Leslie Hansen

Brothers in Arms

Paul Hansen

Top: The Corps' M4 Sherman medium tanks line up on a narrow beachhead ready to move forward into the "Green Inferno"—the swamps and dense jungles near Cape Gloucester on Japanese-held New Britain.

Story by Maj Allan C. Bevilacqua, USMC (Ret) · USMC photos

"War means fighting, and fighting means killing."

—MajGen Nathan Bedford Forrest, CSA

Conventional wisdom holds that there is nothing heroic about war. War, it is said, is a mean, brutish business that reduces men to life at the animal level, concerned with nothing but the reality of killing or being killed. Poets and politicians may see it differently, but on the battlefield that is the only reality that counts. You live or you die; there is nothing else.

Strangely, though, every war is a war of heroes. For the most part heroes are just ordinary men, men like any of us, men caught up in that most extraordinary of circumstances that is war. In the midst of crushing, nerve-stretching stress and deadly com-

bat, these ordinary men routinely perform incredible acts of heroism. Those acts are seen by the men who perform them as only what is necessary at the time.

On a Wednesday in mid-September 1942, three such ordinary men entered the Marine Corps Recruiting Station in Buffalo, N.Y., intent on becoming Marines. The brothers, Alfred, Paul and Leslie Hansen, were like thousands of other young men who were volunteering to serve their country in the most monumental war the world had ever seen. But why had they settled on the Marine Corps when the other armed services were equally eager for recruits?

The eldest, Alfred or "Al," believed America was going to need them. Why wait to be drafted? If they were going to have to fight, why not fight with the best? Why not join the Marines?

Younger brothers Paul and Leslie thought it over and nodded in assent. Twins, they were able to communicate without words; a look, a shrug, a nod would do the job.

It had always been that way with them. Even for twins they were uncommonly close, thinking alike, doing everything together. They played sports together, worked together at after-school and summer jobs, pulled down near-identical grades in school. The two brothers were inseparable. But there was nothing about them to suggest that on a scarcely known Pacific island, Paul and Leslie Hansen would write a page in the Marine Corps' annals of courage that has never been equaled.

First there was Parris Island that along with San Diego was bulging at the seams with a flood of recruits who would eventually swell the ranks of the Marine Corps to a half-million men. In the compressed and accelerated boot camp of the day, there was precious little time to speculate on what the future might hold. There was only the unrelenting dawn-to-dusk training regimen that ate up every minute of the day. Almost as quickly as boot camp began, it was over, and the Hansen brothers were off to their next stage of training.

That was in the unlikely place of Dunedin on Florida's Gulf Coast. Why Dunedin? That was where Donald Roebling and the Food Machinery Company were.

Donald Roebling was the grandson of Washington Roebling, builder of the Brooklyn Bridge and heir to the immense fortune of the Roebling Wire Rope Company. Its braided steel cable products held up most of the suspension bridges in America. It would have been easy to think of him as a spoiled, lazy, ne'er-do-well rich boy. But he wasn't. It was just that nothing much interested Donald Roebling, nothing, that is, except anything mechanical.

The hugely overweight man was an inveterate tinkerer, fascinated by anything that had moving parts. With all the time in the world and a good chunk of the world's money, he had built a lavishly equipped machine shop on his large estate. There he could indulge himself to his heart's content in his fascination for taking things apart, finding out what made them work and putting them back together again. And in 1928 Donald Roebling had an idea that in time would save the lives of countless Marines.

In the late summer of 1928, a huge hurricane went ashore on Florida's East Coast, picked up Lake Okeechobee and flung it in a mountainous wall of water across the Everglades. More than 2,000 people died, many of them before they knew what had happened. In the hurricane's aftermath Roebling had become intrigued by the stories of failed rescue attempts. They had cost even more lives because there was no vehicle that could make its way through the tangle of the Everglades.

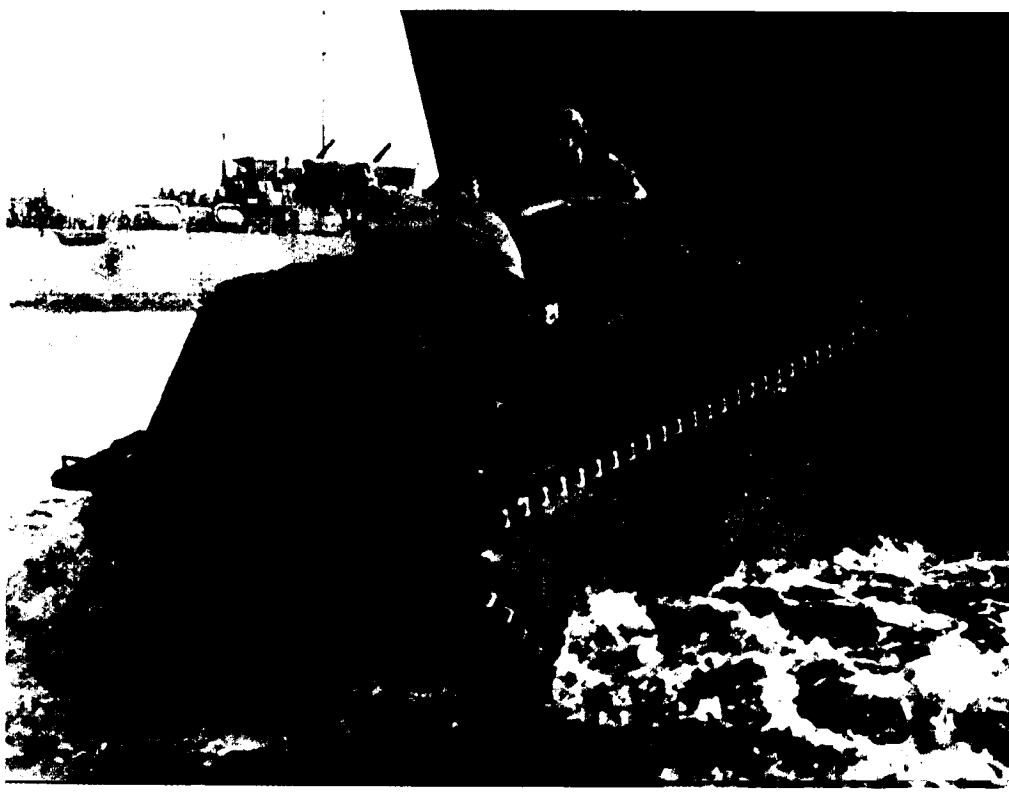
Donald Roebling had an active and inquisitive mind. What about something that could float like a boat, yet still make its way through mangrove roots and vegetation and over marshy hummocks that were too soft to walk on while at the same time too firm to swim in?

Roebling came up with something of a cross between a boat and a Caterpillar tractor he called an "alligator" for its ability to operate in the water or on land. Still thinking of his invention as a rescue vehicle, Roebling soon found that actually making the things in any commercial volume was too big a job for his own machine shop.

That was where the Food Machinery Company (FMC) came into the picture. Makers of machinery for agricultural processing, irrigation and commercial food canning, FMC had a large plant nearby. Roebling made inquiries. Would FMC be interested in a contract to manufacture the hulls for his contraption while he himself fabricated the suspensions? Why not? Donald Roebling started making Alligators.

By 1941 the Marine Corps had tested Roebling's odd-looking vehicle, found it ideal for amphibious operations and let a contract for hundreds of Alligators. Christened a Landing Vehicle, Tracked, LVT for short, Roebling's Alligator was designated as LVT-1 in the Marine Corps' inventory. Placed in newly formed amphibian tractor battalions, the Alligator soon lost its original name and came to be called at first an "amph-trac," then simply an "amtrac." It was the grandfather of a long line of tracked amphibians

In the Cape Gloucester campaign, the Roebling Alligator tracked landing vehicles were used primarily to move supplies ashore and through the jungles.



that still are doing duty with the Marine Corps. In its birthplace of Dunedin, the three Hansen brothers met it.

The training routine at Dunedin was only slightly less frantic than at Parris Island, S.C. True, there was liberty for what few attractions Dunedin offered, but for the most part there was the continuous daily round of lecture, demonstration and application. The Hansen brothers learned the amtrac frontward, backward, upside down and inside out.

A brief leave at home in the spring of 1943 was followed by a rail journey to the West Coast, then aboard a troop transport en route to the South Pacific and the war zone. The slow-moving convoy would make one stop at the island of New Caledonia, and there the three brothers would be parted. Alfred Hansen was among the new personnel assigned to the Third Marine Division and eventually to the division's 3d Amphibian Tractor Bn. The twins, Paul and Leslie, sailed to Australia, never knowing it was the last time they would see their older brother.

Short weeks after he landed on New Caledonia, Alfred Hansen was sent with an amtrac platoon to take part in the assault on the island of Rendova in the northern Solomons. Largely conducted by the Army's 43d Infantry Division, supported by the 4th Marine Raider Bn and the 9th Defense Bn, the landing at Rendova was a steppingstone for a shore-to-shore attack against the Japanese on nearby New Georgia. On 2 July a heavy Japanese air raid that launched from Rabaul struck the American buildup on Rendova. Among the 62 Marines, soldiers and Seabees killed that day was Corporal Alfred Hansen.

It would be weeks before a letter from home would inform Paul and Leslie Hansen of their brother Alfred's death on Rendova. By that time they would have joined the 1stMarDiv and been assigned to Company B, 1st Amphibian Tractor Bn. There would be scant time for mourning. Four months of intense fighting on Guadalcanal had reduced the proud 1stMarDiv to a ghost, shredded by 2,138 combat casualties and an incredible 5,601 Marines laid low by malaria. Replacements were melded into units as fast as they arrived, for there was a new operation on the horizon.

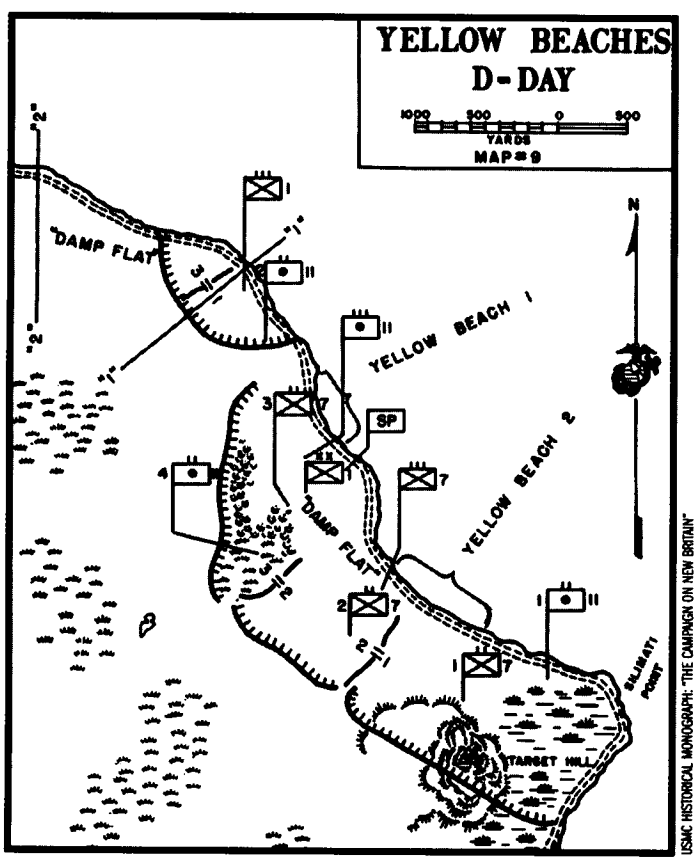
General Douglas MacArthur was about to begin his drive up the east coast of New Guinea. First, though, was the matter of the Japanese airfield at Cape Gloucester on the western tip of New Britain directly to MacArthur's rear. Japanese bombers and torpedo planes launched from Cape Gloucester could seriously interfere with the New Guinea operation. The airfield had to be seized. The call went out for a division that was experienced both in fighting against the Japanese and in jungle conditions. In the entire South Pacific, there was one such division, the 1stMarDiv.

At Cape Gloucester the division would need every bit of its experience. In the entire Pacific War, it is unlikely there was any more inhospitable place to fight a battle. Cape Gloucester was a nigh impenetrable rain forest with a scanty road network and few trails, a place where the soaring temperature and suffocating humidity raced each other to see which could be first to reach the 100 mark. From late December (D-day was scheduled for 26 Dec. 1943) the northwest monsoon comes to New Britain, and for three months pummels the entire island with more rainfall than nearly anywhere on Earth.

In his excellent wartime history of the 1stMarDiv "The Old Breed," George McMillan wrote, "Put a fighting man down in a spot where the plant and animal life and the climate are as much or more of a menace to his existence than the armed human opposite him, and the fighting man will feel he is the victim of an injustice." That was Cape Gloucester.

Beyond that, as Paul and Leslie Hansen and their fellow Marines would find out, there was next to no beach at Cape Gloucester; where the water ended the jungle began. As one First Division Marine saw it, "If a tall man were to stretch out flat on his back with his head beneath the trees, his feet would be in the water."

Immediately behind the landing "beach," a narrow shelf of dry land sup-



USMC HISTORICAL MONOGRAPH: "THE CAMPAIGN ON NEW BRITAIN"

Marines landed across the Yellow series of beaches into seemingly endless jungles and bottomless mud that often stymied the Alligators—aboard which Marines often clambered to ease their movement.

Even the small cleared trails, which were located and exploited by tanks, trucks and LVTs, had dense growth right up to their very edge, providing cover and camouflage for machine-gun bunkers and sometimes large Japanese forces. The Hansen brothers and leathernecks of "King" Co, 3/1 discovered this early in the breakout from the Yellow Beaches.

ported the coastal track that led to the airfield. Beyond that strip of dry land lay an area identified on tactical maps as "Damp Flat." It was in fact a tropical swamp forest that as one disgusted Marine put it was "damp right up to your neck." Standing water and muck were hip-deep. Trees and underbrush of all kinds grew so densely as to reduce visibility to less than 10 yards.

That was the situation ashore at 0830 on D-day when Colonel William J. Whaling's First Marine Regiment landed at Yellow Beach on Cape Gloucester's north shore, passed through the beachhead established earlier by Col Julian N. Frisbie's 7th Marines and turned right to move against its objective, the airfield. Advancing along the coastal track—it was little more than a wide footpath hemmed in by a dense growth of mature trees—the regiment's lead elements ran immediately into stiff Japanese resistance.

Company K, 3d Bn, 1st Marines, leading the assault on a very narrow front, found itself heavily engaged in a matter of minutes. The company commander, Captain Joseph A. Terzi, and the executive officer, Capt Phillip A. Wilheit, were killed in the first exchange of fire. Lieutenant Hoyt C. Duncan took command, as the Japanese, blazing away from a skillfully sited complex of log bunkers, fighting holes and trenches, poured a murderous barrage of fire along preselected fire lanes. Marines in the ranks of Co K found themselves with little to fire back at beyond a wall of vegetation. The advance ground to a halt.

Even as leathernecks dove for cover wherever they could find it, help from an unusual source was on the way. Paul Hansen, responding to a call for ammunition resupply from 1st Marines, had his amtrac smashing its way forward through the thick jungle growth, his brother Leslie and crew chief Sergeant Robert Osborn manning the bow machine guns.

With jungle growth pressing tightly in on both sides, Paul Hansen rammed his way relentlessly forward, more like a bulldozer operator than an amtrac driver. Japanese fire seemed to be coming from every direction but straight up. A blizzard of bullets clanged off the amtrac's hull, while a shower of tree limbs, cut down by the ferocity of the Japanese fire, fell into the troop and cargo compartment. Shot through the head, Sgt Osborn fell lifeless, leaving only Leslie Hansen to return fire.

It was then, at the worst possible moment, that the amtrac stopped dead in its tracks, wedged firmly between two trees at the edge of the trail. Instantly, Japanese defenders swarmed from their fighting positions in an attempt to physically overwhelm Paul and Leslie Hansen by sheer weight of numbers.

Paul Hansen refused to lose his head. Working fast, but under control, he attempted to rock the amtrac free from the grasp of the trees. When two Japanese soldiers clambered up onto the stalled vehicle's front slope plate, he calmly drew his .45-caliber service pistol and shot each man. Then he returned to the task of breaking the amtrac free.

Not all the terrain was flat—it was just thick—and moving up through the jungles to take the airfields and the hills around Cape Gloucester added new dangers for attacking Marines.

Up above, Leslie Hansen was no less busy. Painfully wounded in the hand, completely exposed and with total disregard for his own safety, he employed each of the bow machine guns and his own pistol to lay a withering fire on the Japanese attackers. When he wasn't occupied in that fashion, he took time out to fling Japanese hand grenades back from where they had come.

Leslie Hansen was joined in this improbable game of pitch-and-catch by a Marine whose name remains unknown to this day. Despite being already wounded, this unidentified Marine, who must have come from the ranks of K/3/1, scrambled up into the amtrac to join Leslie Hansen in hurling back grenades, which were now falling thick and fast. But more and more Japanese were joining in the attack, like ants pouring from a kicked anthill.

It was hand-to-hand fighting. The unknown Marine fell wounded again, leaving Leslie Hansen to face the Japanese onslaught alone. With pistol, Ka-Bar and bare fists, the younger of the Hansen twins shot, slashed and battered at the Japanese who were now climbing over the sides of the amtrac. Locked in combat with a pair of assailants, Leslie Hansen tumbled from the amtrac, falling to the ground where he died under a flurry of rifle butts and bayonets, still battling with his last breath.

As his brother died, Paul Hansen, with one final effort, wrenched the amtrac free from the embrace of the trees that had immobilized it. With a fighting spirit worthy of his brother, Paul Hansen sent his heavy amphibian lunging forward, crushing one Japanese bunker under its tracks and silencing the machine gun that had been firing from it. Setting his sights on another bunker, he pounded it into the ground, plowing forward to demolish yet a third. By the time it was over, Paul Hansen had accounted for, or been instrumental in, the deaths of 68 Japanese and the elimination of Japanese resistance, opening the way to the airfield.

For their actions at Cape Gloucester on D-day, 26 Dec. 1943, Paul and Leslie Hansen each would be awarded the naval service's second highest award for military valor, the Navy Cross. Each of their citations would testify to their "indomitable fighting spirit and selfless devotion to duty." It would be the only time in the history of the award that it would be presented to twin brothers fighting side by side in the same combat action.

For Paul Hansen the war was over. By order of the Commanding General, First Marine Division, Major General William H. Rupertus, Paul Hansen was ordered Stateside with the notation in his service record that he never again be sent into a combat zone. The loss of two sons, MajGen Rupertus felt, was enough of a sacrifice to ask of any mother. Paul Hansen spent the remainder of the war at Camp Lejeune, N.C., helping to prepare other Marines for combat.

Author's note: Special thanks to Marine veteran Jerry Connors for bringing this most unusual story to my attention and especially to Marine veteran Paul Hansen for his invaluable assistance in bringing it to life. Semper Fidelis!

Editor's note: Maj Bevilacqua, a Leatherneck *contributing editor, is a former enlisted Marine who served in the Korean and Vietnam wars. Later in his career, he was an instructor at Amphibious Warfare School and Command and Staff College, Quantico, Va.*