construction was such as to make each pillbox mutually supporting against an attack from the flank. In closeup assaults upon enemy strongpoints, attacking troops found themselves under the direct fire of supporting positions.

On 28 July called for renewed attacks with the main effort being made on the left or coastal flank in an effort to straighten out the Division line. On this date the use of tanks was attempted but the development of mechanical trouble and increased anti-tank fire denied all attempts to advance. (20)

On 29 July, the 3rd Battalion having suffered a large

- (18) Personal Knowledge
- (19) A-3
- (20) A-3

number of casualties since being committed on the 14th was relieved by expanding the 2nd Battalion to the left. The very fact that the line held by the Battalion could be so easily occupied by this means serves as an indication of the Battalions strength. On this date after a much belated artillery concentration, a new attack jumped off and prior to the fall of darkness had succeeded in gaining 300 precious yards. (See Map "D") At this point the battle for the important airfield at Munda had developed into a drudging battle of attrition. The overwhelming artillery superiority which American forces possessed was taking a heavy toll, while the Infantry doggedly reduced one enemy strongpoint after another.

(21)

During the two succeeding days of 30 and 31 July all forward elements devoted their efforts to the conduct of intensive patrolling. The mission of the patrols being to locate the enemy pillbox installations to our front. This was no easy task. The type pillbox constructed by the Japanese in this area consisted of a pit approximately six feet wide, six feet long and five feet deep. This pit was covered with coconut logs, then with coral rock. The firing ports were formed only a few inches above the ground allowing the utmost of cover and concealment and making it impossible to discover their locations at ranges greater than 20 yards. Sprouting coconuts and fallen palm fronds in some areas also added to the already complete job of camouflaging these positions. (22)

The arrival of the month of August brought fresh hope

(21) A-3
(22) Personal Knowledge

to members of all units fighting on New Georgia. On 1 August at about 1100 the Division right flank which had been slowed down for several days due to encounters with strongly emplaced enemy positions on high ground, (see map) finally overcame these defenses. A general advance resulted and as darkness approached front line troops gained their first view of the objective for which they had been fighting for nearly a month. Munda Airfield was now visible from the higher ground on the right and from beach positions on the left. (23)

The following two days saw continued dogged fighting as yard by yard our troops advanced on the coveted airfield. By 1600 on 3 August the 103rd Infantry had reached the eastern edge of the airfield. At this point however, all attempts to move over open ground around the field brought heavy fire from Bibolo and Kokengolo hills, in the zone of the unit on the right of the 103rd Infantry. On the 4th of August the 3rd Battalion relieved the 2nd Battalion whose line had now become shortened by the converging of troops as the airfield was approached. The 3rd Battalion conducted numerous patrols to their front but each movement continued to draw heavy fire from the hills which were holding up the right flank of the Division. (24)

On 5 August, enemy positions on the Bibolo and Kokengolo Hills were finally destroyed and our line was able to move forward and with little mopping up completed the capture of Munda Airfield. The 3rd Battalion immediately set up defensive positions. (25)

The day following the capture of the airfield the Regiment

- (23) A-3
- (24) A-3
- (25) Personal Knowledge

went into defensive positions covering the coastline from the airfield to Ilangana Point. This assignment was short lived however, because on 7 August the 2nd Battalion was ordered to Rendova Island to occupy and outpost this area. The following day the 3rd Battalion was moved back to the Russell Islands for rest and recuperation. These two movements left only the Regimental Companies still remaining on New Georgia Island. Semi-permanent bivouacs were immediately prepared. The battle for Munda Airfield was over. (26)

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

In a study of this operation we must first consider the fact that for the entire division this operation was the baptism of fire. The conditions under which this baptism was received, namely, dense jungle and a fanatical, well emplaced enemy, would have taxed the most seasoned veteran.

The key terrain of the operation was that portion of the shoreline in the vicinity of the airfield and the high ground which overlooked this shoreline. It would appear at first glance that an attack launched against such a defense, if approaching from the flank would have little or no trouble in successively eliminating these positions. The enemy however, had apparently considered this in his defensive structures and had so placed the pillbox positions that they were mutually supporting.

The piecemeal commission of the 3rd Battalion to the left of the Division line served only to so decimate this unit as a fighting force that its mass power was entirely lost.

The repeated orders for continued attacks day after day,

when little or no gain had been made by this means, resulted only in an attrition which the size of the force originally committed to the mission could not withstand. The method employed during the 30th and 31st of July, ~~that~~ of employing small patrols to locate enemy positions prior to attacking them proved its worth.

On several occasions one end of the Division line was held up because units on its flanks could not overcome the opposition in its zone. Had sufficient forces been committed to the operation, reserves would have been available. This would allow flank elements to advance where resistance was light while reserves covered their flanks and rear. This lack of sufficient forces to do the job at hand was especially apparent in the early phases when the 172nd Infantry was ordered to move to the south in order to establish a new beachhead and shorten supply lines. The movement when executed resulted in a 600 yard gap between right and left units.

The greatest criticism of this operation was the failure to consider the fact that in jungle operations the amount of frontage which can be allotted to an Infantry element is greatly reduced.

During this operation, little or no use was made of the cover of darkness in assaulting enemy positions. Had the troops been sufficiently trained in night jungle attack and this method employed, casualties would have been greatly reduced.

In summing up the operation it is quite apparent that the 103rd Infantry, although its tactical unity had been broken by the nature of its mission, and despite the fact that

the troops were untried and inexperienced, was able to successfully accomplish its mission, as was the Division as a whole, even though the time required to do so may appear to some to have been too great.

LESSONS

1. When the attack has been stopped because of superior enemy forces or because of the nature of defensive installations, do not repeat the attack in the same manner. This practice serves only to reduce morale and fighting strength.

2. When a unit such as a Battalion loses its effectiveness because of fatigue, casualties or other factors, do not attempt to salvage it by committing reserves in a piecemeal fashion. To do this results only in a gradual decimation of these reserves. It is far better to commit the reserve as a unit which by its fresh mass of power has a chance of success.

3. In planning operations in jungle or very close terrain we must consider the decreased frontage that a unit can occupy. Failure to make such allowance causes gaps to form through which enemy patrols will enter and cause untold confusion.

4. In planning an operation against enemy believed to occupy well fortified positions, Commanders and Staff Officers must study the probable ammunition requirements carefully. For example, in an operation of this type, ammunition for 81 MM mortars should be about 90% heavy and 10% light. It was soon discovered during this operation that the light ammunition had little effect on enemy pillbox emplacements, even with direct hits.

5. Training in jungle operations must include small unit problems which accustom the troops to the noises and extreme blackness of the jungle at night.