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ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS COURSE  
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THE OPERATIONS OF THE 3RD PLATOON, COMPANY "C",  
172ND INFANTRY (43RD INFANTRY DIVISION) AT  
MORRISON-JOHNSON HILL, APPROACHING MUNDA AIRSTRIP,  
NEW GEORGIA ISLAND, BRITISH SOLOMON ISLANDS,  
28 JULY 1943  
(NORTHERN SOLOMONS CAMPAIGN)  
(Personal Experience of a Platoon Leader)

Type of operation described: INFANTRY PLATOON ATTACKING  
A FORTIFIED HILL POSITION IN JUNGLE TERRAIN

Captain Robert S. Scott, Infantry  
ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS CLASS NO II

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>PAGE</u>
Index.....	1
Bibliography.....	2
Introduction.....	3
The General Situation.....	7
The Battalion Situation.....	9
The Battalion Plan of Attack.....	11
The Company Plan of Attack.....	12
The Assault of Morrison-Johnson Hill.....	12
Analysis and Criticism.....	20
Lessons.....	23
Map A - The South and Southwest Pacific Theatres	
Map B - The New Georgia Group	
Map C - 43rd Division Section of Line	
Map D - Assault of Morrison-Johnson Hill	

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### INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of the third platoon, Company "C", 172nd Infantry, 43rd Infantry Division, at Morrison-Johnson Hill, approaching Munda Airstrip, New Georgia Island, British Solomon Islands, on 28 July 1943.

By way of introduction, let us look at the over-all situation in the South Pacific command of Admiral William A. Halsey and in the adjacent Southwest Pacific command of General MacArthur prior to the invasion of the New Georgia group of the Solomon Islands on 30 June 1943. (See Map A.)

The United States Navy had announced the end of organized enemy resistance on Guadalcanal Island as of 11 February 1943. (1) The Russell Islands group, only about twenty miles at the nearest point from Cape Esperance on Guadalcanal or sixty miles from Henderson Field on Guadalcanal, had been converted to an advanced fighter base after an unopposed landing on 21 February 1943. (2) New Georgia's Munda Airstrip is approximately 130 miles from the Russell Islands. Possession of Munda Airstrip would enable bombers from Guadalcanal to strike the Jap airfields on Bougainville Island under fighter escort. Later the bombers could then be moved to New Georgia and thus increase the range of Allied air strikes deeper into

(1) A-4, p. 1; (2) A-4, p. 24.

Jap held territory. An additional reason for taking New Georgia was that the Japs had continued to make Munda airstrip operational, in spite of repeated bombings and naval shelling. Furthermore, the Japs had constructed a strip on nearby Kolombangara Island, just across Kula Gulf from New Georgia.

In the adjacent Southwest Pacific command, Australian and American forces had captured Buna, New Guinea, on 2 January 1943, and Sanananda, on 22 January 1943, thus removing the Jap threat to Port Moresby. (3) The Battle of the Bismarck Sea, a naval aircraft engagement, resulted "in the destruction of an estimated 50,000 Japs originally intended for the reconquest of Guadalcanal and shifted to the New Guinea Theatre at the last minute." (4) Salamaua and Lae, New Guinea, were to fall on 11 and 16 September 1943, respectively. (5) Thus we see that the "big-picture" plan called for a co-ordinated allied double envelopment of Rabaul, New Britain Island, one prong driving up the New Guinea coast, and the other up through the Solomon Islands. *shown on map*

Before describing the actions of the third platoon of Company "C", 172nd Infantry, on 28 July 1943, a few remarks are in order as to: first, the background of experience of the 172nd Infantry, which may shed some light on the state of morale, training and combat efficiency of the regiment; second, the nature of the terrain and the tactics of the Jap, based upon the experiences of combat units on Guadalcanal; and third, a brief summary of the plan of operations of the

(3) A-2, p. 91; (4) A-2, p. 92; (5) A-2, p. 93.

**New Georgia Task Force.**

The 172nd Regimental Combat Team had departed San Francisco on 6 October 1942, having staged at Fort Ord, California, where replacements, running as high as 30% in some of the rifle companies, had been received just three weeks prior to embarkation. The 172nd Combat Team had experienced the sinking of its transport, the S. S. President Coolidge, at Espiritu Santo Island, the largest of the New Hebrides Islands group. Although only four military personnel were reported to have been lost; all equipment, organizational and individual, went down with the ship save what the men were wearing. The Coolidge steamed into our own mine field on 26 October 1942. Re-equipping and re-supplying the Combat Team required the remainder of 1942. Jaundice and malaria made their first appearance and took their first toll at Santo. Limited training was conducted on Santo in addition to much stevedore work. On or about 15 March 1943 the Combat Team moved forward to Guadalcanal where much the same experiences prevailed in the way of stevedoring and training. However, the regiment profited very highly as a result of a two-weeks training period conducted by the 27th Infantry of the 25th Division. During this training period the 1st battalion of the 172nd Infantry was conducted over the battle terrain upon which the 27th fought.

Essentially, until its final phases, the Marines and the Americal Division fought to defend Henderson Field and the beachhead on Guadalcanal. During the later phases of this

*what type training?*

*How much training  
to the 172nd division  
received*

*copy this for*

campaign the 25th Division and the Marines pushed the remnants of the Jap force off the island. As they were being pushed toward Cape Esperance, the Japs had elected to defend the low jungle terrain existing between grass-covered ridges extending like fingers down from the mountainous interior of the island to the narrow coastal plain. Observation between these ridges was excellent and the 27th Infantry learned to establish itself on the ridges, to place blocks across the jungle-filled valleys between the ridges in order to contain the Japs within the blocks, and then to fire artillery and mortar shells as well as bombs into the Jap locations.

From August to November of 1942 the Japs tried repeatedly to drive the Marines and the Americal Division off the island of Guadalcanal. By contrast, the Japs on New Georgia Island fought a defensive action throughout that campaign. On New Georgia the Japs chose to defend the high ground which they organized into heavily fortified positions with mutually supporting log, earth and coral pill-boxes, or bunkers. There were no grass-covered ridges on New Georgia from which observation could be obtained. On New Georgia the Jap was well supplied, operated on interior supply lines, and knew the terrain. From 30 June until the end of the New Georgia operations on 20 September 1943, the Jap was able to evacuate, re-supply, and reinforce almost at will under cover of darkness from nearby Arundel, Kolembangara, Gizo, and Vella La Vella Islands to the northwest. Toward the end of the campaign, however, the Jap suffered heavy losses of men, barges and shipp-

ing through the interception of his water-borne communications by our P-T boats, aircraft, fleet destroyers and cruisers.

New Georgia Island lies approximately 8 degrees south of the equator. (See Map B). Like most tropic islands of the South Pacific, it is covered with a dense rain forest. The interior lacked the high mountains common to most of the Solomons, although prominent hills arose in the central portions of the island. Most of the coastal plain consisted of alternating areas of rain forest and mangrove swamps with occasional coconut plantations on the coast line.

#### THE GENERAL SITUATION

The New Georgia Task Force accomplished its initial mission of landing at widely separated locations in the group of islands on D day, 30 June 1943, successfully. The mission of the New Georgia Task Force was to capture Munda airstrip on New Georgia Island and to neutralize the Vila airstrip on Kolombangara Island. (6) Initial objectives were seized according to plans. Thereafter, however, the operation bogged down to a halting advance on the airstrip. Plans were changed and reinforcements had to be brought in to assist the Task Force. XIV Corps had to assume command of the operation and the Task Force Commander was relieved. After numerous delays and problems in the way of Japs, supply, small-boat transportation limitations, jungle, and mud and swamp, the 28th of July found the 172nd Infantry occupying a line of hills approximately parallel to the Jap main line of resistance. The distance between the Japs and the 172nd Infantry varied from

(6) A-3, p. 3, Section II.



100 yards to about 200 yards. On the right of the 172nd were the 145th and 148th Infantry Regiments of the 37th Infantry Division and on the extreme right rear of the 37th was the 161st Infantry of the 25th Division. On the left of the 172nd Infantry was a battalion of the 169th Infantry, and anchored on the shore line was a battalion of the 103rd Infantry of the 43rd Division. Numerous small islets at the mouth of Rendova Harbor, and in the Roviana Lagoon, provided position areas for field hospitals, navy small-boat pool installations, and firing positions for artillery and anti-aircraft artillery. On 28 July the objective was still 3,500 yards distant.

The 2nd and 3rd battalions of the 172nd Infantry had attempted to storm the fortified hill mass comprising the Jap MLR in their zones of advance and had been twice repulsed with heavy casualties. Upon reaching a certain position on the hill mass the attacking riflemen were subjected to hand grenades rolled down hill by the Japs. On the beach zone the battalion of the 103rd was held up by a multitude of pill-boxes with interlocking bands of fire. Jap machine guns emplaced upon three islets about 200 to 300 yards off-shore could direct grazing fire over a portion of the Lambeti Plantation coconut grove. Mortars on these islets could cover the remainder of the plantation inland to the base of Morrison-Johnson Hill. Morrison-Johnson Hill rises about 250 feet above the coconut grove and is connected by a shallow saddle to the fortified hill mass confronting the 2nd and 3rd battalions of the 172nd Infantry. Automatic weapons from

Morrison-Johnson Hill covered a portion of the coconut grove. Mortars in rear of Morrison-Johnson Hill and adjacent hill masses could fire into the zone of advance of the battalions of the 169th and 103rd. Pill-boxes on Morrison-Johnson Hill and the hill mass to the right, or north, were mutually supporting.

#### THE BATTALION SITUATION

Since 2 July the men of the first battalion had had only two hot meals. Some of the men had not bathed although opportunities had been present, had higher commanders seen fit to take advantage of the opportunities. Morale was not high. Although the first battalion had been quite successful thus far by comparative standards with some of the other units, the men felt that they were <sup>being</sup> penalized indirectly because of their relative efficiency, since other units had been relieved and rested on Rendova in the meantime.

On 25 July Baker Company, 172nd, <sup>1st</sup> had had the mission of assaulting and seizing Morrison-Johnson Hill with the support of one light Marine tank. One tank was all that had been available, as there were at that time only three tanks in operation on the island. Baker Company's assault failed, which was the first decisive failure of any unit in the first <sup>this</sup> battalion. Baker Company had been unable to gain control of the hill. However, the tank had demolished one pill-box situated on the forward slope of the hill, almost in the exact center of the forward slope of the hill. <sup>(duplication)</sup> In its movement, the tank had also crushed out a pathway through the under -

growth so that at this one point a lane of observation from our lines to the military crest of Morrison-Johnson Hill existed. (See Map C.)

Morrison-Johnson Hill was not a large hill, but a dozen earth and coconut log pill-boxes ringed the military crest of the hill. The pill-boxes on the north forward slope of the hill tied in with mutually supporting pill-boxes on the south forward slope of the fortified hill mass confronting the 2nd battalion. The top of Morrison-Johnson Hill was a sort of circular table top of about 75 or 100 yards diameter. Previous artillery and mortar fire placed on the hill had thinned the rain forest on the top of the hill somewhat. But except for the observation lane created by the tank, visibility between our lines and the Jap position was limited to four or five yards in all directions.

On the evening of 27 July all attempts of 2nd and 3rd battalions of the 172nd on the right, as well as all attempts of the 2nd battalions of the 169th and the 103rd on the left, to penetrate the Japanese MLR had failed thus far. The enemy was the thoroughly seasoned Jap 31st Infantry. Our intelligence had informed us that the 31st Jap Infantry had participated in the capture of Singapore. The Jap understood thoroughly the organization of the ground in the defense. Furthermore, in the time since the Jap had first occupied the Solomon Islands, he had improved his defenses. Nature, in supplying rapid vegetation growth, had assisted in making the appearance of the Jap positions a natural part of the terrain.

1 First battalion was ordered to assault again and to seize Morrison-Johnson Hill. <sup>when?</sup> The hill mass occupied by 1st battalion was approximately 60 feet higher in elevation than Morrison-Johnson Hill and about 100 yards to the southeast of the hill.

#### THE BATTALION PLAN OF ATTACK

The battalion commander, Major William H. Naylor, assigned the task of assaulting the hill to Company "C". The company requested but was informed that it would have no tank support as the three light Marine tanks remaining operational were more urgently needed elsewhere. The company was also informed that it would have no artillery preparation. The reason advanced for no artillery preparation was that it was deemed unsafe and that tree bursts would unduly endanger the men. Experience had already taught the 172nd Infantry that when units were withdrawn to safe limits, the Japs came out of their holes and approached our forces closely enough to remain unaffected by the artillery fire. They then re-occupied their positions and manned their guns before the assault could be launched. A further reason for the decision to omit the artillery preparation was the thought that doing so would present the Jap with an opportunity to occupy again a hill mass that had been difficult to take in the first place. So, without tank or artillery support, the battalion commander decided to attempt surprise. The battalion commander ordered "C" Company to assault at 0800 hours on 28 July with two rifle platoons of "B" Company, one on either flank of "C" Company, to furnish flank protection.

### THE COMPANY PLAN OF ATTACK

The plan of attack of "C" Company was very simple. Captain Kenneth D. Russell ordered the 2nd platoon, left, commanded by 2nd Lt. Anthony D. Chetnik, and third platoon, right, commanded by 2nd Lt. Robert S. Scott, to assault with platoons abreast at 0800 hours. Both platoons were ordered to attack with two squads abreast in skirmish line and one squad in support. The company commander and platoon leaders contacted the company commander, Company "B", who conducted them to an observation post from which a hasty visual reconnaissance was made just after daybreak on the 28th. The OP was <sup>at</sup> that point in the lines from which the tank had opened a pathway to the base of Morrison-Johnson Hill. The platoon leaders returned to the company assembly area where they explained the plan to assault the hill to their men. At this time, the platoon strengths were approximately equalized at ten men per squad and three men and the platoon leader in platoon headquarters. The Company commander retained control of the company weapons and planned to use them only from the hill if the assault <sup>(was)</sup> were successful. (See Map D.)

### THE ASSAULT OF MORRISON-JOHNSON HILL

To the greatest extent possible, the men were positioned silently and secretly on the line of departure. The best chance of success lay in the possibility of gaining a foothold on the hill undetected. Surprise might succeed where preparation and support had not. Each man carried two bandoleers of ammunition and as many fragmentation hand grenades as were

available for carrying, hooked over the bandoleer.

*? How many?*

The platoon leader, third platoon, positioned his first squad, right, and second squad in line of skirmishers. Interval between men was at visual contact which in the thickness of the undergrowth rarely exceeded five yards. His third squad was ordered to follow up in the center-rear of the platoon in squad column. Third squad was ordered to execute a flanking movement so as to attack the hill from the right on the platoon leader's order. The draw (up) which the third squad was ordered to flank, was known to be covered by automatic weapons fire from both Morrison-Johnson Hill and the adjacent Jap-held hill mass to the north. The platoon leader's thought was, that this flanking squad might draw some of the Jap attention from the frontally assaulting squads when the fire-fight developed. Contact with the 2nd platoon was the responsibility of the second squad. The platoon leader stationed himself on the line of skirmishers just left of the second squad. There were two reasons for so doing. One was to make doubly certain that contact with the 2nd platoon was maintained and the other was that the tank path was the boundary between platoons and this tank path offered the only visibility forward that was available. Second and third platoons crossed the line of departure at 0800 hours as scheduled.

*2nd platoon*

After proceeding with the greatest stealth possible for about 25 yards, the platoon leader, third platoon, paused momentarily at a single strand of very rusty barbed wire which presented no obstacle. Upon looking to the front, the platoon

leader observed a huge fallen log about one-fourth the way up the base of the hill to his direct front, an abandoned overgrown garden plot of about 30 yards depth to his right front, and the immediate vicinity of the knocked-out pill-box. Without pausing further, the platoon leader stepped over the barbed wire and in one rapid bound ran forward and hit the ground just downhill under cover of the fallen log. He then crawled to his right until he could observe closely the area surrounding the knocked-out pill-box some 15 or 20 yards further to his front. Thus far, not a shot had been fired and no noise by the advancing riflemen had given the Japs warning of our intentions. The platoon leader made another bound to a large tree growing just uphill of the pill-box. At this point the platoon leader faced about toward the advancing platoon intending to order the second squad to rush the hill.

<sup>He</sup> Squad leader, Sergeant Bird, of the second squad had reacted without order. He had rushed three of his men, together with himself, forward to the fallen log to cover the platoon leader's advance. He had then advanced (on forward) alone to a position about five yards in rear of the platoon leader. Immediately after the platoon leader turned about to shout his order to the second squad, four Japs appeared out of nowhere between the three riflemen and the squad <sup>(leader)</sup> sergeant. Sergeant Bird and the riflemen at the log fired at once, killing three of the Japs, while the fourth disappeared <sup>?</sup> suddenly to the north of our position. This firing took place at a maxi-

imum range of ten yards. The incident ended any further chance of surprise and alerted the Jap in his pill-boxes.

The platoon leader ordered Sergeant Bird and his three riflemen to cover him while the <sup>platoon</sup> leader investigated the hill. The platoon leader walked a slight distance to the north and passed over a large, well-concealed pill-box unaware that it was a pill-box, until suddenly he observed two bayonets pointing out of an entrance to the pill-box and heard the <sup>(some)</sup> Japanese, jabbering inside. The platoon leader attempted to position himself so as to direct his fire into this rear entrance to the pill-box. Just as the platoon leader was about to open fire, a Jap from somewhere fired one round first. The slug cut through a part of one of the platoon leader's fingers and lodged between the barrel and the gas cylinder portion of the operating rod of the carbine, putting the carbine out of action. For a moment this incident thoroughly scared the platoon leader, who immediately ran back to a safe position behind the cover of a tree trunk from which he could throw hand grenades at the entrance to the pill-box. The first two grenades the platoon leader threw were misses and the next two were thrown back out of the bunker by the Japs before detonation occurred. The platoon leader then held the grenades in hand long enough to count a hurried "one, two" after the safety handle flew off, before tossing the grenades into the entrance of the pill-box. He had the satisfaction of observing one of the grenades burst in the face of one Jap who was attempting to crawl out of the pill-box entrance and



of knowing that the other two detonated within the pill-box.

The platoon leader then ordered Sergeant Bird and the riflemen to position themselves so as to cover the immediate area around this pill-box. He then sprinted all the way back to the OP on the line of departure, reported what had thus far occurred, obtained the weapons company commander's carbine and as many hand grenades as he could obtain, possibly seven, and returned to his former position on the hill by the same route -- the tank path. The platoon leader was absent from his men approximately five minutes.

Meanwhile, the Japs were firing knee-mortars (grenade dischargers) and machine guns from Morrison-Johnson hill and from the adjacent Jap-held hill mass to the north. Some of this fire was falling into the route of advance of Company "C" although some of the fire from the mortars fell in the area of the Battalion lines in rear of the line of departure.

Upon reaching his former position the platoon leader ordered the squad leader and riflemen to cover the platoon leader while he advanced to the topmost crest of the hill on which a blasted tree trunk about six feet in diameter stood. Most of the top of this tree had been blown off sometime previously and the tops formed a sort of screen of concealment at the base of the tree. Nothing happened so the platoon leader cautiously advanced around the tree trunk and the screen of shrubbery and fallen tree top at the base of the tree. Upon emerging from behind the screen of shrubbery, the platoon leader was immediately confronted with the sight of two Japs

vance of the second squad and to tell the remaining men of the second squad and the first squad to get up on the hill right away using the tank path to come straight up the hill.

As soon as sufficient men were up on the hill, the platoon leader ordered the men to start deploying around the military crest of the hill, always leaving a few men to cover each pill-box located, after grenades were thrown into them. The platoon leader, covered by riflemen, proceeded to each successive pill-box on the north slope of the hill, throwing one or two hand grenades into each one. When this had been completed on the north slope, the platoon leader returned to the vicinity of the fallen log about one-third the way up the hill and found that by this time the platoon leader second platoon had worked his men up onto the hill also. Then the platoon leaders posted their men in a circular defensive perimeter around the military crest of the hill.

Next, the seizure of the hill was reported to the Company Executive Officer, then Lt. C. W. Kilpatrick, who relayed the information on the sound power phone to the company commander that the hill was secure. The platoon leader, third platoon, requested that company mortar fire be placed in front of the hill and on the approach to the hill from the adjacent hill mass to the north. Although this mortar fire could not be observed, its general location could be determined by sound. The thought in requesting the fire was to discourage or at least to delay the Jap from counter-attacking.

Immediately thereafter a section of heavy machine guns and one 37 mm anti-tank gun were brought up and put into position to defend the hill. The men were busy digging individual fox-holes but maintaining visual security in all directions and keeping a watchful eye on the entrances to the pill-boxes.

While this work was in progress, the platoon leader was advised that two men of the flanking squad had been killed as well as one man from the first squad who had been caught by a knee-mortar on the approach up the hill. Three additional men of the company had been seriously wounded, one of whom died a few days later. Meanwhile an engineer demolition team had arrived on the hill, having been sent forward by regiment. Also a flame thrower team had arrived. The demolition team proceeded to blow up each of the pill-boxes except the one over which the platoon leader had walked unknowingly at the start of the action. This particular pill-box was much larger than the others. Not enough TNT was available to blow this large pill-box. One of the flame throwers failed to ignite but the contents were directed into this pill-box. The other ignited and its flame was directed into the entrance of the pill-box. In addition two incendiary grenades were thrown into this pill-box.

At this time the support platoons of Baker Company were brought up to the rear of the hill where they established a connecting line of fox-holes to the right rear in order to restore contact with the second battalion. Some twenty min-

four men unexpectedly appeared within the Jap position. This surprise was made possible in turn by the Jap's failure to have local security posted. It may be assumed the Jap failure to post local security in this instance was based upon the assumption that the American attack plan was stereo-typed. Always before, the attack had been preceded by an artillery and mortar preparation and generally had been launched about 0800 hours.

The regimental commander's evaluation of the hill as a key terrain feature was substantiated by the fact that four days later elements of the 169th and 103rd battalions referred to above had swept through the Lambeti Plantation and onto the air strip. It must be added here that the off-shore islets already referred to were dive-bombed to destruction. (Furthermore, when the 2nd Battalion, 172nd Infantry, next attacked the hill mass to the north of Morrison-Johnson Hill, they found that the Jap had withdrawn from his position on that hill, which in the meantime had been subjected to 81mm mortar delay fuze shelling which dug up many of the Jap emplacements.)

There were twenty-eight dead Japs counted on the hill and no prisoners were taken. The platoon leader felt justified in personally claiming credit for only eight of the enemy killed because often he could not see whether or not his grenades and rifle fire were effective. The leadership of the platoon leader was faulty in respect to the fact that he did not co-ordinate with the platoon leader of the second platoon. He failed to advise the platoon leader of the second platoon of the change in his plans. Of course, the element of sur-

prise might have been lost had the platoon leader taken time to accomplish co-ordination at the time. In retrospect it is believed that the platoon leader should have first explained his intentions to change the original plan, to his squad leader and sent a runner to advise the second platoon leader. SCR 536 radios were not a part of the equipment of the rifle company in the theatre at that time. The platoon leader did not exercise command to any extent in this operation but rather took the initiative personally in assaulting the hill. The platoon leader acted upon <sup>an</sup> assumption in informing the Company Executive Officer that there were no more Japs on the hill when as a matter of fact four Japs later emerged from one of the pill-boxes. However, the platoon leader did demonstrate personal courage and initiative to his men, confirming their confidence in him and in some measure restoring their spirit and morale.

#### LESSONS

1. Reconnaissance must be continuous and complete.
2. Where a fortified position is encountered, a penetration offers more chance of success than a frontal attack of the entire position and is less costly in casualties.
3. Three or four aggressive men within an enemy fortified position can fix most of the enemy within their emplacements.
4. Security is vital and must be maintained constantly.
5. Sometimes surprise can be achieved in jungle fighting by foregoing an artillery and mortar preparation.
6. Control is very difficult in jungle terrain where

visibility is often limited and restricted to two or three yards.

7. In jungle terrain the tendency for men to bunch up must be combatted constantly.

8. The tactics and principles of combat as set forth in Army field manuals apply in jungle terrain as elsewhere, though modifications may be necessary.

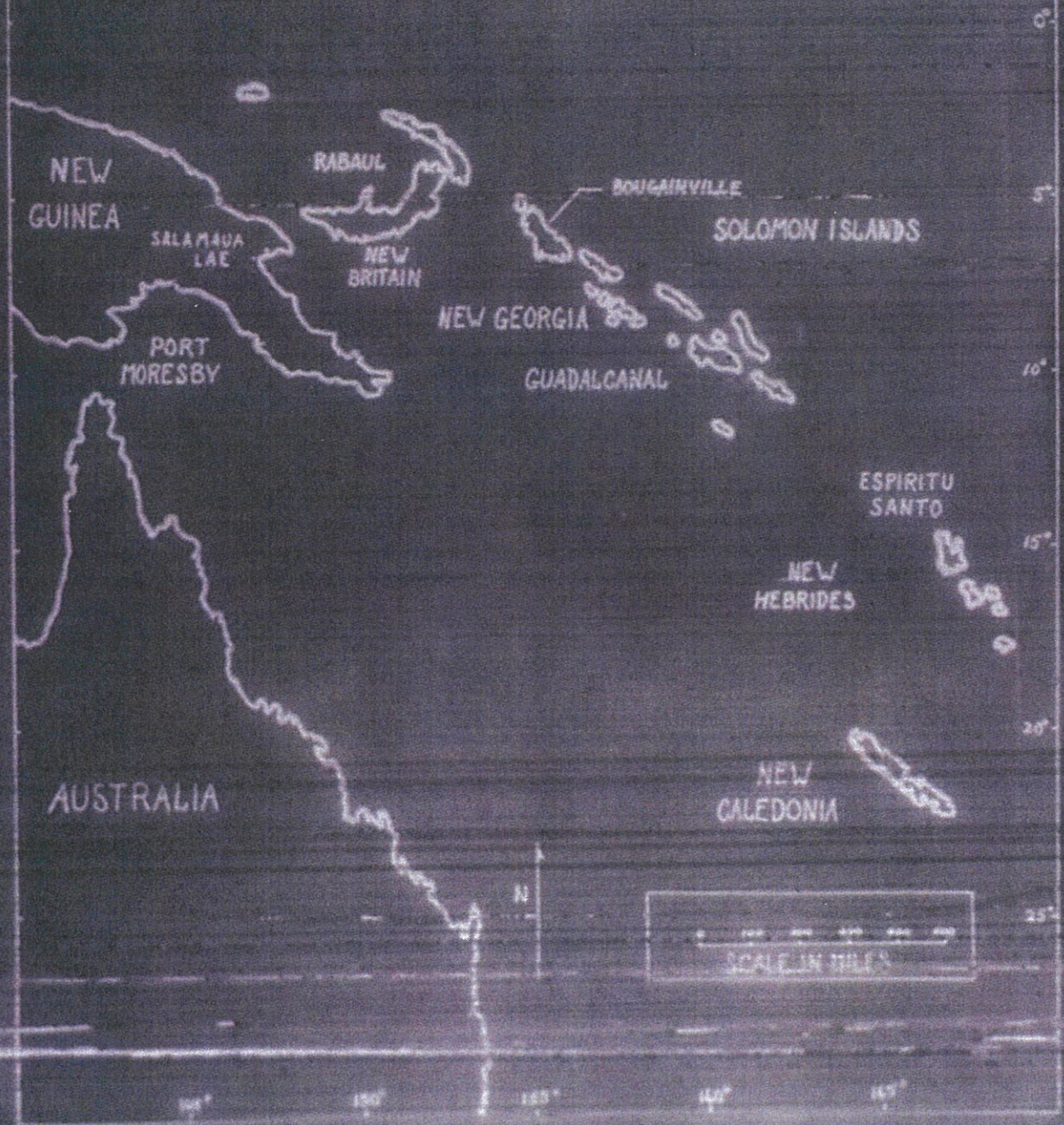
9. The success of a battalion and regiment depends upon the ability of small unit actions above all else.

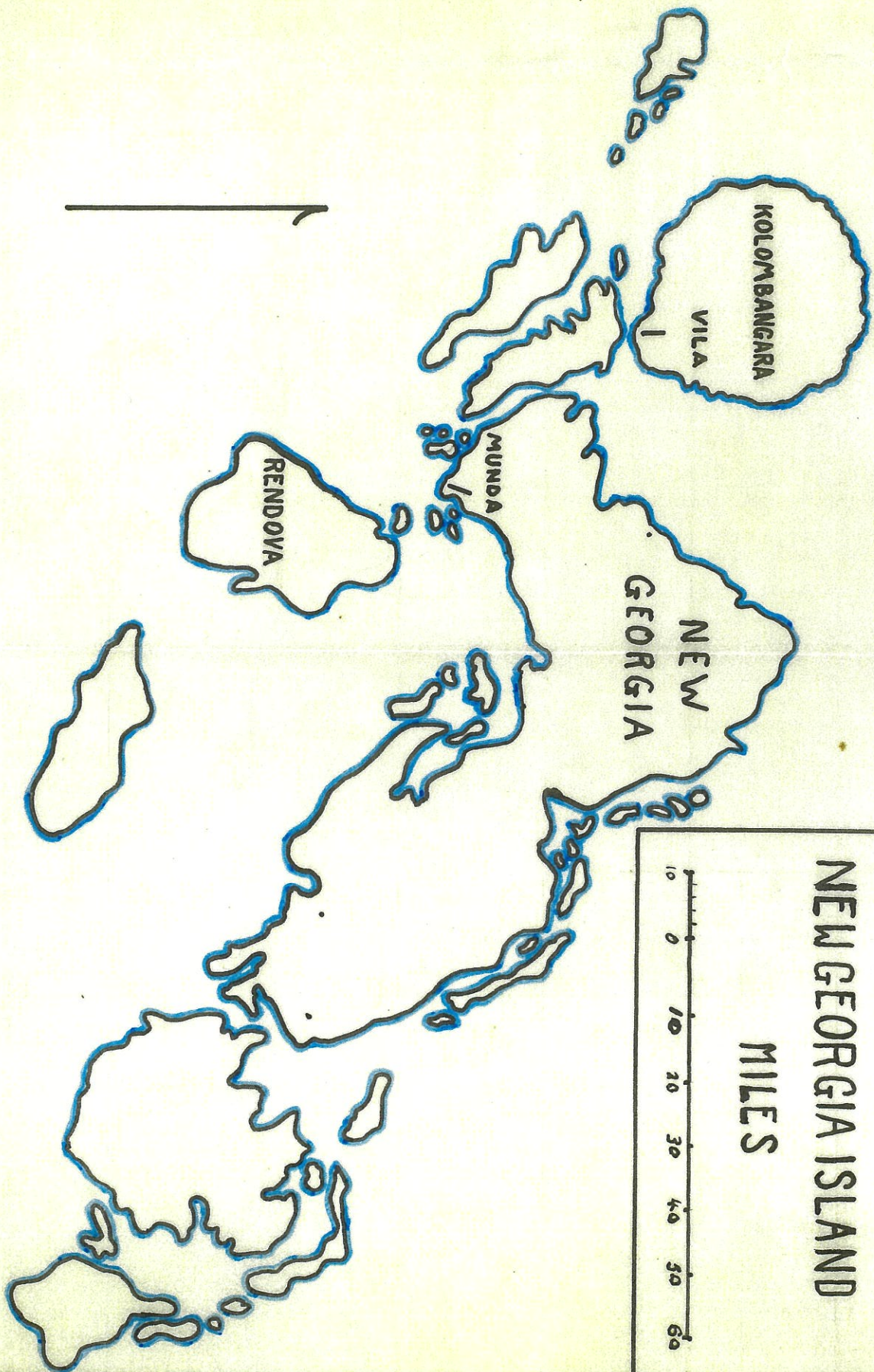
10. Nothing can take the place of extensive realistic small unit training, specially in jungle terrain where direction, control and communications are exceedingly difficult.

11. Commanders should extend themselves to provide hot meals for front line units, and whenever the situation permits, commanders should relieve the men long enough to permit bathing.

# MAP A

## THE SOUTH AND SOUTHWEST PACIFIC THEATRES





# MAP B

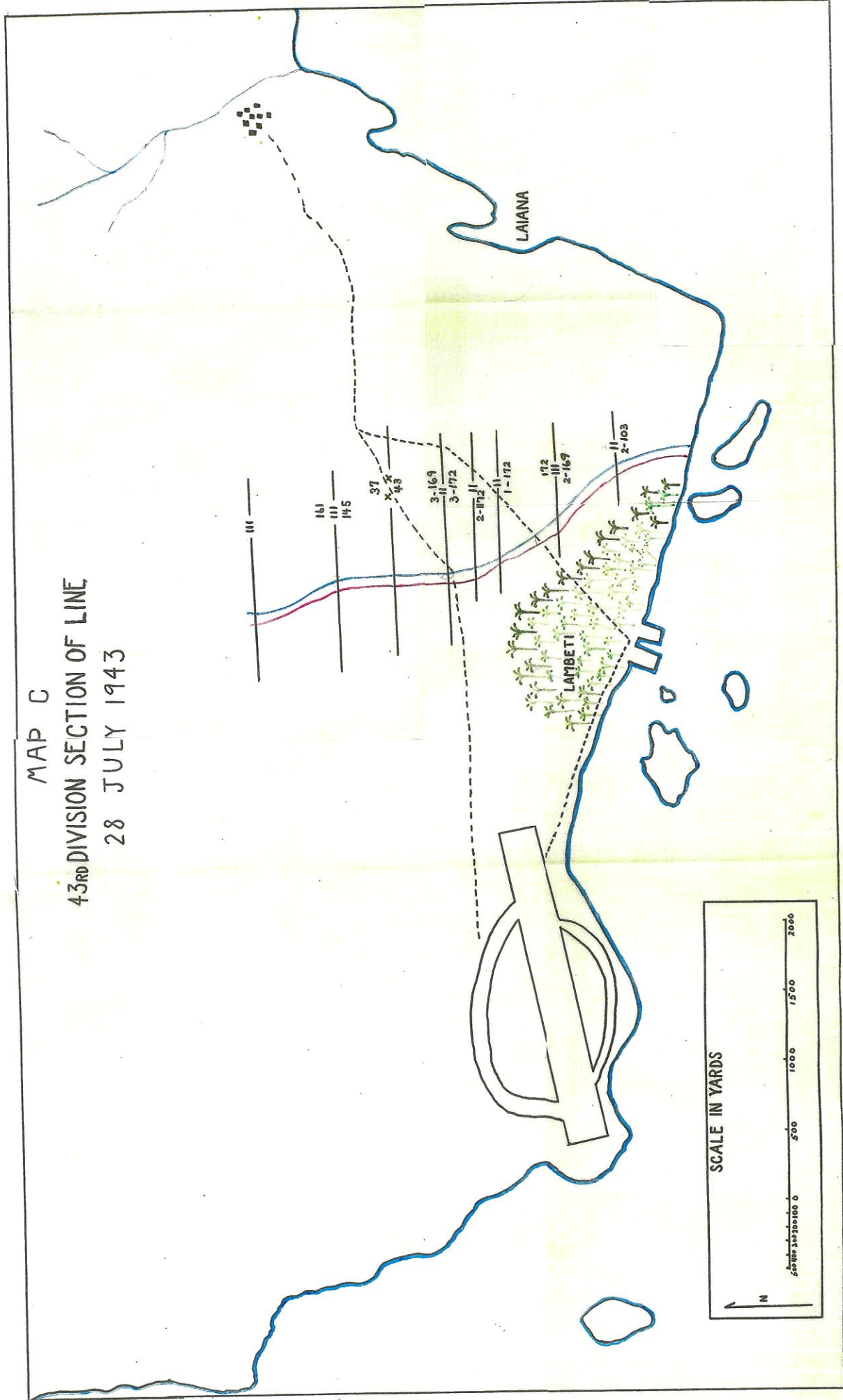
## NEW GEORGIA ISLAND

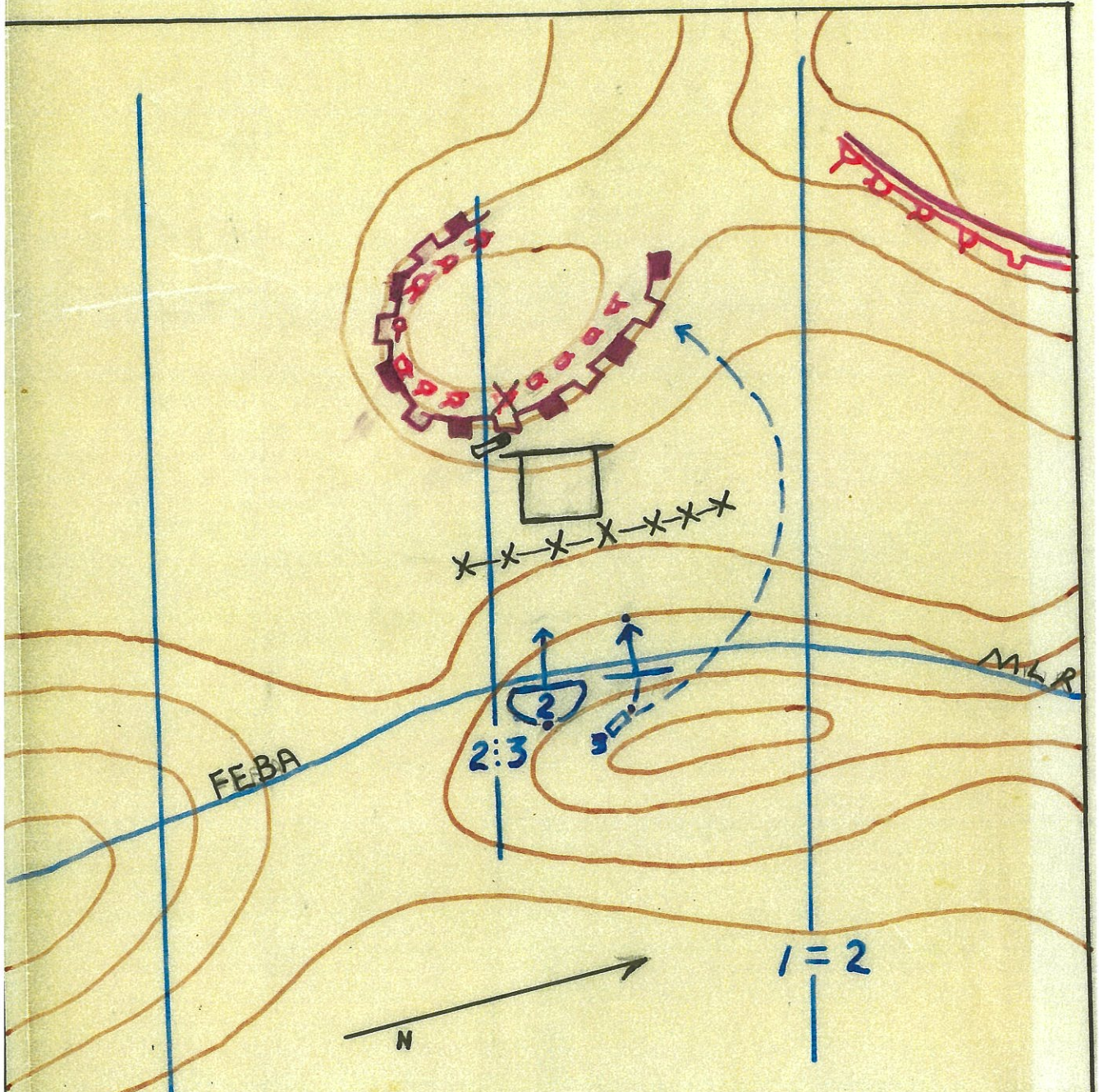
MILES





MAP C  
43<sup>RD</sup> DIVISION SECTION OF LINE  
28 JULY 1943





2-169 = 172

MAP D  
 ASSUALT OF  
 MORRISON-JOHNSON HILL

