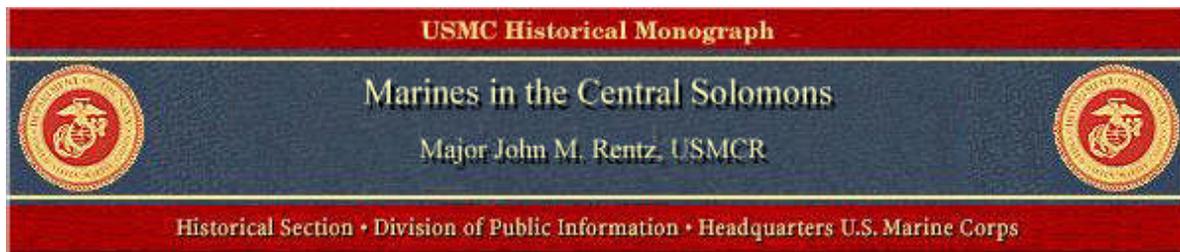


From: Kenneth E. Conklin [noblehouse@islc.net]
Sent: Sunday, January 01, 2006 1:19 PM
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Subject: Emailing: USMC-M-CSol-5



CHAPTER 5

Central Solomons Mop Up

New Georgia Fighting Ends

Munda airfield fell on 5 August. This date, therefore, marked the end of the first phase of Admiral Halsey's TOENAILS operation. But more bitter fighting lay ahead for the air, sea and land forces before phase two was over and the campaign finally concluded.

Because of the heavy pressure and overwhelming strength that the Allies had thrown into New Georgia, General Imamura and Admiral Kusaka, on 27 July, sent a staff officer to Munda with instruction to order Sasaki to withdraw from those positions he had held since the middle of the month. Battered by the mauling he had taken in the Ilangana Peninsula area, Sasaki gladly complied and pulled back to the hills in the vicinity of the airfield. But General Griswold gave the Japanese no respite. On 3 August, therefore, General Sasaki and Admiral Ota agreed to abandon Munda the following afternoon and establish a holding line to the north astride the Bairoko-Munda Trail with the *13th Infantry* and the *Eighth Combined SNLF*. The remnants of the *229th Infantry* would retreat to Baanga Island and prevent American access to Diamond Narrows.

The *230th Infantry* would hold Arundel Island to protect Blackett Strait and cover the southern approaches to Vila on Kolombangara. General Imamura had promised substantial reinforcements, and Admiral Kusaka was already preparing to send them to Sasaki's relief. When these arrived, Sasaki could counterattack and drive the Americans from New Georgia soil.¹ Artillery properly emplaced on Arundel and Baanga meanwhile could prevent effective American utilization of Munda airfield. Accordingly, Colonel Shiroto moved portions of the *10th Mountain Artillery Battalion* and the *15th Field Defense Unit* from New Georgia to the offshore islands. The next day the infantry units completed their moves, while a few suicidal Japanese of the *229th* and *230th Infantry* remained behind to perform a covering mission.

But Griswold had little trouble with these when he made his final move, and the airfield fell without untoward incident.

Upon seizing Munda, Griswold tried to slam the door on the Japanese escape route. Leaving the 43d Division to organize the airfield defenses, he sent the 37th Division pushing along the coast and the 25th Division up the trail toward Bairoko, in the hope that he could ensnare and destroy Sasaki's retreating force. But the enemy was ready.

Covered only by small detachments or individual riflemen, Sasaki withdrew to his main defense line then extending from Bairoko Harbor to Sunday Inlet. This line he determined to hold. From it he would attack.

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Battle of Vella Gulf

General Sasaki's plan to maintain a foothold on New Georgia and there launch a counter-offensive collapsed like a child's card castle during the night of 6-7 August. In accordance with General Imamura's program of reinforcement of the *Southeast Detached Force*, Admiral Kusaka had been shipping men and matériel to Sasaki via Tokyo Express. Ordinarily, despite Allied air and sea interference, these were landed on Kolombangara and deployed as Sasaki saw fit. But Admiral Halsey's sailors and airmen became more and more persistent, until the Japanese "transport program"--as they called it--greatly increased in difficulty.

Just after dark on 6 August, four Japanese destroyers set out from the Shortlands. On board three of the ships 940 soldiers and approximately 700 naval personnel crowded the decks from rail to rail; the fourth destroyer, acting as escort, had only a normal ship's complement on board. Shortly before midnight the convoy turned into Vella Gulf toward Kolombangara to discharge its human cargo. Then disaster struck.²

Just at this time Commander Frederick Moosbrugger's Task Group 31.2 (DD's [*Dunlap*](#), [*Craven*](#), [*Maury*](#), [*Lang*](#), [*Sterett*](#) and [*Stack*](#)) was steaming north in a sweep along the west coast of Kolombangara. Moosbrugger was not there by chance; the day before Admiral Wilkinson had guessed that the enemy would attempt a Tokyo Express run that night.

As the Japanese ships neared their objective, Moosbrugger's radar made contact. The Americans, catching the enemy completely by surprise, fired torpedoes. Within a few minutes the three Japanese transport-destroyers were in flames and sinking. Only one ineffectual torpedo attack plus a bit of ragged gunfire answered Moosbrugger's challenge. The surviving Japanese destroyer turned to run from the scene like a frightened deer. The Americans suffered no loss.

For this, their final attempt to reinforce Sasaki, the Japanese paid dearly, losing 1,520 men in addition to the three destroyers. Henceforth, the *Southeast Detached Force* Commander would have "to make do" with the troops immediately available.³

When news of this defeat reached Sasaki at his command post in New Georgia's dripping jungle, he must have realized that all hope of victory was lost. Shortly after dark the night of 8-9 August he moved to Kolombangara, where he remained until the close of the campaign, leaving further action on New Georgia itself to the supervision of small-unit commanders.

Americans Sweep New Georgia

Unaware of his adversary's move, General Griswold's two columns pushed from the airfield toward Diamond Narrows in an effort to entrap Sasaki's force, opposed mainly by gloomy jungle and oozing mud. Heavy daily rains turned roads and trails into quagmires, impassable to wheeled vehicles. To solve this problem Griswold borrowed tractors (TD-18) and Athey trailers from the 9th Defense Battalion. These vehicles, guarded by Marine riflemen, worked

around the clock to carry vital supplies and ammunition to the front. And sometimes even the tractors bogged down in the sticky mud. Then the most advanced elements had to be supplied by airdrop.⁴

At 1300 on 9 August a patrol of the 1st Battalion, 27th Infantry, then far in advance of the lines up the Munda-Bairoko Trail, met a patrol led by Colonel Liversedge. The Northern and Southern Landing Groups had finally established contact. Meanwhile the 37th Division advanced along the coast, under annoying small-arms and artillery fire from Japanese positions on Baanga and Arundel Islands and several smaller islets offshore. On 10 August, after one amphibious assault was repulsed, the debilitated 43d Division landed on Baanga to take that matter in hand.

Five days later the 27th Infantry (again under the command of Colonel Douglas Sugg), which had swung southward and taken positions in the vicinity of Zieta--(see [Map #16.](#)), ambushed and annihilated 200 Japanese

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XIV CORPS TROOPS SWEEP BAANGA ISLAND after the fall of Munda airfield. Well-camouflaged bunkers near the south end of the island delayed completion of the operation for several days. Here a Marine points to one of the two gun ports of a bunker.

retreating before the advancing 37th Division. On the 11th General Collins' troops joined with the Northern Landing Group, thus pocketing all enemy survivors in the Bairoko area. To the southwest the 37th Division established a main line of resistance some five miles west and northwest of the airfield. Two battalions of the 25th Division, preparing to join the final attack on Bairoko Harbor, outran their tenuous supply lines and had to be supplied by airdrop. By 20 August, the 43d Division, after a 10-day fight in which it had committed four understrength infantry battalions plus a number of supporting troops under General Barker, secured Baanga Island. The surviving Japanese (from the 229th and 230th Regiments) retired to Arundel and Kolombangara.

On the 23d, the 3d Battalion, 148th Infantry, which had been pushing southward from Sunday Inlet, met patrols of the 37th Division on the shores of Hathorn Sound. That night 19 barge loads of General Sasaki's troops (mostly 13th Infantry and Kure 6th SNLF) withdrew from Bairoko Harbor to Kolombangara. The next morning General Collins' men entered the old Japanese encampment. Ground fighting on New Georgia had ceased.⁵

The main body of Sasaki's force was now on Kolombangara, but small detachments still occupied Arundel and Gizo Islands, firing artillery at the American lines. A slightly larger unit held Vella Lavella. In accordance with the *Japanese Imperial Headquarters Navy Staff Directive No. 267*, issued on 13 August, General Sasaki now prepared to hold out as long as possible to permit Admiral Kusaka and General Imamura to strengthen defenses in the Northern Solomons. Then in late September or

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Map 16
Mop Up Operations

early October, he would withdraw his entire force on order from the Central Solomons areas.⁶

Long Toms in the Final Phase

The 9th Defense Battalion's 155mm batteries had supported the XIV Corps drive from the opening of the campaign until 3 August. At this time General Barker suspended firing because of the shortage of ammunition for the M-1 gun, and the possible requirement of heavy expenditures for seacoast defense. Because of the Japanese capability of conducting a counterlanding in the Munda area, Battery B displaced forward on 8 August to Kindu Point on New Georgia with the mission of protecting the western sea approaches to Blanche Channel. Several days later Battery A moved across Rendova Harbor to Tambu Solo Island with a like mission.⁷

Later in the month, after the arrival of adequate stocks of powder and shells, Colonel Scheyer recommended reemployment of the Long Toms as field artillery--this time against Kolombangara--to take advantage of their range and hitting power. Accordingly, Marine officers reconnoitered the shores of New Georgia north and west of the airfield. But a meticulous search found no suitable gun positions. On the advice of a coastwatcher who knew this area thoroughly, a party of 155mm Group officers embarked in small boats, sneaked through Diamond Narrows and landed at a pier at Piru Plantation, about 7,000 yards northwest of Munda Point. Here they were greeted by elements of the 25th Division, gaily attired in remnants of the colorful parachutes used for an airdrop of supplies several days earlier. This area was now secure and the soldiers were amusing themselves by exchanging pot shots with hostile troops still entrenched on Baanga Island. Here, amid swaying palms, the Marines found ideal locations for their guns.

Battery A moved to its new site in two echelons. The first, consisting of a large detail of men with engineer equipment, displaced by boat on 29 August and prepared gun emplacements. The second, which included all remaining personnel and weapons of the battery, embarked in two LCT's and sailed through Diamond Narrows into Hathorn Sound the next day. This echelon unloaded in full view of antagonistic eyes on Kolombangara, some 12,000 yards away. Marine amphibian tractors, following the LCT's, laid underwater cable from the Defense Battalion command post near Munda Point to Piru Plantation, thus insuring adequate telephonic communications throughout the days to come. On 1 September Battery

B accomplished a similar maneuver.

Almost immediately after occupying their new emplacements, Captains Reichner and Wells fired harassing missions across Kula Gulf against Japanese installations. Observers in a tall tree on the beach spotted the initial bursts and signalled corrections for gunners on the ground. Five hostile shells, exploding in uncomfortable proximity to this position, welcomed the Marines aboard. But fortunately the Marines had "read the book." Both batteries were in defilade behind hills and few rounds landed in their positions.

For the men of the 155mm Group, the war soon took on the semblance of a personal fight. Each night the Americans heard the starting sputter and ensuing drone of a Vila-based seaplane that circled overhead to drop a small load of bombs. Several projectiles, fired at irregular intervals by cleverly concealed enemy coast defense guns, usually followed this raid. These nuisance tactics robbed men of sleep but inflicted little damage and no personnel casualties. By day the Japanese had a most annoying habit of shelling the Americans while at mess, resulting in spilled food and ruffled tempers. Whenever boats landed near the Marines' best observation post (the tree near the beach), their opponents would lay in a couple of rounds to make that area untenable.

Naturally a battle of wits ensued. Since the enemy could not hide their gun flashes, the Marines returned the fire to silence the hostile pieces. The foe met this gambit by setting off powder charges at different points every time they discharged their weapons. But coolheaded Americans detected this ruse when they noticed that they were receiving only one shell for every three or four flashes plotted. The

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solution to this problem is best given in the words of one of the observers:⁸

To overcome this unsportsmanlike conduct, we put an aerial observer in a TBM who caught the Japanese in their distardy [sic] trick, accurately located the weapon that was doing the dirty work and promptly put him out of business.

The Marines decided to repay in kind this interference with their chow call. Early each morning artillerymen, fighting-mad over good, hot food spilled from mess gear in a frantic dive for shelter the previous night, lined the beach to watch for evidences of cook fires on Kolombangara. When they perceived smoke curling lazily up through the trees, they dashed back to their guns and shot a salvo or two of super-quick high explosive rounds in an effort to quench the enemy fires with a rain of steel.

Early in this game of give and take, the Marines had to abandon their only effective observation post, now a bull's-eye target of hostile projectiles. Obviously the answer was air spotting. Lieutenant Donald V. Sandager and Staff Sergeant Herschel J. Cooper went aloft as volunteers each day in SBD's or TBF's. At first the planes drew heavy antiaircraft fire, but when the 155mm guns responded with great accuracy, the Japanese soon lost all desire to reveal their locations.⁹

By means of air spot, plus observation from heavily armed Higgins boats cruising off



LOG AND CORAL BUNKERS *studded the coast of Kolombangara. After the Japanese withdrawal from the island in early October, Marine artillerymen landed to study the effects of their fires. This particular bunker had received a direct hit from a 155mm shell.*

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Kolombangara's coast just beyond small-arms range, the Marines detected and reported signs of activity in the vicinity of Vila airfield and along the shores to the north. Aerial photographs and reports of coastwatchers revealed the location of tracks and trails through Kolombangara's jungles. The 155's acted on all data thus obtained. But the Japanese continued to shoot back.

The Marines next hit upon the expedient of coordinating air strikes with Long Tom bombardments. Whenever enemy guns attempted counterbattery work, SBD's and TBF's would dive upon them with screaming bombs and stuttering machine guns. In answer the foe threw up clouds of flak and, at first, succeeded too well in knocking down nine of the attackers. After several such instances, the artillerymen arranged with ComAirSols to lay barrages on all known or suspected antiaircraft emplacements until a few moments before the planes were ready to strike. But the Japanese caught on quickly: Soon the barrages only served to alert them for the coming raid, and as soon as the fires lifted they scuttled back to their antiaircraft weapons.

The Americans countered by firing a preparation intended to warn the enemy that an air strike was coming, lifting it as planes appeared high overhead. Three minutes later, after their opponents had time to man their guns, the 155's again would pour it on, catching the Japanese in their open emplacements. Then, upon completion of this second bombardment, the planes would attack.

After several repeat performances of this tactic, pilots reported antiaircraft fires from Kolombangara as most ineffective.¹⁰

In late September other Allied units joined in the artillery duel when Army 105's and 4.2 mortars moved in and emplaced on Arundel's northern shore. And when a battalion of the 25th Infantry Division walked ashore near Vila in mid-October, wrecked ordnance, smashed emplacements and scattered supplies gave mute evidence of the effectiveness of this combination of shelling and bombing.¹¹

Arundel

On 27 August the 172d Infantry crossed the waters of Hathorn Sound and landed unopposed on Arundel Island to seize the artillery that had been harassing Munda Point. The soldiers quickly established a beachhead and sent out small local patrols in an effort to establish contact with the enemy. But the handful of Japanese on the island refused to offer organized resistance. Instead, they preferred to take pot shots from afar or conduct hit-and-run raids on

command posts and lines of communication after dark.

General Sasaki on Kolombangara reacted promptly to this new thrust. Early in September, before the 172d had an opportunity to sweep Arundel from tip to tip, he sent his *13th Infantry* to contain the American advance. He charged this regiment with delaying the 172d long enough to permit the remainder of the *Southeast Detached Force* and the *Eighth Combined Special Naval Landing Force* then on Kolombangara to withdraw from the Central Solomons.

The *13th* acquitted itself with distinction. Although committed piecemeal to the fighting front, the regiment struck the 172d time and time again. The Americans, who had hoped to clear Arundel of Japanese in only a few days, were forced to send in reinforcements. Even with these, the soldiers found it difficult to withstand a particularly vicious counterattack early in the morning of 15 September. The drive had come to a standstill.

That afternoon General Griswold directed Colonel Douglas Sugg, USA, to take the 27th Infantry and the Marine tanks to Arundel, assume command of all American units there, and push the foe off the island. Accordingly, Sugg began to send a fresh battalion to the Arundel front. During the night of 16-17 September, under cover of a lashing rain that muffled all noise other than its own, Sugg moved the tanks into an assembly area just behind the 27th's lines. At first light the next morning, five machines of the 11th Defense Battalion, with excellent close support by Company C, 27th Infantry, attacked a hostile strong point that had held up the soldiers the preceding day. As the foot troops laid down a

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LANDING CRAFT CARRIED THE 2D BATTALION, 172D INFANTRY, *to this jungle-covered beachhead on Arundel. Although the soldiers met no opposition initially, fanatic enemy defenders soon engaged the invaders and fought on for nearly a month. (Army Photo.)*

heavy volume of small-arms fire, the tanks advanced in two waves, took the enemy completely by surprise, penetrated the position, and then proceeded to mop up. At first the accompanying infantry could not advance because of vicious counterfire, but the Japanese, thrown off balance by the initial assault, could not recover in time to counterattack, so there were no tank losses. That day the front lines on Arundel advanced some 500 yards.¹²

On 18 September Colonel Sugg tried a repeat performance, this time with four tanks. With unbridled confidence motivated by the success achieved the day before, the Americans attacked with their armor echeloned to the right rear, although such a formation prevented mutual support between vehicles and foot troops. To the Americans' astonishment, the foe during the course of the night had cleverly positioned two 37mm antitank guns in the midst of the extremely thick forest, which denied adequate observation and made maneuver difficult. Caught by surprise when the Japanese opened fire with weapons of greater range than those carried in the machines, the Marines lost two tanks before they had advanced 50

yards.

Here the absolute necessity of close infantry support for armor in jungle operations was amply demonstrated. Accompanying soldiers placed a veritable blanket of BAR and rifle fire on the Japanese positions, thus enabling the Marines to escape from their crippled vehicles.

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Map 17
Mop Up Operations

Born as a result of this action was a high degree of comradeship and mutual confidence between the tankmen and their friends of the 27th Infantry.¹³

The following morning eleven tanks with infantry support resumed the attack. Advancing in two waves, the second covering the first, the armor pushed forward rapidly toward Arundel's northern tip. Alert soldiers, giving close protection to each vehicle, immediately shot down any enemy attempting to approach the machines with magnetic mines. Accurate long-range rifle fire discouraged Japanese antitank gunners from manning their weapons, and this coordinated attack achieved complete success.¹⁴

During the night of 20-21 September, General Sasaki withdrew his last survivors from Arundel, Gizo, and the surrounding islands. The next day at 1445 General Griswold announced the cessation of organized resistance. Only the task of mopping up a few Japanese stragglers--the inevitable few who never get the word--remained. Griswold had now freed Munda airfield from the threat of enemy artillery. The Japanese could attack that hard-won piece of real estate only from the air.

About 345 Japanese died in the bitter defense



ENGINEER ASSAULT BOATS moved 27th Infantry troops from beachhead to beachhead on Arundel. Here one group rides through Bomboe Lagoon to establish a new supply base behind the front lines. Colonel Douglas Sugg, the regimental commander, is second from the

left. (Navy Photo.)

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Map 18
Vella Lavella Landings

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of Arundel; an estimated 500 were wounded. But Sasaki had successfully executed the mission assigned him by the *Imperial Headquarters* Navy Staff Directive No. 267: Hold out in the Central Solomons as long as possible, thus enabling General Imamura and Admiral Kusaka to strengthen their strategic line to the rear. He could now withdraw from the Central Solomons, having saved the bulk of his force for future commitment.

Fortunately, the American victory was far from Pyrrhic. It had cost only 44 dead and 256 wounded, and it had placed Admiral Halsey's foot firmly on another rung of the Solomons ladder.¹⁵

Vella Lavella: Halsey's By-Pass¹⁶

As early as 11 July, Admiral Nimitz suggested that heavily defended Kolombangara be bypassed in favor of seizing lightly held Vella Lavella, a densely wooded, volcanic island some 14 miles to the northwest. Such an operation would serve two purposes: First, it would establish an additional base for future operations against the Japanese in the Northern Solomons; second, occupation of Vella Lavella would place the Allies squarely astride the enemy line of supply. This would compel the Japanese on Kolombangara either to withdraw or, like overripe fruit, fall of their own weight.¹⁷

During the night of 21-22 July, a 6-man patrol of Army, Navy and Marine officers landed near Barakoma at Vella Lavella's southeast tip to obtain specific information concerning hydrographic and beach conditions, possible airfield sites and dispersal areas, and the exact location of any hostile defenses. Despite the presence of some 300 Japanese, the patrol contacted the local coastwatcher, Henry Josselyn, and for the following week scouted the island thoroughly. On 31 July the patrol, having returned to Guadalcanal without incident, submitted its report to Admiral Wilkinson, stating that a landing in the vicinity of Barakoma was entirely feasible.¹⁸

When this information reached Admiral Halsey on 7 August, he directed Brigadier General

Robert B. McClure, the 25th Division's Assistant Commander, to take command of a 6,505-man unit called the Northern Landing Force, and attack Vella Lavella on 15 August. A part of McClure's command was the 4th Defense Battalion, FMF (Colonel Harold S. Fassett), responsible for the installation and operation of anti-aircraft and seacoast defenses, and for organization and occupation of a sector of the beach defenses. Other elements of the Northern Landing Force included the U.S. Army's 35th Regimental Combat Team,¹⁹ the 58th Naval Construction Battalion, the 25th Cavalry Reconnaissance Troop, plus additional Army and Navy detachments.

McClure began embarkation of his command in ships of Task Force 31 at Guadalcanal during the morning of 12 August. That night a 25-man Army-Marine advance party from units at Rendova went ashore at Barakoma to mark channels and beaches for use by landing craft on D-Day. On 14 August this party was reinforced by an Army infantry company because of the presence of large numbers of Japanese survivors of the Battle of Vella Gulf, who roamed the island armed with grenades, small arms and clubs.²⁰

A brilliant moon lighted the cloudless sky the night of 14-15 August as the convoy sailed up the Slot toward Vella Lavella. Nothing ruffled the calm sea. Although enemy planes attacked positions on Guadalcanal, the Russells and New Georgia that night, the American ships apparently were not sighted. Shortly after 0600 the following morning as the convoy

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LANDING FORCE COMMANDER during the amphibious phases of the Vella Lavella operation, Robert B. McClure, was promoted to Major General shortly after his relief by Colonel E. E. Brown. (Army Photo.)

hove to off Barakoma, planes from the Munda airfield (VMF-124 and VMF-123) appeared overhead. Debarkation commenced immediately.

Generally, unloading and initial beachhead establishment proceeded according to plan. Major difficulties arose because the three beaches selected could accommodate only eight instead of twelve LCI's as expected. Moreover, preoperation patrol reports and photo reconnaissance had failed to reveal a submerged coral reef some 30 yards offshore from the beach where the 2d Battalion, 35th Infantry was to execute the initial landing. Consequently LCI's bearing this unit grounded with deep water between them and the shore. The 35th's commander, Colonel Everett E. Brown, therefore directed the 1st Battalion (with which he was boated) to continue directly in to its beach and make the initial landing, disregarding the attack order that provided for the 1st to land on the right of the 2d, and some five minutes later. Eventually the 2d Battalion's crews managed to free their craft, back off the reef, and after changing direction to the north come in on the 1st Battalion's beach. The resultant

congestion caused confusion in getting the assault battalions and their equipment properly disposed ashore. This situation, coupled with an improperly transmitted visual message from the beach party, delayed completion of LCI unloading until 0900.²¹

Three LST's beached shortly after the LCI's had retracted, but once again the unloading was delayed when it was found that these large landing craft had grounded in relatively deep water. While irretrievable minutes ticked off, a Seabee lieutenant with a bulldozer scraped up coral ramps from shore to bow doors, after which service troops augmented by all available combatant personnel raced to get rations, ammunition and equipment from the ships to dispersal areas inland. When the LST's finally departed about 1800, they still had on board a small amount of 4th Defense Battalion gear.²²

Enemy retaliation on D-Day was limited to repeated dive bombing and strafing attacks, causing some matériel damage. The first occurred at 0759, with the Japanese using six bombers and eleven fighters. Some two hours later, approximately 14 enemy planes slipped through the American combat air patrol. Shortly after noon 11 bombers and 48 fighters struck the beachhead and the LCIs, then retiring from the area. At 1730, just before the LST's were ready to retract, eight bombers and 45 fighters made an attack on the ships. Throughout the day the Japanese lost 17 planes, the Americans 12 killed (3 Marines) and 40 wounded (12 Marines).²³

By nightfall General McClure had ashore 4,600 troops and 2,300 tons of supplies of all classes, sufficient to maintain the force for 15 days. Three units of fire had been landed for all weapons except the Marine 90mm antiaircraft guns, which had one Marine Corps unit (300 rounds per gun). The soldiers had set up a strong perimeter defense behind which

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NUMEROUS AIR RAIDS opposed the Allied landing on Vella Lavella on 15 August. Ships of the destroyer screen watched helplessly as enemy bombs dropped dangerously close to landing craft on the beach. Fortunately, these raids resulted in little matériel damage and few casualties. (Navy Photo.)

the 4th Defense Battalion, with the assistance of the Seabees, had rapidly emplaced sixteen .50-calibre and sixteen .30-calibre machine guns, eight 20mm, eight 40mm and four 90mm guns for antiaircraft and beach protection. The 58th Seabees, although in their first combat operation, had already begun work clearing the jungle in preparation for construction of an airstrip. McClure was ready--come what may.²⁴

That night, at a conference in Rabaul, Admiral Kusaka proposed that General Imamura send a battalion to Barakoma to effect a counterlanding. Imamura, a realist, demurred; commitment of only one battalion against McClure's 4,600 men would be "like pouring water on a hot stone." Moreover, only two days previously *Imperial Headquarters* had directed that Japanese forces in the Central Solomons should fall back slowly, reduce Allied

strength as much as possible, and finally defend Rabaul to the last. Thus, General McClure faced no serious opposition during his seizure and defense of the beachhead,²⁵ although convoys bringing in additional troops or supplies underwent air attack.

By 1 September, just two days before the amphibious phase of the operation ended, the 4th Defense Battalion's 90mm antiaircraft guns were credited with destroying 20 enemy planes since D-Day. The Battalion's Special

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Weapons Group claimed 11 more in the same period. The Marines also had installed two 155mm gun batteries, thus assuring defense against surface attack.²⁶

In the first 15 days of September Japanese aircraft made 42 separate raids--mostly after dark--on the beachhead, thus giving the Marines plenty of activity. The teamwork evinced by the searchlight battery, with the Special Weapons Group and the 90mm batteries, resulted in the positive destruction at night alone of three of the intruders, while the Marines suffered only 16 men wounded plus some slight damage to searchlights, radars, guns and vehicles.²⁷

On 18 September the 3d New Zealand Division (Major General H. E. Barrowclough) landed at Barakoma to relieve the 35th Infantry, and on the 21st began a two-pronged drive designed to force the enemy into a pocket on the extreme northwest peninsula of the island. But unexpectedly stubborn resistance slowed the New Zealanders' progress to 200 or 600 yards per day. Not until the night of 5-6 October was the pocketing actually accomplished. The fire of mortars, machine guns and two field batteries registered in the enemy area.

By this time the Japanese, having evacuated Kolombangara, had no further reason to maintain an outpost on Vella Lavella. At midafternoon of the 6th, therefore, a convoy of nine destroyers, five subchasers and three MTB's sailed from the Northern Solomons to pick up the survivors there. Just before midnight this force contacted an American 3-destroyer group under Captain F. B. Walker. In the ensuing naval battle the Japanese lost the *Yugumo*



CLOUDS OBSCURED VELLA LAVELLA'S PEAKS as succeeding echelons brought in men and supplies. On 30 August the 1st Battalion, 145th Infantry, landed under severe air attack, and joined the 35th Regimental Combat Team, with which it served until the end of the campaign. (Navy Photo.)

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30 NEW ZEALAND DIVISION TROOPS *pour ashore on Vella Lavella to relieve the 35th Regimental Combat Team and the 1st Battalion, 145th Infantry. (Army Photo.)*

while the Americans lost the [Chevalier](#). However, the Japanese succeeded in accomplishing their evacuation mission.

Meanwhile, the 58th NCB had completed its assignment. On 27 September ComAirSols planes landed on the new field at Barakoma to begin operations from that base. Fighters could now protect bombers nearly all the way to Rabaul; bomber crews would give grateful praise to the ground forces for making this protection possible.²⁸

After the enemy withdrawal from Vella Lavella, air raids were infrequent and ineffectual. But before this, the Japanese had been over the 4th Defense Battalion positions some 121 times with an undetermined number of planes. The relatively little damage wrought attests to the effectiveness of the Marines' shooting. The 90mm Group claimed 20 kills, while the Special Weapons Group was credited with 19; another three fell victim to the .50-calibres of the Seacoast Artillery Group.

Speaking of the work of the 4th Defense Battalion, General McClure said:

This operation was my first experience with the Marine defense battalions, a very superior organization indeed, with AA, tank AWs and 155 guns. Col Fassett and his command did a superior job. AA Guns were ready in an incredibly brief time and shot down many Jap planes. . . . The two 155mm gun batteries gave essential security to our small and congested beachhead.

That McClure believed that the Vella Lavella operation could have been much shortened and the defenders wiped out is evident, when he says: "Had sufficient landing craft been available



GENERAL BARROWCLOUGH AND COLONEL BROWN *conferring just before the New Zealanders relieved Brown's troops on Vella Lavella. (Army Photo.)*

I could have cut off Jap Forces on Vella with small local amphibious operations." But this is in the realm of speculation. Sufficient landing craft were not available. And the Northern Landing Force had successfully accomplished its mission nonetheless.²⁹

A Base of Operations³⁰

Even before fighting ceased on Vella Lavella, Admiral Halsey decided to establish a forward Marine Staging Base there. On 17 September he ordered the commanding general, I Marine Amphibious Corps (Major General Charles D. Barrett) to take the necessary action. Accordingly Barrett formed a task force (Forward Echelon, Corps Troops) of 27 officers and 850 men under the command of Major Donald M. Schmuck from the following units:³¹

Elements, 77th Naval Construction Battalion
2d Platoon, Btry A, 3d Special Weapons Battalion
Company A, I Corps Motor Transport Battalion
Companies A and B, Branch 3, 4th Base Depot
Communications Team, III Amphibious Force
Specially detailed officers and troops (from the 3d Mar Div).

Schmuck organized his command, gave it some elementary training and issued orders for the forthcoming operation on 23 September. For the landing, he divided his force into two assault units plus one support unit. One assault unit, embarked in two APD's, would land at H-Hour of D-Day on east coast beaches near Ruravai; the other, embarked in one APD, would land near the mouth of the Juno River. (See [Map #18](#).) At H-plus 1 hour an LST would beach at each landing point to bring in additional troops, supplies, heavy equipment and rolling stock.

The order directed further that the assault troops would provide immediate beachhead security from land or air attack while Seabees unloaded the LST's and cleared roads and dispersal areas inland. The communicators would immediately establish contact via radio with the base at Barakoma and set up a local air-warning system. All individuals were directed to dig foxholes or slit trenches at the first opportunity. The order indicated that ComAirSols would provide a continuous combat air patrol over the twin beachheads, while destroyers would protect the landing to seaward. After the two landings were completed, all personnel and equipment at the Juno would move northward to Ruravai, where the projected

IMAC base would be constructed.

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H-Hour was set at 0700; D-Day would be 25 September.³²

Escorted by six destroyers, the small convoy sailed from Guadalcanal at noon, 23 September, and conducted a practice landing at Tetera Beach. That night it pushed northward without incident.

Early in the morning of 25 September Schmuck received information that led to some necessary last-minute changes in his plan. Reports of reconnaissance patrols operating out of General McClure's beachhead on Vella Lavella disclosed that the target beaches at Ruravai were unsuitable for Higgins boats. All troops and equipment embarked in the APD's, therefore, would have to land at the Juno River mouth. The LST's, however, could beach without difficulty. At H-minus 1 hour, then, Schmuck made the required change. Fortunately, this word was passed in ample time and so no serious consequences resulted.

As channels and beaches in northern Vella Lavella were unmarked, the ships found the designated landing points only with great difficulty. But despite this obstacle the troops began landing at 0700 as scheduled.

By 0720 all assault troops were ashore and the APD's were unloaded. At this time, Schmuck turned over command of the Juno area to his executive, Captain R. E. Patterson, then, at the head of one company, set out along the coast for Ruravai to secure it for the LST scheduled to land there. He arrived just before



4TH DEFENSE BATTALION 155MM GUN, *emplaced near Barakoma, is prepared to give General McClure's Northern Landing Force seacoast protection. The Marines' eight Long Toms never had a chance to fire at a live target, but were ready to do so if necessary. (Air Force Photo.)*

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90MM ANTI-AIRCRAFT GUNS *such as this played a vital role in the Central Solomons campaign. After these guns were installed, troops on the ground enjoyed a sense of security against high-flying enemy planes, particularly at night or at times when foul weather grounded friendly aircraft.*

the vessel beached, and all operations continued, as planned. By 1115 most of the vehicles were ashore, antiaircraft and truck-mounted guns in position and manned, and unloading and dispersal of bulk cargo was well under way. The destroyer screen, hull down on the horizon, bobbed up and down in the gentle swell.

Suddenly aircraft spotters at points of vantage near Ruravai, shouted a warning. Fifteen enemy dive bombers, covered by 20 ZEKES, were attacking the destroyer screen. All hands immediately manned guns and stood by to watch the show. And then the Japanese planes winged over to head directly out of the sun for the beaches.

Gun crews opened with heavy fire. Soon one dive bomber burst into flame and plunged into the sea. But the other planes continued to bore in and dropped 500-pound bombs on the beach and on LST 167 at Ruravai. Two other dive bombers crashed into the jungle, while a fourth, trailing smoke, wheeled out of sight. Now every man was firing a weapon or assisting with crew-served guns. One bomb destroyed a 40mm gun; another wiped out the crew of a second. Without delay the Marines formed a composite crew and put the second gun back into action.

By this time the ZEKES were sweeping in low to strafe the beaches or the now burning LST. Despite flaming oil, exploding ammunition and the strafing, the Marines continued to fight with every weapon until the last plane disappeared. At this moment the combat air patrol arrived to engage the enemy in a running fight which cleared the skies.

Schmuck's force suffered heavy damage and casualties at Ruravai. Exploding ammunition made evacuation and salvage difficult. Lack of roads plus the narrowness of the beach forced trucks carrying wounded to pass directly in front of the flaming ship. Nevertheless, an aid station was soon set up and a deep trench dug to shelter the wounded in the event the Japanese should attack again.

Small boats began to transport the 58 wounded southward along the shore to a New Zealand field hospital. Later that night the 32 dead were taken to the cemetery at Barakoma. That casualties were not greater on the crowded beaches attests to Schmuck's foresight in insisting that foxholes be dug as soon as the troops reached shore. As he developed his beachheads, he had directed wide dispersion of troops and supplies. The attack of some 35 planes against less than 900 troops therefore achieved much less success than the enemy might have hoped.³³

After this raid Schmuck made a quick survey of the damage and directed that work proceed as before. The Seabees went ahead with road and LST landing-point construction. Marine guards rode the heavy equipment to protect the operators because of the presence of Japanese stragglers in the area. Patrols moved out to keep the enemy at a distance from the beachhead, one of these capturing three prisoners without any difficulty.

As hostile planes attacked his position each day, and as he never received adequate warning of these attacks, Schmuck requested additional antiaircraft support. Accordingly at 0700, 28 September, LCT's bearing Battery A, 70th Coast Artillery (90mm AA), arrived at the Juno beaches and reported to Schmuck for duty. To make use of this unit's radar and in order that the soldiers could give heavy antiaircraft protection to both his beachheads, the major moved the newly arrived battery to Narowai Plantation, midway between Ruravai and Juno. The battery went into position and began operations the next morning.

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At 0930 on 1 October, as LST's disgorged additional troops and supplies (including Lieutenant Colonel Victor H. Krulak's 2d Parachute Battalion, FMF), a large formation of enemy fighters and dive bombers again raided the American beaches. This time the Narowai beach area suffered heavily. Here two 500-pound bombs hit the LST 448 and set it afire. Others, dropping in dispersal areas and on defenses, caused many casualties among gun crews and working parties. Although the burning ship made the beach useless, and wounded men, wreckage and bursting bombs caused confusion, the well-led soldiers succeeded in shooting down one plane.

At 1000 the Japanese tried again. This time one bomb hit LST 334, still on the beach at Ruravai, causing light damage. At 1435 they struck a third time, now with 60 planes. But the combat air patrol was on station and only a few dive bombers penetrated the screen to lay another egg on the still burning LST 448. Finally at 1900 the fourth and last attack of the day destroyed five heavy trucks and three jeeps.

Following the destruction of LST 448 at Ruravai, Admiral Wilkinson directed Colonel Fassett to confer with III Amphibious Force Marine and Navy liaison officers to determine ways and means of avoiding further such losses. The officers made a thorough investigation and finally agreed that all resupply ships for Vella Lavella should unload at Barakoma under the protection of the 4th Defense Battalions' antiaircraft guns. That matériel destined for delivery to Schmuck, who obviously had insufficient weapons to protect nearly immobile ships on the beach, could be carried northward by truck. Accordingly, the officers so recommended and Admiral Wilkinson promptly approved.

To cover the unloading of future resupply convoys, Fassett decided to employ every antiaircraft weapon available to him, including all his spares and eight 40mm guns borrowed from the New Zealanders. Corpsmen, cooks, communicators and clerks turned to, building emplacements, setting up guns, establishing communications, happily getting ready to meet a continuing air assault on Barakoma. They expected to have fun when it came, but they were doomed to disappointment.

Although the Japanese resumed their attacks on Ruravai, striking on the 3d and again on the 6th of October, they assiduously avoided Barakoma, evidently remembering the hot receptions they had received there in September. Thenceforward, LST's landed and unloaded cargo at Barakoma without mishap, while at Ruravai wide dispersal, heavy antiaircraft fire from the Army battery, and an effective combat air patrol kept damage and casualties from hostile air attacks at a minimum.³⁴

By 8 October the Corps Staging Area could be considered secure. On that date, therefore, Schmuck's command was dissolved and his troops either returned to their parent organization or incorporated into the permanent organization designed to operate the base. During its two weeks in the area, the force had lost 149 men in dead, wounded or missing. Half of these had occurred on the first day, before the 90mm guns were installed and when the combat air patrol had not been on station.

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Footnotes

- [1.](#) *Southeast Area Naval Operations*, II, 36-37. At this point Adm Ota disappears from the record.
- [2.](#) *Ibid.*, 43-44.
- [3.](#) *Combat Narratives*, XI, 2-11; Karig, *op. cit.*, 230-233. By far the most complete and readable account of this action is found in Morison, *Bismarcks*, 212-220.
- [4.](#) Hiatt 28Mar52 ltr.
- [5.](#) Col E. A. Craig, report of observation of operations on New Georgia, 18-23 August, 28Aug43; Col E. O. Ames, notes on visit to Munda area, 18-23 August, undated but written about 24Aug43; Morison, *Bismarcks*, 222-223.
- [6.](#) *Southeast Area Naval Operations*, II, 45, 47.
- [7.](#) Reichner 17Mar52 ltr; O'Neil interview; 9thDefBn, Informal Combat Report.
- [8.](#) Hiatt 28Mar52 ltr.
- [9.](#) Capt Donald V. Sandager ltr to CMC, c. 23Feb51; Reichner 17Mar52 ltr.
- [10.](#) Hiatt 28Mar52 ltr.
- [11.](#) *Southeast Area Naval Operations*, II, 49.
- [12.](#) Col Douglas Sugg ltr to CMC, 12Mar52; Col Benjamin F. Evans, Jr. ltr to CMC, 19Mar52.
- [13.](#) Sugg ltr; Evans ltr; Blake ltr; LtCol Joseph E. Ryneska ltr to CMC, 20Mar52.
- [14.](#) 43dInfDiv, G-3, Report of Tank Employment in Arundel Operation, 23Sep43; Blake ltr.
- [15.](#) Morison, *Bismarcks*, 223-224; *Southeast Area Naval Operations*, II, 46 *et seq*; *Combat Narratives*, XI, 39-40.
- [16.](#) Many officers and men who participated in this operation believe it was the first application of the bypass tactic on a large scale in World War II. For this honor, however, due credit must be given to the Northern Pacific operations in the Aleutians. (LtCol Carl M. Johnson ltr to CMC, 21Mar52; *Combat Narratives*, XI, 60.)
- [17.](#) *Combat Narratives*, XI, 60; Morison, *Bismarcks*, 227.
- [18.](#) Feldt, *op. cit.*, 156; TF-31, AR, 20Sep43, 1.

[19.](#) Formed from the 35th Infantry, the 64th Field Artillery Battalion, Company C of the 65th Engineer Battalion, Collecting Company B of the 25th Medical Battalion, and other 25th Division service units.

[20.](#) NLF, FO #1, 11Aug43; CTF-31 OpnOrder A12-43, 11Aug43; III AmphFor, AR, 20Sep43; MajGen Robert B. McClure ltr to CMC, 13Mar52.

[21.](#) III AmphFor, AR, 4-5; BrigGen E. E. Brown ltr to CMC, 15Mar52; LtCol Howard H. Benge ltr to CMC, Mar52.

[22.](#) Benge ltr; 4thDefBn, Operations, 1-2.

[23.](#) *Southeast Area Naval Operations*, II, 47-48; Brown ltr; Benge ltr. Five of the enemy planes were claimed by Special Weapons Group guns mounted on the decks of the LST's. (LtCol C. T. Hodges ltr to CMC 21Mar42).

[24.](#) III AmphFor, AR, 6; 4thDefBn, AR, 2-3; McClure ltr; LtCol D. E. Munson ltr to CMC, 11Mar52; Col M. I. Shuford ltr to CMC, 4Mar52.

[25.](#) *Southeast Area Naval Operations*, II, 48.

[26.](#) III AmphFor, AR, 12; 4thDefBn, AR, 1-4; 4thDefBn ltr of 18Sep43, 1.

[27.](#) Benge ltr.

[28.](#) *Combat Narratives*, XI, 47-57; 4thDefBn, AR; Karig, *op. cit.*, 240-243; Morison, *Bismarcks*, 243-252; *Southeast Area Naval Operations*, II, 54-56.

[29.](#) McClure ltr; Shuford ltr; Benge ltr; 4thDefBn, Operations, 2-3.

[30.](#) Unless otherwise cited information for this section was derived from "Report of CO, Corps Troops and Staging Area . . . 17Sep43-8Oct43," 30Jan44.

[31.](#) CG, IMAC ltr to Maj Schmuck, 17Sep43.

[32.](#) IMAC Warning Order 18-43, 22Sep43.

[33.](#) Casualty statistics furnished by HQMC Statistical Section, 14Apr50.

[34.](#) Shuford ltr.

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