

# The Battle for Motobu Peninsula

The 6th MarDiv Commander tells how his outfit cleared Northern Okinawa in a romp through last-ditch strongpoints and mountain terrain. By MajGen Lemuel C. Shepherd

THE Sixth Marine Division landed on the Yontan Airfield beaches on Okinawa Shima on the morning of 1 April 1945, and executed a swift advance to the northward covering 25 miles of rugged terrain in eight days against a steadily retiring enemy who vigorously defended strongpoints in his rear as he withdrew.

On the afternoon of 8 April 1945, the Division captured the large town of Nago. Intelligence indications had been growing throughout the advance that the enemy which had withdrawn to our front planned to make a determined final stand in the mountains of the Motobu Peninsula. Events which followed demonstrated this deduction to be well founded.

On the morning of 7 April, the 29th Marines, moving in three columns, one along the north, one on the south coast, and the third up the center of the Motobu Peninsula, commenced its efforts to locate the enemy's main force. Light resistance was encountered by all columns, and the character of the opposition was such as to indicate without question that a force of considerable proportions confronted the Division.

From 8 to 13 April, the 29th Marines, supported by tanks, engineers, and armored amphibians, which were employed as artillery, conducted continuous probing operations, gradually developing the character of the enemy situation. During this period frequent contacts were made in the rugged territory northwest and southwest of Itomi. Ambushes were frequent, and the enemy's employment of artillery gradually accelerated. Counterbattery fire was experienced on one occasion by one artillery battalion, whose position areas were accurately shelled on the afternoon of the 13th.

At the same time, night counterattacks increased in frequency. One particularly bitter fire fight occurred during the night of 10-11 April, when the enemy made a suicidal attack on the defensive perimeter of the 1st Bn, 29th Marines. The attack, supported by artillery, mortars, machine-guns, and 20-mm antiaircraft cannon, was broken up in close hand-to-hand combat shortly before dawn. During operations on 10 April, the 2d Bn, 29th Marines, on the right flank seized Unten Ko, an enemy midget submarine and torpedo boat base. Upon the approach of the marines, the base was hastily abandoned, four midget submarines sunk, and much equipment and supplies left behind. Naval personnel, numbering about 150 Japs, were reported to have moved into the mountain area to the westward.

On the 12th, the Sixth Division Reconnaissance

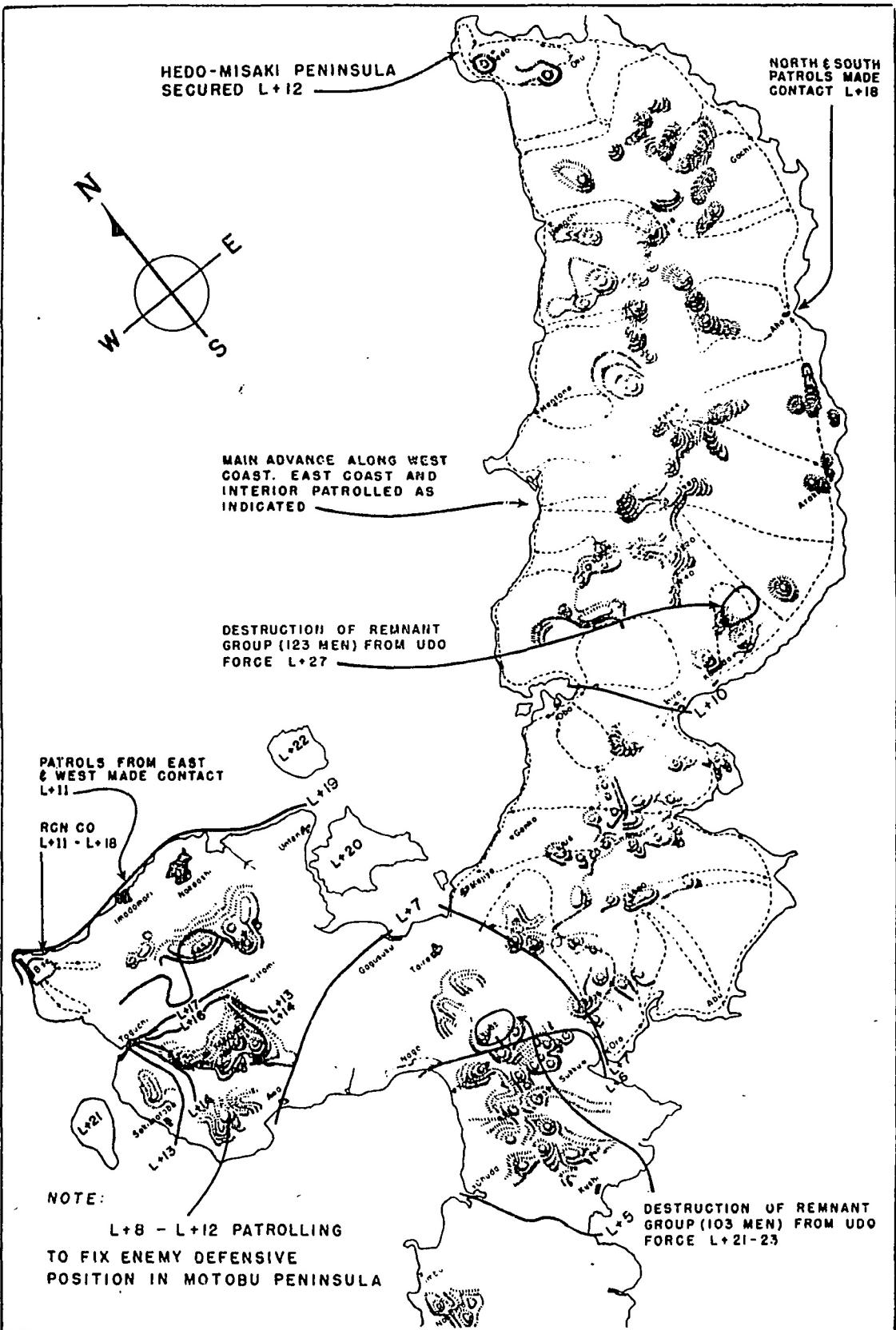
Company was assigned the task of passing through the left of the 29th Marines, reconnoitering the Bise area, and, if resistance was light, to seize and hold the point. As anticipated, resistance encountered was not heavy.

By the 13th, the enemy situation was thoroughly developed and the hostile position firmly fixed. At that time, the 29th Marines was disposed with the 1st and 2d Bns in the Itomi area and the 3d Bn in the vicinity of Toguchi. Mounting intelligence indications placed the enemy strength at 1500 to 2000 troops, including infantry and artillery. The position selected for the final battle was rugged in the extreme and was built around precipitous Mt Yaetake, the key terrain feature on the Motobu Peninsula. This large mountain, a confusion of steep cliffs, deep ravines, and extraordinary outcroppings, was honeycombed with caves and interconnecting tunnels.

The Mt Yaetake area had been intelligently selected and thoroughly organized. Its commanding elevations provided excellent observations of all Nago Wan as well as the outlying islands, including Ie Shima. Furthermore, the character of the terrain precluded the employment of mechanized equipment in its reduction. Actually the terrain was of such an impassable nature that it offered serious difficulties even to light infantry. The Japs had obviously been industriously engaged in making their fortress impregnable. All likely avenues of approach into the position were heavily mined and weapons were carefully placed to cover attack from any direction. Intelligence indicated the force defending the Yaetake area to be built around elements of the 44th Independent Mixed Brigade, known as the Udo Force after its commander. Its composition included infantry, machine-gun units, light and medium artillery, Okinawan conscripts, and naval personnel from the submarine base at Unten Ko. In addition to the supporting artillery which consisted of 75- and 150-mm guns, the enemy had emplaced two heavy 6-inch naval cannon capable of bearing on the whole of Nago Wan, Ie Shima, and the coastal road for 10 miles south of Motobu.

Upon study of the situation, it became apparent that additional troops would be required to reduce the enemy stronghold. In consequence, the Fourth Marines, less the 3d Bn, was moved to the vicinity of Sakimotobu, while the 3d Bn, Fourth Marines, was placed in Division reserve in the vicinity of Awa. A coordinated attack was planned for the

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early morning of 14 April with the Fourth Marines (3d Bn, 29th Marines attached) driving inland in an easterly direction, while the 29th drove west and southwest in an effort to reduce the enemy position by action from two flanks and isolate the enemy forces on Mt Yaetake from those in the northern tip of the Motobu Peninsula.

It is of interest at this point to examine the character which the Motobu operation had assumed. The high Yaetake hill mass intervening between the two assault regiments permitted the rare and interesting situation wherein two large forces of combined arms could attack in opposing directions without great danger of overlapping supporting fires.

The attack of the 14th proceeded as planned, in the zone of the Fourth Marines, where the initial high ground set as the day's objective was seized. Resistance was bitter and casualties high, the Japs selling every inch of ground dearly. During the progress of the day, one battalion commander was killed, and several company commanders were casualties. As the attack developed in the 29th Marines' zone, it became clear that the enemy was so disposed as to render further advance in a westerly direction difficult and costly. The attack was, therefore, reoriented to move initially in a southwesterly direction in order to assault the Yaetake position by a more favorable avenue of approach.

On the 15th, the attack was resumed at 0900. The Fourth Marines, with the 3d Bn, 29th Marines, still attached, drove inland, fighting its way up the steep slopes of Mt Yaetake, encountering many pillboxes and caves. In the late afternoon, the 1st Bn, Fourth Marines, seized, lost, and subsequently regained a key hill mass immediately southwest of the Mt Yaetake peak. The fighting in this area was extremely bitter, as the enemy, entrenched on the dominating terrain covering all approaches, was able to bring heavy and effective fire on assault units as they climbed the steep mountainside. Final success was achieved only after the execution of a vigorous bayonet assault.

During the day, the 29th Marines continued their drive into the rear of the Yaetake position, advancing in a west and northwesterly direction, encountering intermittent resistance throughout the period and, by constant pressure, assisting the Fourth Marines. Concurrent with the day's offensive activities, the Fourth Marines moved the 3d Bn northeast from Awa preliminary to initiation of operations against the southern flank of the enemy position on the following day. During the day, casualties continued to mount, and evacuation was extremely difficult due to the precipitous nature of the terrain. Hospital corpsmen were forced to cling to bushes and rock outcroppings as they dragged the litters down the steep slopes to dressing stations. There were 1120 enemy dead counted, and the number sealed in caves unquestionably was quite as large.

On the 16th, the Division was disposed to attack the enemy position from three sides. The 1st Bn,

22d Marines, assembled in Division reserve in the vicinity of Awa to relieve the 3d Bn, Fourth Marines, was directed to advance northeastward and establish contact with both assault regiments, thus closing the gap between the two and forming a continuous line around the south, east and west sides of the enemy position. This day, which marked the heaviest fighting of the Motobu operation, resulted in complete envelopment of the assigned objective. At dark, the Fourth Marines had seized the Mt Yaetake hill mass, while the 29th Marines had swung its front to the west and north, destroying many fixed emplacements. The 1st Bn, 22d Marines, effectively closed the gap between the assault regiments, and the day ended with units disposed for a final push down the north-south ridges of the Yaetake position.

ON THE 17th, in a coordinated attack with the axis of the attack of the Fourth and 29th Marines gradually shifting to the northward, assault elements drove rapidly through the remaining Yaetake resistance, and the day ended with both regiments in contact on the high ground overlooking the Itomi-Toguchi Road.

On 18 April, following the vigorous fighting of the preceding days, activity in the Motobu area was confined to reorganization, resupply, and patrolling of the Itomi-Toguchi Road.

On the 19th, a coordinated attack was executed by the Fourth and 29th Marines abreast, aimed at the seizure of the high hill mass remaining between the Itomi-Toguchi Road and the north coast, which reconnaissance indicated had been strongly organized. This attack proceeded rapidly, meeting moderate resistance from enemy entrenched in caves and rock fissures. Nightfall saw the 3d Bn, 29th Marines, which had reverted to regimental control and had moved swiftly around the base of the Motobu Peninsula, to the right of the 29th Marines' line, in possession of the objective. Apparently the enemy had failed to occupy the previously prepared position in strength, although a considerable number of dead bodies was found, presumably victims of artillery and naval gunfire.

Movement to the north coast of the Motobu Peninsula was completed on the 20th. Intelligence at this time indicated that several hundred enemy troops had fled the Motobu trap and would probably attempt to escape from the peninsula to northern Okinawa. This estimate was later borne out.

On 21 April, following a night rubber boat reconnaissance, the island of Yagashi Shima was seized without resistance by the Fleet Marine Force Reconnaissance Bn which had been attached to the Sixth Marine Division. The force was transported from the mainland to the island on armored amphibians. The same process was repeated on the 22d, on Sesoko Shima. On 23 April, the Division

Reconnaissance Company executed a daylight landing, mounted on and supported by armored amphibians, on Kouri Shima, likewise finding no resistance.

The Motobu operation may be characterized as mountain warfare of the most rugged sort. Infantry combat was at very short ranges, and the cave and pillbox positions demanded the heavy employment of flamethrowers and demolitions. The enemy had lost 2014 counted dead with an unestimated number sealed in caves and lost in ravines. The framework of the defense was most apparent from

the variety of weapons captured. These included 11 field artillery pieces of 75 and 150-mm caliber, two 6-inch naval cannon, and quantities of mortars, machine-guns, and 20-mm antiaircraft guns.

The formidable terrain, carefully-laid enemy defenses, and the furious resistance made a combination of circumstances, against which mechanization and heavy fire power could not be exploited. Accomplishment of the mission fell squarely on the shoulders of the individual marine, his rifle, and his bayonet—and the results are self descriptive.

# Tracks for Sand

**Wheels dig in, bog down on soft beaches.**

**All-tractor landings urged as the solution.**

**By LtCol L. C. Hudson**

THE first glance ashore at Iwo Jima showed transportation trouble. Half-tracks had got their front wheels ashore, then sunk to the axle in soft lava residual. The tracks could not push them forward and, as the LCMs retracted and swung clear, the half-tracks dug in and settled as following waves engulfed them. Jeeps landed close to a 'dozer might be pulled up to a road but only two of our battalion's seven were so fortunate. The



others spun their wheels, digging holes, then, as the sea rose and washed away the foundations, were either nearly submerged standing upright or toppled to their sides as support washed away. The one-tons that were to tow the 37s met the same fate. One 'dozer was working to snake off vehicles but, occasionally, it would be hit and its work interrupted for good parts of an hour while the driver was replaced or repairs made. Everything on wheels sank. Only the tracked tanks and 'dozers kept going. At night of D-day, one LVT(2) carried supplies to the battalion.

Organic transportation proved almost useless on D-day at Saipan, where we had similar difficulties from a different cause. Here reefs prevented us from landing in anything except LVTs and the one



narrow passage through the reef was used exclusively for LCMs to land tanks, until Jap artillery registered on this channel and made its use so costly that even LCMs were restricted until we got further inland. When we could use LVTs again, losses were high. Even after the battalion's jeeps got ashore, all but two were destroyed by gunfire. The Japs kept shelling the roads, and jeeps could use few alternate routes. So, there, too, troubles with supply; and supplying a battalion solely with two jeeps is rugged.

Wheeled transportation functioned well on Tinian, where there was never difficulty with transportation. The island was a sugar production center and a perfect net of roads crossed in all desirable directions. But such facilities are rare.

If a vehicle is to cross lava residue, swamps, mud and other soft terrain, it must be full-tracked. This seems fundamental. On the other hand, a wheeled vehicle is useful in almost everything else that a battalion does. We form and train where, if roads are not suitable, they are soon made so. Wheels serve to excellent use in economy of employment and they are easy to manufacture.

In my opinion, a solution would be to issue special combat transportation to units in soft terrain. In rear areas we should still use jeeps with trailers, one-tons, etc. Shortly before combat, the special vehicles could be issued and used so that all hands could become familiar with them, the wheeled vehicles being turned over to a depot.

At present, we could effect this change by allowing landing teams to use either weasels or LVTs. In the future, a weasel may be developed that has greater cargo space and can fit into an LCVP. That vehicle would receive my vote.

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