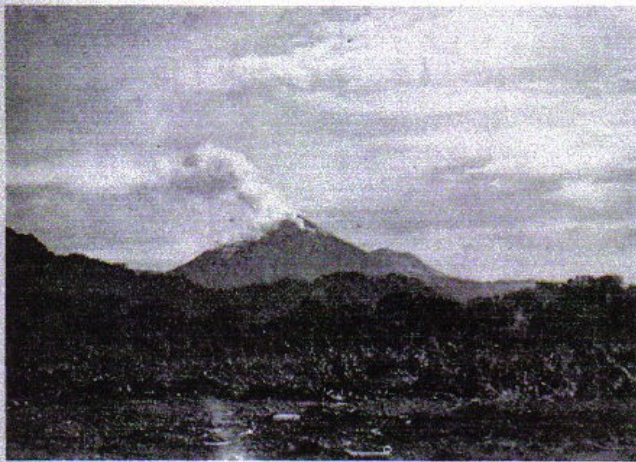


## COMPANY C HISTORY



Mount Bagana, One of Two Active Volcanos on Bougainville.

December 31, 1943 was a red letter day for all hands. It was on that day that we were advised that orders had been received to transfer us to Bougainville via FAG TRANS. We were scheduled to ship out the 10th of January and therefore the day after New Year's, we started to knock down the entire camp. All stevedoring activities were secured and all hands fell to, tearing down camp structures, piling salvaged lumber, crating supplies and packing up gear.

Lt. Comdr. Bennett and Lt. Vercoe flew to Bougainville on January 4, via SCAT to look over conditions at our future base. While there, they stayed at the Sixth Special. On returning to Guadalcanal on January 7, they reported that our new base would be located in the heart of a dense jungle and that due to a high water table and constant rain fall, much mud would have to be overcome. Stevedoring operations would be carried on under very unfavorable conditions.

On January 15, we were informed that our LST which was to transport us and our gear to Bougainville, would be on the beach the next day at noon, to start taking on our cargo. Arrangements were immediately made to start the job of hauling and storing all equipment we were taking with us to the beach at Kokabona. Our bulldozer was pressed into service to build a suitable earth ramp, expediting the handling of cargo from the beach into the LST. When our cargo was stowed to permit easy handling and quick loading, our camp guard was secured and guard placed on and around our cargo to prevent its disappearance.

At 1000 on January 16, our LST was sighted off Kokabona Beach, and at 1100 was beached. It was the LST 207, a Coast Guard ship, which already had quite a bit of cargo aboard. After getting the ramp approach graded up, the working parties fell to shortly after noon, and a steady stream of trucks started rolling into the LST with cargo. Loading operations were knocked off at about midnight because of heavy rain and resumed early in the morning. On the morning of January 18, at 0700 our convoy got under way for Bougainville. The convoy as it left Guadalcanal, was made up of one merchant vessel, the S. S. Benjamin J. Bonnevillie, five LST's and three escort vessels.

Our trip was calm and uneventful. The storm had subsided; it no longer rained, the sun came out and everyone had a chance to dry out. Space was at a premium aboard ship

but as it was rather hot below deck, practically everyone elected to sleep topside.

Chief Bell was placed in charge of a detail of our men who were to man some of the 20 MM. guns in the event of an attack. These men stood regular watches with the ship's company throughout the entire voyage. Several times during the course of our trip gunnery practice was held; target balloons were released at which the guns fired.

Several smaller convoys joined ours as we proceeded toward Bougainville. It soon developed into a fair-sized flotilla numbering upward of fifteen ships. Several destroyers, and destroyer escort vessels furnished protection. Many small islands were passed but the trip proved uneventful.

During the early morning hours of January 20, as we were nearing Bougainville, much anti-aircraft fire could be heard. The beams of the searchlights could be seen stabbing toward the sky, but although we watched carefully it seemed that none of the enemy planes were hit. Everything quieted down after a spell and as we steamed around Purata Island at dawn, all of the Torokina beachhead was dark and quiet. If one listened closely, occasional bursts of artillery fire could be heard.

The bulk of the LST's in the convoy were piloted to the beach on Purata Island where groups of trucks were standing by to aid in discharging their cargo. As LST 207 beached, the huge ramp was dropped into place and our bulldozer scuttled off onto the beach, immediately hauled a huge steel ramp matting into position and began building up an earthen ramp to facilitate the movement of trucks to and from the ship.

The men in the detachment had previously been divided into gangs and a regular schedule was placed into effect, rotating working hours and calling for relief at hourly intervals. This permitted unloading at top speed without any lost motion and assured us that all our cargo would be taken off. The chiefs and officers all had prearranged details and the chow schedule aboard ship was set up in accordance with the working schedule. The guard detail under Chief Bell functioned smoothly and under the eagle eye of these guards all of our cargo was directed to our storage area.

Army and Marine working parties were scheduled to assist us in the handling of our cargo on the beach but it soon developed that if we were to get it all off, our own men would have to be detailed to empty the trucks on the beach. Our working schedule was revised accordingly to meet this condition and despite the fact that our LST had a bigger cargo than the other ships, ours was the first one to be completely discharged. Our orders were that all of our cargo must be off by 1500 and the men, by cooperating and working at top speed throughout the day, easily beat this time. Many of the LST's still had cargo left at 1500. Our first sight of Bougainville had been very impressive on that early morning as the sun rose while the LST was proceeding toward the beach. In the distance, several mountains could be seen, their peaks completely covered by cloud banks. Mount Bagana, one of the two active volcanoes on the island, was belching out a cloud of steam and smoke that was blown about by the wind.

Some time before, the Japs had attempted to use this same volcano as a weapon. Jap planes had been dispatched to drop loads of bombs into the crater with the aim of causing it to erupt and to confuse our forces. It proved a vain attempt as nothing unusual occurred. After the bombs were dropped

## COMPANY C HISTORY

into the crater their explosions caused a roar that echoed and re-echoed across the mountain tops; like so much of Jap strategy, this too was "sound and fury, signifying nothing."

Several PT Squadrons were based at Torokina at one end of Purata Island. Many were returning from patrols up and down the coast of Bougainville and Buka as we neared the beach. These speedy boats, trailed by a large white wake as they cut through the water, emphasized the business-like and war-like attitude of the whole place despite the pretty picture they made.

Lt. Comdr. Kane, Battalion Executive Officer, had flown up to Bougainville via SCAT and had made arrangements for us to use the old 53rd C. B. camp (just evacuated by them that day) until such time as our own camp could be constructed. The 53rd C. B.s embarked for the 'Canal aboard the LST's that came in that morning in our convoy.

That afternoon, after unloading the LST, some of our trucks were loaded with our gear and were ferried across in LCMs to the mainland and were dispatched to the temporary camp. A guard detail was set up to protect our cargo throughout the night against possible pilferage. Lieutenant Burbridge and Ensign Mariner were to stay with this detail. However, the major in charge of the M.P.s gave orders that eleven of our men were to be off the island by 1700 and that our cargo would be guarded by the M.P.s. Purata Island was known as Suicide Island because the Japs periodically shelled and bombed that small dot just off the mainland. It was used as a receiving center and cargo area for the bulk of all in-coming cargo and rations. Everyone was glad to leave this mudhole. The men had been wading around in the knee-deep mud throughout the entire operation and were mighty tired. Several weeks of rains had not helped much in doing away with the mud.

All hands boarded ducks, small boats and LCT's for the mainland and made their way to our temporary campsite. Tarps were broken out to cover some of the fox holes and to provide some protection against the daily rains that drenched everyone.

In the meantime Lt. (jg) Hanna had made arrangements with the 77th CBs to find us some hot chow that night. Despite the fact that it was past their regular chow hours, their entire galley force cooked up a meal of vienna sausages, peas, carrots and coffee. It really hit the spot and we are forever grateful for their courtesy. At that same time they offered to feed our men until such time as our own galley was functioning.

The next morning working parties were dispatched to Purata to load our trucks and send the gear to the new campsite where work was started clearing and preparing it for use. A constant stream of trucks kept flowing in from Purata with our supplies. They were then unloaded and sent back for more.

During this time our bulldozer was busy clearing out the jungle and preparing an area for stowing the cargo. It seemed an impossible task to develop the mudhole and swamp in the heart of the jungle into a decent camp. Our trucks were bogging down in the mud continually and the caterpillar would have to drag them out. A large bulldozer was borrowed then from the 71st CB.s to help get the camp ready and to start throwing up a road. The area was so boggy that even these powerful cats surrendered, at times, to the mud.

The water table had to be lowered before we could make the area habitable. A plan was developed for digging drainage ditches with feeders, the whole system to discharge into a nearby creek. At the same time a road embankment was thrown up by casting volcanic ash from ditches along the road onto the grade. In this manner, a high, dry access road was led into camp.

This system of drainage soon showed results as the water level in the swamp was lowered. Several springs were uncovered and one spring was developed with a flow of 3000 gallons per hour. The water was pure and fresh and was used to supply the entire camp.

While our first night (January 21) on the island had been free of air raids, we soon found that was an unusual occurrence. Artillery units which were located all around us kept up a continuous nightly barrage, firing at Jap concentrations of troops. Then, during raids, anti-aircraft units threw up a steady barrage of ack-ack fire at enemy planes picked up by the searchlights. This AAA fire managed to keep the Jap bombers high in the sky, greatly reducing the accuracy of their aim.

Usually, the night fighters managed to turn back the largest part of the enemy bomber squadrons but several fought their way through to the Torokina beachhead to lay their eggs. Little material damage was done, although occasional casualties to units around the airstrips resulted.

Little difficulty was experienced in getting all hands into foxholes after the first air raid. The danger of falling ack ack flak was evident when the morning after an air raid, punctured tents were the result, and vividly demonstrated the advisability of getting under cover. Further emphasis was given when several bombs fell nearby.

The general attitude on Guadalcanal was characterized by the attitude of Chief Charlie Augatis who dismissed the alerts with a casual "its only a practice, it doesn't mean a thing." However, on Bougainville Charlie was always found in his foxhole, before everyone else, immediately after the siren started to wail. He contended then that "this is carrying practice a little too far."

One night will always be remembered by our men who happened to be working on the beach and on the ship. A Jap bomber slipped through our defenses and lazily maneuvered overhead above the ack ack in the searchlights. The shriek and whoosh of falling bombs was heard and before it was all over eleven bombs fell between the beach and the ship. A regular blanket of flak fell around everyone but, curiously enough, no one was hurt.

The Marines had made the initial landing in force on the Torokina beachhead with the 71st, 53rd and 75th CB.s not far behind. The Seabees built a main thoroughfare from the beach to Torokina and Piva fighter strips and the bomber strip, calling it "Marine Highway" to honor their very close friends.

In expressing their thanks to the Seabees, the Marines in turn posted a sign near the strips reading:

"When we enter the City of Tokyo  
With our caps at a jaunty tilt,  
We'll be marching down a highway  
That the Seabees built."

The major portion of the camp was completely constructed by February 11. The chow hall, sick bay, offices, ship service stores and transportation shops were up. A water

## COMPANY C HISTORY



Camp Area on Green Island

supply system had been installed and most of the men's tents permanently erected with the drainage problem solved.

Our stay at Bougainville was very pleasant. We could attend movies every night at the surrounding camps and showed movies in our own camp area with an Army Special Service 16mm. projector every other night. Our chow hall and sick bay were the show places of the island. Dr. Cohen took special pleasure in showing our camp to visitors. We also received a special commendation from the Island Command for the first class camp that was constructed and for the huge malarial control project we undertook and completed in addition to our regular work.

Our gangs were transported to work in amphibious ducks which took the men directly to the ships. Of course, everyone got a salt water bath on each of these trips when waves were coming over the prow of the duck, but travel time to and from our camp to the ships was materially shortened by this mode of travel.

None of us will ever forget Bougainville and its insects. The jungle was full of bugs and crawlers of all kinds. Some harmless, and several varieties not so harmless. We soon learned to exercise caution on crawling into the "sack." The place was over-run with centipedes of all types and descriptions. Many were 12 inches long and had a wicked set of jaws. These centipedes seemed adept at crawling under the bedding and when any one tried to get in they would bite. It proved rather painful. The victim would be weak and sick and the infected area would swell up. It seemed that poisonous venom was secreted from their jaws that, while not deadly, did make the victim very miserable.

Poisonous scorpions were plentiful, as were millions of mosquitoes, flies, moths, and many funny insects, both winged and earth-bound, that most of us had never seen. There were multi-colored varieties of all species. Ants of all sizes and descriptions pestered all hands and got into everything.

We saw little animal life except for the coconut bear and, of course, rats. Many snakes were encountered but all seemed rather harmless. However, the birds were something to rave about. Their plumage was colorful and their screeching was deafening at times. Song birds were rare. The sky at night was full of bats flitting about but they never seemed to trouble anyone.

February 27 will remain as a day of disappointment in the memory of our chiefs. A chief's mess hall had been erected and was to be put to use on that day. At midnight on February 26, Lieutenant Vercoe received a radio dispatch ordering our transfer to "Green Island" via FAG TRANS.

All stevedoring operations on Bougainville were secured on February 27, and work was started on knocking down the camp and crating our gear once again. The chiefs' mess was one of the first to go. These operations continued until March 3 when we started to haul all of our gear to Purata Island where it was to be loaded aboard an LST.

Purata Island had changed in the six weeks since we landed. Nothing remained of the huge piles of cargo and rations. Practically the whole island was deserted and we had the place to ourselves. Even the mud was gone.

The LST which was to carry us to Green Island arrived shortly after noon on March 4th and the loading of our gear was immediately started. The bulk of it was loaded by midnight and work was knocked off till the next morning. By 0930 on March 5th all our gear and equipment was on and all hands piled aboard for the trip to our new base. The LST backed away from the beach and proceeded to a rendezvous with a convoy at 1200.

Our trip to Green Island was uneventful. Some apprehension was felt at what we might run into at Breen, as landings there had been effected only a short time before. However, we soon found out that this new island was a very quiet, peaceful place compared with the one we were leaving. The day after we left Torokina, the Japs started an offensive there that caused many uneasy hours for the personnel on the beachhead, despite the fact that the Japs couldn't break through. Jap artillery fire caused some casualties. Commander Dunbar of the 6th Special, while stopping over at our camp enroute from Torokina to Emirau in August reported that several Jap shells had landed in the middle of our old camp area. It seemed that Lady Luck had been with us.

Our convoy reached the lagoon entrance at dawn on March 6, and by 0730 the LST had beached and our cargo started to roll off. All hands had an early breakfast and were ready to pitch in and get settled in the new camp. We were to have no opportunity to spend any time building a camp since we continued our stevedoring operations.

A cargo ship arrived early the next morning and we



The Show's the Thing

**From the 9th Special Seabees at Bougainville, the 53rd and 77th are mentioned.**