



NUMBER 1 D-DAY

By Donald L. Dickson

Col Donald L. Dickson, USMC Ret'd, former Editor and Publisher of Leatherneck, clambered over a Guadalcanal beach with the third assault wave. He spent 108 days on the Island as Regimental Adjutant with the 5th Marines.

FRIDAY, 7 August, 1942. Up at 0400 and on deck while still dark. Sliding along the dark bulk of Guadalcanal nearly opposite Kukum. No sign of life ashore. Landing boats ready, men ready. A cruiser shoots her planes, a land battery lets go and all hell breaks loose.

There were to be many D-days from then on—many H-hours, but because it was a first, the Guadalcanal D-day remains Number One in the memories of many Marines.

Getting lighter now, but bright yellow flashes from cruiser and destroyer guns light up the sky. We watch, hypnotized, as the salvos arc lazily toward the palm trees like white-hot sparks. Over the side at 0855. Many isolated fires ashore. Deafened by the sharp bark of five-inchers from the nearest bombardment destroyer. Helmet suddenly feels very heavy and have peculiar feeling in pit of my stomach. Notice all landing boats are streaming American flag. Wonderful sight. Makes me realize why we are roaring in toward this hostile beach.

This was it! This was to be the

payoff after the rugged training all the way from Guantanamo Bay and Vieques, through the swamps of New River, the practice landings of Koro, in the Fiji Islands. America wasn't taking any more. We were going to dish it out this time.

We were in for a reverse surprise, though. Instead of fighting our way ashore, as we had expected, we landed routinely and without opposition. There were mumblings among some of our Banana War veterans.

"Gonna be like Nicaragua—lots of patrol actions."

"They got some surprise up their sleeve for us. Keep your eyes peeled."

The 1st Bn., 5th Marines, fanned out as skirmishers and moved inland through the orderly rows of tall coconut palms. There was little evidence of what we felt had been a saturation shore bombardment. A few shell holes, a few trees down, a grass shack that had buckled to one side.

We were heading generally toward the unfinished airfield. Behind us came the 1st Marines, who angled off toward a tall hill called Mount Austen.

Suddenly we saw our first enemy

soldier. He was sitting under a tree, facing us. He was dead.

After moving out for several hot miles, trying to identify terrain features from our mimeographed maps, we bedded down in a coconut grove. Good deal of random shooting by our sentries. Jittery because of no fight at the beach. It looks suspicious to all hands.

We couldn't believe the enemy would let us land without some kind of opposition. We were sure there would be a counterattack in force or at least some patrol feelers. There was nothing at all from the enemy. He might just as well have been a thousand miles away. We slept fitfully in our strange bivouac between false alarms.

Sat. 8 Aug. Moved out early without chow and changed direction toward Lunga Point. About noon with right flank on the beach 17 torpedo bombers appeared while we watched the attack against our ships. Saw one dive into the *Elliot*. Two more shot down in flames. Plenty of A.A. and noise. Ships got 12 of them.

We were witnessing our first of many enemy attacks. This one was

not directed at the troops ashore and almost seemed like a demonstration for our benefit—something like a very realistic movie. That is, until we remembered buddies still aboard the *Elliott* from which clouds of black smoke rose into the blue sky.

Continued to deserted Jap camp. Borrowed Reising gun and went with patrol through camp. All kinds of gear left behind. Got me a flag. Four half-dead Japs, shaking with malaria, captured by 1-5.

There was no doubt that the enemy had left in a hurry. The signs were everywhere. Blankets turned back on sacks, half-eaten chow and personal belongings of the enemy still sitting on homemade shelves. Reveille and Retreat had been sounded at the same time by our Navy guns.

Continued to Lunga River. Planking of bridge torn up by retreating enemy. First indication of resistance. "Gold-plated" point formed from Regimental Staff. Covered by fire from Weapons Company. No opposition. Through another abandoned camp without stopping. Halted at West Branch of Lunga.

The 1st Marines had discovered that Mount Austen, their first day's objective, was miles away. Orders came from Division to consolidate for the night. The objective of the 5th Marines was Kukum Beach. We were almost there, but our makeshift maps gave us no indication. Gear was beginning to pile up on Red Beach where we had landed.

Took three Weapons Company men and found our way into Kukum. Flushed six Japs who fired at us and faded into the tall Kunai grass. *Elliot's* boats standing offshore, wondering where it was safe to land. Saw us and came in. Warned W.O. in charge we were only small patrol and to stand by his boats. Got fresh



water from him. First in two days.

We had not yet come to grips with the enemy. It was like punching around in a cloud of smoke. Bursts of small arms fire could be heard from time to time—mostly our own people. The echoing crack of our Springfields made an eerie sound through the corridors of palms. It was some time before we learned to distinguish the different sound of the Japanese Arisakas. Not until a platoon from 1-5 pulled into Kukum to evacuate our small patrol did we learn that some of the firing we had been hearing around us represented the first scatterings of organized enemy resistance.

Recalled to lower camp we had passed through earlier. Hauled Snell's little flag up Jap pole just before he was evacuated to sickbay at beach. First American flag to fly over Guadal.

This little six-by-eight-inch flag flew bravely from the top of the tall Japanese flagpole for more than a week until replaced by a larger one.

Started raining about dark and still coming down hard. Have the first watch tonight in abandoned Jap sedan. Phone hanging on palm tree beside open window of car. Terrific naval gunfire has begun out toward Savo. Sounds like a real big sea battle.

It was a big battle. It was the beginning of one of our worst defeats during World War II. One of our old seagoing gunnys was holding forth to a crowd watching the show.

"See those yellow-green flashes? Those are our guns. The red flashes are the Jap guns."

There were fewer and fewer yellow-green flashes, but the red ones continued unabated. The gunny was troubled by this phenomena.

"No, I'm wrong. The red flashes are ours."

He was right the first time, for after what seemed hours of muzzle blasts and vivid explosions we had lost five cruisers and destroyers. Our shipping had ceased unloading operations and had withdrawn suddenly from the area. We who were ashore didn't know it then, but the battle of Guadalcanal was just beginning and we were on our own.

Mon. 10 Aug. Accompanied Kaempfer and A-1-5 on patrol 6 miles south of Kukum. Ran into 2 machine guns and about 4 riflemen. Got 3 of the snipers and silenced both machine guns. We had 3 casualties, all light except Lt Gateley, who got a machine-gun slug in shoulder, another in leg. He got the Jap. Snipers very well hidden. Bullets kicking sand on me and I couldn't locate

rifleman. Somehow seemed natural, altho it is a very peculiar feeling. Returned with patrol, footsore from unusual terrain.

This was the pattern to be repeated innumerable times, not only on Guadalcanal but all through the Pacific War. Patrol, patrol, patrol . . .

Got a galley of sorts going, so had chow and a bath in the Lunga River. First time clothes off since Friday morning.

The galley mentioned was a work of Marine genius. The door had been blasted off a Japanese paymaster's large safe. Another hole was blown on the opposite side in which a pipe was inserted. The safe was fired up and the flat topside made an excellent griddle. It served us for several months to come. Bathing was an experience initially. Lunga River teemed with fish which were attracted by white skins. It was somewhat of a strain for a ticklish Marine.

Wed. 12 Aug. Order is beginning to come out of chaos. Routines all now well established. Right after chow flight of high-level Japs bombed our gun positions.

The enemy also was establishing his routines. From then on we could expect that noonday air raid almost to the minute. Numbers and types of planes might vary, but the regularity did not. We soon learned to plan our activities with it in mind.

Snell and Col Maxwell brought in prisoner. Sailor. Mean looking. Patrol out this afternoon looking for more. . . . Patrol of R-2 going out tonight with Col Goettge. No like. Glad I don't have to go. . . . Patrol this afternoon brought in 8 prisoners . . . Sgt Arndt came in very late. Says R-2 patrol hit. Col Goettge killed . . . Roused at 0510 by Jap subs shelling us. Must be three or more, maybe DDs. Sounds like salvos . . . D-2 man in from patrol says tough sledding . . . Sgt Few came in with bayonet wounds. Say patrol was wiped out. Goettge, Bill Ringer, Doc Pratt, Ralph Corey and all the others, 25 in all . . . A-1-5 and part of 1-3-5 out by boat to smash the Japs. Jap subs shelled us at 1100 and again at 1300 . . . At 2200 Kaempfer returned. He lost 1 KIA, 1 WIA. Whaling still out. A bad day.

As we learned later, the sailor prisoner had led the Goettge patrol into an ambush. The site of this patrol action proved later to be one of the toughest nuts to crack even with several battalions participating. We had learned of the Japanese strongpoint the hard way.

Fri. 14 Aug. To Div. this morning and heard first dope on Tulagi,



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Gavutu and Tanambogo. On way back, caught in early air raid by 3 Jap bombers. Very high but the 90s of the 3rd Def. Bn. winged one and he lost altitude, afire. Sub surfaced and shelled us about 1600. Half tracks fired at him. Claim two hits.

While we had been feeling around for the enemy on Guadalcanal, the Raiders, Parachute Bn. and 2-5 had run headlong into him across Sealark Channel about 20 miles away. Now, a week later, they had the situation well in hand, although at some cost to themselves.

Thur. 20 Aug. Heavy naval gunfire. Cruiser . . . Report says Jap Task Force left Truk, headed south. Be ready for a ram in three days. Hear patrol from 1st Mar. ran into Jap patrol at Koli Pt. last night. Killed 24. Naval gunfire stopped when B-17 flew over. Quiet the rest of the day until 1600 when, with a roar, the first of our Wildcats zoomed in overhead. Air at last! The men's faces looked as if they'd just been given \$500 and a 90 day leave.

Or, as one sergeant put it:

"Those flyboys can have all my next month's pay and half my chow."

The flyboys earned that and a great deal more in the following weeks. We watched with admiration as they roared up to shoot down enemy bombers and to tangle contrails in dogfights with the swarms of protecting Zeros. Aside from the

lopsided score, they ran up against the best the enemy could provide, their mere presence was a tremendous morale factor to the men in the foxholes below.

Fri. 21 Aug. Shook out at 0230 by sudden heavy rifle and machine gun fire in First Marines area. What's up? 0345. Heavy artillery and mortar fire joining in. Sounds like full-scale war. Still dark and cool. No info yet. D-2 says Japs landed and are along east bank of the Tenaru. 0600, five Wildcats take off. Now strafing enemy. Report about 300 Japs landed east of Red Beach with light artillery and mortars. Estimates say Jap lost 250 to 300 KIA, 1 POW. Still sporadic firing.

In the fog of war, information is difficult to obtain and when it is, it is often incorrect. This was the Battle of the Tenaru and in the next few days 1,187 of the enemy were buried. It had been a real fight.

Mon. 24 Aug. Sub shelled us at 0210. Slightly wounded 4 Weap. Co. men. Jap unexploded torpedo slid up on beach at Kukum. They'll try anything! Col Whaling and M. G. Rust going out to knock off Jap OP. Quiet p.m. After dark, 70 planes from carriers landed on our field. Something is up! Report say 4 Jap cruisers are 185 m. north of here. Heading SW. Stand by at 0400.

The pattern was now becoming a groove. We began to look forward to the darkness of the moon as a "shoes-on" night. On clear, moonlit nights, it would be a "shoes-off" spell.

Tues. 25 Aug. Five minutes past midnight, a salvo of 6-inch shells burst in our area. Killed 2, wounded 2 severely. Concussion terrific. Under cover in 5 seconds. Three cruisers continued shelling. Planes take off. Strafed by Zeros at 0400. Not much sleep. Ate hearts of palm from trees knocked down last night. On two meals a day for long time now. Planes back at 1130, report 1,000-lb. bomb on Jap AP (burning badly), one on stern of another, one cruiser burning. Div. Air Flash Yellow. 2 twin-engine Japs flying at 33,000 over in double V. Hell of a concussion from bombs. Don't know damage yet but results of yesterday's raid at 1500 were 5 out of 6 bombers shot down (twin engine), 5 single bombers and 11 Zeros, including the three that strafed us from tree-top level. We lost 3 Wildcats.

Life on Guadalcanal was becoming monotonously repetitive—patrols, land battles, daily bombings, nighttime naval gunfire, air battles—and malarial chills and fever. But this was only the beginning. Enough of

this formula had been mixed to last for four more months with very little change in the servings. Ahead was still the Battle of Bloody Ridge and those at Hot Corner on the Matanikau, at Point Cruz, the naval battles of Tassafaronga and Guadalcanal, of "Zero Sunday" when the air raid signal warning of enemy planes in the vicinity went up and stayed up all day. Ahead also was "the night battleships shelled"—a time no man who experienced it will ever forget and which in the books of many five-battle Marines is marked as the worst single experience of the War. Two hours and 20 minutes of undiluted hell as Guadalcanal was pounded by thousands of high-velocity, flat-trajectory, 14-inch bombardment shells from two Japanese battleships. Almost forgotten in the welter of 14-inchers were the thousands of 6- and 5-inch shells from an accompanying cruiser and 7 destroyers.

It was a war-weary, worn and malaria-ridden 1st Marine Div. that began to leave Guadal on the 14th of December. But it was a proud Division of veterans. They had pioneered the way. They had taken everything a still-fresh Japanese Empire could throw at them and not only held—they had advanced and won.

The foregoing is one man's restricted view of those early days. There are still a few serving throughout the Marine Corps, who can amplify with their own memories. If the reader knows of one and would like amplification just ask.

But be prepared to give up a few hours to it. It's a long story . . .

