



# The 164th Infantry Regiment On Guadalcanal, 1942

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Fifty-six years ago, an untested and untried National Guard Infantry regiment from North Dakota played a major role during the most decisive battle involving American ground troops in the early stages of World War II. That battle—the second battle for Henderson Field—ended Japanese offensive action on Guadalcanal. Yet the role of that regiment—the 164th Infantry—during the darkest days of the Guadalcanal Campaign has been largely overlooked by military historians. Some of the soldiers in the regiment—in diaries at the time and in memoirs later—help tell the story.

*In cooperation with military forces of the United Nations,*

*hold New Caledonia against attack.* These orders from the task force commander heading into the newly designated South Pacific Theater of Operations would ultimately set the stage for the first commitment of an Army regiment into combat during the early days of World War II. (Prior to that, only in the Philippines had U.S. Army units met and engaged the enemy, during the disastrous withdrawal in the face of the Japanese onslaught.)

It was clear that the understrength 1st Marine Division, which had gone ashore on Guadalcanal (code named Cactus) in August 1942, was in serious danger of losing this vital

outpost and could not have held it without the timely arrival and commitment into combat of this superb Army regiment. If one examines "combat at its best," then the role of the 164th Infantry Regiment and the results it achieved during the Guadalcanal campaign offer a classic example. Three elements made it stand out: its previous extensive training program in the United States and on New Caledonia, its outstanding leadership at all levels, and the M1 Garand rifle, which it carried into combat for the first time.

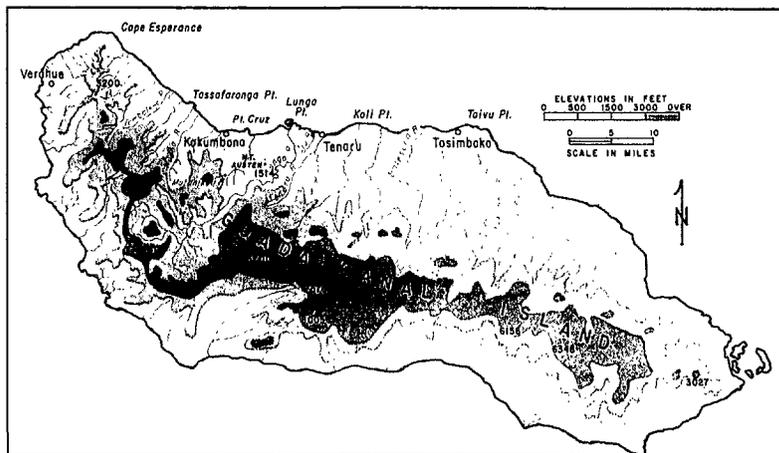
Major General Millard Harmon, Commanding General, Army Forces in the South Pacific, recognized very early the importance of Guadalcanal and its airfield in controlling the air and sea routes into Australia and New Zealand, and in supporting follow-on offensive operations up through New Guinea. After butting heads with Rear Admiral Kelly Turner, who was vigorously promoting the dispersal of forces throughout the area of operations, General Harmon made a decision. His communique to Admiral Robert Ghormley, Commander of South Pacific Area, on 6 October 1942, clearly illustrates his strategic perspective of the Southern Theater:

*If we do not succeed in holding Cactus-Ringbolt [the code name for the Guadalcanal area], our effort in the Santa Cruz will be a total waste—and loss. The Solomons has to be our main effort. The loss of Cactus-Ringbolt would be a four way victory for the [Japanese]—provide a vanguard for his strong Bismarck position,...give [them] a jumping off place against the New Hebrides, [and] effectively cover [their] operations against New Guinea.*

*It is my personal conviction that the [Japanese are] capable of retaking Cactus-Ringbolt and will do so in the near future unless it is materially strengthened. I further believe that appropriate increase in garrison, rapid improvement of conditions for air operations, and increased surface action, if accomplished in time, will make the operation so costly that [they] will not attempt it.*

Two specific areas in Harmon's letter indicate his theater perspective: First, the inclusion of a suitable all-weather B-17 staging field on Cactus, in order to extend reconnaissance and provide a heavy strike force, and second, the immediate reinforcement of Cactus by not less than the equivalent of one infantry regiment. The message was also a clear example of his understanding of the actions necessary at the operational level to gain and maintain the initiative until additional forces of all services could be deployed to the Pacific.

A platoon guide sergeant in Company E, 2d Battalion, 14th Regiment, later wrote: *It was important that the best regiment available be selected to reinforce the Marines. The situation on Guadalcanal was critical and only a limited number of men could be logistically supported on the Island. It was necessary that the Americans get the greatest fight per pound of logistics support delivered. The reinforcing regiment represented the U.S. Army in its first land combat since the fall of the Philippines. The eyes of the world, of countrymen, of friends, and of foes were on the island of Guadal-*



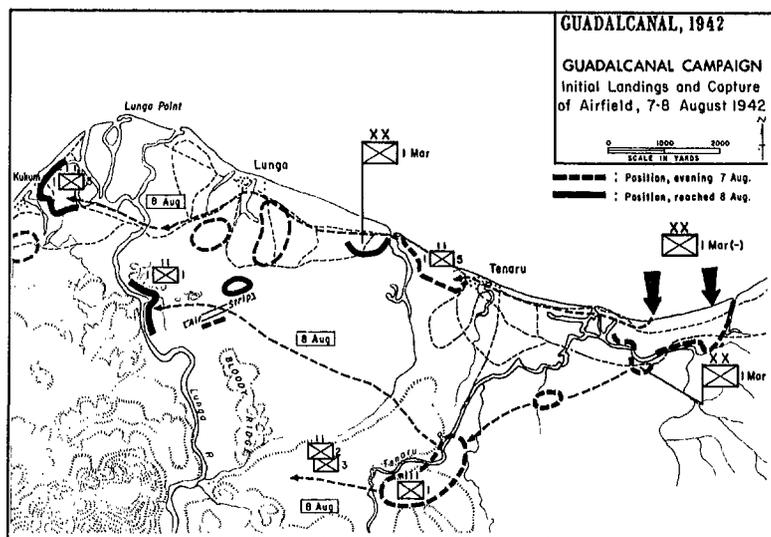
Map 1. (From *Atlas for the Second World War: Asia and the Pacific*, West Point Military History Series, 1985.)

*canal. It was important to the Americans to win. They needed to send their very best. (From *The Battle of Coffin Corner*, by Brigadier General John Stannard. Gallatin, Tennessee, 1992.)*

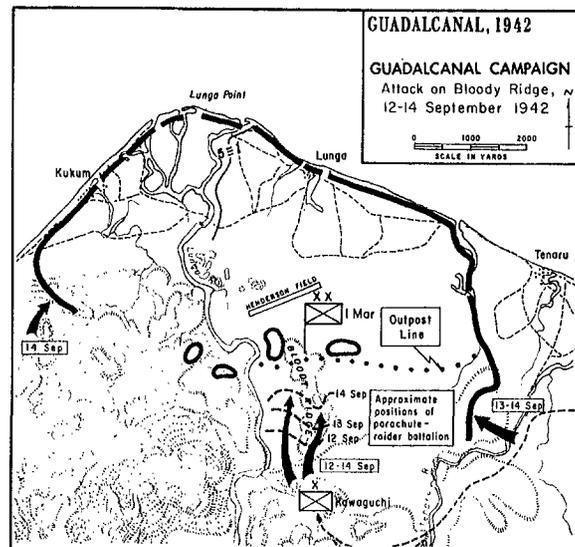
### Setting the Stage

On 25 June 1942 Admiral Ernest J. King directed Admiral Chester W. Nimitz to prepare for offensive operations in the Lower Solomons. Once the Army-Navy command squabble was resolved by a boundary shift to include the area of operations in the South Pacific Theater, the 1st Marine Division (minus), enroute to New Zealand, was selected as the primary ground combat force. The area selected for the first offensive of the war included Guadalcanal, Tulagi, and the Gavutu-Tanambogo Islands, with Guadalcanal being the main effort (Map 1).

Not much was known about Guadalcanal at the time. The island was 90 miles long, 25 miles wide, with extremely heavy rainfall, numerous rivers and streams, and a nearly impassable jungle. Malaria and dengue fever, along with many other tropical diseases, were rampant throughout the area. No updated maps of any of the three islands were available. The operation would be conducted on a shoestring by an understrength division deep in "enemy country," with insufficient tactical air and with naval support far inferior to what the Japanese could bring to the fight. For Tulagi, Gavutu, and Tanambogo, the Raider and parachute battalions, supported by the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, would conduct the operation. The main effort would be directed on Guadalcanal with the 1st and 5th Regiments (minus) and major support units including the 11th Artillery Regiment. Securing the Tulagi-Gavutu islands proved to be a much tougher job than expected, with more than 20 percent casualties before the islands were cleared. On 7 August the Marines went ashore in the vicinity of Lunga point (Map 2). The landings were unopposed, and this was fortunate since the off-loading from ship to shore did not go well. Because of a major shortage in amphibious shipping, much of the equipment required for the operation had been left behind, including prime movers. (The decision to leave the 155mm howitzers, especially, would come back to haunt the division during subsequent operations.)



Map 2. (From Atlas....)



Map 3. (From Atlas....)

Major General (later General) Alexander A. Vandegrift, commander of the first Marine Division, was faced with a nearly impossible situation—and mission. He did not have enough troops to begin with and had to hold a line around the airfield. His only course of action was to establish a defensive line along the Lunga River—about 9,600 yards, which included the village of Kukum, to Lunga Point and to the Lunga River (Map 3). Early, tough fights along the Tenaru and superb fighting by the Marines from well-dug-in positions took a high toll on the attacking Japanese. Air support, which at times was extremely limited as a result of the daily damage to Henderson Field, was provided by the few F4Fs and SDBs, augmented by old Army P-39s, P-40s, and P-400s, which—although incapable of high-altitude dog-fights—were magnificent in a close-support role for the frontline Marines. The bitter fight on Bloody Ridge that turned back the first major Japanese attack also came close to being a disaster; the force between the ridge and the airfield would not have been enough if the Japanese had broken through. Other fights later took place along the Matanikau River and in the Point Cruz area, and even with the arrival of the 7th Marine Regiment, the combat strength available could do little more than hold a narrow line with too many gaps in it.

### Combat

Without immediate reinforcement, the struggle to hold the perimeter around Henderson Field was in jeopardy. In early October, the 164th Infantry Regiment was alerted for deployment to Guadalcanal.

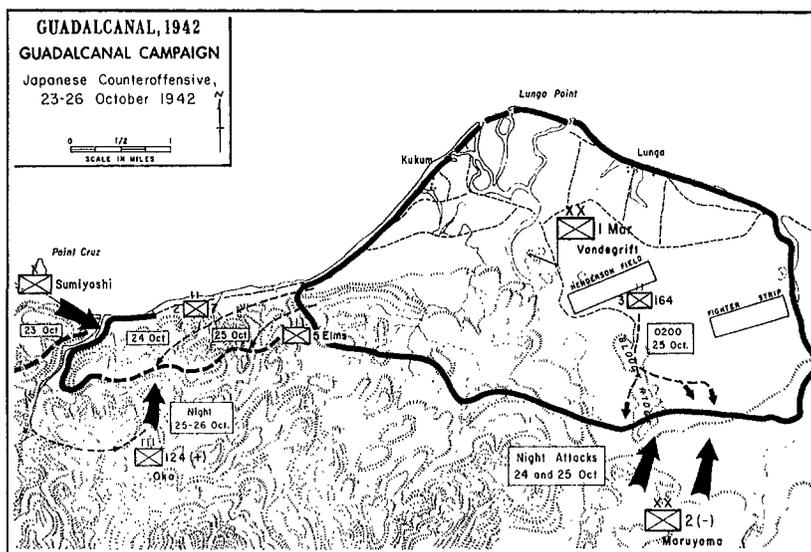
On 9 October the USS *Zeilin* and USS *McCauley* were loaded and, by late afternoon, pulled out of Nomuea Harbor bound for Guadalcanal. Lieutenant Colonel Samuel Baglien, the regimental executive officer, wrote that the trip was uneventful, with the soldiers pulling routine duties, including fire and embarkation drills. As dawn broke on the 13th, the two troop transports arrived at Kukum Beach and immediately began unloading troops and equipment. Within hours, while the regiment was still moving equipment from the

beach, came the first of what seemed to be daily Japanese air attacks. By mid-afternoon, the second air attack hit, and around 1800, Japanese artillery struck the beach area. Japanese bombers, escorted by Zeros, were a constant problem for the undermanned and underequipped Cactus Air Force; and it was difficult to mount a coordinated counter-air campaign because of the daily damage to the airfield's runway.

The artillery shelling by Japanese 150mm guns posed a particular problem: Since the Marine 105mm and 75mm guns were outranged, no effective counterbattery fire was possible. As bad as the bombing was, however, nothing compared to the nightly shelling by battleships, cruisers, and destroyers, which owned the hours of darkness in the southern Solomons. The regiment's baptism by fire on the receiving end of a devastating naval gunfire attack came shortly after midnight on the 14th, when the beach area was pounded for more than three hours. Suitable cover was hard to find, and there was no time to dig in. The infantrymen and marines took whatever cover they could find. Colonel Baglien later wrote, "A new Zealand colonel who was attached to the 1st Division commented that the naval shelling on the 14th was much worse than anything he had experienced on Crete from German naval gunfire." (From *An Account of the 164th Infantry Regiment on Guadalcanal from 7 October 1942 through February 23, 1943.*)

On 15 October the 164th, under the command of Colonel Bryant E. Moore, was officially attached to the 1st Marine Division and moved into defensive positions, replacing the 1st Marine Regiment.

Once the 164th Infantry moved into the lines, General Vandegrift totally reorganized the perimeter and established five separate regimental sectors, with the 164th assigned the longest, which was some 6,000 yards. The Kukum area was assigned to the 3d Defense Battalion with the reinforced 1st Special Weapons Battalion. The Army regiment tied into this line along the beach and the Ilu River, to a position near Bloody Ridge. The 7th (-), 1st (-), and 5th (-) Marine Regiments completed the defensive perimeter. The 164th began active patrolling immediately after tying in positions with



Map 4. (From Atlas....)

Marine units on both flanks and, for the next several days, at extended distances, although the terrain made any sightings impossible. After one week on the line, Colonel Baglien recorded in his diary:

*This is a peculiar war. We have an airfield on our regimental reserve line—the [Japanese] navy hits us in the rear, we fight them to our front, they bomb the Hell out from the air, and we are holding a little piece of ground roughly six miles wide and three miles deep.... It looks like we are in for a rough time.*

Baglien's monograph, which provides a particularly vivid account of the regiment's early days on Guadalcanal, also listed the following activity:

15 Oct	Bombed and strafed	1130 to 1430
	Bombed and strafed	1930 to 2030
16 Oct	Terrific naval shelling	1201 to 1230
17 Oct	20 bombers hit	1315
18 Oct	Enemy bombers hit	1414
	Enemy bombers back	1800

*Pistol Pete* [Japanese artillery] was working overtime between the bombers and naval gunfire on a daily basis.

#### Japanese Plans to Secure Henderson Field

The critical importance of regaining complete control of Guadalcanal was not lost on senior Japanese planners. During mid-October, thousands of replacement infantrymen and additional artillery and support troops were funneled onto the island. Lieutenant General Harukichi Hyakutake, commanding general of the 17th Japanese Army, had developed an attack plan that he was convinced would result in the destruction of the American forces on the island. The plan included a comprehensive deception, using forces along the Matanikau to pin U.S. Marine infantry battalions in place, while nine infantry battalions under command of the 2d Japanese Infantry Division (supported by an ample amount of artillery and engineer support) would conduct the main attack against the Allied flank and drive through Henderson Field. By capturing the airfield, the Japanese would drive any remaining Allied forces toward the Matani-

kau, where they would be trapped between two major Japanese units.

Movement began on 16 October, and nine Japanese battalions headed through the deep jungle for the Allied flank, while five battalions, supported by a tank platoon and artillery, moved toward the Matanikau. From General Hyakutake's perspective, his plan should have ensured a complete victory. The Japanese 150s outranged Marine 105s and 75s. Every night, warships sailed into Sealark Channel and shelled U.S. Marine and Army positions, including the air-field. With 20,000 fresh troops, and banking on the element of surprise, Hyakutake's plan was logical and had an excellent chance of succeeding.

On 20 October the first clash occurred along the Matanikau when patrols from both sides began running into each other in front of the main Marine defensive positions. The first Japanese

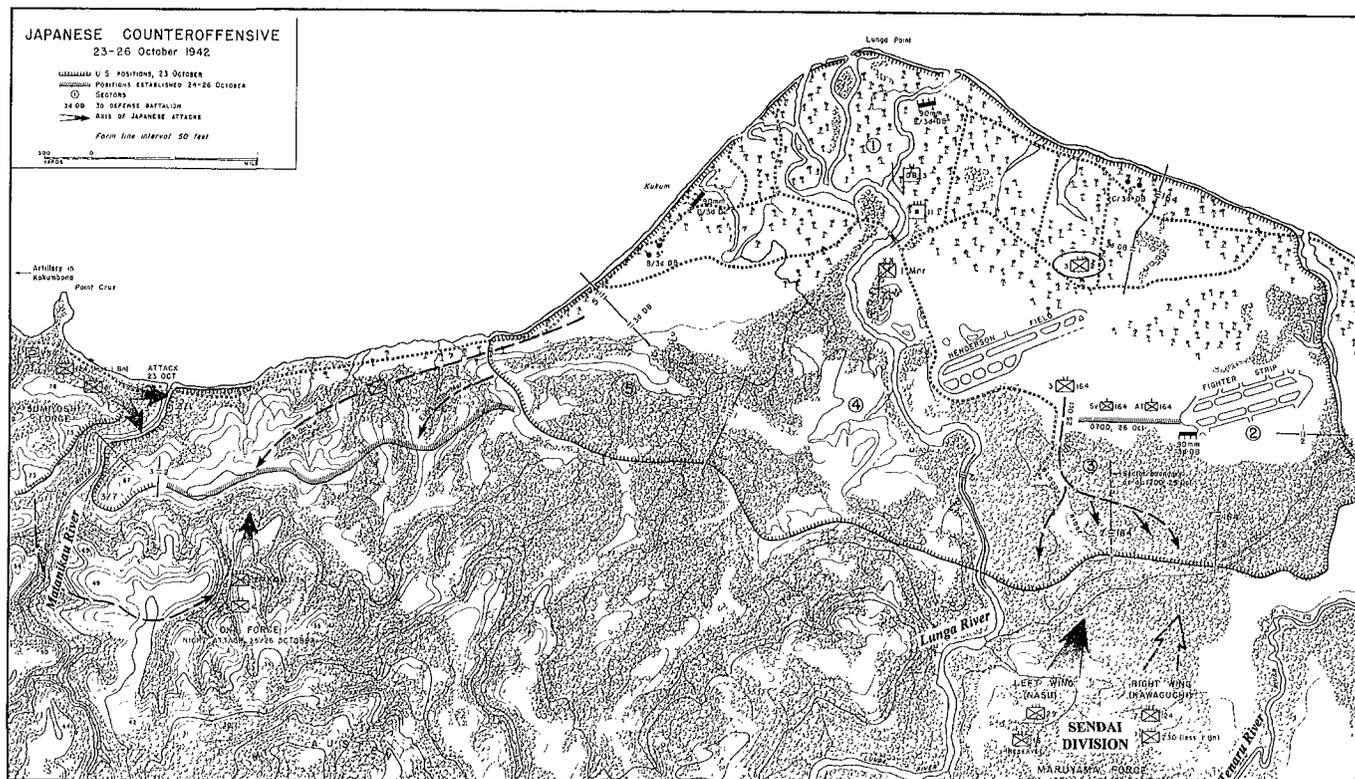
attack supported by two tanks was quickly broken up by Marine artillery and 37mm guns. Three days later, a more serious attack struck the Marines, this time supported by nine tanks and a massive artillery preparation. Once again, the Marine positions held, and the 37s destroyed eight of the tanks, while the ninth one was hit by a halftrack 75mm.

At the division command post, this appeared to be the anticipated main attack for several reasons, one of which was that the Matanikau was the only suitable terrain for an attack. The decision was therefore made on 24 October to pull the 2d Battalion, 7th Regiment, off line where it tied into the 164th Infantry's 2d Battalion, and move it toward the west and to occupy another sector in the perimeter (Map 4). This resulted in a 2,800-yard line, which was filled by Lieutenant Colonel Lewis Puller's 1st Battalion. Meanwhile, stragglers returning through friendly lines were reporting major Japanese forces moving through the jungle toward the Bloody Ridge area, and this created major concern in the command post (CP). Since it was too late to respond, however, the 1st and 2d Battalions in the 164th, along with Marines 1st Battalion, 7th Regiment, remained vigilant and prepared to receive the expected attack.

Stannard wrote:

*American intelligence had failed to develop even a suspicion that a large enemy force was positioned near the southwest portion of the perimeter. Even though Japanese radio messages were intercepted, daily aerial reconnaissance flights were conducted, numerous foot patrols by native scouts, Marine snipers, and Marine and Army squads were out daily, none of these intelligence resources had discovered any sign of the Sendai Division moving to the east, around the perimeter, into attack positions.*

Both General Vandegrift and Brigadier General Roy S. Geiger, who was in temporary command for a time, were convinced that the main Japanese attack would come from the west and not against the south or east sides of the perimeter. The 2d Battalion, 7th Regiment, was moved to the Matanikau salient, and Puller's battalion tied into Company E, 2d Battalion, 164th Infantry.



Map 5. (From *The War in the Pacific: Guadalcanal: The First Offensive*, by John Miller, Center of Military History, 1989.)

Harry Wiens, a soldier in the 164th, recorded the start of the fateful night as follows:

*The evening of the 24th would have started routinely except that it was raining. We placed a shelter half over the entrance trench to our dugout and were sleeping when firing broke out to the southeasterly side of the perimeter. We listened for a while, and then the alert came.* (From *My Own Little Corner of the War: A Look Back After 50 Years to Guadalcanal*, Scotts Valley, California, 1992.)

Wiens further recorded that Lieutenant Colonel Robert Hall, commanding the 3d Battalion (which was in reserve), while getting the battalion on the road, sent two lieutenants (accompanied by Wiens) to the division (CP) for instructions:

*We entered the CP and the lieutenants reported. There was an older, somewhat broad shouldered gray-haired officer in the right side of the tent. The first question he asked was "where are they?" One lieutenant answered, "The troops are just leaving the coconut grove." General Geiger turned and just above a whisper, in what seemed like a low intense prayer, murmured "why don't they hurry?" The General then stopped in front of the lieutenants and most calmly instructed them, pointing to a map, to take the troops onto "that ridge."*

At dusk on the 23d the attack against Marine positions along the Matanikau began with a massive artillery preparation (Map 5). Two Japanese battalions hit the 3d Battalion, 1st Regiment, and 3d Battalion, 7th Regiment, supported by a tank company while three more battalions struck from the south against the 2d Battalion, 7th Regiment, lines. This was the long-expected main attack, thus diverting attention from the eastern positions and achieving exactly the reaction General Hyakutake had counted on. Stannard writes that the de-

cision to move the 2d Battalion, 7th Regiment, off-line because of the expected enemy attack in the west might well have turned out to be the worst and most costly decision the Americans made concerning Guadalcanal. Again, Puller's 1st Battalion now occupied a thin 2,800-yard line that tied into the 2d Battalion, 164th Infantry, line with Company E on the right flank.

On the 24th the Sendai Division—with three infantry battalions in each wing, followed by three more in reserve—slowly made its way through the dense jungle into attack positions. Around 2200 hours, the Japanese struck. The major attack hit the "Corner" where Company E, 2d Battalion, 164th Infantry, defended, and west into the Marines' 1st Battalion lines occupied by Company A. Marine artillery dropped rounds only 40 yards in front of the wire, while the 164th's mortar platoon from Company H fired some 1,600 rounds in front of the Army and Marine infantry companies. As the offensive grew in intensity, even the final protective fires could not halt the furious attack.

Around midnight, breakthroughs were beginning to occur along the thin front lines of the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines. The 3d platoon from the 164th's Company E, 2d Battalion, was attached to the Marine battalion to reinforce the line, soon to be followed by the reserve company. Army and Marine units were intermingled to a large extent, because Army platoons were inserted in the line wherever gaps occurred. Even with six Army platoons mixed in with the Marine units, by 0300 hours the line began to falter before the Sendai Division's brutal attack. The night would soon turn favorable for the American defenders, however, as the 164th Infantry threw the weight of its fresh 3d Battalion into the fight. As these soldiers arrived, Puller and Hall made no attempt to rearrange the lines but led the Army troops into position as

they arrived; they were totally interspersed with Marines.

Colonel Baglien writes that "upon arrival, desperate hand to hand fighting was in progress—and in some cases, hand to hand combat for the possession of foxholes and emplacements." Lieutenant Colonel Frank O. Hough writes:

*...with characteristic resolution, the Japanese struck at the Marines again and again throughout the night. The Bushido spirit was unswerving, but the flesh could not endure the concentrated fire from the combined U.S. infantry battalions, the artillery, and 37mm's from the neighboring 2d Battalion, 164th Infantry. By dawn, [the commander of the 2d Japanese Division] called back his men to regroup for later attacks, and Puller and Hall began to reorganize their intermingled battalions. (From Pearl Harbor to Guadalcanal, Volume 1, History of the U.S. Marine Operations in WW II, Center of Military History, 1989.)*

Once the reorganization was complete, the entire 164th Regiment was on line, with its 3d Battalion tied in with 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, on the southern slopes of Bloody Ridge, supported by four 37mm guns at the juncture, and connected with 2d Battalion on the left flank and tied into 1st Battalion. It was obvious another attack was coming. This time it would be better planned, and the main attack would hit the 164th lines. (Wiens writes that *one excited Marine guide returned to the CP with a firm pronouncement that he was going to get himself an M-1, even if he had to steal it [Many marines had been armed with the 1903 Springfield.] He had been guiding one of our sergeants, with his men following, to a line position, when they met five [Japanese]. The Marine said he'd shot one, and the sergeant, armed with an M-1, dispatched the other four before he could retract his bolt and chamber another round.*)

During the daylight hours on the 25th, hasty preparations were being made all along the 164th line. In the Army's official history, *The War in the Pacific: Guadalcanal: The First Offensive*, John Miller writes that *the 60mm mortars were emplaced behind the lines to put fire directly on the barbed wire; 81mm mortars behind the light mortars to hit the edge of the jungle; and four 37mm guns covered the juncture of the 2d and 3d Battalions.* The regimental reserve was constituted from the service and antitank companies, which moved into positions previously occupied by the 3d Battalion, while the 3d Battalion, 2d Marines, constituted the division reserve.

Adding to the already intense pressure from the previous night, Japanese destroyers sailed into the channel and shelled the airfield and beach area, while enemy aircraft bombed and strafed U.S. positions in seven separate attacks. Even Pistol Pete was active, firing artillery rounds into the Marine and Army sectors from 0800 to 1100. Because of the heavy mud—added to damage caused by enemy fires—planes were unable to take off. By mid-afternoon, however, they took to the air and destroyed 22 Japanese planes.

Shortly after 2000 hours, Japanese artillery began hitting the lines, and as darkness arrived, the major attack hit with full fury. This time, the main effort was straight at the 2d and 3d Battalions of the 164th, with the fight spilling over into the 1st Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment lines. From

midnight until sunrise, the Japanese hit hard with elements of two reinforced regiments, but never made a major penetration, even though hand-to-hand combat was occurring up and down the lines. Company E, 2d Battalion, 164th Infantry, located at the "Corner," took the brunt of the attack by groups of 30 to 200 enemy assaulting the perimeter. Colonel Baglien's account published in the May 1944 *Infantry Journal* ("The Second Battle for Henderson Field," page 23) indicates that the Japanese 29th and 16th Regiments—both experienced and well-seasoned from China, the Philippines, Burma, and Java—spearheaded the strong attack.

Stannard writes that *Japanese tactics were the same as they had been on the previous night. Assaults were made by groups supported by machinegun and mortar fires, and were met by heavy fires from all available American weapons. The [Japanese] could not penetrate or force back the line of the 164th Infantry.*

During the bitter fight, Marine artillery played a critical role and was brought in extremely close to the lines. (One FO telephoned back to the FDC with the message, *Bring the rounds in another ten yards and we'll scratch our names on them as they go by.*) The attack by the Sendai Division at dark on 25 October was the final Japanese offensive action on Guadalcanal. It was much stronger and better planned than the attack the previous night and held within it the promise of victory. But American defensive positions were also stronger and the perimeter much better organized. By morning the bodies of more than 1,700 enemy soldiers were counted in front of the Regiment's positions, probably many more back in the dense jungle.

The performance of this former National Guard regiment was superlative in every respect. Stannard writes:

*The fighting spirit and dedication to duty of both the Americans and the Japanese, who fought at Coffin Corner, were proven on that battlefield. Both sides were brave and disciplined enough to win. The Japanese were determined to win or die. The Americans were determined to win and survive. In the end, superior tactics and firepower gave victory to the Americans.*

General Vandegrift wrote: "The 1st Division is proud to have serving with it another unit which has stood the test of battle and demonstrated an overwhelming superiority over the enemy."

The 164th Infantry Regiment would fight subsequent battles on Guadalcanal as an integral part of offensive actions, and by early February the island would be secured by Major General Alexander Patch's XIV Corps, consisting of the 25th Infantry Division, the 2d Marine Division, and the 164th Regiment's parent Americal Division. Other campaigns would see the 164th committed on Bougainville, Leyte, Cebu, Southeast Negros, and ultimately to Tokyo, where the regiment remained until sent home in November 1945.

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