



# Forgotten Battalion

By Sgt Bill Miller, USMC

**T**he 155 mm howitzers were talking loud and fast as the big push to secure Guam began. Twenty feet to the rear you could feel the heat of the stubby barrels, almost glowing from the continuous firing.

Those were the guns of the 2nd 155 mm Howitzer Battalion, and they were celebrating an anniversary. Two years ago to the day, on Aug. 7, 1942, these same men got their baptism of fire from high altitude Japanese bombers attacking the troop ships off Tulagi and “the Canal.” Then they were the 3rd Bn, 10th Marines, with 75 mm howitzers instead of 155s.

They rate five battle stars and two unit citations. They call themselves “The Forgotten Battalion.” They fought on Tulagi, Guadalcanal, Tarawa, Saipan and Guam, and nobody in the States ever heard of them. The 269 old-timers left of those who shipped out from San Diego on July 1, 1942, are wondering if that two-year rotation deal is only scuttlebutt. They’ve been lucky, but their luck won’t hold forever.

Among their distinctions, they claim to have fired the opening artillery round in the first U.S. offensive of World War II. That was from Gavutu against reported

Japanese sniper positions in the treetops of Gaomi. The next day they fired the first artillery preparation from Tulagi against Makambo, where Marine infantry later found three Japanese and one pig. They have supported every Marine division that has seen action, as well as several Army units, and were the only troops to fight on both Saipan and Guam.

October 1944 made the 28th month they’ve sweated out in the Pacific. They’ve seen a lot of saltwater over the rails of a lot of ships in an odyssey Homer never dreamed of. They’ve seen Tongatabu, the Fijis, Tulagi, Guadalcanal, Espiritu Santo, New Zealand, Efate, Tarawa, the Hawaiian Islands, Eniwetok, Saipan and Guam. And their travels are far from complete.

Like all good fighting men, they know how to laugh off the strain of war and the boredom of so-called rest camps. They remember a song they had about the Tulagi Trots (not a dance) and the lousy chow they had for 22 days when the supply ships were pulled out of the Solomons after they had gone ashore with only 72 hours’ rations. That was the only time Mess Sergeant Willie M. Taylor was stumped.

Each gun section organized its own mess, and the diet was wormy Japanese

rice and taro roots. On the first day they removed the worms before cooking the rice. The next day they cooked worms and all, but only a few of the men could eat it. From then on, however, they ate worms and all, calling it meat and rice. It wasn’t very funny then, and many had to drop out, weak from malnutrition, when both officers and men had to carry ammo up the steep Tulagi hills to the gun positions.

One of their favorite characters is Corporal Samuel Esrick, also known as “TNT Sam” or “Fire-in-the-Hole Esrick,” demolitions man. His biggest job is to clear the line of fire of trees and other obstructions, but he has blasted a lot of holes from one end of the Pacific to the other. As his buddies put it, “When better heads are blown, ‘TNT Sam’ will blow them.”

One battery takes great pride in its canine mascot, Private First Class Sooner, a “two-campaign replacement.” She was enlisted on Dec. 7, 1943, and is a veteran of Saipan and Guam with a letter of commendation in her record book. Her chances for a corporal’s rate are not so hot after a recent trip over the hill from which she returned in a condition that might be described as delicate. But by special

dispensation she won't get a survey. Her lord and master is Cpl Theodore Dorn, and she takes orders only from him. When he is up with the guns in battle, she mopes around the rear areas waiting to give him a joyful welcome when he returns.

There are some good stories about Captain (now a major in another outfit) William G. "Wild Bill" Winters, who came out from the States with the battalion and went through all five campaigns with it. He liked to scout ahead of his own outfit, and one day on Saipan he came tearing in looking for a jeep. He got one, hitched a trailer to it and drove up through the lines again. When he came back, he had the trailer loaded with Japanese beer, which he proceeded to distribute among the men of his battery.

Another time on Saipan, he stopped an adjacent outfit from firing indiscriminately at night by setting up four .50-caliber machine guns in a strategic spot and issuing an ultimatum that his men would return any fire coming in their direction. During the same campaign, when a Japanese battery tried to destroy his OP, he methodically destroyed each Japanese gun in turn by precision adjustments.

The battalion's story begins on Jan. 1, 1941, when it was organized on the West Coast. It shipped out from the States on July 1, 1942, equipped with the 75 mm pack howitzers that were its weapons on Tulagi, Guadalcanal and Tarawa. Just before the Marianas operation, it became one of the first Marine units to be equipped with 155 mm howitzers and was redesignated as the 2nd 155 mm Howitzer Battalion, 5th Amphibious Corps, on April 29, 1944.

Another unit now holds its former designation as 3rd Battalion, 10th Marines, as well as a considerable reputation of its own, being the artillery which stopped the final Japanese breakthrough on Saipan with the fuses of its shells set for four-tenths of a second.

On Aug. 8, 1942, while Battery I was landing on Gavutu, 26 low-flying Japanese torpedo bombers attacked the transports offshore. Men of batteries G and H helped man AA guns on the transports, and nearly all of the Japanese planes were downed. PFC Wayne Briscoe kept firing at the nose of one plane as it came in to lose its torpedo. Finally it burst into flames, hit the water and exploded. PFC Arthur R. Kazmierczak shot down another, which fell 50 yards beyond the fantail of his ship, still carrying its torpedo.

A pouring rain didn't help matters as Btry I hauled its guns across the Gavutu

causeway and set up to shell Gaomi. Sergeant Cecil E. Chastain, chief of the No. 4 section, fired the first round. Its brass casing, engraved with the date and place of firing and bucked until it shines like bright gold, is his proudest possession. Three other members of No. 4 crew, Cpls Joseph E. Churich, Lee H. Abraham, and Elvord E. Fleming, are still with the battalion. The first round was fired at about 9 a.m. and was followed by 100 more.

It was Sunday morning, Aug. 9, when Btry H went ashore on Tulagi to shell Makambo at a range of 1,000 yards. They fired a 10-minute preparation under section control, and No. 1 section was the first to fire. Four men of that No. 1 crew are still with the battalion—Cpls Robert L. Donaldson, Joe N. Harold and Charles O'Reilly and PFC Joseph M.

was shot in the right thigh. Cpl Dorn and PFC Charlie R. Perry carried him back about 75 yards to a corpsman. After he was given first aid and a shot of morphine, the others had to leave him there alone as the battle moved forward. They took the hill in the morning, but when they came back for Held he had disappeared. He was never found, and there is an unconfirmed story that his wallet was found on a dead Japanese.

The rest of 3/10 moved to Guadalcanal between Dec. 18-21, and on Dec. 22, moved into position in support of a combined Marine-Army drive to capture Mount Austen, thus putting the Japanese out of range of Henderson Field.

It was during that push that three enlisted men in H&S Btry won letters of commendation for their devotion to duty in two days and three nights of continuous

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Griggs. Somehow No. 4 gun was loaded in the 3rd section's boat, and vice versa. So when No. 3's boat hit a reef, No. 4 gun went into the water, and No. 4 crew fired No. 3 gun in the preparation.

After organizing defensive positions in which the 75s were set up to fire on the Japanese fleet if it ever came within range, the battalion had ringside seats for all the air and naval battles that took place over and between Tulagi and Guadalcanal. What they saw there gave them undying respect for Marine flyers and the U.S. Navy.

Btry I moved over to Guadalcanal on Oct. 25 to support 3rd Battalion, 2nd Marines. PFCs E.F. Darling and George McCartney were killed when a Japanese cruiser and two cans sank the Yippee boat *Endeavor* and the Navy tug *Seminole*. The guns had been landed, but most of the battery's personal gear was lost. That was the day Sergeant F.G. Iaconelli received the Navy and Marine Corps Medal for putting a tourniquet on a Sailor's leg, although some of his old buddies swear he put it on below the wound, and some will even tell you he put it on the wrong leg. All in fun, of course.

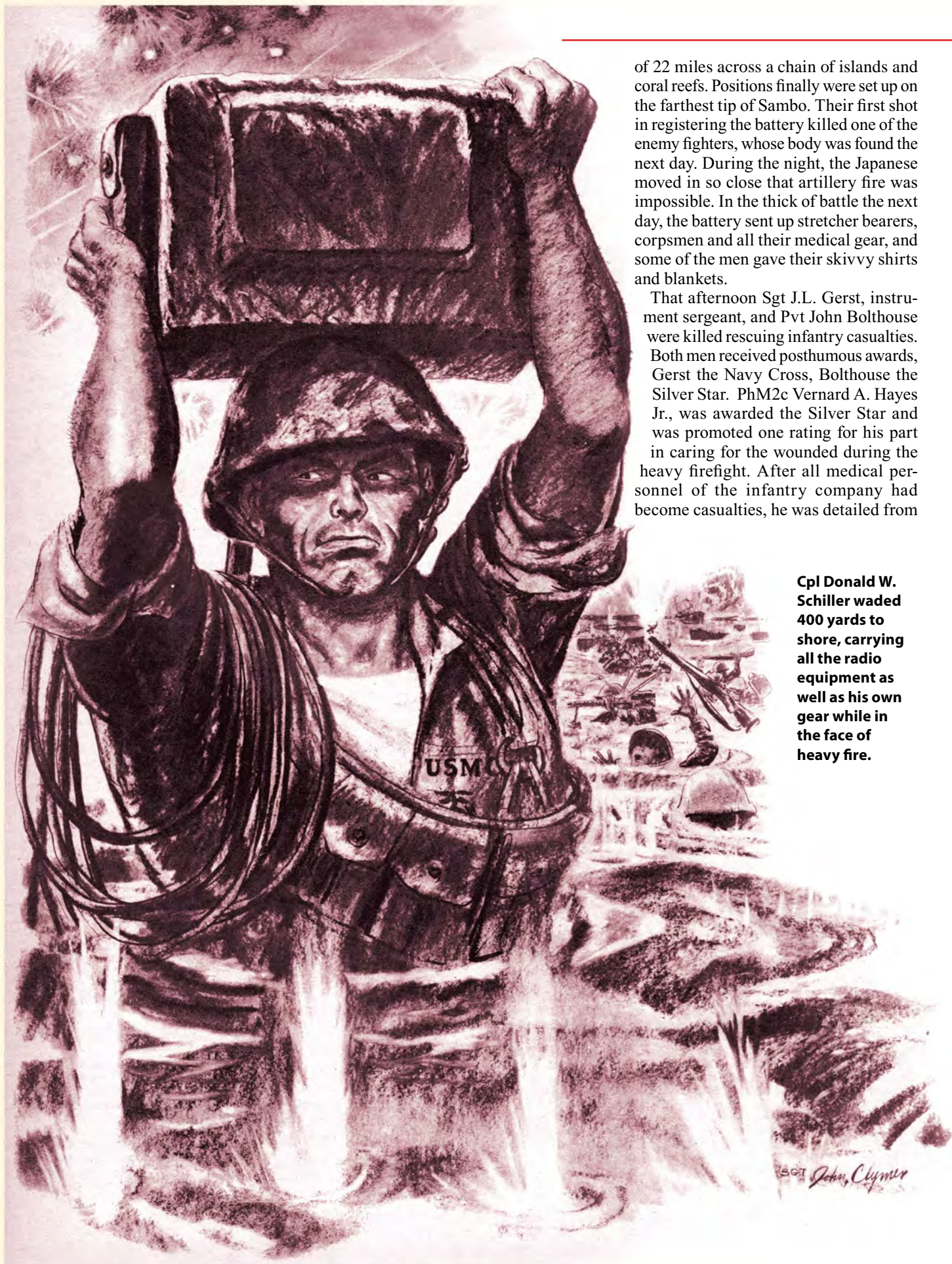
That night the battery lost one of its best men, Scout Sergeant Carl J. "Pop" Held, during the fight for Hand Grenade Hill. The Japanese counterattacked, and Held

firing. They were Sgt John A. Grivich, PFC John D. Cox and PFC Raymond Kehoe. There was also a commendation for Major Earl J. Rowse, Bn S-3 through all five campaigns, who is now executive officer and has been recommended for the Legion of Merit for his excellent direction of the battalion's fire on Saipan.

The battalion spent six months on Tulagi and Guadalcanal, a strenuous tour which few outfits there could match. It fired 13,145 rounds from Dec. 22 to Jan. 7, and finally pulled out for New Zealand on Jan. 31, 1943, for rest and recreation. Nearly every man in the outfit had malaria, dengue or dysentery, and the New Zealand climate aggravated most of the malaria cases so that heavy replacements were needed. But the men got a wonderful reception from the people of New Zealand, particularly from the girls, and most of them would like to go back there some day.

They underwent intensive training and practice landings before leaving with the 2nd Division for Tarawa. Landings with artillery are no picnic, and, as one peon phrased it, "I don't mind the operations so much, but I can't take any more of those maneuvers."

Btry G took most of the honors on Tarawa. They supported 2nd Bn, 6th Marines, in a mop-up of the atoll, a march



of 22 miles across a chain of islands and coral reefs. Positions finally were set up on the farthest tip of Sambo. Their first shot in registering the battery killed one of the enemy fighters, whose body was found the next day. During the night, the Japanese moved in so close that artillery fire was impossible. In the thick of battle the next day, the battery sent up stretcher bearers, corpsmen and all their medical gear, and some of the men gave their skivvy shirts and blankets.

That afternoon Sgt J.L. Gerst, instrument sergeant, and Pvt John Bolthouse were killed rescuing infantry casualties. Both men received posthumous awards, Gerst the Navy Cross, Bolthouse the Silver Star. PhM2c Vernard A. Hayes Jr., was awarded the Silver Star and was promoted one rating for his part in caring for the wounded during the heavy firefight. After all medical personnel of the infantry company had become casualties, he was detailed from

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his battery to take over. After finishing work at the aid station, he went to the front of his own accord to administer first aid under fire and carry wounded to the rear until he was physically exhausted.

Some of the battalion's observers were on Betio as members of naval gunfire shore parties. Cpl Donald W. Schiller was awarded the Silver Star for his heroism and devotion to duty as acting scout sergeant for one of those parties. On the morning of D-day he took complete charge after his officer and one radio operator were wounded seriously in the boat. He waded 400 yards to shore, carrying all the radio equipment and his own gear while men all around him were throwing away their packs in the deep water and in the face of heavy fire.

He set up his radio and contacted the

Blue Beach near Charan Kanoa, positions were assigned and located, and by 9 p.m. one battery had two pieces in position. On June 18, they fired the first volley and completed registration on a base point with air observation. They fired that day and the next in general support of the 4th, covering Tinian and Mount Tapotchau with excellent effect. On June 20 they were detached from the 4th and re-attached to the 2nd.

The battalion displaced three times on Saipan, firing a total of 10,052 rounds. Targets included 53 enemy guns, all of which were disabled or silenced. Direct hits destroyed one coastal defense gun, 25 large caliber guns and four small caliber or AA guns. In addition to these main fire missions, the battalion destroyed 14 assorted oil, ammo and supply dumps,

is probably the biggest reason they have been so "lucky" in the matter of casualties. Before they moved up the guns, every effort was made to organize battery areas completely and to dig in. The whole outfit took a lot of shelling, and one battery alone accounted for 24 Japanese in and around its second position.


The battalion has undoubtedly been lucky a lot of times. One of the best examples of their luck was the night a shell hit in the middle of PFC L.M. Melka's sack a minute after he left it for a foxhole. That same night a dud landed at the corner of No. 2 tent. In one position on Saipan, the FDC was set up between two ridges in a spot which seemed out of reach of the Japanese guns. The men could hear shells fluttering overhead and exploding on the ridgetops. Somehow the Japanese dropped one almost on top of the FDC. It was a dud, too.

Celebrating that grim second anniversary on Guam, guns of the 2nd 155s fired 1,591 rounds in 24 hours, the maximum for the campaign in a single day. They fired 9,116 rounds on Guam, an average of 608 a day.

Aerial observers (Capt Michael Wojcik was one) could see what artillery fire like that does to the enemy. They saw the big projectiles destroy 10 trucks, 20 buildings, three dumps, two bridges and one dugout of reinforced concrete. Twenty-eight enemy field and coast defense guns and 12AA guns were taken under fire with two direct hits observed and the targets neutralized in every instance.

Heavy artillery has seldom moved so fast and so far under such conditions as the 2nd met on Saipan and Guam. By the time they got through Guam the men were calling themselves the "2nd Displacement Battalion" and their pieces "155 mm antitank guns."

They did such a good job that no one man could be singled out for commendation, and each man of the battalion carries in his record book a letter of commendation signed by Brigadier General Pedro A. del Valle, commanding general of 3rd Corps Artillery on Guam, and a letter from his own CO.

They were a beat-up but a proud outfit when they disembarked from the ships and packed their gear on the little train which was to take them to their rest camp. When the train pulled out, captured Japanese flags flew from the engine and from every car. The only thing missing along their triumphal route was the sound of the cheers they rate from every man, woman and child of their own distant country. 

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destroyer assigned to support the assault battalion to which he was attached. Without further instruction, he laid wire to the furthest front line position and was ready to deliver fire wherever it was requested. Of all four teams going ashore with TBX radios, his was the only one contacting destroyers assigned to the battalion.

After Tarawa, the battalion was in rest camp until it shipped out for the Marianas. During that time it was chosen to be equipped with 155s and became a Corps Artillery battalion, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Marvin H. Floom. LtCol Manly L. Curry, now an artillery officer on the staff of FMF, Pacific, commanded the battalion from its organization until the change and won a respect from his men that still endures. "He's the guy that made this battalion," they'll tell you.

What LtCol Floom has done with the battalion shows clearly in the story of what they did on Saipan and Guam. On May 10, 1944, they embarked on APAs for maneuvers that preceded D-day on Saipan, June 15. Their transports were offshore on D-day, but only an advance party hit the beach. On June 17, they were attached to the 4th Division and ordered to land. Advance elements hit

disabled two tanks, two locomotives and five box cars. Four reinforced concrete blockhouses were taken under fire, with 14 direct hits, although results could not be observed.

On July 15, when Saipan was secured, the battalion was ordered to Guam. Two days later all troops and gear had cleared the beach and the ships weighed anchor on July 20, arriving off Guam at 8:30 a.m. on D-day, July 21. The first wave was already ashore on White and Yellow beaches.

Attached to 3rd Corps Artillery in general support, their sector of fire covered Orote peninsula from Neye island to Tepungan. They landed on D+2 and unloaded all that night. The next day the first fire mission was underway against two enemy batteries emplaced in a cliff face on Orote peninsula. The batteries ceased firing, but probably were not destroyed until later in the day when a destroyer blasted the cliff face with direct fire.

All guns were in position and ready to fire on July 25, and Japanese 77s were shelling their area by the next day. As on Saipan, the battalion displaced three times, moving up so fast that it was sometimes ahead of the 75s. In their last position they were even ahead of the secondary infantry line.

They are a battle-wise outfit, which