

Marines' Reporter Tells Thrilling Story of Solomons' Capture

Amphibians and Tanks Used; Japs Scurry To Cave Refuges

(Editors: The navy department in Washington made public tonight the following account of the marines' capture of Solomons island strongholds, as written by Second Lieutenant H. L. Merrillat, US marine corps public relations officer at the battle scene.)

By 2D LIEUT. H. L. MERRILLAT
GUADALCANAL (August 14) (delayed)—August 7, 1942. The largest force of marines ever to engage in landing operations assaulted Guadalcanal, Tulagi and Gavutu, important Japanese bases in the Solomon Islands. The attack marked the first time in this war that American land forces have taken the offensive against the enemy. Marines avenged their comrades on Wake Island by destroying Jap garrisons on Tulagi and Gavutu and driving shattered Jap forces on Guadalcanal into the hills.

These islands, with their inlets that once sheltered Jap seaplanes and a big airfield that the Japs had hastily built as a base for further adventures in the Pacific, now will serve as bases for United Nations air, sea and land power. The process of rolling back the Japs has begun in earnest.

Long before dawn on the seventh, things were humming aboard the ships of the armada slipping silently into the passage between Guadalcanal and Florida islands. Between 0200 and 0300 all hands turned out and wolfed a sumptuous breakfast. Who knew how long it would be before any of us had another real meal? Field rations would soon take the place of steaks and fried potatoes and scrambled eggs. Then we made our final preparations to go over the side and stood by, waiting for the eastern sky to brighten.

About dawn I went out on the top deck of my transport. The weather had been on our side. Low clouds and mist had concealed our progress toward the Solomons all day the sixth. They had cleared during the night and the stars guided us on our way. At 0500 we could make out the dim outline of Guadalcanal to starboard. There was no sign of activity on the shore. At 0525 general quarters sounded and the ship's crew took battle stations. At 0605—"Stand by to lower boats." Then came what all of us had been waiting tensely to see and hear; at 0617 a cruiser's guns boomed and a salvo of shells landed in the laps of the Japs on Guadalcanal.

(The hour designations used by Merrillat conform to the 24-hour clock system, standard in the navy. 0525 is 5:25 a. m., for instance, and 1430 is 2:30 p. m. The 24-hour cycle runs from midnight to midnight.)

To the Japs on Guadalcanal and Tulagi it must have seemed that hell had broken loose. One laborer later taken as a prisoner said he thought he was dead. Salvo after salvo ripped into their midst. Navy planes unloaded high explosive and strafed the ground. The red trails of tracer bullets and shells cut the black coast of Guadalcanal. Fifteen miles to the north of us naval ships and aircraft were dealing out the same punishing bombardment to Tulagi.

At 0700 came the order to lower boats. Methodically they were swung out on their davits and lowered into the water. The ships bearing marines who were to land in the first wave had already lowered away and soon the water about the transports was swarming with hundreds of speedy landing boats. New ramp landing and tank lighters were getting their first test in combat. Amphibious tractors, carrying engineering supplies, began their churning progress toward the beach, to be on hand when the speedier landing boats first hit the shore line.

0800 was "H-hour" (attack hour) when the first wave of marines landed on Tulagi. We could hear destroyers pumping high explosives into the beach. Then the barrage lifted, the marines landed, and a tiny South Sea Island became the first battlefield in America's first offensive in World War II.

Meanwhile the landing boats were gathering for the assault on Guadalcanal. Proudly flying the stars and stripes, the boats took on their loads of marines and equipment and circled in the rendezvous area between the transports and the line of departure marked by two destroyers. I went in early so I was on the water when the first wave hit the beach. As our boat sped across the line

of alarms and excitement. We learned later that fighting was still continuing across the straits in the Tulagi area. In Guadalcanal it was a sleepless night for other reasons. First, the rains came, in a drizzle, then in torrents. The command post had moved west and we were bivouacked beneath the trees without tents. Everyone and his gear was thoroughly drenched. Trying to get a cat nap in our puddles of water we were aroused by a thunderous bombardment. Out at sea to the west the big guns spoke. Flashes of light told us that a naval battle was in progress. We do not know yet the full story of that battle but we do

know that the Jap ships were turned back—ships which undoubtedly had slipped toward Guadalcanal and Tulagi to blast us by night, to sink our transports and supply ships and bombard our forces on land before we were fully dug in and squared away. The Japs' third determined attempt to knock us out had failed.

After the sound of battle receded and we were bedding down again in our puddles, rumors flew thick that the Japs were attempting to land on the beach 200 yards north of the main command post. Flares dropped by Jap planes to mark Lunga Point gave a ring of truth to the alarm and in the blackness and rain our own landing boats had been mistaken for the enemy. The truth was learned before any damage was done.

Since then we have been digging in, scouting out enemy detachments, potting the pesky snipers one by one, getting ready for anything that may come. A few Jap planes make us a daily devil, about noon, but are of more interest as chronometers than as raiders. Enemy subs pop up in the strait now and then and lob a few shells into Guadalcanal. In any case, their periodic popping has become part of the accustomed music of Guadalcanal and we pay little attention.

The marines have what they want, and they mean to hold it. Our comrades in the Tulagi area have had a tough fight. The Japs there cut off from escape, well dug in, and strongly armed—fought from their fortresses to the last man. Brigadier General William H. Rupertus, assistant commander of our forces who directed the operation in that area, described the battle as "the most wonderful work we have had in history." Hundreds of marines became heroes and veterans in the bitter fighting.

The honor of being the first to land in America's Pacific offensive fell to a company under the command of Capt. E. J. Crane. They landed on the west side of a Florida Island promontory which overlooks the island fortress of Tulagi which the raider battalion was to assault half an hour later. They met no opposition at this point, but late in the day were to see some lively action.

The first wave of the raider battalion, under command of Col. Merritt Edson, hit the beach in the northwest end of Tulagi. It is a hilly wooded area and the marines expected tough going. The Japs apparently expected no landing, however, and offered no opposition on the beach. One man was lost by a sniper's bullet, the rest landed safely. Avoiding the trails along the shore which were commanded by steep cliffs, the

raiders made their way along both sides of the central ridge of the little island, pushing through dense brush and woods. In two hours and a half they covered a mile and a half, from the beach to the southeast. Then the shooting started. The marines came up against a strongly defended hill where a concentration of machine gun nests held them up for an hour. The battle was joined at short range, with marines sneaking up on the nests of Japs concealed in caves and crawling down the steep cliffs to drop hand grenades into the cliff holes. A company on the north side of the island pushed through strong opposition and took the ridge above the playing ground.

of departure an amber flare from the shore announced that combat group under Colonel L. P. Hunt had landed. We hit the beach about 1000 and learned that CG-A had landed without resistance. The beach presented a busy scene. Already tank lighters were pulling up with their iron monsters. Amphibious tractors, which the marines call "alligators," chugged ashore, equally at home on land or water. A steady stream of marines was pouring out of boats. By 1045 combat group B, under Colonel C. B. Cates, was landing and lining up for its advance to the southwest. Scattered rifle shots marked the advance of the marines as they fanned out through the tall grass and cocconut grove.

We counted on the Japs arriving to bomb us about noon, figuring it would take that long for them to organize a flight of bombers in Rabaul and fly them down to Guadalcanal. Our guess was only a few hours off; in mid-afternoon bursting bombs and a sky full of flak announced their arrival. Rising-Sun bombers attacked our ships in the roads, without hitting any. Several were shot down. An hour and a half later the Japs attacked again, with dive bombers this time. They hit one of our destroyers. Two Japs more were shot down.

That first day our advance was slow. There were no contacts with the enemy, for their whereabouts was unknown (we later learned they had scurried to the hills) and the thick tall grass and deep feeders of the Iru river made a cautious advance imperative. At 1600 headquarters arrived on the shore and set up a command post in a palm grove south of the east branch of the Iru. There we bivouacked for the night.

On the second day, August 8, the marines on Guadalcanal pushed westward to take possession of the big new airfield which the Japs had obligingly built for us and to occupy and defend the area around Lunga Point. No resistance until one group reached Kukum. There, south of the area occupied by the marines, they ran into snipers and machine-guns in dug-outs manned by Japanese. The area was quickly mopped up, but a night Jap patrol slipped into our lines.

It became apparent after the first day that the Jap forces in the Lunga area had run to the hills when the American onslaught began on August 7. As we moved into their camps we found evidence that they had left in a hurry. Meals were still on the table, personal gear was tossed in all directions, valuable equipment was left intact. Ammunition dumps, pompoms, artillery, fuel, radio equipment, trucks, cars, refrigerating equipment, road rollers, electric power plant—all were found just as the Japs had set them up and used them, except for the damage done by naval gunfire and bombing. A fine airport, with a runway 1400 yards long already completed, was almost ready to receive planes.

At noon on the eighth our visitors in the sky returned, this time bent on a daring raid. As our transports dispersed out to the open sea the Jap bombers came in. Almost skimming the waves they lunged in among the transports and cargo ships. I was watching from the beach of Guadalcanal and saw the big bombers burst into flame as they ran into murderous anti-aircraft fire from the ships. One, two, three—then I lost count in the confusion of the battle. Some ran the gauntlet of ack-ack and headed for the open sea, only to fall prey to our navy fighters darting at them from high above. We heard that 40 bombers had started on their mission; we heard that few returned to their base. Certainly their losses were enormous. In their suicidal raid over the strait they hit one of our transports. The Japs' second attempt to disrupt our operation had failed miserably.

The night of August 8 was one of alarms and excitement. We learned later that fighting was still continuing across the straits in the Tulagi area. In Guadalcanal it was a sleepless night for other reasons. First, the rains came, in a drizzle, then in torrents. The command post had moved west and we were bivouacked beneath the trees without tents. Everyone and his gear was thoroughly drenched. Trying to get a cat nap in our puddles of water we were aroused by a thunderous bombardment. Out at sea to the west the big guns spoke. Flashes of light told us that a naval battle was in progress. We do not know yet the full story of that battle but we do

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