

AFTER THE BATTLE

THE BATTLE FOR NEW GEORGIA
CAPTURE OF KURT MEYER
SIWA OASIS



Number 98

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 European Editor: Karel Margry
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IT HAPPENED HERE

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Front Cover: M3 Stuart light tank of the 11th Marine Defense Battalion on Arundel Island knocked out by Japanese 37mm guns on September 18, 1943. Photographed by Professor Ronnie Day in 1995.

Centre Pages: Where ten people crashed to their deaths in 1944. A splash of red in a spectacular landscape covers the plaque erected high in the mountains of south-eastern France to the occupants of Avro York MW126. (Jean Paul Pallud)

Back Cover: The Egyptian Sand Sea — beautiful yet treacherous — had to be crossed on David List's journey to Siwa Oasis. *Inset:* Wartime Shell petrol tin filled with sand still in use as a way marker. (David List)

Acknowledgements: Jean Paul Pallud is indebted to Louis Warolus and Jean Louis Roba, who gave him much valuable help in his research into the capture of Kurt Meyer, and to Peter Taghon.

Photo Credits: IWM — Imperial War Museum, London.

Our author, Professor Ronnie Day, is the chair of the history department at the East Tennessee State University and has studied all the published works on the war in the South Pacific. For a number of years, he has worked on editing the diary of Mack Morriss, the wartime correspondent for *Yank, The Army Weekly*. 'The moment I saw the diary,' says Ronnie, 'I knew it was a very key piece of World War history, and I visited the South Pacific three times, travelling 65,000 miles in Morriss's footsteps, partially funded by a grant from the Research Development Committee of the University.' This account of the Battle for New Georgia came about as a result. *South Pacific Diary* by Mack Morriss, edited by Ronnie Day, is published by the University Press of Kentucky. The picture shows Professor Ronnie with Morriss's widow, Helen.



The New Georgia group lies approximately in the middle of the Solomon Island chain. Eleven moderately-sized islands and numerous islets make up the group that extends over a north-west south-east axis for a distance of about 130 miles. The islands are volcanic in origin and symmetrical cones rising to several thousand feet and covered with dense tropical forest dominate the interiors of the bigger islands. Barrier reefs studded with islands have created large lagoons that protect much of the coasts, especially those of the largest island of New Georgia. Situated 500 miles south of the Equator, rainfall is heavy and in 1941, the last year the District Officer at Gizo was able to make his report, totalled 133 inches. The battle for New Georgia lasted from July to October 1943. The Allied objective was the Japanese airfield at Munda Point on New Georgia proper (in this regard, New Georgia [2] was the second rung up the Solomons ladder to Rabaul, Guadalcanal [1] being the first and Bougainville [3] the third). The usual air and naval preparation began in January 1943 while the battle for Guadalcanal was still in progress. Because of enemy pressure on the coast-watcher on New Georgia, Marine Raiders seized Segi and Viru Harbor in the eastern parts in mid-June. (American coast-watchers were active on many of the Japanese-occupied islands in the Pacific, equipped with radios, to maintain covert intelligence gathering on enemy movements and shipping.) Then, on June 30, the main ground force was committed, landing at Rendova because Munda Bar (reef) prevented any direct assault on the airfield from the sea.



THE BATTLE FOR NEW GEORGIA

By Professor Ronnie Day

On the eve of the war, the New Georgia group of the Solomon Islands was sparsely inhabited by dark-skinned Melanesian people who lived in small villages along the coasts, primarily in the great lagoons. Widespread head-hunting and murderous retaliatory raids (both finally suppressed by the British Protectorate Government in the early 20th century) along with two severe dysentery epidemics had resulted in depopulation. Government officials estimated that the total numbers had declined from roughly 15,000 before 1914 to less than 8,000 by 1941. The foreign population was never large and probably numbered less than 100 in 1941. The administrative seat was at Gizo where the District Officer, responsible to the Resident Commissioner at Tulagi, collected customs duties and maintained order with an Armed Constabulary of eight men from Malaita and Choiseul and a wooden jail enclosed by barbed wire. The rest of the foreign population was made up of merchants (mainly at Gizo and Simbo); Methodist and Seventh Day Adventist missionaries (the former at Munda and the latter at Batuna) and a scattering of coconut planters on Vella Lavella, Kolombangara, New Georgia and Rendova.

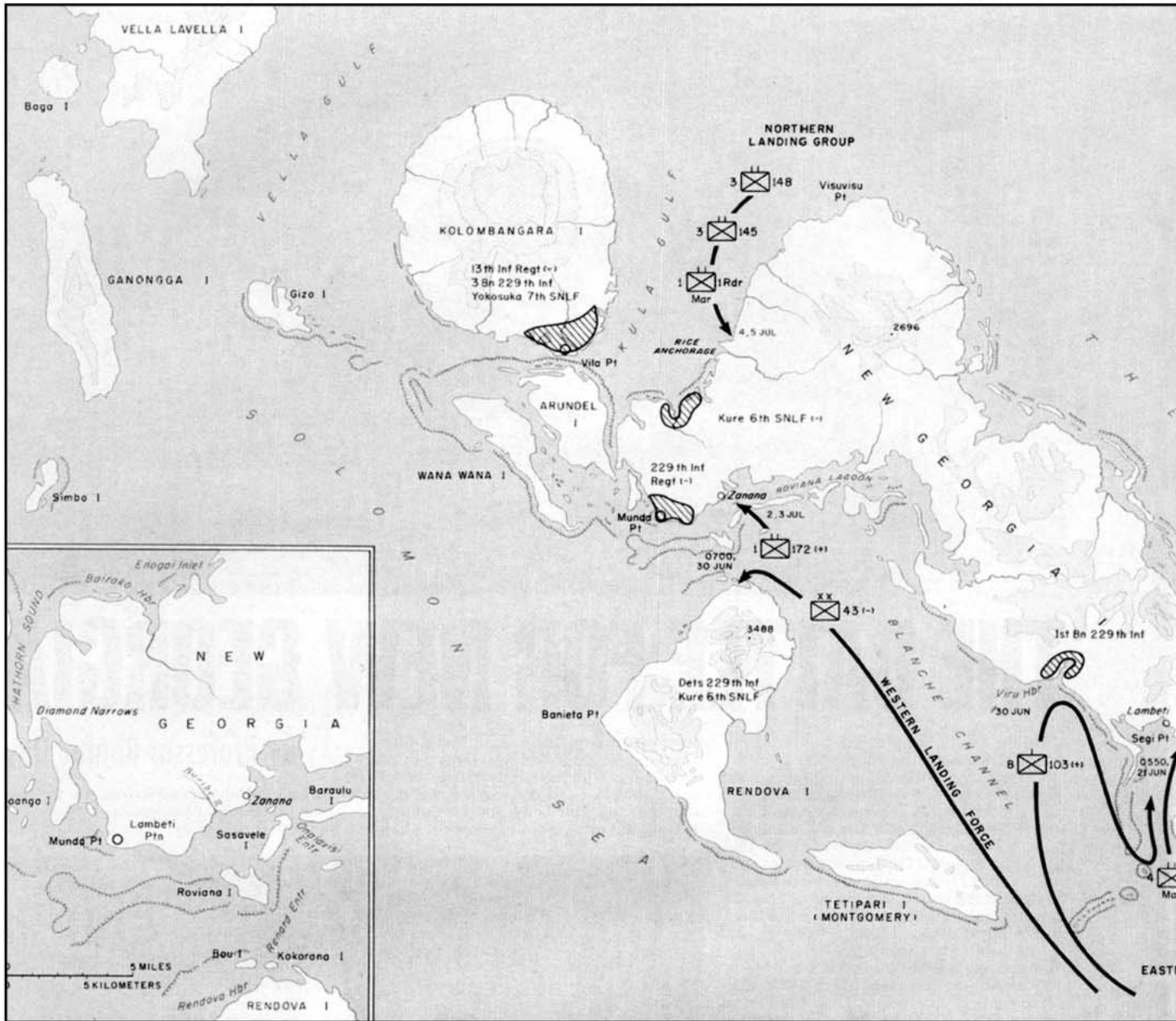
New Georgia's military significance centered on Munda where the old headhunter Ingava once had his canoe house and where the Reverend John Goldie had founded the Methodist mission in 1902. The plain around Kokenggolo Hill where Goldie built his residence and his school was suitable for the construction of a large air base. In mid-November 1942, the Japanese landed in force at Munda and began construction of an airfield in Goldie's coconut plantation, wiring the tops of the palms and then cutting the trunks so that the operation was concealed for a time under the camouflage canopy of the palm fronds. When the airfield was finished on December 15, the Japanese crossed to the Levers plantation at Vila-Stanmore on Kolombangara and began a second air strip although the soil there proved to be unsuitable and the strip was

never much used. The base at Munda, however, was enough to seal New Georgia's fate. As Admiral William F. Halsey, the commander of the US South Pacific Theater, put it after the war, 'Munda was blocking our path to Bougainville, Bougainville was blocking

our path to Rabaul, and Rabaul was the keystone of the whole Japanese structure in the southern Pacific'.



The airfield at Munda had been built by the Japanese after they captured New Georgia in November 1942. They chose a site on the plain between Kokenggolo Hill and the sea where the Methodist missionary, the Reverend John Goldie, had established his residence, school and hospital in 1902, pictured (top) in 1936. (Solomon Islands National Museum) Above: Today, all that remains of the mission are these crumbling foundations in the undergrowth. The Reverend Goldie lost his house, all his personal belongings, and his extensive 3,000-volume library, so he put in a post-war claim for £50,000 compensation to the British government — the island being part of the British protectorate in the Solomon Islands since 1893, becoming independent in 1978. The mission, also the home of the Chairman of the District, has since been rebuilt on a new site north-west of the airfield.



THE OPENING ROUND

Following the Japanese evacuation of Guadalcanal in early February 1943, fighting on the ground in the Solomons came to a halt. But there was no lull in the skies. Allied strategy as the United States Air Force intelligence publication, *Impact*, summed it up, was 'to neutralize enemy air power, repeatedly attacking airfields, which in turn may be attacked by the Navy, occupied by our troops and converted to Allied use'. Along with Japanese airfields in the Shortlands and Bougainville, Munda became a target for the growing Allied airpower based at Guadalcanal and the Russells. Even before the airfield itself was discovered in early December 1942, American heavy bombers levelled the area around Munda and, once the aerial photographs showed that an airfield was being constructed under the tops of the coconut palms, the air attacks increased in intensity. Aircraft of every type from the Army and Marines struck Munda all flying together under Air Command, Solomons, better known as COMAIRSOLS. The Japanese called Kokenggolo Hill *Bakudan* (Bomb Hill) and wrote after the war that the 'violent daily air attacks . . . transformed the lay of the land'. While the Japanese were able to keep the field operational despite the

bombing and the periodic naval bombardments that began on the night of January 4/5 and continued through May 1943, they were not able to use Munda for anything more than a staging base.

The Japanese, in fact, found themselves in a critical situation in what they called the South-east Area — New Guinea, the Bismarcks, and the Solomons — as a result of their defeats in New Guinea and on Guadalcanal. Their losses in the Battle of the Bismarck Sea (March 1-4) while trying to reinforce Lae in New Guinea and in Yamamoto's 'I' operation (early April) while trying to achieve some parity in the air, made their situation worse. This was especially true in regard to New Georgia which after the defeat at Guadalcanal was very likely to be the next Allied objective. But, the army and navy which operated independently disagreed on strategy regarding the group. The army, more concerned with New Guinea, wanted to shorten supply lines and set the defensive line on Bougainville whereas the navy, fearing for its great base at Rabaul, wanted to make New Georgia the first line of defence. In the end, after a formal agreement committed the navy to defend New Georgia and the army Bougainville, the army relented further and agreed to send troops to

New Georgia to support the navy. New Georgia, in fact, would be defended by units that had either fought at Guadalcanal or had been on their way there when Imperial Headquarters gave up the attempt to retake the island.

In February, Rear Admiral Minoru Ota's 8th Combined Special Naval Landing Force (the Kure 6th SNLF, the Yokosuka 7th SNLF and elements of the Maizuru 4th SNLF) which had been destined for Guadalcanal took over the defence of New Georgia from the Base Force. The first army units sent in came from the 38th Division and included all three battalions of the 229th Infantry, at least one battalion of the 230th Infantry and some elements of the 228th Infantry. Along with the ground troops, elements of the 10th Regiment Independent Mountain Artillery and the 15th Field Defence Anti-aircraft Artillery Unit and various support units were in place by May. The 38th Division had fought at Guadalcanal, but it is doubtful that there were many actual combat veterans going into the lines at New Georgia. American XIV Corps intelligence gathered from Japanese prisoners indicated that in the case of the 229th, of which one battalion had fought at Guadalcanal, only about a company of combat veterans



Georgia invasion, arrived in February (less the 172nd Infantry which came later); and the 37th Division (less the 129th Infantry) arrived in April. Neither a destructive tropical storm on May 9 that washed out bridges and destroyed floating docks, nor heavy Japanese air raids which culminated in a 120-plane raid on June 18, did much to impede the effort.

Meanwhile, the Allies had worked out the plans for the coming offensive. On April 26, General Douglas MacArthur, Allied commander in the Southwest Pacific theater, issued Elkton III, the final version of a plan that had evolved over the past three months. Code-named 'Cartwheel', it provided for a two-pronged offensive by stages against the Japanese base at Rabaul, one up the eastern coast of New Guinea, the other up the Solomons chain. Problems of command brought on by the fact that New Georgia was in MacArthur's Southwest Pacific Theater had been resolved. MacArthur was to be in overall command, but Halsey, commander of the South Pacific Theater, was to be in operational command in the Solomons area where the first stage of 'Cartwheel' called for the conquest of New Georgia.

Working from solid intelligence gathered during several reconnaissance missions into the New Georgia area, Halsey's planners came up with 'Toenails', as the operational plan for New Georgia was called, by early June. Modifications were made later as the situation warranted but, in general, the basic plan remained the same. Since the great reef known as the Munda Bar prohibited a direct assault on Munda, 'Toenails' called for five separate landings to be made on D-Day which was ultimately set for June 30. Small forces would occupy Wickham Anchorage, Segi Point, and Viru Harbor to protect the line of communication between Rendova and Guadalcanal and to commence a fighter base at Segi. The main body would land at Rendova with a detachment seizing Honiava Passage, the entrance into Roviana Lagoon. With Rendova secured, additional troops and supplies would be landed July 1-4 and the artillery emplaced on Rendova and the islands in Roviana Lagoon. When these preparations were complete, the assault troops would be ferried from Rendova through Honiava Passage and Roviana Lagoon to the New Georgia mainland and,

supported by the artillery on the islands, launch the attack on Munda from east of the field. Simultaneously, another force coming from Guadalcanal would land at Rice Harbor in Kula Gulf, move overland to take Enogai and Bairoko Harbor which would choke off the main Japanese supply route from Vila to Munda and, if possible, link up with the forces attacking Munda.

In mid-June, however, a situation developed at Segi Point in eastern New Georgia which caused a major change in Allied plans. In general, the Japanese had concentrated their forces at three points. Two battalions of the 229th Infantry (Colonel Genjiro Hirata) and most of the antiaircraft units were at Munda, most of the 6th Kure SNLF (Commander Saburo Okumura) was at Bairoko, and the 7th Yokosuka SNLF (Commander Koshin Takeda) and one battalion of the 229th was at Kolombangara. Only small mixed detachments guarded the other key points at Wickham Anchorage, Viru Harbor, and Rendova. Until early June, the Japanese had shown little interest in Segi where coast-watcher Donald Kennedy had operated with impunity since July 1942. This changed when Major Masao Hara, commander of the 1st Battalion of the 229th, was ordered to eastern New Georgia with part of his unit to set things straight and to push Kennedy out. Documents captured during a sharp clash between a Japanese patrol and native scouts on June 16 alerted Kennedy to the danger and on the night of June 18/19 he requested reinforcement to hold Segi until the Allied invasion force arrived. At Guadalcanal, Turner wasted no time. By the evening of June 20, two destroyer transports were on their way at high speed to Segi with two companies of the 4th Marine Raider Battalion (Lieutenant Colonel Michael S. Curran) which landed early the next morning. The following day, destroyers landed two companies of the 103rd Infantry along with a survey party from Acorn 7, an airfield construction unit built around the 47th Naval Construction (Seabee) Battalion. Turner's altered plans called for the infantry and raiders to establish a base at Segi from which they could aid in the attacks on Viru Harbor and Wickham Anchorage while the Seabee officers determined the site for an airfield. For reasons never clearly explained, the Japanese were curiously complacent about the sudden Allied activity at Segi.

June 29, 1943 — the Allied invasion force assembles off Koli Point, Guadalcanal. That afternoon it sailed for Rendova. Unlike most Pacific operations, Operation 'Toenails' — the invasion of New Georgia — went in virtually unopposed. (Signal Corps)

remained, the rest were replacements. As its command organization in New Georgia, 8th Area Army at Rabaul created the Southeast Detachment Headquarters under the command of Major General Noboru Sasaki, Chief of Infantry of the 38th Division, who moved to Kolombangara on May 31 and set up his headquarters.

OPERATION 'TOENAILS'

While the possibility of bypassing New Georgia and landing in southern Bougainville had been discussed among Allied commanders, Halsey seems to have been convinced from the start that Munda would have to be taken. His amphibious commander, Vice-Admiral Richmond K. Turner, had begun stockpiling supplies on Guadalcanal while construction units rushed to complete two new bomber bases east of Henderson Field along with fuel storage tanks and other facilities and two new airfields in the Russells. 'Every time I pass a Seabee bulldozer,' Halsey reportedly said, 'I want to stop and kiss it.' All the while, Allied troop strength continued to grow. The 25th Infantry Division, veteran of the January offensive on Guadalcanal, was still on the island undergoing training; the 43rd Infantry Division which was earmarked for the New





THE JAPANESE TAKEN BY SURPRISE

As planned, the Allied invasion force moved toward New Georgia on the stormy night of June 29/30. An American task group of light cruisers, destroyers, and minelayers returning from mining the harbour and bombarding the Japanese advance base in the Shortlands early in the morning of June 30, reported that 'all along the west coast of Vella Lavella, Ganongga, and New Georgia, heavy black rain clouds hung almost at mast-head height'. During the first hours of the landing, the weather caused more problems for the invaders than the enemy. Destroyer minesweeper *Zane*, part of the detachment that was to land troops at Honiavasa Passage, ran aground in the darkness during a rain squall, but was pulled free late in the day and towed back to Tulagi. Off Rendova, the advance unit that was to secure the beach, two specially-trained companies of the 172nd Infantry, got lost in the rain and fog and landed at the wrong place. It was still raining at dawn, when Turner's four big transports and two cargo ships screened by eight

The landing — a symbolic composition typifying the Pacific war. Although not identified by the photographer, Professor Day believes this is the 172nd Infantry, 43rd Division, going ashore on the eastern beach of Rendova Harbor. (US Navy)

destroyers, hove off Renard Entrance and at 0630 began landing the 172nd Regiment of the 43rd Division. The small enemy garrison of less than 200 men of the 229th Infantry and the Kure 6th SNLF was quickly overwhelmed and successive waves of landing craft brought in the 9th Marine Defense Battalion, the 24th Naval Construction Battalion, 103rd Field Artillery Battalion and various headquarters and base units. Motor Torpedo Boat Squadron 9 which accompanied the landing force set up a base at Lumbaria Island in Rendova Harbor. By 1600, Turner's transports had unloaded and were underway in Blanche Channel for Guadalcanal. During the next four days, the second, third and fourth echelons, utilising for the first time in the Pacific war the new LST (Landing Ship, Tank), LCI (Landing Craft, Infantry), and LCT (Landing Craft, Tank) brought in the rest of the 43rd Division not

committed to the other landings at Segi and Wickham Anchorage.

The Japanese response was uncoordinated and, while inflicting some casualties and damage on the Allies, ineffective. Although warned at midnight on June 29/30 by submarine *RO 103* that Turner's transports were on the way, the commanders at Munda as they wrote later were 'completely baffled' by the landing at Rendova. The SNLF coastal artillery, eight guns ranging from 3-inch to 5.5-inch, had been sited to cover the approach over the Munda Bar. These guns opened fire on the closest screening destroyers, but after scoring one hit were quickly silenced. Thereafter, the Japanese at Munda could only watch as seven miles away the Allies transformed Rendova into a military base. On July 2, 155mm guns on Rendova took the airfield under fire and subjected it to a constant bombardment.



Left: USS *Zane* (DMS 14), which ran aground at Honiavasa Passage in the early morning of June 30, was commissioned in 1921 as a Clemson-class destroyer. She was converted to a high-speed minesweeper in 1940 and was a veteran of Pearl Harbor and Guadalcanal. Following the grounding at Honiavasa, she was repaired at Mare Island and served in the later campaigns in the Marshalls and Marianas. (Photo supplied via Joseph E. Gunterman, a member of the *Zane's* crew in WWII.)



The *Zane* was struck from the Navy list in 1946 and scrapped in 1947, but she lived on as the model for one of the most famous novels to come out of the war: Herman Wouk's *The Caine Mutiny*. Right: It appears now that a material part of her has survived in this anchor, pictured here by Professor Day at Sasavele Village, which Dave and Mariana Cook, operators of Solomon Sea Divers at Munda, found on the reef at Honiavasa Passage.



LSTs following the same route as the assault troops the day before, pass through Renard Entrance to Rendova Lagoon on July 1, 1943. Kokorana Island (local spelling Kukurana) is to the left, Bau Island (local spelling Pau) is to the right. Rendova

Mountain, obscured by rain and clouds, is in the background. East landing beach is to the port side of the leading LST, while the west landing beach is blocked from view by Pangopango Island off the starboard bow of the leading LST. (US Navy)

What little success the Japanese enjoyed against the invasion force was in the air. But, here again they had miscalculated. Misled by the lack of radio intelligence in the last days of June, they had pulled back their aircraft from the advanced bases in Bougainville. As a result, they were not able to put any planes over Rendova until roughly 1100, over four hours after Turner had started unloading, and none of these got through fighter cover to the transports. The second and last attack of the day, arriving after Turner had finished unloading and was underway in Blanche Channel, did succeed in torpedoing the flagship *McCawley* which was left sinking. On July 2 and again on July 4, the Japanese

struck Rendova with heavy raids. The first of these caught the men on the beaches by surprise and without fighter cover since the Allied bases were shut in by weather and almost 200 men were either killed or wounded and a considerable amount of supplies destroyed. The Independence Day raid, however, came in too low and lost many of its planes to anti-aircraft fire while inflicting only moderate damage to some LCIs. Japanese naval forces closest at hand in the Shortlands at the time of the invasion consisted of one light cruiser, *Yubari*, and eight or nine destroyers. Two attempts were made against the Rendova beach-head. Both were complete failures. The first, a destroyer

force, sailed from the Shortlands on the night of June 30, but early next morning ran into a rain squall in Blanche Channel and retired without making contact with the Allied force. The second attempt was made early on the morning of July 3 when *Yubari* and nine destroyers bombarded Rendova, but all of the shells landed in the jungle and caused no damage. That afternoon, three light cruisers and five destroyers under the command of Rear Admiral Walker L. Ainsworth sailed from Tulagi and took up a cruising position just west of Rendova a couple of hours before midnight. But the Japanese failed to put in an appearance and the American force returned to Tulagi.



Renard Entrance and Rendova Harbor, July 25, 1995. The settlement on what was once the eastern landing beach is now

the married quarters for workers of the Malaita Labour Line which works the coconut plantation.



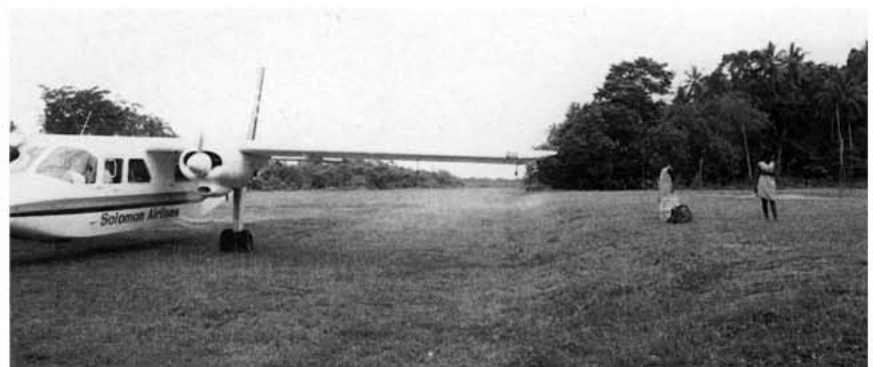
A tractor-drawn scraper of the 47th Naval Construction Battalion of Acorn 7 ripping out the airstrip at Segi from Harold Markham's coconut plantation. Some of the mature palms that made his operation profitable can be seen still standing in the background. Markham, along with other small, independent planters, was ruined by the war since the British government declined to make any compensation for war losses. He died in Sydney in 1954. (Signal Corps)

Meanwhile, the secondary landings took place as planned. As at Rendova, the weather caused problems at Wickham Anchorage. The landing force which included the 2nd Battalion, 103rd Infantry, a detachment of the 4th Marine Raider Battalion, elements of the 20th Seabees, a battery of the 70th Coast Artillery and a battery of the 152nd Field Artillery, began landing at Oloana Bay, Vangunu about 0335 on June 30. It was raining heavily and high winds had whipped up the sea. Consequently, the landing craft scattered and it was not until 0700 that the commander could regroup his force and march on the Japanese garrison a few miles east at Kaeruku. Although taken by surprise and badly outnumbered, the platoon of the 229th Infantry and company of the 6th SNLF put up a fight that lasted three hours and cost the attackers 22 dead and 43 wounded. Over 100 of the defenders were killed before the survivors retreated into the bush. Early the next morning, three Japanese barges bringing in supplies and unaware that Americans now occupied the site, tried to land and were wiped out almost to a man. Within a few days, the Vangunu-Wickham Anchorage-Gatukai region had been cleared of Japanese forces.

Viru Harbor proved a harder nut to crack and the Allies suffered their only setback there in the landings on June 30. The plan was for the marine raiders at Segi Point to go first by rubber boat and then through the jungle to attack Viru Harbor from the land side in conjunction with the arrival of the occupying force by sea. To carry out their part of the plan, the raiders left Segi at nightfall on June 27. But rain-swollen rivers and Japanese resistance delayed their arrival for a day and when the occupation force arrived at dawn on June 30 it was met by fire from a Japanese 3-inch gun. As a result, the Viru Harbor force turned back and landed at Segi Point. Next morning, however, the action was worthy of a Hollywood script-writer. The raiders attacked the main body of Hara's troops dug in on the west shore of the harbour; American dive bombers were called in and hit the Japanese positions at about 0900; while the bombing was still in progress the LSTs of the second echelon of the occupying force, unaware that the Japanese

were still holding the area, sailed blithely into the harbour. In a fierce fire-fight that lasted through the morning and into mid-afternoon, the raiders drove Hara's men from their positions at a cost of two dozen marine dead and wounded. Almost 50 Japanese were killed and the rest, some 170 men, retreated into the bush and ultimately made their way to Munda in time to take part in the final defence of the field. By late afternoon, the LSTs were unloading.

As it turned out, only Segi Point, where Harold Markham had developed a plantation that visitors described as a Garden of Eden, proved of much value to the Allies in the coming campaign. Before the initial landing, an artillery officer in the American reconnaissance mission had reported that he had 'found very good gun positions in Mr Markham's garden' (which contained rare tropical fruits imported from all over the world) and another, Captain Robert Ryan, a California engineer serving with the 47th Seabees, began marking out with his eye the airfield he visualised in Markham's profitable coconut plantation. On June 30, an LST landed Acorn 7 at 1010 in the morning and by that afternoon the bulldozers had begun ripping the airstrip from Markham's 4,000 mature coconut palms. Eleven days later, the first fighters landed at Segi Field.



Now Segi Airport. Solomon Islands Domestic Airlines makes regular stops, and tourists en route to the Uipi Island resort in Marova Lagoon land here and complete the last leg of the trip by canoe.

The final two landings of the 'Toenails' operation took place during the first week of July, one at Zanana east of Munda and the other at Rice Harbor north of Munda on Kula Gulf. Major General John W. Hester who wore the two caps of commander of the 43rd Division and commander of the New Georgia Occupation Force has been criticised, in particular by naval historian Samuel Eliot Morison, for his decision to land at Zanana which was five miles from the objective when another suitable beach, Laiana, three miles to the west, would have put the assault troops so much closer. Responding later to Morison's criticism, Turner, who had approved Hester's decision, noted that patrols had reported Laiana to be heavily defended and that prevailing opinion at that stage of the war had held that, if possible, landings should be avoided in the face of organised resistance. At any rate, the landing was made at Zanana beginning July 3 when the first elements of the 172nd Regiment established the beach-head and continued until July 6 when all of the 172nd and the 169th had been ferried across from Rendova along with the 1st Commando, Fiji Guerrillas, who were to serve as scouts. At the same time, over five battalions of artillery, 105mms and 155mms, were emplaced on the barrier islands to support the attack. The plan was for the infantry to advance some 2½ to three miles to the Barike River and from there launch the attack on Munda.

The landing at Rice Harbor, 15 miles north of Munda, took place early in the morning of July 5. Eleven destroyers with three more in a screening group brought in the mixed force of the 3rd Battalions of the 145th and 148th Infantry, 37th Division, and the 1st Marine Raider Battalion, under the command of Colonel Harry Liversedge, commanding officer of the 1st Marine Raider Regiment. Ainsworth's cruisers and destroyers led the way to carry out a bombardment of Vila and Bairoko Harbor and a few minutes after midnight, the warships opened fire on Vila and then turned and shifted their fire on Bairoko Harbor. They were retiring from Kula Gulf as the landing force arrived when *Strong* was hit by a torpedo that tore open her hull on both sides and stopped her dead in the water, sinking. Alerted by the naval gun-fire, the Japanese had turned and retired toward the north-west, but not before launching the long-range torpedoes at Ainsworth's squadron. *Strong* sank and *Chevalier* was damaged in a collision with her as the crew was taken off. Through the rest of the night, Higgins boats took the troops ashore at Rice Harbor in a downpour and under fire from two of the Japanese 14cm guns at Enogai. No casualties were suffered in the darkness. But with the approach of dawn, and with all the troops and 90 per cent of the supplies and equipment ashore and the chances of being hit growing, the transports withdrew.



Smoke from a near hit by a Japanese bomb drifts over a 155mm 'Long Tom' of the 9th Marine Defense Battalion on

Rendova. Two 155s were slightly damaged in the heavy Japanese air raid on July 2. (US Navy)



A typical Japanese pillbox on one of the ridges that formed the Japanese defensive line east of Munda Field. (Signal Corps)

attack on the Allies at Rendova, aiming to take his troops in landing craft in the darkness, mangle unnoticed (it was hoped) with the American PT boats and so achieve surprise, but the 8th Fleet Headquarters, ordered the plan cancelled. Nevertheless, the Japanese high command was determined to hold New Georgia as long as possible and the army agreed to a further commitment of troops from the 6th Kumamoto Division (consisting of the 13th, 23rd and 45th Regiments) stationed on Bougainville. In the light of their 'painful battle experience in the Guadalcanal Island operation', the Japanese later declared they intended to throw in their 'entire sea, land and air strength at the first sign of an enemy landing'. It was in fact the Tokyo Express (the Allies' name for the Japanese destroyer transports) attempting to land the 2nd Battalion of Colonel Satoshi Tomonari's 13th Infantry that had encountered Ainsworth's bombardment force and sank *Strong* on the night of July 4/5.

With Allied forces landing on the mainland of New Georgia, the Japanese altered their plans accordingly. On July 2, army and navy commanders agreed that Sasaki would coordinate all ground forces in New Georgia and next day he shifted the third battalion of the 229th from Kolombangara to reinforce the defences east of Munda field. It is probable also that he moved his headquarters from Kolombangara to the Munda area at this time. With most of the 229th Infantry now available at Munda, Sasaki planned in typical Japanese fashion to launch a counter-

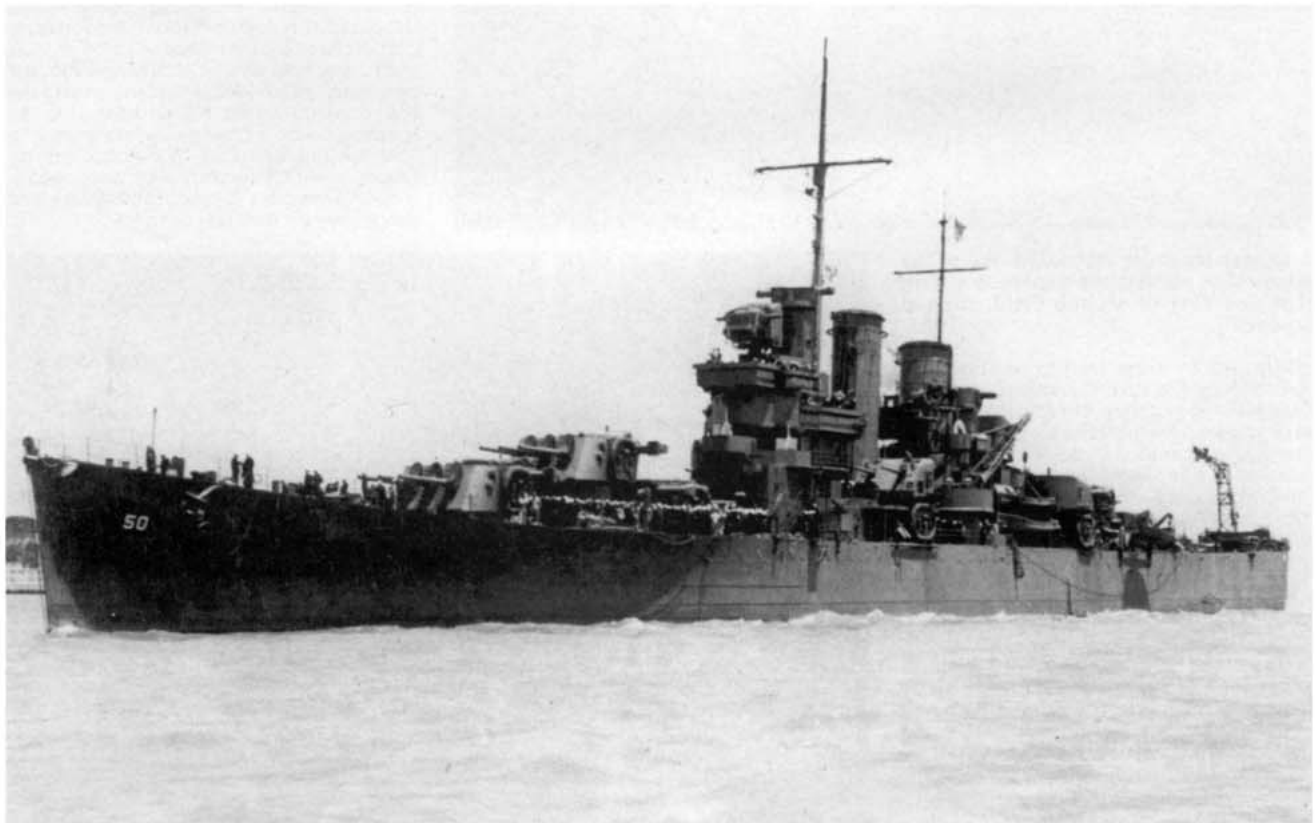


In 1995, the author and Alfred Bisili, a scout for the Americans in 1943, made their way back into the ridge area north of Ilangana. Time had done its work and the only traces of the war that could be found in the heavy undergrowth were chunks of coral and bottles scattered on the dark jungle floor.

Allied and Japanese warships operating at night in the waters around New Georgia faced a multitude of threats not just from surface units but from submarines, mines, and aircraft. Right: Here, *Nicholas* (DD 449), a veteran of Guadalcanal, fires on Japanese aircraft off Vella Lavella in August 1943. (US Navy)

The next night, July 5/6, the Japanese tried again and brought on the first major surface action of the campaign, the Battle of Kula Gulf. Rear-Admiral Teruo Akiyama commanding two transport groups and one support group, altogether a force of ten destroyers, left Buin after sunset to deliver the troops and supplies to Vila. He was spotted from the air and Halsey ordered Ainsworth, who was nearing Tulagi, to turn and head back up the Slot. Two destroyers from Tulagi joined up with his force to replace *Strong* and the damaged *Chevalier*, bringing Ainsworth's force to three light cruisers and four destroyers. When Ainsworth arrived in Kula Gulf, three of Akiyama's destroyers were unloading at Vila and the other seven were in two groups on a course north along the eastern shore of Kolombangara. At 0157, Ainsworth's guns opened fire and Akiyama's torpedoes hit the water. Akiyama's flagship, *Niitsuki*, was hit repeatedly and sank, the other two destroyers in the support group, *Suzukaze* and *Tanikaze*, both suffered some damage as they headed north-west out of the battle. But three torpedoes found *Helena*, the first blowing her bow off at No. 2 turret and the second and third buckling her in the

Just a month before, the *Nicholas* had been involved in the Battle of Kula Gulf (between the north-western shore of New Georgia and Kolombangara island) in which the *Helena* (CL 50) (below) was sunk. She was a light cruiser of the St Louis class and was also a veteran of one of the fiercest surface actions of World War II: the night action against Japanese battleships that heralded the beginning of the naval Battle of Guadalcanal on November 13, 1942. (US Navy)





As it had in the battle for Guadalcanal, the Imperial Japanese Navy gave a good account of itself in the series of actions touched off by the invasion of New Georgia. But it was a war of attrition the Japanese could not hope to win. Captain Tameichi Hara commanded destroyers in the Solomons from Guadalcanal through New Georgia to the bitter end at Bougainville, and survived to write his memoirs. He recalled his feelings on the bridge of *Shigure* on the dark night of August 1 as his four destroyers entered Blackett Strait bound for Vila, Kolombangara to deliver supplies. It was his first sortie since returning to the Solomons after his destroyer had been badly damaged by *Helena* in the naval battle of Guadalcanal the past November. 'In my absence from action,' he wrote, 'the seas of the Central Solomons had claimed many illustrious destroyers. *Kagero*, *Kuroshio*, and *Oyashio* — veterans of Tanaka's victorious

battle off Savo Island — were sunk by mines and air attack on May 8, 1943. My Java Sea battle teammate, *Nagatsuki*, and *Niizuki* were lost in these waters in July. *Hatsuyuki*, hero of the October 12, 1942 Savo Island battle, was blasted into the ocean depths near Bougainville on July 17.' If it was any consolation that *Helena*, his opponent at Guadalcanal, now herself lay broken in two in the depths of the ocean off Kula Gulf, Hara did not mention it. *Nagatsuki* is shown in this photograph dated May 8, 1944 aground and bombed out on the east coast of Kolombangara, a victim of the same battle that sent *Helena* to the bottom almost a year before. She was a 'Mutsuki' class destroyer built in 1926 by Ishikawajima and armed with the 24-inch torpedo. In 1941-42, she was modified for use as a fast transport which increased her tonnage from 1,313 to 1,590 tons and reduced her speed from 37 to 34 knots. (US Navy).

middle and causing her to sink 20 minutes after the third hit. About 200 of the crew perished with the ship, but almost 1,000 were rescued (over 100 of these on July 16 after they had drifted to Vella Lavella).

The battle then shifted to the second transport group. Of these, *Amagiri* and *Hatsuyuki* were both hit, but were able to turn away into the gulf while *Satsuki* and *Nagatsuki* in the rear reversed course and headed back south toward Vila. In the darkness and without radar, *Nagatsuki*, which had taken one direct hit in the action, ran hard aground at Surumuni Cove about five miles north of Vila.

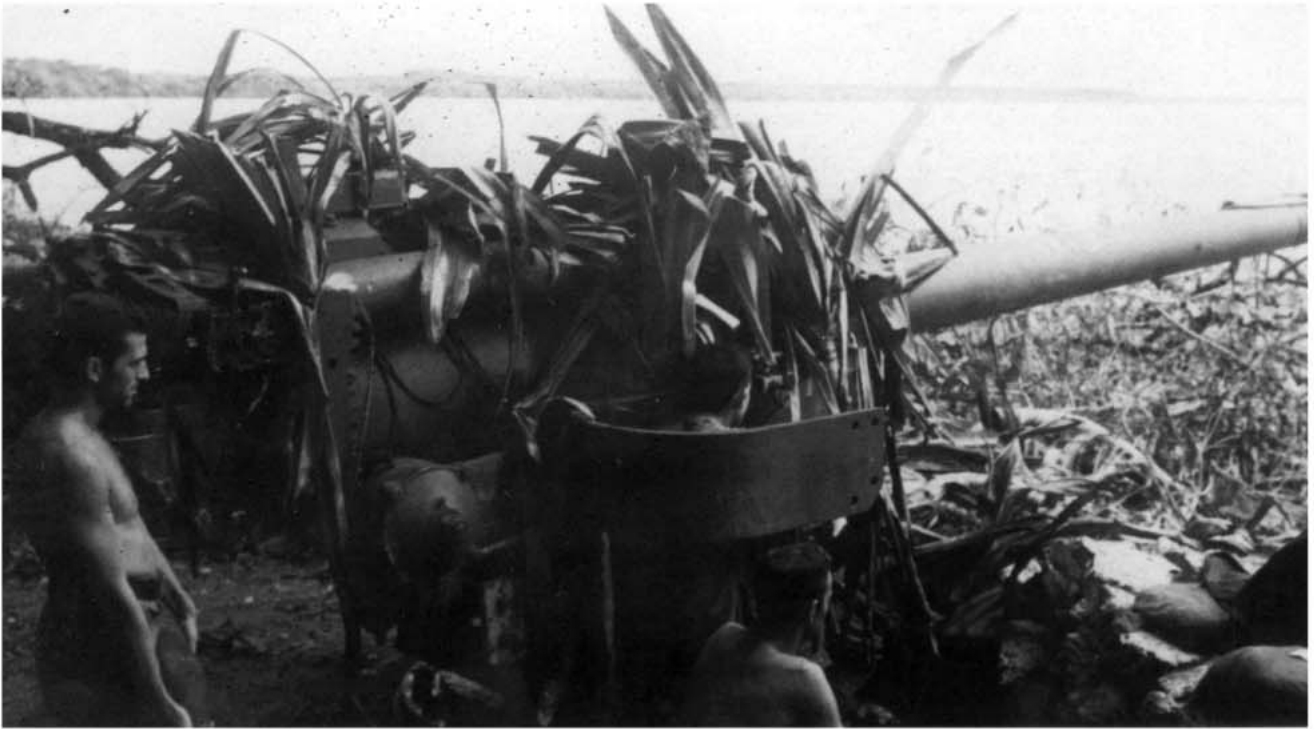
The ships were now scattered and Ainsworth, thinking the battle was over and low on both fuel and ammunition, retired, leaving *Radford* and *Nicholas* to pick up *Helena's* survivors. During the next hours, *Radford* and *Nicholas* worked at their task unaware that several miles away *Amagiri* was doing the same for *Niitsuki's* crew. Meanwhile, *Satsuki* tried to pull *Nagatsuki* off the reef, but gave up and according to the Japanese records landed her troops at Vila. The troops on *Nagatsuki* marched overland to Vila while the crew stayed with the stranded ship. Shortly before dawn, *Nicholas* and

Amagiri saw each other, stopped their rescue operations, and exchanged torpedoes none of which hit and then went to the guns. Hit once again, *Amagiri* made smoke and retired to the north. One by one the remaining combatants left the area except for doomed *Nagatsuki*. Next morning, the Dauntlesses and Avengers duly appeared followed that afternoon by B-25s and by day's end, finally abandoned by her crew, *Nagatsuki* had been gutted by fire and her bow blown off. The Occupation Force G-2 Daily Summary for the day noted that smoke from the beached destroyer was 'pouring up to 8,000 feet'.



This single piece of metal protruding from the water marks the final resting place of the rusting bones of *Nagatsuki* today. Following the war, a salvage group blew up the wreck and sold off the scrap. While staying at Agnes Lodge on the shore at the

eastern end of Munda Field, the author was shown a well-kept Japanese tea kettle said to have come from *Nagatsuki*. A ship's bell at Tiropou School, however, reportedly from the Japanese vessel, turned out to be marked USN!



**THE FIGHT FOR MUNDA FIELD —
NORTHERN SECTOR**

'Toenails' called for the Liversedge force to capture Enogai and Bairoko Harbor in order to isolate the Japanese defending Munda while the main offensive effort would be made by the 43rd Division from east of the field. On paper the plan looked good and the hope for a campaign of short duration seemed reasonable. This did not, however, reckon with the New Georgia jungle, the likes of which the Allies had not faced before. There were no roads and movement was by trails, some of which had been used by the Solomon Islanders and others that had to be cut ahead of the troops (the author can

One of the four undamaged Model 3, 14cm Japanese naval guns at Enogai that the Marine Raiders captured on July 10, 1943. A marine digging a foxhole discovered one of the hastily-buried breech-blocks and a search turned up the other three. (USMC)

vouch from his own experience that one can be on one of these trails and not notice any difference from the rest of the jungle). Rains turned knee-deep rivers into swollen torrents and made the swampy areas impassable. Against this type of terrain, the best the bulldozers and carry-alls of the 43rd engineers could do was about 200 yards of road a day. Such terrain naturally favoured the defenders. The Japanese were able to construct pill-boxes and large bunkers out of logs, coral and earth that were impregnable against

small-arms fire. Under these conditions, the Allied attack stalled from the beginning.

In the northern sector, Liversedge moved out shortly after the landing was completed on July 5. The going was slow and not until July 7 did he make the head of Enogai Inlet. Here the forces split, the 3rd Battalion, 148th Infantry, moving toward the Bairoko-Munda Trail to establish a block, the 1st Battalion, Marine Raiders, and two companies of the 3rd Battalion, 145th Infantry, moving up the western side of the inlet toward Enogai



One of the Japanese 14cm guns photographed by the author in July 1995. The four guns are close to shore and spaced fairly

evenly around Enogai Point. The remains of the American supply dump is also still evident.

Point. A sharp fight occurred at Triri village and this and the terrain again slowed down the advance. Finally, on July 10, the raiders took Enogai Point after some heavy fighting that cost 54 dead and 91 wounded and captured the four 14cm guns there. By this time, food shortages were so acute that an air drop had to be made by C-47s. On July 11, the raiders mopped up Enogai and established their own base there, weathering two Japanese air strikes without any anti-aircraft weapons of any type. PBVs coming in to take off the sick and wounded were attacked and damaged by Japanese float planes, but were able at dusk to get off with their human cargos. Given his losses from combat and sickness and the determined Japanese defence to be expected at Bairoko, Liversedge paused at Enogai and asked for reinforcements. Meanwhile, during July 10-11, fighting was going on at the trail block as elements of the Japanese 13th Infantry en route to the Munda front attacked the American 148th. One post-war Japanese account has the Americans annihilated after two days, but this was patently not the case and the trail block was not withdrawn until July 17 and then in preparation for the attack on Bairoko Harbor. On the other hand, the trail block failed to stop the Japanese reinforcements from reaching Munda, for they shifted to another trail that was unobstructed.

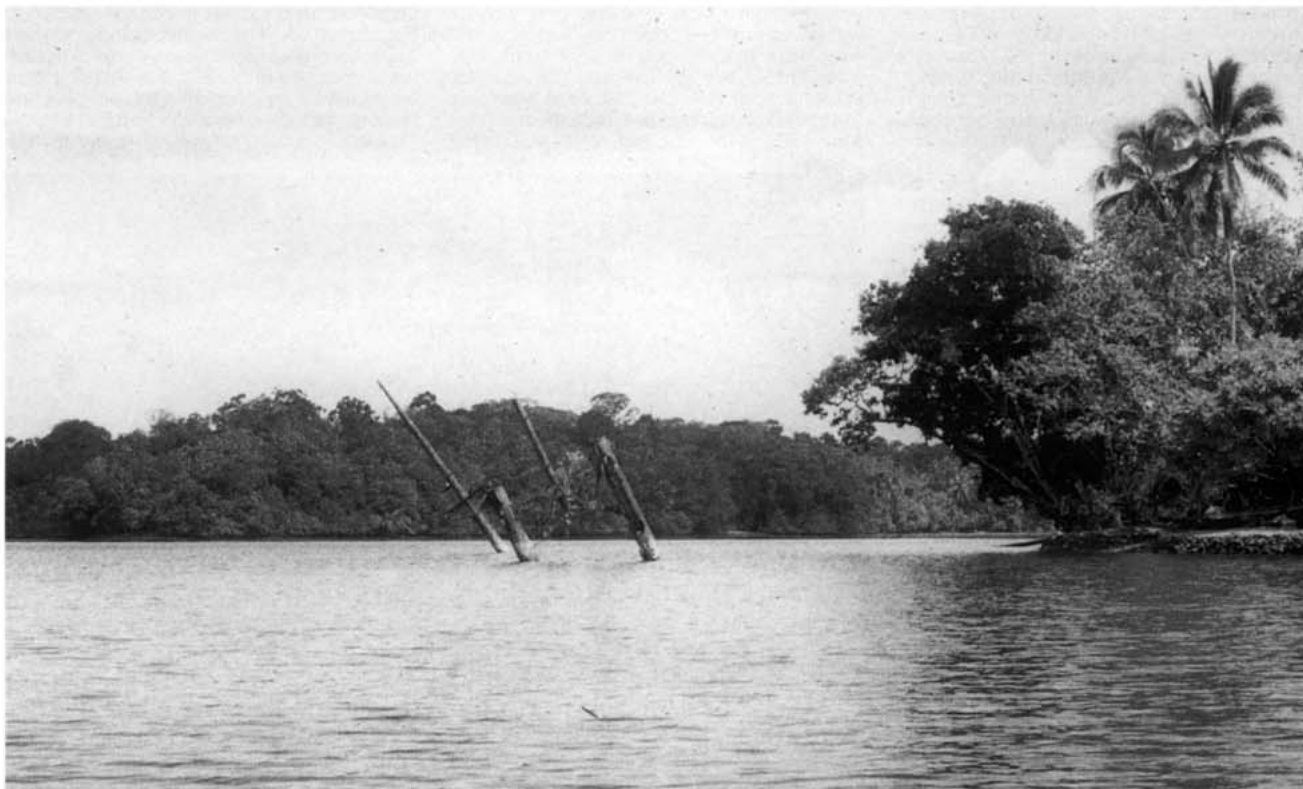
Liversedge, resupplied and reinforced by the 4th Marine Raider Battalion (veterans of the eastern New Georgia landings on June 30), made the attack on Bairoko Harbor on July 20. He had no heavy weapons or flame-throwers to use against the Japanese bunkers and an air strike he requested never materialised due to bureaucratic miscommunication back at Guadalcanal. Consequently, after a day's furious fighting in which the Americans suffered 50 men killed and 200

wounded, mostly from the two raider battalions, the attack was stopped cold. Late that afternoon and less than 500 yards from his objective of Bairoko Harbor, Liversedge gave the order to withdraw several hundred yards and dig in for the night. Next morning, under cover of a heavy air strike, Liversedge took his forces back to Enogai and that afternoon, harassed by Japanese fighters, PBVs began taking off the wounded. For the rest of July, the Americans sat tight at Enogai. While their presence there tied down Japanese troops that could have been used elsewhere, the objective of choking off the stream of reinforcements moving from Kolombangara through Bairoko to the Munda front had failed.

Nor could the flow of troops be stopped on the first leg of the route from Bougainville to Kolombangara although the Allied surface and air forces took a heavy toll. On July 12/13, Ainsworth again intercepted the Tokyo Express which resulted in the Battle of Kolombangara, fought just north of the island after which it is named. This time Ainsworth had three light cruisers, New Zealand *Leander* replacing *Helena* sunk in the previous engagement, and ten destroyers to oppose Rear-Admiral Shunji Izaki in light cruiser *Jintsu* who with five destroyers was escorting four destroyer transports. The battle opened an hour after midnight and in the first phase, Ainsworth had the best of it. *Jintsu* was smothered by gun-fire, took at least one torpedo, and sank quickly, taking with her Izaki and most of the crew. Only one Japanese torpedo found its mark, hitting *Leander* and putting her out of action. In the second phase, however, after the Japanese destroyers retired north-west into a rain squall and reloaded their torpedo tubes, the tide of battle flowed in the other direction. This time the Japanese torpedoes found their

mark, sinking destroyer *Gwin* and damaging both *Honolulu* and *St. Louis*. As Ainsworth's cruisers limped toward Tulagi, the four Japanese destroyer transports unloaded over 1,000 troops at Sandfly Harbor on the west coast of Kolombangara. A few nights later, on July 19/20, the Japanese attempted to set a trap, sending three destroyers as bait toward Vella Gulf with about 500 men and equipment and supplies while a large force of three heavy cruisers, one light cruiser, and nine destroyers waited for the American force to arrive. But a Black Cat (PBY) spotted the Japanese first and what showed up shortly after midnight were TBF Avengers with 2,000lb bombs. Destroyer *Yugure* was sunk and a heavy cruiser hit and damaged. Several more attacks were made before dawn and the Japanese decided to retire, leaving behind destroyer *Kiyonami* to pick up *Yugure's* survivors. When daylight came, American bombers sank *Kiyonami*. It is not clear where the transports landed the troops and supplies, possibly at Vila by way of Blackett Strait, but they too were attacked by aircraft as they returned.

After July 20, therefore, the Japanese did not attempt again to send surface units into Kula Gulf. Instead, when they dared risk destroyer transports, they shifted to Vella Gulf on the western side of Kolombangara and made their way to the landing points by way of the narrow Blackett Strait. In addition, they made extensive use of *Daihatsus*, large landing craft which the Allies insisted on calling barges. The most usual type was 46 feet long and could carry one tank, or 70 men or ten tons of cargo with a speed of around eight knots. With a steel hull and an armament of machine guns and cannon up to 37mm, they were a match for the PT boats that put out from Rendova Harbor every night to hunt them.



Bairoko Harbor, objective of the Liversedge force, pictured in July 1995 looking west from the eastern shore where the Japanese defences were located (the mouth of the harbour to the right in the photograph is due north). The sunken ship is thought to be the small Japanese freighter *Kashi Maru* (spelled *Kasi* in the Lloyds of London Registry), built in Osaka in 1940 and sunk in an Allied air attack on July 2. Australian Peter Woodbury, who has done considerable research on wrecks

around New Georgia, is reasonably certain of the identification. *Kashi Maru* was carrying a cargo of fuel drums and ammunition ranging from what appears to be 14cm to 37mm when she was attacked and an internal explosion blew her side out. Today, along with the 7,000-ton cargo ship, *Toa Maru*, which was carrying supplies, ammunition and a small tank when hit by an aircraft and run aground off Gizo on January 31, 1943, the ship is an attraction for divers.

THE FIGHT FOR MUNDA FIELD — SOUTHERN SECTOR

The attack on Munda, it will be recalled, was to be made from east of the field by the 43rd Division. The main Japanese defence line, manned by three battalions of the 229th Infantry, some units of the 8th Combined SNLF, and artillery and anti-tank units (later reinforced by the 13th Infantry; the 2nd Battalion, 230th Infantry; and some troops of the 228th Infantry) ran from Ilangana on Roviana Lagoon north-west for some 3,000 yards. The defences centered on mutually supporting pillboxes of logs and coral, some having two levels so that the men inside could drop down during shelling, and all extremely well concealed. Hester's plan called for the 172nd on the left and the 169th on the right to advance from Zanana to the Barike river and with the river as the line of departure launch the assault on July 7. Two days later, the 3rd Battalion, 103rd, along with the tanks of the 9th Marine Defense Battalion would land at the western tip of Munda Point. Allied leaders envisioned a 'quick stroke' that would deliver the airfield into their hands in a few days. It was not to be. A month of hard fighting and the commitment of most of three divisions would be necessary before the field was taken. 'When I look back on "Elkton",' Halsey wrote four years later, 'the smoke of charred reputations still makes me cough.'

Hester's attack never gained momentum. The 172nd moved to its position at the Barike river without opposition, but a trail block set by one company of the Japanese 229th on the upper reaches of the river halted the 169th. After a two-day delay, the attack commenced on July 9 following an artillery barrage that put 6,000 rounds on Japanese positions, a naval bombardment that added 2,000 rounds, and an air strike that delivered 70 tons of high explosives. Next day, the artillery put 4,000 rounds and the planes another 67 tons of bombs, but on the ground very little progress was made; the 172nd took some of the forward positions, but the 169th remained stalled. On July 11, Hester made some changes. The commander of the 169th, his executive officer, intelligence officer and operations officer were all relieved of command and a regimental commander from the 37th Division took over the 169th. On the ground, Hester who had earlier abandoned the plan of landing at Munda Point, instead ordered the 172nd to disengage and turn south and take Laiana in order to shorten his line and to provide a landing site for reinforcements. That night, July 11/12, four light cruisers and ten destroyers put almost 8,000 rounds into the Munda area; a few hours later, as the 172nd fought its way toward Laiana, dive-bombers struck the enemy positions. Next day, the 172nd took Laiana and the 3rd Battalion, 169th, took the first of the fortified ridges in its sector and held on against furious Japanese counter-attacks. As the situation began to improve, reinforcements began landing, the 3rd Battalion, 103rd Infantry, and the 9th Marine Defense Battalion tanks at Laiana on July 14, and the 1st Battalion, 145th Infantry, at Zanana, the following day. Japanese efforts to interdict the Laiana landings with artillery fire had little effect and a 75-plane air strike on July 15, the largest the Japanese had mounted since the Rendova landings, was intercepted by 31 Allied fighters, the latter claiming 15 bombers and 29 fighters destroyed.

On July 15, also, the Allies began to reorganise their effort. Turner was relieved of his command and replaced by Rear Admiral Theodore Wilkinson and Hester was relieved of command of the New Georgia Occupation Force by Major General Oscar W. Griswold, commander of XIV Corps. Henceforth, Griswold would direct operations while Hester would only command the 43rd Division. While Turner's relief had



A 155mm howitzer of Battery B, 136th Field Artillery, firing on Munda from Honiavasa Island on July 8. Honiavasa Passage separates the spot from Dume Island. Professor Day comments that 'the Signal Corps photographer described the location as Baraulu Island, which is the name of the village on the eastern end of the island, and this and other documents that made the same mistake have led military historians to follow suit. However, it should be noted that the rough maps brought back by the pre-invasion reconnaissance parties accurately identified the islands.' (Signal Corps)

been planned in order to free him to command the upcoming operations against the Gilbert Islands, Hester's relief was tied directly to the problems at Munda. Griswold had arrived with part of his staff on July 11 and did not like what he saw. Casualties from combat had not been excessive — by July 17 according to the official army historian the 43rd had lost 90 killed and some 600 wounded — but disease had put another 1,000 men out of action and, more worrying to the Allied command, hundreds of troops were leaving the line with what was called

'war neurosis'. Under these circumstances, Griswold was certain that the 43rd could not take Munda and, two days before he took command, requested that the rest of the 37th Division and the 25th Division be sent.

Once in command, Griswold set about preparing for the final offensive scheduled to begin July 25. The supply system was reorganised by establishing a dump for each division on two of the islands where the ships from Guadalcanal could unload supplies and landing craft then transport them to Laiana. Medical services were also improved.



The invasion troops were by no means solely American. Here, five Fijians and a New Zealand corporal of the 1st Commando, Fijian Guerrillas, are pictured on July 15, 1943, in the deep bush east of Munda. (Signal Corps)



Colonel Franklin T. Hallam, XIV Corps surgeon, who arrived on July 14 when the problem of war neurosis was at its peak, placed some blame on inadequate leadership, but found that the major cause was utter physical exhaustion for which rest areas and better medical facilities were required. By the end

A Signal Corps photographer on the north-western tip of Kokorana Island captured this pyrotechnics display at 0300 hrs on July 12 as the light cruisers *Montpelier*, *Denver*, *Columbia* and *Cleveland*, together with a dozen destroyers, shelled Munda from the Blanche Channel. The battleship *North Carolina* had originally been scheduled to take part in the bombardment but she was later replaced by *Denver* and *Cleveland*. As it turned out, no battleships saw action in the New Georgia campaign. (Signal Corps)



A few hours later, as daylight broke over Roviana Lagoon, the same photographer, standing at the same spot on Kokorana Island, recorded American Douglas SBD dive-bombers leaving

the scene after their attack on Munda. The target is visible in the lower left of the photograph under a cloud of smoke. (Signal Corps)



Roviana Lagoon in 1995 from the identical location on Kokorana. The outline of Kolombangara can be seen in the background.



Left: Lieutenant James W. Dougherty of VMSB 144 pictured sitting on the wing of his SBD-4 dive-bomber in the Russells in July 1943. On July 23, flying BuNo (Bureau Number) 10348, he was shot down during a strike on Japanese installations at Kindu on Gurasai Point and made a forced landing in Rendova Harbor just off what had been east landing beach during the invasion. Both he and his gunner, Robert Bernard, escaped from the plane unhurt and were rescued. (Jim Dougherty)



Right: In 1992, the author identified Dougherty's plane in 12 metres of water resting in the silt of Rendova Harbor and, through a series of fortunate circumstances, the Dougherty family learned of the plane's existence. In 1995, Jim Dougherty was reunited with his plane when he donned diving gear and went down and sat in the cockpit as the subject of the film *Lost Warriors of the South Pacific*, produced by Kevin Juergenson and Bob Keet of Pacific Media Associates.

of July, the 17th Field Hospital had arrived and rest areas had been set up on Rendova. On the ground, Griswold planned for a two-division front and by July 22 the units were in place. Hester's 43rd Division consisting of the 103rd less its 1st Battalion and the 172nd was along the coast on the American left; Major General Robert S. Beightler's 37th Division, consisting of the 145th less its 3rd Battalion, the 148th less its 3rd Battalion, and the 161st attached from the 25th Division, occupied the center and the right. The 169th had been withdrawn for rest and so, all told, Griswold had five regiments with 12 battalions for the attack.

Before these preparations were complete, the Japanese attempted to launch a counter-attack. Sasaki's plan was to send the newly arrived 13th Infantry to circle around the American line to the north and, in conjunction with a landing on the beach behind the lines by troops of the 7th SNLF, attack the rear. At the same time, the 229th would attack the American positions on the front. The plan had real possibilities. Griswold's reinforcements were not yet in place and if the attack on the rear succeeded in cutting communications with the front, the regiments in the line would find themselves surrounded. But the jungle was as implacable an enemy of the Japanese as it was of the Allies. The 13th Infantry hacking its way through the undergrowth took three days to get around the American line to the Barike river. Heavy artillery fire prevented the SNLF's landing operation from ever starting. Communications broke down and when the 13th made its attack on the night of July 17/18, apparently only the 1st Battalion was involved. The Japanese homed in on the American positions in the rear by the smell of cigarette smoke and overran some of the ration dumps and surrounded the 43rd Division command post at Zanana. The collection of troops at the command post, however, made do with whatever weapon could be had and drove off the Japanese and set up a perimeter defence. This action and highly effective artillery fire which was called in on the Japanese during the night, ended the threat. On the front, the 229th attacked Laiana and the American positions on Kelly Hill (named after an officer killed there), and

were beaten back in both attempts. For the next few days, groups of Japanese troops, some of which may have been the survivors of the Hara detachment at Viru Harbor who were making their way back to Munda, operated in the American rear and a number of skirmishes occurred. But the counter-attack, if such it can be called so great was the confusion, was a failure.

The XIV Corps offensive began on July 25 as scheduled. The morning haze still hung over the Munda area when the first of seven destroyers under the command of Commander Arleigh A. Burke opened fire on the Japanese positions in front of the waiting American troops. When the bombardment ended at 0644, the destroyers had put 4,000

5-inch shells on the target. The first Allied planes arrived over the target while the destroyers were still firing. Over 250 planes struck Munda that morning, practically everything at Guadalcanal that could fly, and a half million pounds of explosives was dropped. It was the 'greatest show on earth', the 23rd Squadron, 5th Bomb Group (H), recorded. 'The crews of the planes participating plus all the ground officers who had been able to talk themselves into a ride on the mission were thrilled at the sight of dozens of B-24s, B-25s, TBFs, SBDs, P-38s, P-39s, P-40s, F4Fs and F4Us milling around over the target in coordinating attacks while destroyers stood off shore and lobbed shells into Jap positions.'



One of the 75mm guns that was Dougherty's target the day he was shot down still sits in the jungle at Kindu. The dive-bombers flew up The Slot climbing to 16,000-17,000 feet by the time they reached the north-west tip of New Georgia. They then turned south and, with flaps closed, dived on their targets at speeds sometimes reaching 500 knots. At about 2,500 feet the bombs — one 1,000lbs and two of 100lbs — were released, and at around 1,000 feet the pilot pulled out and left the area in level flight.



At 0700, the artillery began firing the first of a hundred preparations that would be fired that day and as the guns shifted their fire farther west, the infantry moved to the attack. In addition to the M3A1 'Stuart' light tanks of the 9th and 10th Marine Defense Battalions, the infantry for the first time in the Pacific war had flame-throwers.

At the beginning, progress was slow. The main Japanese defences confronted the attackers and a week of gruelling fighting was required to break through these. In the 43rd's sector, the strong points were along the beach at Ilangana and inland at Shimizu Hill; in the 37th's sector, they were in some depth on and around Bartley Ridge and Horseshoe Hill. Against this main line, the attack ground on, yard by yard, pillbox by pillbox. The assault troops went about their deadly work as methodically as a civilian work force on the job. Prior to the assault, a number of patrols of four or five men probed the suspected strong point to develop the extent of the position. Since many of the positions held their fire, this was followed by a reconnaissance in force by a reinforced platoon to uncover a portion of the centre of resistance (although in the jungle the concealment was such that the full extent of the strong point would not be known until the attack started). The attack then went forward in three stages. First, artillery was called in to provide shock action and to improve visibility. Second, intensive 81mm mortar fire which proved very effective, was placed on the area between the front lines and the nearest artillery impact area and on all observed positions. Third, while a holding attack by a platoon or company delivered covering fire with both heavy and light machine guns, the riflemen, using grenades and flame-throwers (if the latter were available), enveloped and reduced the position. With nightfall, the assault unit dug in and established a perimeter defence with strict fire discipline. Only the perimeter guards were permitted to fire, but they were under orders to fire at anything that moved whether inside or outside the perimeter. At least one soldier was shot when he left his foxhole to urinate, but the procedure stopped Japanese counter-attacks in their tracks and put an end to the night harass-

A flame-thrower in operation against a Japanese pillbox in the coconut palms along the beach from Ilangana to Lambeti, the 103rd Infantry's area in the drive on Munda. Roviana Lagoon is in the background. (Signal Corps)

ment tactics that had so rattled the 169th earlier in the month.

For the men doing the fighting, the war in the jungle was at close range and as a result was intensely personal. Rocks were thrown, insults exchanged.

'Americans cowards', the Japanese would taunt.

'Tojo eats ___!', the Americans would yell back.

Opponents were nicknamed so that a Japanese rifleman who was an excellent marksman was called 'Button' by the two infantrymen who set out to kill him using homemade Molotov cocktails. Describing the fighting on Bartley Ridge, *Yank* combat correspondent Mack Morriss wrote that 'it reached the point where individual action and individual courage were knitted together in two- and three-men units of assault, pitted against similar little units of Japs crouched in

pillboxes. And the best fighters won because they cooperated with each other best.'

Although the issue was never in doubt, the Japanese missed a golden opportunity on the north flank of the American line. Colonel Stuart A. Baxter's 148th Infantry (less its 3rd Battalion which was at Bairoko) was on the extreme right and faced no prepared Japanese positions. On July 25, therefore, when the offensive started, Baxter's battalions advanced rapidly and quickly outdistanced the unit on its left, the 161st. By July 28, the 148th was just east of Bibilo Hill and contact with the 161st which was reducing the ridge positions had been lost. The first hint of trouble came on July 27 when a platoon of the 117th Engineer Battalion which was using a bulldozer to extend the trail in the area north of Horseshoe Hill was ambushed and three men were killed. Next day, the 148th's ration dump was attacked and the



In 1995, the remains of a pier marks the area on the beach at Ilangana that the older inhabitants of Munda still call 'General's Landing'. Barges also unloaded trucks and other heavy cargo at this spot according to those old enough to remember.



Japanese infantrymen had dug in on Kokenggolo Hill and most of them died defending their positions. What appears to be drums for the Japanese Model 92 7.7mm machine gun can be seen on the roof of the entrance. (USMC)

supply trail cut. The enemy forces coming into the gap between the 148th and the 161st were from the 13th Infantry which American intelligence had lost track of since the counter-attack on July 18. General Beightler ordered Baxter to withdraw and link up with the 161st and, late in the morning on July 29, the 148th began fighting its way back to the American lines. Harried by Japanese attacking their rear, the first elements reached the 1st Battalion, 161st, dug in on O'Brien Hill late in the afternoon of July 30 and passed through the lines. The pursuing Japanese ran flush into the 1st Battalion's machine guns and a battle started that did not end until the next day when the Japanese withdrew. The main body of the 148th, however, running low on water and carrying over 100 wounded men, was still cut off. On July 31, as the 148th fought its way along the trail, Private Rodger Young single-handedly destroyed a Japanese machine gun that had pinned down an entire platoon, but at the cost of his life. His platoon was able to withdraw safely and he was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor for his self-sacrifice. (In 1945, Frank Loesser wrote a ballad about Young that became a popular hit — see *After the Battle* No. 72, page 53.) The day after Young was killed, the 148th rejoined the American lines.

All along the front, Japanese resistance was weakening as Sasaki began to withdraw his troops. On July 29, a staff officer from 8th Fleet had arrived at Munda with orders for Sasaki to withdraw to a line extending from Munda Point north-east thus giving up the airfield. Sasaki and his officers argued for withdrawing even farther, but were overruled. With the Japanese defensive positions only lightly manned, the American forces found the going easier. In the south, the 43rd (with the 169th now relieving the 172nd) fought its way through what was left of Les

Gill's Lambeti Plantation and reached the edge of the airfield by August 1. In the north, the 37th had reached Bibilo Hill. During the next three days, the remaining Japanese were cleared from their caves in Bibilo and Kokenggolo Hills and, on August 5, the assault troops were finally able to take a bath in the sea. One month to the day after the Fijian scouts located Sasaki's first trail block on the upper Barike, Munda Field belonged to the Allies.

The prize seemed hardly worth the effort. Unused by the Japanese and churned by shells and bombs, one of the first Seabees on

the scene remarked later that 'I wasn't sure whether we were on the field or not'. But as *Yank* correspondent Morriss put it, 'the Army took Munda field and went on fighting, the Navy put Munda into operation and went on working'. By August 7, the 73rd and 24th Seabees had the field in good enough condition for emergency landings; by August 13 it was ready for use as a base. Next day, two marine fighter squadrons, VMF 123 and VMF 124, flew their Corsairs into Munda. It was the beginning of the transformation of Munda into one of the largest and most-used airbases in the South Pacific.



Although the construction of the bomber base at Munda removed part of Kokenggolo Hill, some of the Japanese caves still remain, this photograph being taken by the author in 1995.



THE JAPANESE WITHDRAWAL FROM NEW GEORGIA

With the airfield lost, the Japanese withdrew from the island of New Georgia. The 13th Infantry and the troops occupying Bairoko escaped to Kolombangara by way of Bairoko; the 229th and other units that had defended Munda withdrew toward Zieta and from there crossed to Banga. The 3rd Battalion, 23rd Infantry, 6th Division, which had been prevented from landing at Munda on August 2 by American bombardment, had landed instead on Banga and begun digging in on the southern part of the island. Sasaki set up his headquarters on Banga on August 7, but moved on next day to Kolombangara.

The American pursuit was slow, the troops hampered as much by the jungle and the heavy equipment they carried as by enemy opposition. Since both the 43rd and 37th Divisions were now badly under strength as a result of the weeks of fighting, the 25th Division made up of the 27th Infantry, which had arrived on August 1 and the 161st which had gone back to its parent division after the fall of Munda, was given the task of driving the Japanese from New Georgia island. The 1st Battalion of the 27th followed by the 161st worked its way up the Munda-Bairoko Trail against very little opposition. By mid-August, the force was converging on Bairoko and on August 25 Bairoko was occupied without bloodshed, the last Japanese escaping by barge on the previous two nights. The 2nd and 3rd Battalions of the 27th advancing toward Zieta with the Fijian scouts in front, faced more organized opposition. A number of sharp fights ensued, but Zieta was taken on August 15 and shortly thereafter, Piru Plantation on the coast (where the 9th Marine Defense Battalion's 155mm 'Long

Above: Seabees of the 73rd and 24th Battalions went to work immediately, often enduring shell-fire from the two 12cm Japanese guns at Banga, to make Munga airfield operational. The Japanese had surfaced the 150ft x 3,000ft runway with coral but the remainder was soft and overgrown with grass. By August 14, the strip was ready, complete with taxiways, and 50 hardstands. (US Navy) Below: Munda Field in 1995 looking west. The small Solomon Airlines plane taking off is dwarfed by the size of the runway.



Toms' were emplaced by September 1 to fire on Vila). Major General J. Lawton Collins, the 25th Division commander, accompanied the 2nd and 3rd Battalions in what was to be his last battle in the South Pacific. The following year, he would command VII Corps in the offensive against Germany.

The 43rd was given the task of taking Banga. Command of the 43rd had been a bit like the game of musical chairs for the past few weeks. Hester, who had commanded the division during most of the campaign, had been relieved because of his health on July 29 by the commander of the Americal Division, Major General John R. Hodge. When

Hodge returned to his own division on August 10, he was replaced by Brigadier General Harold R. Barker, commander of the 43rd Division's artillery, who served until August 21 when he was replaced by Major General Leonard F. Wing, the 43rd Assistant Commander, who was senior to Barker (for the rest of the war, Wing commanded the division, Barker the artillery). The fight for Banga lasted from August 10 until August 20 and ended with the Japanese slipping across to Arundel Island. The two naval guns that had fired on the destroyers on June 30 and then on the American forces on New Georgia were captured.



Left: The guns at Banga Island were finally captured on August 20. Here, one of the 12cm guns is inspected by men of Company A of the 172nd Infantry. (Signal Corps) Above: Fifty years later, Professor Day found the pedestal mount still standing, although the barrel is almost hidden by undergrowth.



The PT — or Patrol Torpedo-boat — was a war-winning tool in the Pacific where the little Elco and Higgins boats caused considerable damage and destruction to Japanese lines of communication. A base was established on New Georgia in Rendova Lagoon as soon as the first troops came ashore on June 30 and, nightly, the PT boats would set out to hunt from the base at Lumbaria, one of the small islands in the lagoon, seen here in a rare photograph made available to the author by Tom White, a member of the New Zealand radar crew stationed on the island at the time. The photograph dates from early August just after Japanese bombers had destroyed two boats at their moorings.

Sasaki, pressed back to Kolombangara, asked for additional troops with which to launch a counter-attack on New Georgia but the Japanese High Command had no intention of attempting to reinforce the area. Twice in early August, destroyer transports had made the run to Kolombangara in both instances using the route through Vella Gulf and Blackett Strait. The first resulted in a famous encounter with American PT boats while the second ended in disaster.

As we have seen, the first American PT base in New Georgia had been established on the islands of Lumbaria and Bau which formed part of Rendova Harbor. In addition to Squadron 9 which came in with the assault troops, Squadrons 5 and 10 arrived in July, followed by Squadron 11 in August. From the latter part of July to the end of the campaign, the PT boats were on the hunt almost nightly for Japanese barges that trafficked up and down the coasts of Kolombangara and the surrounding islands with cargos of troops and supplies. Torpedoes were useless against the shallow draft barges and the PTs began carrying 37mm cannon for added fire-power. Even then, barge hunting was a dangerous business. On more than one occasion, PT

boats going in at high speed to attack the barges hugging the shore ran into concentrated fire from Japanese shore positions or grounded on an unmarked reef. On the night of September 6/7 for example, PTs 118 and 172 hit a reef at such speed that PT 172 put 50 feet of the reef astern before stopping and PT 118 grounded up to her stern. The crews were saved, but the boats had to be destroyed.

Air attack, both by enemy planes and on occasion by friendly planes, accounted for the loss of PT boats, planes and casualties among the crews. One such case of mistaken identity occurred at dawn on September 30 when one of three Corsairs attacked PT 126 wounding one officer and killing two men. PT 126 returned the fire and shot down the Corsair.

To prevent mishaps resulting from mistaken identity, the PT boats were kept out of the combat area when Allied destroyers were operating. As a result, only one major confrontation between PT boats and Japanese destroyers occurred, this on the night of August 1/2 when the Japanese, avoiding Kula Gulf, sent four destroyers by way of Vela Gulf and Blackett Strait to Vila.

Fifteen boats from Rendova made the interception. The action itself was confused and ineffective; while at different times eight boats fired torpedoes, no damage whatsoever was done the enemy ships. But what happened next became one of the most celebrated events of World War II. The destroyers had unloaded and were returning at high speed through Blackett Strait when *Amagiri* which was leading *Hagikaze*, *Arashi* and *Shigure*, collided with PT 109 commanded by Lieutenant (jg.) John F. Kennedy. Two men were killed and the rest were rescued with the help of the natives a week after the incident. Two weeks later, the episode was a page one story in the *New York Times* — 'Kennedy's Son is Hero in Pacific' — and before the war ended the incident had been skillfully publicised into a valuable political asset. (See *After the Battle* No. 9.)

The collision also brought *Amagiri* good fortune — at least for a time. Her bow was damaged and this probably saved her from the disaster that befell the other destroyers a few nights later. Heartened by the success of the August 1 mission, the Japanese decided to repeat it on August 6 and with *Kawakaze* replacing *Amagiri*, the four destroyers entered Vella Gulf shortly before midnight with replacements for the 13th Infantry on board. The moon had set and the sky was completely overcast; depending on the frequent rain squalls, visibility varied from 3,000 to 4,000 yards. Hidden against the blackness of Kolombangara were Destroyer Division Twelve — *Maury*, *Craven* and *Dunlap* — and Destroyer Division Fifteen — *Lang*, *Sterett*, and *Stack* — under the command of Commander Frederick Moosbrugger. Division Twelve which was leading fired 24 torpedoes at the unsuspecting Japanese ships and then took evasive action to avoid any enemy torpedoes and to bring it into firing position later. At the same time, Division Fifteen was coming up on the port bow of the Japanese destroyers with guns ready. In minutes the battle was over. At 2346, explosions rocked the three leading Japanese destroyers as Division Twelve's torpedoes struck home and immediately Division Fifteen swung right to cut across the Japanese course and opened fire with all guns. At roughly 2351, *Kawakaze* turned over and sank and shortly after midnight *Hagikaze* and *Arashi* followed her. Some 200-300 Japanese made it to Vella Lavella, more than 1,500 soldiers and sailors perished. Only *Shigure* which had been lagging behind survived to tell the tale. The near-perfect action on the part of the American destroyers went into the history books as the Battle of Vella.



It was from the Lumbaria base that John Kennedy set out in PT 109 on the night of August 1/2. Left: Motor Machinists Mate Harold Marney was in the forward turret when the collision with *Amagiri* occurred after which he was never seen again.



Back at the PT base in August 1943, his shipmates named a pier in his honour and erected this sign. (PT Boats, Inc.) Right: The Solomon islanders who own the island maintain Lumbaria today as a tourist attraction.



Men of the 3rd Battalion, 27th Infantry, crossing from Arundel to Sagakarasa Island on September 13, in the final mopping up operations against the Japanese in the area. (Signal Corps)

THE ISOLATION OF KOLOMBANGARA

Throughout the campaign, the Japanese had been preoccupied with the defence of Kolombangara. Before the battle for Munda, the bulk of the Japanese forces had been concentrated there and, when the attack on the airfield had begun, been fed into the battle unit by unit. Following the withdrawal from the island of New Georgia, the Japanese forces were once again concentrated there. To the Japanese command, the volcanic island whose name in the Roviana language means 'King of the Waters' appeared to be the next logical place to make a stand against the Allied advance up the Solomons. Vella Lavella, the north-western-most of the New Georgia group, was left unoccupied despite the fact that at Barakoma on the south-eastern tip, there was an excellent airfield site. Only a few hundred Japanese — survivors from the débâcle of Vella Gulf — were on the island.

Halsey, on the other hand, alarmed at the time consumed by the yard by yard advance on New Georgia, proposed on July 11 that the Allies isolate Kolombangara. A Northern Force under Admiral Wilkinson would seize Vella Lavella and build an airfield there while Griswold's New Georgia Occupation Force would occupy Arundel Island and bring Vila under the guns of the American artillery. During the last weeks of July and the first of August, reconnaissance parties landed on Vella Lavella and on August 15, the first of a succession of transports began landing the invasion force consisting of the 35th Regimental Combat Team (25th Infantry Division), the 4th Marine Defense Battalion, the 58th Seabees, and a Naval Base unit with its boat pool at Barakoma. There was no resistance on the ground, but the Japanese attempted, unsuccessfully, to destroy the landing force from the air. Marine fighters from Munda, the anti-aircraft guns of the 4th Marine Defense Battalion, and those on the destroyers and landing craft, broke up the attacks before any major damage was done. A defensive perimeter was quickly established and construction started on the airfield.

At first, the Japanese command at Rabaul disagreed as to how to react to Halsey's move. The navy apparently first argued for a counter-landing to be made using one battalion. The army, correctly estimating the

Allied strength to be much larger than this, replied that a landing in such force would be 'like pouring water on a hot stone'. In the end, facing the fact that the New Georgia group was becoming untenable, the Japanese command decided to send in a force of infantry and naval personal to establish a barge base on the north-eastern tip of Vella Lavella at Horaniu in Kokolope Bay and thus provide a link in the evacuation route from Kolombangara. The plan was executed on the night of August 17/18 when Rear-Admiral Matsui Ijuin put to sea with four destroyers to escort the barges to Vella Lavella. Early on, the Japanese force was spotted and four American destroyers under Captain Thomas J. Ryan headed out to meet them. As the two forces converged, both were aware of the other's presence and while TBFs bombed Ijuin's ships, Japanese float planes harassed the Americans. Ijuin's manoeuvres to keep away from a trap such as had been sprung earlier in the Battle of Vella Gulf and at the same time lure the Americans away from the barges was largely successful and the bulk of the landing force

made Vella Lavella and no Japanese destroyer was lost. When the 'action' was over, both sides were left puzzled, the Japanese as to why the Americans had not concentrated on the barges to the exclusion of all else, the Americans as to why the Japanese had 'fled' without offering a fight.

The Japanese base at Horaniu, however, was short-lived. Late in August, the Vella Lavella ground commander, Colonel Everett E. Brown (35th Infantry), asked for reinforcements and received the 1st Battalion, 145th Infantry. When it arrived on August 31, he used it to replace the 1st Battalion, 35th Infantry, which he sent up the east coast of the island. Using landing craft for transportation and supply, the Americans met little resistance and with the Japanese retreating toward the north-western tip of the island, occupied Horaniu on September 14. On September 18, elements of the New Zealand 3rd Division under Major-General H. E. Barrowclough, including 14th Brigade under Brigadier Leslie Potter, landed on Vella Lavella. Barrowclough assumed command of the Northern Landing force and Potter's brigade (a New Zealand brigade was built around three infantry battalions and so was comparable to an American RCT) was given the task of clearing the island of Japanese. Potter began a pincers movement on September 21, with 37th Battalion moving from Horaniu around the east coast and 35th Battalion moving up the west coast. Fierce fighting resulted in early October as the pincers closed and the Japanese found themselves squeezed into a pocket at Marquana Bay on the north-west coast.

Meanwhile, the second part of Halsey's move against Kolombangara had begun on August 27 when the 172nd Infantry crossed to Arundel and landed without opposition. Two reinforced companies were sent on long-range patrols, one up the west coast and the other up the east coast. The west coast appeared to be free of enemy troops, but the patrol working its way up the east coast ran into strong Japanese resistance on September 1 just north of Stima Lagoon on the north-east shore of the island. Here the Japanese would make their stand. Sasaki, his plan to launch a counter-attack on Munda cancelled by his superiors in Rabaul, had not been made aware of the decision to evacuate the central Solomons. Consequently, he made plans to defend what the Japanese still held, assigning the defence of Kolombangara to the 8th Combined SNLF (6th Kure the western sector, 7th Yokosuka the eastern) and what was left of the 229th Infantry (Jack Harbor), sending the 2nd Battalion, 45th



The author came by canoe, in water often so shallow that he had to get out and wade, to visit the same location in 1995.



Infantry, to Gizo, and beginning in late August, the 1st and 2nd Battalions, 13th Infantry, to Arundel to halt the American advance. Holding the high ground on north-east Arundel just across from Sagekarasa Island, the 13th Infantry put up such stout resistance that Griswold was forced to send in part of the 169th Infantry, all of the 27th Infantry, the tanks of the 11th Marine Defense Battalion, and a 4.2-inch mortar unit. The marine tanks went into action on September 17 and were effective against the Japanese defences.

That same evening, Colonel Bin Tomonari, the commander of the 13th Infantry, was killed by shell-fire as he received the report of one of his officers. Next day, the tanks tried again but this time the Japanese had put a 37mm anti-tank gun in place and two tanks were knocked out and the attack stalled. For the first time in many months, a Japanese veteran wrote, he and his comrades were able to hold their guns high and shout 'banzai'. But, he added, everyone realised that it was not the same 'banzai' they had shouted in China, that it was only a small victory. He was, of course, correct. Next morning, the marine tanks with good infantry support attacked again and this time drove the Japanese from their positions. With a suicide squad continuing to fight, the bulk of the Japanese withdrew to Kolombangara on the night of September 20/21.

Airpower 1. By October, Munga Field had added considerably to US airpower in the Pacific and, by December, the 47th Naval Construction Battalion, 828th Aviation Engineers, and 131st Army Engineers had extended the runway to 8,000 feet and completed the transformation into a heavy bomber base. (US Navy)



Professor Day had to climb a tree on Kokenggolo Hill in order to photograph a small segment of the west end of the field.



Airpower 2. Major Gregory 'Pappy' Boyington, commander of VMF 214 — the famed 'Black Sheep' Squadron — in his F4U Corsair at the newly-constructed airfield on Vella Lavella on December 27, 1943. A few days later, on January 3, 1944, he was shot down, but not before he had downed the planes that

were to make him the leading Marine ace of the war. Boyington was picked up by a Japanese submarine and spent the rest of the war in a Japanese prison camp. The popular American television series *Baa, Baa Black Sheep* (1976) claimed to be based on the exploits of the squadron. (US Navy)



Sergeant Dil Ferris, a photographer on the staff of *Yank*, took this photograph of Munda cemetery on a Sunday morning in the late spring of 1944. It was used to illustrate the article by Sergeant Barrett McGurn titled 'Munda: One Year Later' in the issue of September 15 that year. (Signal Corps)

THE JAPANESE EVACUATION

The Japanese were in fact preparing to evacuate the New Georgia group. The Allied airbase at Barakoma on Vella Lavella was nearing completion (it became operational on September 27) and Seabees were hard at work constructing a fighter strip and a naval base at Ondonga on the eastern shore of the Diamond Narrows. The Allied vise was clamping shut. On September 15, Sasaki was notified by a naval officer who arrived at Kolombangara that he and all of his troops were to be evacuated.

In preparation, all Japanese troops were withdrawn from Gizo and the surrounding islands as well as Arundel. Using destroyers which could make the run from Bougainville and back in a night and numerous barges which could make neighbouring Choiseul under cover of darkness, the Japanese waited for the dark of the moon (October 1/2 would be moonless). Then on the nights of September 28/29, October 1/2, and October 2/3, the mass transports left Kolombangara, the troops taking with them a few day's rations and leaving behind all their heavy weapons.

Correctly anticipating that the Japanese would move during the dark of the moon, American cruisers and destroyers searched the sea north and north-west of Vella Lavella. Success was limited. To keep mishaps from occurring because of mistaken identity, the PT boats were kept out of the area. After September 25, the fear of enemy submarines also caused the Allies to withhold the light cruisers. For their part, the Japanese waged a masterful campaign to confuse and harass the American destroyers and distract their attention from the barges. Surface units sortied and after being spotted, withdrew; float planes were as determined as flies over a spoil, dropping flares and an occasional bomb to keep the Allied destroyers pre-occupied with a possible air attack. On September 29, nonetheless, with no moon and visibility at 3,000 yards, four destroyers sank some barges caught off the coast of Kolombangara. During the night of October 1/2, American destroyers wreaked havoc on the Japanese barges until the 'water was thick with bodies', but a PBY sighting of Japanese destroyers lured the Americans away in a futile search. The night of October 2/3 was a repeat performance. Sources conflict and the numbers can only be considered approximate in the broadest sense of the term, but it seems likely that the Japanese succeeded in evacuating safely about 9,000 men while losing about 1,000.

OCTOBER 6/7, 1943

On the morning of October 6, 1st Battalion, 27th Infantry, landed on Kolombangara at Ringgi Cove just west of Vila. Patrols headed east but found nothing but abandoned guns and a few Japanese who had been left behind. One prisoner who first claimed to be a Korean cook for the 45th Infantry and later admitted that he was a Superior Private in the 6th Engineer Regiment, 6th Division, said that he had heard that the Americans killed all prisoners. This was why he had lied at first.

But the battle for New Georgia was destined to end not with a whimper but with a bang. That night the Japanese determined to evacuate their men from Vella Lavella where they were pinned in on Maraziana point between the New Zealand 35th and 37th Battalions. Six destroyers under Ijuin escorting a group of three destroyer transports and a group of sub-chasers and smaller craft made the attempt. Ijuin's force was spotted late in the afternoon, but the Americans had only three destroyers under Captain Frank R. Walker available, the rest being commit-

ted to convoy duty. Wilkinson ordered Walker to head for Vella Lavella and detached three additional destroyers under Captain Harold O. Larson from a convoy south of New Georgia and ordered them to the area. Walker, as expected, arrived before Larson, and at about an hour before midnight, the battle began between *Selfridge*, *O'Bannon*, and *Chevalier* on the one side and *Yugumo*, *Kazegumo*, *Isokaze*, *Akigumo* on the other (*Shigure* and *Samidare* had not yet joined up). The Americans drew first blood as gun-fire reduced *Yugumo* to a flaming wreck, but minutes later a torpedo from the latter made a fatal hit on *Chevalier*. *O'Bannon* collided with *Chevalier* and although the damage was not great, she too was out of the action. Only *Selfridge* was left and a few minutes later, she took a torpedo from the spread fired by *Shigure* and *Samidare*. By this time, Japanese planes had spotted Larson coming up from the south, reporting the force as cruisers; Ijuin turned away and headed for home. Larson arrived too late to take part in the battle, but assisted in picking up survivors from *Chevalier* and helping with the cripples. No one on the American side was aware that the Japanese sub-chasers had slipped in and taken off the almost 600 Japanese trapped by the New Zealanders. Next morning at dawn, four PT boats arrived to pick up survivors. A group from *Yugumo* were face down on the deck of *PT 163* when one was able to grab the gun of an American sailor and kill him as the latter gave him a drink of water. The Japanese sailor and three of his confederates were shot immediately. So ended the Battle of Vella Lavella as it was officially called.

And with it the battle for New Georgia. At a cost of slightly over 1,000 men killed and almost 4,000 wounded (to which must be added the casualties suffered by air and naval personnel as well as several thousand non-combat casualties due to disease and fatigue), the Allies had tightened the noose on Rabaul. Remember Halsey's words: 'Munda was blocking our path to Bougainville, Bougainville was blocking our path to Rabaul, and Rabaul was the keystone of the whole Japanese structure in the southern Pacific.'

The valiant but costly Japanese effort in New Georgia — XIV Corps counted almost 2,500 Japanese dead exclusive of Vella Lavella, and losses at sea and in the air would raise the total considerably — had largely been in vain. . . .



The cemetery site is known locally as Christmas Hill. After the war, the remains of the dead were removed. Only the memories of the local people and the concrete foundation of the altar used in services, which is hidden in the thick undergrowth to the left in the picture, testify to the fact that here hundreds of Allied soldiers were once laid to rest.