

WORLD WAR II:
70 YEARS AGO

Thick jungle-like foliage, streams and swamps slowed but did not stop the Marine advance across New Britain en route to capture the airfield at Cape Gloucester.

NEW BRITAIN: Nightmare in Green

Story by Maj Allan C. Bevilacqua
Photos from the Eric Hammel Collection

"In the memories of the men who fought there, American, Australian, and Japanese, it will remain one of the evil spots of this world. Nearly everybody had malaria, dysentery or fungus infection, often all three simultaneously; dengue fever and scrub typhus occurred, and among the Japanese beri-beri and scurvy as well."

—USMC Historical Monograph,

"The Campaign on New Britain" by LtCol Frank O. Hough,
USMCR and Maj John A. Crown, USMCR

With the possible exceptions of Guadalcanal and Bougainville, close seconds, it is unlikely that the war in the Pacific confronted Marines with a more inhospitable natural environment in which to fight than the island of New Britain. A steaming, sweltering, rain-drenched miasma of an island where nature itself was every bit as hostile as the Japanese defending it, New

Britain gave Marines who fought there a completely new appreciation of the true meaning of misery.

It is not an overstatement to say that a Marine on New Britain had more than just the Japanese to fight; the island itself was a remorseless and relentless enemy.

As Marines who did fight there said, only partly in jest, the weather on New Britain occurred in just two seasons, wet and wetter. Rain, particularly during the Northwest Monsoon that lasted from late December to May, could and did fall uninterrupted for days on end, deluging the island with some of the heaviest amounts of rainfall ever recorded anywhere. Soaring temperatures and suffocating humidity drained men of energy, while at the same time producing legions of voracious insects, poisonous plants and microbe-borne diseases almost beyond counting.

As Sergeant Earl Mitchell, who thought he had seen it all on Guadalcanal, would remember it, New Britain was a place where "even the damn caterpillars bit."

A volcanic island some 370 miles in length, New Britain was densely covered with a nearly impenetrable wall of jungle that could reduce visibility to less than 15 yards. Tropical swamp forests where a single misstep could sink a man chest deep in near-liquid mud, mangrove forests with spreading tangles of above-ground roots tough enough to immobilize a tank and the true triple-canopy rain forest where the sun never reached the jungle floor covered New Britain from end to end.

The island abounded with insect life, all of it unpleasant. Little ants, big ants and bigger ants, disease-bearing ticks and swarms of mosquitoes, overgrown wasps, scorpions and centipedes, spiders bigger than a man's hand, all combined in a living, crawling blanket of monstrosities straight out of a science-fiction horror movie.

If New Britain was all that bad, why fight for the place? There were two reasons.

First, the Japanese airfield at the far western tip of the island, Cape Gloucester,

posed an unacceptable threat to the flank and rear of General Douglas MacArthur's advance up the east coast of neighboring New Guinea. Cape Gloucester and its airfield had to be cleared of Japanese.

Second, the further elimination of all Japanese forces in Western New Britain would complete the stranglehold on the vital Japanese base at Rabaul on the very northeastern tip of the island. Taken by the Japanese in January 1942, Rabaul had been transformed into the supreme headquarters and logistical hub of all Japanese forces in the Southwest Pacific Operating Area. If Rabaul were to be cut off and isolated, on its own with no hope of support from any direction, it could safely be bypassed and left to die on the vine. Before that, though, there was Western New Britain to be dealt with.

At 0746 on 26 Dec. 1943, the First Marine Division began attending to that task. The bow ramps of the LCVPs (landing craft, vehicle and personnel) carrying Lieutenant Colonel William R. Williams' 3d Battalion, Seventh Marine Regiment no sooner had splashed down on Beach Yellow 1, than it soon became apparent that New Britain was going to be something memorable.

One of the first dictates of an amphibious assault is the criticality of getting off the beach quickly. In one respect, at Cape Gloucester that proved to be no particular problem. At Cape Gloucester there was no beach; where the water ended, a solid green wall of jungle began. "If a tall man were to stretch out on his back with his head under the trees his feet would be in the water," was one Marine's impression of Beach Yellow 1.

On the plus side, though, the landing was unopposed. Pre-invasion reconnaissance elements, combined American-Australian teams dubbed the Alamo Scouts, had done their work well. Not one Japanese soldier was in the vicinity. The assault waves came ashore without a shot being fired at them. The 1stMarDiv had succeeded in coming ashore exactly where the Japanese could not oppose a landing.

That was possible because of the inland terrain just beyond the coastal trail that paralleled the beach immediately behind the dense jungle at water's edge. Aerial-photography interpreters had determined that particular piece of real estate to be a "damp flat." It was in fact a wide swath of tropical swamp forest where almost all movement was next to impossible and which one unknown Marine described as "damp right up to your neck." A barrier to the landing force, the area was impossible to defend as well.

What the Japanese could defend, and where the Japanese defenses had been

accurately located by the Alamo Scouts, was just to the west, blocking the sole approach to the airfield. There, the ocean on one side and the damp flat on the other would prevent the landing force from outflanking the Japanese line from either direction. The Marines of 3/7 would have no option other than a direct frontal assault. Several hundred yards into the approach, the lead elements of 3/7 came under well-planned and intense flat-trajectory fire from well-sited and strong field fortifications. The advance was stopped cold.

That was where twin brothers, Privates First Class Paul and Leslie Hansen, leathernecks in Company B, 1st Amphibian Tractor Bn, changed the entire picture. Following the attack in trace with a resupply of water and ammunition, the Hansen brothers didn't hesitate to send their heavy vehicle directly into the teeth of the Japanese defense. Using the sheer weight of their tracked vehicle, the brothers plowed

that it would be awarded to twin brothers fighting side by side in the same combat action.

The decisive action of Paul and Leslie Hansen tore a gaping hole in the Japanese line. By midafternoon that line had fatally weakened. Then Mother Nature checked in. What appeared to be a solid wall of water, propelled by near gale-force winds out of the west, roared in from the Bismarck Sea. The Northwest Monsoon had arrived right on schedule. It would reduce life on New Britain to barely above the existence level for the next four months as drenching sheets of never-ending rain fell for day after endless day. From that moment until the end of Japanese resistance, no Marine on New Britain was ever completely dry.

The airfield was secured on 31 Dec. after a series of sharp, deadly firefighting, all of which took place amid a driving rain in which a Marine in a fighting hole was rapidly up to his chest in water. "What



Navy corpsmen demonstrated their flexibility tending wounded leathernecks at aid stations just behind the lines in the Cape Gloucester jungles.

over the Japanese, crushing bunkers, pillboxes and their occupants. With Paul at the controls and Leslie manning the bow machine gun, they methodically tore the Japanese line apart, opening the route to the airfield.

In an action that would become hard to hand as the Japanese attempted to swarm over the vehicle, Paul Hansen would live to describe the fight. Leslie would die. In their wake they left more than 50 dead Japanese. For their actions at Cape Gloucester, Paul and Leslie Hansen each would be awarded the Navy Cross, the only time in the history of the medal

next," snarled one exasperated Marine, "a damn earthquake?" Maybe the owner of that fed-up voice knew something no one else had picked up on. Two days later, under a torrential rain, an earthquake did rattle New Britain from one end to the other.

The relatively easy securing of the airfield did not signal the end of the fighting on Cape Gloucester. The Japanese had no intention of simply walking away and leaving the 1stMarDiv in possession of its prize. Beyond the tactical imperative of counterattacking before the division had fully established itself ashore, Major



Leathernecks with the 11th Marine Regiment (above) fire their 75 mm pack howitzer at a rapid pace to support the advance on Cape Gloucester, 27 Dec. 1943. A Marine (below) takes cover behind a log.



General Iwao Matsuda, the senior commander of all Japanese forces in Western New Britain, had another pressing concern, one that could make all other considerations academic. Briefly put, MG Matsuda had a serious problem on his hands.

With New Britain lacking anything remotely resembling a road network, the Matsuda Force could be supplied only by the motorized barges of the 1st and 8th Shipping regiments transporting cargo along New Britain's south coast from their base at Rabaul. With American and Australian naval forces in total control of the waters surrounding New Britain, that 300-mile supply line was out of business. Completing the isolation of MG Matsuda's

troops, the important intermediate supply depot at Cape Merkus, about midway down the south coast, had been taken by the U.S. Army's 112th Cavalry Regt in an independent action.

MG Matsuda was well and truly on his own. The troops he had on hand, Colonel Kouki Sumiya's 53d Infantry Regt and Col Kenshiro Katayama's 141st Infantry Regt, were all he was going to have. Every round of ammunition fired, every bite of food eaten—the Japanese already were on reduced rations, two skimpy meals each day—would not be replaced. The Japanese commander could not play a waiting game. He must attack, and there was no time to spare in doing so. But having a tactical need to attack and having

the combat power to attack are two different things. MG Matsuda would not be long in finding that out.

For a solid week a series of battering attacks continued all along the 1stMarDiv's perimeter. Despite the daily nature of the attacks, that perimeter was slowly and steadily being enlarged by the addition of the 1st and 5th Marines. In what would become a pattern for combat on New Britain, those were small-unit actions, the dense jungle, broken only infrequently by patches of head-high kunai grass, precluding units much larger than platoons from maintaining contact and severely limiting visibility and movement.

That those encounters were on a small scale took away nothing from their ferocity. At times, as the division's beachhead was pushed outward, it was difficult to determine who was attacking, Japanese or Marines. A task force built on Col Julian N. Frisbie's 7th Marines, with LtCol David S. McDougal's 3/5 attached, and commanded by the assistant division commander, Brigadier General Lemuel C. Shepherd, ran into a hornet's nest of Japanese along the banks of an unnamed stream that ran along the east edge of the chest-deep swamp with the ill-chosen designation of damp flat.

The stream ran between steep banks, and as the lead elements of 3/5 approached, at the far bank of the watercourse, "The jungle exploded in their faces," in the words of Marine Corps combat correspondent Asa Bordages. All through the day of 2 Jan. 1944, the Marines of 3/5 and 3/7, mostly in squad-sized groups out of touch with one another, fought back and forth across the stream to no avail. It took three days, three days of small-arms fire, hand grenades and demolition charges, to blast the Japanese out of their log and earth bunkers. It took three days to give the unnamed stream a name: "Suicide Creek."

More than a week of daily firefights, like that at Suicide Creek, were necessary to bring BGen Shepherd's task force to its final objective, Hill 660, that would anchor the division's left flank. The Japanese were already there. Caught unaware by the division's initial landing, the Japanese had been quick to appreciate the tactical importance of Hill 660, which afforded unobstructed observation of the landing beaches and the capability of bringing direct and indirect fires on the shore party elements moving follow-on traffic inland. Geographically and tactically, Hill 660 fit the textbook definition of "key terrain," important to both the division and the Japanese.

If Hill 660 was a classic piece of military real estate, it also was a truly ugly piece of real estate for anyone attempting



A Marine patrol trudges through the Cape Gloucester jungle in search of MG Iwao Matsuda, the senior commander of all Japanese forces in Western New Britain, and his soldiers.

stricken Marines, while the temperature soared and the rain poured.

Every bit as rampant as malaria among the Marines were fungal infections: "jungle rot," "the creeping crud," in Marine-ese. Those constant itching, burning miseries were often a compound of several varieties of fungus. What combated and soothed one would inflame and irritate the others. No light-duty chits were issued there either. Marines went on patrol, were fired upon and fired back, their armpits, groins and feet rubbed raw and bleeding. Then they went back to treating the affected parts liberally with salves and ointments and unguents that seldom gave any relief. It was just a fact of life on New Britain.

Photographs of Marines on New Britain

Leatherneck—On the Web

See more photographs of the Marines' capture of New Britain at www.mca-marines.org/leatherneck/newbritain

show some with helmet covers, others without. No one was making a fashion statement. The energy-draining blanket of humidity that made simply drawing a breath of air akin to attempting to breathe water had completely rotted the cloth until it fell apart like wet tissue paper.

Socks rotted in the same way, and most Marines went with bare feet in their boonockers. Letters, those most precious links with loved ones far away, dissolved into pulp in less than three or four days. "Guaranteed water-proof" watches purchased in Australia, became frozen, corroded bits of metal in a week's time. The ubiquitous blue mold was faster acting; it appeared on leather and web equipment overnight, to be scraped away each morning, if the owner was fastidious.

There was always the wildlife. Col Amor LeRoy Sims, Division Chief of Staff, crawled from his cot one morning to find an eel curled up in one of his boonockers. Why not? The tent floor was six inches deep in water, and Col Sims' boonockers

were floating. Amid a barrage of incoming Japanese mortar fire, a member of Headquarters and Service Co, 2d Bn, 5th Marines, dove into his hole only to find it already occupied by a 9-foot python. A patrol leader from 1st Bn, 1st Marines had to put the war against the Japanese on hold while he fought his own personal war against an inquisitive alligator. Biting, stinging insects were constant companions. Sgt Earl Mitchell had it right: "Even the damn caterpillars bit."

Another constant companion was dysentery. Rare indeed was the Marine who escaped the vile and humiliating scourge that left a man soiled with his own filth. Much has been made of the "horrors of war," but little has been said about the gut-wrenching, bowel-cramping burning of uncontrollable spasms of dysentery.

On 22 April 1944, the U.S. Army's 40th Infantry Div began relieving the weary men of the 1stMarDiv. Casualties during the New Britain operation had been astonishingly light, only 310 killed, while an additional 1,083 were wounded. On the other hand, there were more than 6,100 cases of malaria. Fungal infections and cases of dysentery were beyond counting. Very few of the departing Marines looked back. Left behind to fend for themselves were the 50,000 members of the Japanese garrison at Rabaul. There they sat, out of the war as effectively as if they had been marooned on the planet Jupiter.

That was life for the men of the 1stMarDiv on the island of New Britain, alternately burning and freezing with the fevers of malaria, rubbed raw by the "creeping crud," suffering other indignities that are best left unmentioned. Most of them are gone now, gone with the passage of 70 years. Of those who are left, a few slip away into the shadows each day. Soon enough there will be no living man with memories of the campaign on New Britain. It is a pretty safe bet that the memories of all the Marines who fought in that campaign on New Britain are uniformly memories of "one of the evil spots of this world."

Editor's note: To read more about the Hansen brothers, go to the Leatherneck magazine archives at www.mca-marines.org/leatherneck, and search for the article "Brothers in Arms," April 2007.

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