

Lessons Learned at Guadalcanal

By Brigadier General Clifton B. Cates, USMC

Editor's Note: This is the third article from the memoirs of Brigadier General Clifton B. Cates, who commanded the First Marines on Guadalcanal. General Cates has previously described the Battle of the Tenaru River and the Japanese slaughter at Bloody Ridge.

FRIDAY, the 23rd of October, 1942, was another date that will go down in the history of the First Marines as one to remember. The Jap force that had landed west of Kokumbona ten days before had evidently been working its way eastward toward our right flank on the Matanikau River. For the preceding week it had been shelling our positions and the airfield with long range guns.

On the afternoon of the 22nd they opened up with fairly heavy artillery fire on scattered targets in our beach-head. Soon our artillery was replying. The firing continued into the night, when they shifted it, along with heavy mortar fire, to McKelvy's (Lieutenant Colonel William N. McKelvy, Jr.) 3rd Battalion at the mouth of the Matanikau.

Soon, evidence of enemy tanks and infantry activity was observed across the sand-spit at the mouth of the river. The battle was on in earnest.

Heavy infantry weapons' fire started from each side of the river, and a few minutes after the enemy barrage lifted, tanks were seen advancing across the narrow entrance at the beach.

Flares illuminated the targets, and our 3-inch guns on the half-tracks and 37mm guns were blazing away at the tanks. In the meantime, all twelve batteries of our artillery had opened up and were laying a heavy barrage just across the river.

One enemy tank after another was knocked out but the Jap infantry pressed right behind them and our machine gun and mortar fire caught them like rats in a trap. Also, our artillery was cutting them to pieces as they had to come right through our barrage.

The battle raged for about eight hours but finally the din of the firing died out and our positions were still intact. Only one tank had succeeded in crossing the sand-spit. After it had over-run two of our machine guns, one of our men disabled it by laying a grenade in its tread as it ran over his foxhole. A direct hit from one of our 3-inch guns blasted it back into the ocean.

When daylight came, nine enemy tanks were burning or disabled on the beach. Three more back in the woods had been destroyed by artillery fire. It is impossible to estimate correctly the Jap casualties but they must have been unusually high, as the woods were literally cut to ribbons by our artillery fire. Undoubtedly, it must have knocked out much of their artillery also as they had moved it well forward to support the attack.

About daybreak, a force of a few hundred Japs was seen advancing around the flank of a battalion of the Seventh Marines, on McKelvy's left. A heavy artillery concentration was laid on them and they took refuge in deep ravines.

Soon our aviators took up the chase and one dive-bomber after another blasted the enemy with 100 pound fragmentation bombs. Again they must have suffered extra high casualties. How many, we never knew, but we do know that they paid a terrific price for what little damage they did to us. McKelvy's battalion only lost two men killed and eleven men wounded in the entire operation. It seemed a miracle that we did not lose more.

McKelvy's battalion finally received the credit that was due it. The 1st and 2d Battalions had previously been given official commendation for their work at the Tenaru River. Now, the 3rd Battalion received a citation. Naturally, I was very proud.

I was fortunate in having three good battalion commanders in Lieutenant Colonel Leonard B. Cresswell of the 1st Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Edwin A. Pollock of the 2d Battalion, and Lieutenant Colonel McKelvy of the 3rd Battalion. All were later decorated with Navy Crosses.

During this action along the Matanikau, one of the officers of the Seventh Marines fooled the Japs with one of their own typical stunts. They were trying to infiltrate around the ridges well up the river. As they advanced up a steep hill, this officer rushed to the crest with what he thought was a gunny-sack containing hand-grenades. The "grenades" turned out to be canned rations. Taking a chance on the element of surprise, he hurled can after can into the enemy's midst. They turned and fled down the hill and strangest of all, made no further effort in that area.

WE had previously turned over our sector on the Tenaru to an Army unit which had just arrived. It was thought best to give these new and untried troops a quiet, well-developed sector in which to get accustomed to Guadalcanal. Little did we realize that they would soon have the opportunity here to write a glorious page in their own history. This chance came on the night of 24-25th of October.



Staff of the First Marines on Guadalcanal. Colonel Cates is seated, in center.

After the attack on my 3rd Battalion at the Matanikau River, part of the Seventh Marines were withdrawn from the right of the Army unit and were replaced by an Army battalion west of the upper branches of the Ilu.

That night, a Japanese regiment made an attack in force down the grassy plain and through the woods against the Army's right. Soon after dark all hell broke loose in that sector and it kept up all night. There was terrific fire from machine guns, mortars, rifles, and hand-grenades, and the artillery laid a heavy barrage.

When dawn came, the Japs decided that they had had enough and started withdrawing. The open field and woods were littered with their dead and dying and it had all been in vain as they had not made a dent in the line. The total number of dead will never be known, but by 30th of October about 800 had already been buried and there were still a lot more. Counting the wounded, their casualties must have been near 3,000. Lieutenant Colonel Pollock cussed constantly after the attack. He claimed the First Marines should have been kept in that sector so that we could have had the fun of slaughtering another thousand or so Japs.

This attack also hit the left of the Seventh Marines, and they had their full share of the fighting and glory.

At daybreak, our aviators took up the chase, bombing and strafing enemy concentration points all day. They also put heavy fire on the Japanese positions in the vicinity of Kokumbona, evidently their command post and supply dumps, starting enormous fires.

To add to the Japs' misery, our Navy sent in a cruiser and four destroyers on the morning of the 29th of October to pour more than 6,000 shells into their positions near Kokumbona and to the westward to Cape Esperance.

I learned that the commanding general of the Japanese force was Major General Kawaguchi, whom I had known in Shanghai in 1938 and 1939. This was a little different from our previous social meetings. However, in Shanghai, we were only friendly on the surface, even then.

A SUMMARY of our stay on Guadalcanal makes me marvel at the stamina and endurance of our troops. We landed there after being en route for almost seven weeks. At the time of our arrival, I was very doubtful of



Pulling out. The 3rd Battalion, First Marines, embarking on 15 December, 1942, after the 4 1/2-month campaign.

our physical ability to stand the strain of all the adverse conditions—terrain, weather, shortages of clothing, food, equipment and other supplies required for personal comfort. Our casualties had been unusually light, considering those inflicted on the enemy.

During this period we assumed the offensive at every opportunity and gradually enlarged our beachhead to protect the landing strips from actual occupation and from long range artillery fire. Every time the Japs made an attack, we beat them off and inflicted heavy casualties upon them. We attacked them along the beaches on the east and west and compelled them to withdraw. We advanced along rivers, through coconut groves, through dense jungle, and up and down high ridges—the very worst kind of terrain for offensive work.

It would be foolish to hide the fact that we did have our difficulties. It was not only a fight against the Japanese but we had to overcome many other obstacles. Quite a few officers and men had to be evacuated for mental and physical breakdowns. The strain of being under daily aerial bombardment and nightly naval shelling and intermittent artillery firing, in addition to the ground fighting, was bound to have some bad effect, especially when troops were physically exhausted and their resistance was low.

Every advance or move that we made entailed an enormous amount of hard work. Foxholes had to be dug, gun emplacements prepared, fire lanes cut through the jungle, trails cut for supplies, telephone wires strung, ammunition and supply dumps moved. There were many other back-breaking jobs.

FINALLY, the time came for us to leave. The day before we started embarking we held a memorial service at the cemetery for our boys who had paid the supreme sacrifice. As we bowed our heads in prayer, we felt the full meaning of the phrase: "They died that we might live." After the brief ceremony, the men turned to and cleaned each of the graves as a final tribute to their friends and comrades.

Just before embarking to leave Guadalcanal, the following letter was published to the personnel of the 1st Marines:

Some did not leave. A memorial service of the First Marines at the graves of their departed comrades. "They died that we might live."

1st MARINES, 1st MARINE DIVISION
FLEET MARINE FORCE

December 22, 1942.

From: The Commanding Officer.
To: Officers and Men, 1st Marines.
Subject: Excellent performance of duty.

1. I can pay no higher tribute to you than saying: "Well Done All." The Battle of Guadalcanal has been most successful and you have done your part—and a heroic part it was.

2. For four and one half months, under trying conditions, you have upheld every tradition of the Marine Corps and have added additional pages of glorious history. It is not necessary for us to expound our own accomplishments as the records speak for themselves; however, I feel that we can, without being egotistical, cite the following operations of ours as being most outstanding:

(a) The landing at Red Beach and advance of eight miles to the Lunga River and the slopes of Grassy Knoll on 7 and 8 August, 1942.

(b) The defense of the Tenaru River by the 2d Bn., and the offense of the Tenaru by the 1st Bn., on 21 August, in which an enemy force of approximately 1000 were annihilated.

(c) The defense along the South Tenaru during the Battle of Bloody Ridge by the 3rd Bn., on 13-14 September.

(d) The combat patrol along the Lunga River by the 1st Bn., on 17 September.

(e) The defense of, and the patrols west of, the Matanikau River, 23-31 October, by the 3rd Bn., in which 12 tanks and 600 enemy were destroyed.

(f) The combat patrols of the 2d Bn., on Grassy Knoll during the period 19-29 November, in which three enemy groups were attacked and about 150 killed.

(g) And, probably most outstanding of all, the most active and long distance patrolling of all units in which much infor-

mation of the enemy was secured, many weapons captured and heavy casualties inflicted upon the Japanese.

(h) The support given by the detachments from the Weapons Company in all of the defenses enumerated above.

3. This Regiment has inflicted extra heavy casualties on the enemy, a total of over 2100 killed, in addition to those wounded, while our total losses from air bombardment, naval gunfire, artillery and infantry was 106 killed or dead of wounds, one twentieth of what this unit inflicted upon the Japanese.

4. To Aviation, 11th Artillery, Special Weapons Battalion, "B" Company Tanks, and other supporting troops, we give full credit and appreciation for most valiant support in making our operations a success.

5. My sincere thanks and congratulations to you all. You have made a name for yourself that will live forever in the annals of history. Good luck and Bon Voyage.

C. B. CATES.

I wish I could paint a word picture of the men as they scrambled into the boats. They were certainly a non-descript looking outfit. Their clothing consisted of hats and caps of every description, tattered shirts, some of which were without backs, trousers of every kind—some cut off so short that they looked like "G" strings, badly worn shoes of all kinds—some wore Japanese sneakers. Very few of the men had any underwear or socks. Surprisingly enough, almost every one had his weapon and gas-mask and these weapons were all in excellent condition. A good Marine—and they were all excellent Marines—always takes good care of his arms even though everything else goes to pot.

As we took our last look at the rugged mountains of the island through a misty rain and heavy black clouds, through which the full moon occasionally showed, we all offered up a silent prayer.



Box Scores of American Combat Aircraft

Name and Location of Air Force	When	Enemy Loss	Our Loss	Rate
Army Air Forces	Dec. 7, 1941-Sept. 1, 1943	7,312 enemy planes	1,867 planes	Almost 4 to 1
Army Air Forces	March 1-Sept. 1, 1943	5,389 enemy planes	1,239 planes	Better than 4 to 1
Heavy Bombers	Jan. 1-June 30, 1943	1,333 enemy planes	316 planes	Better than 4 to 1
Medium Bombers	Jan. 1-June 30, 1943	113 enemy planes	69 planes	Almost 2 to 1
Fighters	Jan. 1-June 30, 1943	763 enemy planes	375 planes	Better than 2 to 1
Fortress of 8th American Air Force based in Britain	Month of July, 1943 while dropping 3,600 tons of bombs on enemy targets.	500 German fighters	108 Fortresses	Better than 4 to 1
Eighth and Ninth American Air Forces over Sicily, Sardinia and Southern Italy	Month of July, 1943 while dropping 12,460 tons of bombs.	342 enemy planes	190 planes	Almost 2 to 1
Fourteenth American Air Force—China	13 Months from July 4, 1942 to August 4, 1943.	442 enemy planes	51 planes	Almost 9 to 1
Navy—North Solomons	First 10 days of last June's Offensive.	199 enemy planes	34 planes	Better than 5 to 1