

# A Long and Bloody Night: Holding the Left Flank at Tinian

By Geoffrey W. Roecker

The first sounds wafted ghostlike out of the darkness. Voices conversing in low tones. Clinks of metal on wood, hobnails on stones. Creaks of leather and turning wheels. Liquid pouring, breaking glass. A short laugh. A stern command. A moment of quiet. Then the voices resumed, omnipresent and invisible.

Private First Class Alva Roland Perry Jr. knew from experience what the sounds foretold. He pressed himself flat against the dirt—as flat as he could while aiming his Browning Automatic Rifle over the lip of his foxhole. He could feel the comforting presence of Leon Roquet and Wallace Holt—buddies he could trust to stick by him, even though they all knew what was coming.

The sounds grew louder. Bottles smashed. Voices swelled in chanting song. Rifle bolts clicked, blades slid from sheaths. Something landed with a thump just outside the foxhole. The three Marines braced for an explosion, waited, peered out. A rock. The Japanese had good arms. Or good aim. They were close. They might know exactly where the foxhole was.

This was just a prelude. Perry knew the voices would rise to a howling crescendo, then approach with terrifying speed. Individual words would be lost in the cacophony, but for Marines who spoke little Japanese, one word was enough to chill the blood. Banzai.

Al Perry glanced at his luminous watch: 12:30 a.m. on July 25, 1944, Jig+1 in the battle for Tinian. “This is going to be a long and bloody night,” he thought.

Perry’s outfit, Company A, 1st Battalion, 24th Marines, knew something of “long and bloody nights”: Tinian was their third amphibious operation in five months. In February 1944, as part of Operation Flintlock, they helped conquer the island of Namur in a sharp but short battle lasting less than two days. Full of confidence and fire, they hit the shores of Saipan on June 15, 1944, and entered into a maelstrom that made “the Marshalls show look tame” by comparison. A month of fighting left them

dazed and bloodied. Casualties in Battalion Landing Team (BLT) 1/24 ran just shy of 50 percent, and the ratio was even more dramatic in its subordinate units. Of “Able” Company’s 232 Marines who landed on D-day, barely 100 marched into the regimental rest area on July 13. Even those untouched by wounds or illness were indelibly marked by their experience. “I was personally exhausted from our fighting on Saipan,” Perry related. “I had lost 30 pounds and saw many of my good friends killed or wounded.”

Fortunately for Able Co, their skipper was one of the three officers still standing. Twenty-six-year-old Captain Irving Schechter, formerly a lawyer from Smithtown, N.Y., exemplified the class of reservists who possessed a deep well of leadership talent. He applied for Marine officer training in 1941 after hearing a radio advertisement seeking college graduates. “I am Jewish, and my father still had relatives in Europe,” he later explained. “If the time came when the U.S. made an amphibious landing in Europe, I wanted to be there.” Instead, he stood garrison duty in the Canal Zone before taking command of Co A in December 1942. The “green as grass” outfit felt shortchanged to get a “little, thin, sad-eyed Jewish lad ... inclined to be timid and self-effacing,” in the words of one lieutenant. “Not the natural leader type necessary to run this bunch of Marines.” They soon ate their words. Schechter pushed the company hard and himself harder. He could deliver a rousing speech one moment and lead a 30-mile march the next. His decisions were calculated and his discipline even-handed; he rarely raised his voice and made a point to never curse out an enlisted man who might be punished for defending himself. Schechter built a tough company, and they loved him for it. “Rugged Able Company,” they happily called themselves, or “Buck Schechter’s Raggedy-Assed Marines.”

Combat only enhanced the persona of “Buck” Schechter. He countermanded orders that unduly endangered his men, calmly chewed grass while making decisions, and always carried his helmet under his arm. “I told the men when they



PFC Alva Roland  
Perry Jr.

COURTESY OF GEOFFREY W. ROECKER

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COURTESY OF GEOFFREY W. ROECKER

**Howard M. Kerr, right, with his machine-gun squad at Camp Pendleton, Calif., in 1943. By the time they landed on Tinian, Kerr's squad had only two members.**

went in that they had to wear their helmets," he said, "but I wouldn't put on my own helmet until I felt things were really bad. This way the men could look over at me and see how things were." As a reminder of his commitment to his company, Schechter carried the dog tags of the fallen in his pocket. "He didn't let us see how many he had," remarked Perry. "Probably wasn't good for morale." Schechter's performance on Saipan earned a recommendation for the Bronze Star with combat "V," and caught the attention of senior officers planning the Tinian operation.

Tinian sits 3 miles southwest of Saipan. Although roughly the same size as its northern neighbor, it is considerably flatter—ideal for sugar cane cultivation and airfield construction. Japanese engineers constructed no fewer than four strips of varying size and capability on the island. By July of 1944, Japanese air power in the Mariana Islands was utterly destroyed; the senior aviation officer, Vice Admiral Kakuji Kakuta, was in such a state of despair that he played no role in organizing the defense of Tinian. The task fell to Colonel Kiyochi Ogata (50th Infantry Regiment) and Captain Goichi Oya (56th Naval Guard Force). Imperial Army and Navy rivalries ran high, and with the 9,000-man garrison evenly split between the branches, coordination suffered. Oya's keibitai protected the airfields while Ogata placed most of his strength at logical landing sites:



**Capt Irving Schechter**

COURTESY OF GEOFFREY W. ROECKER

the wide, smooth beaches at Tinian Town in the southwest and Asiga Bay to the east. He assigned a handful of troops to guard a pair of tiny beaches on the northwestern coast but spared no more. Anyone could see the impossibility of invading Tinian on such insignificant beaches.

Unfortunately for Ogata, V Amphibious Corps was preparing to do just that.

After a day or two of rest in a temporary camp near Aslito Airfield, Buck Schechter was summoned to the headquarters of Colonel Franklin A. Hart, commander of the 24th Marines. "Rusty" Hart got down to brass tacks: "Schechter, I like the way your company operates. I'd like to have Company A lead the assault on Tinian. How would you like to go in?"

If the question caught Schechter off guard, he recovered quickly. "Well, Colonel, I'd like to land with my entire company in one wave. This way, I'll have my riflemen, mortars, and machine gunners all ashore at the same time."

"That sounds like a good idea," said Hart. "I think I'll land the whole regiment in company waves." He gave Schechter priority status for new equipment and supplies and laid out the timetable:

the landings would take place on July 24, fewer than 10 days away.

Schechter quickly moved to prepare his battered company for combat. He quashed rumors of a return to Hawaii and





**Above: Marine LVTs head for the Tinian landing beaches on "J-day," July 24, 1944. (Photo courtesy of National Archives)**

**Left: Marines come ashore on one of Tinian's beaches. The rock outcropping at left prevented the tractor from advancing onto the beach itself.**

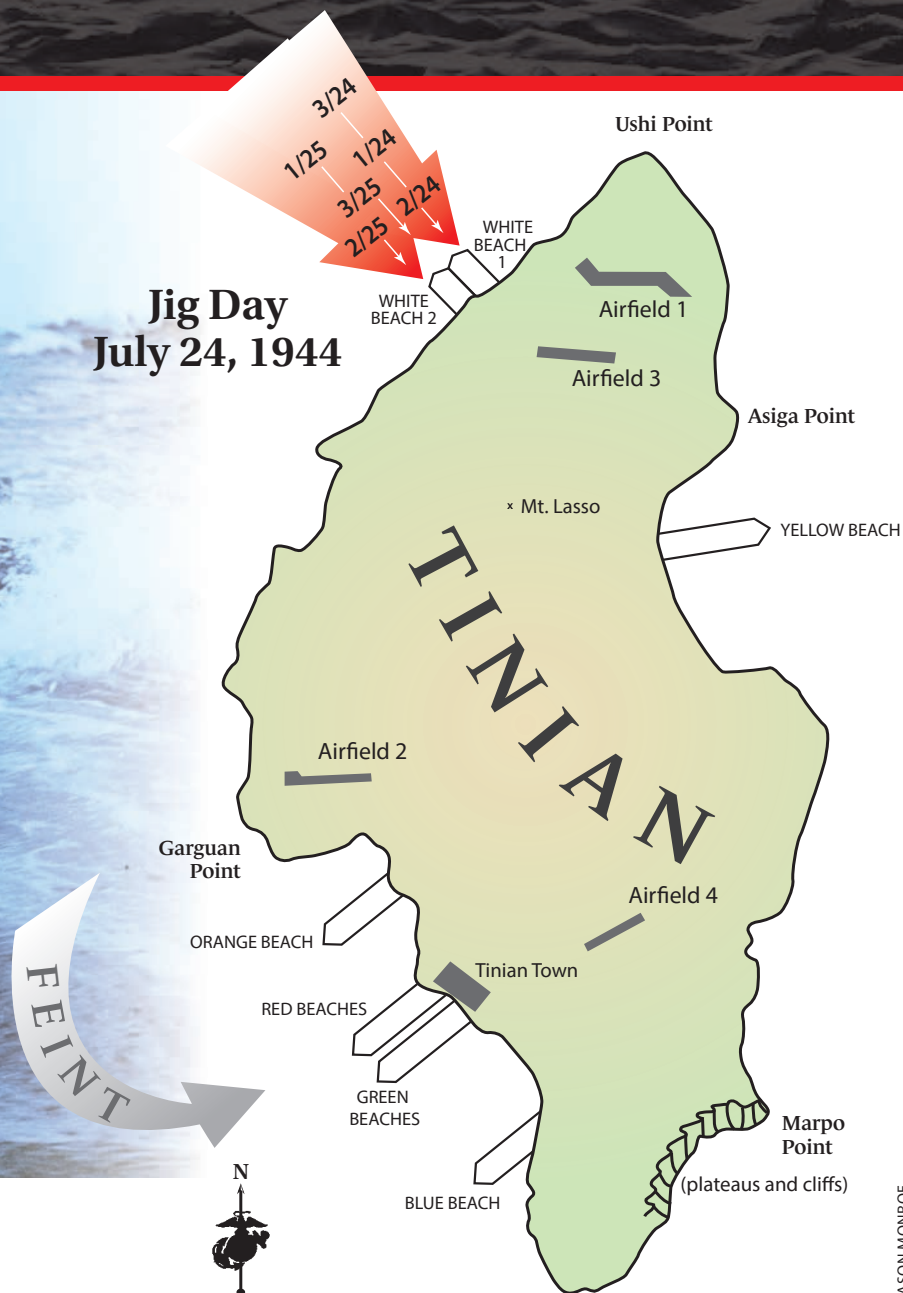
encouraged his men to rest, write letters, and get hot meals whenever possible. Platoon leaders surveyed worn-out gear, replaced damaged weapons, and requested extra barbed wire for nighttime defense. Clerks typed up recommendations for decorations (including a Silver Star Medal for Alva Perry) and a promotion list for NCOs. These new sergeants and corporals, all proven combat veterans, were key to replacing a command structure shattered on Saipan.

Reorganization could only do so much: what the company really needed was a chance to rebuild. An infusion of new

men, originally intended for the 2nd Marine Division helped fill out the ranks somewhat; a trickle of veterans returned from the hospital sporting fresh scars or shaking off the effects of disease, but the daily sick list largely negated these gains. In Able Company's machine gun platoon, "there were just 12 of us left out of 60" according to PFC Howard M. Kerr. "Each squad [originally] had eight men. I started out an ammunition carrier and ended up on the gun. One other guy and myself were the only two that were left." Rifleman PFC Lionel "Pappy" Salazar recalled that "my squad had five people out of twelve," and Oscar "Buddy" Hanson, one of the newly made sergeants, received "replacements consisting of cooks and office personnel" into his rifle squad. When they boarded LST-486 on the morning of July 23, 1944, Able Co could muster 138 men—barely half of their authorized strength.



## Jig Day July 24, 1944



The assault troops were numbly resigned to the coming battle. "It was estimated that it would take two weeks of the same kind of combat we had just finished on Saipan," Al Perry recalled. "This was not what [was] promised in the movies." Perry squirreled away aboard an LVT for the night, but "slept very little ... We had the customary steak, eggs, and fried potatoes ... I was sure that if the breakfast didn't kill me, the Japanese would." Private Alva E. Gordon, a replacement making his first landing, concurred. "If you weren't scared, you didn't have very good brains," he remarked. "You didn't know from one minute to the next if you were going to be there or not—alive, anyway."

At 6 a.m. on July 24, "Jig Day," the eight LVTs carrying Able Co fired up their engines and waddled down the LST ramps and into the sea. Colonel Hart's final landing plan placed Easy Co in the first wave; Able would follow them ashore within five minutes. A few alert defenders aimed 20 mm and 40 mm guns at the tractors, but their fire was "intermittent" and most Japanese attention was fixed on a feint landing at Tinian Town. Easy Company reached Beach White One, a 60-yard strip of sand framed by steep coral cliffs, at approximately 7:50 a.m. and immediately went after the outnumbered defenders. Able Co was hot on their heels. The beach was so narrow that some tractors could not crawl up on the sand, and the Marines rolled over the sides into chest-deep water, slicing hands and knees on sharp coral. Howard Kerr watched some heavily laden Marines jump off a vehicle and disappear; he worried that they had drowned.

Ogata's few defenders gamely "appeared out of nowhere to greet us with small arms fire," said Captain Schechter. "As I waded in, I turned to give some orders to my radio operator only to see the poor guy floating in the surf. He had been hit in the head with a bullet." Nineteen-year-old Pappy Salazar was "crawling, crawling, crawling—I saw half of a Marine as I was crawling. You keep on going." Able Co swung to the left, planted their flank on the coastline, and moved slowly inland through narrow gullies and sharp crevices. Although outnumbered, the Japanese made masterful use of the terrain. The 24th Marines' action report noted that the only "heavy enemy resistance" on Jig

Day occurred in "the thick brush and caves near the beach on the left flank."

By late afternoon, Able Co had gained 200 yards and began digging in for the night. They were not quite at their objective, but Schechter knew that securing defensible ground—and leaving time to prepare positions—was more important than reaching an arbitrary line on a map. The Americans had achieved tactical surprise, but the Japanese were sure to respond. "If they can't kick us off the island this first night, we'll take over," remarked PFC Robert D. Price. "Our officers told us, 'Prepare your foxhole, dig 'em deep—we have reports that the Japanese are gonna give us everything they got.'"

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Constructing a nighttime defense required careful, almost ritualistic, planning. The “line” was a series of mutually supporting fighting positions, likely in the checkerboard pattern commonly employed on Saipan. Marines dug two- or three-man foxholes; no man fought alone, but veterans knew not to bunch up. Every available machine gun was brought forward, and battalion headquarters detailed additional crews to bolster the lines. Schechter also requested a pair of 37 mm guns from the regimental weapons company and an extra supply of anti-personnel rounds. The crew-served weapons were set at intervals and positioned to create deadly crossfires.

fumbling for a weapon in the dark could mean the difference between life and death. As the light began to fade, Marines memorized landmarks, likely avenues of approach, and the location of the nearest foxholes. If lucky, they had time for a cigarette before Schechter doused the smoking lamp.

Able Co faced north-northeast toward Ushi Point and the Japanese-designated “Northern Sector” of defense, held by one of Colonel Ogata’s reinforced infantry battalions and Oya’s 56th Keibitai. In the event of a landing, they were to “destroy the enemy at the beach,” but Ogata was vague on the specifics. The troops at Ushi Airfield interpreted this directive as calling

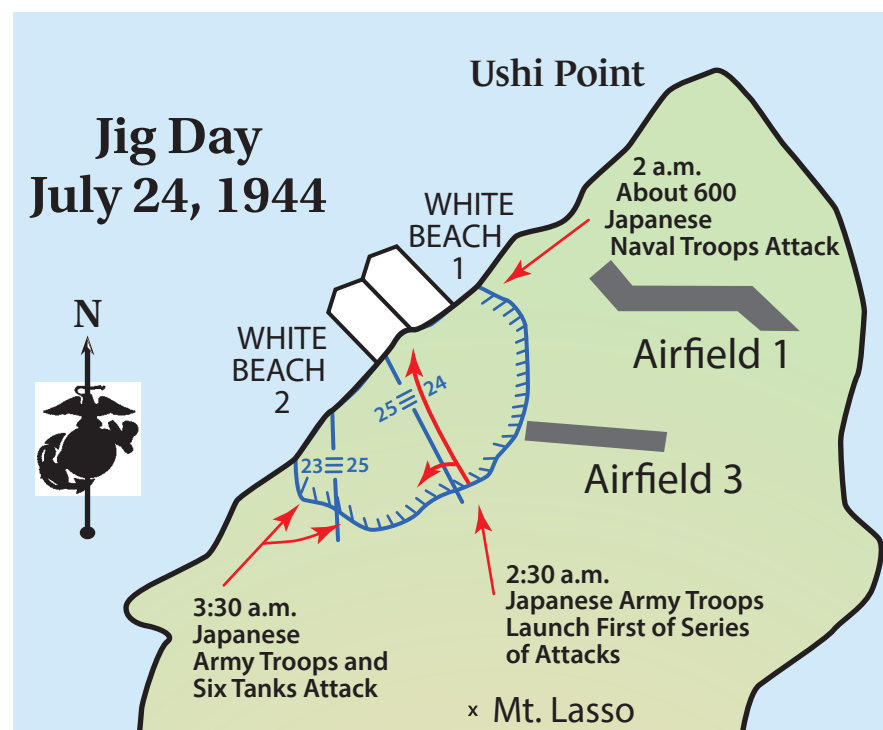
for a counterattack; they were “not trained for an infantry mission,” notes historian Carl Hoffman, but “had a fanatic will to close with the Americans, a will that compensated only in part for their lack of technique.” Armed with everything from grenades to dismounted antiaircraft guns, nearly 600 Japanese naval personnel began moving toward the coast at dusk, intending to hit the American left flank.

“People ask me what was the worst thing I can remember when in combat,” Al Perry wrote. “Well, there are a whole lot of worst things. First, a long artillery barrage. The next worst is waiting for a counterattack that you know is coming.” The Japanese chanting and catcalling sacrificed surprise for psychological impact—for both sides. While Perry felt his nerves stretched to the breaking point, young Japanese men were mustering the courage needed to sustain the last chapter of their lives. The macabre celebration lasted nearly two hours.

At 2 a.m., “all hell broke loose” as the Japanese unleashed “the most devastating artillery and mortar attack we had ever

been under.” Explosions rocked the thin line of foxholes, sending hot shards of shrapnel shredding through equipment and bodies. Howard Kerr was behind his machine gun when a shell landed nearby. “The concussion from the blast, so much pressure, it blows the wind out of you,” he said. Shrapnel killed Kerr’s assistant gunner and wounded another man. Kerr himself was riddled; he struggled to breathe with a collapsed lung but was “so angry I stayed on the gun.” He lapsed into unconsciousness, finger on the trigger.

The first Japanese troops rushed forward under the cover of the barrage and began pitching grenades. Perry flinched under a shower of dirt and metal. “Are you all right, Al?” shouted Roquet. Wally Holt dropped to the floor of the foxhole, looking bewildered. The sharp-eyed North Dakotan had spotted a Japanese soldier throwing a grenade and tried to field the missile like a baseball. He was a fraction too late; Perry saw that Holt’s right arm was mangled. “My hand is gone!” he howled.



Riflemen and BAR teams filled in the gaps. Farther to the rear, the company’s 60 mm mortar teams measured and memorized ranges, while comms men laid phone lines to the heavier 81 mm mortars near the battalion command post. Working parties hauled up Schechter’s extra bales of barbed wire and as much ammunition as they could find. Belted rounds for the machine guns were in short supply (Howard Kerr recalled specific orders to shoot sparingly) but Sergeant Buddy Hanson’s rifle squad received “extra ammunition for all guns”—a sure sign of an impending counterattack.

Finally, the men made their own personal preparations. Robert Price “found” a Browning Automatic Rifle and spent time straightening the cotter pins on his grenades. Alva Perry laid out ammunition for his own BAR—30 magazines, a total of 600 rounds—for quick access. Some Marines preferred to have their knives unsheathed, while others re-cleaned personal sidearms. Everything had to be just so: an extra second of



"I won't be able to play baseball anymore!" Holt scrambled out of the hole and disappeared into the night.

Perry and Roquet turned to the front just as a wave of Japanese troops burst out of the bushes about 30 yards away.

Able Company opened fire so rapidly that Captain Schechter believed his men surprised a marching column of enemy troops who right-faced and raced towards his line. The Japanese hit Schechter's barbed wire—"God, did we pile them up on it!"—and pushed through with the sheer weight of numbers. "The Japanese would yell 'banzai,' and my men would yell it right back at them, along with some choice obscenities," remembered Schechter. "The most remarkable thing to me was that every single one of my men stayed put. I don't think a single one of them broke and ran." For his part, Schechter was racing along the line, encouraging his men, "trying to keep a lid on things." He was, of course, without his helmet. "I was as scared as any other Marine in Company A," he admitted. "I just tried not to show it."

As he moved from foxhole to foxhole, Buck Schechter may have noticed similar selfless acts of bravery. Rifleman Cecil Ray Tolley was supplying ammunition to a machine-gun team when a barrage of grenades disabled both gunners. Tolley was also badly wounded but, using one good hand, got the gun back in action and fired through four boxes of ammunition—a thousand rounds—before he passed out.

PFC Charles Edward Seader, a green replacement, had spent just two weeks with Able Co; Tinian was his first time under

fire. When the Japanese threatened to break through a weak point, Seader grabbed his BAR and launched a counterattack of his own. The startled enemy fell back, but not before shooting Seader through the chest. PFC Gust Alex Pappas

worked his BAR with equal vigor and at close range. Japanese troops reached his foxhole several times, but Pappas, a stolid construction worker from Duluth, Minn., refused to budge.

Corporal Claude Thomas Henderson Jr., had long dreamed of wearing a second stripe, so much so that he sewed on new chevrons while still a PFC. His buddies called him "Praying For Corporal." He earned his rank after Roi-Namur and showed great skill as a 60 mm mortar squad leader on Saipan. As soon as the Japanese infantry appeared, Henderson posted himself on the front lines and directed mortar fire as the range dropped to danger close. When he saw a corpsman tending a wounded Marine, Henderson provided covering fire, emptying his carbine "with deadly effectiveness" until a bullet ripped through Henderson's neck. The corpsman quickly bandaged the corporal and tagged him for evacuation, but the wounds were fatal. Henderson died in the sickbay of USS *Heywood* (AP-12),

choking on blood and phlegm. "Not a pretty sight," remarked a friend who witnessed the end.

PFC John C. Pope, whose heavy machine gun was attached to Able Co for the night, held the literal end of the line—"with the cliff on our left, we did not have to worry about our flank and could concentrate our fire straight ahead." To his right,



COURTESY OF GEOFFREY W. ROECKER

**Claude Thomas Henderson Jr.**



USMC

**A squad from Able Co, 1st Battalion, 24th Marines, prepares to advance on Tinian.**





**Above: A Japanese officer's sword captured by PFC John C. Pope during the banzai attack of July 25, 1944.**

five Marines worked a 37 mm gun; beyond them was a BAR team, then another machine gun manned by Pope's buddy PFC Glenn E. Doster. "Red" Doster was busily dueling an enemy machine gun when a small group of Japanese broke through the crossfire. In the sudden light of a flare, Pope beheld a screaming officer running full pelt, gripping a sword "as if he was going to chop wood." Pope dropped his belt of ammo and picked up the squad's shotgun. "I swung up and fired. Probably several rifle bullets hit him at the same time as my buckshot. He went backward, but the saber continued end over end and came to rest near where I was sitting."

Pope's gunner, PFC Robert Sherrill, called for ammunition



**PFC John C. Pope**



and Assistant Cook Manuel Schoolus crawled forward with two fresh boxes. "Enemy knee mortar shells were falling all around and bullets were zipping and whizzing like crazy," continued Pope. "I yelled for him to get in the hole with us but he was not quick enough. A shell burst just to the right of him ... it hit 'Schools' in the neck, causing a deep gash, and [passed] under my chin and [cut] my helmet strap. He was out like a light and bleeding badly, with both hands clutching his throat. All I could do at the time was pull him into the hole behind the gun."

Alva Perry was well and truly in the thick of it. He was an exceptional gunner, firing in short, controlled bursts, but still burned out the barrel of his BAR. "I had to find another one if I wanted to live. It was pitch dark; I had to wait for the flares to provide some light ... I got out of the hole and crawled along until I found a BARman who was wounded or dead. I didn't have to go far." Roquet was gone when Perry returned, and he decided to hold the position alone. His ammunition dwindled rapidly, but "I knew I could not stop firing and load my empty magazines."

COURTESY OF GEORGE D. WEBSTER

COURTESY OF GEOFFREY W. ROECKER



Tanks advance past a Marine defensive line during the fighting on Tinian.



USMC

Salvation arrived in the form of an unfamiliar Marine. “We are out of ammunition for our mortars, so I came here to help,” he said. With perfect composure, the young stranger sat bolt upright on the edge of the hole, reloading magazines and handing them off to Perry. In foxholes all along the line, “engineers, corpsmen, communicators, naval gunfire liaison and shore party personnel” took up firing positions to help repel the attack.

The carnage continued until the sun began to rise over Tinian’s eastern shore at 5:45 a.m. Sensing failure, the surviving Japanese troops grew desperate and turned their weapons on themselves. “Many used hand grenades,” explained Sergeant Hanson. “They pulled out the pin, hit the grenade against their

head [or helmet] and held it to their face until it exploded ... approximately five to seven seconds.” A soldier with a land mine tried to jump in Hanson’s hole, but “something went wrong. The mine exploded ... it killed the Japanese soldier, the force of the explosion blowing his helmet off, and it went sailing through the air and landed in our foxhole. By this time, we were all battle weary, and in a queer kind of way there was almost some humor in it.”

Medium tanks from Company B, 4th Tank Battalion rumbled up to join the fray. Pappy Salazar was pleased to see the tanks—until one accelerated toward his foxhole. Salazar stood up to wave off the tank and was immediately shot through the shoulder by a Japanese sniper. The young Marine scuttled around behind

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COURTESY OF NATIONAL ARCHIVES

**A wounded Marine is placed aboard an LVT for evacuation from Tinian. Note corpsman holding plasma bottle.**

the tank and was ordered back to the beach by his platoon leader. The wound—his second in three weeks—spelled the end of his combat career.

A handful of Japanese troops remained hidden in the brush and behind the bodies of the dead, waiting for a Marine to let down his guard. PFC Price recalled “my squad leader, Sergeant Bill Linkins—terrific guy, physique like a Roman god—really a good Marine. We got word that we were gonna have another unit take over our position. Linkins stood up, a big grin on his face, and circled his arm in the air, ‘squad, assemble here’—and some Japanese out there, stacked in with the dead, shot him right through the head.”

Al Perry, deafened by hours of constant firing, went around to check on his friends. PFC Richard J. Brodnicki’s foxhole looked empty; the Marine from Buffalo lay on his face in the dirt. “I rolled him over on his back and noticed that he had

been shot between the eyes.” Corporal Winston M. Cabe “was still alive, but most of his face had been blown away. I called for a corpsman ... I was amazed at his age. He was about 35 to 40; I thought, this guy is old enough to be my father.” With a practiced eye, the Sailor sized up the situation. “First, we have to cut away the hairs from where his nose was,” he announced, rummaging through his bag. “This guy is brave as hell,” thought Perry, but awe turned to shock in an instant. “He looked me full in the face and grunted, and reached down to his stomach ... I could see his hands were full of his own intestines. He fell forward on top of Cabe and died immediately.”

Perry checked the corpsman and Cabe for pulses and, finding none, tried to cover his buddy with a blanket. He saw a blur of movement and just had time to register a Japanese soldier running at him. “The grenade exploded, and I felt a hard blow to the right side of my neck. I reached up to see how bad it was

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COURTESY OF GEOFFREY W. ROECKER

**Able Co, 1st Battalion, 24th Marines on Tinian on Aug. 5, 1944. Several Marines sport fresh bandages along with their captured Japanese flags.**

and felt something strange. It was the hand of the soldier that had just blown himself up. It was grasping my neck.” At this moment, Capt Schechter passed by and ordered Perry back to his foxhole. The dazed Tennessean complied and sat quietly, alone and staring into space as his friends were evacuated. Cabe miraculously survived—Perry’s blanket helped stave off the onset of potentially fatal shock—but was permanently blinded.

Schechter sent patrols out to mop up the battlefield. The area was a charnel house: shredded corpses hung from barbed wire, lay flat in the trampled grass, or dangled out of Marine foxholes. John Pope and Bobby Sherrill quietly surveyed the devastation from their gun position. “If I had known there were that many of them,” Sherrill muttered, “I would have jumped off the cliff and swam to the nearest ship.”

“I would have been right behind you,” said Pope. An official body count totalled 476 dead, “most of them within 100 yards of Company A’s lines.”

Gratefully, Able Co handed over their positions to fresh troops from the 8th Marines and reverted to regimental reserve. In 24 hours, the company suffered 40 casualties—seven dead, 33 wounded—and lost all of their remaining corpsmen. “About 30 percent casualties, which is pretty bad for one early morning battle,” concluded Captain Schechter, who estimated “about 30 men with usable weapons” fit for duty on the morning of J+1. He singled out the 37 mm gunners—who also paid a heavy cost—for special praise. “I don’t know if we could have stopped another charge without [their] shells.”

The Japanese tried to break through the Marine lines in three places on the first night of the Tinian campaign; the futile

effort cost them 1,241 lives. Although it was not immediately evident to the men on the ground, the costly defeat effectively broke the back of the Japanese resistance. While Able Co never claimed nor sought sole credit for holding the vulnerable left flank of the Tinian beachhead, they played a critical role at a crucial point in the battle. As historian Carl Hoffman notes, “the attack on the left came first and lasted longest.”

Ultimately, the campaign for Tinian was neither as long nor as bloody as Saipan and would eventually be eclipsed in history by Iwo Jima. However, fending off the big banzai on July 25, 1944, loomed large in the memories of those who lived to tell the tale. “The horrible sight I beheld is something I have never been able to forget,” remarked Buddy Hanson, six decades after the fight. “Time has not been able to erase it from my mind.”

*Author’s note: Captain Irving Schechter and Private Cecil Tolley received the Navy Cross for their actions during the counterattack on July 25, 1944. Sergeant William P. Linkins Jr., Corporal Claude T. Henderson Jr., PFC Glenn E. Doster, PFC Wallace M. Holt, PFC Gust A. Pappas and PFC Charles E. Seader received the Silver Star.*

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