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OPERATIONS OF THE 2ND BATTALION, 7TH MARINES, 1ST MARINE
DIVISION AT THE MALIMBIU RIVER AND THE METAPONA RIVER ON
GUADALCANAL ISLAND, 1 NOVEMBER 1942 TO 8 NOVEMBER 1942
(Personal Experience of a Platoon Commander)

Type of operation described: WITHDRAWAL AND ATTACK OF
INFANTRY BATTALION IN JUNGLE TERRAIN

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OPERATIONS OF THE 2ND BATTALION, 7TH MARINES, 1ST MARINE
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INTRODUCTION

This monograph relates the actions of the 2nd Battalion, 7th Marines, 1st Marine Division at the Malimbiu River and the Metapona River on Guadalcanal Island, 1 November 1942 to 8 November 1942, during the struggle for this island with the Japanese forces. (CMAA)

With the Naval victory at Midway Island in 1942 the Naval high command felt that this was an opportune time to launch an amphibious operation. So, on 26 June 1942, Major General Alexander A. Vandegrift, Commanding General of the 1st Marine Division, was told that his 1st Marine Division, must prepare for an August operation. (1)

In order to understand this action it is necessary to look at the size and location of this island, study the composition and the primary objective of the 1st Marine Division and to become especially familiar with the obstacles that confronted this particular battalion.

An obscure island in the Solomons group, by the name of Guadalcanal, had been selected as the key to the Pacific War. The Naval high command made their decision to attack this island knowing that an enemy air force based on Guadalcanal could disrupt the American supply line to Australia and cause the war in the South Pacific to be delayed considerably.

The Marines knew practically nothing about Guadalcanal and knew less about what the Japanese already there had done to defend it. (2)

(1) A-7, p. 22; (2) A-7, p. 23.

Not one detailed, topographical map was in the possession of the Marine Commander, or as far as he knew, was there one in existence. Some sketches on hand of the island gave it the name of Guadalcanar instead of Guadalcanal. Later, an Army B-17 aerial reconnaissance flight made by two Marine officers in early July 1942, furnished much information as to the topography of this particular area. (3)

Guadalcanal Island is one of the many islands in the Solomons Group. It lies east of New Guinea, northwest of New Hebrides Island and southeast of Bougainville Island in the Pacific Ocean. It is about 90 miles long and about 25 miles wide. The island possesses a backbone of high rugged mountains but the southern shore gives way to a comparatively level coastal plane which in some places reaches a depth of 8 miles. (See Map "A") Therefore, this was practical terrain for the construction of an airfield and the Japanese forces had taken advantage of this fact and already were in the process of constructing an airfield near its center to the north.

heading needed

The objective assigned the 1st and 5th Regiments of the 1st Marine Division, was to secure a beachhead on Guadalcanal and seize the nearly completed airfield. This assigned task was scheduled for 7 August 1942. The first troops of the 1st and 5th Regiments landed virtually unopposed on the shores of Guadalcanal on the scheduled date. The 1st Marines arrived at the airfield on the 2nd day, D-plus-1, while the 5th Marines were pushing westward on the island. (4) This unopposed landing may be rated as one of the most successful tactical surprises accomplished in this or any other war.

(3) A-7, p. 23; (4) A-3, p. 42.

However, this unexpected accomplishment only gave the Japanese forces on the island time to become fully aware of the surprise landing and to reorganize. In order to hold the captured airfield and to combat this organized resistance, General A. A. Vandegrift, Commanding General of the Marine forces on Guadalcanal, requested that the missing element of his division - the 7th Marine Regiment - be brought to the scene as soon as possible. The 7th Marine Regiment, of which the 2nd Battalion is a part, was at Samoa Island. This 7th Regiment had been sent to Samoa as a protective force against any possible Japanese advances early in May 1942. (5)

The 7th Marines arrived at Guadalcanal, 18 September 1942, to lend aid to the division, now under-staffed and battle-weary from over a month in combat. (6)

With the arrival of these fresh troops, General Vandegrift was able to begin limited offenses on a much larger scale than heretofore was possible, and at the same time furnish adequate security around the airfield. On 30 October 1942, General Vandegrift received an intelligence report which prompted him to plan on sending the 2nd Battalion, 7th Marines, commanded by Lt. Colonel H. H. Hanneken, on a mission eastward toward the Metapona River in order to investigate the Jap's plan to land in force in that area. (See Map "B") It is well to mention here that the actions of this battalion at the Malimbiu River and the Metapona River were augmented by the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines and the 2nd and 3d Battalion, 164th Army Infantry. (5) Personal knowledge; (6) A-1, p. 245.

THE GENERAL SITUATION

During the first two weeks of November the defenders of Henderson Field, as the strip was called, had many difficulties. Not only were the Marines assigned the mission of holding the defense perimeter around the field, but they also had to drive out Japanese detachments elsewhere on the island before the enemy forces increased. As the Marines of this 1st Division struck in one direction, the Japanese would threaten from another. As the situation demanded, the troops were switched from one hot spot to another to meet any threatening blows. Every hour brought new problems for the high command. There was always a constant change in the placing of units. Intelligence reports revealed that no ^{TAP} landings of any force had been made since early September when the Japanese had put ashore approximately a brigade. However, intelligence data received on 1 November, informed General A. A. Vandegrift that a renewed enemy drive in the direction of Guadalcanal Island was apparent. Coastal watchers, stationed on Rabaul Island, had been able to keep an accurate log on enemy shipments there, and as a result, positive information was given that a big enemy movement was about to get under way.

The current enemy target for this anticipated movement was believed to be in or near the Koli Point area, located eastward of the Henderson Field on Guadalcanal. (See Map "B") Realizing that a landing in or near this area would serve as a threat against the perimeter of defense around the airfield, as well as to strengthen the scattered enemy forces already located on the island, General Vandegrift decided to put troops in this area to disperse or destroy the enemy.

So, with this information, telling of the possible landing to the east of this island, the 2nd Battalion, 7th Marines prepared to depart to Koli Point and points eastward on 1 November 1942, to greet and investigate any possible Japanese landings in that area. Needless to say, after seven weeks of fighting in this steaming jungle the battalion was reduced in strength, having many combat casualties as well as loss of personnel due to illness.

Ninety per cent of the men of this battalion had contracted malaria and unofficially it is thought that every man on the island was infected. There was no D.D.T., sanitation was bad, and as a result, dysentery and fungus infection were common in this unit. Beri-beri and the disease known as jungle rot had greatly weakened the morale of this battalion. Even though the above conditions only added misery and discomfort to the men of the 2nd Battalion, their mission had been assigned, and all obstacles such as disease, shortage of rations, and jungle weather must be overlooked and overcome. (7)

THE BATTALION SITUATION AND THE METAPONA RIVER WITHDRAWAL

1 November 1942, found the 2nd Battalion, 7th Marines composed of E, F, G, and H companies, moving by foot to Koli Point and points eastward with an assigned mission of investigating any possible Japanese landings or activities in that area. (8) (See Map "B") The original plan called for this outfit, commanded by Lt. Colonel H. H. Hanneken, to move to their objective by boat but all landing craft was being used on the western part of the island to transport those units engaged in action with the Japanese forces there.

(7) Personal knowledge; (8) A-4, p. 103.

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details
needed

*no down
on map B*

The first night out Colonel Hanneken bivouacked just west of Koli Point - proceeding to the Point the next day, 2 November 1942. To add to the misery of this exhausted battalion, a freak accident occurred during the march. At the mouth of the Malimbui River, while the battalion halted for rest, a coconut tree, without reason, toppled over and killed 2 men and injured 1 officer and 3 enlisted men.

Upon arrival, Colonel Hanneken was informed by a native scout that a Japanese patrol had passed there earlier that morning, heading eastward. On numerous occasions the natives on Guadalcanal were used as scouts, and their services in this capacity proved invaluable. (9)

*Position
not shown
on map B*

The battalion pushed eastward toward the Metapona River and found, upon arrival, that the mouth of the river was separated from the sea by a sandbar about 70 yards wide. To cross the river itself, would require wading waist deep in some places. (See Map "B") Crossing this wide sandbar would also make one visible for some distance. The only alternative would be to make the waist-deep crossing of the river, but back inland and quite some distance up-stream. Colonel Hanneken, wishing to make use of all concealment possible, decided to cross the river by the sandbar, but by night. The battalion then took up positions 2000 yards east from the point where the sandbar joins the beach. The battalion, after crossing the river, and establishing itself along the beach, facing the sea, deployed F Company on the right flank of its position and G Company in the center and Easy Company on the eastern flank of the battalion. This deployment took place during the night, after which all hands waited for developments. The waiting, however, was short-lived.

(9) Personal knowledge; (10) A-3, p. 194.

F Company, deployed on the battalion's right flank, received word from its observation post at 2020 hours that night that they thought several ships were entering the bay at Tetre near their position. See Map "B". This report was not too definite as visibility was extremely poor, due to the continuous rain that night. Soon, however, this report was confirmed as signal lights flashed from the beach, approximately 1000 yards east of the battalion's right company. F Company then reported that 3 ships which they assumed to be a troop ship, cruiser, and destroyer, were standing close in to shore at the eastern side of the bay. The 3 companies, deployed in line, facing the beach, watched and waited in silence. They could hear noise and clatter aboard the ships and the Japanese jabbering on the beach, where they were landing under the protection of their naval guns. This landing occurred about half a mile from the nearest Marine position - to the right of F Company. Word was passed and all hands were thoroughly warned to conceal their position. Not a shot was to be fired - the Marines had great respect for the guns aboard the Jap vessels.

The battalion's C.O. tried to notify division headquarters, located some 8 miles to the west of its position, of this new development, but the radio had broken down on the long march eastward and various attempts to repair it had failed. (11) For 3 long hours, the battalion lay in the rain listening to the Japanese move from ship to shore, apparently unloading heavy equipment as well as artillery pieces. All through the night successive attempts to contact division headquarters and inform them of this landing proved unsuccessful.

At dawn on 3 November 1942, a patrol of nearly 10 Japs
(11) A-4, p. 103

strolled down the beach toward F Company's position. After the Japs had spotted the Marines' lines, the men of F Company fired on this Jap patrol, killing 4 and sent the remaining into the undergrowth where they escaped. Now that the Japs knew the Marines were in this vicinity, Colonel Hanneken decided to attack immediately. He opened up with the 81 mm mortars on the position of the original Japanese landing. He used the mortars not only to neutralize the Jap's position but he also had high hopes of attracting the attention of division headquarters. (12) As the Japs returned no fire for some time, Colonel Hanneken assumed that the enemy force consisted of nothing more than a battalion with no heavy supporting weapons. Suddenly and unexpectedly, several hundred Japanese appeared and started up the beach toward the F Company sector.

Machine-gun fire from F Company, commanded by Captain Amedo Rae, U.S.M.C. and the continuous mortar fire from the 81 mm mortars caused many casualties among the advancing Japanese and drove them into the woods near the beach. The enemy then retaliated. Soon F Company began to receive mortar and artillery fire from the Jap position to the east. It was obvious now, that the enemy had landed heavy artillery and were much larger in number than was previously estimated. Wounded from F Company, including Captain Rae, began to pass through the battalion's lines; the 81 mm mortar ammunition was now running low; no contact with the division headquarters could be established; therefore, Colonel Hanneken, in the face of these obstacles, decided to fight a withdrawing action to the west bank of the Metapona River, make a stand and fight from there. (See Map "B")

The battalion's plan of withdrawal called for F Company,
(11) A-4, p. 103; (12) A-2, p. 196.

the right flank company of the battalion, to withdraw first; the center group, G Company, next; and last, Easy Company. The heavy vegetation and jungle condition slowed the withdrawal considerably, and made the evacuation of the wounded a slow process. As the battalion was preparing to take up a position on the west bank of the Metazona River, the enemy, who apparently had crossed the stream further upstream, made an attempt to attack the rear of the battalion's position. Immediately, the battalion commander decided to withdraw further and ordered G Company to cover the rear of this withdrawal. (13)

Immediately, Captain Wesley Martin, C. O. of G Company, contacted his platoon leaders and deployed his units for a delaying defensive action to cover the withdrawal of the battalion. The 3d platoon, led by the author, was given a position 75 yards in front of the company's zone of action - that 75 yards being practically in the Jap's lap. The 1st and 2d platoons were deployed nearly 25 yards to the rear of the 3d platoon almost abreast, due to the density of the jungle.

Reinforced by a light machine gun section, the 3d platoon conducted a fire-fight with the enemy for nearly 45 minutes. This succeeded in temporarily holding up the advance of the enemy before ordered to withdraw and rejoin the battalion moving westward to the Malimbui River. As the company and battalion moved westward to the Malimbui River, the Japs continued the attack and they took up positions in front of the battalion on the west bank of this river.

General Vandegrift, Division Commander, did not receive word until the afternoon of the 3d that the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines had been attacked by a fresh regiment of Japanese, recently landed to the east.

(13) A-4, p. 104.

ATTACK AT MALIMBIU RIVER AND RECAPTURE OF METAPONA RIVER

In approximately three hours after receiving the message the division commander had a large outfit moving eastward to reinforce the 2nd Battalion, 7th Marines at the Malimbiu River. At this stage of the war in 1942, two Army battalions and one Marine battalion was easily classified as a large scale movement.

Immediately, General Vandegrift sent the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines commanded by Lt. Colonel Lewis Puller, on its way to reinforce the 2nd battalion, and two battalions of the 164th Army Infantry were to join the Marines at the Malimbiu by way of an inland route. Colonel Puller's 1st battalion moved up the shore that night and joined Hanneken's position near the mouth of the Malimbiu. (14)

By evening of the 4th, two battalions of the 164th Infantry were well on their way east. The plan was to encircle the Japanese at the Malimbiu. The 3d Battalion, 164th Infantry, commanded by Lt. Colonel R. K. Hall, advanced 3 to 4000 yards south of the Jap's position well inland, while the 2nd Battalion, 164th Infantry, commanded by Lt. Colonel Tomhoe, advanced north-east of Colonel Hall's position and prepared to cross the river about 4500 yards from its mouth. The enemy was well dug in on the east bank of the Malimbiu, directly in front of Hanneken's position.

The next morning, 5 November 1942, the 2nd battalion of Marines crossed the Malimbiu River and began to move northward to find the enemy's line and to attack their position. About two hours later, Lt. Colonel Puller's 1st battalion crossed the river and also started moving north. Neither battalion was

(14) A-3, p. 72.

able to contact the Japanese. Obviously, the Japanese command had decided to withdraw further to the east, back toward the Metapona River.

The 2 Army battalions, by this time, were approximately 1500 yards from the beach east of the Malimbiu. Here they ran into a small detachment of Japanese and succeeded in destroying a machine gun nest. Just a few casualties were suffered by the Army battalions in this little fracas.

At this time the 3d battalion of the 164th Infantry was recalled to its former position near the airfield for security reasons. (15)

On 6 November the enemy was contacted at the Metapona River as our forces continued to move eastward. Their position was definitely placed as being well dug in on the ^{east?} west bank of the river with its right flank laying along the beach and its left flank extending approximately 1000 yards into the jungle.

A meeting of the 3 battalion commanders called for complete annihilation of the enemy in its track. The 2nd Battalion, 7th Marines was to press inland into the jungle and take up positions to the rear of the Japanese position. The 1st Battalion, 7th Marines was to remain in place at the Metapona River in front of the Jap position; the 2nd Battalion, 164th Army Infantry, whose position was west of the Metapona, was to cross the river upstream to the right of the enemy's left flank and close the circle of the 3 battalions around the enemy. With this plan of action, the enemy would be pinned between 2 battalions of Marines while the army battalion closed any possible escape inland by an encirclement movement around the enemy's left flank.

(15) A-2, p. 204.

See Map "C".

The 2nd Battalion, 7th Marines plan of action in this attack was to push westward toward the Jap's position and try to force the enemy into the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines position, located some 2000 yards to the west. G Company was designated as the assault company with Easy and Fox Company in reserve. Due to the density of the jungle, movement was greatly retarded and only light machine gun and 60 mm mortars were used to support this company. Due to the weight, the ammunition carriers had unwisely but purposely left the greater load of mortar ammunition back at the defense area near the airfield. This fact contributed absolutely nothing to the success of the operation about to get under way.

(16)

*MT
slower
on the*

Captain Wesley Martin, C.O. of G Company, 2nd Battalion, 7th Marines, decided to move westward and to launch his attack with two platoons abreast, the 2nd and 3d, with the 1st in reserve. His decision to split the machine-guns of the weapons platoon between the two assaulting platoons was in order and necessary due to the limited visibility and jungle conditions. As the two platoons moved westward and started fording a small stream, approximately 200 yards from their assembly area, they began to receive mortar and machine-gun fire. The enemy had dug in on the opposite bank of this stream about 300 yards in front of its support group. The Japanese guns caught both advancing platoons of Marines in the water. The 1st platoon on the left, led by Lt. William Watkins, U.S.M.C., suffered five casualties before he was able to get his men to positions of cover, out of water. The 3d platoon on the right, led by the author, made a desperate rush for positions of cover on

(16) Personal knowledge.

the right side of the stream which was occupied by the enemy. Luckily, the enemy had its light machine-guns and rifles strapped to the tree-tops, so, as a result, their heavy volume of fire was concentrated on the river stream. The situation then became very critical for the 3d platoon, with the stream directly behind its position, and the enemy guns fixed all along the stream. The only plan left for the platoon leader was to hold his position of cover, if possible, and pray for darkness to come. Jap knee mortars began to spray this area and this platoon began to receive a few casualties. However, the 1st platoon had notified Captain Martin of the 3d platoon's situation and Martin maneuvered the 2nd and 1st platoons to the rear and left of the 3d platoons's position on the other side of the stream. Here he was able to deliver heavy machine gun fire into the enemy's position, thoroughly spraying the treetops. At the expense of 8 men the 3d platoon, under the cover of darkness was able to rejoin its company on the other side of the stream early that night. (17)

The battalion commander, sensing that this force must be the advanced guard of the main Japanese force, located near the Metazona River, ordered G Company to move some 500 yards from its position back westward as he intended to plaster this area with 81 mm mortar fire. This plan was immediately curtailed by a shortage of ammunition and a request was made of the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines' commander to deliver fire in this area. (18)

Such a request for mortar fire was a risky problem for Lt. Colonel Puller as the enemy's position lay between the two marine battalions and quite close.

(17) Personal knowledge; (18) Statement of Captain Wesley Martin.

Colonel Hanneken requested that Colonel Fuller register his 81 mm in the sea along the coast and then bring the fire inland when the proper range was estimated. All night on 7 November 1942, the enemy's position was plastered with 81 mm mortar fire from the 1st battalion's position to its west. The 2nd battalion's limited supply of mortar ammunition allowed it to deliver an occasional round from its position west of the enemy. The 2nd Battalion, 164th Infantry, under the command of Lt. Colonel Tombroe, was in position to the enemy's left flank by this time.

On the morning of the 8th, the plan of attack was for the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines to drive westward toward the Jap's position and the 2nd Battalion, 164th Infantry was to drive northward on the Jap's position toward the sea.

The Japanese were pinned against the beach in the woods as the attack progressed. The Marines began to throw all the mortars available into the Jap position in order to drive them into the Army battalion that was driving toward the sea northward. (See Map "C")

Some of the enemy driven into the Army battalion broke through the encirclement and managed to escape; but the maneuver was completely successful. The Army and Marine forces captured ammunition and many stores that the Jap's had in this fortified area around the Metazona River. The booty included several rubber boats, many artillery pieces, and quite a few bags of rice used by the Japs as gun emplacement protection. In addition to the above booty, quite a number of collapsible boats were captured and the number of enemy dead was estimated as approximately 450. (19)

(19) A-4, p. 104.

Our casualties were 40 dead and approximately 125 wounded in action.

After this action with the Japanese forces the 2nd Battalion 7th Marines with its friendly forces returned to position west of the Metazona River and later to the Henderson airfield, thus ending the second front in the east.

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

A thorough study of the actions of the 2nd Battalion, 7th Marines in the Malimbiu and Metazona River sector reveals that several mistakes were made. ✓ Taking into consideration the nature of the terrain with its dense vegetation and jungle condition, the 2nd battalion should not have been ordered to march eastward to investigate Japanese activities in that area. This battalion should have been transported by boat. Surprise still could have been maintained even if the troops had been carried only 4 miles down the east coastline. Such a ride would have added greatly to the morale of the troops as their physical condition was weak to begin with. Also, it was during the crossing of the numerous streams while on the march that much of the heavy ammunition was discarded. This scarcity of ammunition left the battalion commander no alternative but to withdraw on the morning of 2 November at the Metazona River.

✓ The battalion was far under strength before departing on its mission and measures should have been taken to replace these missing men and bring it up to authorized strength. The men were fatigued from prior combat activity and not physically able to make this all-day march eastward on 1 November 1942. Their condition necessitated making numerous stops while en route, and it was during one halt for rest that the battalion lost several men - two men killed, and one officer and three

men injured.

✓ The lack of communication from this battalion to division headquarters made the withdrawal to the Malimbiu River mandatory on the 3d of November, 1942. Even with all radio communication gone, some pre-arranged signal or manner of communication should have been established with division headquarters before the battalion left for its objective. If proper communication with division headquarters had been maintained, this operation at the Malimbiu and Metapona River could have been shortened by at least four days. (20) On the morning of 3 November 1942, a runner should have been sent to division headquarters notifying them of the latest development in this area even though radio contact could not be made. This messenger should have been directed to request that air support be dispatched to this area in the Metapona vicinity. Planes on Henderson field were available for such a mission. (21)

✓ During this entire action from 1 November to 8 November the field rations for this battalion was entirely too low. A request for planes to drop field rations on the 2nd Battalion, 7th Marines position certainly seemed in order and would have relieved this situation.

✓ As to the withdrawal itself - particularly in the case of the 3d platoon of G Company on 3 November 1942, - mortar support should have been given to the 3d platoon of G Company when this platoon was covering the entire battalion's withdrawal. This particular phase of the withdrawal was entirely too fast and at one time during this action this platoon had no contact or communication of any sort with its own company.

✓ As intelligence had confirmed the definite landing of Jap-
(20) Statement of Lt. Col. H. H. Hanneken, U.S.M.C.; (21) Personal knowledge.

anese forces to the east, positive steps should have been taken to insure that adequate ammunition was on hand in all units for sustained battle. Commanders of the various units should have assured themselves that their respective commands were adequately supplied. This lack of ammunition, together with no means of communication, caused the action in this sector to be long and drawn out.

✓ A reconnaissance of this entire area certainly would have contributed to an early victory for our forces. If the stream beds and river crossings had been thoroughly studied, a more satisfactory plan of battle, as well as evacuation of the wounded, could have been accomplished.

However, a summary of the action of the 2nd Battalion, 7th Marines at the Metapona and Malimbiu River shows that this battalion did succeed in its mission in that it did intercept the Japanese forces and eventually annihilate them in the Metapona sector. The accomplishment of this mission would have been greatly speeded had adequate transportation, ammunition, and communication been provided for.

LESSONS LEARNED

1. Some method of communication must be provided for at all times in order to accomplish a given mission successfully.
2. Proper transportation must be available and properly utilized to insure efficiency.
3. Proper amounts of ammunition must be carried and available when the situation demands it. Caution men not to dispose of ammunition en route to their destination or battle position.
4. Proper evacuation of the wounded should be arranged for and definite location of the aid stations must be known

to all hands.

5. A thorough reconnaissance should be made of the battle area whenever possible. Special note should be made of such obstacles as large river, streams, and lakes.

6. Adequate artillery support should be provided for independent missions of any duration.

7. An organization should be at authorized strength and properly equipped at all times.

8. A constant flow of supplies, especially food, must be ever present within a combat organization.