

U.S. Marine Corps Parachute Battalion in World War II

In The Spring of 1940, prior to the establishment of parachute detachments, the Division of Plans and Policies, Headquarters, Marine Corps put forth a tentative recommendation for the formation of a tactical parachute organization. Utilizing ideas based upon the reports of German and Russian paratroops, Marine parachute troops were conceived as light shock troops whose function was three-fold; (1) to act as a reconnoitering and raiding unit to secure and transmit information or destroy strategic installations of sufficient importance to warrant the risk of force; (2) to act as a spearhead, similar to an advance force which seizes and holds critical terrain features; and (3) to act as a force which can be placed in large numbers into a position of tactical advantage where it can operate as a self-sustaining unit for a considerable length of time.

The parachute troop program in the Marine Corps began on October 26, 1940, when the first detachment of parachute trainees arrived at Lakehurst, New Jersey, to start training as parachutists and parachute riggers. Graduating on 26 February 1941, the majority of personnel of this detachment were retained as instructors and in early 1942, formed the nucleus for the instructional staffs of the parachute training schools established at Camp Elliott, San Diego, California and at Camp Jejunee, New River, North Carolina and other stations throughout the United States.

The second detachment assembled at Lakehurst in December, 1940, and like the first, went through a period of training, graduating 26 February 1941. On 22 March 1941, the second detachment together with several riggers from the first, arrived at San Diego, where it was organized as the 2d Parachute Company. On 1 May 1941, the company was redesignated Company "A", 2d Parachute Battalion, under the command of Captain Robert H. Williams.

As more personnel finished their training, the organization of a complete battalion was begun. At Quantico, Virginia, the organic elements of the 1st Marine Parachute Battalion were formed: Company "A" on 28 May 1942 and Headquarters Company on 10 July 1941. They were attached to the 1st Marine Division, until 28 July 1941, when they were assigned to the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing. Meanwhile, in June, 1942, Company "A", 2d Parachute Battalion moved from San Diego to Quantico and was attached to the 1st Marine Division.

On 15 August 1941, the 1st Parachute Battalion, consisting of three parachute companies at Quantico, was activated and transferred from the Wing to the Division Special Troops, 1st Marine Division. Major Robert H. Williams assumed command of the battalion. Company "A", 2nd Parachute Battalion was redesignated Company "B", 1st Parachute Battalion on 20 September 1941 and after the battalion had moved to New River, North Carolina, Company "C" (organized 28 March 1942) was added, completing the organization of the 1st Parachute Battalion.

The 1st Parachute Battalion entrained for Norfolk, VA on 7 June, where it embarked in the USS MIZAR on 10 June and sailed via the Panama Canal for Wellington, New Zealand, arriving and disembarking on 11 July 1942. On 18 July, it boarded the USS HEYWOOD and sailed for Koro, Fiji Islands, where it underwent rehearsals of the Guadalcanal operation.

The 1st Parachute Battalion, attached to the 1st Marine Division, went ashore on the island of Gavutu, British Solomon Islands, on 7 August 1942. Company "A", the leading wave, landed without being fired upon but as it hit the beach, it came under intense rifle and machine gun fire. Company "B", the second wave, in the meantime, came under enemy fire while in the landing craft, and shortly thereafter the third wave, Company "C", plus attached units, was subjected to the enemy fire while still in boats. Against heavy enemy fire, the leading element landed on Gavutu and pushed inland about 75 yards where it was pinned down by enemy fire from Hills 148 and 121. The second and third waves landed and were immediately subjected to intense enemy fire. During this early fight, Major Williams was wounded and command of the battalion passed to Major Charles A. Miller. Company "B" pushed on the seize Hill 148 and the, with assistance of Company "A", captured Hill 148. By dusk the battalion commenced mopping up the island.

On 8 September 1942, the 1st Parachute Battalion in conjunction with the 1st Raider Battalion, the whole force under the command of Colonel Merritt A. Edson, carried out a raid in the vicinity of Taivu, near the village of Tasimboko, Guadalcanal. The 1st Raider Battalion landed at Taivu Point and began the advance to the village, The leading elements of the 1st Parachute Battalion landed on a beach about 2000 yards east of Tasimboko, without any resistance, and took up flanking and rear positions for the advancing Raider units. After a short heavy fire fight,

the enemy fled to the westward, abandoning their entire base of supplies in the village, The Marines entered the deserted village and destroyed food, medical equipment and military stores, With this action, the first major activity of the Japanese in the area ceased and the success of the raid, with the resultant capture of enemy supplies, had a profound effect upon the latter "Battle of the Ridge".

Upon return from the Tasimboko raid, the 1st Parachute Battalion and the 1st Raider Battalion were ordered to occupy the elevated area along the ridge southeast of Henderson Field, Guadalcanal. Commencing 11 September 1942, the enemy activity in this sector increased, taking the form of a series of small encounters. No full scale attack developed, however, until the night of 13-14 September, when the enemy made a determined effort to seize this high ground overlooking the airfield. The final Japanese assaults, which lasted throughout the night was centered around the ridge, although a thrust on each side succeeded in breaking through and in isolating the center. Due to the stubborn resistance offered by the Marine Raiders, the "Paramarines" and the supporting units, plus the excellent support of the batteries of the 11th Marines, the positions as a whole were retained. The enemy attacks became weaker and less frequent toward morning, and when, at daylight, the supporting aircraft were able to fly against Japanese positions, the activity was reduced to individual rifle fire and some machine gun fire. After the battle, it was found that more than 600 Japanese had been killed in the battlefield itself, in addition to those who died of wounds during the retreat to the westward. On 18 September 1942, the 1st Parachute Battalion was withdrawn from Guadalcanal and proceeded to Noumea, New Caledonia, where it remained for a year, reorganizing and retraining for future combat.

At the same time that the 1st Parachute Battalion was being organized on the east coast, the 2d Parachute Battalion began its formation at Camp Elliott, San Diego, California. On 23 July 1941, Company "B", 2d Parachute Battalion was activated and attached to Division Special Troops, 2d Marine Division. This company formed the nucleus for the 2d Parachute Battalion, which was organized 1 October 1941, under the command of Captain Charles E. Shepard, Jr. Company "A" was organized 7 February 1942 and Company "C" on 3 September 1942.

The 2d Parachute Battalion sailed from San Diego on 20 October 1942, and arrived at Wellington, New Zealand, on 9 November, encamping with other 2d Marine Division Special Troops at a camp at Titahi Bay, fourteen miles north of Wellington. It remained here until 6 January 1942, when it sailed for Noumea, New Caladonia, and joined the 1st Parachute Battalion. On 1 April 1943, when it became an element of the newly organized 1st Marine Parachute Regiment, it was reorganized - the letter companies "A", "B", "C", redesignated companies "E", "F" and "G", respectively. Lieutenant Colonel Victor H. Krulak assumed command of the battalion.

The 3d Parachute Battalion, with Company Headquarters and Company "A" as organic units, was organized 16 September 1942, under the command of Major Robert T. Vance, and was assigned to the newly created 3d Marine Division, stationed at San Diego, California. Company "B" was activated 10 November 1942 and Company "C", 10 December 1942.

In January 1943, the 3d Parachute Battalion was attached to Amphibious Corps, Pacific Fleet, Camp Elliott, until its movement overseas in two echelons on 5 and 13 March, respectively. By 27 March 1943, all troops had arrived at Noumea, New Caladonia where the 3d Parachute Battalion settled at Camp Kiser and continued its training. On 1 April 1943, it was made an organic unit of the newly formed 1st Parachute Regiment and was reorganized on the same lines as the 2d Parachute Battalion, i.e., letter companies "A", "B", "C", were redesignated "I", "K", "L" respectively.

On 1 April 1943, the 1st Marine Parachute Regiment was activated at Camp Kiser, Noumea, New Caladonia, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Robert H. Williams. The regiment consisted of Regimental Headquarters and Service Company, Weapons Company and the 1st, 2d and 3d Parachute Battalions.

The organization of the 4th Parachute Battalion began on 2 April 1943, with the activation of Company "B", at Camp Elliott, San Diego, California. On 1 July 1943, the remaining elements of the Battalion (Headquarters Company, Company "A" and Company "B") were formed at Camp LeJune, New River, North Carolina, from personnel of the Parachute Training Battalion stationed there. Lieutenant Colonel Marcellus J. Howard assumed command on that date. On 6 July 1943, the 4th Parachute Battalion arrived at Camp Joseph H. Pendelton and on the same day,

Company "B" was transferred from Camp Elliott and attached to the battalion. Six months later, on 19 January 1944 with the decision of the Marine Corps to abandon its parachute troop program, the 4th Parachute Battalion was disbanded.

In Southwest Pacific, meanwhile, in September, 1943, the 1st Parachute Regiment moved from Noumea to Guadalcanal. Then, the last two days of September, the entire Parachute Regiment was transferred to Vella LaVella, in the New Georgia Island Group. On 27 October 1943, a task force consisting of the 2d Parachute Battalion, reinforced with a machine gun platoon from Regimental Weapons Company, a boat detachment (4LCP (R) 8s), and as Experimental Rocket Detachment, landed on Choiseul Island without opposition and began their diversionary raid. After successfully accomplishing the mission of screening the Bougainville operation, the force withdrew from the island on 4 November and returned to Vella LaVella. On 8 November the command of the 2d Parachute Battalion passed to Major Marnar T. Bigger.

With the return of the 2d Parachute Battalion, the 1st Parachute Battalion sailed from Vella LaVella on 22 November 1943 and the next day, landed at Empress Augusta Bay, Bougainville Island. Here it is attached to the 2d Raider Regiment (then in the Corps Reserve area), being thus designated part of the 1st Marine Amphibious Corps reserve. On 27 November, the 1st Parachute Battalion was assigned a raiding mission northwest of Koiari, Bougainville, for the purpose of disrupting communications, destroying the enemy, his installations and supplies, and gathering information. On 29 November 1943, the battalion landed in the vicinity of Koiari, but when heavy enemy fire developed and it became apparent that the raid could not be successfully completed, the force was withdrawn under cover of naval gunfire, 155mm heavy artillery, and LCI-gunboat fire.

On 3 December 1943, the 1st Marine Regiment (less the 1st and 2d Battalion) embarked from Vella LaVella, arriving at Empress Augusta Bay 4 December. On 5 December it was committed to battle on 3d Marine Division front. For the next four days, fighting off enemy patrols, ambushes and sniper fire, the fighting collimated in an unsuccessful Marine attack against strong Japanese positions. On 10 December 1943, this force was relieved in position by elements of the 9th Marines and 21st Marines and moved into 9th Marines regimental reserve position, the secondary line of defense. On 22 December, the 1st Parachute Battalion, Weapons Company and a Headquarters and Service platoon, attached to the 2d Raider Regiment, relieved the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines in the vicinity of Eagle Creek, Bougainville, and continued to strengthen defensive positions until relieved in turn by elements of the 132d Infantry Regiment, 27th Army Division on 11 January 1944.

In the latter part of December 1943, the parachute program of the Marine Corps was discontinued and the 1st Parachute Regiment was ordered transferred to the United States to be used as cadres for rifle regiments of the 5th Marine Division. The first echelon of the Regiment left Bougainville for the United States on 15 January 1944 and on 29 February 1944, the 1st Parachute Regiment was disbanded.

The 1st Parachute Battalion was awarded the Presidential Unit Citation for its service on Guadalcanal while attached to the 1st Marine Division. The 1st Parachute Regiment participated in the consolidation of the Northern Solomon Islands, occupation and defense of Cape Torokina, Bougainville (less the 2d Parachute Battalion at Vella LaVella). The 2d Parachute Battalion, reinforced, participated in the Choiseul Island Diversion.

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