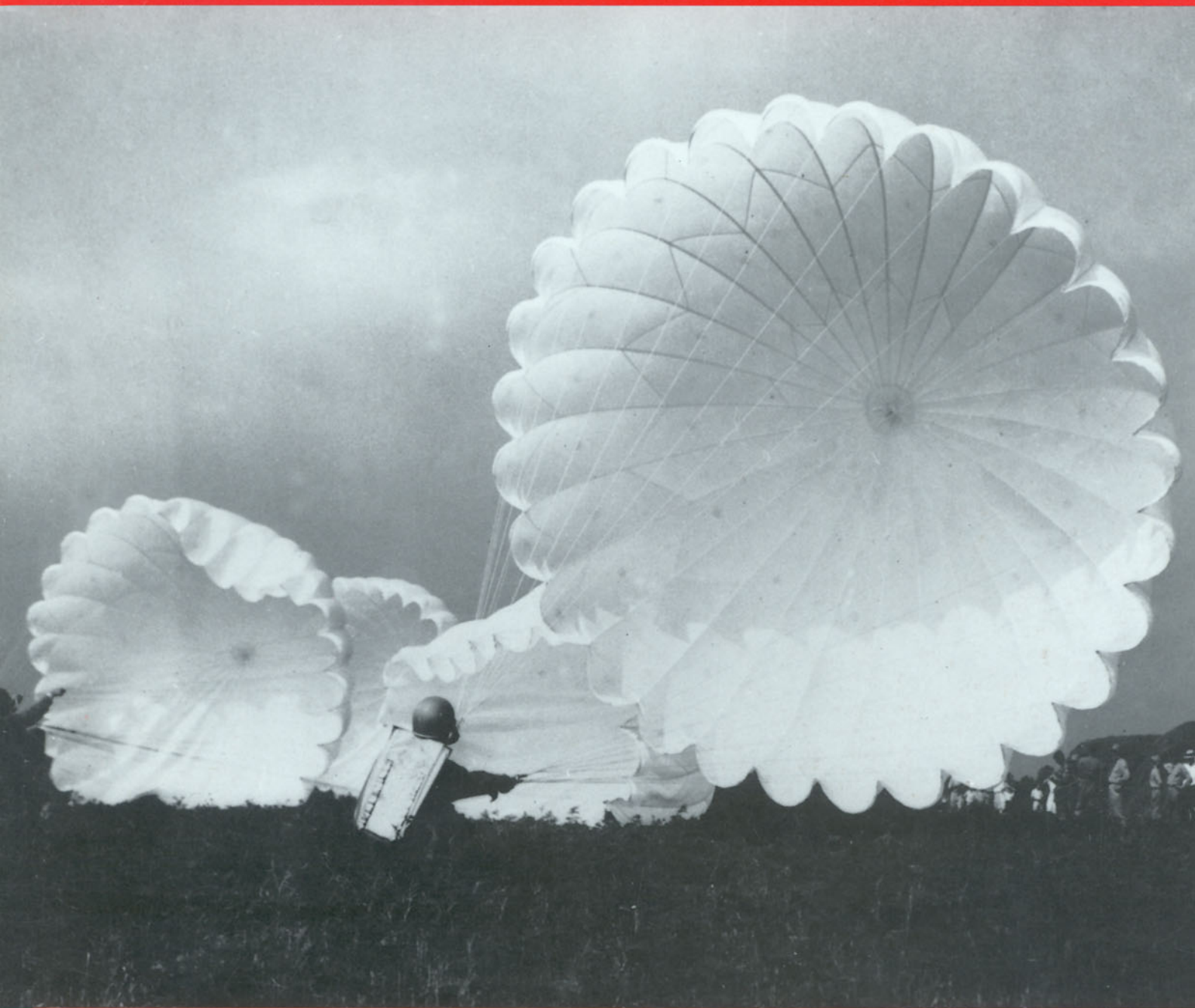


# SILK CHUTES AND HARD FIGHTING: U.S. MARINE CORPS PARACHUTE UNITS IN WORLD WAR II



HISTORY AND MUSEUMS DIVISION  
HEADQUARTERS, U.S. MARINE CORPS  
WASHINGTON, D.C.

*COVER: Marines of the fledgling 1st Parachute Battalion land near Fredericksburg, Virginia, following a tactical jump in July 1941. Their unexpected arrival in the midst of an Army maneuver demonstrated the disruption that parachutists could cause to unwary opposing units.*

# Silk Chutes and Hard Fighting: U.S. Marine Corps Parachute Units in World War II

by

Lieutenant Colonel Jon T. Hoffman  
U.S. Marine Corps Reserve



HISTORY AND MUSEUMS DIVISION  
HEADQUARTERS, U.S. MARINE CORPS  
WASHINGTON, D.C.

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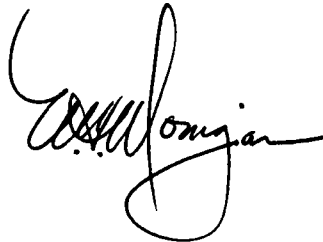
# Foreword

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*Silk Chutes and Hard Fighting: U.S. Marine Corps Parachute Units in World War II* is a brief narrative of the development, deployment, and eventual demise of Marine parachute units during World War II. It is published to honor the veterans of these special units and for the information of those interested in Marine parachutists and the events in which they participated.

Lieutenant Colonel Jon T. Hoffman, USMCR, is an infantry officer currently on duty as a staff officer with the Special Purpose Marine Air Ground Task Force-Experimental. During his 15 years of active duty, he has served as a platoon and company commander with 2nd Battalion, 3rd Marines; as an inspector-instructor with 2nd Battalion, 23rd Marines; as a history instructor at the U.S. Naval Academy; and as an action officer at Headquarters Marine Corps. His reserve service has been with the field history branch of the Marine Corps History and Museums Division, the II Marine Expeditionary Force Augmentation Command Element, and the adjunct faculty of the Marine Corps Command & Staff College. He is a distinguished graduate of the resident program of the latter institution. He also holds a bachelor's degree from Miami University, a law degree from Duke University, and a master's degree in military history from Ohio State University. His 1994 biography of Major General Merritt A. Edson, *Once A Legend*, received the Marine Corps Historical Foundation's Greene Award and was selected for the Commandant of the Marine Corps' Reading List. His numerous articles in professional military and historical journals have earned a dozen prizes, most notably the Marine Corps Historical Foundation's Heintz Award for 1992, 1993, 1994, and 1995.

In the interests of accuracy and objectivity, the History and Museums Division welcomes comments on this pamphlet from key participants, Marine Corps activities, and interested individuals.



MICHAEL F. MONIGAN  
Colonel, U.S. Marine Corps  
Director of Marine Corps History and Museums



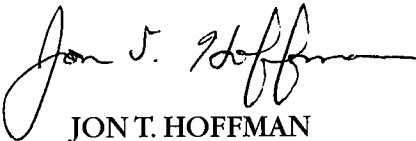
# Preface

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This historical pamphlet covers the Marine Corps' flirtation with airborne operations during World War II. In tracing this story, I relied heavily on the relevant operational and administrative records of the Marine Corps held by the National Archives in Washington, D.C. and College Park, Maryland, and the Washington National Records Center in Suitland, Maryland. The various offices of the Marine Corps Historical Center yielded additional primary materials. The Reference Section holds biographical data on most key individuals, as well as files on specific units. The Oral History Section has a number of pertinent interviews, the most significant being Lieutenant General Joseph C. Burger, Major General Marion L. Dawson, General Gerald C. Thomas, and Brigadier General Robert H. Williams. The Personal Papers Section has several collections pertaining to the parachute program. Among the most useful were the papers of Eldon C. Anderson, Eric Hammel, Nolen Marbrey, John C. McQueen, Peter Ortiz, and George R. Stallings.

A number of secondary sources proved helpful. Marine Corps publications include Charles L. Updegraph, Jr.'s *U.S. Marine Corps Special Units of World War II*, Major John L. Zimmerman's *The Guadalcanal Campaign*, Major John N. Rentz's *Bougainville and the Northern Solomons*, and *Isolation of Rabaul* by Henry I. Shaw, Jr. and Major Douglas T. Kane. A valuable work on the overall American parachute program during the war is William B. Breuer's *Geronimo! The Marine Corps Gazette* and *Leatherneck* contain a number of articles describing the parachute units and their campaigns. Ken Haney's *An Annotated Bibliography of USMC Paratroopers in World War II* provides a detailed listing of sources, to include Haney's own extensive list of publications on the subject. Many Marine parachutists graciously provided interviews, news clippings, photographs, and other sources for this work. Colonel Dave E. Severance, secretary/treasurer of the Association of Survivors, was especially obliging in culling material from his extensive files.

I would like to thank Benis M. Frank, former Chief Historian for the History and Museums Division, for his insightful advice and editing. Many members of the division staff ably assisted the research and production effort: Charles D. Melson, Chief Historian; Jack Shulimson and Charles R. Smith of the Writing Section; Evelyn A. Englander of the Library; Amy C. Cantin of Personal Papers; Ann A. Ferrante, Danny J. Crawford, and Robert V. Aquilina of Reference Section; Richard A. Long and David B. Crist of Oral History; Lena M. Kaljot of the Photographic Section; Frederick J. Graboske and Joyce Conyers-Hudson of the Archives Section; and Robert E. Struder, W. Stephen Hill, and Catherine A. Kerns of Editing and Design.



JON T. HOFFMAN  
Lieutenant Colonel  
U. S. Marine Corps Reserve





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# U.S. Marine Corps Parachute Units in World War II

*The Jump into Parachuting – Rendezvous at Gavutu – Tasimboko – Edson's Ridge – Recuperation and Reevaluation – Choiseul – Bougainville – The Closing Shock*

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At 0430 on 10 May 1940, the German Army launched its offensive in western Europe by crossing the borders of neutral Holland, Belgium, and Luxembourg. Five minutes prior to that, nine Luftwaffe gliders had swooped out of the dark sky and landed on a patch of ground that covered the roof of Eben Emael fortress, the key position in Belgium's defensive line fronting on the Albert Canal and Meuse River. The 60-odd men of a parachute-engineer detachment quickly debarked and set about their well-rehearsed work. Using newly developed shaped charges, they systematically destroyed the armored cupolas housing the fort's artillery pieces and machine guns. Although Eben Emael's 1,200 defenders held out below ground for another 24 hours before surrendering, the fort had ceased to be a military obstacle. The paratroopers lost just six killed and 15 wounded. Simultaneously with this assault, a battalion of German parachute infantry seized two nearby bridges and prevented sentries from setting off demolition charges. These precursor operations allowed two panzer divisions to cross the Meuse on 11 May and collapse Belgium's entire defensive line. Germany's remaining five parachute battal-

ions conducted similar missions in Holland and achieved substantial results. In the course of a few hours, 4,500 parachutists had opened the road to easy conquest of the Low Countries and laid the groundwork for Germany's amazingly swift victory in the subsequent Battle of France. These stunning successes caused armed forces around the world to take stock of the role of parachutists in modern war.

## *The Jump into Parachuting*

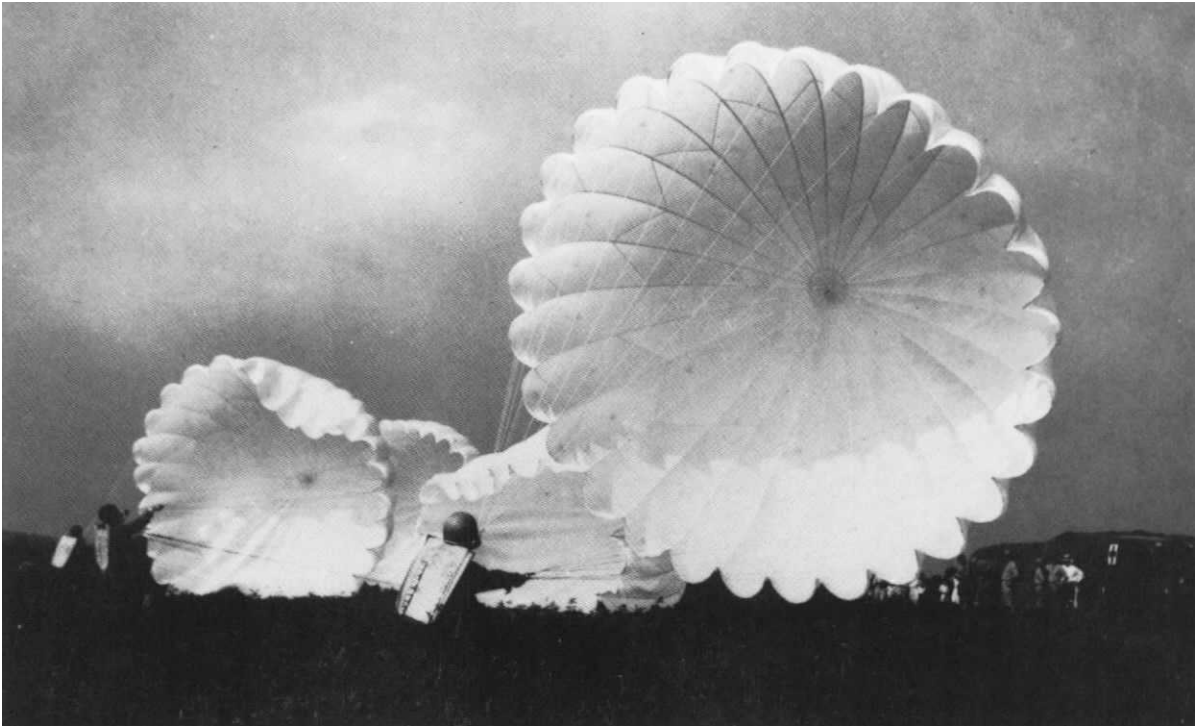
The widely publicized airborne coup in the Low Countries created an immediate, high-level reaction within the Marine Corps. On 14 May the acting director of the Division of Plans and Policies at Headquarters Marine Corps issued a memorandum to his staff officers. The one-page document came right to the point in its first sentence: "The Major General Commandant [Thomas Holcomb] has ordered that we prepare plans for the employment of parachute troops." The matter was obviously of the highest priority, since Colonel Pedro A. del Valle asked for immediate responses, which could be submitted "in pencil

*Marines hit the dirt in a drop zone at New River, North Carolina, in November 1942. Parachutists*

*used a tumbling technique to absorb some of the impact of the landing.*

Department of Defense (USMC) Photo 127-GC-495-5049





Department of Defense (USMC) Photo 127-GC-495-504479

*Marines of the fledgling 1st Parachute Battalion land near Fredericksburg, Virginia, following a tactical jump in July 1941. Their unexpected*

*arrival in the midst of an Army maneuver demonstrated the disruption that parachutists could cause to unwary opposing units.*

on scrap paper.” Perhaps as telling, the memorandum did not direct a mere study, but the creation of a course of action.

Considering the Corps’ complete lack of expertise in this emerging field of warfare, Headquarters quickly translated staff plans into reality. The first small group of volunteers reported for training in October 1940 and graduated the following February. Succeeding classes went through an accelerated program for basic parachute qualification, but the numbers mounted very slowly. Throughout 1941 the Marine Corps produced just a trickle of jumpers and remained a long way from possessing a useful tactical entity. Most members of the first three training classes reported to the 2d Marine Division in San Diego, California, to form the nucleus of the Corps’ first parachute unit. The 2d Parachute Company (soon redesignated Company A, 2d Parachute Battalion) formally came into existence on 22 March 1941. The first commanding officer was Captain Robert H. Williams. The majority of the fourth class went to Quantico, Virginia, and became the nucleus of Company A, 1st Parachute Battalion, on 28 May. Its first commanding officer

was Captain Marcellus J. Howard. From that point forward, graduating classes were generally detailed on an alternating basis to each coast. In the summer of 1941, the West Coast company transferred to Quantico and merged into the 1st Battalion. Williams assumed command of the two-company organization.

The concentration of the Corps’ small paratrooper contingents at Quantico at least allowed them to begin a semblance of tactical training. The battalion conducted a number of formation jumps during the last half of July, some from Marine planes and others from Navy patrol bombers. In no case could it muster enough planes to jump an entire company at once. Captain Williams used his battalion’s time on the ground to emphasize his belief that “paratroopers are simply a new form of infantry.” His men learned hand-to-hand fighting skills, went on conditioning hikes, and did a lot of calisthenic exercises. A *Time* magazine reporter noted that the parachutists were “a notably tough-looking outfit among Marines, who all look tough.” One of the battalion’s July jumps demonstrated the consternation that paratroopers could instill by their sur-

prise appearance on a battlefield. A landing at an airfield near Fredericksburg, Virginia, unexpectedly disrupted maneuvers of the Army's 44th Infantry Division, because its leaders thought the Marines were an aggressor force added to the

problem without their knowledge. The same jump also indicated some of the limitations of airborne operations. An approaching thunderstorm brought high winds which blew many of the jumpers away from their designated landing site

## Overseas Models

The Soviet Union was the first nation to take a serious interest in parachuting as a means to introduce ground forces into battle. The Red Army created a test unit in 1931 and by 1935 was able to employ two battalions of parachute infantry in field exercises. Beginning in the mid-1930s, several other European nations followed suit. Germany launched a particularly aggressive program, placing it in the air force under the command of a former World War I pilot, Major General Kurt Student. The German parachutists were complimented by glider units, an outgrowth of the sport gliding program that developed flying skills while Germany was under Versailles Treaty restrictions on rearmament. By 1940 Hitler had 4,500 parachutists at his disposal, organized into six battalions. Another 12,000 men formed an air infantry division designed as an air-landed follow-up to a parachute assault. A force of 700 Ju-52 transport planes was available to carry these troops into combat and each Ju-52 could hold up to 15 men.

The Soviet Union made the first combat use of parachute forces. On 2 December 1939, as part of its initial abortive invasion of Finland, the Red Army dropped several dozen paratroopers near Petsamo behind the opposing lines. They apparently came down on top of a Finnish unit, which shot many of them before they reached the ground. Subsequent Soviet attempts during the Finnish campaign to employ airborne forces, all small in scale, met equally disastrous fates.

Germany's first use of airborne forces achieved favorable results. As part of the April 1940 invasions of Norway and Denmark, the *Luftwaffe* assigned a battalion of paratroopers to seize several key installations. In Denmark, two platoons captured a vital bridge leading to Copenhagen, while another platoon took control of an airfield. In Norway, a company parachuted onto the airfield at Stavanger and quickly overwhelmed its 70 defenders, thus paving the way for the landing of 2,000 air infantrymen. Although these operations were critical to German success in the campaign, they received little attention at the time, perhaps due to the much larger and bloodier naval battles that occurred along the Norwegian coast.

German airborne forces achieved spectacular success just one month later. One battalion breached

Belgium's heavily fortified defensive line during the offensive of May 1940. Four battalions reinforced by two air infantry regiments captured three Dutch airfields, plus several bridges over rivers that bisected the German route of approach to the Hague, Holland's capital, and Rotterdam, its principal port. In each case the airborne units held their ground until the main assault forces arrived overland. The final parachute battalion, supported by two regiments of air infantry, landed near the Hague with the mission of decapitating the Dutch government and military high command. This force failed to achieve its goals, but did cause considerable disruption.

The last major German use of parachute assault came in May 1941. In the face of Allied control of the sea, Hitler launched an airborne invasion of the Mediterranean island of Crete. The objective was to capture three airfields for the ensuing arrival of air-landed reinforcements. Casualties were heavy among the first waves of 3,000 men landed by parachute and glider, but others continued to pour in. Despite an overwhelming superiority in numbers, the 42,000 Allied defenders did not press their initial advantage. Late in the second day the Germans began landing transports on the one airstrip they held, even though it was under Allied artillery fire. After a few more days of bitter fighting, the Allied commander concluded that he was defeated and began to withdraw by sea.

In the course of the battle, the Germans suffered 6,700 casualties, half of them dead, out of a total force of 25,000. Allied losses on the island were less than 3,500, although an additional 11,800 troops surrendered and another 800 soldiers died or were wounded at sea during the withdrawal. The Allies decided that airborne operations were a powerful tactic, inasmuch as the Germans had leapfrogged 100 miles of British-controlled waters to seize Crete from a numerically superior ground force. As a consequence, the U.S. and British armies would invest heavily in creating parachute and glider units. Hitler reached the opposite conclusion. Having lost 350 aircraft and nearly half of the 13,000 paratroopers engaged, he determined that airborne assaults were a costly tactic whose time had passed. The Germans never again launched a large operation from the air.

and into a grove of trees. Luckily, none of the 40 men involved sustained any serious injuries.

The first tactical employment of Marine parachutists came with the large-scale landing exercise of the Amphibious Force, Atlantic Fleet, in August 1941. This corps, under the command of Major General Holland M. Smith, consisted of the 1st Marine Division and the Army's 1st Infantry Division. The final plan for the exercise at New River, North Carolina, called for Captain Williams' company to parachute at H plus 1 hour onto a vital crossroads behind enemy lines, secure it, and then attack the rear of enemy forces opposing the landing of the 1st Infantry Division. Captain Howard's company would jump on the morning of D plus 2 in support of an amphibious landing by Lieutenant Colonel Merritt A. Edson's Mobile Landing Group and a Marine tank company. Edson's force (the genesis of the 1st Raider Battalion) would go ashore behind enemy lines, advance inland, destroy the opposing reserve force, and seize control of important lines of communication. Howard's men would land near Edson's objective and "secure the road net and bridges in that vicinity."

For the exercise the parachutists were attached to the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, which operated from a small airfield at New Bern, North Carolina, just north of the Marine base. The landing force executed the operation as planned, but Holland Smith was not pleased with the results because there were far too many artificialities, including the lack of an aggressor force. A shortage of transport planes (only two on hand) handicapped the parachutists; it took several flights, with long delays between, to get just one of the understrength companies on the ground. Once the exercise was underway, Smith made one attempt to simulate an enemy force. He arranged for Captain Williams to re-embark one squad and jump behind the lines of the two divisions, with orders to create as much havoc as possible. Williams' tiny force cut tactical telephone lines, hijacked trucks, blocked a road, and successfully evaded capture for several hours. One after-action report noted that "the introduction of paratroops lent realism to the necessity for command post security."

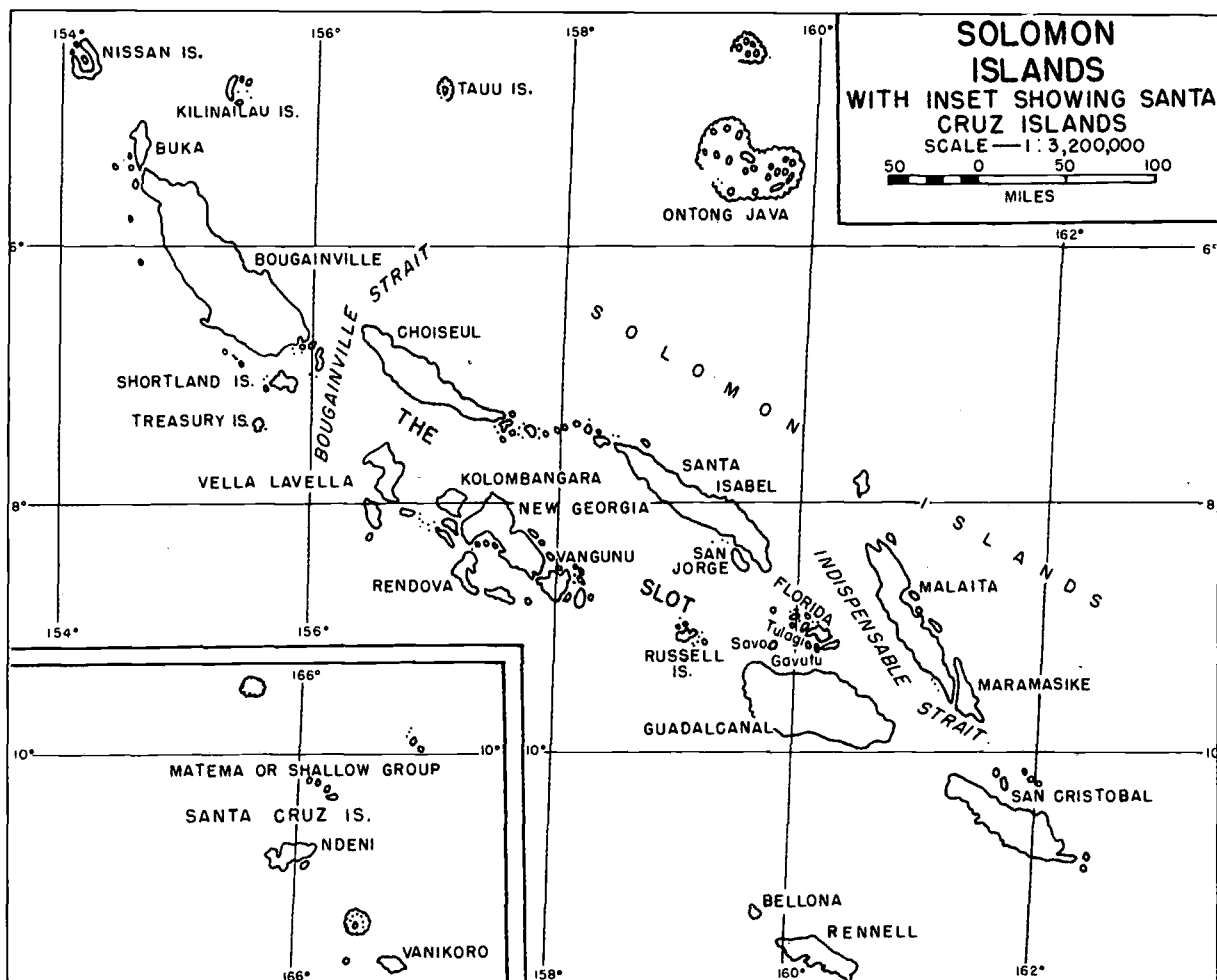
Smith put great faith in the potential value of airborne operations. In his preliminary report on the exercise, he referred to Edson's infantry/tank/parachute assault on D+2 as a

"spearhead thrust around the hostile flank" and emphasized the need in modern warfare for the "speed and shock effect" of airborne and armor units. With that in mind, he recommended that his two-division force include at least one "air attack brigade" of at least one parachute regiment and one air infantry regiment. (The term "air infantry" referred to ground troops landed by transport aircraft.) He also urged the Marine Corps to acquire the necessary transport planes. Despite this high-level plea, the Marine Corps continued to go slowly with the parachute program. At the end of March 1942, the 1st Battalion finally stood up its third line company, but the entire organization only had a total of 332 officers and men, less than 60 percent of its table of organization strength (one of the lowest figures in the division). The 2d Battalion, still recovering from the loss of its first Company A, had barely 200 men.

Manpower and aircraft shortages and the straightjacket of the parachute training pipeline accounted for some of the bottleneck, but a lack of enthusiasm for the idea at Headquarters also appears to have taken hold. By contrast, the Corps had not conceived the original idea for the raiders until mid-1941, but it had two full 800-man battalions in existence by March 1942. The Marine Corps was not enthusiastic about the latter force, either, but it expanded rapidly in large measure due to pressure from President Franklin Roosevelt and senior Navy leaders. Without similar heat from above, Headquarters was not about to commit its precious resources to a crash program to expand the parachutists and provide them with air transports. Marine planners probably made a realistic choice in the matter, given the competing requirements to fill up divisions and air wings and make them ready for amphibious warfare, another infant art suffering through even greater growing pains.

### *Rendezvous at Gavutu*

After four months of war, the 1st Marine Division was alerted to its first prospect of action. The vital Samoan Islands appeared to be next on the Japanese invasion list and the Navy called upon the Marines to provide the necessary reinforcements for the meager garrison. In March 1942, Headquarters created two brigades for the mission, cutting a regiment and a slice of sup-



porting forces from each of the two Marine divisions. The 7th Marines got the nod at New River and became the nucleus of the 3d Brigade. That force initially included Edson's 1st Raider Battalion, but no paratroopers. In the long run that was a plus for the 1st Parachute Battalion, which remained relatively untouched as the brigade siphoned off much of the best manpower and equipment of the division to bring itself to full readiness. The division already was reeling from the difficult process of wartime expansion. In the past few months it had absorbed thousands of newly minted Marines, subdivided units to create new ones, given up some of its best assets to field the raiders and paratroopers, and built up a base and training areas from the pine forests of New River, North Carolina.

The paratroopers and the remainder of the division did not have long to wait for their own call to arms, however. In early April, Headquarters alerted the 1st Marine Division that it would begin movement overseas in May. The destination was

New Zealand, where everyone assumed the division would have months to complete the process of turning raw manpower into well-trained units. Part of the division shoved off from Norfolk in May. Some elements, including Companies B and C of the paratroopers, took trains to the West Coast and boarded naval transports there on 19 June. The rest of the 1st Parachute Battalion was part of a later Norfolk echelon, which set sail for New Zealand on 10 June.

While the paratroopers were still at sea, the advance echelon of the division had already bedded down in New Zealand. But the 1st Marine Division's commander, Major General Alexander A. Vandegrift, received a rude shock shortly after he and his staff settled into their headquarters at a Wellington hotel. He and his outfit were slated to invade and seize islands in the southern Solomons group on 1 August, just five weeks hence. To complicate matters, there was very little solid intelligence about the objectives. There were no maps on hand, so the division had to

create its own from poor aerial photos and sketches hand-drawn by former planters and traders familiar with the area.

Planners estimated that there were about 5,275 enemy on Guadalcanal (home to a Japanese airfield under construction) and a total of 1,850 on Tulagi and Gavutu-Tanambogo. Tulagi, 17 miles north of Guadalcanal, was valuable for its anchorage and seaplane base. The islets of Gavutu and Tanambogo, joined by a causeway, hosted a seaplane base and Japanese shore installations and menaced the approaches to Tulagi. In reality, there were probably 536 men on Gavutu-Tanambogo, most of them part of construction or aviation support units, though there was at least one platoon of the *3d Kure Special Naval Landing Force*, the ground combat arm of the Imperial Navy. The list of heavy weapons on Gavutu-Tanambogo included two three-inch guns and an assortment of antiaircraft and antitank guns and machine guns.

By the time the last transports docked in New Zealand on 11 July, planners had outlined the operation and the execution date had slipped to 7 August to allow the division a chance to gather its far-flung echelons and combat load transports. Five battalions of the 1st and 5th Marines would land on the large island of Guadalcanal at 0800 on 7 August and seize the unfinished airfield on the north coast. The 1st Raider Battalion, slated to meet the division on the way to the objective, would simultaneously assault Tulagi. The 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, would follow in trace and support the raiders. The 2d Marines, also scheduled to rendezvous with the division at sea, would serve as the reserve force and land 20 minutes prior to H-Hour on Florida Island, thought to be undefended. The parachutists received the mission of attacking Gavutu at H plus four hours. The delay resulted from the need for planes, ships, and landing craft to concentrate first in support of the Tulagi operation. Once the para-

## Marine Parachute Pioneers

In October 1940, the Commandant sent a circular letter to all units and posts to solicit volunteers for the paratroopers. All applicants, with the exception of officers above the rank of captain, had to meet a number of requirements regarding age (21 to 32 years), height (66 to 74 inches), and health (normal eyesight and blood pressure). In addition, they had to be unmarried, an indication of the expected hazards of the duty. Applications were to include information on the Marine's educational record and athletic experience, so Headquarters was obviously interested in placing above-average individuals in these new units.

The letter further stated that personnel qualified as parachutists would receive an unspecified amount of extra pay. The money served as both a recognition of the danger and an incentive to volunteer. Congress would eventually set the additional monthly pay for parachutists at \$100 for officers and \$50 for enlisted men. Since a private first class at that time earned about \$36 per month and a second lieutenant \$125, the increase amounted to a hefty bonus. It would prove to be a significant factor in attracting volunteers, though parachuting would have generated a lot of interest without the money. As one early applicant later put it, based on common knowledge of the German success in the Low Countries, many Marines thought "that this was going to be a grand

and glorious business." Parachute duty promised "plenty of action" and the chance to get in on the ground floor of a revolutionary type of warfare.

To get the program underway, the Commandant transferred Marine Captain Marion L. Dawson from duty with the Navy's Bureau of Aeronautics to Lakehurst, New Jersey, to oversee the new school. Two enlisted Marine parachute riggers would serve as his initial assistants. Marine parachuting got off to an inauspicious start when Captain Dawson and two lieutenants made a visit to Hightstown, New Jersey, to check out the jumping towers. The other officers, Second Lieutenants Walter S. Osipoff and Robert C. McDonough, were slated to head the Corps' first group of parachute trainees. After watching a brief demonstration, the owner suggested that the Marines give it a test. As Dawson later recalled, he "reluctantly" agreed, only to break his leg when he landed at the end of his free fall.

On 26 October 1940, Osipoff, McDonough, and 38 enlisted men reported to Lakehurst. The Corps was still developing its training program, so the initial class spent 10 days at Hightstown starting on 28 October. Immediately after that they joined a new class at the Parachute Materiel School and followed that 16-week course of instruction until its completion on 27 February 1941. A Douglas R3D-2 transport plane arrived from Quantico on 6 December and



troopers secured Gavutu, they would move on to its sister. The Tulagi, Gavutu-Tanambo, and Florida operations fell under the immediate control of a task force designated as the Northern Group, headed by Brigadier General William H. Rupertus, the assistant division commander.

After a feverish week of unloading, sorting, and reloading equipment and supplies, the parachutists boarded the transport USS *Heywood* on 18 July and sailed in convoy to Koro Island in the Fijis, where the entire invasion force conducted landing rehearsals on 28 and 30 July. These went poorly, since the Navy boat crews and most of the 1st Marine Division were too green. The parachute battalion was better trained than most of the division, but this was its very first experience as a unit in conducting a seaborne landing. There is no indication that planners gave any thought to using their airborne capability, though in all likelihood that was due to the lack of transport aircraft or the inability of available planes to make a

round-trip flight from New Zealand to the Solomons.

The parachutists had the toughest mission in many respects. With a grand total of eight small infantry platoons, they had just 361 Marines, much less than half the manpower of other line battalions. More important, they lacked the punch of heavy mortars and machine guns and had fewer of the light versions of these weapons, too. Even their high proportion of individual automatic weapons would not help much; many of these were the unreliable Reising submachine gun. The late hour of their attack also sacrificed any element of surprise, though planners assumed that naval and aerial firepower would suppress Japanese defenders. Nor was terrain in their favor. The coral reef surrounding the islets meant that the only suitable landing site was the boat basin on the northeast coast of Gavutu, but that point was subject to flanking fire from defenders on Tanambo. In addition, a steep

remained there through the 21st, so the pioneer Marine paratroopers made their first jumps during this period. For the remainder of the course, they leapt from Navy blimps stationed at Lakehurst. Lieutenant Osipoff, the senior officer, had the honor of making the first jump by a Marine paratrooper. By graduation, each man had completed the requisite 10 jumps to qualify as a parachutist and parachute rigger. Not all made it through—several dropped from the program due to ineptitude or injury. The majority of these first graduates were destined to remain at Lakehurst as instructors or to serve the units in the Fleet Marine Force as riggers.

By the time the second training class reported, Dawson and his growing staff had created a syllabus for the program. The first two weeks were ground school, which emphasized conditioning, wearing of the harness, landing techniques, dealing with wind drag of the parachute once on the ground, jumping from platforms and a plane mockup, and packing chutes. Students spent the third week riding a bus each day to Hightstown where they applied their skills on the towers. The final two weeks consisted of work from aircraft and tactical training as time permitted. Students had to complete six jumps to qualify as a parachutist. The trainers had accumulated their knowledge from the Navy staff, from observing Army training at Fort Benning, and from a film depicting German parachutists. The latter resulted in one significant Marine departure from U.S. Army methods. Whereas the Army made a vertical exit

from the aircraft, basically just stepping out the door, Marines copied the technique depicted in the German film and tried to make a near-perpendicular dive, somewhat like a swimmer coming off the starting block.

Marine paratroopers used two parachutes in training and in tactical jumps. They wore the main chute in a backpack configuration and a reserve chute on their chest. When jumping from transport planes, the main opened by means of a static line attached to a cable running lengthwise in the cargo compartment. Once the jumpmaster gave the signal, a man crouched in the doorway, made his exit dive, and then drew his knees toward his chest. The parachutist, arms wrapped tightly about his chest chute, felt the opening shock of his main canopy almost immediately upon leaving the plane. If not, he had to pull the ripcord to deploy the reserve chute. (When jumping from blimps, the parachutists had to use a ripcord for the main chute, too.) A parachutist's speed of descent depended upon his weight, so Marines carried as little as possible to keep the rate down near 16 feet per second, the equivalent of jumping from a height of about 10 feet. At that speed a jumper had to fall and roll when hitting the ground so as to spread the shock beyond his leg joints. Training jumps began at 1,000 feet, while the standard height for tactical jumps in the Corps was 750 feet. The Germans jumped from as low as 300 feet, but that made it impossible to open the emergency chute in time for it to be effective.

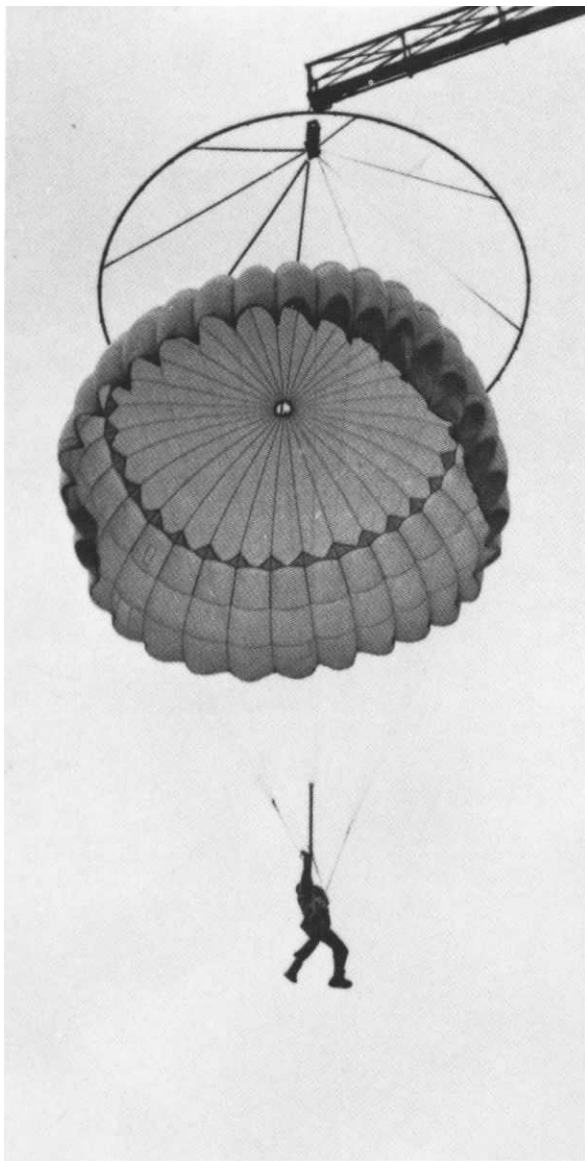


Photo courtesy of Anderson PC826

*The canopy fills out as a jumper is released from the fly-away tower at Hightstown, New Jersey, in 1941. This 150-foot tower was a copy of one used as an amusement ride at the New York World's Fair the previous year.*

coral hill dominated the flat coastal area of each islet. Finally, despite a rule of thumb that the attackers should outnumber defenders by three to one in an amphibious assault, they were going up against a significantly larger enemy force. The parachutists' only advantage was their high level of training and esprit.

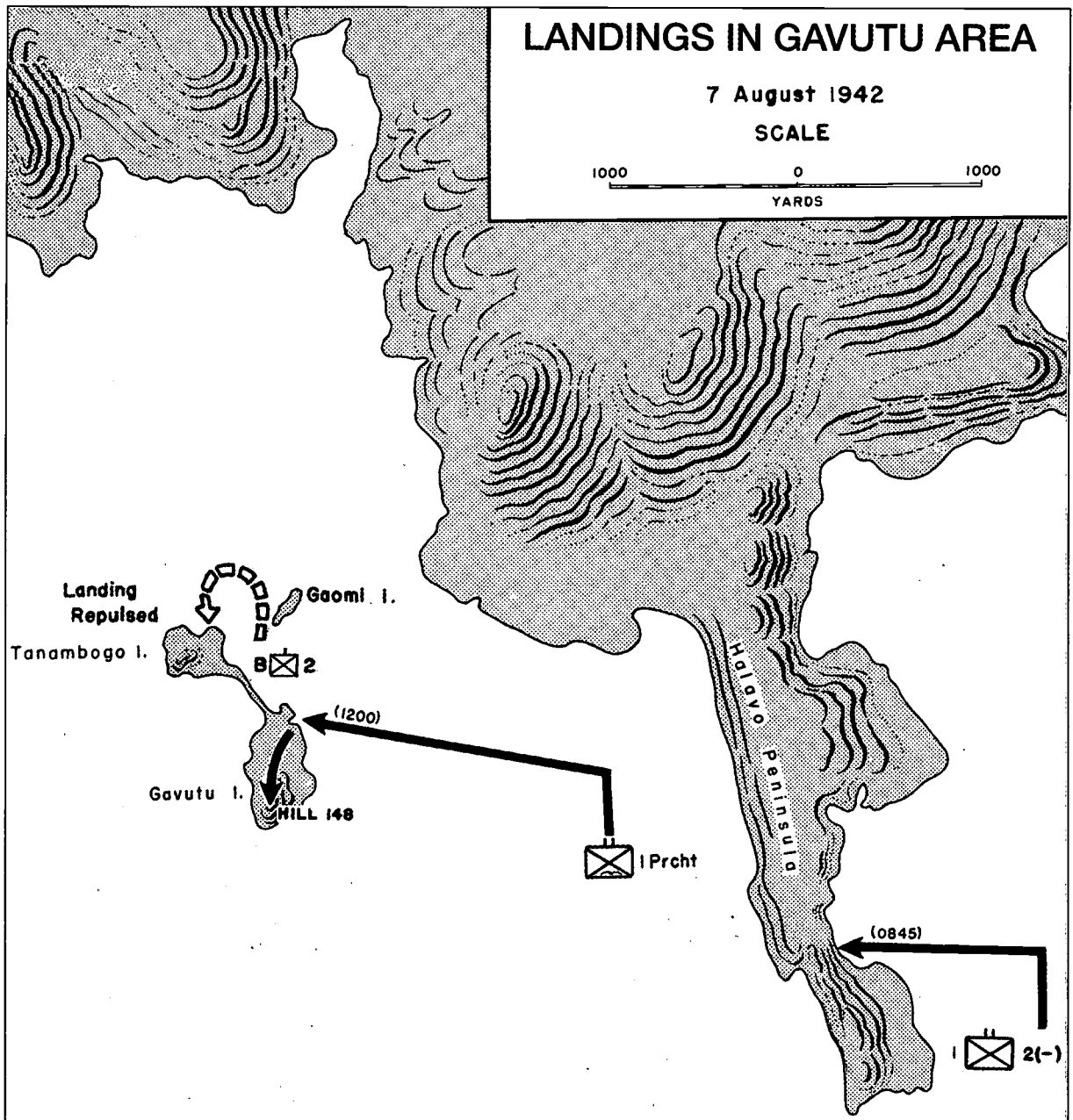
The U.S. task force sailed into the waters between Guadalcanal and Florida Island in the pre-dawn darkness of 7 August 1942. Planes and

ships soon opened up on the initial objectives while Marines clambered down cargo nets into landing craft. The parachutists watched while their fellow sea-soldiers conducted the first American amphibious assault of the war. As the morning progressed and opposition on Tulagi appeared light, the antiaircraft cruiser *San Juan* conducted three fire missions against Gavutu and Tanambogo, expending 1,200 rounds in all. Just prior to noon, the supporting naval forces turned their full fury on the parachute battalion's initial objective. *San Juan* poured 280 five-inch shells onto Gavutu in four minutes, then a flight of dive bombers from the carrier *Wasp* struck the northern side of the island, which had been masked from the fire of ship's guns. Oily black smoke

*A trainee descends from the controlled tower at Hightstown, New Jersey, in January 1941*

Department of Defense (USMC) 127-GC-495-302377





rose into the sky and most Marines assumed that few could survive such a pounding, but the display of firepower probably produced few casualties among the defenders, who had long since sought shelter in numerous caves and dugouts.

The bombardment did destroy one three-inch gun on Gavutu, as well as the seaplane ramp the parachutists had hoped to land on, thus forcing the Higgins boats to divert to a nearby pier or a small beach. The intense preparation fires had momentarily stunned the defenders, however, and the first wave of Marines, from Company A,

clambered from their landing craft onto the dock against little opposition. The Japanese quickly recovered and soon opened up with heavier fire that stopped Company A's advance toward Hill 148 after the Marines had progressed just 75 yards. Enemy gunners also devoted some of their attention to the two succeeding waves and inflicted casualties as they made the long approach around Gavutu to reach the northern shore. Company B landed four minutes after H-Hour against stiff opposition, as did Company C seven minutes later. The latter unit's commander,

Captain Richard J. Huerth, took a bullet in the head just as he rose from his boat and he fell back into it dead. Captain Emerson E. Mason, the battalion intelligence officer, also received a fatal wound as he reached the beach. When Company C's two platoons came ashore, they took up positions facing Tanambogo to return enfilading fire from that direction, while Company B began a movement to the left around the hill. That masked them from Tanambogo and allowed them to make some progress.

The nature of the enemy action—defenders shooting from concealed underground positions—surprised the parachutists. Several Marines became casualties when they investigated quiet cave openings, only to be met by bursts of fire. The battalion communications officer died in this manner. Many other parachutists withheld their fire because they saw no targets. Marines tossed grenades into caves and dugouts, but oftentimes soon found themselves being fired on from these “silenced” positions. (Later investigation revealed that baffles built inside the entrances protected the occupants or that connecting trenches and tunnels allowed new defenders to occupy the defensive works.)

Twenty minutes into the battle, Major Williams began leading men up Hill 148 and took a bullet in his side that put him out of action. Enemy fire drove off attempts to pull him to safety and his executive officer, Major Charles A. Miller, took control of the operation. Miller established the command post and aid station in a partially demolished building near the dock area. Around 1400 he called for an air strike against Tanambogo and half an hour later he radioed for reinforcements.

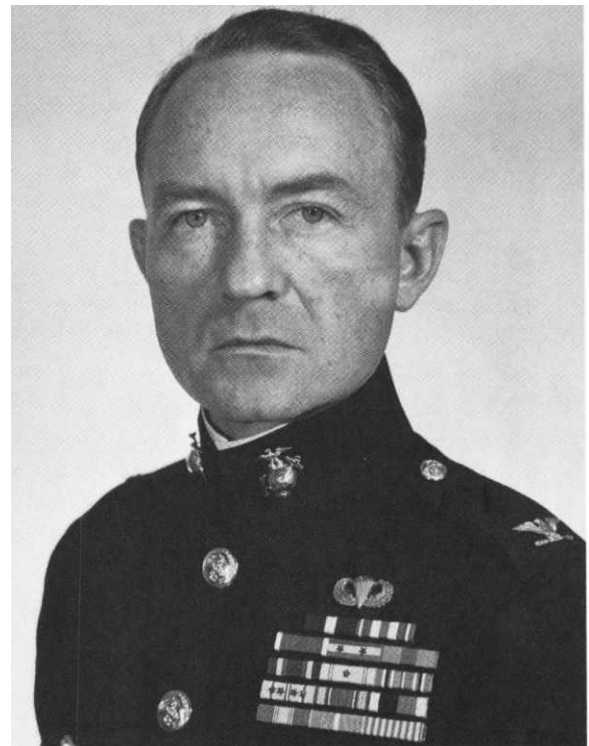
While the parachutists awaited this assistance, Company B and a few men from Company A continued to attack Hill 148 from its eastern flank. Individuals and small groups worked from dugout to dugout under rifle and machine gun fire from the enemy. Learning from initial experience, Marines began to tie demolition charges of TNT to long boards and stuff them into the entrances. That prevented the enemy from throwing back the explosives and it permanently put the positions out of action. Captain Harry L. Torgerson and Corporal Johnnie Blackan distinguished themselves in this effort. Other men, such as Sergeant Max Koplou and Corporal Ralph W. Fordyce, took a more direct approach and

entered the bunkers with submachine guns blazing. Platoon Sergeant Harry M. Tully used his marksmanship skill and Johnson rifle to pick off a number of Japanese snipers. The parachutists got their 60mm mortars into action, too, and used them against Japanese positions on the upper slopes of Hill 148. By 1430, the eastern half of the island was secure, but enemy fire from Tanambogo kept the parachutists from overrunning the western side of the hill.

In the course of the afternoon, the Navy responded to Miller's call for support. Dive bombers worked over Tanambogo, then two destroyers closed on the island and thoroughly shelled it. In the midst of this action, one pilot mistakenly dropped his ordnance on Gavutu's hilltop and inflicted several casualties on Company B. By 1800, the battalion succeeded in raising the U.S. flag at the summit of Hill 148 and physically occupying the remainder of Gavutu. With the suppression of fire from Tanambogo and

*Colonel Robert H. Williams commanded the 1st Parachute Battalion for much of its early life, taking charge at its inception and leading it into its first battle at Gavutu. He later served as commander of the 1st Parachute Regiment during most of that outfit's 10 months of existence.*

Department of Defense (USMC) A400721



the cover of night, the parachutists collected their casualties, to include Major Williams, and began evacuating the wounded to the transports.

Ground reinforcements arrived more slowly than fire support. Company B, 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, reported to Miller on Gavutu at 1800. He ordered them to make an amphibious landing on Tanambogo and arranged for preparatory fire by a destroyer. The parachutists also would support the move with their fire and Company C would attack across the causeway after the landing. Miller, perhaps buoyed by the late afternoon decrease in enemy fire from Tanambogo, was certain that the fresh force would carry the day. For his part, the Company B commander left the meeting under the impression that there were

*This publicity photo from 1942 purportedly shows a Marine of the Lakehurst, New Jersey, parachute school jumping from an aircraft in flight. While it was likely staged on the ground, it does clearly depict the soft helmet then worn by Marine parachutists in training, the main and emergency chutes, and the static line that automatically opened the primary canopy.*

Photo courtesy of Anderson PC826



only a few snipers left on the island. The attack ran into trouble from the beginning and the Marine force ended up withdrawing under heavy fire.

During the night, the parachutists dealt with Japanese emerging from dugouts or swimming ashore from Tanambogo or Florida. A heavy rain helped conceal these attempts at infiltration, but the enemy accomplished little. At 2200, General Rupertus requested additional forces to seize Tanambogo and the 3d Battalion, 2d Marines, went ashore on Gavutu late in the morning on 8 August. They took over many of the positions facing Tanambogo and in the afternoon launched an amphibious attack of one company supported by three tanks. Another platoon followed up the landing by attacking across the causeway. Bitter fighting ensued and the 3d Battalion did not completely secure Tanambogo until 9 August. This outfit suffered additional casualties on 8 August when yet another Navy dive bomber mistook Gavutu for Tanambogo and struck Hill 148.

In the first combat operation of an American parachute unit, the battalion had suffered severe losses: 28 killed and about 50 wounded, nearly all of the latter requiring evacuation. The dead included four officers and 11 NCOs. The casualty rate of just over 20 percent was by far the highest of any unit in the fighting to secure the initial lodgement in the Guadalcanal area. (The raiders were next in line with roughly 10 percent.) The Japanese force defending Gavutu-Tanambogo was nearly wiped out, with only a handful surrendering or escaping to Florida Island. Despite the heavy odds the parachutists had faced, they had proved more than equal to the faith placed in their capabilities and had distinguished themselves in a very tough fight. In addition to raw courage, they had displayed the initiative and resourcefulness required to deal with a determined and cunning enemy.

On the night of 8 August, a Japanese surface force arrived from Rabaul and surprised the Allied naval forces guarding the transports. In a brief engagement the enemy sank four cruisers and a destroyer, damaged other ships, and killed 1,200 sailors, all at minimal cost to themselves. The American naval commander had little choice the next morning but to order the early withdrawal of his force. Most of the transports would depart that afternoon with their cargo holds half full, leaving the Marines short of food, ammunition,

and equipment. The parachutists suffered an additional loss that would make life even more miserable for them. They had landed on 7 August with just their weapons, ammunition, and a two-day supply of C and D rations. They had placed their extra clothing, mess gear, and other essential field items into individual rolls and loaded them on a landing craft for movement to the beach after they secured the islands. As the parachutists fought on shore, Navy personnel decided they needed to clear out the boat, so they uncomprehendingly tossed all the gear into the sea. The battalion ended its brief association with Gavutu on the afternoon of 9 August and shifted to a bivouac site on Tulagi.

### *Tasimboko*

As August progressed it became clear that the Japanese were focusing their effort in the Solomons on regaining the vital airfield on Guadalcanal. The enemy poured fresh troops

onto the island via the "Tokyo Express," a shuttle of ships and barges coming down the "the Slot" each night. The 1st Marines destroyed the newly landed *Ichiki Detachment* along the Tenaru River on 21 August, but the understrength Marine division had too few troops to secure the entire perimeter. To bolster his force, General Vandegrift brought the raiders over from Tulagi at the end of August and switched the parachutists a few days later. The two battalions went into reserve in a coconut grove near Lunga Point. During this period Major Miller took ill and went into the field hospital, as did other parachutists. The shrinking battalion, temporarily commanded by a captain and down to less than 300 effectives, was so depleted in numbers and senior leadership that Vandegrift decided to attach them to Edson's 1st Raider Battalion. The combined unit roughly equalled the size of a standard infantry battalion, though it still lacked the heavy firepower.

Following the arrival of the first aviation reinforcements on 20 August, the division made use

## Marine Corps Airborne Doctrine

On 15 May 1940 the Commandant, Major General Thomas Holcomb, wrote the Chief of Naval Operations to seek the help of his naval attaches in gathering information on foreign parachute programs. He noted that he was "intensely interested" in the subject. The Berlin attache responded the following month with a lead on how to obtain newsreels and an educational film on the German paratroopers. The London attache eventually provided additional information on the Germans and on Britain's fledgling parachute program launched in June 1940.

The Commandant's own intelligence section had already compiled available material on the German and Soviet forces. The report noted the distinction between parachutists and air infantry, the latter consisting of specially organized units trained and equipped to move by transport aircraft. The paratroopers acted as the advance guard for the air infantry by seizing the airfields upon which the transports would land. The report also detailed the different methods that the Germans and Soviets used to train their respective forces. German paratrooper recruits went through an intensive ground school prior to making the six jumps required to achieve membership in a unit. The Soviet program featured the use of towers for practice jumps prior to actual

training with a plane. When staff officers at Headquarters first looked at parachute forces in the aftermath of Eben Emael, they specifically considered the functions such a unit would perform. Their ideas were generally similar: paratroopers would be valuable for raids, reconnaissance, the seizure of airfields, aerial envelopment of the enemy's rear area, and the occupation of key terrain in advance of the main force. Several officers specifically tied the latter two missions to the conduct of amphibious operations.

Although the Corps' amphibious doctrine had existed on paper for several years, the Fleet Marine Force was having a difficult time turning those ideas into reality. During annual exercises, a lack of decent landing craft and transports had prevented the rapid buildup ashore of combat power, something the amphibious force had to do if it hoped to defeat counterattacks against its beachhead. Brigadier General Holland M. Smith, commander of the 1st Marine Brigade, first tried to solve this problem during Fleet Exercise 6 in February 1940. A key part of his plan was the night landing of one company three hours prior to the main amphibious assault. This company, embarked in a fast destroyer transport, would go ashore by rubber boat, seize key terrain overlooking the proposed beachhead, and then protect the rest of the force as it landed and got itself

of its daytime control of the skies to launch a number of seaborne operations. Near the end of the month, a battalion of the 5th Marines conducted an amphibious spoiling attack on Japanese forces to the west of the perimeter, but inflicted little damage due to a lack of aggressive leadership. Two companies of raiders found no enemy after scouring Savo Island on 4 September, while a mixup in communications scrubbed a similar foray scheduled the next day for Cape Esperance. By 6 September, Japanese naval activity and native scouting reports indicated that the enemy was concentrating fresh troops near the village of Tasimboko, located on the coast several miles east of the Marine lines.

Edson and Lieutenant Colonel Gerald C. Thomas, the division operations officer, hatched a plan to raid this eastern terminus of the Tokyo Express on 8 September. Intelligence initially placed two or three hundred Japanese at Tasimboko, with their defenses located west of the village and facing toward Henderson Field.

Edson planned to land to the east of the village and attack them from the rear. The available shipping consisted of two destroyer transports (APDs) and two small, converted tuna boats, so the raider commander divided his force into two waves. The raider rifle companies would embark on the evening of 7 September and land just prior to dawn, then the tiny fleet would shuttle back to the perimeter to pick up the weapons company and the parachutists. Since the APDs were needed for other missions, the Marine force would have to complete its work and reembark the same day. (The Navy had already lost three of the original six APDs in the Guadalcanal campaign.)

On the evening of 7 September, native scouts brought news that the enemy force at Tasimboko had swelled to several thousand. Division planners discounted these reports, believing that they were greatly exaggerated or referred to remnants of previously defeated formations. When the raiders landed at 0520 on the 8th, they immediately realized that the natives had provided accu-

organized. This idea eventually gave birth to the 1st Marine Raider Battalion. In the spring of 1940, it was obvious to a number of Marine officers, at Headquarters and in the FMF, that parachutists now constituted an ideal alternative for speedily seizing a surprise lodgement on an enemy coast. Smith explicitly would advocate that new wrinkle to doctrine the following year.

The Marine Corps did not develop formal airborne doctrine until late 1942. It came in the form of a 12-page manual titled *Parachute and Air Troops*. Its authors believed that airborne forces could constitute "a paralyzing application of power in the initial phase of a landing attack." Secondly, parachute troops could seize "critical points," such as airfields or bridges, or they could operate behind enemy lines in small groups to gather intelligence or conduct sabotage operations. The doctrine noted the limitations of airborne assault and emphasized that these forces could only seize small objectives and hold them for a short time pending linkup with seaborne or overland echelons. The manual envisioned the formation of an air brigade composed of one regiment each of paratroops and air infantry, the type of force originally sought by Holland Smith.

The doctrinal publication did not provide much detail on tactics, but the parachutists worked out techniques in combination with Marine transport pilots. The standard method of operations called for

a terrain-hugging approach flight at altitudes as low as 50 feet, with a last-minute ascent to several hundred feet, at which point the jumpers exited the aircraft. All leaders were thoroughly briefed beforehand with maps, aerial photos, and a sandtable mockup of the objective, so that they could quickly get organized and oriented once they hit the ground. When they jumped, the paratroopers carried the collapsible Johnson weapons or Reisings, along with basic individual items such as a belt, knife, canteens, and ammunition. Cargo parachutes delivered heavier weapons and supplies.

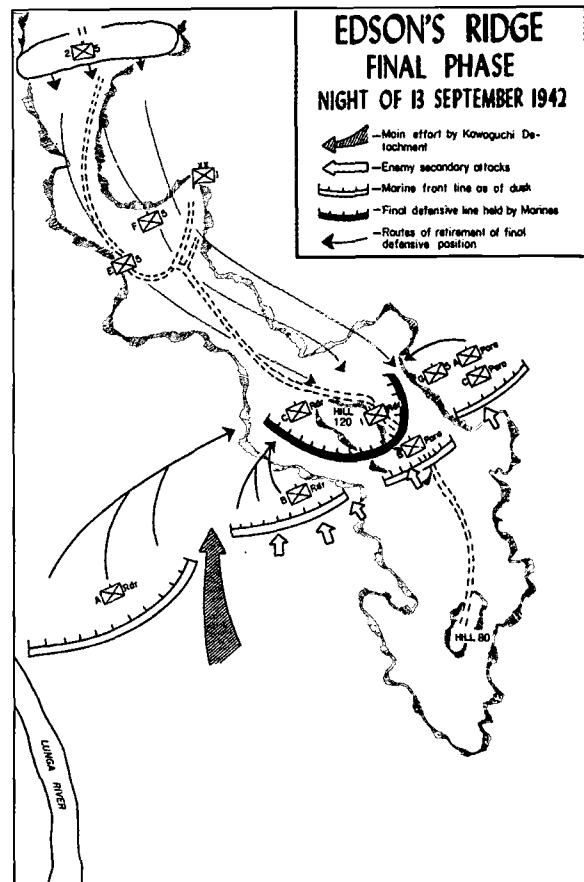
From early in the life of the program, planners realized that a lack of training facilities and planes hampered the ability of the Corps to field an adequate airborne force. They thus began looking at using parachutists for secondary missions. In April 1941 the Commandant directed that parachute units conduct training in rubber boat operations, reconnaissance, demolitions, and other subjects to enable them to conduct special missions requiring only small forces or not necessarily involving airborne insertion. On New Caledonia in 1943, the 1st Parachute Regiment devoted much of its training time to such skills. In many respects the Marine Corps had molded the parachutists and raiders into carbon copies of each other, with the parachutists' unique ability to enter battle being the only significant difference between the two special units.



rate information. Not far from the beach, Marines discovered endless rows of neatly placed life preservers, a large number of foxholes, and several unattended 37mm antitank guns. Luckily for Edson's outfit, Major General Kiyotake Kawaguchi and his brigade of more than 3,000 men already had departed into the interior. Only a rear guard of 300 soldiers remained behind to secure the Japanese base at Tasimboko, but even that small force was nearly as large as the first wave of raiders.

Company D of the raiders (little more than a platoon in strength) remained at the landing beach as rear security while the other companies moved west toward Tasimboko. The raiders soon ran into stubborn resistance, with the Japanese firing artillery over open sights directly at the advancing Marines. Edson sent one company wide to the left to flank the defenders. As the action developed, the APDs Manley and McKean returned to Kukum Beach at 0755 and the Parachute Battalion (less Company C) debarked within 25 minutes. The 208 parachutists joined Company D ashore by 1130 and went into defensive positions adjacent to them. Edson, fearing that he might be moving into a Japanese trap, already had radioed division twice and asked for reinforcements, to include another landing to the west of Tasimboko in what was now the enemy rear. In reply, division ordered the raiders and parachutists to withdraw. Edson persisted, however, and Japanese resistance melted away about noon. The raider assault echelon entered the village and discovered a stockpile of food, ammunition, and weapons ranging up to 75mm artillery pieces. The raider and parachute rear guard closed up on the main force and the Marines set about destroying the enemy supply base. Three hours later the combined unit began to reembark and all were back in the division perimeter by nightfall.

The raid was a minor tactical victory with major operational impact on the Guadalcanal campaign. At a cost of two killed and six wounded, the Marines had killed 27 Japanese. The enemy suffered more grievously in terms of lost firepower, logistics, and communication. Intelligence gathered at the scene also revealed some details about the coming Japanese offensive. These latter facts would allow the 1st Marine Division to fight off one of the most serious challenges to its tenuous hold on Henderson Field.



### *Edson's Ridge*

On 9 September, Edson met with division planners to discuss the results of the raid. Intelligence officers translating captured documents indicated that up to 3,000 Japanese were cutting their way through the jungle southwest of Tasimboko. Edson was convinced that they planned to attack the unguarded southern portion of the perimeter. From an aerial photograph he picked out a grass-covered ridge that pointed like a knife at the airfield. He based his hunch on his experience with the Japanese and in jungle operations in Nicaragua. Lieutenant Colonel Thomas agreed. Vandegrift, just in the process of moving his command post into that area, was reluctant to accept a conclusion that would force him to move yet again. After much discussion, he allowed Thomas to shift the bivouac of the raiders and parachutists to the ridge to get them out of the pattern of bombs falling around the airfield.

The combined force moved to the new location on 10 September and quickly discovered that it was not the rest area they had hoped to enjoy. Orders came down from Edson to dig in and





Department of Defense (USMC) 127-GC-121-40542  
*Private First Class Kenneth Kleist strikes an aggressive pose after a training jump at San Diego in February 1943. He wears a camouflage parasmock and carries a folding-stock Reising submachine gun. The Reising initially was considered ideal for the pararchutists because it was small enough that they could jump with it.*

enemy aircraft bombed the ridge on the 11th and 12th, inflicting several casualties. Native scouts reported the progress of the Japanese column and Marine patrols confirmed the presence of strong enemy forces to the southeast of the perimeter. The raiders and parachutists found the process of constructing defensive positions tough going. There was very little barbed wire and no sandbags or heavy tools. Men digging in on the ridge itself found coral just below the shallow surface soil. Units disposed in the flanking jungle were hampered by the thick growth, which reduced fields of fire to nothing. Both units were smaller than ever, as tropical illnesses, poor diet, and lack of sleep combined to swell the number of men in the field hospital. Those still listed as effective often were just barely so.

Edson faced a tough situation as he contemplated how to defend the ridge area. Several hundred yards to the right of his coral hogback was the Lunga River; beyond it, elements of the 1st Pioneer and 1st Amphibious Tractor Battalions had strongpoints. More than a mile to his left was the tail end of the 1st Marine Regiment's positions along the Tenaru River. With the exception of the kunai grass-covered slopes of the ridge, everything else was dense jungle. His small force, about the size of a single infantry battalion but lacking all the heavy weapons, could not possibly establish a classic linear defense. Edson placed the parachutists on the east side of the ridge, with Company B holding a line running from the slope of Hill 80 into the jungle. The other two companies echeloned to the rear to hold the left flank. Company B of the raiders occupied the right slope of Hill 80 and anchored their right on a lagoon. Company C placed platoon strongpoints between the lagoon and river. The remaining raiders were in reserve near Hill 120. Thomas moved 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, into position between the ridge and the airfield and reoriented some of his artillery to fire to the south. Artillery forward observers joined Edson's command post on the front slope of Hill 120 and registered the guns.

Kawaguchi's Brigade faced its own troubles as it fought through the jungle and over the numerous slimy ridges. The rough terrain had forced the Japanese to leave behind their artillery and most of their supplies. Their commander also detailed one of his four battalions to make a diversionary attack along the Tenaru, which left him with just 2,500 men for the main assault. To make matters worse, the Japanese had underestimated the jungle and fallen behind schedule. As the sun set on 12 September, Kawaguchi realized that only one battalion was in its assembly area and none of his units had been able to reconnoiter their routes of attack. The Japanese general tried to delay the jumpoff scheduled for 2200, but he could not contact his battalions. Without guides and running late, the attack blundered forward in darkness and soon degenerated into confusion.

At the appointed hour, a Japanese float plane dropped green flares over the Marine positions. A cruiser and three destroyers began shelling the ridge area and kept up the bombardment for 20 minutes, though few rounds landed on their

intended target; many sailed over the ridge into the jungle beyond. Japanese infantry followed up with their own flares and began to launch their assault. The enemy's confusion may have benefited the parachute battalion, since all the action occurred on the raider side of the position. The enemy never struck the ridge proper, but did dislodge the Company C raiders, who fell back and eventually regrouped near Hill 120. At daylight the Japanese broke off the attack and tried to reorganize for another attempt the next night.

In the morning, Edson ordered a counterattack by the raiders of Company B and the parachutists of Company A to recapture Company C's position. The far more numerous Japanese stopped them cold with machine gun fire. Since he could not eject the Japanese from a portion of his old front, the raider commander decided to withdraw the

entire line to the reserve position. In the late afternoon the Companies B of both raiders and parachutists pulled back and anchored themselves on the ridge between Hills 80 and 120. Division provided an engineer company, which Edson inserted on the right of the ridge. Company A of the raiders covered the remaining ground to the Lunga. Company C parachutists occupied a draw just to the left rear of their own Company B, while Company A held another draw on the east side of Hill 120. The raiders of Companies C and D assumed a new reserve position on the west slope of the ridge, just behind Hill 120. Edson's forward command post was just in front of the top of Hill 120.

Kawaguchi renewed his attack right after darkness fell on the 13th. His first blow struck the right flank of the raiders' Company B and drove

## Air Transport

The fate of the parachute program was intertwined completely with Marine aviation, inasmuch as the airborne infantry could not fulfill its function without transport aircraft. Although men could jump from just about any type of plane, tactical parachute operations required certain characteristics in aircraft. The door had to allow easy exit and the interior freedom of movement so that a stick of jumpers could exit the plane in short order; the ideal was one second per man. Any increase in the delay between jumpers resulted in wide dispersion once the stick landed on the ground and that translated into extra time spent in finding weapons and getting organized to fight. The last parachutists also might find themselves landing outside the drop zone in woods or water, either of which could easily result in death or serious injury.

When Headquarters planners first began evaluating the idea of creating Marine parachute units, the Corps possessed just two planes suitable for tactical jumping, the pair of R2D-1s of Utility Squadron 1 (VMJ-1) in Quantico, Virginia. The R2D-1 was a military version of the Douglas DC-2 airliner. Its two Wright engines generated 710 horsepower, lifted the plane's maximum gross weight of 18,200 pounds, and pushed it to a top speed of 210 miles per hour. It could accommodate approximately 10 parachutists. (The capacity depended, of course, upon the amount of equipment to be dropped, since each cargo parachute for weapons and supplies took up the space of one man.) At that time the Department of the Navy had on order seven of Douglas' newer

DC-5s, known as R3D-2s in the naval services. The Marine Corps was slated to receive four of these aircraft, which could hold about 15 jumpers. The Corps had its R3D-2s by mid-1941 and placed two each in VMJ-252 and 152, respectively located in Hawaii and Quantico. One of the old R2D-1s remained in service at the air station in San Diego.

The real workhorse of Allied airborne operations during World War II was based on Douglas' DC-3 airliner, which made its first commercial flight in 1935. The Army Air Forces began buying a military version in 1940 and labelled it the C-47. The Department of the Navy acquired its first planes of this type, designated the R4D, during 1942. The Skytrain's two Pratt and Whitney engines generated 1,200 horsepower, lifted the plane's gross weight of 29,000 pounds, and pushed it to a top speed of 227 miles per hour. It could carry up to 25 paratroopers out to a range of 1,600 miles. The United States built over 10,000 C-47 variants during the war, with the naval services receiving 568 of them. In August 1943 the Marine Corps possessed about 80 of these planes. There were seven VMJ squadrons and an eighth on the drawing board, each with a projected authorization of one dozen R4Ds, but most of the units were brand new and still short of planes and crews. A number of the aircraft also were distributed in ones or twos to headquarters squadrons in support of various air groups. The heart of Marine transport capability rested at that point in Marine Air Group 25's three squadrons in the South Pacific, a grand total of just 36 transports.



*A stick of Marines boards an R4D (the Corps' variant of the Army C-47). This transport could carry*

Photo courtesy of MSgt W. F. Gemeinhardt, USMC (Ret)  
*25 jumpers out to a range of 1,600 miles.*

more than a platoon of those Marines out of their positions. Most linked up with Company C in their rear, while the remainder of Company B clung to its position in the center of the ridge. The Japanese did not exploit the gap, except to send some infiltrators into the rear of the raider and parachute line. They apparently cut some of the phone lines running from Edson's command post to his companies, though he was able to warn the parachutists of the threat in their rear. By 2100 the Japanese obviously were massing around the southern nose of the ridge, lapping around the flanks of the two B Companies and making their presence known with firecrackers, flares, "a hellish bedlam of howls," and rhythmic chanting designed to strike fear into the heart of their enemy and draw return fire for the purpose of pinpointing automatic weapons. Edson responded with a fierce artillery barrage and orders to Company C raiders and Company A parachutists to form a reserve line around the front and sides of Hill 120. As Japanese mortar and machine gun fire swept the ridge, Captain William J. McKennan and First Sergeant Marion LeNoir gathered their paratroopers and led them into position around the knoll.

The Japanese assault waves finally surged forward around 2200. The attack, focused on the open ground of the ridge, immediately unhinged the remainder of the Marine center. Captain Justin G. Duryea, commanding the Company B parachutists, ordered his men to withdraw as Marine artillery shells fell ever closer to the front lines and Japanese infantry swarmed around his left flank. He also believed that the remainder of the Company B raiders already were falling back

on his right. To add to the confusion, Marines thought they heard shouts of "gas attack" as smoke rose up from the lower reaches of the ridge. Duryea's small force ended up next to Company C in the draw on the east slope, where he reported to Torgerson, now the battalion executive officer. The units were clustered in low-lying ground and had no contact on their flanks. Torgerson ordered both companies to withdraw to the rear of Hill 120, where he hoped to reorganize them in the lee of the reserve line and the masking terrain. Given the collapse of the front line, it was a reasonable course of action.

The withdrawal of the parachutists left the rump of the raiders, perhaps 60 men, all alone in the center of the old front line. Edson arranged for covering fire from the artillery and the troops around Hill 120, then ordered Company B back to the knoll. There they joined the reserve line, which was now the new front line. This series of rearward movements threatened to degenerate into a rout. Night movements under fire are always confusing and commanders no longer had positive control of coherent units. There was no neat line of fighting holes to occupy, no time to hold muster and sort out raiders from parachutists and get squads, platoons, and companies back together again. A few men began to filter to the rear of the hill, while others lay prone waiting for direction. Edson, with his command post now in the middle of the front line, took immediate action. The raider commander ordered Torgerson to lead his Companies B and C from the rear of the hill and lengthen the line running from the left of Company A's position. Edson then made it known that this would be the final stand, that no



*Trainees at Lakehurst sit on the floor of their transport waiting for the signal to prepare to jump. Given the number of jumpers and their seating*

*Photo courtesy of Anderson PC826 arrangement, this appears to be an R3D-2, the Marine Corps variant of the Douglas DC-5 civilian aircraft.*

one was authorized to retreat another step. Major Kenneth D. Bailey, commander of the Company C raiders, played a major role in revitalizing the defenders. He moved along the line of mingled raiders and parachutists, encouraging everyone and breathing new life into those on the verge of giving up.

Under the direction of Torgerson and unit leaders, the two parachute companies in reserve moved forward in a skirmish line and established contact on the flank of their fellows from Company A. They met only "slight resistance" in the process, but soon came under heavy attack as the Japanese renewed their assault on the hill. Edson later thought that this action "succeeded in breaking up a threatening hostile envelopment of our position" and "was a decisive factor in our ultimate victory." The new line of raiders and parachutists was not very strong, just a small

horseshoe bent around the bare slopes of the knoll, with troops from the two battalions still intermingled in many spots. The artillery kept up a steady barrage—"the most intensive concentration of the campaign" according to the division's final report. And all along the line, Marines threw grenade after grenade to support the fire of their automatic weapons. Supplies of ammunition dwindled rapidly and moving cases of grenades and belted machine gun rounds to the frontline became a key element of the fight.

At 0400, Edson asked division to commit the reserve battalion to bolster his depleted forces. One company at a time, the men of the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, moved along the spine of the ridge and into place beside those who had survived the long night. By dawn the Japanese had exhausted their reservoir of fighting spirit and Kawaguchi admitted defeat in the face of a tena-

cious defense backed by superior firepower. The enemy began to break contact and retreat, although a number of small groups and individuals remained scattered through the jungle on the flanks and in the rear of the Marine position. The men of the 2d Battalion began the long process of rooting out these snipers, while Edson ordered up an air strike to hasten the departure of the main Japanese force. A flight of P-40s answered the call and strafed the enemy infantry still clinging to the exposed forward slopes of Hill 80. The raiders and parachutists walked off the ridge that morning and returned to their previous bivouac in the coconut grove. Although an accurate count of Japanese bodies was impossible, the division estimated there were some 700 dead sprawled around the small battlefield. Of Kawaguchi's 500 wounded, few would survive the difficult trek back to the coast.

The two-day battle on the ridge had cost the 1st Raiders 135 men and the 1st Parachute Battalion 128. Of those totals, 59 were dead or missing, including 15 parachutists killed in action. Many of the wounded parachutists would eventually return to duty, but for the moment the battalion was down to about 100 effectives, the equivalent of a severely under-strength rifle company. It was no longer a useful tactical entity and had seen its last action on Guadalcanal. Three days later, a convoy brought the 7th Marines to the island and the remaining men of the 1st Parachute Battalion embarked in those ships for a voyage to a welcome period of rest and recuperation in a rear area.

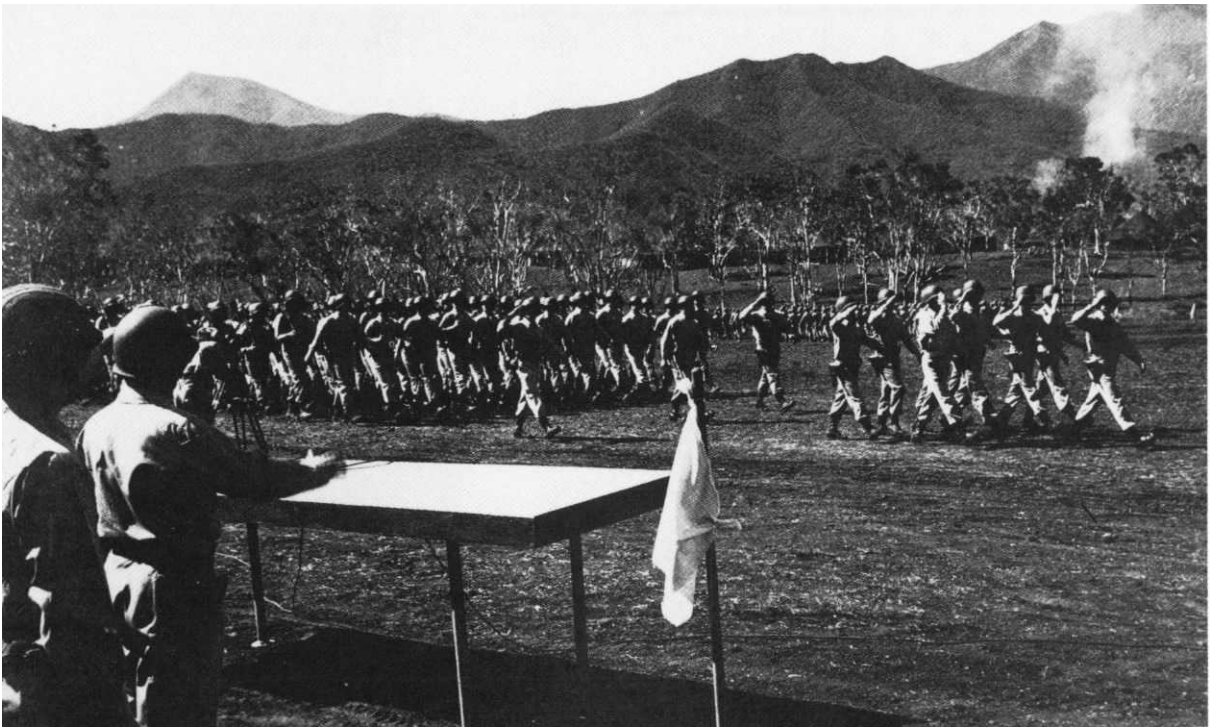
The parachute battalion had contributed a great deal to the successful prosecution of the campaign. They had made the first American amphibious assault of the war against a defended beach and fought through the intense fire to secure the island. Despite their meager numbers, lack of senior leadership, and minimal firepower, they had stood with the raiders against difficult odds on the ridge. The 1st Marine Division's final report on Guadalcanal lauded that performance: "The actions and conduct of those who participated in the defense of the ridge is deserving of the warmest commendation. The troops engaged were tired, sleepless and battle weary at the outset. Throughout the night they held their positions in the face of powerful attacks by overwhelming numbers of the enemy. Driven from one position they reorganized and clung tena-

ciously to another until daylight found the enemy again in full flight." Looking back on the campaign after the war, General Vandegrift would say that "I think the most crucial moment was the Battle of the Ridge."

### *Recuperation and Reevaluation*

The 1st Parachute Battalion arrived in New Caledonia and went into a "dreadful" transient camp. For the next few weeks the area headquarters assigned the tired, sick men of the orphaned unit to unload ships and work on construction projects. Luckily Lieutenant Colonel Williams returned to duty after recovering from his wound and took immediate steps to rectify the situation. The battalion's last labor project was building its own permanent quarters, named Camp Kiser after Second Lieutenant Walter W. Kiser, killed at Gavutu. The site was picturesque; a grassy, undulating plain rising into low hills and overlooking the Tontouta River. Wooden structures housed the parachute loft and messhalls, but for the most part the officers and men lived and worked in tents. The two dozen transport planes of VMJ-152 and VMJ-253 occupied a nearby airfield. The parachutists made a few conditioning hikes while they built their camp and began serious training in November. The first order of business was reintroducing themselves to their primary specialty, since none of them had touched a parachute in many months. They practiced packing and jumping and graduated to tactical training emphasizing patrolling and jungle warfare.

The 1st Battalion received company on 11 January 1943, when the 2d Battalion arrived at Tontouta and went into bivouac at Camp Kiser. The West Coast parachute outfit had continued to build itself up while its East Coast counterpart sailed with the 1st Marine Division and fought at Guadalcanal. During the summer of 1942, the 2d Battalion had found enough aircraft in busy southern California to make mass jumps with up to 14 planes. (Though "mass" is a relative term here; an entire battalion required about 50 R3D-2s to jump at once.) The battalion also benefitted from its additional time in the States, as it received Johnson rifles and light machine guns in place of the reviled Reisings. However, the manpower pipeline was still slow, as Company C did not come into being until 3 September 1942 (18 months after the first parachutists reported to San



*General Alexander A. Vandegrift, then commanding general of I Marine Amphibious Corps, reviews a formal parade by parachutists at Camp Kiser on 29 July 1943. Unbeknownst to the marchers, they*

*Department of Defense (USMC) 127-GW-371-57931 alrerady had executed their last training jump and Vandegrift would bring their organization to an end less than five months later.*

Diego for duty). The battalion sailed from San Diego in October 1942, arrived at Wellington, New Zealand in November, and departed for New Caledonia on 6 January 1943.

As the 2d Battalion prepared to head overseas, it detached a cadre to form the 3d Parachute Battalion, which officially came into existence on 16 September 1942. Compared to its older counterparts, the 3d Battalion grew like a weed and reached full strength by the end of December. The battalion commander, Major Robert T. Vance, emphasized infantry tactics, demolition work, guerrilla warfare, and physical conditioning in addition to parachuting. At the beginning of 1943, the battalion simulated a parachute assault behind enemy lines in support of a practice amphibious landing by the 21st Marines on San Clemente Island. The fully trained outfit sailed from San Diego in March and joined the 1st and 2d Battalions at Camp Kiser before the end of the month.

At the end of 1942, the Marine Corps had transferred the parachute battalions from their respective divisions and made them a I Marine

Amphibious Corps asset. This recognized their special training and unique mission and theoretically allowed them to withdraw from the battlefield and rebuild while the divisions remained engaged in extended land combat. After the 3d Battalion arrived in New Caledonia in March 1943, I MAC took the next logical step and created the 1st Parachute Regiment on 1 April. This fulfilled Holland Smith's original call for a regimental-size unit and provided for unified control of the battalions in combat and in training. Lieutenant Colonel Williams became the first commanding officer of the new organization.

Just when things appeared most promising for Marine parachuting, the Corps shifted into reverse gear. General Holcomb and planners at Headquarters had not shown much enthusiasm for the program since mid-1940 and apparently began to have strong second thoughts in the fall of 1942. In October, Brigadier General Keller E. Rockey, the director of Plans and Policies at HQMC, had queried I MAC about the "use of parachutists" in its geographic area. There is no record of a reply, but I MAC later sent Lieutenant Colonel Williams

in a B-24 to make an aerial reconnaissance of New Georgia in the Central Solomons for a potential airborne operation. In early 1943, I MAC dragged its feet on planning for the Central Solomons mission and the Navy eventually turned to the Army's XIV Corps headquarters to com-

mand the June invasion of New Georgia. In March, the Navy decided that Vandegrift would take over I MAC in July, with Thomas as his chief of staff. They had suffered the loss of some of their best men to the parachute and raider programs during the difficult buildup of the 1st

## Training Centers

Very early in the process of creating the parachute program, the Marine Corps sought out information on the parachute tower then being used as an amusement ride at the New York City World's Fair. A lieutenant with the Marine Detachment at the fair provided his report on 20 May 1940. He thought such a tower could be used to advantage if the Corps modified it to simulate the physical jolt that a jumper would experience when his parachute opened and radically slowed his rate of descent. Safe Parachute Company, the builder of the World's Fair ride, also owned two towers at Hightstown, New Jersey. Each stood 150 feet tall and used a large ring to lift a spread parachute with the jumper dangling from the risers. When the mechanism released its load, the descending chute automatically filled with air. One tower featured a controlled descent guided by four cables, while the other completely released the parachute for a free fall. Fortuitously, Hightstown was just 20 miles from the Navy's Parachute Materiel School at Naval Air Station Lakehurst, New Jersey, the facility that trained sailors and a handful of Marines to pack parachutes for pilots. That made Lakehurst the obvious choice as the primary instruction facility.

Lakehurst eventually had room to train a maximum of 100 men at a time. Given the length of the course (which often stretched to six weeks or more due to delays for weather), the Corps thus could produce no more than 700 qualified parachutists per year. By mid-1941 the school was not even achieving that pace, having fallen more than two months behind schedule. In July 1941, the officer in charge of the school recommended creation of an additional parachute training facility at the burgeoning Marine base in New River, North Carolina, but it would be awhile before the Corps found the resources to act on that suggestion.

In the meantime, Headquarters decided to shift its primary parachute school to San Diego to allow more efficient use of training time due to better weather and the proximity of Marine aviation units. In April

1942 the Lakehurst detachment began transferring its instructors to San Diego, a process completed in May after the last Lakehurst class graduated. The new San Diego school began training its first class on 27 May. The plan called for the program to start a new class of 36 students each week, with a possible expansion to 60 trainees per week in the future. The school initially operated out of San Diego's Camp Elliott, but the Corps built barracks, jump towers, plane mock-ups, and aviation fields near Santee and moved the entire operation there at the end of August 1942. The Commandant named this small base, dedicated entirely to parachute training, Camp Gillespie in honor of Brevet Major Archibald H. Gillespie, who had participated in the campaign to free California from Mexico in 1846.

The Marine Corps established another training facility at New River's Hadnot Point during 1942. In June the 1st Parachute Battalion had transferred one officer and 13 NCOs to form the instructor cadre. The school opened with a first class of 54 students on 10 August, but delays in constructing the jump towers and obtaining parachutes slowed training. The initial group finally graduated on 13 October. The New River school's designed capacity was 75 students per class, with a new class beginning every week. By the end of 1942 the Marine parachute program was finally in full swing and capable of producing 135 new jumpers per week, though actual numbers were never that high.

The Marine Corps had one more source of trained parachutists. During the 1st Battalion's initial period of recuperation from fighting on Gavutu and Guadalcanal, it had difficulty obtaining qualified jumpers from the States. To solve the problem, Lieutenant Colonel Williams organized his own informal school. It lacked towers and he ignored much of the syllabus used stateside, but during the program's brief operation it produced about 100 trained jumpers from volunteers garnered from other units located in New Caledonia.





Department of Defense (USMC) 127-GC-121-402906

*Parachute trainees undergo their initial training at San Diego. This included leaps from platforms*

*to practice the proper landing technique.*

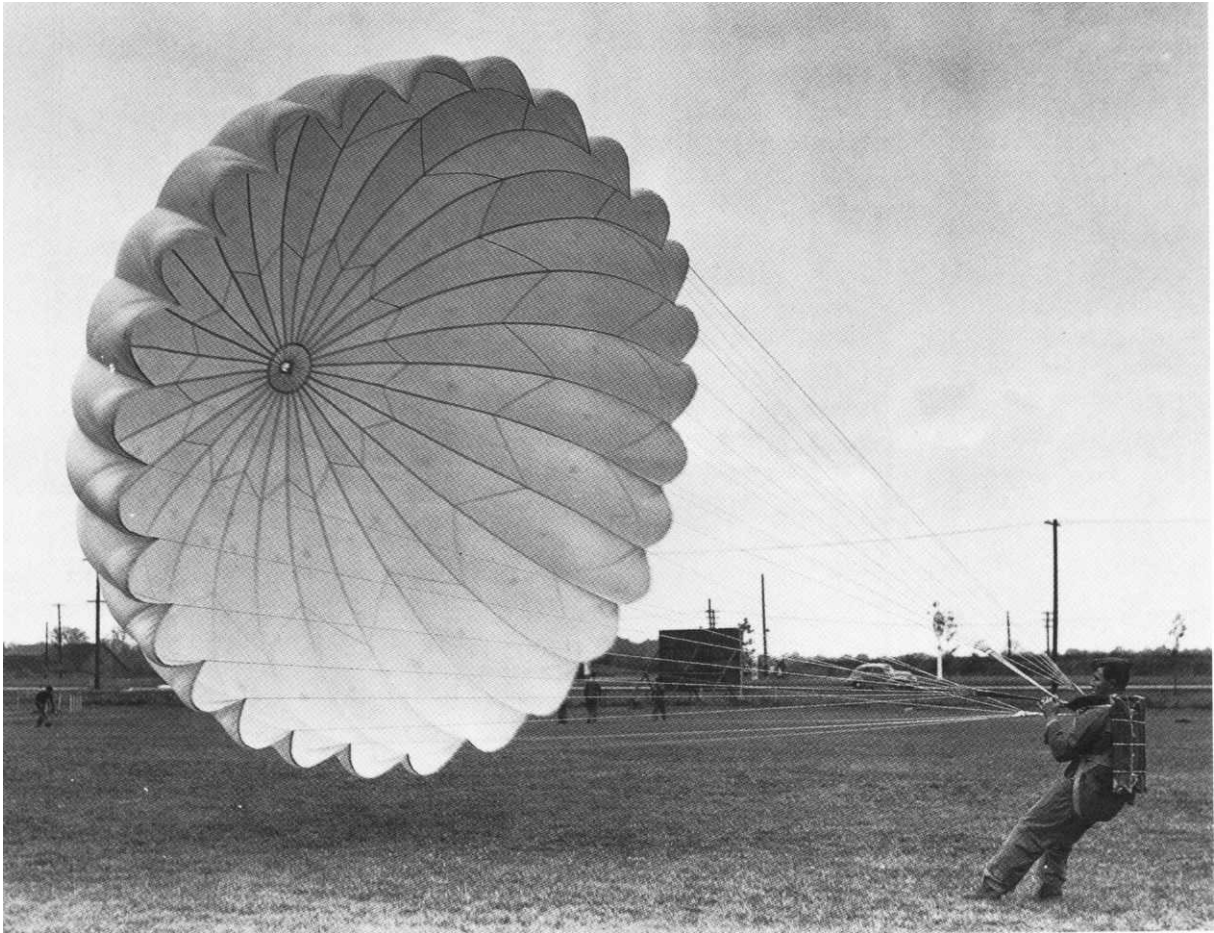
Marine Division and both believed that “the Marine Corps wasn’t an outfit that needed these specialties.” They made their thoughts on the subject known to Headquarters.

The chronic shortage of aircraft also continued to hobble the program. In the summer of 1943 the Corps had just seven transport squadrons, with only one more on the drawing boards. If the entire force had been concentrated in one place, it could only have carried about one and a half battalions. As it was, three squadrons were brand new and still in the States and another one operated out of Hawaii. There were only three in the South Pacific theater. These were fully engaged in logistics operations and were the sole asset available to make critical supply runs on short notice. As an example, the entire transport force in New Caledonia spent the middle of October 1942 ferrying aviation gas to Guadalcanal, 10

drums per plane, in the aftermath of the bombardment of Henderson field by Japanese battle-ships. They also evacuated 2,879 casualties during the course of that campaign. Senior commands would have been unwilling to divert the planes from such missions for the time required to train the crews and parachutists for a mass jump in an operation. The Army’s transport fleet was equally busy and MacArthur would not assemble enough assets to launch his first parachute assault of the Pacific war until September 1943 (a regimental drop in New Guinea supported by 96 C-47s).

The regiment was unable to do any jumping after May 1943 due to the lack of aircraft. The 2d Battalion’s last jump was a night drop from 15 Army Air Corps C-47s. The planes came over Tontouta off course. Unaware of the problem, the Marines jumped out onto a hilly, wooded





Department of Defense (USMC) 127-GC-495-302373

*At the completion of his jump from the Hightstown fly-away tower, a Marine learns how to control his*

*parachute in the wind.*

area. One parachutist died and 11 were injured. Thereafter, the parachutists focused on amphibious operations and ground combat. Lieutenant Colonel Victor H. Krulak drew rubber boats for his 2d Battalion and worked on raider tactics. In late August, I MAC contemplated putting them to work seizing a Japanese seaplane base at Rekata Bay on Santa Isabel, but the enemy evacuated the installation before the intended D-Day.

Near the end of April 1943, Rockey suggested to the Commandant that the Corps disband the parachute school at New River and use its personnel to form the fourth and final battalion. He estimated that production of 30 new jumpers per week at San Diego would be sufficient to maintain field units at full strength. The reduction in school overhead and the training pipeline would relieve some of the pressure on Marine manpower, while the barracks and classroom space at New River would meet the needs of the burgeon-

ing Women's Reserve program. Major General Harry Schmidt, acting in place of Holcomb, signed off on the recommendations. Company B of the 4th Battalion had formed in southern California on 2 April 1943. Nearly all of the 33 officers and 727 enlisted men of the New River school transferred to Camp Pendleton in early July to flesh out the remainder of the battalion. Transport planes were hard to come by in the States, too, and the outfit never conducted a tactical training jump during its brief existence.

### *Choiseul*

The Allied campaign in the Central Solomons had as its ultimate objective the encirclement and neutralization of the major Japanese air and naval base of Rabaul. As the South Pacific command contemplated its next step toward that goal, it initially focused on the Shortland Islands, but these

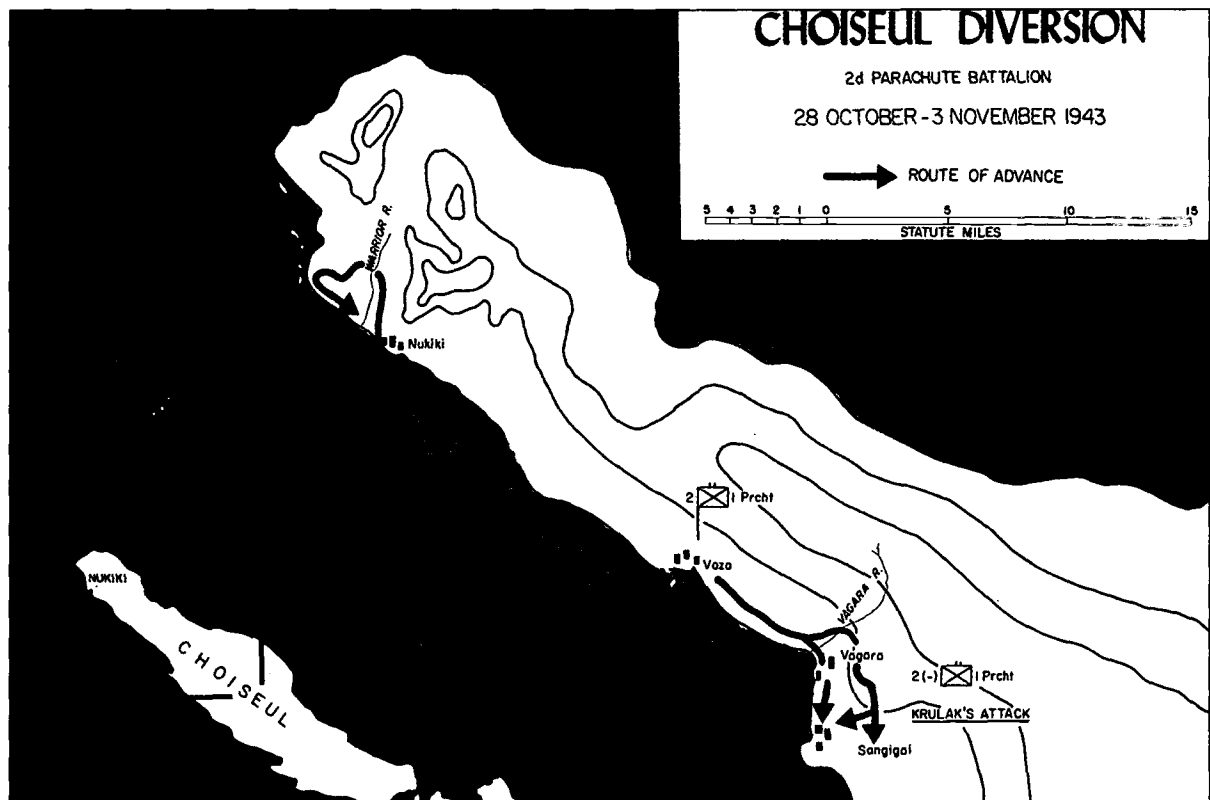
were too heavily defended in comparison with the available Allied forces. Planners then turned their attention to Choiseul Island. Once seized, air bases there would allow U.S. airpower to neutralize enemy airfields on the northern and southern tips of Bougainville. General Douglas MacArthur, the Southwest Pacific commander, wanted to short-circuit the process and move directly to Bougainville, which would allow American fighter planes to effectively support bomber attacks on Rabaul. Admiral William F. Halsey's South Pacific command had too few transports and Marines to make a direct assault on the strongly garrisoned airfields on the northern and southern tips of Bougainville, so he decided to seize the Empress Augusta Bay region midway up the western side of the island and build his own air bases. Defenses there were negligible and Bougainville's difficult terrain would prevent any rapid reaction from enemy ground forces located elsewhere on the island.

D-Day for the Empress Augusta Bay operation was 1 November 1943. Two regiments of the 3d Marine Division, two raider battalions (organized as the 2d Raider Regiment), and the 3d Defense Battalion formed the assault echelon for the land-

ing. The division's third regiment, the Army's 37th Infantry Division, and assorted other units would arrive later to reinforce the perimeter while construction troops built the new airfields. The I MAC staff slated the 1st Parachute Regiment as the reserve force.

The 2d Parachute Battalion sailed to Guadalcanal in early September and then moved forward to a staging area at Vella Lavella on 1 October. New Zealand and U.S. forces already had secured part of that island, but the Japanese still were contesting control of the air overhead and small bands of soldiers were roaming the jungle. Enemy planes struck the parachute battalion's small convoy of three APDs and an LST as it unloaded and put two bombs into the tank landing ship just as it was preparing to beach. It sank in shallow water, which allowed most of the troops to make it ashore. But 14 paratroopers died and the battalion lost most of its supplies and unit equipment. Once established in camp, the parachutists conducted patrols to search for Japanese stragglers on the island. The rest of the regiment arrived in Vella Lavella during the latter part of October.

As the final planning for Bougainville pro-



gressed, the I MAC staff grew concerned that preliminary operations might make it obvious to the Japanese that an invasion was in the offing. To address that problem, in mid-October Major James C. Murray, staff secretary, advanced the idea that a raid on Choiseul might make the enemy think that it was the next objective. Even if that did not dissuade them about Bougainville, it might cause them to suspect that a U.S. landing on Bougainville would come on the east coast, since Choiseul would be a move in that direction. On 20 October, Vandegrift brought Lieutenant Colonel Krulak, the 2d Battalion commander, to Guadalcanal for a conference with I MAC staffers, who outlined the scheme. The corps issued final orders on 22 October for the 2d Parachute Battalion to begin the raid six days later. Intelligence indicated there were up to 4,000 Japanese on the island, most of them dispersed in small camps along the coast awaiting transportation for a withdrawal to Bougainville. Their supply situation supposedly was poor, although planners believed they still had most of their weapons, to include mortars and light artillery.

The 2d Parachute Battalion's mission was to land at an undefended area near Voza, conduct raids along the northwestern coast, select a site for a possible PT [patrol torpedo] boat base, and withdraw after 12 days if the Navy decided it did not want to establish a PT boat facility. The parachutists were to give the enemy the impression that they were a large force trying to seize Choiseul. To beef up the battalion's firepower, I MAC attached a platoon of machine guns from the regimental weapons company and an experimental rocket platoon. (The latter unit—a lieutenant and eight men—had 40 of these fin-stabilized, 65-pound weapons. They were not very accurate, but their 1,000-meter range and large warhead gave the lightly armed battalion a hefty punch.) A detachment of four landing craft would remain with the force and give it some mobility. A Navy PBY also landed at Choiseul and brought out an Australian coastwatcher, Carden W. Seton, who would accompany the raid force and ensure it received the full support of local natives. Altogether the reinforced battalion numbered about 700 men. Krulak planned a night landing at 0100 on 28 October. His order emphasized the nature of the operation: The "basic principle is strike and move; avoid decisive engagement with superior forces."

Early in the evening of 27 October, four APDs and the destroyer *Conway* (DD-507) hove to off Vella Lavella. The 2d Battalion, which had half its supplies already pre-loaded in landing craft, completed debarkation in less than an hour. The small convoy had a short but eventful trip to Choiseul, as an unidentified aircraft dropped bombs close aboard one of the APDs. The ships arrived early off Voza and the small Marine force was completely ashore by 0100. In the course of the landing, a Japanese float plane unsuccessfully attacked the *Conway*, again missing the target by a narrow margin. Shortly after the ships departed, another Japanese plane appeared, circled the landing beach, and dropped two bombs that landed just off shore. One platoon accompanied the boats to Zinoa Island and camouflaged them, while the rest of the battalion made an early morning move less than a mile inland to a mountain hideout that would serve as its patrol base. Local natives had already blazed a trail through the jungle and now provided bearers to assist in moving supplies. The parachutists created a dummy supply dump of empty boxes on a beach two miles to the north to invite enemy attention to the landing. To back up the diversion, on 30 October Halsey's command released to the press news of the invasion by paratroopers. At least one newspaper illustrated the story with fanciful drawings of parachutists floating down from the sky.

In the afternoon a small Marine patrol moved west along the seacoast to investigate possible sites for a PT base. Two other native patrols working farther away from Voza provided the battalion with information on the nearest Japanese dispositions. Approximately 200 enemy were guarding a barge station at Sangigai to the southeast, while another force was 18 miles to the northwest beyond the Warrior River. Krulak decided to attack Sangigai on the 30th. On the 29th he sent out several patrols and personally led one to reconnoiter the objective. Krulak's reinforced squad encountered 10 Japanese unloading a barge near Sangigai and killed seven of them. Later in the day an outpost drove off a Japanese platoon and killed seven more enemy soldiers. Some of the patrols observed considerable barge traffic moving along the coast.

On 30 October, two companies reinforced by machine guns and rockets moved overland toward Sangigai. Company E continued down the



Department of Defense (USMC) 127-GC-248-35436  
*Navy Lieutenant Robert Leonard, a parachute-qualified doctor, poses with a Johnson light machine gun at Camp Elliott in February 1943. Paratroopers preferred the Johnson family of weapons due to their accuracy and reliability, but they were never produced in adequate numbers to fully equip Marine jump units.*

beach trail while Company F split off and moved inland to take the base from the rear. Early in the morning, a prearranged air strike of 12 torpedo bombers had hit identified enemy positions just outside Sangigai. When Company E approached the same area at 1430, it executed a bombardment with its mortars and 36 of the experimental rockets. The Japanese retreated to the interior after being hit by the barrage, with the apparent intent of occupying prepared defensive works located there. They arrived at their destination at the same time that Company F was approaching the area. The Marines, still in a single-file approach formation, were almost as surprised as the enemy; they received only the briefest warning from the accompanying native scouts. The lead platoon of parachutists reacted immediately and attacked;

the next platoon in line moved out to the right of the route of march to flank the Japanese. The enemy occupied their positions and responded with rifles, machine guns, and knee mortars. After 15 minutes of heavy fighting the parachutists were making slow progress, when the Japanese suddenly launched a Banzai-style attack. Marine machine guns cut them down and stopped the charge in short order. Company F's 3d platoon then moved out to the left to cut off the enemy's retreat, but the Japanese ran headlong into the 2d Platoon instead and lost yet more men. About 40 escaped the net, but they left 72 dead on the battlefield.

While that fight raged in the jungle, Company E entered Sangigai unopposed. It destroyed supplies, installations, defensive positions, and one barge. Captured documents included a chart pinpointing minefields off Bougainville. The company then linked up with landing craft and made it back to base that evening. Casualties slowed the movement of Company F through the dense jungle and it ended up spending the night near the coast before getting boated back to Voza the next day. The cost of the victory was 6 dead, 1 missing, and 12 wounded, the last figure including Krulak, who suffered wounds in his face and arm from fragments. A flying boat evacuated the severest casualties and picked up the invaluable mine charts.

On 1 November, Major Warner T. Bigger, the battalion executive officer, launched an operation in the other direction with the goal of destroying barges in Choiseul Bay and bombarding enemy installations on Guppy Island. Major Bigger and a reinforced Company G (less one rifle platoon) rode landing craft to the Warrior River, where they left their sole radio and a security team before moving overland toward their objective. Things began to go wrong thereafter. The native scouts were unfamiliar with the area and the patrol soon found itself going in a circle. Bigger and his force bivouacked for the night, but he sent one squad back to the Warrior River to make a report to battalion by radio.

At dawn on 2 November, the squad and radio team awoke to find a Japanese platoon in the immediate vicinity. After a firefight, the Marines broke contact and joined up with the boats, which were waiting along the coast at Nukiki. On the way back to Voza they observed eight Japanese barges at Moli Island, which indicated

there was an even larger enemy force between the two wings of the 2d Battalion. Concerned that Major Bigger's force might be cut off, Krulak requested air and PT support from I MAC and ordered the landing craft to return to the Warrior River. Company G had moved out for Choiseul Bay at 0630 and met up with a local native who guided them to the coast. They encountered an occupied bunker on the beach and killed five Japanese, then set up their 60mm mortars and fired 142 rounds onto Guppy Island. (To obtain a clear area to fire the mortars, the Marines had to set up their weapons in the sea with only the upper half of the tubes projecting above the surface of the water.) The bombardment started several blazes, one obviously a burning fuel dump. The enemy replied with ineffective machine gun fire from the island and farther up the coast.

Major Bigger and his main body returned to the Warrior River at 1600. They expected to meet the landing craft there, but found none. When they attempted to cross the river to reach the radio team (unaware that it was gone) they came under fire from Japanese forces. After 90 minutes of fighting, three boats appeared, with Marines on board firing their weapons. The Japanese fire died down in the face of this new opposition and Company G embarked in the midst of heavy rain and high seas. One craft hit a reef after retracting from the beach and began to take on water. Then its engine died and it drifted toward the enemy-held beach. Two PT boats, one commanded by Lieutenant (jg) John F. Kennedy, finally came on the scene and took aboard the men on that boat.

*A stick of Marines trails out of a transport plane over Camp Gillespie in California. It was often hard to obtain aircraft to make tactical jumps; in*

Three aircraft appeared at the same time and covered the operation by strafing the shore. The combat patrol had killed 42 Japanese in several firefights and inflicted undetermined casualties and damage with its mortar fire. Marine losses were 2 killed, 1 wounded, and 2 missing (natives later recovered the bodies of these two men).

While Major Bigger operated to the northwest, Krulak dispatched platoon-size patrols to the southeast toward Sangigai. Two of them made contact with smaller enemy units on 1 November. They dispatched at least 17 Japanese at the cost of one Marine killed. Intelligence gathered by Marine and native patrols indicated that the Japanese were moving from both directions to recapture Voza and secure their barge lines and the important coastal track (the only trail for movement to the northwest). There were an estimated 1,800 enemy troops to the southeast and possibly 3,000 in the opposite direction. Krulak assumed that the Japanese were becoming aware of the strength and limited mission of his force given the Marine withdrawals from Sangigai and Choiseul Bay. On the afternoon of 2 November, he informed I MAC of developments and stated that his battalion could handle the enemy for a week, though increasing Japanese activity would hamper Marine patrol operations. In the meantime, he took steps to strengthen his defenses. He placed a platoon-size outguard on each flank of Voza, put his demolition platoon to work laying mines, and requested that PT boats patrol the coast to hinder the approach of Japanese forces by barge.

*this case, the parachutists were putting on a demonstration for visiting senior officers from the Army and Navy.*

Photo courtesy of Cunningham PC1305



The corps staff had considered expanding the operation on 30 October by inserting the rest of the parachute regiment. Now they radioed Krulak and asked him for his "frank suggestion whether we should remove your outfit tomorrow night." The message ended with the straightforward assessment—"Feel your mission accomplished." The parachute commander responded that he expected a strong Japanese attack within 48 hours and recommended withdrawal in light of I MAC's view that nothing further could be gained by continuing operations. Two days into the Empress Augusta Bay landing, it must have been obvious to the Japanese that the west coast of Bougainville was the main target and Choiseul was a diversion.

In the afternoon of 3 November, the battalion moved to the beach at Voza and established a perimeter pending the nighttime arrival of four LCIs (one of them a gunboat version to provide covering fire). The demolition platoon placed out hundreds of booby traps on avenues of approach, to include a rocket suspended in a tree and double-edged razor blades worked into palm trunks (to discourage snipers from clambering into their habitual perches). As darkness fell, native scouts reported that Japanese forces were moving closer and enemy patrols began to reach the Voza area near midnight, as evidenced by exploding booby traps. The three transport LCIs arrived just prior to that and beached by 0130. The parachutists were completely loaded in less than 20 minutes and were back at Vella Lavella by 0800. As the battalion marched to its camp, coastwatchers were reporting the occupation of Voza by the enemy, who still were having difficulty with the varied devices left by the Marines.

At a cost of 11 dead and 14 wounded, the 2d Battalion had killed a minimum of 143 Japanese and seriously disrupted the movement of enemy forces from Choiseul to points northward. The minefield chart also provided a valuable assist to naval operations in the northern Solomons. Halsey ordered mines laid in the clear channels and they eventually sank two Japanese ships. In retrospect, I MAC may have staged the operation too late and with too small a force to serve as a good diversion, though it did have some effect on Japanese actions. The enemy apparently shuttled some troops from the Shortlands to Choiseul and on 1 November sent a heavy bomber strike to attack the task force they assumed would be

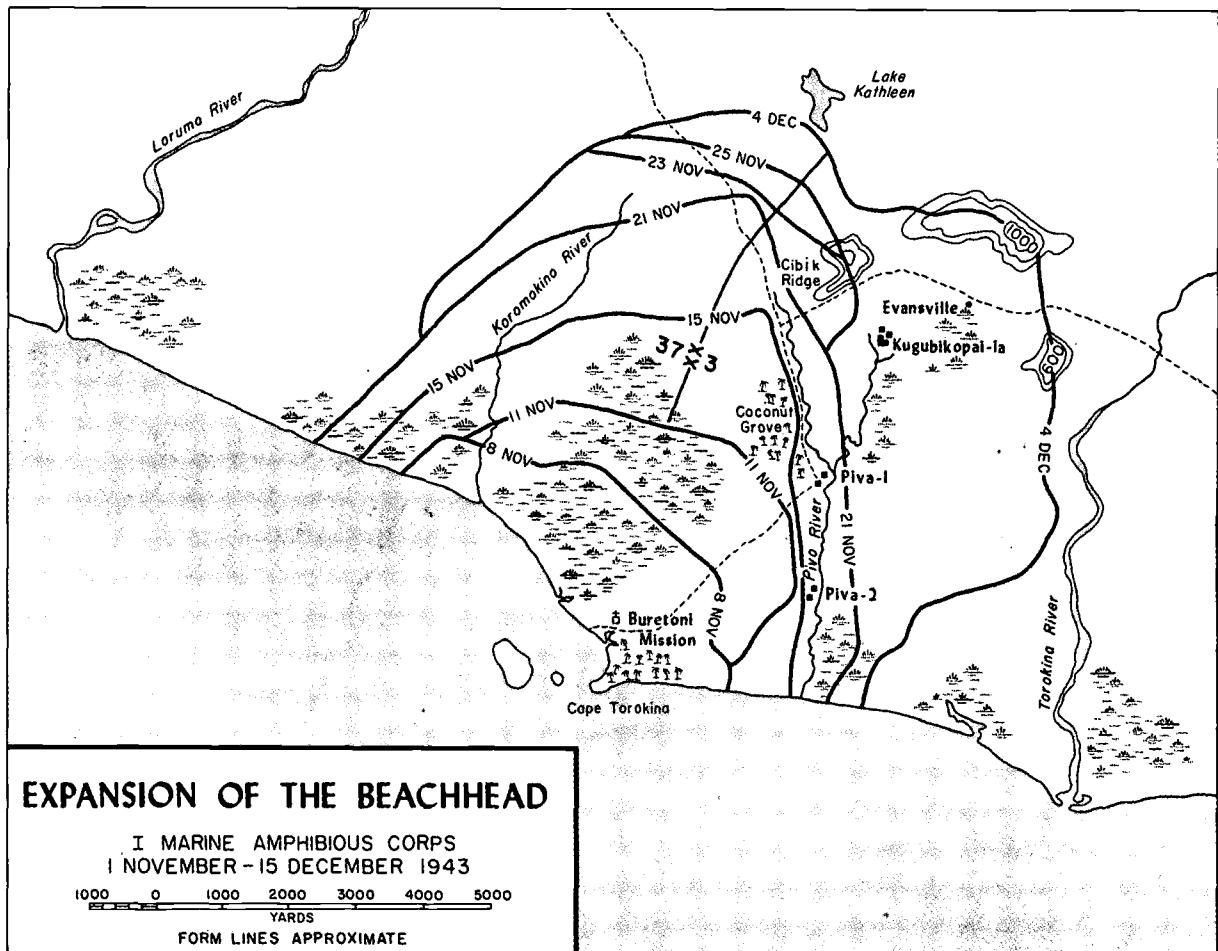
located off the Voza beachhead. In any case, the raid kept the Japanese high command guessing for a time and certainly must have given them reason to be concerned about the prospect of future attacks of a similar nature. Lieutenant Colonel Williams later would call the Choiseul operation "a brilliant little bit of work."

### *Bougainville*

On 1 November 1943, the 3d and 9th Marines, assisted by the 2d Raider Battalion, seized a swath of Bougainville's coast from Cape Torokina to the northwest. At the same time, elements of the 3d Raider Battalion assaulted Puruata Island just off the cape. The single Japanese company and one 75mm gun defending the area gave a good account of themselves until overwhelmed by the invasion force. Over the next several days the Marines advanced inland to extend their perimeter. There were occasional engagements with small enemy patrols, but the greatest resistance during this period came from the terrain, which consisted largely of swampland and dense jungle beginning just behind the beach. The thing most Marines remembered about Bougainville was the deep, sucking mud that seemed to cover everything not already underwater.

Japanese resistance stiffened as they moved troops to the area on foot and by barge. The Marines fought several tough battles in mid-November and suffered significant casualties trying to move forward through the thick vegetation, which concealed Japanese defensive positions until the Marines were just a few feet away. Heavy rains and the ever-present mud made logistics a nightmare and quickly exhausted the troops. Nevertheless, the perimeter continued to expand as I MAC sought an area large enough to protect the future airfields from enemy interference. By 20 November, I MAC had all of the 3d Marine Division and the 37th Infantry Division, plus the 2d Raider Regiment, on the island. In accordance with the original plan, corps headquarters arranged for the parachute regiment to come forward in echelon from Vella Lavella and assume its role as the reserve force. The 1st Parachute Battalion embarked on board ships on 22 November and arrived at Bougainville the next day, where it joined the raider regiment in reserve.

The corps planners wanted to make aggressive



use of the reserve force. In addition to assigning it the normal roles of reinforcing or counterattacking, I MAC ordered its reserve to be prepared "to engage in land or water-borne raider type operations." By 26 November, the corps had established a defensible beachhead and enemy activity was at a low ebb. However, the Japanese *23d Infantry Regiment* occupied high ground to the northeast of the U.S. perimeter and remained a threat. Enemy medium artillery also periodically shelled rear areas. To prevent the Japanese from gathering strength with impunity, I MAC decided to establish a force in the enemy rear from whence it could "conduct raids along coast and inland to main east-west trail; destroy Japs, installations, supplies, with particular attention to disrupting Jap communications and artillery." The plan called for Major Richard Fagan's 1st Parachute Battalion, Company M of the raiders, and artillery forward observers to land 10 miles to the east, near of Koiari, prior to dawn on 28 November. The raiders would secure the patrol

base while the parachutists conducted offensive operations. They would remain there until corps ordered them to withdraw.

A Japanese air attack and problems with the boat pool delayed the operation for 24 hours. Just after midnight on 28 November, the 739 men of the reinforced battalion embarked on landing craft near Cape Torokina and headed down the coast. The main body of the parachute battalion went ashore at their assigned objective, but Company M and the parachute headquarters company landed nearly 1,000 yards farther to the east. Much to the surprise of the first parachutists coming off the boats, a Japanese officer walked onto the beach and attempted to engage them in conversation. That bizarre incident made some sense when the Marines discovered that they had landed in the midst of a large enemy supply dump. The Japanese leader must have thought that these were his own craft delivering or picking up supplies. In any case, the equally surprised enemy initially put up little opposition to the Marine





Department of Defense (USMC) 127-GR-84-69793

*Marines bug the sand during the Koiari raid on Bougainville. The man nearest the camera has a Model 55 folding wire-stock Reising submachine*

*gun, reviled by many Marines due to its propensity to jam.*

incursion. Major Fagan, located with the main body, was concerned about the separation of his unit and felt that the Japanese force in the vicinity of the dump was probably much bigger than his own. Given those factors, he quickly established a tight perimeter defense about 350 yards in width and just 180 yards inland.

By daylight, the Japanese had recovered from their shock and begun to respond aggressively to the threat in their rear area. They brought to bear continuous fire from 90mm mortars, knee-mortars, machine guns, and rifles; the volume of fire increased as the day wore on. Periodically infantry rushed the Marine lines. The picture improved somewhat by 0930 when the body of raiders and headquarters personnel moved down the beach and fought their way into the battalion perimeter. The battalion's radio set malfunctioned about this time, however, and Fagan could not receive messages from I MAC. For the moment he could still send them, but was unsure if the corps headquarters heard them. The artillery spotters could talk to the batteries, though, and they fed a steady diet of 155mm shells to the Japanese. Unbeknownst to Fagan, the raider

company had its own radio and maintained independent contact with the corps. These communication snafus would lead to great confusion.

By late morning, I MAC already was thinking in terms of pulling out the beleaguered force. At 1128, it arranged to boat 3d Marine Division half-tracks (mounting 75mm guns) to assist in covering a withdrawal. Staffers also called in planes to provide close air support. Around noon Fagan sent a message requesting evacuation and corps decided to abort the mission. It radioed the battalion at 1318 with information concerning the planned withdrawal, but the parachutists did not get the word. As a consequence, Fagan sent more messages asking for boats and a resupply of ammunition, which was running low. For some reason, neither Fagan nor corps headquarters used the artillery net for messages other than calls for fire support. While sending other traffic would have been a violation of standard procedures, it certainly was justified under the circumstances. (After the operation was over, Fagan would express dismay that Company M radio operators, without his knowledge or approval, had sent their own pleas for boats and ammuni-



## Tables of Organization

When the Plans and Policies Division at Headquarters made its initial request in May 1940 for input on a Marine parachute program, it suggested that planners work with a notional organization of one infantry battalion reinforced by a platoon of pack howitzers and some light antiaircraft and anti-tank weapons. In late October 1940, the Commandant determined that each infantry regiment would train one of its battalions as air infantry, with one company of each such battalion prepared to conduct parachute operations. He estimated that would require 750 parachutists, about the number originally envisioned for a separate battalion. However, those men would now double as regular infantry and help fill spaces in the chronically undermanned line units. That idea did not last long and the Corps soon began talking about multiple battalions specializing in parachute operations.

The first official parachute table of organization, issued in March of 1941, authorized a battalion of three line companies and a headquarters unit. The line companies consisted of a weapons platoon (three 60mm mortars and three light machine guns) and three rifle platoons of three 10-man squads (armed with six rifles, two Browning Automatic Rifles [BARs], and two Thompson submachine guns). The standard squad for regular infantry at the time was nine men, with eight rifles and a single BAR. The 34 officers and 832 enlisted men of an infantry battalion dwarfed the 24 officers and 508 enlisted men of a parachute battalion, with the main difference coming from the former's company of heavy weapons. The parachutists lacked the large-caliber mortars, water-cooled machine guns, and antitank guns possessed by the infantry, but made up for it in part with a much greater preponderance of individual automatic weapons.

Once the United States entered the war, the parachute units went through the same process of exper-

imentation in structure as the rest of the Corps. A 1942 revision to the tables did away with the weapons platoons, distributing one 60mm mortar to each rifle platoon and getting rid of the machine guns. The latter change was not as drastic as it might appear, since each rifle squad was to have three Johnson light machine guns. The remaining "riflemen" were supposed to carry Reising submachine guns. This mix of automatic weapons theoretically gave the parachute squad an immense amount of firepower. As things turned out, the Johnson took a long time to get to the forces in the field and the Reising proved to be an unreliable weapon.

The 1943 tables created a regimental structure consisting of a headquarters company and a weapons company. The latter unit of seven officers and 172 men served as a pool of extra firepower for the lightly armed battalions. The company was supposed to field four 81mm mortars, one dozen each of the air-cooled and water-cooled .30-caliber machine guns, two .50-caliber machine guns, two bazookas, and eight grenade launchers. Headquarters also authorized a change in the size of the battalions from 24 officers and 508 enlisted Marines to 23 officers and 568 enlisted. The additional personnel were all in the headquarters company, though 33 of them formed a demolitions platoon that did add directly to the battalion's combat power. Beyond that, I MAC allowed the line companies to reestablish weapons platoons exactly like those deleted in 1942. That move increased the authorized strength of each battalion by another three officers and 87 enlisted men (though manpower for these units was often taken out of hide). The new rifle squad of 11 men was supposed to have three Johnson machine guns, three Johnson rifles, and five Reising, but by this time the parachute regiment informally had adopted the fire team concept of three three-man teams and a squad leader.

tion throughout the afternoon.)

At 1600, the landing craft arrived off the beach and made a run in to pick up the raid force. The Japanese focused their mortar fire on the boats and the sailors backed off. They tried again almost immediately, but again drew back due to the intense bombardment from the beach. Things looked bleak as the onset of night reduced visibility to zero in the dense jungle and increased the likelihood of a strong enemy counterattack. Ammunition stocks were dwindling rapidly and weapons failed due to heavy firing and the accu-

mulation of gritty sand. Marines resorted to employing Japanese weapons, to include a small field piece. The destroyers *Fullam*, *Lansdowne*, and *Lardner* and two LCI gunboats came on the scene after 1800 and turned the tide. The heavy fires at short range of the *Lansdowne* and the LCIs soon silenced most of the Japanese mortars and boats were able to reach the shore unmolested about 1920. American artillery also continued to rain down around the perimeter. The parachutists and raiders exhibited a cool discipline, slowly collapsing their perimeter into the beach and con-

ducting an orderly backload. After a thorough search to ensure that no one remained behind, the final few Marines stepped onto the last wave of landing craft and pulled out to sea at 2100.

The raid might be counted a failure since it did not go according to plan, but it did achieve some positive things. The day of fighting in the midst of the enemy supply dump destroyed considerable stocks of ammunition, food, and medical supplies. Rough estimates placed Japanese casualties at nearly 300 dead and wounded, though there was no way to confirm whether this figure was high or low. Undoubtedly the aggressive operation behind the lines caused the enemy to worry that the Americans might repeat the tactic elsewhere with better luck. The Marine force attained these ends at considerable cost. Total casualties were 17 dead, 7 missing, and 97 wounded (two-thirds of them requiring evacuation). In one day of fighting the parachute battalion lost nearly 20 percent of its strength, as well

as many weapons and individual items of equipment. The unit was not shaken, but it was severely bruised.

While the 1st Battalion prepared for its trial by fire at Koiari, the rest of the regiment temporarily enjoyed a morale-boosting turkey dinner on Thanksgiving Day. (Many of the parachutists awoke that night with a severe case of diarrhea, probably induced by some part of the meal that had gone bad.) On 3 December, the regimental headquarters, the weapons company, and the 3d Battalion embarked on five LCIs and joined a small convoy headed for Bougainville. The regiment received its first taste of action that evening when Japanese aircraft attacked at sundown. Accompanying destroyers downed three of the interlopers in a short but hot fight and the ships sailed on unharmed. The convoy deposited the parachutists in the Empress Augusta Bay perimeter the next day and they went into bivouac adjacent to the 1st Battalion. They did not have to

*A file of parachutists crosses a stream on Bougainville in November 1943*

Department of Defense (USMC) 127-GW-1064-68621





Department of Defense (USMC) 69783

*This photograph vividly portrays the action as Marine raider and paratroop units landed on a beach eight miles behind the Japanese lines to raid an enemy supply area. Here on the beach, at the edge of the jungle, Marines fire at snipers in the*

*trees who are attempting to knock out a captured field gun which was turned against them. The boxes on the sand contain ammunition for the 37mm field piece.*

wait long for their next fight.

Early December reconnaissance by the 3d Marine Division indicated that the Japanese were not occupying the high ground on the west side of the Torokina River, just to the east of the perimeter. The division commander decided to expand his holdings to include this key terrain, but the difficulty of supplying large forces in forward areas deterred him from immediately moving his entire line forward. His solution was the creation of strong outposts to hold the ground until engineers cut the necessary roads. On 5 December, corps attached the parachute regiment (less the 1st and 2d Battalions) to the 3d Division, which ordered this fresh force to occupy and defend Hill 1000, while other elements of the division outposted other high ground nearby.

To accomplish the mission, Williams decided to turn his rump regiment into two battalions by creating a provisional force consisting of the weapons company, headquarters personnel, and

the 3d Battalion's Company I. The parachutists moved out on foot from their bivouac at 1130 with three days of rations and a unit of fire in their packs. By 1800 they were in a perimeter defense around the peak of Hill 1000, 3d Battalion (less I Company) on the south and the provisional unit to the north. Supply proved to be the first difficulty, as "steep slopes, overgrown trails, and deep mud" hampered the work of carrying parties. Division eventually had to resort to air drops to overcome the problem. While some parachutists labored to bring up food and ammunition, others patrolled the vicinity. Beginning on the 6th, the outpost line began to turn into a linear defense as the division fed more units forward. The small parachute regiment had a hard time trying to cover its 3,000 yards of assigned frontage on top of the sprawling, ravine-pocked, jungle-covered hill mass.

On 7 December a 3d Battalion patrol discovered abandoned defensive positions on an east-



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*Private First Class Henry J. Kennedy, right, an instructor, gives pointers to Father Joseph P. Mannion, left, before his first jump from the fly-away tower at New River. The Navy chaplain qualified as a parachutist with the 15th Platoon in May 1943.*

ern spur of Hill 1000. The unit brought back documents showing that a reinforced enemy company had set up the strongpoint on what would become known as Hellzapoppin Ridge. The battalion commander, Major Vance, ordered two platoons of Company K to move forward to straighten the line. With no map and only vague directions as a guide, the unit could not find its objective in the dense jungle and remained out of touch until the next day. That night a small Japanese patrol probed the lines of the regiment and the enemy re-occupied the position on the east spur. On the morning of 8 December, a patrol from the provisional battalion investigated the spur and a Japanese platoon ambushed it. The parachutists returned to friendly lines with one man missing. They reorganized and departed an hour later to search for him and tangled with the enemy in the same spot. This time they suffered eight wounded in a 20-minute firefight and withdrew. Twice during the day the regiment received artillery and mortar fire, which it believed to be friendly in origin. The rounds knocked out the regimental command post's telephone communications and caused five serious casualties in Company K.

In light of the increasing enemy activity, Williams decided to straighten out his lines and establish physical contact between the flanks of the battalions. This required the right flank of Company I and the left flank of Company K to advance. On the morning on 9 December, Major Vance personally led a patrol to reconnoiter the new position. Eight Japanese manning three machine guns ambushed that force and it withdrew, leaving behind one man. At 1415, the left half of Company K attacked. Within 20 minutes, strong Japanese rifle and machine gun fire brought it to a halt. Although after-action reports from higher echelons later indicated only that Company I did not move forward, those Marines fought hard that day and suffered casualties attempting to advance. Among others, the executive officer, First Lieutenant Milt Cunha, was killed in action and First Sergeant I. J. Fansler, Jr. had his rifle shot out of his hands.

The inability of Company I to make progress enlarged the dangerous gap in the center of the regiment's line. Vance ordered two demolition squads to refuse K's left flank and Williams sent a platoon of headquarters personnel from the provisional battalion to fill in the remainder of the hole. Snipers infiltrated the Marine line and the regimental commander turned most of his command post group into a reserve force to backstop the rifle companies. The parachutists called in artillery to Company's K's front and Japanese fire finally began to slacken after 1615. The fighting was intense and Company K initially reported casualties of 36 wounded and 12 killed. That figure later proved too high, though exact losses in the attack were hard to ascertain since the parachutists had 18 men missing and took casualties in other actions that day. Major Vance suffered a gunshot wound in the foot and turned over the battalion to Torgerson.

The executive officer of the 21st Marines was in the area, apparently reconnoitering prior to his regiment taking over that portion of the front the next day. He responded to a request for assistance and had his Company C haul ammunition up to the parachutists. When those Marines completed that task, he offered to have them bolster the parachute line and Williams accepted. For the rest of the night the parachute regiment fired artillery missions at 15-minute intervals against likely enemy positions. The Japanese responded with occasional small arms fire. Division shifted

## Parachute Accidents

Despite the inherent danger of jumping out of a plane high above the ground, the Marine parachute program had very few accidents. That may have been due in part to the system initially used to prepare the parachutes. From the very first training class, the Corps set the standard that each jumper would pack his own parachute. In addition, a trained rigger supervised the task and had to sign his name on the tag before the parachute was certified for use. (Later this procedure was dropped and riggers packed all parachutes for use in the FMF, but by that time Marines were making very few jumps.) The record indicates only one Marine accident that may have involved a malfunctioning parachute. During training on New Caledonia, one man's main parachute failed to open properly. He pulled the ripcord on his reserve, but it just had time to begin deploying when he hit the ground. Observers thought, however, that the main parachute did not deploy because the suspension lines tangled up in the Marine's rifle.

Three other men died in Marine Corps jumping accidents not related to the performance of the parachute. Two men drowned after landing in water; one at Norfolk, Virginia, and one at New River, North Carolina. The final fatality occurred when a New River trainee lost his nerve just as he approached the door of the plane. He moved out of the line of jumpers, but his static line became tangled with the next man to go out. The non-jumper's parachute opened while he was inside the plane and the billowing chute slammed him against the aircraft body hard enough to wreck the door and sever his spine.

The most unusual accident occurred near San Diego, California, on 15 May 1941. Second Lieutenant Walter A. Osipoff and 11 enlisted men of Company A were making a practice jump over Kearney Mesa. Everyone else had exited the plane and he threw out a cargo pack, which possibly tangled in his static line. His parachute opened prema-

turally while he was still in the door of the plane; it billowed outside the aircraft and pulled him out, but the canopy and suspension lines tangled in the bundle of static lines streaming beside the transport. For a moment the cargo pack, Osipoff, and his partially opened parachute were all suspended from the cable that held the static lines. Under this combined load the bracket holding one end of the cable gave way and it streamed out the door. The cargo pack fell away, but Osipoff and his parachute remained dangling from the cable and static lines, suspended behind the plane's tail. The accident also ruined his reserve chute and ripped away the part of his harness attached to his chest. He ended up being dragged through the air feet-first, held only by the leg straps.

The crew of the plane attempted to pull him in but could not do so. Since the transport had no radio communications, the pilot flew it over the field at North Island to attract attention. Two Navy test pilots, Lieutenant William W. Lowery and Aviation Chief Machinist's Mate John R. McCants, saw the problem and took off in a SOC-1, an open-cockpit, two-seater biplane. The SOC-1 flew just below and behind the transport while McCants attempted to pull Osipoff into his cockpit. It was an incredible display of flying skill given the necessity to avoid hitting the Marine lieutenant with the SOC-1's propellers. McCants finally succeeded in getting him head first into the plane, though his legs dangled outside. Before McCants could cut the shroud lines, bumpy air pushed the biplane up and its propellers did the job (chopping off 12 inches of the tail cone of the transport in the process). Lowery landed his aircraft as McCants maintained his tenuous grip on the Marine parachutist.

Osipoff suffered severe cuts and bruises and a fractured vertebra. He spent three months in a body cast, but fully recovered and returned to jump status. Lowery and McCants received Distinguished Flying Crosses for their successful rescue.

the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, to a reserve position behind Hill 1000 and placed the parachute regiment under the tactical control of the 9th Marines, scheduled to occupy the line on their left the next day.

That was not the only action for the parachutists on 9 December. That morning the provisional battalion had sent a platoon of Company I reinforced by two weapons company machine gun squads on a patrol to circle the eastern spur and investigate the area between it and the

Torokina River. The unit moved out to the northeast and reached the rear of Hellzapoppin Ridge, where it came upon two Japanese setting up a machine gun along the trail. The Marine point man observed the activity and alerted the patrol leader, Captain Jack Shedaker, who killed both in quick succession with his carbine. Unbeknownst to the Marines, they were in the midst of a Japanese ambush and the enemy immediately returned fire from positions in a swamp on the left side of the trail. The first burst of fire killed



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*A sign at San Diego, California, in 1942 reminds parachutists that it is up to them to "pack well" if they want to survive to pack another parachute on another day. It was only toward the end of the*

*parachute program that the Marine Corps rescinded the rule requiring each Marine to prepare his own parachute.*

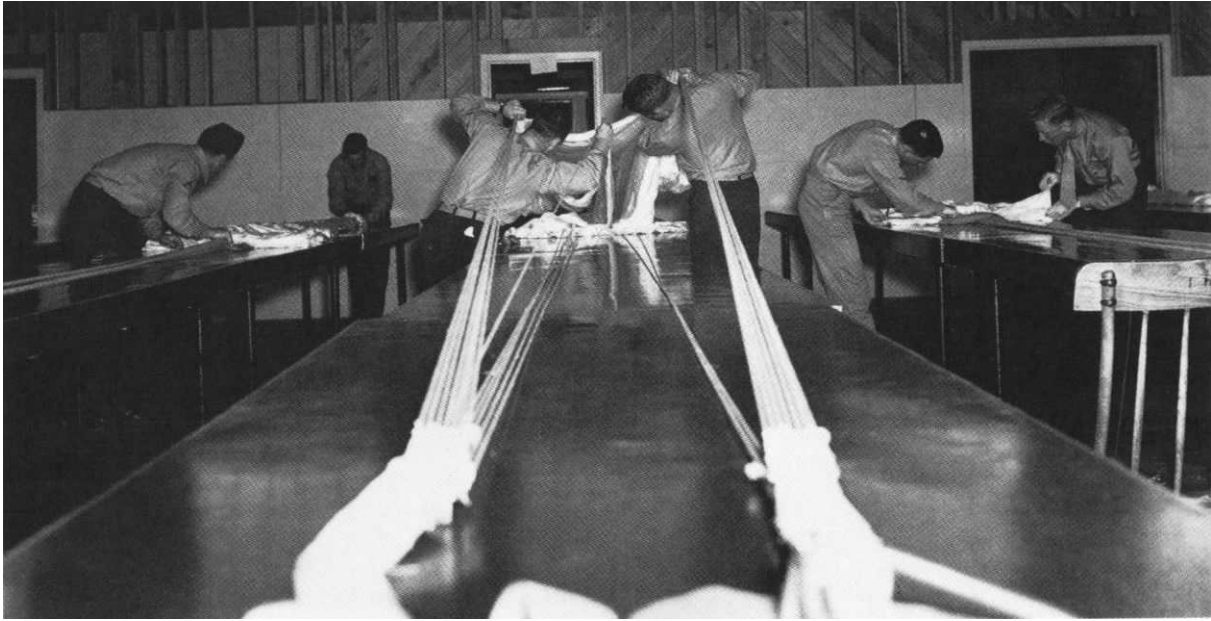
one Marine, but the parachute machine gunners quickly got their weapons in action and opened a heavy return fire into the swamp. While the tail-end Marine squad tried to flank the enemy position, other parachutists moved up onto the higher ground on the right side of the trail to obtain better fields of observation and fire. The Japanese soon withdrew under this withering response, but not without heavy losses since they had to cross open ground in full view of Marines on the slope above them. The patrol estimated that it killed 16 Japanese, though regiment later downgraded the claim to 12. The reinforced platoon retraced its steps to the Marine perimeter, its only loss being the one man killed at the start of the ambush.

At least one other patrol made contact that day and one of its machine gun squads became separated in the melee. A third patrol sent to search for the missing men came up empty handed. Three of the machine gunners made it back to friendly lines the next day, but a lieutenant and three enlisted men remained missing.

The enemy continued to harass the parachutists with small arms fire on the morning of 10 December and drove back a patrol sent out to

recover Marine dead on Hellzapoppin Ridge. To deal with the problem, Companies K and L withdrew 200 yards and called down a 45-minute artillery barrage. When they advanced to reoccupy their positions, they had to fight through Japanese soldiers who had moved closer to the Marine lines to avoid the artillery. Later in the day, the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, relieved the left of the parachute line and the 1st Battalion, 21st Marines, took over the right. Williams dissolved the provisional battalion and the rump regiment remained attached to the 9th Marines as its reserve force. Over the next few days the parachutists ran patrols and began building their portion of the corps reserve line of defense. The reserve mission was not entirely quiet, as the parachutists suffered three casualties in a patrol contact and an air raid. Two machine gunners from the weapons company took matters into their own hands and went forward of the front lines searching for their comrades missing since 9 December. Their unofficial heroics proved fruitless. Meanwhile, the 21st Marines spent the period of 12 to 18 December reducing Hellzapoppin Ridge. Their efforts were successful only after





Department of Defense (USMC) 127-GC-1243-402913

*Marines pack parachutes in the paraloft at San Diego in 1942. Each paratrooper had to prepare*

*his own parachute under the supervision of a certified rigger.*

corps supported them with a lavish outlay of aerial firepower (several hundred 100-pound bombs) and the dedicated assistance of a specially sited 155mm artillery battery.

The Army's XIV Corps headquarters relieved I MAC in command of the operation on 15 December and the Americal Division began replacing the 3d Marine Division on 21 December. As part of this shift of forces, the regimental companies and 1st Battalion of the parachutists fell under Colonel Alan Shapley's 2d Raider Regiment, with Williams assuming the billet of executive officer of the combined force. While the 3d Parachute Battalion continued as the reserve force for the 9th Marines, the raider and parachute regiment took over the frontline positions of the 3d Marines on 22 December. This placed them with their right flank on the sea at the eastern end of the Empress Augusta Bay perimeter. Army units relieved the 9th Marines on Christmas Day and the 3d Parachute Battalion departed Bougainville soon thereafter. The 1st Battalion conducted aggressive patrols and made its only serious contact on 28 December. Company A crossed the Torokina River inland and swept down the far bank to the sea. Near the river mouth it encountered a strong Japanese position and quickly reduced 8 pillboxes, killed 18 of the enemy, and drove off another 20 defenders. Three para-

chutists died and two were wounded. Shapley joined the company to observe the final action and commended it for an "excellent job." The last parachutists left Bougainville in the middle of January 1944 and sailed to Guadalcanal.

### *The Closing Shock*

The final reevaluation of the parachute program began in August 1943. In a one-page memorandum, the Division of Plans and Policies summarized the heart of the problem. Simply put, there were far too few transport planes in the entire Marine Corps for the regiment to jump into combat, which was its only reason for existence. The Marine Corps either needed to acquire many more aircraft or borrow squadrons from another service. Left unstated was a third option—to get out of the paratroop business. That already was nearly a foregone conclusion, since Vandegrift was the Commandant-designate and he had pronounced views about the future of special units in the Corps. Holcomb set things in motion with a formal recommendation on 21 December to disband both the parachute and the raider organizations. However, he did so with the strong concurrence of Vandegrift, who actually presented the proposal in person to Admiral Ernest J. King, the Chief of Naval Operations.



Photo courtesy of Anderson PC826

*An aerial view shows the 4th Parachute Battalion's tent camp at San Onofre Canyon at Camp Pendleton, California. This unit never deployed*

*overseas and was disbanded in early 1944 along with its three sister battalions.*

Colonel Omar T. Pfeiffer, the Marine planning officer on King's staff, summarized the position of Holcomb and Vandegrift. Deletion of the parachute program would save \$150,000 per month in jump pay, free 3,000 personnel for assignment to one of the new divisions, allow for uniformity of equipment and training within all Marine infantry units, and "avoid setting up some organizations as elite or selected troops." King agreed to the plan on 25 December 1943. Except for a small cadre to provide an air delivery section for each of the two Marine corps-level headquarters in the Pacific, the 1st Parachute Regiment would return to the States and disband upon its arrival. Its manpower would form the core of the new 5th Marine Division. The 4th Battalion would disband at Pendleton and provide men for the general replacement pool. Headquarters issued the official orders for this process on 30 December. Vandegrift took the oath of office as the 18th Commandant of the Marine Corps on 1 January and one of his early official acts was ordering the closing of the Parachute Training School at Camp Gillespie. Those personnel joined the 4th Battalion men in the replacement pool.

The 2d Parachute Battalion sailed from Vella Lavella on 2 January to join the rest of the regiment on Guadalcanal. The 1st and 2d Battalions embarked for the States on 18 January and arrived

in San Diego on 4 February. The regimental headquarters and the 3d Battalion departed Guadalcanal on 30 January. The 1st Parachute Regiment officially furled its colors on 29 February 1944.

The 5th Marine Division, leavened by the veterans of the 1st Parachute Regiment, would land at Iwo Jima barely a year later and distinguish itself in that bitter fight. Three parachutists would participate in the famed flag raisings on Mount Suribachi on 23 February 1945. Sergeant Henry O. Hansen helped put the first flag in place and Corporals Ira H. Hayes and Harlon H. Block were among the group of six featured in the Joe Rosenthal photograph of the second flag raising. Of the 81 Marines to earn the Medal of Honor in World War II, five were former paratroopers who performed their feats of heroism on Iwo Jima.

Several Marine parachutists did put their special training to use in combat. A handful of graduates of the parachute program joined the Office of Strategic Services and jumped into occupied France in support of the resistance movement. Two officers participated as observers in an Army airborne assault in New Guinea. The Marine parachute units of World War II never jumped into combat, but they did make an indelible impression on the history of the Corps.



*The device reproduced on the back cover is the oldest military insignia in continuous use in the United States. It first appeared as shown on Marine Corps buttons adopted in 1804. With the stars changed to five points, the device has continued on Marine Corps buttons to the present day.*

