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THE OPERATIONS OF THE 132ND INFANTRY (AMERICAN DIVISION)  
AT MOUNT AUSTEN, GUADALCANAL ISLAND, SOLOMON ISLANDS  
15 DECEMBER 1942 - 9 JANUARY 1943  
(Personal Experience of an Anti-Tank Platoon Leader)

Type of operation described: REGIMENT IN THE ATTACK

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## INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of the 132nd Infantry Regiment of the Americal Division from 15 December 1942 to 9 January 1943. During this twenty-day period the 132nd Infantry assaulted and captured Mount Austen, the strategic high ground commanding Henderson Field.

The Americal Division was formed from units of Task Force 6814, which sailed from New York City 23 January 1942. After a brief stop in Melbourne, Australia, the Task Force was ordered to sail for New Caledonia and prepare to defend the island. (1)

In July of 1942 the Americal Division was formed, a regular triangular division. Its name was derived from America and Caledonia. It is the only unnumbered division in the United States Army. (2)

In order to get a clear picture of the situation in the Pacific, it will be necessary to go back to the spring of 1942. The Allied position in the Pacific was very grave indeed. Japan's war machine was rolling on from one crushing victory to another. The Allies were on the defensive. It was with great difficulty that the supply lines to Australia, the Middle East, and India were maintained.

In early April 1942, the Japanese landed troops on Tulagi and Guadalcanal. In July work was started on an airport on Guadalcanal not far from Lunga Point, between the <sup>TENARU</sup>~~Tinean~~ and Lunga rivers. This indicated further danger to the supply line to Australia. In order to protect and maintain this vital supply route to Australia, it was evident that offensive action must be taken. (3) (See Map A)

With this plan in mind Vice Admiral Robert L. Ghormley was placed in command of all Allied Forces in the South Pacific east of east longitude 160°. General Douglas MacArthur was in command west of 160° east

(1, 2) Personal knowledge; (3) A-4, p. 9

longitude. But, as 160° east longitude cut through Guadalcanal, the boundary was shifted slightly to place all of Guadalcanal under Admiral Ghormley's command. (4)

Close coordination was necessary due to the limited number of Allied Forces available to the two commanders in the Southwest Pacific. General MacArthur and Admiral Ghormley met in Australia on 7 July 1942, and reached an agreement for the effective and cooperative use of all Allied Forces available. (5)

#### THE GENERAL SITUATION

On 26 June 1942, Major General A. A. Vandegrift and part of his staff flew from Wellington to Auckland for a conference with Admiral Ghormley. The object of the conference was to lay plans for the invasion of Guadalcanal by the 1st Marine Division Reinforced.

General Vandegrift was notified that the invasion date was set for 1 August 1942. This caused considerable discussion, as only the advance echelon of the 1st Marine Division had arrived in Wellington. The remainder of the Division was still en route to Wellington, and its date of arrival was uncertain. Later the landing date was changed to 7 August 1942. (6)

During the next few weeks the General and his staff were busy preparing plans for the impending landing. One important item necessary to the planning was missing. Nowhere could an accurate map of Guadalcanal be found. Former employees who worked on the island were contacted to gather any information they might contribute. All that was known of Guadalcanal was its general size and coastline. The interior remained a big question mark. Even aerial photographs failed to reveal much of the needed information. General Vandegrift and his staff were forced to make the plans from an aerial photo mosaic and an old coastal survey map. Every precaution was taken to prevent any information of the impending amphibious assault from reaching the Japanese. (7)

(4) A-1, p. 3; (5) A-1, p. 3; A-4, p. 9; (6) A-1, p. 3; (7) A-6, p. 22-23; A-4, p. 10-15.

The Japanese force on Guadalcanal was reaching a formidable strength. With the Marine line thinly held and all troops committed, Admiral Ghormley decided to reinforce the Marines with the Americal Division now on New Caledonia.

The 164th Combat Team arrived on Guadalcanal in mid-October, just a few days after the Japs had landed a large number of replacements. (15) The 164th Infantry Regiment was put in the lines immediately, and assisted in repulsing a heavy Jap attack. (16) On the morning of 15 October, our troops watched the Japs unload five transports filled with troops. The Americans were unable to do anything about the landing. The men shook their heads and said, "They are landing faster than we can kill them." (17)

On the 12th November, the 182nd Combat Team landed and went into the lines. (18) During a series of intense sea and air battles lasting from the 13th to the 16th of November, the Japs landed more reinforcements. (19) As the American forces built up their strength, a rumor persisted that the 1st Marines would be relieved. (20)

On December 5th, 1942, the 132nd Combat Team landed and went into the lines along the Tenaru River. (21) On December 9th the 1st Marine Division was relieved and command of the island was turned over to the Army under the command of Major General A. (Sandy) Patch, Jr. (22)

During the relief of the 1st Marine Division General Patch took the opportunity to reshuffle the perimeter and prepare for an attack against the Japanese stronghold on Mount Austen. December 15th was the date, and the unit was the 132nd Infantry Regiment less the 2nd Battalion. (23) (See Map B).

#### THE REGIMENTAL PLAN OF ATTACK

The regimental plan of attack called for the 3rd Battalion under Lt Colonel William Wright to lead the attack. The 1st Battalion under Lt Colonel Earl Ripstra was to follow the 3rd Battalion and in regimental

(15) A-6, p. 32-33; (16) A-4, p. 142-143; (17) A-4, p. 147; (18) Statement by Major Murphy, TIS; (19) A-6, p. 193-215; (20) A-4, p. 213; (21) Personal knowledge; (22) Personal knowledge; (23) Statement by Col L.E. Nelson, C.C.

To the inexperienced jungle-fighter it is a nerve-racking experience, causing imaginations to run wild (also the trigger finger). (27)

On the morning of the 16th of December the battalion pushed off at approximately 0815. The terrain was becoming very difficult; deep draws filled with vegetation, strong spiny vines hampering the advance of the troops. Jap outposts began to seriously impede the advance. By the time the 1st Battalion reached the slopes of Mount Austen it was 1700. The battalion was ordered to dig in. An all-around perimeter was standard in this terrain. The night was a series of small fire fights as the Japs attempted to infiltrate our positions. When dawn broke the battalion had accounted for thirty Japs. (28)

At approximately 0800 the morning of the 17th, the battalion commander held a conference with his staff and company commanders. It was decided to assault the northwest slope of Mount Austen. About 0900 the battalion jumped off. By 0930 increased Jap resistance in the form of snipers and "pill boxes" had almost halted the advance of the battalion.

It was a well-planned defense the Japs were putting up. As our units located a pill box and worked toward it, the snipers would open up and pick off our men. This caused quite a bit of confusion and loss of time and personnel. Often several pill boxes were mutually supporting. (29) The fight for Mount Austen had begun.

#### THE ATTACK ON MOUNT AUSTEN

After a wild night of firing caused by attempted Jap infiltration, the battalion jumped off at 0830. As the battalion neared the peak of Mount Austen, the peak split into two ridges. The battalion halted momentarily until the battalion commander decided to push along the right ridge (Hill 31) (See Map C). The attack was resumed against increased Jap resistance. It seemed apparent from the stubborn resistance that the battalion was

(27) Personal experience; (28) Statement of Capt M. Jarvis, CO, Co M;  
(29) Personal experience.

approaching the main line of Jap resistance on Mount Austen. This was the Jap 124th Infantry Regiment, if G-2 information was correct.

At approximately 1000, Lt Colonel Wright left the battalion C.P. to contact "K" Company. He took with him a radio operator and a 511 radio. At 1030 the battalion C.P. received a message from the radio operator that both he and the Colonel had been wounded. The Colonel had been hit several times trying to get out. Any movement on their part drew fire from the Japs.

This message was relayed to the regiment, And while the 3rd Battalion tried to rescue the Colonel, Capt Kynett organized and led a patrol into the scene. Both the Colonel and the radio operator were brought out, but the Colonel died from six wounds. (30)

Major Sheldon, the executive officer of the 1st Battalion, was given command of the 3rd Battalion. Before the attack continued, the regiment decided to commit the 1st Battalion along the last ridge (Hill 30). By 1700 both battalions had advanced under fierce opposition to the edge of the ridges along which they were advancing. Deep draws confronted both battalions. Regiment ordered the battalions to dig in.

The night of 18-19 December was filled with bursts of gunfire. The Japs were feeling out our lines. Attempts to infiltrate were made all along the line. Occasional rounds of 90-mm mortar shells landed in the area. The small Jap 60-mm ("knee mortar") shells were bouncing off the thick jungle. Most of the attempts to infiltrate were stopped, and toward morning the Japs withdrew into their lines.

The morning of 19 December was spent in strengthening the present line and in reconnaissance. Regiment wanted information as to the terrain and the Jap positions. Accordingly, both battalions sent patrols out to the flanks and front. The patrols attempting to move out in front of the battalions were stopped within twenty-five yards of our own lines.

(30) Statement by Lt Col (Capt) Kynett

Considerable rifle and machine-gun fire forced the patrols to withdraw. However, the patrols to the flanks had better luck. They made contact with the Japs, but were able to move around. When the patrols had returned, regiment ordered a meeting of regimental staff, the battalion commanders, and their S-2 and S-3's. (31)

From the information gained, it was determined that the 132nd Infantry was up against the main line of resistance of the Jap 124th Infantry. Its strength was unknown. Colonel Nelson requested division to release the 2nd Battalion from the labor detail on Lunga Beach. Division refused the request. The plan adopted was as follows: The 3rd Battalion was to put in a perimeter defense around Hill 31 and tie in with the 1st Battalion on Hill 30. The 1st Battalion would extend to its left and attack the right flank of the Jap position. The 3rd Battalion would make a weak diversionary attack to the front. One platoon of Anti-Tank Company would patrol the exposed flank and rear of the 1st Battalion, one platoon would guard the native carrying parties, and one platoon was to guard the regimental C.P. The plan would go into effect at 0800 the next day, the 20th of December.

The battalion commanders and their staffs returned to their units and began preparations for the attack next day. Numerous small fire fights broke out during the day as Japs infiltrated our lines and shot at carrying parties and litter bearers moving along the trails. Efforts were made to find and eliminate each of these snipers. (32)

The morning of the 20th the attack jumped off on schedule, but after three hours of hard fighting, the 1st Battalion had advanced but fifty yards. The Japs were well dug in with machine guns in well-concealed pill boxes. It seemed as though all pill boxes were mutually supporting. Well-placed riflemen supported the pill boxes. Movement under these conditions was rugged. This, plus the fact that the battalion had to descend

(31) Personal knowledge; (32) Personal knowledge.

a steep slope made the Jap position extremely difficult to attack. Regiment again requested the 2nd Battalion and again division refused. The regimental situation was not too good.

In order to maintain a supply point and evacuation station on Hill 31, it was necessary to hold the 3rd Battalion in position in order to safeguard these installations and fix the Japs in their present position. The 1st and 3rd Battalions had to maintain physical contact to prevent the Japs from slipping through and attacking the rear installations. This limited the maneuverability of the 1st Battalion. It seemed to be an almost impossible mission. The only course of action open to the regiment was to continue the attack and try to break through somewhere.

The next eight days were spent hitting the Jap lines. No appreciable gains were made. Every patrol that was sent out made contact; fire fights and casualties mounted. Nights were used by the Japs attempting to infiltrate our lines. The troops were getting tired. They had been in contact and fighting for thirteen days with little sleep, no baths, change of clothes, or hot food. "C" rations get very monotonous. The casualty rate was about as expected, but malaria was beginning to hit the troops. On the 28th of December, division notified regiment that the 2nd Battalion would be released to regiment at 1200. Welcome news indeed!. Plans were immediately formed to use the 2nd Battalion on a wide envelopment to capture Hill 27. This would give us a strong point in rear of the Japs.

#### CAPTURE OF MOUNT AUSTEN

About 1000 on the morning of 29 December, Major Butler, executive officer of the 2nd Battalion, appeared at the forward C.P. He was accompanied by a ten-man patrol. His orders were to reconnoiter a route for the 2nd Battalion from Burnt Ridge to the base of Hill 27. He was to avoid all contact with the Japs, as the element of surprise was necessary to the success of the attack. He was to return by 1200 on 30 December.

Orders were sent to Lt Colonel George Ferry, commanding the 2nd Battalion, to move to Burnt Ridge on 30 December and be prepared to move toward Hill 27 on the 31st of December. The battalion would carry three days' "C" rations and each man would carry two canteens of water. Packets were provided which contained atabrin and Halazone tablets. The men were briefed and the battalion was ready to go.

Major Butler and his patrol returned at 1100 the morning of the 30th. He reported that the route was extremely difficult. It was all up and down, and the jungle growth was very thick. He figured the battalion could reach the bottom of Hill 27 in ten to twelve hours. It had taken the small patrol six and one-half hours. (33)

Major Butler passed this information on to Colonel Ferry. Plans were laid, the officers and men were given a final briefing, and the plans were told. The battalion would jump off the 31st of December at approximately 0800.

The artillery was requested to prepare fire data to support the battalion's attack. Close in fire support was desired. Hill 27 is higher than Hills 30 and 31, but the towering banyan trees on 30 and 31 would seriously affect the fire on the crest of Hill 27. But fire would be delivered when called for.

The morning of the 31st was hot and humid. Sweat rolled off the men as they moved off into the jungle. Radio silence was the order, until 1800 and then only a short message to locate the battalion.

The 2nd Battalion found the going very rough. They had to break a path all the way. It was slow work because noise had to be kept at a minimum. Surprise was essential. By 1630 the battalion halted and dug in for the night. Absolutely no smoking after dark, no lights of any kind were to show.

The 2nd Battalion moved out at about 0900 after a very quiet night.

Statement

(33) ~~Statement~~ by Colonel (Major) H.W. Butler

wounded until such time as they could be evacuated.

While the 2nd Battalion was capturing Hill 27, the 1st Battalion jumped off in an attack to try to crack the Jap line and tie in with the 2nd Battalion. Hill 27 was approximately 1000 yards away. But once again the 1st Battalion met fierce resistance and advanced only two hundred yards. Rather than continue the attack and suffer additional casualties, regiment ordered the 1st Battalion to dig in at their present position.

A platoon from Anti-Tank Company was sent with supplies and litters to the 2nd Battalion. The platoon walked into a hornet's nest. Apparently the Japs resented losing the hill and were making the Anti-Tank platoon pay for it. The platoon got about eight hundred yards from the C.P. when Jap snipers on all sides harassed the party. The platoon worked on each sniper as he fired. The platoon was soon spread over several hundred yards of jungle. It was spread too far; by a prearranged signal the platoon leader reassembled the platoon. Regiment was contacted and ordered the platoon back to the C.P. (36)

Meanwhile the 2nd Battalion was having a hard fight to hold the hill. Counter-attacks and mortar barrages caused many casualties to the troops holding the base knob. In seventy-two hours the battalion repulsed severe counter-attacks ranging in size from a platoon to a battalion.

The Anti-Tank platoon had been unable to break through to the 2nd Battalion during the 3rd and 4th of January. Supplies were dropped by air. This was one of the first successful air drops of the war.

The morning of the 5th of January the Anti-Tank made it to the 2nd Battalion. Evacuation of the wounded began at once. Four natives were assigned to each litter and two natives to spell off the carriers when they tired. The platoon with carriers started out with twenty litter cases and all of the walking wounded. The return trip was slow and difficult. At places the slopes were so steep six men were used to slide the litters

(36) Personal experience.

down. Jap snipers were active; two litter cases were wounded a second time and three natives were hit. The trip took ten hours and the men were bushed. (37)

The following day two platoons from Anti-Tank Company and one hundred fifty native carriers set out for the 2nd Battalion. Water, rations, and small arms ammunition were carried to resupply the 2nd Battalion. As the party reached the slopes of Hill 27, the leading elements of the 1st Battalion broke through the jungle. The carrying party had the honor of guiding the 1st Battalion up the hill. (38)

Mount Austen and Hill 27 were now secure. The Japs had withdrawn to positions which were to become famous as the Gifu Strong Point. And strong it was!

On the 9th of January, 1943, the 132nd Infantry was relieved by the 35th Infantry.

#### ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

In making an analysis of this operation, it is my opinion that Mount Austen could have been taken in less time and with fewer casualties had the regiment been able to use all three battalions. Piecemeal attacks seldom achieve the desired results.

The 132nd had no previous experience or training in jungle operations. Their fighting efficiency was affected until the troops became acclimated.

Necessary G-2 information was lacking throughout the entire Guadalcanal campaign. Jungle terrain is difficult, but without good maps it becomes almost impossible.

A great deal of credit is due the officers and men of this regiment for a job well done. They started the attack as green, untried troops and came out successful veterans.

In brief, this attack was a part of the first Allied drive against the Axis. It was made over terrain that was unbelievably difficult. It

(37) Personal experience; (38) Personal experience.

is true we made mistakes and at times our tactics were faulty, but we had no pattern to work from. We did the best we could.

### LESSONS

The lessons learned were many, but here are a few of the important ones:

1. The Japanese soldier fights fanatically even unto death. He lacks the resourcefulness of the American GI, but he is a worthy foe.

2. Close-in artillery support is very effective. Even though friendly troops may suffer a few casualties, the effect on the enemy is much greater.

3. Our troops need more training on camouflage. The Japs are very good at it.

4. More stress should be placed on small unit training. Jungle fighting requires skilled action on the part of squad and platoon leaders.

5. Training should include a complete course on attacking pill boxes.

6. Jap snipers are not particularly expert shots, but are well-concealed riflemen.

7. Special lightweight clothing should be worn in the jungle. Most issue clothing is too hot.

8. Special measures must be taken to insure troops taking their atabrine.

9. Flashless and smokeless powder is desirable. The Japanese often located us by the flash or smoke.

10. "C" rations get very monotonous. A new ration with a more varied diet should be issued.