

infantry
IN ACTION

Deception on the Shuri Line

CAPTAIN EDMUND G. LOVE

EDITOR'S NOTE: During the past several years, the United States Infantryman has been the target of a good deal of criticism from all kinds of writers. Too often, he has been pictured as incompetent, poorly trained, and poorly led, and his heroism and fighting ability in World War II, in Korea, and in Vietnam have been seriously questioned.

We disagree with this assessment. We think the U.S.

Infantryman was then and is now one of the best fighting men in the world. We intend to show just how good he was in the past in this new series of articles — INFANTRY IN ACTION.

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It is a generally accepted theory that everyone has a bit of the thespian in him somewhere. But the 2d Battalion, 106th Infantry, comprised the best group of actors in the United States Army, in or out of grease paint, according to observers who saw their performance on Okinawa during 12 to 19 April 1945. Their remarkable show was carried out without a rehearsal. Yet not one man missed his cue.

The 27th Division had been committed in South Okinawa on 12 April and the first unit to go into the line was this veteran battalion, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Almerin O. O'Hara, more familiarly known as "Buzz." At the time the 2d Battalion took over, from elements of the 26th Division, activity in its zone was more or less subdued. The rifle companies settled down in the vicinity of a little hill that rose about 150 yards from the East China Sea. This eminence later came to be called, in the somewhat irreverent manner of infantrymen, "O'Hara's Knob" (See map). It wasn't much of a hill, as hills go. There was a much better one facing it, directly across the Machinato Inlet. This second one rose seventy-five feet straight up on two sides in sheer cliffs. One cliff faced northwest, toward the Americans; the other faced north toward the sea. Atop this eminence was ensconced something between a platoon and a company of Japanese. They didn't bother anyone as long as they weren't bothered. They were there to take the view, to see what the Americans were up to all along the line on the north. They had admirable scenery and they must have felt sorry for Colonel O'Hara and his boys on their little knob. O'Hara couldn't see a thing. In fact he couldn't make a move if the Japanese didn't want him to. All they had to do was to throw a few machinegun rounds across the 500-foot estuary and they'd have the colonel and his lads pinned to the earth. But they seemed content to exist by sort of a gentlemen's agreement as long as they were

free to report the movements of the Americans to their superiors.

Behind Machinato Bluff, about a mile away, stood the Urasoe Mura Escarpment, an imposing cliff barrier that formed the outer works of the famous Shuri Line. Lieutenant General J.R. Hodge wanted very badly to get up on that ridge and General Hodge was the Corps Commander. Major General G.W. Griner also had a yen and he was the 27th Division Commander. Naturally, such yens are usually translated into action. The 96th Division had tried vainly for eight days to get up there, but it couldn't get by the village of Kakazu. The 27th was to have the same trouble later. All that stood in the way of Buzz O'Hara was the 500-foot estuary, the 75-foot bluff, a village named Machinato, a mile hike over open and exposed ground, and a roadblock that filled a 30-foot cut in the rim and was protected by antitank guns, machine guns, and a new little number from the Japanese, but which one member of the 27th dubbed a "boxcar launcher." The shells were that big, and the holes they made, filled with water, were deep enough to float a car ferry.

Because of these obstacles it was not deemed wise for Buzz O'Hara have the honor of capturing the Urasoe Mura Escarpment. Instead he was placed out on O'Hara's Knob with orders to keep the Japanese from making any counterattack down the road. Eventually, when the escarpment was taken, maybe he could go up there and get a good view of Shuri. But life on O'Hara's Knob was conducive to brooding, and as the battalion commander sat on his stump of a hill and looked across the water at his counterparts on the larger hill, he began to get delusions of grandeur. He *could* capture that hill. Not only that, but he could capture the escarpment, if they'd let him! Major Jacob H. Herzog, assistant division G-2, came by one day and helped him brood. Soon

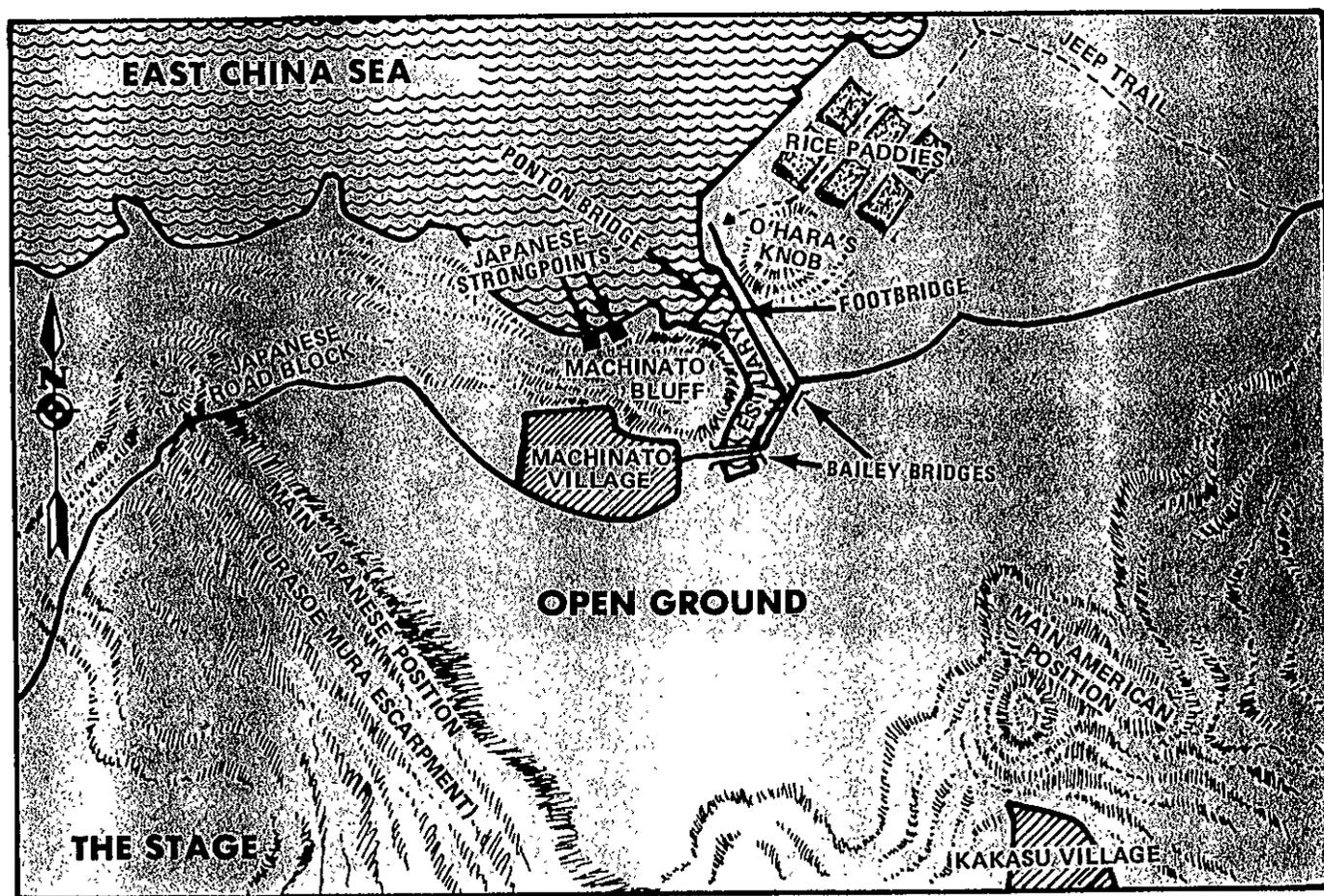
the assistant division commander, Brigadier General William B. Bradford, came by and lent an ear. Major Herzog suggested the night part, the general helped to list a cast of characters, but the battalion commander wrote the play. The division commander, General Griner, agreed to produce it.

Act I

It was a play in four acts. The first act was preparation. The 2d Battalion was perched way out on a flank. The only road that led anywhere near O'Hara's Knob had been commandeered by the Imperial Army as an impact area for artillery fire. For days jeeps came bounding over plowed fields to the battalion positions, dumped their supplies on the edge of some rice paddies and scurried back out of sight over a hill before General Ushijima's

be built right across the swampy area. But you couldn't bring in a lot of dirt and a bulldozer in broad daylight and do the job. The Japanese across the inlet had accepted the fact that the men on O'Hara's Knob weren't going to do anything. If a lot of activity broke out they might suspect something and do a little preparing on their own hook. The platoon or company over there might turn into a battalion.

The first scene in the play, therefore, occurred one afternoon when a jeep came blooming over the field, stopped on the edge of the rice paddies, then with great bravado, tried to swim across. No matter what the other virtues of a jeep may be, it can't double as a beaver or an otter. Within ten feet it was stuck and stuck good. An hour later, as if in answer to a hurry-up call, a bulldozer came rumbling across the fields, hitched on to the jeep and yanked it out of the mud. Long after the impertinent little vehicle had unloaded and rushed off, the bulldozer



artillerymen got the range. A small trail came into being, but by no stretch of the imagination could it be called a road. The rice paddies were about fifty yards across and, like most paddies, these appeared to be bottomless. Infantrymen picked their way from the shelter of O'Hara's Knob, gathered up the boxes dropped by the jeeps and tripped back along the little pathways that ran between the paddies. Now the fourth act of the play that Colonel O'Hara was writing called for a lot of traffic over these fields and across the rice paddies. A road would have to

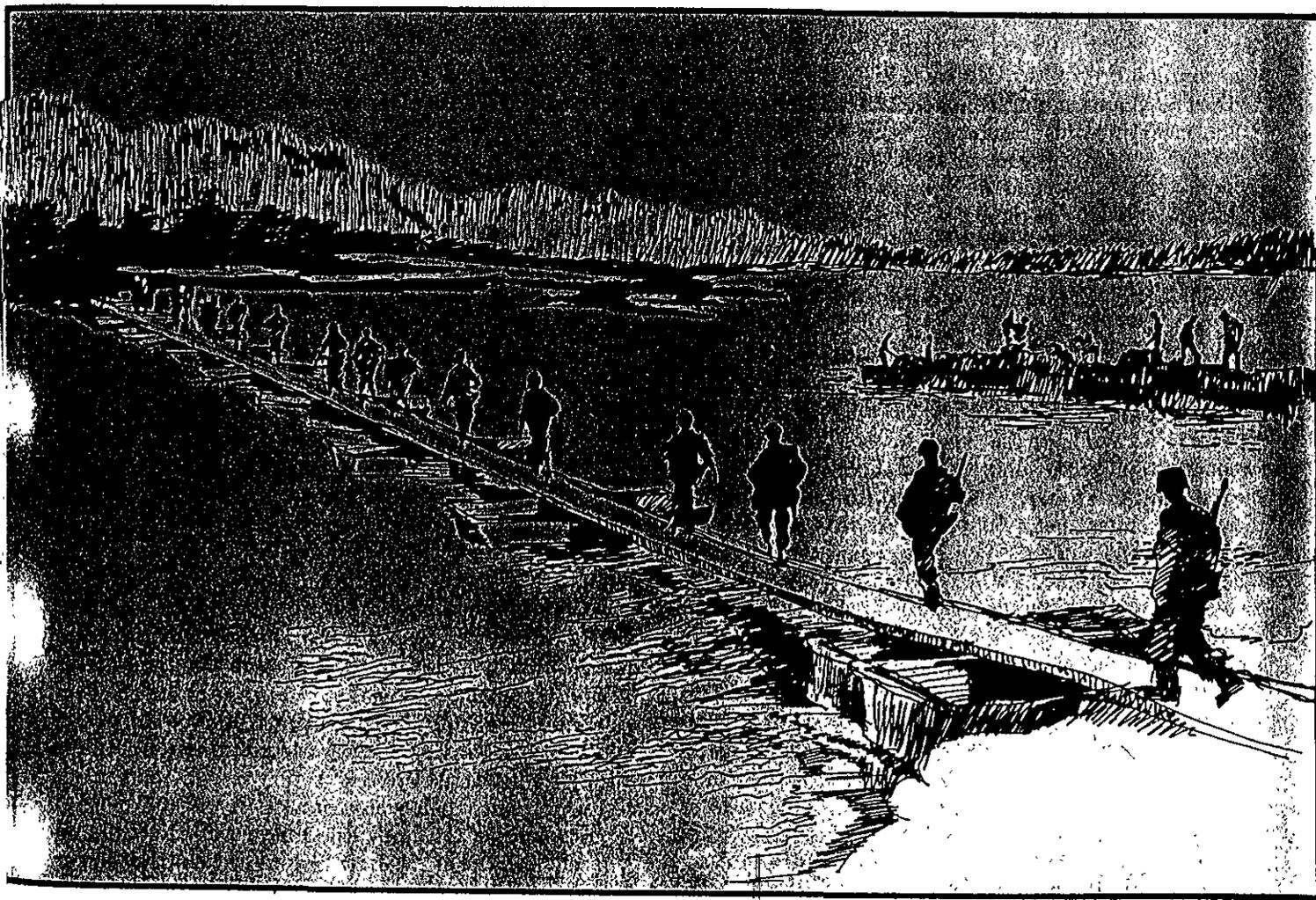
operator hung around, smoothing out tracks and shoving a little dirt into the paddies where the jeep had gone down. A little later in the afternoon, another jeep got stuck. When nightfall came, the second jeep had been pulled out amid much arguing between the operator of the bulldozer and the jeep jockey. This argument was conducted with many gestures and the two men left little doubt in the minds of the Japanese that the operator of the bulldozer thought very little of a damn fool who waited until he got to Okinawa to find out that mud was

soft. Of course, after the second helping hand, the engineer tinkered around, trying to spread some dirt over the rice paddies so that the next jeep wouldn't get stuck. Then night came and a blanket of darkness settled down over the scene. That's when the bulldozer went to work. By morning the engineers had a sturdy causeway halfway across the paddies. Only a close inspection could show the difference between the dirt that the bulldozer had pushed into the water on the afternoon before and the relatively firm roadbed that now existed.

The second day was a repetition of the first, with a few added touches. Infantrymen of the 2d Battalion, obviously the luckless carriers who had to go across the paddies and carry back the supplies, became very lazy. They dared the jeeps to come on across. They argued with the bulldozer operator, trying to convince him that he could save them a lot of work by finishing the roadway. He agreed to try. He pushed more dirt in the hole. The first jeep to try got stuck. He pulled it out, then pushed more dirt in. It was plain to see that he was disgusted with the whole futile job. Once or twice during the day he pulled his dozer over in the shade of a tree and took a nap. But during the second night the causeway was pushed out a little farther. There remained only about ten minutes'

work to fill in the last little gap. Most of this was accomplished the next day, in broad daylight. Any Japanese who might have been watching would have been quite impressed with the indolence of the American soldiery.

The building of the road was not all that took place during this period. Colonel O'Hara's men had been snooping. Day patrols, night patrols, and reconnaissances in force were in order. One young man, Lieutenant Robert Monnett, almost staked out citizenship in the village of Machinato. He went over in the nighttime and he went over in the daytime. Twice he became involved in scraps and once he became so mad he requested permission to stay and wipe out the Japanese lookouts across the estuary. Colonel O'Hara forbade this, however. He didn't want the garrison wiped out, thus inviting strong reinforcement. So Monnett had to pull back, leaving three dead behind him. He did bring with him a rather complete knowledge of the Japanese. He knew where they were, what they could see, and mapped out pretty carefully just where they would have to be hit to remove them noiselessly and efficiently. He reported the absence of minefields on the main street of the village and even conducted Buzz O'Hara, O'Hara's



executive officer, Major William Foxen, and Lieutenant Colonel Harold P. Gormsen, commanding the 102d Engineers, on a sightseeing trip across the estuary one morning. The whole affair was rapidly becoming a ridiculous show, like the "phony war" at the Maginot Line. But that's what Buzz O'Hara and General Bradford and General Griner wanted.

Still another part of the drama was being conducted a mile and a half behind the lines. The 102d Engineers had won a bridge-building contest during the 1941 Arkansas-Louisiana maneuvers, but they hadn't touched a bridge since. The fighting on Makin, Eniwetok, and Saipan had been bitter enough, but the only water the division had crossed was the Pacific Ocean and not being overly ambitious it had let the Navy carry it. Most of the engineers had seen nothing but movies of a Bailey bridge. So a young lieutenant named Irving Golden, just out of OCS, who had built Baileys in the States, took a company back behind the hills and went to work. Morning, noon, and night, for three days, they built, tore down, built, and tore down again. Other companies of engineers worked like beavers gathering materials. Not one stick of it ever appeared near O'Hara's Knob, however. It was all loaded carefully on DUKWs, trucks, jeeps, anything with wheels on it, then tucked away in coral cuts on the reverse slopes of hills. Thus loaded were two Bailey bridges, comprising 60 feet of span, and one footbridge, to be laid on assault boats. This was 478 feet long. A 500-foot rubber pontoon bridge was also loaded.

Darkness came at approximately 1920 on 18 April. The trucks carrying this equipment were to converge on O'Hara's Knob, beginning at 1930. One of the engineer companies was to build the two Bailey bridges before midnight, working in the dark. They were to cover two blown-out bridges in a causeway which carried the main highway across the estuary. The footbridge was to be thrown across the inlet almost directly between the knob and the bluffs. The pontoon bridge was to be constructed about fifty yards seaward of the footbridge. It was considered probable that the Bailey bridges would be easily knocked out by Japanese artillery that was unquestionably checked in on the sites. However, if the building went according to schedule, enough supporting tanks and heavy vehicles to carry the attack forward would be across the stream before daylight. All troops would use the footbridge, while the pontoons would carry supplies and the evacuation load in quarter-ton vehicles in the event the Baileys were knocked out early.

The troops of the 2d Battalion gave no indication that anything was afoot for the whole three days. The enemy expected the vigorous patrolling and carried out similar activities themselves. However, Monnett and 2d Battalion patrols had accurately located the Japanese patrol routes and the enemy was usually allowed to proceed unmolested as long as he didn't approach the rear of O'Hara's Knob where preparations were going forward during the night. Most of the 2d Battalion took their ease in and around the bivouac area, hanging laundry out to

dry, writing letters, and even playing a game or two. Now and then the Japanese artillery would pepper the area, but the concentrations had little rhyme or reason. Few casualties resulted and as long as the men were careful and didn't thumb their noses too flagrantly at the Japanese across the inlet, the whole situation was allowed to develop without serious attention.

Act II

This was the first act in Colonel O'Hara's little play. The second came on the afternoon of 18 April. XXIV Corps had been building up toward a general offensive since 10 April. The big push was to come on the morning of the 19th. All across the Corps front each division had its objective. It had been Major Herzog's deduction that the Japanese certainly would not expect any kind of a night movement against their stronghold. This had been confirmed by captured Japanese documents. Colonel O'Hara had seized upon it as the solution to his whole problem.

Preliminary to any surprise, however, was the elimination of the Japanese detachment on the bluffs opposite O'Hara's Knob. This presented something of a problem because any large-scale assault on the position would certainly alert the enemy high command that something was afoot. So the task had to be done delicately. Part of the plans to accomplish this was the many patrols. By the afternoon of 18 April the American probing in and around the village of Machinato had evidently come to be accepted as routine. One more large-scale patrol would probably be accepted as just that. Furthermore, for four or five days the bluffs across the way had been hit daily by air strikes from carrier planes. Beginning at 1000 on the 18th, American planes gave the village of Machinato a thorough going over. Particular attention was given to the strongpoints that Monnett had located. The planes did a good deal of damage but there was no attempt on the part of the Japanese to strengthen their now weary and battered lookout group. They evidently still thought the air strike was routine.

At approximately 1500, Colonel O'Hara's Company G men took in their laundry, strapped on bandoliers, slung rifles, and started out at a leisurely pace toward the estuary. Lieutenant Monnett was in the lead. The men were not brazenly open about the whole thing. They took necessary precautions to keep from being shot and they weren't altogether carefree. But Japanese observers certainly could not expect anything more than one of the routine American patrols that came over to bother them every afternoon. Lieutenant Clarence Stokely, commanding the company, was careful not to let the enemy see his whole strength. If they saw anything at all, it was not more than a platoon.

Elsewhere on O'Hara's Knob there was carefully hidden activity. The heavy machineguns of Company H, for instance, were moved to points where they could cover

Stokely's company by firing across the inlet. However, the actors carried this move out with finesse. A bare-headed, barefoot sergeant in his undershirt came up to one machinegun crew which was lolling around its gun in a defensive position. After a few moments of conversation, he bawled the men out for something, waved his arms toward the northeast bank of the estuary and then led off down the forward slope of the hill. The crew lazily picked up the gun and followed. When it reached a covered position behind the sea wall which overlooked the principal Japanese strongpoints, the sergeant stood up in plain sight, his hands on his hips, discussing something with the crew, then the gunner would turn, squeeze off a few shots, and throw up his hands at some criticism the sergeant made. They were obviously engaged in some sort of practice firing. Of course, some of the Japanese strongpoints happened to be directly in line with the fire, but accidents will happen in the best regulated of phony wars. Not an enemy bullet was fired in return. All over the knob, similar scenes were being enacted, not simultaneously but with just enough casualness to make it seem as though the whole thing had been ordered by higher-ups to get the insolent men on O'Hara's Knob off their lazy rear ends.

At 1550 a lone smoke shell landed about a hundred yards up Kakazu Valley from the inlet. A minute or two later another landed near by. Then more. Smoke began to waft lazily downstream toward the sea. For days, O'Hara's patrols had been studying the normal wind drift within this area. He knew, barring any sudden wind shift, just about how much smoke to lay down and how long it would last. At 1600, the upper end of the estuary was covered with a thick screen. Monnett, who had been hiding in the bushes on the northeast side of the estuary, got to his feet and tightroped across fifty feet of water pipe to the southwest shore. A sergeant followed him, then the whole company, one by one, quietly and rapidly. By the time the smoke lifted, all of Stokely's men were out of sight in caves and beneath the overhang of the bluffs. The Japanese could not possibly have known that a whole company, reinforced by one rifle platoon, had crossed the estuary.

Act III

Until 1600 nothing had happened to mar the reading of O'Hara's script. The only incident that threatened to give the show away was not of the battalion's doing. Word had gotten around the division, naturally, as to what was going on. About two hours before the show started, people all over the 27th, 96th, and Corps zones began piling into jeeps to go up and see the fun. Roads leading to O'Hara's Knob were jammed by 1500. Every jeep seemed to contain an observer of one sort or another. Luckily, Colonel A.K. Stebbins, regimental commander of the 106th, discovered the crowd before more than a handful of the guests had infiltrated forward, and an MP was stationed a mile to the rear to stop the movement.

Lieutenant Stokely's mission was to get rid of the Japanese observers atop the bluffs at Machinato and to eliminate any other enemy that might be in a position to discover and report on Act IV, which was to follow. As soon as Company G had assembled on the south side of the estuary, the rifle platoons split. Monnett and one platoon headed straight up the highway into the village. Moving from building to building and through the ditches along the highway, they soon arrived at the western limits of Machinato Village. They had found one small culvert mined and had experienced no fire. Reaching the edge of the building line, they swung north and built up a defensive line between the highway and the cliffs above the sea. The Japanese observation post was now effectively cut off from the main defensive line a mile farther to the southwest. Any telephone wires that were found were cut.

A second platoon of Company G had followed Monnett up the sharp hill which carried the highway into Machinato Village and to the ground above the cliffs. Instead of moving on west, however, it cut north as soon as it reached the eastern outskirts of the village and skirted back along the cliff top. Its mission was to knock out the enemy's main points of observation and listening posts, also to take the command post and strongpoint under fire with mortars and small arms. These two Japanese nerve centers were located in two small hillocks that jutted up out of the northern cliff like turrets in a Tudor fortress. Lieutenant Stokely was with this platoon.

Two other rifle platoons had the difficult mission of scaling the cliffs on the sea side and coming up to the top directly under the two turrets. One of these platoons was an attachment from Company L under Lieutenant Pitts. This platoon bore the brunt of the fighting in the early evening. Pitts was wounded almost as soon as he led his men into the open over the rim. From shortly after 1700 until 2100 this platoon and the third rifle platoon of Company G, working together on the strongpoints, with the support of Stokely and the Company H mortars, which the company commander directed from across the estuary by radio, managed to clean out thoroughly the eyes of the Japanese in Machinato. There was no longer anyone there who could report on the doings below.

Act IV

Exactly at 1930, ten minutes after darkness fell, long lines of trucks moved out of hiding places all over the central part of the Okinawan countryside. There were vehicles of every description and each one carried some part of the four bridges that were to be constructed. The 102d Engineers moved with them. Quietly and in complete darkness the men went to work. The span most essential to the success of Colonel O'Hara's play was the footbridge. General Griner, the division commander, ordered Lieutenant Colonel Gormsen to have this ready for use at midnight. The last section was tied into place at 1135. Shortly after midnight Company F, 106th Infantry,

filed out onto the narrow little bridges. It was followed by the rest of the 2d Battalion. Before 0300 the 1st Battalion, 106th Infantry, was moving on across the inlet and by daylight the 3d Battalion was following.

The Bailey bridges went somewhat slower, but were in place by 0330. A platoon of tanks moved up to the causeway, ready to skitter across the two spans at dawn.

Only in one place did the actors go up in their lines. The pontoon bridge across the mouth of the estuary, scheduled for completion by 0300, was not completed until almost noon the next day and much of the traffic that was supposed to have supported troops on the southwest side of the inlet was thus kept from completing its mission. Supplies and evacuation had to be carried out by carrying parties across the thin life line of the footbridge. Much of the trouble at the pontoon bridge occurred when the drift line on one section broke and the ebb tide carried the pontoons out to sea.

Colonel O'Hara and the balance of his 2d Battalion moved swiftly around Company G once they were across the estuary. Using the low, flat, coastal strip underneath the Machinato bluffs, they moved northwest along the shore to a point several hundred yards west of the village. Here the cliffs gave way to a gradual inland slope and the men of the battalion moved silently up this hill in the night, assembling near the main highway at approximately 0330. After a brief reorganization, Company F moved south along the road. By 0445 this unit was at the escarpment ridge, facing the roadblock. Then, still according to the script, Lieutenant Robert J. Hyland, Jr., led out a platoon to the right. It crept up the slopes of the steep ridge a hundred yards north of the roadblock. Shortly after 0500 it was atop the hill and creeping toward the roadblock which was now directly to its left. By 0530 Buck Hyland had deployed his men. Ahead of them they could see the glow of a campfire or two and hear voices singing. As the men crawled onto the brink of the road cut they saw a strange sight. Lolling around a series of little campfires a full company of Japanese was eating breakfast and singing songs. Rifles were stacked in neat piles several feet away. There was not the slightest indication that callers were expected. No lookouts were posted and no anxiety showed on any of the soldiers' faces. After all, the Americans were a mile or more away on the little knob across the estuary!

At 0545 Buck Hyland signaled his men. BARs, M1s, a light machinegun, carbines, all swung carefully into place. Then big Buck stepped forward. One tremendous volley rattled out, then another. Fully seventy-five Japanese went down for keeps in that first burst of fire. Others, panic stricken, tried to reach their rifles. They

were cut down by the machinegun and the BARs. Within ten minutes those of the enemy who could had taken to their heels. Over a hundred lay dead. Buck Hyland signaled down to the rest of the battalion below. Company F rushed up over the roadblock, followed by Company E. The 2d Battalion formed a defensive perimeter around the newly won position while the 1st Battalion poured through the gap and started down the ridge to the south. By nightfall on 19 April the entire Urasoe Mura Escarpment in the zone of the 106th Infantry was in American hands.

Epilogue

What General Hodge had predicted would be a bloody struggle had turned out to be a comparatively simple skirmish. The Japanese fought back grimly in the next twelve days to retake this key piece of terrain, but the battle was over before they had begun to fight. Although the 27th incurred over 3,500 casualties in this short period, the initial advantage gained by Colonel O'Hara's maneuver served well, for the division not only held but extended its gains for another two miles in the next week. When it retired with its companies at less than quarter strength, it was with the knowledge that it had been more than successful. General Ushijima, the Japanese commander, had taken note of the achievement on 22 April in his order of the day, one of the few times he had ever admitted that the Americans were threatening part of his line. To meet the threat he shifted his entire troop disposition and committed a fresh division in the line, something that he could ill afford to do.

Yet this important gain had been accomplished with only seven casualties. All of them were incurred by Company G in the fighting at Machinato Village on the afternoon of the 18th in the preliminary move. Credit for the achievement must go to every man who took part in the preparation. With an entire battalion in on the secret not a single man by any deed or word ever tipped his hand. And to Colonel O'Hara, General Bradford, and Colonel Gormsen of the Engineers, must go credit for conceiving and supervising a plan that was perfect down to the most minute detail. In his commendation to the 27th when the division was relieved from the line, General Buckner, the Tenth Army Commander, took particular note of the achievement. "Particularly brilliant," he said, "was the night attack of the 2d Battalion, 106th Infantry, on 18 April. Infantry commanders everywhere would do well to study the planning that went into this maneuver and the care with which it was executed."

