

## Machine Gun Ordeal on Biak, Sixty Years On

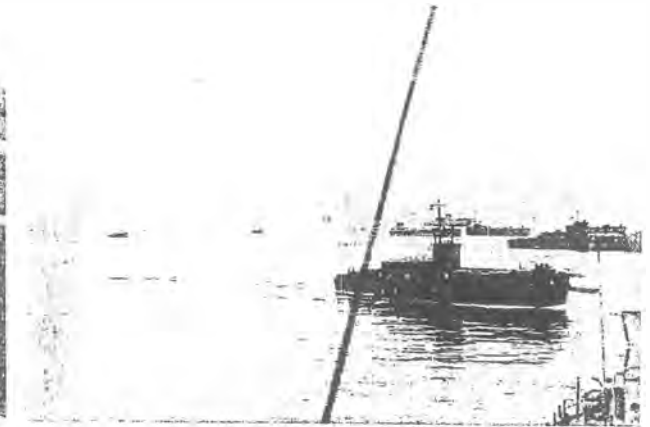
By Fred Kielsingard, Anti-Tank Co., 162nd Rgt.

Editors Note: The story that follows was actually written in 1971, but was submitted by Fred to the *Jungleer* Editor last year. As it relates to the "D-Day" theme on the cover, this seemed like a good time to share it with our readers. Photos are from my collection copied at the National Archives, Washington DC.

As our [Anti-Tank] Company was known as a bastard outfit, with the different platoons often attached to separate battalions of the regiment, our scope was quite limited and sort of boils down to a worm's eye view of World War II.



**162nd on their way from New Guinea**



**LCIs and LSTs going in for landing; sky full of smoke from naval & aerial bombardment**

Our roughest campaign as a Company was Biak. We landed after the beach was secured and began by unloading an L.S.T. on the double. As I recall it was mainly ammo and petrol. After about half unloaded, about 4 Jap light bombers made a strafing and bombing run on us and other ships nearby. We were inside, working like badgers and it sounded like hail on a tin roof and then a heavy thud. We ran out and heard more planes and hurriedly took shelter inside the ship.

After it was over there was a Jap plane lying in shallow water near the port side of our ship. It was discovered that the thud was a bomb that hit the deck and proved to be a dud. Someone said the gunners threw it overboard after knocking out the plane. That was our introduction to Biak, with the worst yet to come, not by planes, however.

After the initial supplies were unloaded, we were assigned line company duty, at first setting up a perimeter around the air strip. Shortly thereafter we were to guard a trail crossing the Island. It was late in the day and we spent our first night on the coast overlooking the Bay. It was extremely frustrating not being able to dig in as most of Biak was solid coral. Our picks would bend over until they looked like fish hooks. That night a Jap recon plane came over and dropped flares. We expected a attack, but fortunately none came. The next morning another recon plane flew over our position so low we could see the expression on the pilot's face. He then headed for the ships out in the Bay.

They were throwing everything at him but somehow he made it thru this wall of flak, but we heard later our fighters finally tagged him out at sea.

Next day we started out for the ridges. As I recall, our Company was all together at that time. The majority of our Company including the first platoon was positioned upon one ridge. The trail ran over a series of ridges. On the next ridge some distance away we were to set up a defense. As we were climbing the last steep slope of the first ridge, my friend Al Janosky reached out to give me a hand as I was carrying someone's pack along with my own gear. It seems it had been raining and the trail was slippery. Shortly thereafter a member of my platoon, Steve Gardner, made a recon up the ridge and we heard a shot shortly thereafter. He came back with a Nip rifle that barely had the Cosmoline wiped off. He said we should see the size of the Nip who was the former owner of that rifle. Over 6 ft tall and bigger than any he'd ever seen.

Just before dark I was told to take my squad about midway between this ridge and the next where the other platoon was set up and act as a listening post. We had no telephone and no other means of communication but ours was not to wonder why. I was a Corporal at the time, but we were short handed for non-coms, due primarily to malaria. There were about six in our squad and we deployed on the upper side of the trail, scattered out on the coral rock. We had no machine gun, only rifles and grenades. Shortly after dark the action began and continued throughout the night until noon the next day. It was a dark night and it sounded like the entire Jap army was coming down the hollow between the two ridges some 100 yards from our position.

Their scouts had located the portion of our company on the first ridge and we could hear the leader giving orders and then their machine guns would start spraying the ridge. Our boys were throwing it back at them. This action kept up most of the night. Small arms fire interspersed occasionally with knee mortars and grenades. After a while some of the Japs worked up our trail. Just below us there were several empty G.I. Water cans in the trail. They kept stumbling over them. Someone has said the Japanese language has no cuss words. But what we heard was a reasonable facsimile.

Due to being so greatly outnumbered I thought it best not to give our position away if at all possible. I was greatly hampered in this by having one of our squad prone to snoring as soon as he dozed off a bit and another newer member of our group breathing hard (audible for 25-30 feet). Besides that my own knees were knocking together so loud it sounded like a woodpecker on the shed house door. Finally that was solved by getting these boys on each side of me so I could elbow them occasionally and getting my knees down on the coral. After so long a time I couldn't hold back any longer so lobbed a grenade at the sound below. After much scrambling things were quiet, at least in that area. In the hollow and on the first ridge the action continued most of the night. Normally, at dawn, the Japs would retreat. But these nips apparently hadn't read that chapter.

It seemed like rifle fire was coming from all directions at once. I told the boys to lay low and don't fire unless they had a definite target. This kept up for several hours. Around

noon we heard many footsteps coming down the trail from the next ridge. We were greatly relieved to see it was our other platoon. A large number of Japs had unloaded by trucks below them and they had decided, after taking a considerable toll of the attackers to withdraw to the ridge where the rest of our company was on. As they came thru they told us to cover their rear, which we did and followed them back to our Company. Unfortunately, our first platoon did not fare as well as we. We saw three forms covered with ponchos. As I recall they were Al Janosky, Frank Hovoorka and Cecil Ray. We had been together since Camp Seymour, Australia, and it was a bitter pill.

It was a day or so later that our Company was to make a push along the ridge that was so savagely attacked. Jimmie Shields from Hillman, Michigan, a second cook, who distinguished himself on the ridge below our listening post by reportedly killing 28 nips with a rifle the night of the attack was acting as lead scout. I was somewhere on right flank. We got some distance along the ridge before the firing began. Finally our scout, Shields, shot a Jap who jumped behind a log. As Shields ran up to him he was shot point blank. It was several weeks before we could retrieve his body. His brother in 163 Inf. led a group of volunteers to accomplish this. On Roosevelt Ridge in New Guinea I stayed 28 days in the same hole with Jimmie Shields. He was a little guy with a big heart and plenty of guts. Another good buddy, "Block" Strauser was mortally wounded by machine gun fire while carrying out wounded from another company.

Finally the firing got so hot we were forced to set up our defensive positions prior to sending out patrols. I was standing near a buddy named Hansen from Houston, Texas. He was next to a tree. A sniper bullet struck this tree. It was an explosive bullet and showered bark all over his face. We were located all along the top of the ridge and again we could not dig in. Just before dusk Corporal McCormack on the L.M.G. located on a rocky knoll at our Company's point was hit in the calf of the leg by enemy fire. I was called to replace him. The incoming fire had not been extremely heavy but consistent.

Shortly after I took over the machine gun, an enemy plane made a strafing run, but we lucked out and he did not return. That night the moon was full, which was definitely not in our favor. Again action was not long in reaching a high intensity. Only this time the nips could see their objective. Our knob of coral had been denuded of any trees or bushes. So we were out in the open and the enemy had the advantage of cover to within 10-20 feet of our positions. With me on the point was Steve Gardner who helped out on the machine gun and more importantly knocked them off on our right flank as they attempted to rush the gun throughout the night. Steve was using a carbine at first but changed to my M1 with much better results. Other members present were Steve Counts, Art Helms, George Boruch, Steve Thachek, Paul Boston.

The attack lasted all night with hardly any let up. At one time I counted three machine guns, at least two knee mortars, besides rifles and grenades lobbed at us. The usual routine was to fire the M.G.s and at times knee mortars. Then bushes would shake on one side to get our attention. Then a nip would try to rush us on the opposite side. About every hour or so we would send two helmets back to the Company to be filled with grenades. The Japs were trying to get us to freeze on the M.G. and then rush us as we

were reloading. So I fired the shortest bursts possible no often than necessary. At one time a big nip rushed the M.G. and let out a piercing scream. Fortunately I caught him in the nick of time as he landed not far from the end of the barrel. Finally dawn came and the enemy withdrew. We likewise withdrew back to our Company perimeter. There was 19 cartridges left in the M.G. belt. As I tried to locate the snap that holds the barrel of the gun on the tripod, I found it had been shot off during the night. At the time as well as now, I consider it a miracle that we came thru this ordeal with no casualties. Our prayers had been answered. After daylight we sent out a patrol. They were shot up as they ran into stiff resistance. Luckily none were hit badly. They said there was considerable evidence of our firing out on the point during the night. We found out later we were bucking a battalion in the caves ahead of us. It was also reported that our earlier antagonists between the ridges was a company of harassing commandos. We knew it wasn't the home guard, but didn't realize it was such an elite group.

Later that day we withdrew, and were ordered back to the beach area after seven days on the ridges. As we were beginning to unwind a little, a group of our planes made a strafing run thru our area. We heard one or two guys were killed in H.Q. Co. News came that the menu was hot cakes. After our skimpy fare on a concentrated diet, we could only eat about one or two cakes. Afterward we ran patrols but don't believe any other action came near to comparing with those seven days on the ridges.

By a strange twist of fate my ordeal on the machine gun June 6, 1944 coincided with D Day on the beach at Normandy, where the outfit I'd left to join the 41<sup>st</sup>, (A Co., 116<sup>th</sup> Inf. Reg 29<sup>th</sup> Div.), suffered such heavy casualties, nearly all killed or wounded.

Sometimes our chaplain would hold services for us, even for just a few of us, and speak in not much more than a whisper, lest the Nips might hear us. My prayers were answered on so many occasions and I have no doubt that there was a divine presence guiding and sustaining us to overcome the tremendous odds we at times encountered.

As these experiences are recalled after many years, at no time do I mean to be complaining about my lot in this Jungle War. Many of my fellow servicemen endured much greater hardships. I feel very fortunate to have returned safely. Gen. MacArthur stated it well when he said "a combat infantryman is constantly a heartbeat away from eternity". It is wearing.

REFLECTIONS OF A FOOT SLOGGER  
from Fred Kielsgard

War: A series of crises, victories and defeats, mishaps and mistakes, calculations and miscalculations, prizes and surprises, wonders and blunders.

How do officers achieve good judgment? By experience. How do they get experience?  
By using poor judgment.

We should never be the host country, as the transportation saved is false economy.