

# BATTLE OF THE TENARU

By Brigadier General Clifton B. Cates, USMC

*A vivid eye-witness account of the Guadalcanal campaign has been written by General Cates, who was the colonel commanding the First Marines in those operations, and who was awarded the Legion of Merit for his part in them. "It is not my contention," he writes in his foreword, "that the First Marines are any better than any of the other regiments, as they all did outstanding work. For every medal awarded, or citation given, there are a dozen equally deserved. But the real heroes are the ones who died that we might live." This article is condensed from General Cates' chapter describing the savage fighting at the Tenaru River. Other chapters will be published in later issues of the GAZETTE.*

THE Battle of the Tenaru River initiated the first hard fighting on Guadalcanal. It began at 0310 on 21 August 1942—an hour and date that will be forever remembered by those participating, and that will go down in Marine Corps history as one of our most glorious moments. And it was certainly a great day for the First Marines.

The 2d Battalion, First Marines, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Edwin A. Pollock, and with units of the Special Weapons Battalion attached, had been assigned the mission of defending the right Tenaru sub-sector, which extended along the beach-front and to the south along the river. Where the river (really a lagoon except in the monsoon period) ran into the sea, there was a narrow sand-spit, probably forty yards wide. We had prepared strong positions along the entire line, and all available wire had been put up. An extra heavy concentration of our 37mm. and automatic weapons covered the approach to the sand-spit and, in addition, wire salvaged from fences had been erected in the edge of the surf. This wire probably spelled the difference between defeat and a real victory.

In the pitch-black night the advance guard of the Japanese force was hiking down the beach when they got tangled up in the trip-wire. Evidently not realizing that they were only 100 feet from our position, they immediately started gabbling, which gave the alarm and the battle was on.

Our weapons opened up with a terrific fire at point-blank range. The Jap support closed and rushed our positions, overrunning a few of them, but they were driven out by hand to hand fighting. Their main body across the Tenaru soon opened up with cannon, mortar, and small arms fire. Our 60mm. and 81mm. mortars were soon blasting away at them and the din of battle was terrific.

Within a short while, after getting the situation reports, I requested artillery concentration on the narrowest part of the sand-spit, which was very close to our lines; in fact, it was so close that we hesitated to fire. After firing test shots the concentration was laid.

The combined fire of all weapons soon had a mass of enemy dead piled one on top of the other, and the survivors withdrew about 200 yards into the coconut trees east of the Tenaru. Then it settled down to a state of siege, with all weapons firing. No one knew the exact situation as daylight was still far off. For some reason, I do not yet know why, we shifted our artillery concentration to the right and down, and we have since found out that it caught them digging in.

There they stayed, taking terrific punishment from our artillery and the fire of the 2d Battalion.

Finally day began breaking—never had I had the minutes pass so slowly—but the battle continued. It was a gruesome sight on the sand-spit as it gradually became visible. Dead Japs were piled in a row from our gun positions eastward. Among them were some only wounded, who resumed fire after playing dead. Others had taken refuge under a two foot sand embankment at the edge of the water, not forty yards from our lines, and it was a difficult task to clean them out.

THE battle raged on and we soon realized that our fire had pinned them down. Now these questions arose: How much of a force was behind them?

Was this their main body or was it an advance party of a larger force?

Where were their reserves?

We certainly would have liked the answers to these, as it would have made the decision much easier.

It was later established that the troops had been landed from destroyers at night by rubber boats at Kaukau Bay, about forty miles to the east of our beachhead. They had been very careful to conceal their landing and their ap-



Officers of the First Marines. Left to right: Lieutenant Colonel L. B. Cresswell, C.O., 1st Bn.; Lieutenant Colonel E. A. Pollock, Ex.Off.; Colonel C. B. Cates, C.O., First Marines; Lieutenant Colonel W. N. McKelvey, Jr., C.O., 3d Bn.; Lieutenant Colonel W. W. Stickney, C.O., 2d Bn. Taken on Guadalcanal 7 December 1942.

proach march. They had only hiked during darkness, hiding in the jungle during the day.

At 0800, the 1st Battalion, First Marines, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Leonard B. Cresswell, which had been the Division Reserve since our landing on the 7th, was released to me by Lieutenant Colonel Gerald C. Thomas, Operations Officer of the Division. He also attached "B" Company, 1st Tank Battalion, to our regiment for the proposed enveloping attack.

After a hasty conference, orders were issued for the 1st Battalion, with the company of tanks attached, to proceed southeast across the grassy field to the upper reaches of the Tenaru; to pass through the jungle area and, after crossing the branches of the river, to deploy and attack northward, keeping their right flank on the Block Four River. The mission was: to envelop and attack the enemy from their rear, and to prevent their withdrawal and escape.

Due to the difficulty in getting through the dense jungle, the attack proper did not get under way until 0950 and the tanks never did get across the Tenaru branches.

After Cresswell had started his movement northward, he requested permission (telephone communications were maintained throughout the attack) to sweep eastward to the

Ilu River, so as to be sure that a force wouldn't hit his open right flank. Leaving a small force to cut off any possible escape of the Jap force to the south, he advanced to the beach with his right flank on the Ilu.

No resistance was encountered, prior to reaching the beach; but after executing a left turn and changing direction to the westward, he soon struck heavy fire from the village at Block Four. This was soon overcome and the advance through the coconut trees continued. The detachment from the south closed up and the Jap force was entirely surrounded.

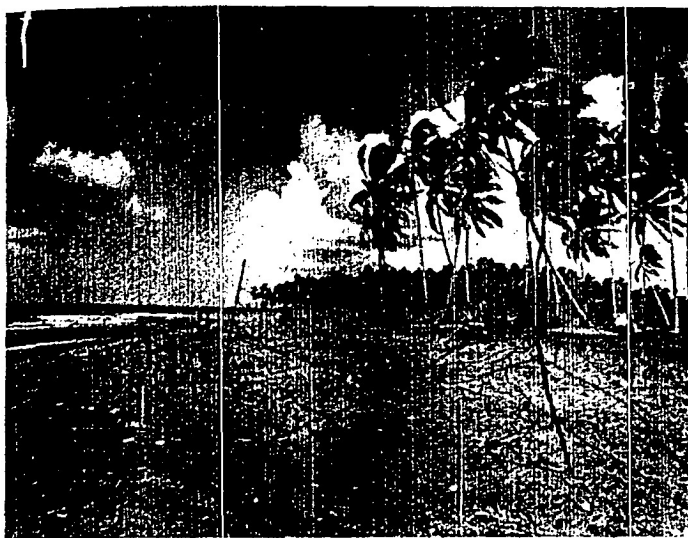
About 1500 I ordered a platoon of five tanks to cross the Tenaru sand-strip at the beach and to assist the attack. With guns blazing they rolled across, right to the middle of the enemy positions and knocked out gun after gun.\* It was a great sight seeing them running along the beach, weaving through the coconut grove and chasing the fleeing Japs. Finally one tank had its track blown off by an antitank mine, but another tank rescued its crew.

About this time I ordered the tanks, by radio, to withdraw, but the reply I received was: "Leave us alone, we're too busy killing Japs."

\*See cover illustration, MARINE CORPS GAZETTE, September, 1943.



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"This wire probably spelled the difference between defeat and a real victory."

The Japs, realizing that they were entirely surrounded, became panicky and about 250 of them ran and tried to jump into the ocean. Caught by fire from three sides—the 1st Battalion on the east and south and the 2d on the west with the tanks in the middle of them—they were caught like rats in a trap. As they dove into the ocean and tried to swim seaward, Pollock's men picked them off like ducks on a pond.

Finally the tanks were withdrawn and the 1st Battalion closed in for the final mopping up. The whole attack was a beautiful example of perfectly coordinated effort, fire, and movement.

After receiving word that the Jap force had been entirely surrounded, I hopped into my jeep and went up on the Point to see the finale. As Strunk (my chauffeur) and I ran up to the forward gun position on the Point, the Jap fire was still ricocheting through the coconut trees and was plenty hot. Captain Harry Q. Findley, in command of my weapons company, was standing watching the fireworks when he was hit in the chest by a sniper. What we thought was only a fairly serious wound later proved fatal to him.

By 1700 practically the entire enemy force of 1,000 had been annihilated. The sand-spit and coconut tree areas were a mass of dead and dying. Never at any time in France during World War I, did I see such a congestion of dead.

Later we learned that the colonel commanding the Jap regiment, upon realizing the hopelessness of the situation, had burned his colors and code before he was killed. We also learned that the entire force had been wiped out to a man, except one unwounded and 14 wounded prisoners.

We captured the following equipment: ten heavy machine guns, twenty light machine guns, twenty knee mortars, twelve flame-throwers, three 70mm. battalion guns, about 700 rifles and, in addition, radios, pistols, swords and other miscellaneous articles.

Our casualties were fairly heavy at Hell's Point where the enemy first hit the 2d Battalion. But our total of killed and wounded combined was less than one-tenth of the Japs killed. This is hard to believe but it is true.

During the next few days, the bodies of over 200 Japs, who had been shot as they tried to swim to sea, were washed

back to shore near the Tenaru. These, with the other bodies along the beach and in the coconuts, not only presented a gruesome sight but created a terrible stench.

We immediately put the Jap prisoners to work burying their dead, but it is a big job to dig holes for that many. I have wondered what these prisoners thought when they saw 1,000 of their dead comrades. It must have made a big impression on them. The Japs may think they are the sons of heaven, but the Marines certainly shot them to the wrong address that 21st day of August 1942.

There were many heroes that day but it is impossible to record the deeds of all of them. Many were recommended for and have since received Navy Crosses and other decorations for outstanding heroism and gallantry.

This engagement proved to my youngsters that the Jap is no super-fighter. He possesses plenty of animal courage but it is of little value unless combined with intelligence.

### COMMENDATION

HEADQUARTERS, FIRST MARINE DIVISION

FLEET MARINE FORCE

c/o Postmaster, San Francisco, Calif.

24 August, 1942.

1. The Commanding General desires that all personnel of the Division be informed concerning the results of the Battle of the Tenaru River which commenced at 0200 August 21 and was terminated at nightfall of that date.

2. The 1st Marines and supporting units, when their defensive position west of the Tenaru River, north coast of Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands, was assaulted under cover of darkness by a well trained, well equipped enemy landing force of about 700 men whose mission was to seize the airport west of the river, defended their position with such zeal and determination that the enemy was unable to effect a penetration of the position in spite of repeated efforts throughout the night. The 1st Marines, counterattacking at daybreak with an envelopment which caught the enemy in the rear and on the flank, thus cutting off his withdrawal and pushing him from inland in the direction of the sea, virtually annihilated his force and achieved a victory fully commensurate with the military traditions of our Corps. The Commanding General conveys to the officers and men who carried through this outstanding operation the salute of all officers and men of the Division.

/s/ A. A. VANDEGRIFT,

Major General, U. S. Marine Corps,  
Commanding.