



6th Special Naval Construction Battalion- Seabees

Under enemy fire- 6th Special Seabees, Second Section's Echelon One at Vella La Vella - October 1, 1943 - November 22, 1943

Second Section's Echelon One was called upon to handle cargo for 1stMAC, (First Marine Amphibious Corps) at Vella La Vella. A thirty-day supply of rations, gasoline and oil was to be stocked there. A convoy of LST's was shipping out from Guadalcanal on September 29, to deliver more supplies and troops to the new staging base, the Sixth would help load it up and discharge it. For the first time the men would be working on an unsecured island. The men were given K-Rations and ammunition. They would go in with full combat equipment. Although the Seabees did not know it, the Japanese ground troops were not a big worry even though they were stubbornly resisting the New Zealand's Third Division's efforts to pocket them in the northwest corner of the island. The major threat was Japanese air attack. Enemy flyers bombed the staging base everyday; clearly the base anti-aircraft defenses and the combat air patrol were inadequate. The Sixth's Echelon One was responsible for loading and unloading LST 460. The trucks and drivers of Company B, First Corps motor transport battalion, a Marine unit, would assist them. Knowing that every minute their LST remained on the beach it was at serious risk of air attack the officers of Echelon One plan loaded the ship so that it could be discharged in a minimum amount of time. They knew that no LST had yet been fully unloaded in the five hours time it was allowed to stay beached at the Vella La Vella staging base, and they were determined to show that it could be done.

In a driving rainstorm on September 29, the seven LST supply convoy left Guadalcanal for Vella La Vella with Echelon One and the Marine truck drivers aboard Large Slow Target 460. At one mile from the beach the LST crews completely un-dogged their doors and ramp and unclutched the ramp motor so that when the brake was released the ramp would fall of its own weight. The men on the deck watched for enemy planes. Navy gunners hung from the straps of their 20mm cannons, eyes skyward. To beef up their anti-aircraft defense, the Sixth men deck loaded the two New Zealand 40mm Bofors anti-aircraft cannons as well as all their own 50 caliber machine gun-equipped 6x6 trucks. A few hundred yards from shore, the LST's dropped their stern anchors and paid out the cables until seconds later they were crunching onto the beach. LST 460 grounded a little short of dry land, but Echelon One was prepared, as soon as their ramp splashed into the surf at 07:15, their bulldozer was disembarking immediately followed by their five-ton tractor crane. As their bulldozer pushed a coral road up to the ramp, the Marine truck drivers on the tank deck waited with their engines idling. After the first trucks rushed out the Seabees installed the LST's elevator guides and lowered the 40mm cannons to the tank deck where they were attached to their prime movers and driven ashore. The Sixth men wasted no time in getting their own 20mm cannon and truck mounted 50 caliber anti-aircraft guns emplaced in positions ashore.

While their shipmates worked the ship the Seabee gunners stood by their weapons. Inside LST 460 tank deck 32 Stevedores worked at top speed to load the returning trucks. At 09:20, less than two hours after starting, Echelon One completed unloading their LST. The now empty LST 460 pumped out its ballast and prepared to haul in its stern anchor cable and retract from the beach. The Seabees began dispersing into the jungle, where they would dig their foxholes. LST 448, beached a half mile north of Echelon One, was still unloading. Marines had charge of the operation and it was not proceeding as quickly as it should have. Echelon One sent a work detail to assist discharging LST 448. At 09:30, a large force of Japanese fighters and dive-bombers raided the staging area. One veteran recalled how he was walking on the beach to retrieve his rifle and gear and saw a 'V' formation of about sixteen aircraft come out of the sun. He first thought they

were allied planes, but the sudden cry "air raid" and the formation's nosing over into a dive convinced him otherwise. The Seabees and Marines ran for the cover of the jungle as the anti-aircraft guns on ship and shore sputtered to life. Some men fired their rifles at the incoming planes. Two Japanese dive-bombers swept down and released their payloads on LST 448. The men watched helplessly as the bombs fell into the beached ship. There was a muffled explosion and the Sixth men could feel the ground tremble from the force of the blast though the exploding ship was half a mile away. Seconds after the impact of the bombs, the Sixth men took to their feet running down the beach toward LST 448. When Japanese fighters swept in and strafed the beach the 20 or so running Seabees dived into the jungle for cover, re-emerging to continue their dash as the enemy fighters passed. The Japanese planes bombed the dispersal areas too, wounding many among the work parties and gun crews. LST 448 was a twisted burning wreck when the Seabees got to her. Ammunition was exploding in her hold and magazines. Marines were helping the wounded, assisted by the Sixth's medical officer who stayed on board throughout the afternoon despite the fires, exploding ordinance and a second attack. Many men were wounded. Of the work detail the Sixth had dispatched before the raid, eight men were wounded by shrapnel, two seriously, and another could not be found at all. Though he was listed as missing in action, it was clear two days later, when 21 unidentified bodies were pulled out of the wreckage that Echelon One had lost one of its own.

The Sixth's first experience under fire was costly, but the men did not lose their sangfroid. They dug foxholes near their work area on the beach and waited for the next supply echelon to land. The Japanese attacked intermittently throughout the day and into the night, until about 22:30. The second Japanese air strike came at 10:00 at Ruravai about two miles up the beach from where the Sixth landed and LST 334 had still not finished discharging its cargo. It sat on the shore as an inviting target. The Japanese hit it with a bomb but fortunately the damage was light. As the enemy planes swarmed over the beachhead, one Val dive bomber came hurtling across the cove at a very low altitude only to find cannon fire from the Sixth's 20mm anti-aircraft gun slamming into its nose. As the crippled plane reached the far end of the cove it suddenly exploded into pieces and fell into the sea. Later in the day the airsols (air solomoms command), combat air patrol was on station above the staging base, and they helped deflect the worst of a 60-plane raid. Some enemy bombers still got through, and LST 448 was hit again. For the Japanese pilots there was no mistaking where the beachhead was as long as smoke belched out of the burning LST 448. In the last raid of the day the Japanese scored again, destroying 5 heavy trucks and two jeeps. The violence of the air attacks on Vella La Vella that continued, vividly illustrated for Echelon One the importance of anti-aircraft guns. While on the island the Sixth set about acquiring more 20mm cannon .50 caliber machine guns, and trained men in their operation when there was spare time. The corps staging area on Vella La Vella was considered secured by October 8. Air raids continued but the anti-aircraft defenses were by then beefed up. During Echelons One's seven and a half weeks on Vella, their gunners were part of the bases anti-aircraft defense.

UNLOADING LST's AND THE BATTLE FOR BOUGAINVILLE - 6TH SPECIAL-NCB

On November 22, 1943, echelon one of the 6th special NCB followed the First Marine Amphibious Corps to Bougainville. After breaking camp and loading their equipment on an LCT, they picked up their helmets, packs and rifles and boarded LCI's for the 170-mile trip from Vella Lavella to Empress Augusta Bay. As the Seabee stevedores of echelon one, and the LST supply convoy they were part of, sailed northward where the Third Marine Division was beating back the Japanese along the Numa Numa trails to secure ground for the two additional bomber strips called for in Admiral Halsey's plans.

Just before dawn on November 23, as 6th special echelon one's convoy drew up to Cape Torokina, an air raid alert was sounded. Anti-aircraft guns on the beaches opened fire, exciting the dim sky with the blazing streaks of thousands of tracers. The LCI's and some of the LST's slipped through the coral lined channel

and quickly made their way to the beach north of Cape Torokina to discharge their cargoes. Other LST's headed for the seaward side of Puruata Island, about 1,000 yards away. It took most of the day for echelon one to get into its temporary bivouac position. Before they left the beach they saw an LST get hit with mortar fire and their Marine neighbors shoot up some Japanese barges moving up on their left flank. Between these episodes of violence they discharged their equipment, piling it on the narrow beach feet from the bows of their landing craft. The LCT's were unloaded easily, but negotiating crates down the steep narrow ramps of the LCI's was more difficult.

The Seabees were assigned a bivouac area in front of the artillery batteries about 1,000 yards from the nearest point of the perimeter, a salient approximately four miles wide and four miles deep. No part of the beachhead was out of enemy gun range, and the Japanese had been busy moving artillery, up to 155mm, into the hills outside the perimeter to shell the American positions. In light of this, compared to the danger of enemy shellfire, rain and mud were minor concerns. The 6th's camp was nothing more than a couple of hundred foxholes dispersed among trees of an uncleared jungle. The stench of things rotten pervaded the jungle, especially after the daily rainstorm. The humidity and the insects made life even more unpleasant. It was preferable to sleep above ground rather than in a wet foxhole, so some men improvised sleeping platforms right over their foxhole shelters. During an air alert they could roll out of bed and into their foxholes. The 6th special men were technically behind the perimeter, but that perimeter had plenty of holes in it, and there was real danger of Japanese infiltrators, so guards were posted. It was an uneventful first night beyond wild shooting by nervous men on sentry duty and the unfamiliar sound of American artillery harassing the Japanese.

On November 23, as the Marines were finishing off the Japanese resistance to the northwest of the proposed bomber strips, the stevedores of echelon one were sent to the beach to assist Marine unloading details, while the 6th's maintenance gang got to work building their showers and galley. The returning stevedores found hot food and cool showers waiting for them when they returned from the beach, but not a good night's rest. The whistle of incoming artillery shells sent a cry through the bivouac to take cover. The men dashed for their foxholes and wished they had dug them deeper as Japanese shells exploded near their camp shaking the earth. Throughout the night the Japanese guns sent shells over their heads. The enemy lengthened and shortened the range unpredictably, apparently searching for some profitable target; perhaps it was the Marine artillery battery dug in 200 yards behind echelon one. Many of the shells fell too close for comfort and to compound the strain, Japanese bombers raided the area before dawn. Sunrise on November 23rd brought an end to the night's mayhem, with no 6th special casualties.

Though the historian can look back and calmly calculate that the Japanese air attacks on Bougainville were never of sufficient magnitude to threaten the success of the operation, the picture was much different to the men who stood on the receiving end of those attacks. The few planes that slipped past the air patrols and the island anti-aircraft defenses were of great concern to the stevedores whose work was frequently interrupted by them. The prime targets for Japanese artillery and bombers were not the Marines and Army troops on the perimeter but the ships, supply dumps, and airfields on or near Cape Torokina where the 6th special lived and worked. Air raids and artillery attacks were so frequent in the first three months after the invasion that the Seabees had to wonder if it was less dangerous on the perimeter.

For the Seabees, working under the threat of Japanese attack made for exciting duty. On one occasion an LST beached outside the American defensive perimeter, but the stevedores gamely unloaded its cargo anyway. On Bougainville the 6th special was in the awkward position of being directly responsible for the timely discharging of the LST echelons but not having direct control over the units they were trying to unload. Getting the ships unloaded so they could get off the beach before deadline took tact and diplomacy as well as innovative stevedoring. All of the 6th special's stevedoring work on Bougainville before January

15, was unloading LST's. The Seabees had experience in this line of work but on Bougainville it took a new twist. The beaches at Torokina were shallow causing LST's to beach 75 feet from shore with three feet of water between their lowered ramps and the sandy bottom. This made unloading a problem. A vehicle driven off the LST ramp would disappear under the water at high tide and crash to the ground at low tide. Additional ramps were needed to bridge the gap between the LST ramp and the sand. In the strong surf, dirt ramps were quickly washed away, and coconut log ramps sometimes broke up under the continuous strain of supporting heavy vehicles. The Navy had a prefabricated ramp that held together well, but it took over an hour to assemble, an intolerable delay in light of the frequency of artillery attacks. For the sake of speed the 6th men preferred the log ramp. Bulldozers pushed it in place and then the LST's own bow door anchor windlass was used to hoist the log ramp where it was secured. The whole operation was completed in 10 minutes. Even with the ramps in place vehicles could not always drive off under their own power if the water was too deep. When it was necessary to drive vehicles through deep water the 6th's stevedores preferred to deflate the tires slightly and remove the fan belts. If the fan belts were not removed from the engine it was likely to stall when the spinning fan blades hit the water as the vehicle rolled off the ramp into the surf. A vehicle stalled in front of the ramp was like a cork in a bottle. No other cargo could be towed or driven off the LST until a bulldozer pulled the immobile vehicle away.

The first LST echelons that the 6th discharged brought in men as well as supplies. Depending on the distance to the supply dumps, maximum cargo discharging efficiency required at least 16 trucks, eight taking on cargo in the tank deck while the other eight were delivering their loads to the supply dumps. Subsequent LST supply echelons brought fewer new troops and their related organizational gear and more of the aviation fuel and lubricating oil necessary to satisfy the needs of the three airstrips. Eventually each LST brought on 2,000 drums, about 500 tons, of fuel and oil. By this time the 6th men could discharge 2,000 drums from an LST in five to seven hours. Trucks greatly boosted the 6th's operational efficiency, but even without them, no LST that they were charged with unloading ever withdrew with its cargo less than completely discharged. This was at a time when LST's were ordered to sail on an 18:00 deadline whether they had completed unloading or not, and many ships were leaving with cargo still on board. When they had no trucks the Seabees improvised. A 55-gallon drum of gasoline or oil weighs almost 500 pounds, which makes it very tiring to manhandle. The Seabees let the ocean carry the drums. The drums were simply rolled down the LST's ramp and into the surf where the wave action washed them ashore. The men guided the drums through the water, swimming them in. To unload ammunition without using trucks the Seabees formed a human chain and passed artillery shells hand to hand. When there were no trucks available to take the cargo directly to the dumps, the highly explosive fuel and ammunition was simply piled on the beach. The supply-strewn beaches were inviting targets to the Japanese and a distinct danger to the coastal defense batteries. One night the Japanese artillery scored a hit on a big stack of aviation gas drums causing a tremendous explosion and spectacular fire the likes of which was rarely seen. Drums were blowing up and launching other hot drums hundreds of feet into the air, where they too would explode. There was no fighting the fire. When it finally burned out, it was discovered that 480 drums of fuel had been lost, and the intense fire had destroyed an adjacent 155mm Long Tom coastal defense gun, its melted barrel drooping like a wilted flower.

By getting the dangerous cargoes off the beach as quickly as possible they reduced the risk of losing to enemy action the supplies they had worked so hard to unload. They also eased the nerves of the 155mm gunners defending the beach, who were not enthusiastic about working in a powder keg. Work on the perimeter defenses and airfields were steadily progressing while the 6th special brought ashore the men and material to construct and sustain the beachhead. By December 15, the army and Marine troops were finished fortifying their perimeter. The 1stMAC was relieved by the Army's XIV Corps, and the Marines contribution to the Bougainville fight began to close as newly arrived Army troops gradually relieved them

all along the front line. The 6th men wondered if they too would be relieved, but it was not to be. They were attached to the XIV Corps.

The month of January brought more Japanese air raids. From Jan. 23 to Jan. 29, enemy planes attacked 11 times under cover of darkness, once hitting a ship in the bay. Red alerts caused the stevedores to lose 45 platoon hours of working time. In February, the Seabees experienced 11 more attacks over five days and lost another 40 hours to red alerts. The Seabees at least had the satisfaction of seeing one enemy plane shot down over the water. The last four attacks, which came on February 14, killed a few soldiers and showered shrapnel around the 6th's camp. In February, Japanese air and naval forces ceased to contest the American occupation of Bougainville, but the Japanese ground forces, estimated at 15,000 men, had no intention of giving up. Driving the American garrison off the island and denying them the airfields could have given Rabaul breathing space to build itself. The Americans expected the Japanese to attack. Enemy troops were on the move and barge activity was up. On February 1, several Japanese barges were sunk up the beach from the 6th's position. Rumor was that they were loaded with troops. On February 23, 700 of the 6th special men began training for emergency defensive operations. It was thought that the Japanese would attempt an amphibious landing, and the service troops would have to defend the beaches. During the march attacks, a "Condition Black", signifying an enemy amphibious landing was announced and the 6th men were sent back to camp for their rifles and ammunition. Foxholes and pillboxes were being built all over the beachhead. In their seaside foxholes they sweated out a Japanese counter invasion that fortunately never came.

The Japanese attack opened on March 8, just after dawn, when the Japanese opened up on all parts of the beachhead with artillery they had laboriously hauled up into the mountains outside the American perimeter. That night the Japanese broke through a part of the perimeter. The ground action was fierce, artillery shells were traded back and forth regularly. For ten days during the offensive, Japanese shells fell spasmodically all around the 6th's camp, blowing up an ammo dump on March 20. On the noisy nights of March 22, 23, and 24, the American gunners were trying to smother what would turn out to be the final serious attack of the Bougainville campaign. The last Japanese offensive cost the Americans 263 dead, and the Japanese more than 5,000 dead and more than 3,000 wounded. The Japanese ground forces were still an effective force, and there were a few more vigorous fights in store for the Americans in April, when they expanded the perimeter. In April the Japanese made their presence known to the 6th special with an artillery attack. The Japanese shelled the beachhead on April 10, 11, and 12, when they hit a fuel dump. After a final artillery attack on April 16, the 6th special was unmolested by the enemy.

Log from 6th Special NCB on Bougainville "1944"

AIR RAIDS ON BOUGAINVILLE

1/20 - Alert at 0400

1/21 - Alert

1/22 - Bombed @0430

1/23 - Alert @0430

1/25 - Bombed @ 0430

1/26 - Alerts @2200,2300,2400

1/27 - Alert @ 2030

1/28 - Bombed 0405 - Jap air raid Empress Augusta Bay. Our stevedores were working aboard the S.S. Bonneville, anchored near Puruata Island. At that time Puruata Island (Suicide Island) was used for our supply dump and had been bombed frequently by the Japs. 2400 - 0600 There were three crews working on the Bonneville, with Chief Dempsey in charge. Gamberg was in charge of one of the three working gangs aboard. The ack-ack flak was rather heavy from our own guns and three Jap bombs dropped quite close to the Bonneville. One bomb dropped close enough to wash her deck.

- 1/30 - Japs try to advance on hill 16 and are repulsed
- 2/4 - Bombed 2130 to 2300
- 2/5 - Alert 2030 to 2130 & 2230 to 2300
- 2/6 - Bombed 0015 to 0100
- 2/10 - Bombed 0200 to 0430
- 2/11 - Bombed 2030 to 2300 & 0200 to 0415
- 2/13 - Bombed 2300 to 0130
- 2/14 - Bombed 0600 to 0615 some flak fell in camp
- 3/1 Alert
- 3/8 - Japs on major push on Hill 660 - heavy fighting, receiving artillery fire.
- 3/13 - 0030 & 0430 Jap planes overhead but no bombing or ack-ack
- 3/15 - 6 second earthquake that was both static & rolling
- 3/17 - Bombed 0300 to 0430
- 3/21 - Alert 0030 to 0130
- 4/28 - Alert 2300 to 2400
- 6/26 - 15 second earthquake, rather sharp and continuously rolling no apparent damage.

