

Bloody Battle for Biak; A Soldier's Story

By Thomas J. Smith, I Co., 162nd Regt.

Editor's Note: Tom sent me this story after interviewing him at the 41st Reunion in New Orleans. It originally ran as a serial in his local newspaper. Tom was spurred to write this account following the publicity given the 50th Anniversary of the D-Day Invasion in 1994. I have omitted some of the background information included in the original story, and inserted photographs copied at the National Archives in Washington DC

The landing took place on 27 May, 1944 on the east coast of Biak. I should have known we were in trouble when I saw the Japanese bayonet training course along the beach at Bosnek. The lead battalion was the 3rd of the 162nd with the lead company being I Co. (my unit). At about 7,000 yards west of the village of Bosnek, the coral ridges approached within 40 or 50 yards of the coast and became vertical coral and limestone cliffs, forming a narrow defile. Here, the advanced I Co. encountered the first organized Jap resistance. On the ocean side of this Parai Defile was the mouth of a cave that water boiled from, forming a 50-foot wide river that was about waist deep.



I Co. and the rest of the 3rd Bn. Was held up here for several hours by two Japanese machine gun nests and dozens of snipers in caves. Some caves were as high as 100 feet up the cliffs and impossible to reach from the ground. I saw my first real hero here. One of K Company's sergeants took off his pack, helmet and side arms and climbed out of sight through vines and jungle growth. We all thought he was a goner for sure. But after about 30 minutes we heard his M1 Garand rifle several times and he came back down the same way he went up. These machine guns had knocked out six of our guys and held us up for three hours. When we began to move across the river I saw my first American who I knew killed. Sgt. Wood got one shot between his eyes by a sniper.

The night of 27 May we dug in for the night about half way between the Parai Defile and Mokmer village, where the first targeted airfield was. Though several of our other units had a bad time, we were not attacked. But a Jap major and senior sergeant did walk into our position about an hour after dark. We sent them to Shinto heaven pronto. Also, our artillery shelled the area around us so close that hot pieces of shrapnel fell on us. My best Army buddy, John W. Story Jr., my friend all through training, and now my fox hole buddy, had a piece burn through his fatigues. Little did we know this was just a preview of the hell that awaited us the next day, 28 May.

At first light I Co. moved out down the coast road and, after knocking out some Japanese in bamboo houses and burning them to the ground, we moved off the beach on a road pushed up hurriedly by a bulldozer operated by a most brave soldier from the 116th

Combat Engineers. I often wondered how this man went about his business with bullets and mortar fire all around without getting hit. After we got up on the higher road, the ocean was behind us, down a 30-40 foot drop. Here, the Japanese came in behind us and cut the 3rd Bn. Off from the 2nd by about 1,000 feet leaving the 2nd still on the beach.

About a half mile from our position was a cliff 240 feet high. In the cliff were hundreds of caves and 50 by 50 feet sump holes. The caves held at least 1,000 men of the 222nd Imperial Army Regt and at least another 200-400 special naval forces. They had 90mm mortars, 20 heavy machine guns, 20 light machine guns, and eight anti-aircraft guns (40mm and 20mm). I Co. and K Co. had walked into a trap. We had only one operational field radio and very little water. Since Biak lies one degree off the Equator, the temperature was around 110-120 degrees at noon, so water was a big problem. We took any cloth and soaked up mud puddles in the road to comfort the wounded.

The Japanese hit us with 200-400 man banzai charges, tanks and hundreds of personnel mortar rounds. We had nowhere to go, no time to dig in. It was a straight drop 30 feet to the water. We killed all of the attacking Japs and thanked God we had two medium Sherman tanks from 603th Tank Co. cut off with the 3rd Bn. They routed the Jap tanks that morning.



We lost more than 100 dead and another 200-300 wounded. I lost six close friends that day. But Storey and I were still okay. We had some awful wounded men, legs and arms gone, eyes gone. Several had as many as 15 holes in them. The only way we could get them out was to tear off their clothes and tie them to stretchers, then lower them down to waiting Amtrac landing craft (crawlers). As the Amtracs came and left, the Japanese fired at them from the limestone cliffs. In the background there was always the aak-aak guns.

Around 5:30 p.m., what was left of I Co., K Co. and L Co. were ordered to pull back to the 2nd Bn. Or be wiped out that night. We were not to stop for wounded or dead. My C.O., Capt. Eulon Richardson told me to pick up the EE8-Fieldphone and radio and bring them out. I weighed 130 pounds at that time and the communications gear weighed 80, and I still had my own gear, ammo and weapon.

At this time, as we were on the move, I saw why our artillery had not supported us. While we were cut off, the Army artillery spotter and the Navy artillery officer were both dead, lying at the foot of a tree. My friends, Dunlap, Powerhouse and Lt. Folsom of K. Co had also been killed, and dozens of others. Folsom had been squashed by a tank as it wheeled around.

We were told to move as fast as possible. Japanese machine guns on a 50-foot ridge, adjacent to the beach and palm trees cut down many of our men. One was my friend, Frost. He was running next to me, when bullets hit him and Sgt. Albroginer. One bullet hit my left ankle. Three bullets hit the EE8 field phone on my left hip and five bullets hit

the radio I was carrying on my right shoulder. It knocked me down, but my ankle had only a flesh wound. We made it through to the 2nd Bn. And pulled behind them for the night on the beach, dreading the night and the following days.

The night of 28 May was active, but not as active as the sector in front of us held by the 2nd Bn. 162nd. It was still as lively as when we were cut off. Lt. Medera, and what was left of I Co. platoon held the 30 foot ridge above us and east of the Japanese, on the same ridge. We were down to about 60 percent strength and really demoralized. At about 9:30am I was sitting at the bottom of the 30-foot ridge, by a bamboo house, listening for our new EE8 Field phone to ring, when I saw a cousin, Quill Smith from Grayson, GA. I went through infantry training at Camp Wheeler with him. He and three of his heavy weapons platoon buddies were sitting at the base of a palm tree about 30 feet from me.

I knew I could hear the phone ring, so I left my rifle by the phone and walked over to them. As I squatted down (Georgian for “kneeling down”) the area I had just left exploded. Five men of our Co. HQ were killed out right. They were leaning on the same ridge, five feet from my phone. Six more were killed on the ridge 30 feet above my phone. Lt. Medera had his right arm ripped off at the shoulder. Thirty-five other men were seriously wounded and flailing around on the ground, screaming. Parts of their bodies were lying all around. My cousin, Quill Smith, had a big chunk gone out of his forearm. The man next to me was killed instantly. The man on the other side of Quill was killed and there was a big chunk of steel imbedded in the palm above our heads. We had been accidentally shelled by our own Navy cruiser right off the beach. The Navy’s artillery officer had been killed the day before.

Down the beach from our position about 500 yards, the Japanese tried to trap us again. They hit our cannon company and Co. B of 1st Bn. 162nd Reg. In a fierce, short battle. The cannon company took many casualties and B Co. even more. But the Japanese banzai charge was stopped and most of the 200 Japanese were killed or ran off.



Our 3rd and 2nd battalions were so completely beaten, our battalion C.O., Lt. Col. Paul Hollister, directed that we walk back, fighting when necessary, eight miles to above the Parai Defile and water cave before nightfall. (This was called a “strategic withdrawal”, a U.S. Marine term for retreat!) As we pulled back down the beach to the defile, two platoons of the 2nd Bn. and two of the tanks brought up the rear. The walking wounded and many litter cases went along with us. As we approached the cannon company battle area in the jungle, we could see what a terrible price was paid by both sides. Many were lying dead in the road. The tanks went right over them. Some popped and burst like over-ripe grapes, sometimes slinging grime all over those close by.

As we waded the narrow river (the Japanese had blown up the bridge the night before – Either the Japs or our 116th Combat Engineers blew it up about six times that week), all the men who could dunked themselves in the water, trying to wash the filth off their bodies and clothes. That night we pulled back to Mandon, another village, west of

Bosnek, where we landed. So exhausted, we dug in the best we could in the rainforest. Come daylight we found Sgt. Norm Smith and two other GIs dead. The Japanese had infiltrated to their advanced position and killed the men there.

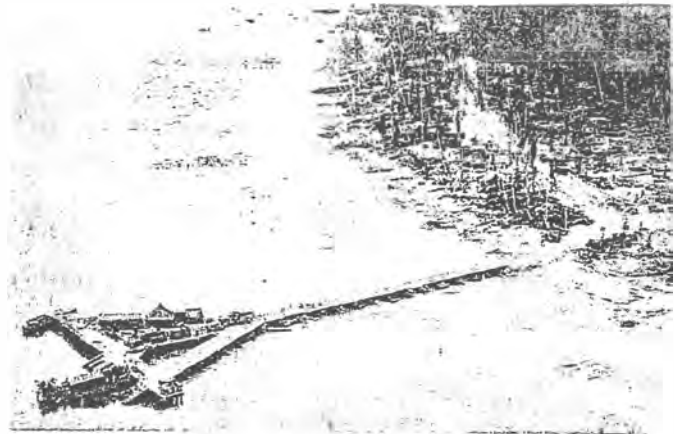
We had moved back to Mandon on 30 May to reorganize the 3rd Bn. Just at dark, the Japanese five-inch naval guns above began to pound us, blowing up an ammo dump and killing several of our men. About that time our own A-20 attack bombers came in low and strafed our troops, killing even more. We were in their grid and they didn't know it.



Jap 5" Naval Gun

I lost my best buddy, John W. Storey Jr., that evening. No one knew which raid got him. A shell took off his right leg at the hip. I ran over to where he lay. He looked in my face, gasped twice and was gone. I cried like a child as I took his dog tag and other personal effects to give to Sgt. Kelly. Storey truly had a premonition of death. He told me just before we loaded on the LCI that he would not make it this time and wanted me to take two letters; one for his mother and dad and one for his sweetheart. But I would not. I did not want to believe anything like that would happen. I wished many times that I had. I did not find any letters in his personal effects. The few things I found and took off him that night, his family did not receive until the spring of 1958, from St. Louis. Storey was truly an all-American boy. He was the same age as I, 19, tall, handsome and a varsity football player in Atlanta. What a waste of a fine human being. God rest his soul.

The westward advance to the aerodromes was underway again on 4 June. For three days, the 162nd Rgt. tried to break through the Parai Defile, and other Japanese strong points. But after losing another dozen men at the narrow road and cliffs over the river they tried another plan. One of the 603rds' tanks had been knocked out and several of its crew killed. That blocked the road. So the 3rd Bn. 162nd was loaded on amphibious craft and carried to a landing point at Parai Jetty, about a mile past the west of the river. We met strong enemy resistance and it was impossible to make much headway.



T-Jetty and road showing path of advance

About an hour before dark we were ordered to form a perimeter and prepare for a hard night. Sgt. Kelly told me and another runner, Private Crider, to bury some of our dead who we had left when we pulled back on 29 May. The detail was to decrease some of the stench. We buried two men who had laid there seven days. This was 6 June 1944, and in the Pacific a body would be covered with blowflies and maggots in about two hours. You can imagine what condition these bodies were in.

Crider grabbed one and I took a redhead. We dug shallow graves in the sand. Before covering them, we took a dog tag for the Graves Registration and put the other one between their teeth, so they could be identified when uncovered. We also took personal effects to give our first sergeant; wallets, money, etc. These men were from B. Co., 1st Bn. and not our company, so we did not know them. In the wallet of the redheaded sergeant was the last letter he received in early May. The letter had a picture of his pretty wife and two small children. She said in the letter how they all missed him and loved him and were waiting for their daddy to return home. I could only cry. I know they would never see him again and did not even know he was dead. This was only the beginning of what I had to do for many other soldiers later in the Philippines.

That night, I was along in some tree roots that had been knocked over by artillery. I was very lonely and the smell of the bodies seemed to stick to me. Next morning, as we prepared to shove off toward Mokmer, I realized why rotten flesh was so strong in my hole position. I found I had a dead Japanese partly covered with sand as my companion. In fact I had rested my head on his boot, **thinking it was a root.**

We made it to Mokmer on 7 June, but still had a long way and another month of fighting before the island was secure. That day came 20 July, but by then our clothes just rotted off and some of the men had only their undershorts. Big jungle sores were on our faces, under our arms and between our legs, where moisture and filth collected. We had diarrhea so bad we didn't even take down our pants. We didn't have time. This was also a big killer. The heat, rain day and night, humidity and tropical diseases also took a toll on the Japanese.



This is my story of what some of us were doing in the Southwest Pacific when D-Day took place in Europe 14,000 miles away. I dedicate this story of my World War II experience on Biak Island to my grandson Justin W. Smith, and hope and pray he will never have to experience anything like it.

Epilogue: My grandson and I returned to Biak in 1994 for a nostalgic trip after fifty years of memories.