Never Raised to Be a Soldier

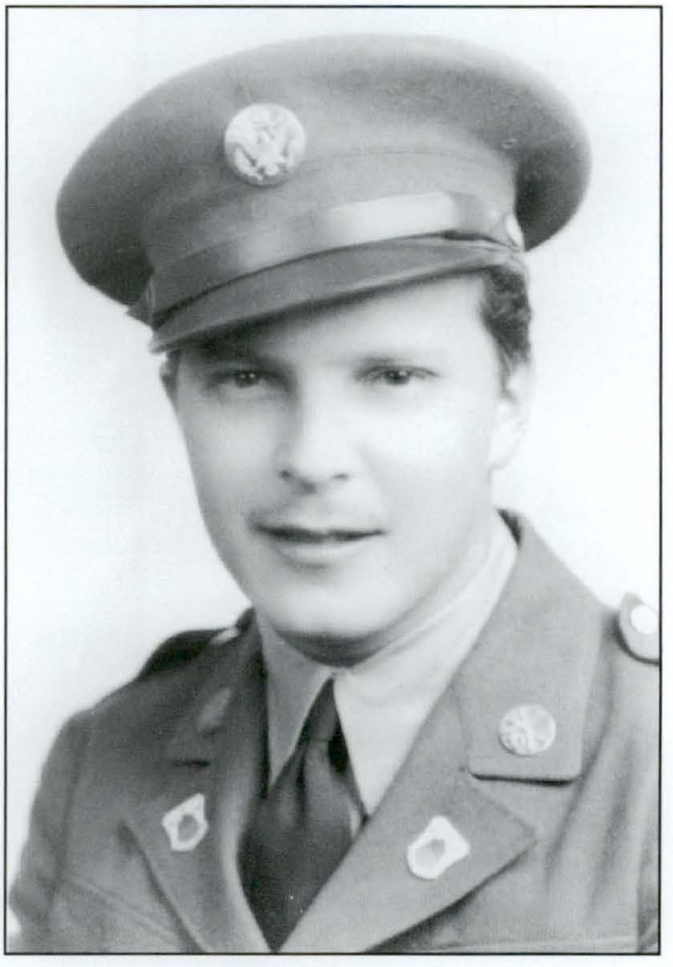
John Hagen's Memoir of Service with the 164th Infantry, 1941-1943 (Part One)

by John Hagen
Edited and annotated by Terry L. Shoptaugh

Editor's Note:
Unless otherwise indicated, all of Hagen's remarks quoted here are taken from tape recordings of his memoirs of World War II. Some readers may be offended by Hagen's reference to the Japanese soldiers as "Japs" and his use of curse words, but we decided it was editorially important to render the terms as he used them or remembered the conversations of others. The second part of this memoir will appear in the next issue, Spring 1999.

When the 164th Infantry Regiment went into action at Guadalcanal in 1942, it was one of the first United States Army units sent into action in the first American offensive in the Pacific war. From its arrival in October through February 1943, the 164th, which was made up mostly of men from North Dakota, distinguished itself in combat. After its first major action in October, Major General Archer A. Vandegrift, the marine commander of the Guadalcanal operation, publicly praised the 164th's 3rd battalion, commanded by Colonel Robert Hall, for standing "the test of battle" and demonstrating "an overwhelming superiority over the enemy." In 1948 historian Fletcher Pratt also praised the "largely Scandinavian farmers of the Dakotas" in the 164th for being "very good" fighting men. Subsequent books and articles have also commended the combat record of the 164th at Guadalcanal.[1]

The remarkable performance of the 164th came as a surprise to American military commanders. Rear Admiral Robert Ghormley, the theater commander for the Solomons area, sent the 164th to Guadalcanal to reinforce the 1st Marine Division, but doubted that the soldiers were ready for serious battle. Throughout October, President Franklin Roosevelt worried about the situation on the island. He told a representative of the Allied powers that it seemed "questionable" that the marines and soldiers could hold. On the 24th of the



John Hagen, during basic training at Camp Claiborne, Louisiana, in 1941. He was born on June 8, 1918, in Fargo, and died on November 21, 1985, in Spokane, Washington. After his military service on Guadalcanal and in the Army Air Force in Italy, he graduated from the University of North Dakota and the Palmer College of Chiropractic. He married, and he and his wife Geraldine had four sons. Courtesy of Terry L. Shoptaugh.

month, at the same time Colonel Hall's battalion was fighting for its life, Roosevelt ordered the Joint Chiefs to get "every possible weapon" to Guadalcanal.[2]

Today, more than fifty years after that great battle, it is often forgotten that in 1942 the men of the 164th were almost entirely amateurs in the arts of war. The core of the regiment was made up of the men of North Dakota's national guard companies. Their officers, as Fletcher Pratt noted, were "over-age for their rank, lacking field experience, willing to do their duty but not [yet] realizing that wars are won by people who do more." At Guadalcanal, the 164th faced veteran Japanese troops, units that had fought with great success in China and had swept over the western Pacific in the months after Pearl Harbor. Americans believed that the average Japanese soldier had been raised since birth to be a warrior. Virtually no North Dakota mother of the 1920s and 1930s had raised her son to be a soldier. As historian William Manchester pointed out in his memoir of military experience in World War II, most American GIs were very young and away from home for the first time in their lives. Manchester wrote,

> Not one of us, I think, comprehended how all this training would end on battlefields, why we were being taught monstrous things. Our thoughts and our life-styles were still largely civilian . . . we whistled popular songs . . . and shot the breeze much as we would have done at home.[3]

The memoir reproduced here, by a member of the 164th's 3rd battalion, echoes the words of Manchester. The author John Hagen had joined the North Dakota National Guard in 1940, and taped his memoir forty years later, in 1980, at the request of his nephew, Peter Geib. Hagen's military record was unusual in that he served in combat in both the Pacific and in Europe, first as an ordinary soldier at Guadalcanal, then as a pilot-officer in Italy. The excerpts here concern his service in the Pacific.[4] Hagen's memoir is a spirited reflection of a young man, a civilian to his marrow, who got more than he bargained for when he joined Fargo's guard unit.

Olaf J. Hagen, M.D., about 1940. Born in 1872 in Wisconsin and raised near Fort Abercrombie, D.T., Olaf became a schoolteacher, then studied medicine. By the 1920s he was well known in medical circles, was on the Board of Regents for the University of Minnesota, and was active in politics. In 1940 he ran for the U.S. Senate in Minnesota but lost in the Republican primary. Courtesy of Terry L. Shoptaugh.

John Hagen was born in Moorhead, Minnesota, in 1918. His father, Dr. Olaf Hagen, was a noted physician and surgeon in Minnesota through the first half of the twentieth century. John grew up in more comfortable circumstances than many of his depression-era friends. But his was hardly an easy childhood. John's mother died when he was thirteen. Since Dr. Hagen's work necessitated frequent travel, John and his siblings spent much of their time with housekeepers. Years later, John observed that the family "was broken up when my mother died." As he grew to manhood, John was shy and somewhat insecure. His sister Harriet remembers him in those years as "a very humble person." This was in marked contrast to Dr. Hagen's youngest son, Jim. Everyone who met Jim Hagen remembered him as a "beautiful child," and he grew into an attractive, bright, and charming young man. Jim was, in his sister's words, "very handsome and tall, and just very gregarious, and people paid attention to Jimmy so quickly that I think John always felt like he was sort of the 'background child.'"[5]

After John graduated from high school in Moorhead, he spent about three years listlessly trying to find his way. He went to the Milwaukee School of Engineering

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1. A. A. Vandegrift, *Once a Marine* (New York, W. W. Norton, 1964), 186-188. Fletcher Pratt, *The Marines War* (New York: William Sloane Associates, 1948), 87-88. Some 164th veterans have been less pleased with Pratt's reference to the soldiers as "big burley men, a little slow on the uptake." Jerry Cooper, *Citizens as Soldiers: A History of the North Dakota National Guard* (Fargo: Institute for Regional Studies, 1986) has the most recent detailed study of the 164th at Guadalcanal.

2. Eric Larrabee, *Commander in Chief: Franklin Delano Roosevelt, His Lieutenants, and Their War* (New York, Harper and Row, 1987), 290-293.

3. Pratt, 88.; William Manchester, *Goodbye Darkness* (New York: Little Brown, 1980), 126.

4. Copies of the original tapes-twenty-two hours of narration altogether-were deposited by Hagen's sister, Harriet Hagen Geib, in the collections of the Northwest Minnesota History Center at Moorhead State University (hereafter NMHC) in 1994.

5. Harriet Hagen Geib, interview with the editor, June 11, 1997, Oral History Collection, NMHC, 8.

to study radio, but, by his own admission, spent little time in class: "Frankly, it turned me off, especially the people who were trying to teach it." Leaving Milwaukee about 1937, he tried Concordia College in Moorhead, then the University of North Dakota in Grand Forks. Neither school held his interest. Instead, he found that he preferred to hang out with his friends from Moorhead and Fargo, meeting them at one of the local taverns, having a few beers, and generally "pooping around," as he called it. John showed promise in music. He had an excellent tenor voice, and, at one point, Dr. Hagen sent him to France to study with a noted voice teacher. But this too failed to take.

In the fall of 1940 John hit on the idea of letting the military provide some direction to his life. As he remembered it, this thought came out of his love of flying:

> ✪ Back home I ran into my friend, old Stub Comrie. . . . We were out at the airport pooping around in these little Piper airplanes, flying around. Stub loved to fly and so did I. We would go out and rent an airplane, take it up. And we always went in an area where they couldn't see us and turn that thing loose. We would try to scare each other. We always managed to come back home. Then we got the bright idea that these Canadians needed some hot pilots, not realizing that we were not that hot. We thought we would give bodies to the cause.

John and his friend Comrie went to Winnipeg and tried to enlist in the Canadian Air Force. After passing the physical examination and other tests, they were both accepted. "So we signed there and then and they told us that we were to report in six weeks to Brandon, Manitoba, where we would start our initial flight training in Gypsy Tiger Moths. These were old biplanes with a 90-horsepower engine in it. It hauled two people around in the sky at the terrific speed of 87 miles an hour." Back home, John told his dad of his plans. Dr. Hagen was stunned and told him, "Thataboy, John, just throw yourself away." But John simply said he wanted to fly and made his plans to leave for Canada.

What happened next is a little unclear. As John remembered it, he decided to make the rounds and say goodbye to several of his friends:

> ✪ I met up with Ozzie Frederickson, Jimmy Bruso, Saul Horwitz and those boys. These boys were National Guard fellows from Fargo in the Headquarters Company, 164th infantry. They were having guard drill on a Monday night at seven o'clock, as I recall. It was Monday afternoon about three o'clock. . . . [a time when a trip to] the Bison Tavern was the thing to do. We buzzed in there with all of their gear. We had about a $1.75 apiece. Saul and Ozzie knew the owner of that place and we proceeded to get juiced. [Laughter] To show you how this demon rum will take away your perspective, destroying the ideas you've already formulated and acted on: The Bison Tavern was only a block and a half from the Fargo Armory and I was going to wait there until the boys got done with drill. I didn't think I could get out of that [Canadian] boat I was in anyway. Besides, they insisted I go with them. "We're going to show you what this [Guard duty] is all about," they said.
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> They had already planned this in their minds. I found this out much later down in Louisiana, where you could stand knee-deep in mud and still have dust blowing in your face. So, the boys escorted me down there, and we were all in pretty good shape. Captain [Arthur] Narum and Lieutenant Carter were there.[6] I was sitting on the edge watching all of this take place. . . . It wasn't long before everybody fell out to attend to their different duties as the headquarters company. They had signal corps, a message center, and everything. They would write out these little messages and a guy would run across the room and deliver them. He would get the message and get on his

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6. Arthur Narum, of Fargo, subsequently went to Guadalcanal with Hagen and the 164th Infantry. There he was stricken with jaundice and eventually sent home with the rank of major. See also, "Major Narum, Ill in Hospital, Describes Ordeal in Pacific," Fargo *Forum*, November 22, 1942.

7. In 1993 William S. Boyd, another member of the North Dakota National Guard, and a friend of John Hagen, commented on Hagen's description of how he joined up: "That does ring a bell. It is probably true. I can't say positively, but that does sound like what really happened. I wouldn't say we got him drunk, but let's say we softened him up a little. We took advantage of his youth and innocence." William S. Boyd, interview with the editor, August 20, 1993, Oral History Collection, NMHC, 9. I also asked Boyd if Dr. Olaf Hagen had "suggested" to him and other guard members that perhaps John could be "persuaded" to join the guard instead of the Canadian Air Force. Boyd smiled, but declined to comment. When the guard was called up to federal service in early 1941, Boyd promised Dr. Hagen he would "look after" John, and indeed over the months penned Dr. Hagen several notes, often at the end of John's letters to his father.

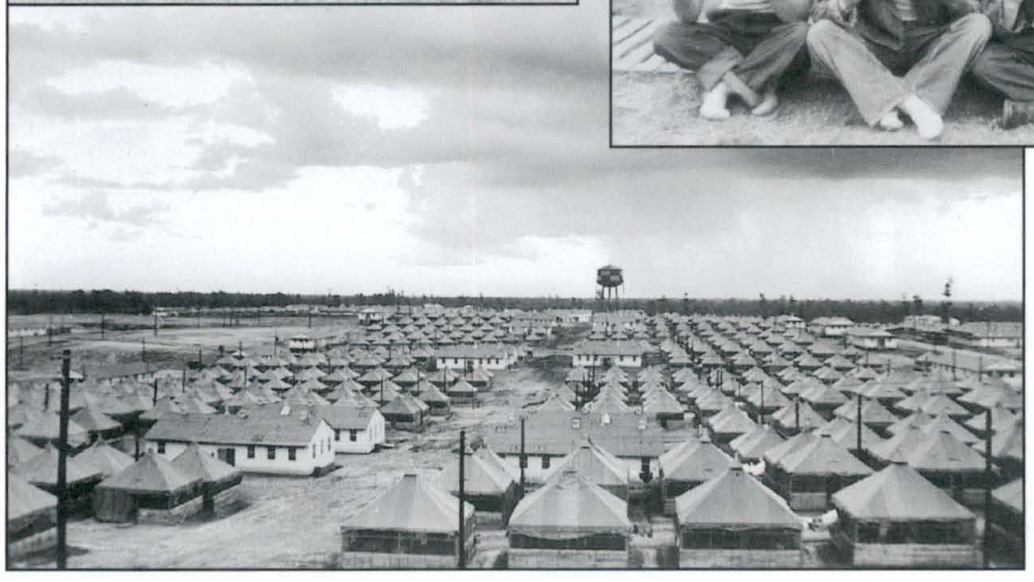
8. Boyd interview, 6; William Hagen, interview with the editor, April 5, 1991, Oral History Collection, NMHC, 4. When the North Dakota guard left for federal service in February 1941, William Hagen went with Company B to Louisiana. He would have graduated from high school three months later, but the war prevented him from completing his education until 1945. See Robert Bruce Sligh, *The National Guard and National Defense: The Mobilization of the Guard in World War II* (New York: Praeger Press, 1992) for background on the federalization of guard units.

radio and send the message back to the other guy. He would write it down and the other guy would run back over there again. It looked like so much fun! They had these hand-cranking generators. And they started working on me. "Would you like to come over and try your hand at cranking one of these generators?" they asked me. I told them I did not want to be electrocuted, I was too young. This went on for an hour or an hour and a half. Finally, the boys came and bodily took me into the orderly room. They said, "We have a new recruit." They had already made everything out on the forms the best they could. They started asking me questions and were very vociferous about it. I figured to be a good fellow I could sign up for a while. They said I "could get out anytime" and all of this. So, anyway, here I was, a boy from Minnesota, hooked up with a North Dakota outfit and still belonging to the Canadians. How do you like that? Once the Canadians knew the story, they cut me loose.[7]

As the son of a prominent physician, John was not your typical national guard private. A large number of men who enlisted as privates in the guard in the 1930s did so out of financial need. William Boyd, a friend of both John and Dr. Hagen, joined the North Dakota guard in 1935 "because it was an additional income. I couldn't get into the Headquarters Company [at first]. It was full, mostly college students at that time. I got into Company B and later on I transferred into Headquarters." A Fargo high school student, William Hagen (no relation to John) joined Company B of the guard in 1940; he was just seventeen at the time. "There were three or four of us guys that needed a little extra money," he explained when asked why he joined. "We thought it would be a good thing to do, a patriotic thing to do. There was [also] talk about going in for a year and then avoiding the draft that way. I think that was one of the main reasons we joined."[8] John, by contrast, had no need for the money that the guard offered. Rather, his remarks suggest that, having failed to find his niche in several educational programs, what he wanted most of all in 1940 was to find somewhere he could feel he belonged.

But he never had a chance to experience the camaraderie of a national guard unit in peacetime. Barely a month after John signed up, the North Dakota guard units were activated for federal duty. Early in 1941 the

Below: Camp Claiborne, Louisiana, 1941. Men from Company C, 1st Battalion of the 164th Infantry Regiment, spent basic training at Camp Claiborne. The home station of Company C was Grafton, North Dakota.



Top right (l-r): W. Sevigny, E. Anderson, K. Axvig, and Griffin. Top left (l-r): A. McLean, G. Anderson, unidentified, W. Anderson. Military photographs in this article are courtesy of North Dakota National Guard Historical Holding and Archives [NDNGHH&A].

unit set off for basic training at Camp Claiborne in Louisiana. "I can remember when they loaded us on the train. We were all in full dress uniform, our B[arracks]-bags full of our winter underwear and bottles of whiskey."

The guardsmen—civilians at heart—were at Camp Claiborne when Pearl Harbor was attacked in December. On hearing this, John's first thought was "Where the hell is Pearl Harbor?" Within days, the soldiers were out of Louisiana and headed for California. A few months of garrison duty followed. At one point, John and some of his friends were detailed to guard an armory up in Washington. Then, in mid-March 1942, the newly organized 164th Infantry Regiment was sent to the Southwest Pacific Theater.[9]

The 164th settled in on the island of New Caledonia. The joint military authorities of the Southwest Pacific Theater had feared that the Japanese would stage landings south of the Solomon Islands chain, cutting off Australia. It was an accurate estimate of Japanese intentions. In May 1942 Japanese naval landing forces established posts in the southern Solomons. In early June they sent patrols to Guadalcanal, and soon began construction of an airfield on that large tropical island.

Once the Australian and American military planners became aware of the situation in the southern Solomons, they accelerated plans of their own and prepared a landing at Guadalcanal, to be carried out by the 1st Marine Division. The objective was to seize and hold the Japanese airfield. The invasion plan was a hurried affair, and the Allies were well aware that supplying the marines, once they had established a beachhead, would be difficult. But the situation left them no choice. The marines landed on Guadalcanal, seized and completed the airfield, named it Henderson Field, then settled into a perimeter to defend it. Although the marine division was well trained and had a hard core of old veterans on hand to lead in the coming battles, their supply situation was tenuous. The navy did not have enough ships or aircraft to control the sea around the Solomons. The Japanese began landing veteran units on the island at night.

The Japanese were not slow to use these troops. On September 13 a "scratch force" of troops, commanded by Major General Kiyotake Kawaguchi, attacked the marine positions on a ridge south of the airfield. Their objective was to overrun the marine positions and seize Henderson Field. Cut off from their supplies, lacking air protection, the marines would have had little choice but to surrender. But the marines tore the Japanese attack apart, inflicting heavy casualties in the battle of "Bloody Ridge." The Japanese thus found it necessary to send more troops to Guadalcanal, a process that took several weeks.

The marines, meanwhile, were learning what a tropical environment could do to troops. By late September, nearly a thousand men of the 1st Marine Division had been evacuated from the island, victims of malaria, skin infections, various fevers, and other illnesses. The jungle was inflicting more casualties than the Japanese, and the marines needed reinforcements if they were to deal with another Japanese assault. On October 11 a force of American cruisers and destroyers turned back a Japanese cruiser force short of its goal of shelling the marine positions on the island. This victory permitted the reinforcement of the marine division by the 164th.[10]

This was the background behind the decisions that sent John Hagen and his buddies to Guadalcanal. Military service was already having its impact on Hagen. The knowledge that he would see combat before 1942 was over was making him more introspective, as witnessed in his letter home, dated June 1:

> ✪ Eight more days and I'll be 24 years old. Hard to realize that I'm that old. Not very far ahead for that age am I? Guess I haven't used my head.

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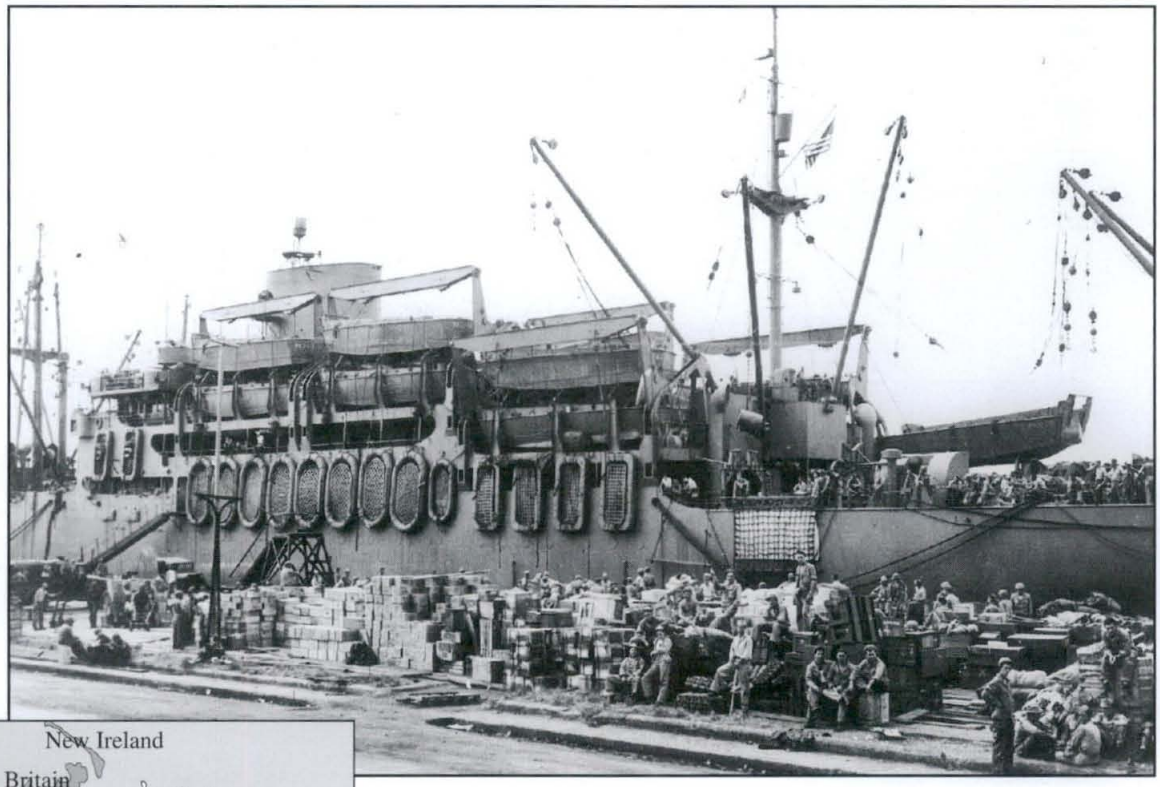
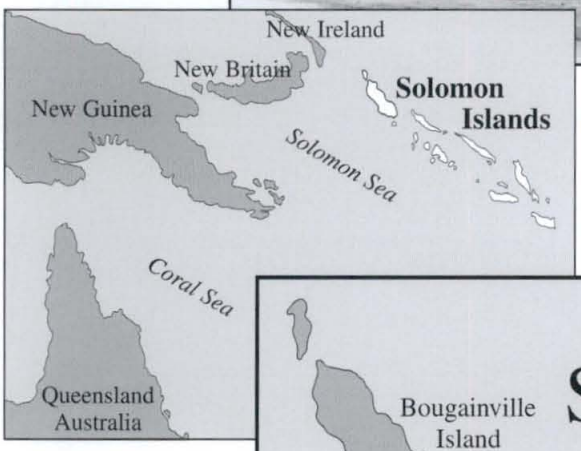
9. In April 1942, the members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff divided the Pacific war into two commands, one for the army, one for the navy. The Pacific Ocean Area was commanded by Admiral Chester Nimitz, and divided into three zones: the North, South, and Central Pacific Areas. The Southwest Pacific Area was commanded by General of the Army Douglas MacArthur. Guadalcanal was at that time in MacArthur's theater of operations. But when the Joint Chiefs agreed to challenge the Japanese for control of the island, MacArthur had no troops to spare for the task. Therefore, in August, the Joint Chiefs moved the boundary of MacArthur's command one degree west and placed Guadalcanal under Nimitz's command. The 164th came to Pacific in March, intended to be within MacArthur's command, but when they were sent to Guadalcanal to reinforce the 1st Marine Division, they quickly came under the command of Nimitz's subordinate, Vice-Admiral William F. Halsey, who took command of the South Pacific Area's operations after October 16, 1942.

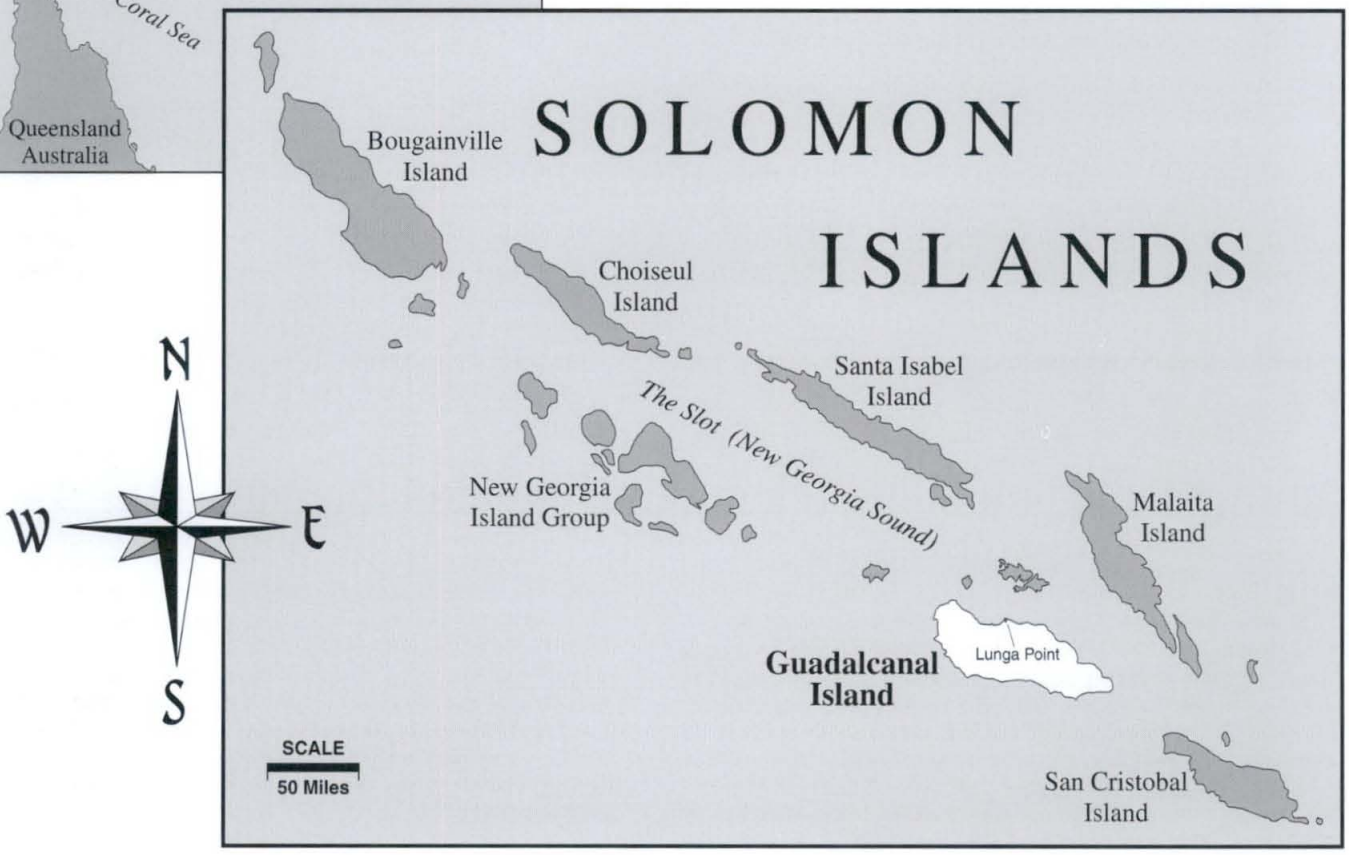
10. Merrill B. Twining, *No Bended Knee: The Battle for Guadalcanal* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1996), 121; John Miller, Jr., *Guadalcanal: The First Offensive* (Washington: Historical Division, Dept. of the Army, 1978), esp. 141. The "Americal" Division was chosen as the designation for a division created ad hoc from three regiments of American troops in New Caledonia. The division was listed on the Army's table of organization as the 23rd Infantry Division, but it retained the name "Americal" throughout the Pacific war and beyond. The first full history of the Americal Division, Francis D. Cronin, *Under the Southern Cross: The Saga of the Americal Division* (Washington, D.C.: Combat Forces Press, 1951), 28-40, describes the formation of the division in some detail. According to Merrill Twining, "This fine regiment of the Army's Americal Division [the 164th], commanded by Col. Bryant Moore, USA, was composed of National Guard troops from the upper Midwest states, the Dakotas and Minnesota."

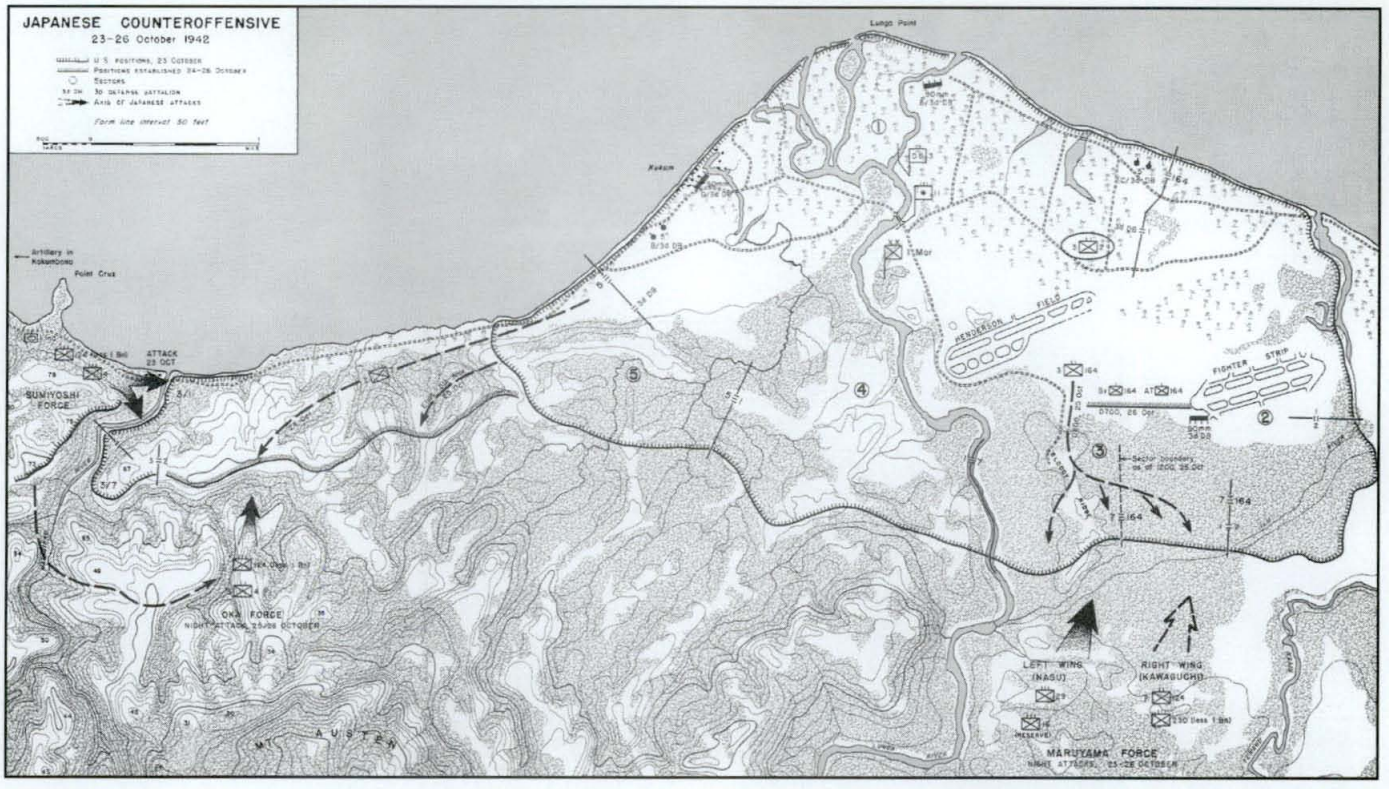
Troops of Americal Division wait to embark on naval transport somewhere in South Pacific. Rations, supplies and equipment are being loaded while they wait. U. S. Army Photograph. NDNGHH&A.





The Solomon Islands are in white on the map to the left and are individually identified in the enlargement below. Guadalcanal Island (in white below) is detailed in a map on the next page. Maps by Brian R. Austin.





This map, prepared by the Historical Division of the Department of the Army, shows the situation in Guadalcanal, October 24-26, 1942. The 3rd Battalion of the 164th Infantry Regiment is marked on the map, moving into position to support the marines against Japanese attacks from the south.

> Ceases being a guess. I stop and look at these fellows, some of them, who haven't had a chance for decent education and I get a guilty conscience.

John especially regretted losing his chance to fly:

> ✪ [You] certainly pay for mistakes one makes, I realize that when I see these boys with [Army Air Force] wings walking around here. Too much wishing and no action on my part. I'll learn some day.[11]

But his desire to fly would have to be deferred a while longer. In early October the 164th Regiment was alerted for transfer to Guadalcanal. Together with his friends, John Hagen was about to experience the searing transformation from civilian-soldier to veteran:

> ✪ The morning we left for Guadalcanal [October 8, 1942], we had to get up about three. We had pretty well packed up the night before. I rode down to the dock at Noumea with Bill [Boyd]. I had my stuff in the back of the jeep. Everything else was piled in the trucks. We all loaded the trucks with our gear. We got the alert only about twenty-four hours before we were to move out, because of security purposes. There was quite a [naval] task force out there. They had brought up some supplies for the marines from New Zealand, Auckland, I guess. They were milling around out

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11. John Hagen to Olaf Hagen, June 1, 1942, John Hagen papers, NMHC.

12. The U.S.S. *New Jersey* was not launched until December 7, 1942, some seven weeks after the 164th landed on Guadalcanal. Hagen's error here perhaps stems from confusing this ship with one of the cruisers escorting the 164th Regiment. "The Slot" that Hagen mentions is the term American soldiers and sailors used when referring to the narrow waters between the many Solomon Islands.

13. In 1940 the army dropped the 75mm gun as its standard artillery piece for supporting infantry attacks. The newer, more powerful 105mm replaced the older guns. But the army continued to use a lightweight 75mm that was fairly simple to disassemble and transport. These lightweight "pack" howitzers, to which Hagen refers, were used widely in the war, especially by paratroops. Ian V. Hogg, *The Guns, 1939-1945* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1970), 54, has a nice illustration of the 75mm pack howitzer.

14. This incident is also related in Eric Hammel's book, *Guadalcanal: Starvation Island* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1987), 228-229. In Hammel's version, however, the credit for this fast-firing artillery is given to the 105mm howitzers of the marines – one more point of dispute between the marines and army over this battle.

there. You could see an aircraft carrier way off in the distance in the ocean, with a couple of destroyers and about three cruisers.

We loaded onto the troop ship there at Noumea, and we started up "the Slot." I can't think of the name of the troop ship, the *McCawley*, I think. It was pretty good size, and moved right along. On the way up, the battleship *New Jersey* was in the middle of the convoy.[12] We were in the middle. We had cruisers all over the place.

The trip to Guadalcanal was uneventful. There weren't any enemy aircraft sighted or anything; in fact, we weren't even expected up there. The Imperial Japanese Marines were giving our marines fits, but they didn't know we were coming. We landed on October 13th. We were the first wave to go ashore, but there wasn't any action right where we landed. We landed on Lunga Point. We got in about six in the morning. We had to climb down the nets on the side of the ship and into those lighters. They would scoot us into shore and dump us. We didn't have any tanks, maybe a couple of little ones. We had some 155[mm] howitzers that we pulled by jeep and trucks. We unloaded them. Other field pieces like 75[mm] pack guns and things like that.[13]

Those 75's, by the way, were something. The Japs couldn't believe we had an "automatic" artillery piece. We placed those guns on the perimeter of Henderson Field, and they would shoot up into the hills where the Japs were. The air boys would send up a light plane and try to find some activity for the guys to shoot at. Those four guns were lined up side by side, you know, about thirty or forty feet away from each other. I remember the firing officer saying, "We will really shake hell out of those Japs." He was standing at the end of the line about twenty feet away from gun number one. He would holler, "Fire!" As they heard it, the crews pulled the lanyards, so it would go, "Pop-pop-pop-pop," four shots in a row. They later captured a Jap major along with a recon group of Japs. They brought them in and the Japs thought we were going to kill them. This major said, "Before you shoot me, I want to see your automatic artillery." This battalion colonel had a sense of humor. He said, "I will work it out for you." He took the Jap major over in a staff jeep over to the artillery. He had these guys from the pack howitzers shoot off a salvo for him. The major stood there shaking his head. This guy spoke English well; he had been in San Francisco. He went to school at UCLA.[14]

Anyway, the day we landed was pretty clear. We were unloading about six in the morning and had all of the troops ashore. We got all of our stuff and started to move in, move a lot of it off the beach. Pretty soon this siren goes off, for a

Americal Division troops land without enemy opposition on beach at Lunga Bay, Guadalcanal. An air raid took place only three hours after the landing, however. U. S. Army Photograph. NDNGHH&A.

A bivouac area and supply dump the day after the Japanese retreated before the U.S. forces. Shell and bomb craters are used as foxholes by the troops. Native carriers help the soldiers move rations and supplies. Note the shredded palm trees in the background. U.S. Army Photograph. NDNGHH&A.

condition red, which meant we were going to get a bombing. We had no sooner gotten ashore and into an area back in the palm trees [when it went off]. The palm trees, by the way, were owned by the Lever Brothers of England. They had big groves of copra trees and palm trees. After the war, believe it or not, they sent an assessing officer in there. All the trees that were damaged by artillery or whatever had to be paid for. The United States had to pay the Lever Brothers of England so much money for their trees. The government had to pay them for the trees we screwed up while we were fighting the Japanese! Of course, if the Japanese would have won the island, they wouldn't have had any trees anyway.

So, here we were on the island, and the air raid siren goes off. We had already dug slit trenches. They told us to get in our trenches right away with our faces down and our helmets over our head. But I hadn't seen any Jap airplanes, so I laid on my back and watched the show. We had a few Grumman F4F Wildcats with marine pilots flying them. People like Joe Foss from South Dakota and those guys. They took off and headed for the Japs. I was lying on my back, and bombs were flying all over the place. Some came pretty close.

A fragmentation bomb killed one of our sergeants and a marine. That was our first fatality on the first day. The kid happened to be one in our headquarters company from Fargo that got killed.[15] The bad part about these national guard units is you got brothers in them. His brother was there. He was in another section, I think the second [battalion]. I was in the third. This kid was in the headquarters section. I should explain that you have a headquarters communication section and first, second, and third battalion communications sections. When you are all together you are all one headquarters company, but then when you get into action, your sections are put out to the battalion you are assigned to. We happened to be third battalion communications section. Right at this time we weren't assigned to anything. We were all over the place.

When that bombing was over with, the "all-clear" siren blew. They had bombed us pretty heavily. That was ten or eleven o'clock in the morning. Sure as hell, at two o'clock in the afternoon they came again. Another condition red sounded and up went the fighters. Of course, the Japs had knocked out a bunch of planes on the field. There were fires on Henderson Field. We couldn't see Henderson from where we were at that point. It was back about a mile on the other

side of the Lever Brothers palm trees.

I'd had to stay down at the beach, because some idiot assigned me to the shore party switchboard. This meant that when a load of stuff came off the ships, I had to call the companies involved to tell them their stuff was here. They would race down to the beach with a truck and pick it up to take it to their assigned areas. There was a marine there in a hole, a kind of dug-out hole with no roof over it. It was kind of deep; I would say five to six feet, about 50-75 yards from the water. This whole picture is indelibly etched in my mind, for the rest of my life.

During the first air raid, the troop ships, the cruisers, the destroyers and so forth, took off. They came back after the first air raid and unloaded some more, then again after the second air raid. We got hit three times that day by bombs. I was down on the beach most of the time when I wasn't in a foxhole watching it happen. That evening, after all the raids, they still hadn't even finished unloading a lot of the equipment. The food, they hadn't unloaded a lot of it yet. Then all of the sudden the whole shebang just plain took off, heading south. All of the sudden they weren't there. It was starting to get dark. I was sitting there on the edge of this hole. It had Jap sandbags all around it up about two to three feet. The hole was in the center forward of that ring of sacks that were stacked up there.

So, I was assigned to that switchboard to relieve this marine. The 3rd Battalion was placed in reserve in bivouac, back from the front lines and back from the airfield. We were only to be put into the line in case of an emergency. Those emergencies came up in a hurry, when you didn't expect them, let me tell you. That evening, nobody knew what had happened to the navy. Even the general wasn't sure why that whole navy just turned around and took off south. What it was, there was a big Jap task force coming down the Slot. They were moving south, so rather than engage our fleet in a fight with the Japs, they turned them around and headed them back to Noumea, New Caledonia. Here it took them quite a bit to get them up there as it was, and [Vice-Admiral Robert] Ghormley just turned them around and scooted back![16] There we sat without any protection whatsoever and here came the Japanese navy. They had a bunch of troop ships. As I understand it, they landed about ten thousand men just above us that night.[17]

It was just getting dark. Major [Harry] Tenborg was the executive officer of our third battalion. Tenborg and I were sitting on the side of this ring of sacks around this hole. The marine was running the switchboard, and I was watching him so I had to take over that switchboard. When I took it over I was going to disconnect all of his stuff and put our own stuff in. His was World War I vintage equipment, and ours was "World War I and a half" stuff. I knew how to work our stuff, but I didn't know how to work his too well, as I was about to find out.

I happened to look up over to Savo Island, up north of us there. I had a pretty good view of it. I saw these three flashing lights moving toward us. They looked like airplane lights, except they were red. I said, "Major, those three lights coming this way can't be airplanes because they are red. The right wing light on an airplane is green, not red." The marine took one look and said, "Jesus Christ," and jumped up out of that hole and took off for the woods. Those "red lights" were 14-inch shells coming in from a big Jap battlewagon.

So, there I was sitting with a switchboard that I didn't even know anything about. The number one circuit was connected to General Vandegrift, who was the commander of the marines in the South Pacific at that time. From where I was, I could throw a rock at his tent. I told Tenborg he had better get down with me, those had to be shells. Here we hadn't seen any fighting yet. He jumped down in that hole with me. Everybody was ringing that switchboard, but the marine hadn't shown me the circuitry or where anything was. He just grabbed his rifle and took off into the copra trees.

In came those three shells. They hit right in

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15. Samuel Baglien, executive officer of the 164th Regiment, records this event as follows: "In the midst of the [unloading] work, at about noon, a flight of Japanese bombers passed over and bombed the area for a half hour. Corporal Kenneth S. Foubert, Company 'M', was killed; the first casualty of the regiment." Baglien, *The 164th Infantry in Combat from October 7, 1942*, 2.

16. Five days after the 164th Infantry landed at Guadalcanal, Vice-Admiral Robert Ghormley was relieved from his command of the South Pacific Area. The decision to relieve Ghormley had been made by Admiral Nimitz before the 164th landed. Nimitz appointed Vice-Admiral William Halsey in Ghormley's place. See Cronin, 53.

17. Hagen is at this point confusing the events of two consecutive nights: on the night of October 13-14, a task force made up of two Japanese battleships, the *Haruna* and the *Kongo*, and several destroyers, shelled the American position on Guadalcanal; on October 14-15, two Japanese heavy cruisers and two destroyers shelled the positions again. It was during this attack that Japanese transports landed the infantry reinforcements Hagen refers to. His error in this matter is understandable, for as Eric Hammel (321) comments, "GIs of the virgin 164th infantry were certain after only two nights ashore that bombardments of this magnitude were common fare."

front of us in the water. You talk about getting wet, and sand raining all over you. [Laughter] Then we heard the airplane. There was a Jap observer up there. The ack-ack guns were shooting at the observer, but it was so dark that they couldn't hit it anyway. We were also shooting machine guns; you could hear them crackling along the beach, trying to shoot that observer airplane down. It was an observer aircraft off of that battlewagon, one of the "Haruna" class, one of the biggest that they had in the Japanese navy.

Anyway, those three shells were to give a vector onto the airfield. Now, it was dark by that time and we couldn't fly anybody off the field, because we couldn't light it up to land them afterwards. So those boys had a field day firing at us from those navy vessels. Pretty soon the next salvo hit behind us about four or five hundred yards. The two of us were down in the hole, crap flying all over the place. Pretty soon that observation plane of the Japs dropped a flare over Henderson Field. Boy, it lit that island up, just like someone had turned on the lights. Then the fireworks really started.

They zeroed in on Henderson Field and knocked out all but four aircraft. Then they practically passed in review. To my right straight across the channel at an angle was Tulagi [Island]. That was where the PT boats were based. To my left was Savo Island, a round island, about five or eight miles away. Both of them were straight across from me. The bay that I was sitting in front of there was Sealark Channel.

I tell you, those shells started coming in and were raking that island. The Jap ships would pass in review, just like in a parade. First would come by a cruiser firing those four- and five-inch shells right over our heads. Have you seen this picture of the "Kilroy" with his nose hanging over the board? All that you see is the two eyeballs and his nose? That is the way we were, Tenborg and I, sitting with our noses over the sand bags watching all this going on. We said to hell with the switchboard. We didn't even know how to answer the damn thing when it rang. We couldn't have heard it anyway with all of the racket going on. This went on for two or three hours, just pounding us. They would go by with destroyers and cruisers. The battlewagons stood off quite a ways because they were too cumbersome to turn in that channel. The PT boats were out there racing around. I tell you, the Japs were dumping them left and right. They'd put searchlights on them and five-inchers would hit them and blow them to pieces.

God, I tell you I'm surprised they didn't blow up that little hole that we were sitting in. They could sure as hell see it. They were right smack in front of it. In fact you could almost feel the heat of the guns as they went by firing. What they would do is go down from our left to right. They would go down, turn around and come back. First, they'd fire the batteries on the starboard side of the ship. The shells were going right over our head. They would fire the batteries on that side of the ship and then turn around and go back the other way, firing from the port side over the tops of other ships. Jesus, this went on *all night*.[18]

Finally, they took off and later went back up the Slot again to reload and refuel. I think they came down from Truk. I would have to look some of these details up. Anyway, then out came Vandegrift from his hole. Boy, he was mad. Oh, God, was he mad! He said, "Who was running this goddamn switchboard?" I said, "I was supposed to be, sir, but I don't know anything about it." "Where was the man that was on here?" He gave me his name, Corporal so-and-so. I said, "Sir, as soon as those first three rounds came over the island, that boy was gone." Major Tenborg bore me out on that. He said, "I have never seen a kid run so fast in my life, General." Vandegrift was madder than hell. He said, "Can you get me headquarters down there? I have to assess the damage at Henderson Field." I said I would do my best. I searched around and finally plugged in. Nothing on the board was labeled. There were only about six leads on the whole board. Vandegrift's tent had to be one. He stormed off. I told him I would connect him up with the airfield and put him through. He went back to his tent, which was full of holes, incidentally, and picked up his own phone which was hanging on the front pole of his tent. I could sit there and watch. He was talking his head off, shouting in the phone.

There wasn't anything left for me to do, except for me to sit on that damn board until they could find the marine. As far as I know, they never did. Bill came down and wanted to know how I was doing. I told him that it had been quite a show. Bill

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18. Actually the shelling lasted for about eighty minutes, but eighty *very* intense minutes which, in General Twining's words, "really shook things up. Under [the Japanese ships'] constant pounding the earth seemed to turn to the consistency of Jell-o, making it difficult to move or even remain upright." Twining, 121.

19. This march by the Japanese forces of the Japanese 2nd ("Sendai") Division proceeded slowly, greatly delaying the planned attack, and the Japanese were forced to abandon most of their heavy artillery. See Hammel, 338-340.

Casualties from front line fighting are being unloaded at scene of new bridge construction on the Matanikau River, Guadalcanal. The first part of the trip was in flat-bottom boats pulled and walked through shallow rapids. The latter half was made by outboard motorboat. U.S. Army Photograph. NDNGHH&A.

said, "God, did they get the marines in those dugouts. They buried them." Shells that came went right down the hole of dugouts and exploded down in there. Many marines were killed. I don't remember if we lost anybody in our outfit. I tell you, something like that will really scatter you around the neighborhood.

Anyway, General Vandegrift set up five different regimental sectors on our perimeter. They had five regiments of Marines and us there at that time. They had a special weapons battalion. Our colonel [of the 164th] was Bryant Moore. He used to teach French at West Point. He got killed later in another action up in the Philippines. Lieutenant Colonel [Robert] Hall, our battalion colonel, was a tactical wizard. He was the one that set up our perimeter line. He got the Navy Cross from Vandegrift because of the work he did on the perimeter line. He really knew what he was doing.

So anyway, we were on the beach there. Major Tenborg was long gone, and I finally got relieved. There wasn't anything more to unload because every [American] ship had taken off. I went back to our unit and almost got shot coming in, because those guys were so scared. Anybody wandering around that wasn't identified "had to be a Jap." Ed Goff came up to me afterwards and said, "Jesus, John, you don't know how close you got to being shot." I said, "What for?" He said, "Well, hell, you walked into the area without even identifying yourself." And I said, "Great, where the hell are the guards?" He said, "Well, we don't have any. We're trying to string wire." I said, "Wonderful."

I started setting up our switchboard in the rear area. We [the 3rd Battalion] were in reserve. The 1st and 2nd Battalions had gone up to just past Bloody Ridge, where the marines had had a real hell of a time. They were all dug in up there on a perimeter around Henderson Field. The 1st and 2nd were filling in there with the 7th Marines. The 1st, 5th and 7th Marines were there, and I think it was the 7th Marines which was on that side. Our first two battalions were sent right up to the front lines because after the Japs landed all those troops they knew that we were going to get clobbered. The main body of the Jap 2nd Division landed in the vicinity of Kokumbona, which was just north and west of us there, and they were going to deliver a "surprise" attack against the south flank of the American position. The attack was set for the 18th of October so we had a couple of days to get ready.

Incidentally, this deal we got when the Japanese navy hit us, they came back again the night of the 14th and did it again. The racket was terrible. You couldn't believe the noise from all those shells exploding and the guns going off, right in your face

Colonel Bryant Moore, commanding officer of the 164th Infantry Regiment. John Hagen incorrectly recalled where Col. Moore was killed in action; it was not in World War II but, rather, in Korea in 1951. NDNGHH&A.

practically. After two nights of that we were all kind of punchy. The Japanese believed that our morale and strength must be declining, which of course wasn't true. We were hot to fight after that; we were tired of being shot at!

Half of our provisions and heavy weapons hadn't been unloaded off our ships onto the beach before the Japs' navy scared them away. We were limited to mortars, some artillery, mainly 75s. We could have shot at those Jap ships going by, but of course that wouldn't have lasted long. All they'd need is one [muzzle] flash and they'd have been right on us, knocking out those guns. Here we were, sitting ducks really, on the perimeter line. Of course, we were dug in. They weren't; they were going to rush us, which they did continually, but they were continually beaten back, which we'll go into later.

To give you an idea of how small our beachhead was, we had barely a three-mile perimeter around Henderson Field, one end to another, with some rivers in between, and very few hills. Bloody Ridge was the biggest hill. You could put the mortars back behind that and they were protected. We had cut fields of fire in front of the places where these infantry men were dug in. We also had 37-millimeter anti-tank guns dug in that could fire canister shells. Canister shot was a round tube-like affair with a charge behind it. There was a bunch of slugs in it about the size of a .32 pistol slug, a hunk of lead. The whole bunch was held together with rosin. When that shell was shot out of the gun, it came out with such force that it broke up. All these pellets—I've forgotten how many were in there, maybe 40 or 50—they'd split up, just like shotgun shot. It was just like a great big shotgun. They had quite a few of those shells.

We were in bivouac, back behind the line, down on the other side of the airfield. The Japanese troops had to come across, from where they landed, down into the jungle in order to attack us. One force had to assemble at Kokumbona and set out to march towards a line of departure east of the Lunga River, crossing mountains and rivers. They had a lot of difficulty due to the bad trails and heavy terrain. The trails were narrow, so they marched single file in a long, straggling column. They didn't have any road building equipment. They had to hack their way through by hand using axes, saws, and machetes. We couldn't see this; they were hidden because of the heavy jungle that they went through. We didn't know where they were. . . .[19] (End of Part One) ND

*** Part Two will appear in the next issue.**

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