

Bloody Ridge

By Brigadier General Clifton B. Cates



EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the second article from the memoirs of Brigadier General Clifton B. Cates, who was the colonel commanding the First Regiment of Marines in the fighting on Guadalcanal. In a previous issue of THE MARINE CORPS GAZETTE General Cates told how his regiment scored the Americans' first real land victory in the Solomon Islands by repulsing, with heavy losses, the Japanese in the Battle of the Tenaru River. Here the General discusses some of the daily problems and tells briefly of the savage fighting at Bloody Ridge and subsequent events. Another installment will follow next month.

ONE thing we learned the hard way. We definitely needed more engineers and laborers in the division, as it was necessary to take extra large working parties from each unit daily to repair the airfield and to handle supplies on the beaches. At times my regiment had almost 1,000 men away from the front line on working parties. Naturally, the preparation of our defensive position suffered and the men were also fatigued for their night watches. Luckily, the Japs always attacked during darkness so they did not catch us short-handed in the front lines.

We also had an acute shortage of entrenching and engineering tools. Axes, brush-hooks, shovels, machetes, and bolas, were at a premium. Everyone jealously guarded the limited supply.

On the night of the 13-14th of September, 1942, the enemy launched a strong night attack from the south against what we considered our rear. It was executed by units that had been landed from cruisers and destroyers east of our beachhead. They had advanced inland through the dense

jungle, cutting numerous trails, from Koli Point southwest across the Ilu River. The main effort was made against the 1st Raider Battalion and the Parachute Battalion which occupied positions along the ridge south of the airfield, later called "Bloody Ridge." The Japanese made a temporary penetration just east of the Lunga River and also east of Bloody Ridge. It was necessary for our artillery to join into the fire-fight with automatic weapons to save the situation. Later, reserves were rushed in and the lines were restored.

A strong attack was also made against the 3rd Battalion, 1st Marines. In my opinion, it was a holding attack to keep us from flanking their main body. They evidently hadn't forgotten the Battle of the Tenaru where we encircled a regiment and slaughtered 1,000 of them. The fighting lasted practically all night and the enemy withdrew after suffering heavy casualties. They left 600 dead along the Ridge, and 200 in the wire and in the field in front of Lieutenant Colonel William M. McKelvy Jr.'s. battalion. In addition, many more dead were later found in the jungle,

Above: A stick of heavy bombs bursts on Henderson Field, the focal point in the fierce action on Guadalcanal.



Colonel L. P. Hunt and Colonel Cates at C.P. of 1st Marines.

where heavy artillery and mortar concentrations were laid.

Afterwards, we salvaged much miscellaneous equipment abandoned by the enemy in their flight. They must have withdrawn in a great hurry as it was not the usual custom for the Japs to abandon their equipment and dead. Our casualties were very light but the raiders and paramarines were fairly hard hit.

General Vandegrift had originally selected a site for his command post which was not only a low, muddy spot, but it was near the airfield and a battery of AA guns. As it was straddled with 1,000 pound bombs in several air-raids, he decided it was time to move to a better location. So the engineers built a nice screened command post for him south of the airfield in the jungle on a high ridge. The night after he moved in, the Japs attacked down the Ridge and quite a few infiltrated all around him. It was a hot spot. I went up to see him the afternoon of the 14th of September and I found everyone on the nervous side. Three Japs had just come charging out of the brush yelling "Banzai" as they ran through the command post with fixed bayonets and killed a sergeant before he knew it. Two of the Japs were killed but one got away. Orders were issued to rebuild the old command post and the General moved back a few days

later. It is a hell of a war when a division command post can't be fairly safe, especially from the enemy's infantry.

After this we enjoyed a brief lull in ground fighting. An amusing incident happened one day. Strunk, my chauffeur, and I were driving near Lunga Lagoon when we saw a working party on the beach take flight out through the coconut trees. After the excitement calmed down, we found out that a Jap submarine had sneaked in and fired three torpedoes. One hit and sank a small cargo ship of ours which was unloading supplies, one torpedo ran up toward Lunga Point, and a third, with its propeller still turning, came crashing right up on the beach in the middle of the working party. You can hardly blame the men for taking to the tall timber.

With the exception of extensive patrolling, my regiment did not have much action during this lull. However, we kept sending patrols farther and farther and the boys did some fine work. Wherever we would locate a detachment of Japs we would go right after them, and give them no rest.

FROM all indications, the Japs were now concentrating their forces to the west of our beachhead in the vicinity of Kokumbona. They would slip troops in at night by cruisers and destroyers, evidently with the idea of building up a force for another strong attack on us. Our planes and artillery kept pounding them and must have inflicted heavy casualties.

One of the things that I liked was the spirit of co-operation existing among all units. No one was trying to make a name for himself at the expense of the others.

The morale of the outfit remained excellent, although everyone was, to a certain extent, down physically. We had had two months of hard work with some heavy fighting, and we had been under the strain of intense bombing almost daily for six weeks, and heavy naval gunfire at night. Our nerves, naturally were on edge and a few officers and men had broken under the strain. But as a whole we had stood it very well. Although we had suffered some casualties, they were small in comparison to what we had inflicted on the Japs.

Incidentally, I would like to say a word of praise for our Medical Department. Since the First World War there has been a big improvement in the treatment of the wounded. This can mostly be attributed to the following: blood plasma, use of sulfa drugs, expediting of field treatment, modern equipment and evacuation by plane to base hospitals. The doctors and corpsmen have done an excellent job, but like the rest of us, they undoubtedly learned a lot from this experience.

As is always the case in circumstances like these, we had no shortage of scuttlebutt. One recurrent rumor was to the effect that Premier Tojo's son, an aviator, had been missing in action on a flight over Guadalcanal. About this time some of our patrols captured a Jap pilot who had been shot down south of Red Ridge. He was undoubtedly an officer, although he was dressed only in new Marine Corps underwear. God only knows where he got it. He was a very belligerent type and refused to answer any questions, but he kept repeating that he was the son of a very high-ranking official in Japan. We have all since wondered if it could have been Mr. Tojo, Jr.

My most valuable possession during this campaign was my portable radio. Little did I realize when I purchased it, just before leaving Philadelphia, how much it would mean to me. It was the source of much entertainment and enjoyment. I always had a large audience listening to the news, athletic events, and musical programs which we would get from San Francisco shortwave stations. We listened with great interest to the World Series and to play-by-play accounts of the larger football games.

Of course, the daily news review was the most popular program as we liked to hear how we Marines were doing. Some of the colored and inaccurate reports got good horse laughs from the boys. We all knew it was no pink tea, but there was no question in our minds about us holding the beachhead if the Navy would keep us supplied with bullets and beans. The boys gave the "Bronx cheer" to all suggestions that Guadalcanal would be another Bataan.

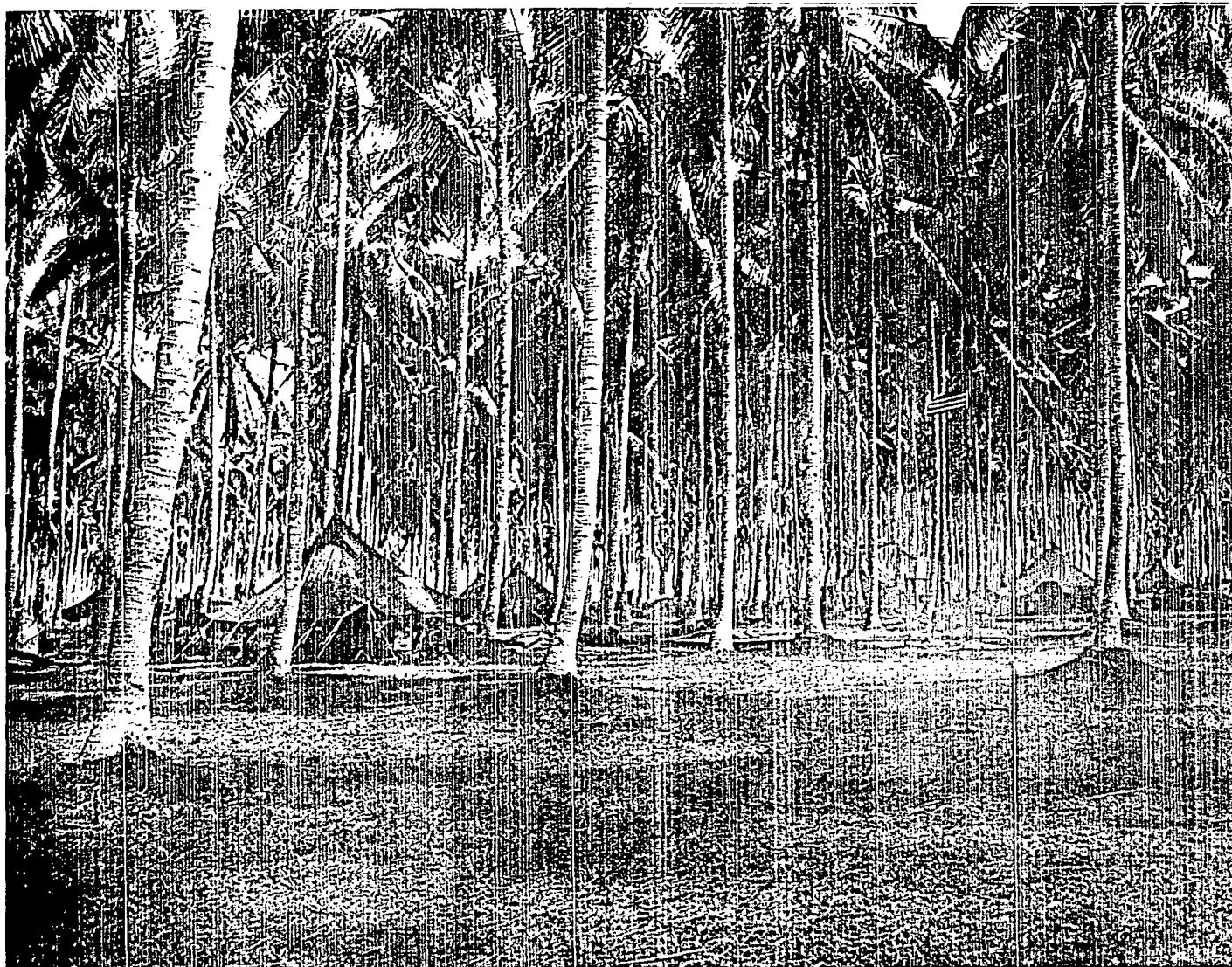
ONE afternoon Captain Smith (Major John Lucien Smith who received the Congressional Medal of Honor for shooting down nineteen Jap planes) was shot down after he had got two Jap Zeros. He made a crash landing in Japanese territory about three miles east of our lines. By radio, I immediately contacted my patrols which were re-

turning from that vicinity, and started a search for him. I also ordered out additional combat patrols, but by late afternoon they had not located either Smith or his plane.

After looking at the map and gazing into my own personal crystal-ball, I figured the most probable route I would take if I were in Smith's place and able to walk. Jumping into my jeep, Strunk and I headed through a jungle trail across the upper branches of the Tenaru. After reaching the grassy field where there was good visibility, we waited. Within ten minutes I saw Smith emerge from the dense woods along the Ilu right in front of us. It was almost dark and at first he thought we were Japs. But after we yelled at him he came on in and we drove him back to camp. He was unhurt except for shock and a bump on his head but he was completely fagged out from his long hike (actually a run) through the jungle and swampy ground.

In answer to my question, he said he had not waited to destroy his plane, instruments, and maps. The thing he mostly was concerned about was losing his lucky baseball cap (all aviators wear them). It was a happy bunch of youngsters at his bivouac when I drove up with him.

Just about dark, one of my patrols located and burned his damaged plane. They returned with the prized baseball cap which was delivered to him.



First Marine C.P. 9 August to 15 October 1942. It was badly damaged by naval gunfire on the night of 13-14 October and by aerial bombardment 15 October 1942.