

THE FIGHT AT FONTE



... using field glasses and maps in view of

ALTHOUGH VIEWED AS AN EPIC STRUGGLE BY those who participated, the fight for Fonte Hill on Guam is not likely to be encountered in the history books of the future. During that fight, however, certain tactical truths were emphasized which are often forgotten by small unit commanders.

Sunset on the 24th of July, 1944, found the 3d Marine Division engaged for the fourth consecutive day in a bitter fight for a beach head on Guam. The 9th Marines on the right and the 21st Marines in the center had captured the objectives forming the beachhead in their zones of action, but the 3d Marine Regiment on the left, after fighting fiercely from the very water's edge, had not yet overcome the fanatical resistance offered by the Japs on the high ground in the vicinity of Fonte Hill. Front line positions in the neighborhood of this terrain objective are shown in figure 1. Awaiting orders in division reserve was the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines.

Late in the evening of the 24th, this reserve battalion was attached to the 3d Marine Regiment and received orders to pass through a battalion (the right battalion) of the 3d Marines, attack, and seize Fonte Hill. Time of attack was 0900, 25 July. Early in the morning, after a conference at the command post of the 3d Marines, the battalion commander started for the front lines with a small party to make all necessary arrangements with the battalion to be passed through, to reconnoiter, and to make plans for the attack. The battalion was to be moved forward by the executive officer to forward company assembly areas in rear of the front lines.

By LtCol Robert E. Cushman

Maps by PFC John R. Beveridge

Let's go forward with this battalion commander and acquaint ourselves with the terrain through his eyes. Refer to figure 1. As we leave the battalion assembly area we follow a tortuous single file path up the side of the cliff to our front. Upon reaching the top, we move along

the escarpment through jumbled coral rock thickly overgrown with jungle trees, shrubs, and

vegetation restricting observation to a few yards until we reach a point behind the center of Hill A where the command post of the battalion we are to relieve is situated. The two battalion commanders make their way to the front lines through the saddle of Hill A. Although the hill itself and some of its forward slope are covered with jungle growth, from the top of the saddle a view can be obtained of the terrain over which the attack is to be made. The thick vegetation gives way to grass and a few scattered palm trees in the draw forward of the saddle. In the foreground the terrain slopes gently down to the Mt Tenjo road. Just across the road from Hill A is a small cliff some 10 to 20 feet high, in which the reconnaissance party can see a number of caves. From the top of the cliff, and from elsewhere along the far side of the road, the ground is open and slopes up to the top of Fonte. Fonte Hill itself is covered with jungle growth and we cannot see the depression set into its top like a soup bowl nor the abrupt dropping off of a small ridge just this side of the old penal farm, shown on the map as two buildings in the right of the zone of action. Part of the power line can be

Although initial supporting fire was heavy, 3d Marines encounter strong Jap resistance on the crest of Fonte Hill; thorough planning keynotes the successful attack



the enemy is an invitation to trouble . . .

seen where it runs up the hill and into the jungle on top. This first panoramic view reveals that, in essence, the attack will be made from one ridge, across a small valley, and up a rather long bare slope to the jungle-covered top of the objective ridge.

A quick analysis of the terrain indicates that the ground favors the enemy—he can lie hidden in caves and in the brush and fire at the marines as they cross the open ground. Desultory firing going on during the reconnaissance reveals that there is some enemy in the brush on Hill A just a few yards from the present front lines. An occasional shot comes from Fonte Hill to show that it, too, is occupied, but in general the enemy there seems to be lying in wait.

By means of this "reconnaissance in the present tense" we hope to acquaint the reader with exactly the information available to the attacking troops, no more and no less. Now let us revert to the past tense to show the plans made, the execution of the plans, and the reactions of the enemy which influenced the action.

The battalion commander first divided his problem into three parts; first, the passage of lines; second, the seizure of the wooded portion of Hill A; and third, the seizure of Fonte Hill. As a line of departure, a small trail was selected which was parallel to, but behind, the front lines. In this manner intermingling of the two battalions would be avoided and the attacking troops, by getting what might be called a running start, would make the actual passage of the two lines at high speed thus reducing to a minimum a period of great danger. The troops being

relieved were to support the attack from their positions with all weapons until their fire was masked, which would be soon because of the dense brush. On each side of the saddle of Hill A, the ridge which ran down to Mt Tenjo road was covered with jungle, although the saddle itself and the draw leading from it down to the road were almost bare as previously described. This meant that two avenues of approach existed almost to the road, and that each of two assault companies could attack down one of these spurs to the edge of the cover, then, without being exposed to fire, pause for further orders leading to the capture of the main objective. The final solution to this third problem, the capture of Fonte itself, would depend upon the situation existing after the first objective was seized.

In accordance with this plan (see figure 2), Capt Lyle Q. Petersen's E Company was placed in assault on the right, Capt Louis H. Wilson's F Company on the left, and Maj Fraser E. West's G Company was to await orders in reserve. By



LT COL ROBERT E. CUSHMAN's by-line has appeared over many GAZETTE articles, including the prize-winner of the 1944 article contest.

Commissioned out of the Naval Academy in 1935, LT COL CUSHMAN served

in China, at the New York World's Fair, and aboard the USS Pennsylvania where the war caught up with him at Pearl Harbor. He took the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, through Bougainville, Guam, and Iwo Jima. In addition to his Navy Cross (awarded for his part in the Fonte battle), he holds the Legion of Merit and Bronze Star.

this time, Maj William I. "Chuck" Glass, the battalion executive officer, had most of the battalion up the cliff. Company commanders were assembled, while the company executive officers moved the troops into their forward assembly positions along the previously mentioned trail. Command post personnel started their relief. The operation order was given orally by the battalion commander to the assembled company commanders and supporting weapons representatives from a vantage point in the open part of the saddle. Here a couple of close rifle shots brought home the point that using field glasses and spread out maps in view of the enemy is an invitation to trouble.

At the designated hour the attack jumped off. As the troops passed through the line of the relieved battalion, they immediately ran into resistance and fought slowly ahead through the brush. Before they had advanced more than a few yards (although even this put them out of sight), the relieved troops, their fire masked, began to as-

semble and prepare to move out. The two command posts were still in the same area, turnover there not yet quite completed. At this exact moment, the enemy reacted violently and came down with a heavy mortar barrage and intense machine gun fire. Shells exploded in the command post and among the assembling troops, who, needless to say, rapidly redeployed but not before suffering a number of wounded. Command could not be exercised from the command post, only from the observation post on Hill A.

If two simple statements from the field manual on the rifle battalion had been remembered, this lesson would not have had to be learned the hard way: "When the relief is made in daylight, the battalion passed through remains in position and continues fire support of the relieving battalion until its fires are masked and until the new attack has progressed far enough for the battalion relieved to be assembled and reorganized without undue casualties. Because a hostile bombardment, while the relief is in progress, may

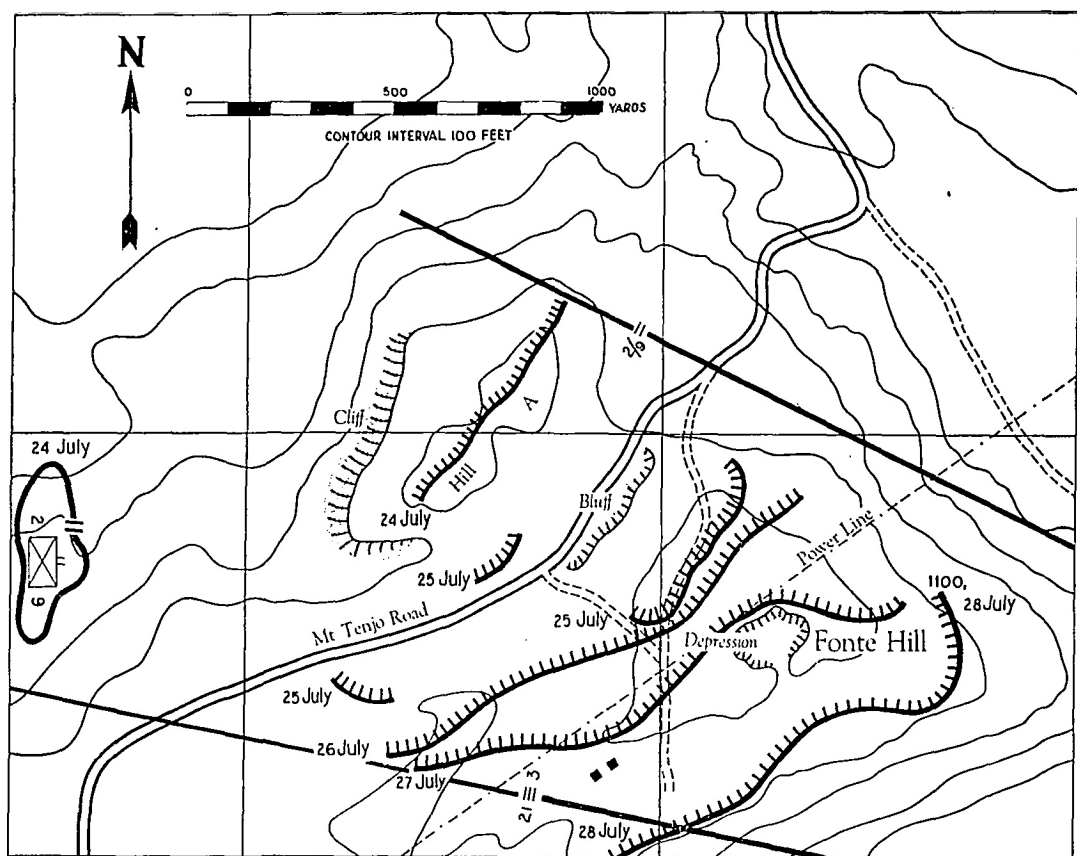


Figure 1. Successive evening positions of the front lines.

result in heavy casualties, the utmost precautions are taken to keep both battalions properly dispersed."

By early afternoon the Mt Tenjo road had been reached by the assault companies without undue difficulty, although the fighting through the brush had been a slow process. The difficult part of the problem now had to be solved: the advance up the bare slope of Fonte. Supporting fires were the only answer, and they would have to be followed closely—"leaned upon"—by the assault troops. Accordingly, naval gunfire was placed on the rear slopes of Fonte Hill, art-

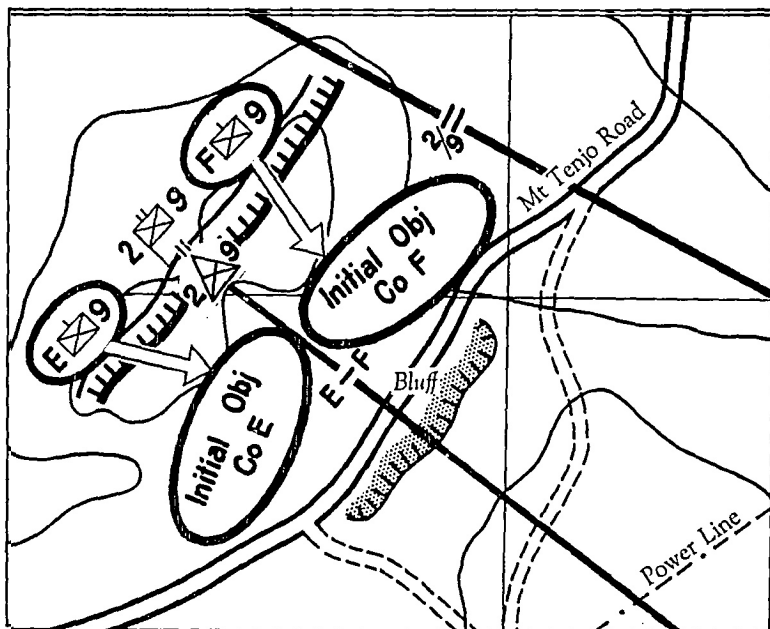


Figure 2. The attack on the morning of 25 July 1944.

illery was to take care of the top of the hill, mortars were given selected portions of the forward slope to take under fire, and rocket launchers were to fire into all visible caves across the road. Within each company, machine guns and light mortars were to provide close overhead and supporting fires during the attack. These different types of fires were to be delivered for varying amounts of time prior to the attack, and were to continue during the attack until stopped or shifted by the requests of the attacking company commanders. That portion of Fonte Hill within each zone of action was designated as the company objective. The line of departure was the road, which, although not in our possession, was under our control and only a few yards from the edge of the brush which we held.

The same companies remained in assault, and the boundary was left unchanged. (See figure 3.) At "K-hour," about 1430 (memory fails to recall the exact time), the troops left their positions and made a magnificent assault up the hill immediately under and behind a thunderous fire from every available weapon. Within minutes the military crest of the forward slope of Fonte Hill was reached by F Company and the left half of E Company; the near edge of the jungle atop Fonte was gained. The right half of E Company was split off from the rest of the assault by a knot of resistance hidden, Jap style,

in the draw on the right. Capt Petersen, one of the bravest of many brave men that day, fell mortally wounded at this point. In general, however, casualties were light in reaching the positions just described. The troops had successfully crossed the bare slope. To every man in the battalion had been proved the truth of these statements from the field manual: "The final plan of attack must insure maximum teamwork between the attacking rifle elements and the supporting weapons. The plan of attack consists of two main parts, the plan of maneuver and the plan of supporting fires. The plan of supporting fires must be designed to support the plan of maneuver and give maximum assistance to the advance of the main attack."

What had weighed upon the battalion commander's mind as being the worst problem had been overcome by supporting fires. Now, however, a new predicament arose. The troops, who had gained the edge of the brush on Fonte Hill, found that the enemy had not been destroyed by the intense bombardment but had only been neutralized. They were therefore faced at close range by a well integrated and mutually supporting enemy position set into the jumbled coral rock and dense vegetation around the top of the hill. Supporting fires could not reach these targets because of their proximity to the marines or because they could not be definitely located.

To draw the troops back into the open and repeat the bombardment would be risky and of problematical value. Success thus became dependent upon small unit tactics, aggressiveness, and leadership. A grim struggle ensued and by nightfall the lines were as shown in figure 1. The principal gaps in the line are noticeable in the figure. To take care of this situation, a portion of the reserve company was placed on the left in such a position as to refuse that flank and cover the gap to the battalion on the left by fire. The remainder of the reserve was disposed west of the Mt Tenjo road but in such positions that the gaps between the front line units could be covered by fire. In other words, the gaps were blocked by occupying tactical localities in rear of them. See figure 4.

Since the Mt Tenjo road was now controlled by the marines throughout its northern extent, some reinforcements from the weapons company, 3d Marines, had made their way up the

road and their weapons were disposed in depth to cover the most likely avenues of approach into the position. Some of the weapons company had been reorganized as provisional infantry and they took their place in the line between Company F and that portion of Company G on the left. Just as night fell some tanks arrived but were held in rear near the road because of darkness.

Unbeknownst to the marines, the enemy had moved up reserves and concealed them in the depression and behind the small bluff in the vicinity of the penal farm. The first part of the night saw a series of local counterattacks by the Japanese, increasing in severity as the night wore on. Ammunition was being expended at a high rate, but it still looked as though there was sufficient to last through the night. Supplies were laboriously carried up the cliff by carrying parties and placed in dumps near the battalion command post. The 3d Marines had supplies

on trucks, ready to roll as soon as dawn came. They had been unable to reach the battalion during the day because of obstacles which the tanks were able to detour but not the trucks.

The storm broke suddenly, about four o'clock in the morning. About six battalions of the enemy launched a "do-or-die" counterattack preceded by intense mortar fire. Approximately a battalion of this force struck the positions of the marines on Fonte Hill, with other hostile units hitting the line to left and right in the zones of the 3d and 21st Marines. About two hours of fierce hand-to-hand combat ensued with the enemy coming in apparently never ending waves. Capt Wilson received the Medal of Honor for his night's work and Maj West got the Navy Cross.

Ammunition ran dan-

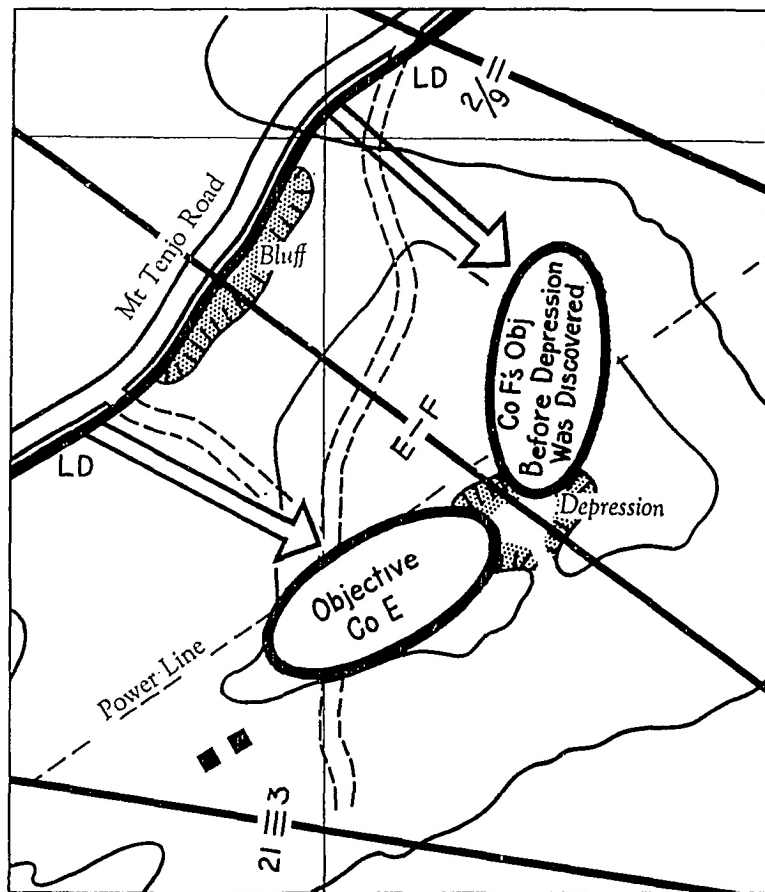


Figure 3. Continuation of the attack, 1430, 25 July 1944.

gerously low; but just as hope was about lost the first faint outline of dawn showed, the tanks were rushed up to the lines where their machine guns and high explosive helped stem the tide. Shortly thereafter ammunition was pushed to the troops by carrying party and by truck. The captured ground was still ours, although at heavy cost.

What lessons were learned, or proven, in this action? First, this defensive principle was emphasized: "A battle position comprises a zone of resistance. Some positions of the front may remain unoccupied yet be held effectively by a combination of fire power and obstacles." In this battle, even though the battalion was "sticking out in the open," the defense maintained its integrity by occupying the tactical localities, covering the gaps by fire, and providing depth to the position as a whole.

Second, the importance of tenacity in the defense was shown in accordance with this doctrine: "Our defensive doctrine contemplates the organization of a battle position to be held at all costs."

Third, the validity of this statement from the field manual was demonstrated: "Supply is a responsibility of command which cannot be delegated. The battalion commander is responsible for the initial supply and the replenishment of all classes of supply to his battalion. The battalion commander must use the means at his disposal to effect distribution." In this case, even though it ran contrary to the so-called rules of jungle warfare which had guided the fighting in the Pacific up to that time, the battalion commander should have pushed ammunition up to the troops *during the night* by making use of carrying parties.

The 26th, the second day of the attack, was spent in local attacks to close the gaps, in reorganizing (quite heavy casualties had been sustained in repelling the Jap counterattack), and in moving up supplies and equipment. Lt Paul

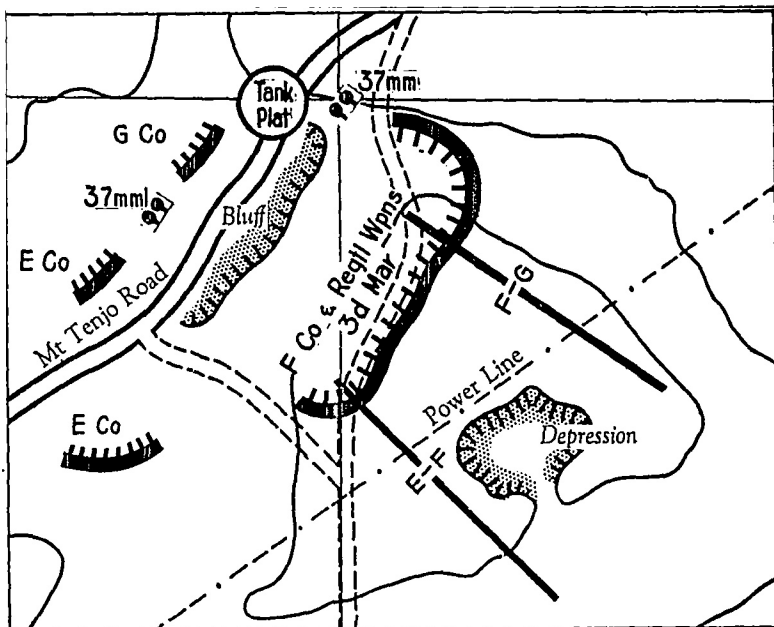


Figure 4. Location of units on the night of 25 July.

McLellan, who had relieved the wounded Maj West, was in turn wounded and relieved by Capt Francis L. "Dutch" Fagan. Capt Maynard W. Schmidt now commanded E Company.

During the day an infiltrating party of Japs, armed with mortars and machine guns, attacked the command post. Maj Glass, Capt Laurence W. Cracroft, and Capt Luther S. Kjos, among others, distinguished themselves in the defense. Lt Paul Smith, now editor of the San Francisco Chronicle, then commanding a platoon of the division reserve, attacked and killed this enemy group. Lt Smith later held a portion of the front line, tying in with F company. For his valor during this period he was awarded the Silver Star. By nightfall, the line shown in figure 1 had been won. It was held that night without too much difficulty.

On the 27th, the battalion launched a coordinated attack which was characterized by fierce small unit fighting in the dense growth, and by noon the line shown on figure 1 had been reached. Just as the attack was about to be resumed along about 1300, a screaming horde of Japs some 150 strong came pouring over the top of the small bluff between the marines and the concrete buildings of the penal farm in a last wild counterattack. Capt Fagan and his men bore the brunt of this charge and fought bravely. For his heroism "Dutch" Fagan re-

ceived the first of two Navy Crosses he was to win before his death on Iwo Jima.

A platoon of the reserve was rushed into a blocking position and after an hour or two of fighting the threat was stopped. This counter-attack, however, had disorganized those units involved in the fight. This posed a problem, for higher headquarters wanted Fonte Hill in our possession at the earliest possible time. On the other hand, it was approaching four o'clock in the afternoon. A detailed plan would have to be made in order to continue the attack and do it properly, for a queer twist of the terrain had been brought to light during the day's attack. This was the depression on top of the hill. This pit was circular with very steep sides honeycombed with caves all round. This meant that any troops attempting to work their way down into the pit would come under fire from four sides. To solve the plan of maneuver and plan of fires required for taking this would take time. The essence of the problem was this: every minute the enemy maintained his hold on the hill was in effect a victory for him; on the other hand, every casualty incurred because troops were committed without a sound plan was also a victory for the enemy. The battalion commander put the problem to higher headquarters in this light and permission was granted to delay the attack until dawn the next day, 28 July.

The remaining hours of daylight were spent in furious preparations for the attack. Special demolitions loads were made up; flamethrowers were fueled; and extra rocket launchers were brought up. Intensive reconnaissance was conducted. This revealed one spot where a tank

could be placed to fire into the pit; firing positions for machine guns and rocket launchers were located on the north and west sides of the pit; and still another place on the north side was found for the descent of the troops. Finally orders were issued and all was in readiness for the morrow.

Early the next morning from two sides a criss-cross of bazooka, machine gun, and tank fire pin-pointed every cave in the pit with a tremendous volume of fire. Under cover of this a small picked assault group rapidly worked their way down into the pit and systematically cleaned out every cave and emplacement. Without suffering a Marine casualty, some 35 to 50 Japs were killed. If the participants in this small action had not been convinced before, they were now: There is no substitute for thorough, prior planning.

☛ WITH THE SEIZURE of Fonte Hill the capture of the beachhead was completed. In the larger picture, the defeat of the large counterattack on the 26th by the many battalions of the 3d Division who fought bravely throughout that bloody night finished the Jap on Guam. Pursuit by the entire III Amphibious Corps followed until the sea in the northeast was reached and the campaign concluded. What made the fight for Fonte important was the fact that this pursuit could not take place until it was seized. To emphasize again the heroism of the men of the battalion it is fitting to conclude by remarking that their valor during this fight won the Presidential Unit Citation for the battalion as an attached part of the 3d Marines. US ☛ MC

To the Last Man

☛ He was an extra-small Japanese soldier. His uniform hung limp like a scare crow's trappings. A marine on Orote Peninsula asked him why he surrendered.

"My commanding officer told us to fight to the last man," the prisoner answered.

"Well?" queried the marine.

A look of wounded innocence spread over the Jap's face as he declared, "I was the last man!"

—MTSgt Murray Marder
page 227, *Semper Fidelis*