

# Battle of Bougainville

## 37th Infantry Division's Battle for Hill 700



Some key locations in the campaign

The American strategic plan was clear: Move up the Solomon Island chains to open a direct route to the Philippines, take the Philippines and then move out from there on to Tokyo.

In 1942, the U.S. Marines drove the Japanese out of the first Solomon island, Guadalcanal; in 1943, painfully, bloodily, the 37th Infantry Division pushed through the equally impenetrable jungles of New Georgia, sweeping what was left of the 15,000 defending Japanese into the sea. The next and final Solomon island was Bougainville, and there the tactics were dramatically altered though the strategic concept remained the same.

In early November 1943, the 3rd Marine Division and the 37th Infantry Division invaded Bougainville with an offensive-defensive mission. There was no thought of pushing across this 250-square-mile island and eliminating the 25,000 Japanese in a brutal, costly, slow action. Instead, the plan was to take only a small piece of Bougainville, perhaps six square miles, including the deepest, best port at Empress Augusta Bay. Within those six square miles, a major airfield would be built, from which American planes could range over the South Pacific as far forward as the Philippines, assuring security from the air for the convoys and task forces that would invade the Philippines in October 1944.

By November 13, the Marine and Army units had reached their 2-mile-deep objective against relatively moderate enemy ground resistance and airstrikes. During the next four months, the position was consolidated, the airfield was built, and the springboard to the Philippines was set. Fighting had been limited; it was obvious that the Japanese had assumed—and hoped—that the American troops would go after them in the jungle terrain, where the Japanese could inflict heavy casualties on the Americans as they hacked their way, yard by yard, through those jungles. By March 1944, the Japanese realized that the Americans were going to sit this one out, manning defensive lines. If they wanted to kill their enemy and, most important, take out the vital airfield, the Japanese would have to attack head-on.

The American perimeter was dotted with a number of hills and valleys. The famed Hill 700 was right in the center of the perimeter, towering above the entire area with a clear view of the airfield. Hill 700 was the linchpin of the American defenses, the key to holding the perimeter positions to its right and left and eventually the airfield. The 3rd Marine and 37th Infantry divisions were spread thinly along this two-mile perimeter, with forces in reserve that could be sent forward wherever the Japanese might break through. Patrols were sent out to find and fix Japanese troop concentrations. A few prisoners were taken, and several quickly confessed that the Japanese command had finally understood the U.S. defensive concept and tactical plan with Hill 700 as its heart.

On March 8, the inevitable massive Japanese attack began, and it did not wane until March 13, when Hill 700, which had been partially overrun by the Japanese, was retaken by 37th Division forces, who annihilated thousands of Japanese in the recapture phase.

At 6 a.m. on the 8th, the first artillery shell from the attacking Japanese hit in the 145th Infantry Regiment's sector. The enemy began to carry the fight to the Americans.

The American beachhead was on a coastal plain lying at the foot of the towering Crown Prince Range, volcanic mountains held by the Japanese. The enemy also occupied the rest of Bougainville—giving them a white elephant compared to the Americans' potent mouse. The two American divisions could not spread their perimeter beyond the nearest foothills overlooking the

beachhead. The best they could do was to hang on to the lesser heights that dominated the airfield and to deny those hills to enemy artillery.

Hostile fire was coming from Japanese positions on Blue Ridge, Hills 1001, 1111, 500 and 501 and the Saua River valley. Fire from only a few pieces could hit the airfield from those positions, but those meager rounds hinted at the Japanese destructive potential if they could place their cannon on the hills that the 37th Division defended, mainly Hill 700.

At 7 a.m., the 2nd Battalion, 145th Infantry, received a few stray small-arms rounds, just enough to alert all positions and encourage the men to clean their M-1 rifles. Short-range patrols discovered that the enemy was assembling in front of the 2nd Battalion, and it was thought that the major attack would be against Hill 700.

Shells continued to fall—not only on the airstrip but also on the 145th, the 6th Field Artillery Battalion, the 54th Coast Artillery Battalion, and the 77th and 36th Seabees. Casualties were light, but the Americans were tense. The inaccuracy of the Japanese fire made even the least strategic American installation subject to those wild haymakers. Helmeted repairmen kept the airstrip in operation, filling up holes and smoothing out shell craters. Planes landed and took off with casual disdain. A few planes were destroyed, however, and the possibility of declaring the bomber strip off-limits was seriously considered.

At noon the last patrol was reported in by the 145th, and the combined guns of the 135th Field Artillery, the 6th Field Artillery, the 140th Field Artillery, the 136th Field Artillery, and two battalions of the Americal Division artillery were readied for area fire on the Japanese as they moved from assembly areas behind Hills 1111 and 1000 toward the American lines. The Japanese 3rd Battalion, 23rd Infantry, and the 13th Infantry (less one battalion) crowded toward Hill 700 to join the 2nd Battalion, 23rd Infantry, which had filtered in earlier. For two hours, thousands of rounds of American medium and heavy artillery blanketed the target zone. Later, a prisoner admitted that the Japanese 3rd Battalion, 23rd Infantry, was practically annihilated during this bombardment; he said the rest of the troops escaped a similar fate by moving close enough to American lines to get within that umbrella of safety. Anticipating this ruse, U.S. artillery observers had called for fire closer and closer to the 37th's front lines.

Still, the enemy was in an excellent position. Once the Japanese closed in on the Americans, it was difficult for the U.S. artillery to reach an enemy hiding literally under the front lines. Mortars pounded away in the dark with unobserved results. The 136th Field Artillery alone expended 1,239 rounds that day. Those manning the observation posts yelled back that the enemy was scrambling up the hill after the artillery had subsided. Several booby traps and warning devices were exploded near the positions of Companies E and G, 145th Infantry, and the men in the perimeter holes replied with small arms and mortars. The enemy retaliated with rifles and knee mortars. Fog and rain made the darkness impenetrable.

During that night attack, a device cooked up by Staff Sgt. Otis Hawkins proved invaluable. As soon as the first Japanese started jimmying the barbed wire on the perimeter, Hawkins ordered mortar flares fired and wires pulled, setting off gallon buckets of oil ignited by phosphorus grenades. With help from this artificial lighting, Hawkins directed 600 rounds of 60mm mortar

fire, and the riflemen picked off many Japanese who had counted on darkness and confusion to help them achieve their goal.

At the boundary between Companies E and G, an alert sentry killed two Japanese who had squirmed through the wire, and the 2nd Battalion, 145th, reported possible penetration at Hill 700. Under cover of heavy rain and darkness, using Bangalore torpedoes and dynamite to blast holes in the wire, and pushing one full battalion directly at the forward U.S. emplacements, the Japanese had shoved their foot in the door.

Holding fast, the hopelessly overwhelmed soldiers from the 2nd Battalion, 145th Infantry, lived or died where they stood. The Japanese assaulted an isolated mortar observation post from Company E, situated on a knoll on the outer perimeter and affectionately dubbed 'Company E Nose.' The enemy managed to cut three of the four double aprons of protecting wire before a sergeant, investigating the noise, crawled out of his pillbox and discovered them. Just as the Japanese placed a Bangalore torpedo under the fourth double apron, the sergeant opened up with his Browning Automatic Rifle (BAR) and caught eight Japanese in the wire. Holding off additional Japanese with his BAR, he called in a 60mm mortar concentration, adjusted it in and around the wire, ducked back to his pillbox and then had a steady concentration dropped around—and often behind—his pillbox during the night. The sergeant and his men survived.

Not so fortunate were Sergeant William I. Carroll, Jr., Pfc John W. Cobb, Pfc Armando W. Rodriguez and Pfc Howard E. Ashley from Company G. Fighting desperately from their large emplacement, they were engulfed by Japanese who attacked them from all sides. Disregarding a possible escape route because they recognized the strategic importance of their assignment, they decided to stick it out, hoping for reinforcements.

The four soldiers fired rifles and threw hand grenades, and Rodriguez knifed an enemy soldier who got in close. His knife was later found in another dead Japanese soldier 100 yards away. One fanatical Japanese shoved a Bangalore torpedo next to the pillbox, and the explosion dazed the occupants. The Japanese then rushed the emplacement. Semiconscious, the four men fired at and wrestled with the enemy. The next day, when the bodies of the gallant Americans were recovered, 12 dead Japanese were found inside the pillbox. Probably many more of the hundreds of lifeless Japanese found around that position were killed by those four soldiers.

At dawn, elements of the Japanese 23rd Infantry, 6th Division, had occupied a portion of the north slope and two strategic positions on the crest of Hill 700, penetrating the American lines 50 yards deep and 70 yards wide. At 7 a.m., a forward observer sensed a new attack in the offing and told his battalion, 'Pour it on as close to me as you can get.' The artillery response melted the new Japanese attack. The enemy salient was further boxed in when the 145th lines were extended around the south slope of Hill 700.

At noon, elements of the 1st and 2nd battalions, 145th, counterattacked to regain the lost pillboxes. Some progress was made to the east of the penetration and on the south slope of Hill 700, but the Japanese dagger still cut into the American perimeter. Japanese artillery and mortar shells dropped on the suffering troops, and Japanese snipers pecked away. Enemy field artillery

positions were spotted on Blue Ridge, and the 135th Field Artillery plastered them. Chemical mortars whammed their shells into the rear of enemy avenues of approach.

By 10 p.m. a few more pillboxes were recovered, but the Japanese repulsed attempts to recover the remaining positions on the commanding ground of Hill 700. The reverse slope was pitted with Japanese foxholes, and reinforcements kept pushing forward over the dead bodies of their comrades, clashing head-on with the attacking Americans.

Darkness discouraged much aggressiveness, but during the night the Japanese chattered and whistled as they replenished American sandbags and enlarged American foxholes, strengthening their own precarious positions. The 135th Field Artillery alone had expended 2,305 rounds during the day. That afternoon, two light tanks from the 754th Tank Battalion had tried to wipe out pockets of resistance with little success. During the day, the Americans had lost one officer and 28 enlisted men killed and four officers and 135 men wounded. Japanese losses were 511 killed.

The night of March 9 was ominously quiet, and the next morning the Americans pounded the Japanese, who seemed to gain strength with each hour of digging time and infiltration. A provisional battalion from the 251st Anti-Aircraft Artillery occupied a sector of the 145th's line and with terrifying accuracy laid its 90mm anti-aircraft guns on point-blank targets in the hills. At 11:15 a.m. on the 10th, 36 American bombers showered targets marked by artillery smoke shells. The 135th, 140th and 136th field artillery and the 145th Infantry's cannon company kept pounding away. At noon, Japanese troops were reported moving south along the Laruma River; the American artillery made short work of this fresh target.

At 5 p.m. the 1st and 2nd battalions, 145th Infantry attacked again, assuming that the Japanese resistance had been sufficiently softened. Using Bangalore torpedoes, bazookas and pole charges, the infantrymen strove for the enemy pillboxes on the crest of Hill 700. The main line of resistance was tenuously re-established with the exception of a 30- or 40-yard gap in the lines. Four pillboxes remained in Japanese possession. Ammunition supply was a knotty problem, and the men ran out of hand grenades in the middle of the attack. Japanese artillery and mortar shells dropped sporadically.

At 6 p.m., the 37th Cavalry Reconnaissance Troop was brought south and east of Hill 700; it then advanced into ticklish positions in the Company G area. During the night, increased Japanese gibbering and scurrying in front of Cannon Hill was detected, and Lt. Col. Russell A. Ramsey's 3rd Battalion on Cannon Hill reported that the Japanese had resorted to firecrackers and other ruses to draw fire. American casualties for that day were seven enlisted men killed, and seven officers and 123 enlisted men wounded. Three hundred and sixty-three Japanese were erased. The 129th and 148th infantry sectors had been relatively quiet, although patrols invariably ran into enemy squads and platoons.

During the afternoon of March 10, Brig. Gen. Charles F. Craig, the assistant division commander, visited the regimental and battalion commanders of the 145th Infantry on the south slope of Hill 700 to observe the situation for the division commander. It was late at night before he could return in a halftrack over the bullet-swept road down which he had come.

During that night, Staff Sgt. William A. Orick of the regimental intelligence section, with two men who had joined him, had a brush with the enemy on top of Hill 700; his companions were bayoneted and evacuated to the battalion aid station. Returning alone to the site of the struggle, Orick slipped a noose of telephone wire over the foot of a Japanese officer killed in the struggle and then pulled him from the crest of the hill. On his body were found plans for the attack on the beachhead, with maps and directions. That information was rushed to the Division G-2 section.

During the early morning hours of March 11, the enemy maneuvered forward and occupied an empty pillbox on the forward slope of Hill 700. With their reverse-slope positions in front of Hill 700 as a stepping stone, the Japanese launched a new assault at dawn. The 23rd Infantry of the Japanese 6th Division attacked along the front from Hill 700 to Cannon Ridge. They came on in waves, one whole battalion attacking on a platoon front. Brandishing their prized sabers, screeching '*Chusuto!*' ('Damn them!'), the enemy officers climbed up the slope and rushed forward in an admirable display of blind courage. The men screamed in reply, '*Yaruzo!*' ('Let's do it!') and then '*Harimosu!*' ('We will do it!'). As they closed with the Americans, their leaders cried, '*San nen kire!*' or 'Cut a thousand men!'

These battle cries sounded like so much whistling in the dark to the GIs. Mowed down by heavy fire from the dug-in infantry, the Japanese kept tumbling over the bodies of their comrades, unwaveringly advancing toward the spitting guns. The battles on Hill 700 and Cannon Hill were at such short range that infantry weapons alone had to repulse the assault waves. The attack on Cannon Hill came to an end and by 8 a.m. the dazed remnants of a Japanese battalion had withdrawn, leaving hundreds of dead comrades stacked up in front of the 145th's line.

In the midst of the Japanese assault, Lieutenant Clinton S. McLaughlin, Company G's commander, dashed from pillbox to pillbox in the heat of the battle, encouraging and directing his men; he stopped only occasionally to return the fire of a few persistent Japanese whose bullets tore his clothes to shreds, punctured his canteen, and painfully wounded him twice. When the Japanese had gotten to within a few feet of the platoon's most forward position, McLaughlin jumped into the lead emplacement, which had already been outflanked by the enemy. Then he and Staff Sgt. John H. Kunkel, firing point-blank at the invaders, killed enough of them to dissipate the threat. The pile of bodies in front of their position numbered more than 185. Both McLaughlin and Kunkel were later awarded the Distinguished Service Cross.

On Hill 700, the enemy soldiers had succeeded in holding on to a part of their salient, and fresh Japanese troops kept thrusting forward, trying to occupy new positions and reinforce old ones. By this time, the 145th infantrymen were near physical exhaustion from the continuous three-day fight. Lieutenant Colonel Herb Radcliffe's 2nd Battalion, 148th Infantry, having been alerted the night before, arrived in a rear area and prepared to assist the embattled 145th Infantry in its efforts to recapture the lost positions.

Retaking the enemy-held positions on Hill 700 was a daunting undertaking. The Americans had to assault the enemy-held pillboxes by crawling up a slope so steep that a foothold was difficult to secure and maintain. Add withering machine-gun fire, rifle fire and grenades, and the obstacles looked almost insurmountable. The Japanese guns swept all approaches. Their positions were only 25 yards from and overlooking the main supply road. Their guns on the crest

of the hill covered the ridge itself with intense, accurate and deadly grazing fire. Approximately 100 yards to the rear of those ground-emplaced weapons, other machine guns in trees on the spur of the hill also swept the entire front. With the exception of a few scattered trees and a series of shallow trenches, little cover was available for troops moving up the slope.

Tanks and armored cars manned by the 37th Cavalry Reconnaissance drivers were the only safe means of moving casualties and supplies up and down the main supply road. Evacuation had been hazardous and backbreaking from the start. On the first day of the fight, litter-bearers hand-carried the wounded over a back mountain trail to the reserve area of the 1st Battalion, 145th. The route was long and painful, and the only alternative was the supply road.

On the 9th, ambulances had tried to run the gantlet and succeeded. Encouraged, a convoy of litter jeeps and ambulances from Collecting Companies A and B, 112th Medical Battalion, drove to the Company G motor pool, an area safe for motor vehicles. The route from there was dangerous, and Colonel Cecil B. Whitcomb, commander of the 145th Infantry, explained to the drivers that he would not order them to run this Japanese blockade.

Eight men went on their own anyway, and though they were under fire most of the trip, brought their casualties back safely. Drivers Bob Pittman and 'Doc' Davis were slightly nicked by mortar fragments. Private Joe Bernard of Company A had his ambulance ripped in the hood, the cab and finally the windshield by two Japanese snipers. The ambulance orderly was hit, and halftracks were called in. Seventeen halftracks thereafter made constant round-trips from the lines to the aid stations.

Against the obstacles of terrain, supply and determined Japanese resistance, the 2nd Battalion, 148th Infantry, prepared to go into action. Lieutenant Colonel Radcliffe and his five company commanders made a reconnaissance of the sector, and Radcliffe then presented his recommendations for an attack to Brig. Gen. Charles Craig, who was representing the division commander at the 2nd Battalion, 145th, command post.

The plans called for an immediate envelopment of the remaining enemy positions on Hill 700 by Company E. The plans were approved, and at 1:20 p.m. on the 11th the first Company E scout moved cautiously over the line of departure.

The lead squad of Company E's right platoon crawled awkwardly up the precipitous slope. Led by Lieutenant Broadus McGinnis, 11 men of the squad went over the crest together. Eight men were killed instantly, mowed down by machine-gun fire from their front and flanks. Lieutenant McGinnis and three other men dived safely into a connecting trench on the enemy's side of the hill and captured a pillbox by killing the three Japanese occupants.

From his vantage spot in the pillbox, McGinnis shouted instructions back to the rest of his platoon throughout the afternoon. At 4 p.m., as he peered out of the pillbox to determine enemy intentions, he was killed by a burst of machine-gun fire. Further advances were deemed suicidal, and at 7 p.m. Company E was ordered to cease the attack, reorganize, hold the ground it was able to occupy and supplement its defenses with one platoon of heavy machine guns from Company H.

Wire teams from Company G strung concertina wire in the gap between platoons, which was covered by fire from positions on the reverse slope of the hill. The rest of the battalion, meanwhile, had settled down for the night in the forward assembly area. The operations for the day, though unsuccessful in restoring the main line of resistance, did prevent further penetration by the Japanese.

At 8 a.m. the next morning, Companies E and F attacked again in a coordinated double envelopment, with Company G in reserve and Company H in general support. The two attacking companies edged slowly around the hill to the right and left, remaining in defilade as much as possible in order to avoid the Japanese machine guns that dominated the ridge in both directions. Then they dispersed along the steep slope. Using every means at their disposal, from smoke and fragmentation grenades to flamethrowers, rocket launchers and dynamite, the Americans began to make their way to the top of Hill 700 against undiminished Japanese resistance.

On the Company F side of the hill, a flamethrower team—Pfc Robert L.E. Cope and Pfc Herbert Born of 2nd Battalion Headquarters Company—crawled up to destroy an enemy pillbox from which machine-gun fire held up the advance of the company. The two soldiers had joined the regiment after the New Georgia campaign and were now seeing their first action. They worked forward, dragging the bulky equipment over terrain dangerously exposed to Japanese automatic-weapons fire until they were 10 yards from the pillbox. At that point, they suddenly rose up in full view of the Japanese and doused the emplacement with liquid fire, destroying it and killing its occupants. The pair then came back through the same hazardous area, recharged their flamethrower and returned to destroy another pillbox. They repeated the action a third and fourth time. Altogether, they crossed the exposed sector five times and knocked out four enemy positions.

The rocket launcher, or bazooka, had not yet been fired in action by the 148th. Staff Sergeants Jim L. Spencer and Lattie L. Graves told Lieutenant Oliver Draine that they would volunteer to take a crack at it. Preceding the company until they reached a shallow trench 20 yards from the nearest Japanese pillbox, they selected their target, and with much anticipation they launched their first rocket. Although this round completely missed the target, the men were so pleased with their partial success that they immediately reloaded the weapon, aimed more carefully and launched a second rocket. This time they scored a direct hit and demolished the pillbox. Now greatly encouraged, they concentrated their rocket fire on other Japanese positions, with Spencer holding the bazooka and Graves reloading it, yelling, 'Make way for the artillery!'

Spencer and Graves dodged from one covered position to another, blasting away, either killing the occupants of the pillboxes or frightening them into flight. During the intervals between loading and firing the launcher, Graves blasted away with his M-1 rifle, and on one occasion killed three fleeing Japanese. Spencer and Graves fired the bazooka periodically for three hours.

Private First Class Jennings W. Crouch and Pfc William R. Andrick, armed with BARs, advanced with their platoon in the initial movement across the fire-swept ridge. Then, under withering Japanese fire, they ran toward enemy-occupied pillboxes on the rest of the hill. From their final position 15 yards from the pillboxes, they began their assault, firing their rifles from the hip as they advanced. Crouch had an eye shot out, among other wounds, and one .25-caliber



bullet went through Andrick's left wrist. Upon reaching the pillbox, they poured a steady stream of fire into the entrance until all the occupants were killed.

Over in the Company E sector, Pfc John E. Bussard was out for vengeance. Thirty-six years old, married and the father of three children, Bussard was draft exempt, but he had enlisted immediately after learning that a younger brother had been killed in action on New Guinea. Eventually he arrived overseas with but one idea—to avenge his brother. By March 10, he had killed one Japanese soldier, but having the ledger read one-for-one far from satisfied him.

In the unsuccessful afternoon attack on March 11, Bussard volunteered to climb the high slope to observe the enemy installations, although four others of his company had been killed and eight wounded in earlier attempts. Snaking his way inch by inch, he reached a large tree from which he could watch the Japanese. The enemy, well aware of his presence, kept him pinned down to prevent his return, and he was unable to report back to his commanding officer with his observations until an hour after sundown.

The next morning, when the attack was in danger of bogging down, Bussard again volunteered, this time to knock out with anti-tank grenades the installations he had approached the day before. Passing through intense fire, he gained the shelter of the same tree. He fired eight rounds, but was unable to observe the effect because he had to fire between bursts from enemy guns, pulling in his head and shoulders to escape the answering hail of bullets.

Since the results could not be determined, Bussard was summoned to his platoon's command post, a mere dent in the side of the hill partially sheltered by a 3-foot boulder. Now it was decided to use a rocket launcher against the pillboxes, and again the irrepressible Bussard volunteered for the assignment. 'I know my way up there better than anyone else,' he stated convincingly.

Setting out a third time, now carrying a bazooka as well as his rifle, he reached the tree that had sheltered him twice before. Ammunition supply was a problem, but this was overcome by passing each round by hand along a continuous line extending up the side of the hill until the top man could toss the shell over the last 15 yards to Bussard. Twice the rocket fell short of his reach, and each time he had to risk enemy fire to recover it.

After six rounds Bussard was told to cease firing, again because of inability to observe the effect. He threw the launcher over the cliff and rushed to a hole 15 feet away where three members of his platoon had remained, pinned down, the entire night before. With these three men he waited to take part in the assault that they knew would follow, and during the next few minutes they were fired upon by Japanese in the trees to their left. Bussard was wounded in the shoulder, but he managed to return the fire, killing one of the Japanese.

Shortly before Company E attacked, six Japanese riflemen, with bayonets fixed, charged out of a position 20 yards away. All six were killed, two by Bussard himself. But his luck had run out and he was killed by their fire.

Although the effects of Bussard's grenades and rockets could not be observed while he was using the weapons, two of his pillbox targets were later found to be demolished and 250 dead Japanese, many of them doubtless his victims, were counted in the 50-yard area immediately in front of the tree behind which he had taken up his position. His brother's death had been avenged many times over, at the cost of his own life.

Meanwhile, Pfc Vernon D. Wilks, a BAR man from Company E, had reached a 1-foot depression protecting him from a machine gun 30 yards away. During the next two hours Wilks remained in the depression, firing more than 25 magazines of ammunition and using four different BARs, although two members of his company were killed and 11 wounded within a few yards of him.

By rising to a kneeling position between enemy bursts and firing well and fast before a Japanese machine gun was again directed at him, Wilks inflicted heavy casualties on the gun crew that was holding up his company. He also distracted the attention of another enemy machine-gun crew so that their effect against Company F was materially weakened.

By noon, Captain Richard J. Keller of Company E and Lieutenant Sidney S. Goodkin of Company F reported by radio to the battalion commander: 'We believe we have got them. We are going over the top together.' They personally led the assault, shouting defiance at the Japanese and encouragement to their own men.

Fifteen minutes after the charge commenced, Captain Keller was struck down by Japanese fire and seriously wounded in the chest, but Lieutenant Sam Hendricks, a University of Tennessee football player, assumed command with no interruption in the advance. Lieutenant Goodkin himself was leading his men despite painful arm burns he had suffered earlier. A smoke grenade had exploded in the middle of several incendiary grenades and ignited them. The fires had menaced two wounded men in the same hole, so Goodkin had tossed out the burning grenades one by one to safeguard his men, severely scorching his arms and hands.

The American troops stormed up the hill and over the crest. Staff Sergeant Jack Foust of Company E spotted an abandoned light machine gun, disengaged the weapon from its mount and, firing as he held it in his arms, killed a Japanese machine-gunner shooting from a tree at the troops leading the charge. On both sides of the hill the remaining emplacements of the enemy were being systematically wiped out. By 4 p.m., the 2nd Battalion had regained Hill 700, and the American lines were restored.

The few Japanese who had survived the onslaught would not give up. Mopping-up operations were repeatedly interrupted by sporadic fire from two pillboxes, each occupied by a lone rifleman who had apparently tunneled into the steep hill and could not be dislodged. But there was one trick left, and it remained for Sergeant Harold W. Lintemoot and Pfc Gerald E. Shaner of the 2nd Battalion Ammunition and Pioneer Platoon to pull it out of their bag.

Bringing demolition equipment to a point behind the crest of the hill, the pair prepared explosive charges, fastening six half-pound blocks of TNT to a board about four feet long and attaching a slow-burning fuse. In turn, Lintemoot and then Shaner scurried up to the pillboxes. The hill

provided them cover until they were within 10 yards of the emplacement. Then they rushed over the remaining distance, placing the charges on top of the pillboxes and withdrawing to nearby positions that offered them protection from the flying debris. In seconds, the pillboxes were liquidated. No Japanese now contested the occupation of the hill.

The battle for Hill 700 was the bloodiest in which the 37th Infantry Division had yet participated, exceeding in carnage any single action of the New Georgia campaign. A great clearing stood on the reverse slope of Hill 700 where the enemy had made its attack up the hill. Fifteen hundred Japanese were buried in graves and foxholes on that side of the hill. When the battle had ended they were piled on top of one another in all types of grotesque positions, some completely unmarked except for clean bullet wounds in their chests or heads, others without legs or arms. Captured prisoners claimed that the four days of fighting had resulted in the virtual annihilation of the 2nd and 3rd battalions of the Japanese 23rd Infantry and the 13th Infantry, which had been pitted against this thin, narrow front of the 37th Infantry Division.

The battle at Hill 700 was the first defensive action of the 37th Division. Heretofore the division had been on the offensive. Its mission on Bougainville had been to set up a perimeter and defend the airfield. Japanese capture of the hill would have imperiled the whole installation at Empress Augusta Bay.

Japanese staff work during the battle had been good. They had correctly evaluated the importance of the hill and had cleverly approached it through the defiles in the mountains. They had performed magnificently in transporting supplies and ammunition over the mountains and through the jungles. They had hand-carried large guns and placed them on almost inaccessible mountains. They fought up a steep slope that would have been difficult to climb empty-handed. They attacked in force on a narrow front and took advantage of a dark, rainy night to penetrate a key section of the American lines. The Japanese took tremendous losses without wavering. They held their positions until exterminated. At no time in its campaigns in the Pacific did the 37th Division meet enemy soldiers equal to these in valor or ability. This was the real test of the fighting power of the division.

The defense of the hill was committed to the 145th Infantry. The point of the attack was within the sector of the 2nd Battalion, but the whole regiment was eventually engaged in the fight, with the entire division behind it in support. The artillery of the 37th Division and of the entire corps area had been placed so that it could be used in support of an action on any part of the perimeter. The Reconnaissance Troop took a place in the line. The 117th Engineers laid aside their picks and shovels and, taking up rifles, took the place of infantry. The 2nd Battalion of the 148th Infantry made the counterattack that cleaned off the ridge. Quartermaster troops, ordnance men and medics brought up supplies and ammunition and carried away the wounded. The MPs patrolled the roads and fought off the souvenir hunters. The straggler line was used not to keep the front troops from coming back but to keep the sightseers from going forward. The game was over.

This article was written by Stanley A. Frankel and originally appeared in the September 1997 issue of *World War II*.

Originally published by World War II magazine. Published Online: June 12, 2006