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A PATROL OPERATION OF THE 1ST BATTALION, S-2
SECTION, 35TH INFANTRY (25TH DIVISION), ON
VELLA LAVELLA ISLAND, 3 SEPTEMBER 1943
(NORTHERN SOLOMONS CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Battalion S-2)

Type of operation described: A RECONNAISSANCE PATROL

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INTRODUCTION

In the early part of 1942 from their advanced bases in New Britain the Japanese had invaded New Guinea and the Northern Solomons. (1) By June of that year they had completely overrun the entire British Solomon Islands as far South as Talagi and Guadalcanal. (See Map A) (2)

In order to relieve the pressure being exerted on the New Hebrides Islands and New Caledonia, as well as to protect our supply and communication lines to New Zealand and Australia, the Joint Chiefs of Staff decided to launch an offensive campaign in the Solomon Island group. The initial objective was to be Guadalcanal. (3)

On the 7th of August 1942, the 1st Marine Division made an unopposed landing on Guadalcanal, and the following day captured the important enemy airfield, which was later re-named Henderson Field in honor of a hero of the Battle of Midway. (4) Six months of fierce and continuous fighting followed. With the commitment of three more divisions: the 2nd Marine Division; the Army 25th Division, veterans of Pearl Harbor; and the Americal Division, formed from non-divisional units in New Caledonia, resistance ended on the 8th of February 1943, and the first objective had been secured. (5)

As the fighting on Guadalcanal terminated, all eyes

(1) A-1, p. 1; (2) A-2, p. 67; (3) A-5, p. 3; (4) A-4, p. 37-45; (5) A-5, p. 10-25.

were focused to the North at New Georgia, Kolombangara, and Bougainville. These islands constituted a direct threat to and temporarily checked the advance of the Allies in that direction. The Air Forces had only been able to neutralize temporarily the enemy-held airfields on New Georgia and Kolombangara; and, therefore, Japanese aircraft continued to carry out air strikes to the South. As a result, plans were made for the continuance of the offensive to include the New Georgia group of islands. (6) (See Map B)

In the meantime the 3rd Marine Division and the Army's 37th and 43rd Divisions were undergoing jungle training on Guadalcanal, which by this time had been firmly established as an advance base for the forthcoming operations. (7) In addition, the Russell Islands, approximately 65 miles to the North, had also been secured; and, as a result of the airfield recently constructed there, it likewise was to play an important role in support of the operations to the North. (8)

THE GENERAL SITUATION

In the latter part of June 1943, the 37th Division, the 43rd Division, and a reinforced Marine battalion began the assault on New Georgia Island, while the 25th Division was held in reserve on Guadalcanal. The resistance encountered from the Japanese, as well as from the terrain and weather, proved to be considerably more than originally expected; thus by the middle of

(6) A-5, p. 28; (7) A-5, p. 29; (8) A-4, p. 94.

July it was necessary to commit the 25th Division, which, as mentioned above, had been held in reserve. On the 5th of August the important airfield at Munda fell to the advancing forces, and by the end of the month organized resistance had ceased.

When Munda fell, it was decided to by-pass the strongly held island of Kolombangara and, instead, to secure Vella Lavella; thereby cutting the supply route to Kolombangara and providing the Air Forces with a base from which they could more easily operate against the Japanese on Bougainville and New Britain as well as on Kolombangara. (9)

On the 15th of August 1943, the 35th Regimental Combat Team, supported by the 4th Marine Defense Battalion, landed on Vella Lavella with the mission of securing the Barakoma beach area, destroying the enemy forces encountered, and organizing the area for perimeter defense. The 58th Naval Construction Battalion and a Naval Base group were to construct an airfield and operate a minor naval base within the perimeter once it was established. (10) The landings were made without encountering any ground resistance. The enemy, however, was very active in the air and made numerous strafing and bombing runs over the beachhead, which proved very distracting and tended to delay the landing operations. (11)

THE BATTALION SITUATION

From the 16th of August to the 28th of August the perimeter extended from Sambora on the southern part of

(9) A-5, p. 30; (10) A-3, p. 80; (11) Personal knowledge.

the island to a point approximately 1,000 yards north of the Barakoma River on the east side of the island. The 2nd Battalion was deployed on the left, the 3rd Battalion in the center, and the 1st Battalion on the right. (See Map C) Patrols from these battalions were actively engaged in reconnaissance to their front, and had worked well inland and as far North as Ruravai without encountering any resistance except for a few Japanese Naval survivors, who were either killed or captured. (12)

On the 29th of August the Battalion Commander, Major Delbert Munson, at the 1st Battalion command post was ordered to move the battalion to Lambu Lambu, take and hold the high ground to the west in the vicinity of Boko Mission, and clear the Japanese out of the Kokolope Bay area in order that a Radar unit could be installed in that vicinity. (See Map D) (13) The regimental S-2 section informed the battalion that to the best of their knowledge the area was occupied by one or two hundred non-supplied, underfed, malaria-ridden, lightly-armed remnants of Japanese Naval units, who had made their way ashore when their ships were sunk during several of the engagements in and around Vella or Kula Gulf. (14)

Early the following morning Major Munson held a meeting with his company commanders and the battalion staff in order to inform the battalion of its mission and to issue the necessary orders for the battalion's move up the east coast of the island. In order to accomplish the first objective, that of securing Lambu

(12) A-3, p. 86; (13) Personal knowledge; statement of Major Delbert Munson, then commanding 1st Battalion, 35th Infantry 29th August 1943; (14) Personal knowledge; statement of Captain Fred Brewster, Regimental S-2.

Lambu, the battalion commander decided on the following course of action: Company A, which at that time was occupying the right flank of the battalion sector, was to move initially to Maravari from its present position on the perimeter and from there to continue up the coast to the vicinity of Orete Cove. (See Map C) This advance company was to be followed by the battalion approximately one day later. The initial move, a distance of approximately five miles, was to be completed before dark. The remainder of the battalion would stay in relatively the same positions on the perimeter except that the line would have to be thinned out in order to fill the gap on the right flank caused by A Company's move to the North. The 1st Battalion, 145th Infantry, would take over the sector early the following morning; thereby enabling Headquarters, B, C and D Companies to follow A Company's advance. (15)

From reports of patrols that had previously reconnoitered the route over which A Company would move, and from information obtained from the native sentrymen, no opposition other than the normal inability to move through the thick jungle was expected until the battalion reached the vicinity of Lambu Lambu. (16)

Company A moved out and reached Maravari the evening of the 30th, and the following morning, as scheduled, the remainder of the battalion was on the trail headed north over the route A Company had made for them the day before.

(15) A-3, p. 87; (16) Personal knowledge.

Upon their arrival at Maravari on the 31st the battalion was informed by messenger that A Company, in accordance with the pre-arranged plan, had moved on to Narowai, a distance of some six miles, with negative enemy reports.

With A Company in the lead and the remainder of the battalion following, the movement was continued until the 2nd of September when the battalion was assembled in the vicinity of Orete Cove, approximately 3,000 yards south of Lambu Lambu, the first objective. (See Map D) (17)

After receiving rations and a few supplies, the first since the battalion's departure from the perimeter, each company prepared to dig in for the night. In addition to the rations and supplies referred to above, reinforcements joined the battalion. These reinforcements consisted of Major Tripp with two non-commissioned officers from the Royal New Zealand Army and seventeen well-trained Fiji Island scouts. This little unit was assigned for the purpose of assisting the battalion in its reconnaissance. (18)

In the meantime a patrol sent out by the battalion commander to locate the Japanese in the small village at Lambu Lambu sent a message back indicating that the Japanese had moved out of the village and recommended that a company be sent forward to secure and hold this ground. (19) The village was in an ideal location, situated on a narrow peninsula which had a small hill mass rising abruptly to the south and made the area

(17) Personal knowledge; (18) A-3, p. 88; (19) Personal knowledge.

extremely easy to defend in case of an attack. In addition, the east side of the small peninsula provided an excellent landing beach, which could be used by the S-4 section as a means of supplying the battalion until such time as the engineers could construct a road and the necessary bridges over which the battalion supply trains could travel. (20)

Upon receipt of the above message the battalion commander moved A Company forward and had them occupy the village as darkness closed in. This move was accomplished without encountering any enemy opposition. (21)

THE PATROL TO BAKA BAKA

The following morning the battalion commander was advised by Kalib and Jim, the native guides or "sentry-men", as they preferred to be called, that, "Many Nips Boko Mission, many Nips Baka Baka." As a result of these reports, and in order to determine his course of action in the successful accomplishment of the second phase of his mission, the battalion commander sent out two reconnaissance patrols. The first patrol was to locate the reported enemy troop concentrations in the vicinity of Boko Mission; the other to verify the native's reports of Japanese within the Baka Baka area. (22)

The first patrol, consisting of the Battalion Executive Officer, Captain Jones, a group of the newly

(20) Personal knowledge; (21) Personal knowledge;
(22) A-3, p. 88.

acquired Fiji Island scouts, and Jim, one of the native sentrymen, advanced toward Boko Mission, but were unable to make deep penetrations because of enemy patrols actively engaged in outpost security within that area. (23)

The second patrol consisted of the battalion S-2, his section of five enlisted men, Kalib, the other assigned native sentryman, Lieutenant King of A Company, and a New Zealand non-commissioned officer with five Fiji Island scouts. The Fiji Island scouts had acquired a distinguished reputation for themselves in the operations against the Japanese on New Georgia Island; and as such, the patrol, although veterans themselves of earlier operations in the Solomons with considerable patrol experience, considered themselves fortunate to have the assistance of these scouts. (24)

After the first patrol moved out, the second patrol was assembled in the vicinity of the battalion command post; and each man was issued a chocolate bar (D ration) which was to last him until his return to the battalion area that evening. The battalion S-2 explained the mission of the patrol to all the members, and later the New Zealand non-commissioned officer translated the instructions to his group of scouts. Each member of the patrol was armed with a carbine except for the attached personnel, who were armed with Thompson sub-machine guns. It is of interest to note that fatigue caps were worn

(23,24) Personal knowledge.

during this type of operation in order to eliminate the noise usually caused by vines and undergrowth hitting the steel helmets. (25)

The initial plan was to follow an inland trail to the west through the jungle; later picking up another trail breaking to the north which would lead to Baka Baka, the objective. This route had been suggested to the patrol leader by Kalib, the native sentryman. (See Map D)

Due to the unusual terrain, the razor-backed ridges and the dense jungle undergrowth, the patrol moved out in single file with the interval between men determined by existing visibility. It was extremely necessary for each member of the patrol to maintain visual contact with the man in front as well as with the man to his rear. If contact with the man to the rear was lost, it was necessary to halt the forward element until such time as contact could be restored. Flank protection, although very desirable, was usually impossible due to the inability of the flanking element to move with rapidity or maintain contact with the main body; as a result, it was seldom employed.

The advance of the patrol passed ^{without} incident, save for an occasional noise to the front or rear which necessitated the immediate deployment on either side of the trail. A two-man detail was usually sent out to investigate the disturbance; however, nothing materialized and the precautions taken, although justified, were probably caused by small animals or birds. (26)

(25, 26) Personal knowledge.

After traveling inland for approximately three hours, Kalib stopped and whispered, "Baka Baka little way," and then pointed to a trail bearing to the north. (27) Several times during those first three hours the alertness of the Fiji Island scouts was noticed by the entire patrol. Several clues indicating the recent presence of humans along the trail had been overlooked by members of the patrol; however, the clues were swiftly brought to their attention by the scouts. (28)

After following this northern trail a short distance, it was obvious that the Japanese were in this area; and it was easy to detect the fact that a Japanese patrol had recently moved over this trail because fresh footprints were readily recognized.

The patrol continued down the trail and crossed a small stream. On the far side of the stream the trail forked in three directions. One trail led to the right, appearing to follow along the bank downstream; the second turned abruptly to the left, moving upstream; while the third continued straight ahead and appeared to go over the high ground to the front. Kalib again whispered, "Baka Baka, over hill, Nips." (29)

Following along the trail to the front, the patrol moved uphill. As the patrol continued, numerous smaller trails broke off to the right and left; and at several of these intersections it was noticed that Japanese signs had been nailed to the trees, apparently indicating

(27) Statement made by Kalib, the Vella Lavella native;
(28) Personal knowledge; (29) Statement made by Kalib, the Vella Lavella native.

directions. The patrol paused long enough to copy the signs and then continued on up the hill. Upon reaching the top, the patrol overheard voices and detected other signs of activity a short distance farther down the trail on the reverse slope of the hill. (30)

It was decided that the patrol was too large at this time to go any further without the possible disclosure of their approach; therefore, it was split into two groups. The first group consisted of Kalib and the five enlisted men of the S-2 section, while the second group was formed from the remaining members of the patrol. The first group fell out of the advancing column with instructions to establish a small perimeter at this point in order to cover the withdrawal of the second group in the event that it ran into opposition farther down the trail. (See Map E) In addition, the first group was to block the approach of anyone coming over the trail from the south; thereby preventing an attack on the immediate rear of the second group as it proceeded forward. (31)

At this time one of the Fiji scouts asked, "Shoot Japs?" and the S-2 answered, "No shoot. Look and listen," at the same time pointing to his eyes and ears. With that in mind the little group started forward. Without hesitation two Fiji scouts led the way down the trail with the S-2, Lieutenant King, and the remainder (30, 31) Personal knowledge.

of the scouts following. By creeping and crawling, the patrol worked its way well down the trail and had nearly reached a point where they could extend to the right and left a short distance for better observation and security when the two lead Fiji scouts suddenly stood up and ran back up the trail, carrying the rest of the scouts with them in their hasty withdrawal. When this occurred, the two officers jumped to the side of the trail, seeking concealment in the undergrowth. They did not have time to select positions that concealed them to any extent from five Japanese soldiers who came up the trail almost immediately thereafter. It was obvious from the leisurely manner of the Japanese that they were unaware of an enemy patrol in that area. It was not until one of the Japanese came abreast of Lieutenant King's position on the side of the trail that a fire fight took place. (See Map E) After killing three of the Japanese and forcing the remaining two back down the trail and out of sight, the two officers, covering one another's withdrawal, moved back along the trail a distance of approximately 100 yards to the position where the patrol had originally split into two groups. By the time they arrived at this point, they found that the Fiji scouts had also reassembled there and that all persons of the patrol were present. (32)

Realizing that the patrol was in an undesirable location because its position would prove to be untenable

(32) Personal knowledge.

very shortly, the patrol reorganized and retraced its steps down the hill towards the stream from whence it had come.

As the patrol recrossed the stream, noises could be heard downstream. It sounded as though men were digging emplacements or positions within that area. In addition, an occasional clatter of a canteen or mess kit could be heard, and once again the voices of the Japanese were clearly distinguishable. (33)

The patrol moved along the bank of the stream in the direction of the noises. Movement was more difficult because of the narrowness of the trail, which had been used very little, and the ever present jungle growth which did, however, afford excellent concealment. The patrol was able to work its way into a position almost directly opposite the location from which the voices could be heard. At this point, a distance of approximately 75 yards from where the patrol had crossed the stream, they deployed in a tight oval-shaped formation, protecting themselves on all sides. Two men were sent back upstream to act as a trail block on the left flank, while two other men were sent along the bank downstream to determine the extent of the enemy unit to the front if possible. (34)

(See Map E)

Shortly after the two groups moved out, a Japanese twenty-man detail came out of the jungle on the opposite

(33, 34) Personal knowledge.

bank of the stream and proceeded to bathe themselves and fill their canteens in the stream. Several of the men in the patrol could have practically reached out and touched one or two of them with the muzzles of their rifles, while most of the patrol watched this unusual scene through the apertures of their rifles. It would have actually been like ducks on a pond had the patrol opened fire; however, disclosure of its position at that time could have resulted in a split in the patrol, since the right flank two-man detail was downstream and there was no way to recall them. (35)

After about five minutes or so the group of Japanese, apparently upon an order, hurried out of the stream in an excited manner and disappeared back in the jungle. After this happened, no further movement could be detected from the opposite bank; and as such, the entire patrol seemed to sense the fact that the enemy must have been advised of the patrol's presence somewhere within their area. (36)

Another five minutes or so passed, which at the time seemed like an eternity, while no one budged. Each member of the patrol was anxiously awaiting the return of the two men who were downstream. Finally, as if out of nowhere, the two men returned as quietly as they had left with a report that they had discovered what appeared to be an outpost line on the same side of

(35, 36) Personal knowledge.

the stream as the patrol was then located. (37) (See Map E)

With the return of these two men, the trail block upstream was recalled and the patrol began the long and arduous task of retracing its steps to Lambu Lambu, having obtained the following information:

1. The enemy was occupying the Baka Baka area as reported by the native sentrymen. (38)

2. The Japanese observed within this area were not a group of unorganized remnants of Naval units as originally reported by the regimental S-2 section; but instead, they were Army personnel establishing a defensive sector with their perimeter running along the far side of the stream and an outpost line on the near side of the stream. (39)

3. The enemy appeared healthy and in good spirits, and there was no indication that they were suffering from malnutrition nor did they appear sickly as originally reported. (40)

4. The Japanese uniforms and small-arms equipment observed did in no way indicate that they were not receiving supplies or that they were in poor condition since both compared favorably with those observed in the past, which again was contrary to earlier S-2 reports. (41)

In addition to the above it was anticipated that additional useful information could be obtained by interpretation of the sketches made of the Japanese trail signs. (42)

(37) Statement made by Sgt. Hurdlebrink, Intelligence NCO, a member of the patrol; (38) Personal knowledge; (39) Personal knowledge and statement by Sgt. Hurdlebrink on 3 September 1943; (40,41,42) Personal knowledge.

As darkness was closing in over the jungle, the patrol returned to A Company's area at Lambu Lambu and bedded down for the night. (43)

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

The battalion commander, in order to formulate his plan for the pending operations, sent out the patrol with the mission of verifying the native sentry-men's reports that the Japanese were occupying the Baka Baka area.

The formation adopted by the patrol while moving over the trails to the objective certainly lacked security, control and flexibility; however, due to the terrain and the limited visibility, it was the only suitable method of approach.

The value of the Vella Lavella natives cannot be overemphasized. By their aggressive attitude, whole-hearted cooperation and voluntary assistance they contributed greatly to the successful operation of the patrol on this and numerous other occasions.

Two outstanding errors committed by the patrol leader during the operation were:

1. The selection of the Fiji scouts to continue the reconnaissance once the objective had been located.
2. The incompleteness of the order, "No shoot, look and listen."

In the first case, the patrol leader moved forward with a group of men who were not accustomed or trained to work with him. The Fiji scouts were unaware of

(43) Personal knowledge.

the formation normally employed in the event their presence was detected in an area. If the battalion S-2 section had been used as the advancing element and the Fiji scouts as the trail block, it can be said from past experiences that the patrol would have been deployed in an orderly and organized manner on each side of the trail when the first group of Japanese made their appearance. The hasty disorganized withdrawal which resulted would have been prevented.

In the second case, the patrol leader should have been more explicit in his order to the Fiji scouts. He should have explained to them that if they were discovered or fired upon, they should, in order to protect themselves, open fire; however, if they were not detected, they should refrain from disclosing their positions. The patrol leader could have prevented the untimely withdrawal mentioned above by a compromise in his orders to the scouts.

LESSONS

Lessons learned as a result of this operation were:

1. Intelligence reports should be verified before accepting them as facts.
2. Reconnaissance patrols should be trained not to engage in fire fights unless the safety of the patrol is in danger.
3. In dense jungle terrain the foremost reconnaissance should be conducted by a small unit of the patrol,

usually not more than three men. The remainder of the patrol should establish a perimeter defense on critical terrain as security for the reconnoitering element.

4. When it becomes necessary to split a patrol, as mentioned above, plans should be made for a point of rendezvous in a location which may be reached easily and which affords the maximum of protection.

5. Utilize the assistance of natives after a careful evaluation of their ability has been made.