The Memoirs of Armand Charest Part II

Armand Charest in 2000

The Charest-Frenchette Family in America: A Success Story

Editors Note: Shortly before my father had his stroke which ultimately was fatal, I managed to convince him to write some stories and family history. I promised him I would get them at least published on a family website if he did. Well, with a lot of "encouragement" from myself and possibly my brother Howard, Dad did write some of the family stories.

I have taken the liberty of re-formatting Dad's writings to be suitable for this website. Otherwise, I have posted them as written. I may on occasion add some editorial comments of my own; these will be clearly marked when I do.
Ron Charest.

Part II – The Pacific Engagements

Chapter 6

Armand ships out for the South Pacific and Combat Action…

I reported to Texas in late August of 1943 for seventeen weeks of basic infantry training. It was rough going at first, especially the long hikes over dusty Texas roads. But soon enough I became accustomed to the daily routine of exercise, training and close-order marching. I gained twenty-five pounds and grew three inches in height.

In December I received leave and I spent Christmas with the family in Rhode Island. My father accompanied me to the train taking me back to the war. I knew instinctively that I would not see him again.

Armand Charest as Army Private, 1943

I reported to the San Francisco area from where I shipped out to Australia in January of 1944. I joined the 41st Division, a division made up primarily of National Guardsmen from the states of Washington, Oregon, Idaho and Montana, in the city of Rockhampton in the part of the country called Queensland. I discovered Australia to be a friendly one whose inhabitants were very grateful for the Americans' presence. I had spent a few days at a camp outside the large city of Brisbane. We were not allowed to visit the city without a pass, which was never given.

So we found a way out of camp through what we called the Burma Road and checked out the city, making sure we avoided the MPs. We then traveled to Rockhampton by rail, a trip that took several days as we moved through the empty outback country. At the end of

January, by which time we had acclimated to the hot weather, the division sailed for New Guinea, a strange world inhabited by strange but gentlepeople. We were stationed at a place called Lae, the departure town for the famous aviatrix, Amelia Earhart who later disappeared over the Pacific and has never been found

On April 27, we landed at Hollandia, just inside the Dutch part of the island. There was not much fighting because the Japanese troops fled into interior, leaving us much food and tea, hot tea. The next landing occurred on May the 27th and that is where my military experiences really began. For many years I had put the whole war behind me but a small boy brought it all back one day. I wish to explain to my descendants the pain, horror and destruction of war as well as the bravery, courage and devotion to duty of all participants, on both sides of the war.

Chapter 7

Armand's First Encounter with Sergeant Theodore Brown…

I stood at curbside absent-minded watching the drum and bugle corps swinging by on Main Street. The flags snapped in the light breeze coming off the Pacific Ocean. It was' Memorial Day, 1994, a truly exciting occasion for the onlookers who remembered the reason for the parade. I did not quite know why I stood there. As a general rule I avoided parades since I had seen so many in the past, especially in the military. A small voice interrupted my reverie.

"Hey, gramps, ain't you got no politeness for the flag? Ain't you gonna salute?"

Startled, I looked down at a freckle faced redheaded boy about the age of ten. He was eyeing me in a quizzical manner, his smile removing any sting from his remark.

"Sure I replied, "I guess I just forgot."

I pressed my hand to my heart and came to attention, alertly watching the flag. The flag, I mused. It's been fifty years since I defended it with my life, but it seems only yesterday. Where has the time gone? Soon we will be celebrating the big invasion: D-Day, Normandy. There will be the usual ceremonies at the beaches where the politicians will be up front making speeches, pointless and self-serving for the most part; they will then lay wreaths in the military cemeteries while piously proclaiming the need for understanding among nations. I am sure that for centuries soldiers have heard the same thing.

Perhaps some returning veterans will be interviewed and will be asked inane and dumb questions such as: "How did it feel to go ashore on June, 6th? What outfit were you with?"

For the most part they will be patronized and perhaps viewed as doddering half-senile old coots. They certainly will not look like soldiers, certainly not like the trim and tough men who hit the French beaches. The stomachs will protrude a bit, the faces will be fleshier, the hair thinner, the backs a bit more stooped, the legs no longer as strong. I sighed as I thought back to that time.

I realized that it was May 29th. I let my mind drift back fifty years to May 27th, 1944, as my division approached the island of Biak, off the northeastern coast of Dutch New Guinea, which is now part of Indonesia.

We had been told by G-2 (military intelligence) that the island was essential to the leap-frogging strategy of the high command. Since it was mostly coral, the Japanese had constructed three large first class airfields on a huge plateau.

We were solemnly assured that the Air Force and the Navy needed them as they prepared for their assault on the Philippines. So the job of seizing the island was given to the 41st inf., a veteran division, comprised mostly of National Guardsmen with a leavening of draftees, many of who were untried replacements.

I had joined the outfit in Australia and I had already participated in an invasion. At the age of nineteen I considered myself a seasoned soldier. I was also a first class griper. It was during one of my tirades that I made the acquaintance of T. J. Brown, staff sergeant in the third platoon. I was in the first so we had not met frequently before. He happened to be walking by as I was sounding off:

“What are we doing here anyway in this God forsaken place? Who cares if the Japs control these empty islands? There’s nothing here but palm trees and a few savages? By the time we’ve cleared them we’ll all be dead and for no good reason”.

No one answered me. My listeners were new arrivals with no opinion. But then T.J. stepped forward. He had a kind, smooth shaven face, clear blue eyes and a mustache that he always kept trim. Sgt. Brown was, without argument, the most popular man m E Co. He was a strict but extreme1y fair leader. The men of the third platoon knew that he would always look after their interest, would always be there to talk about their problems. T.J. Brown was loved and respected by all. Due to his leadership abilities, E Co.2nd battalion, 162nd Regiment was a first class outfit. He answered me in a soft voice:

“Easy, young fellow, easy. Don’t let your anger cloud your mind. Have you forgotten Pearl Harbor? Don’t you know that the Imperial forces of Japan have been fighting in China for the past ten years? That makes the Chinese people victims of aggression, the same as Americans. They happen to be in the way of Japanese plans for control of East Asia.

God has not forsaken us. He never will. Sure, many of us will die. No one lives forever anyway. And, remember this young man, you may be taking part in the last major war in history. Men cannot keep killing each other forever. Sooner or later reason will prevail and we will find other means of resolving national differences without war. Our sacrifices here, yours as well as mine, may possibly prevent our grandchildren from having to repeat this someday”.

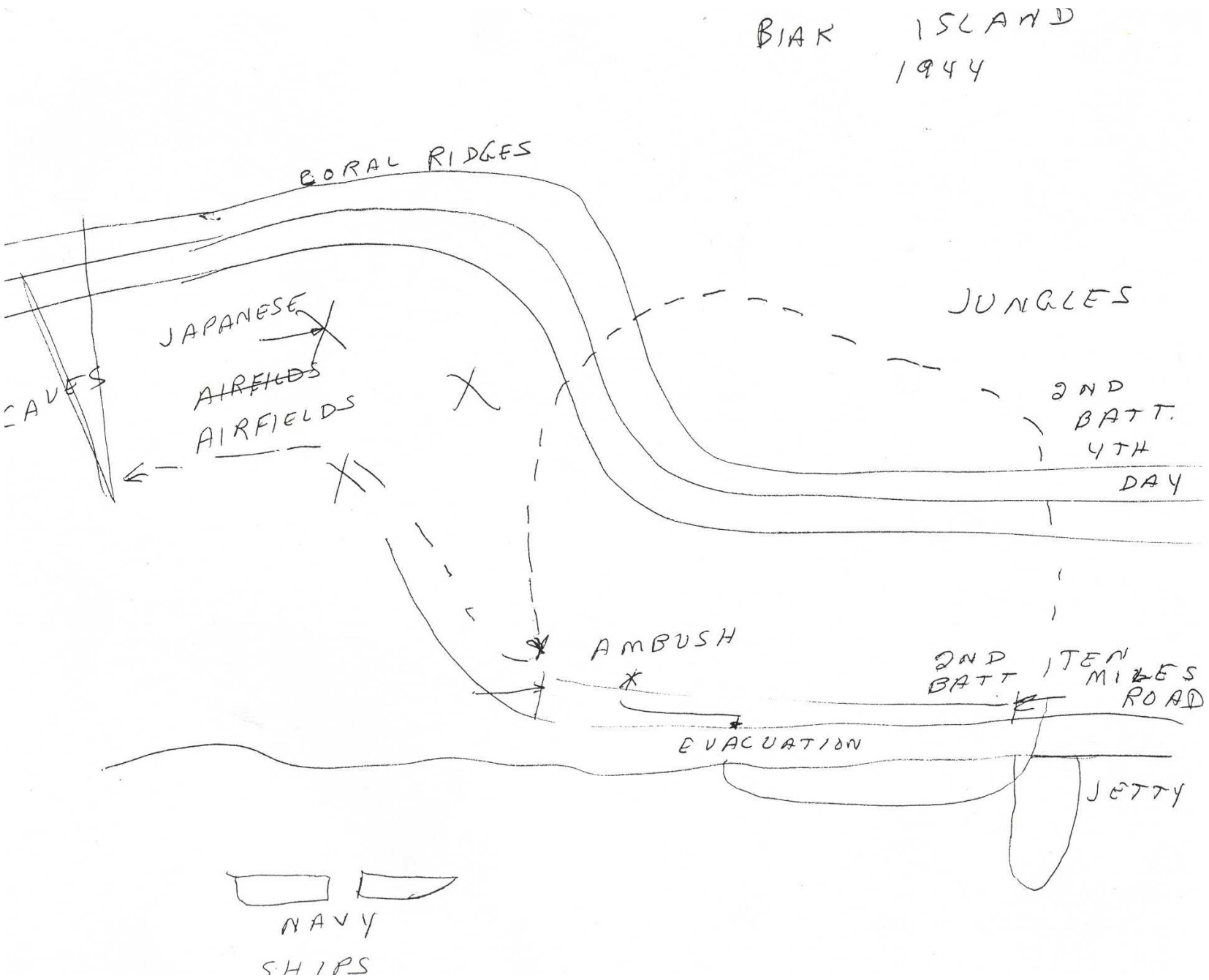
I fell silent, mollified, thankful for his intervention. Sergeant Theodore Jefferson Brown had just won one more admirer.

Chapter 8

The Battle of Biak Island, D-Day May 27, 1944…

Editor's Note: This starts Dad's description of the battle of Biak Island. I have done a bit of research and located some websites that describe present day Biak island, which is now part of Indonesia. These websites will be listed at the end of each chapter of the Battle for Biak Island. The present day descriptions of Biak corroborates Dad's narrative.

I have to wonder if Dad's narrative is the only eye-witness account of the battle written.



Map of Engagement on Biak Island

Let us fast reel forward. E is hitting the beach in an ungainly but deadly efficient ship called an L.C.I. (landing craft, infantry). This guarantees us dry feet as the boat will ease up to a jetty and we will walk down a ramp onto it. I am restrained by space to explain fully the intricacies of sea borne invasions as carried out by the U.S. Navy, to describe the awesome power of an attacking fleet and the make up of a W.W.2 army division.

A beach landing was a difficult undertaking requiring precision planning and timing. After many such operations, sometimes tragic, the navy had succeeded in achieving a high degree of professionalism. We GI Joes appreciated the skill and dedication of the crazy sailors. Let me take some time to explain the details of a beach invasion.

The size of the fleet depended on the size of the landing force that depended on the area to be invaded. In a typical landing the landing force ranged from a division of 15,000 men to a regiment of 3,000 men. The attacking force usually sailed on giant troopships each carrying several thousand men. Navy ships traveled in lanes: the outer lane held any aircraft carriers; next sailed battleships; then came the cruisers and transports. Destroyers circled the fleet, watching for Japanese aircraft or submarines.

Aircraft usually opened festivities by taking off from carriers and dropping bombs on the beaches or further inland. Battleships then opened up and sent 16-in. shells from 20 miles away on designated targets. The whole panorama of war was extremely thrilling. Perhaps that is why men love war so much. Here you had planes swooping low over the beaches, dropping bombs or sometimes strafing targets; shells coming in would sound like trains one hears from a distance. At a designated time the army troops would line up next to the ship railings preparing to climb down cargo nets.

Down below small boats able to carry forty men or one platoon maneuvered close to the transports, bobbing up and down like a worn out cork. The four platoon Sergeants were the first ones down into the boats. Their job was to steady the nets and advising the men when to jump into the boats. If one jumped too soon when the boat was on the upswing, one ran the danger of suffering injuries. If one jumped too late, then one took a chance on breaking a leg. The men had to tie their steel helmets securely or someone down below could get hit by a flying steel pot.

My machine gun was passed down very carefully from one man to another. All in all forty men could scramble down in a few minutes. When the little boat became filled it moved out and another one moved in. You must remember that there were

two or three loading stations on each side of the ship. The little boats then circled while waiting for further instructions. This part of the operation was usually classified as SNAFU (situation normal all fouled up).

As the Little boats circled, the boatswain would watch for a flare shot off by a naval officer. When it came the boats formed into a straight line and waited. This operation was called TARFU (Things are really fouled up). It was called that because the boats were not usually in the proper places, so they did not have full companies together. When the second flare shot up, the boats sped away toward the shore. At some close point all aircraft and battleships ceased activities. Then the lucky sailor sitting up on the stem opened up with his machine gun and raked the beach until we hit it or until he ran out of bullets. What happened after we hit the beaches constitutes another story. Suffice it to say that at this point the acronym was FUBAR (fouled up beyond recognition).

Our L.C.I. was equipped with dozens of rows of quick firing rocket tubes. So as we approached the beach we witnessed the first ship-to-shore rocket attack in the South Pacific as the tubes belched hundreds of 3-in rockets. We were awed and appalled as those terrifying messengers of death rained down on the beach area and surrounding jungles. It was a dreadful sight. There is no limit to man"s ability to inflict pain and suffering on his fellow man. I remembered again T.J. "s words and hardened my heart. Some rockets hit the ridges and ricocheted into the air like screaming banshees right out of hell.

Ours is the second wave. The first battalion has preceded us and is already on the march to its objective (see map). The second is to move along the coastal road to the airfields. Since the first has the longer distance to cover, we are given the job of securing the landing area before moving on. This we do. Patrols fan out across the hog back ridges. The third battalion is kept on the ships in reserve. It will land on the second day.

We wonder at the inactivity of the tough Japanese soldiers. It is not their nature to be so passive. We should have suspected something, but in our arrogance we deride G-2″s estimate of ten thousand China war veterans. E Co. sustains a few casualties on the first day, but we are not alarmed. We spend the night in makeshift corrugated-roofed huts. That does not turn out to be a good idea. It rains all night. The noise keeps us awake.

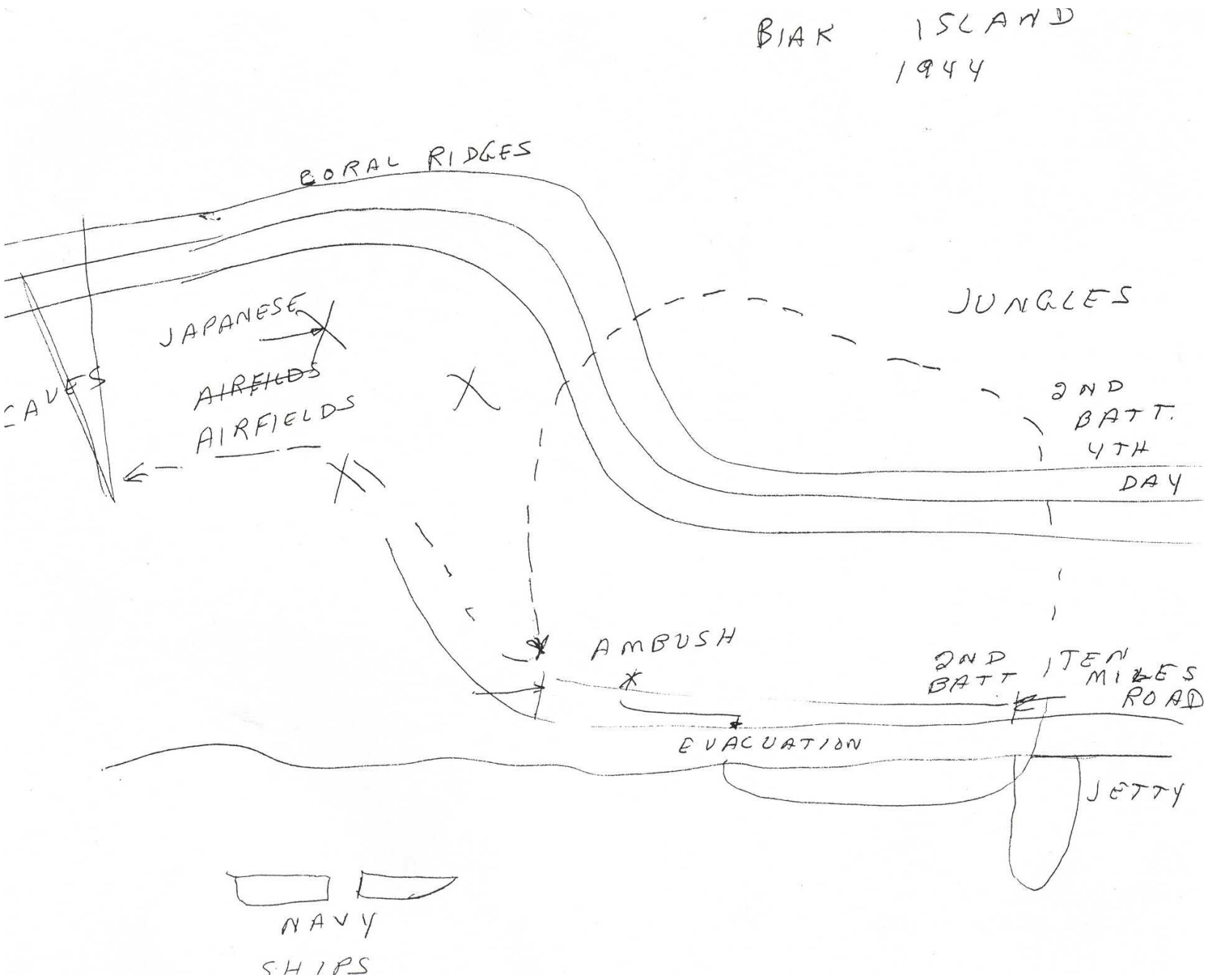
Websites About Present Day Biak Island:

Biak

A database of photographs, descriptions and locations of WWII wreckage remaining on Biak Island, Irian Jaya, Indonesia.

Chapter 9

D-Day Plus One…



Map of Engagement on Biak Island

The second day is uneventful. Early in the morning E Co. leads the advance followed by G and F, with the heavy Weapons Company H dispersed among the three line outfits. It is a great day for a hike. The sky is cloudless and the air fresh due to an onshore breeze. A navy destroyer covers our left flank. It moves along slowly, in a zigzagging manner. We can see the lookouts keeping an eye on us. We are thankful for the support. The invasion is turning into a picnic.

The only problem is the lack of drinking water. But that is soon rectified as the engineers find abandoned wells that they restore to working order.

The National Guard veterans, who have been in the South Pacific area a long time, do not share our joviality. I remember First Sergeant Jim Duncan advising us to be cautious and not to take things so casually. We pay little attention; we should have because the next day"s events prove him to be correct.

The scouts move along at a rapid pace; they report no enemy activity. We become complacent and careless. We bed down for the night on a section of beach reminiscent of the movie scenes where the boy and girl discuss their future under a full moon with an ebb tide for company. The only problem arises from relentless attacks of gigantic army ants as they fed on us the whole night. So it is with relief that we assemble the next morning and leave the field to our tormentors.

Websites About Present Day Biak Island:

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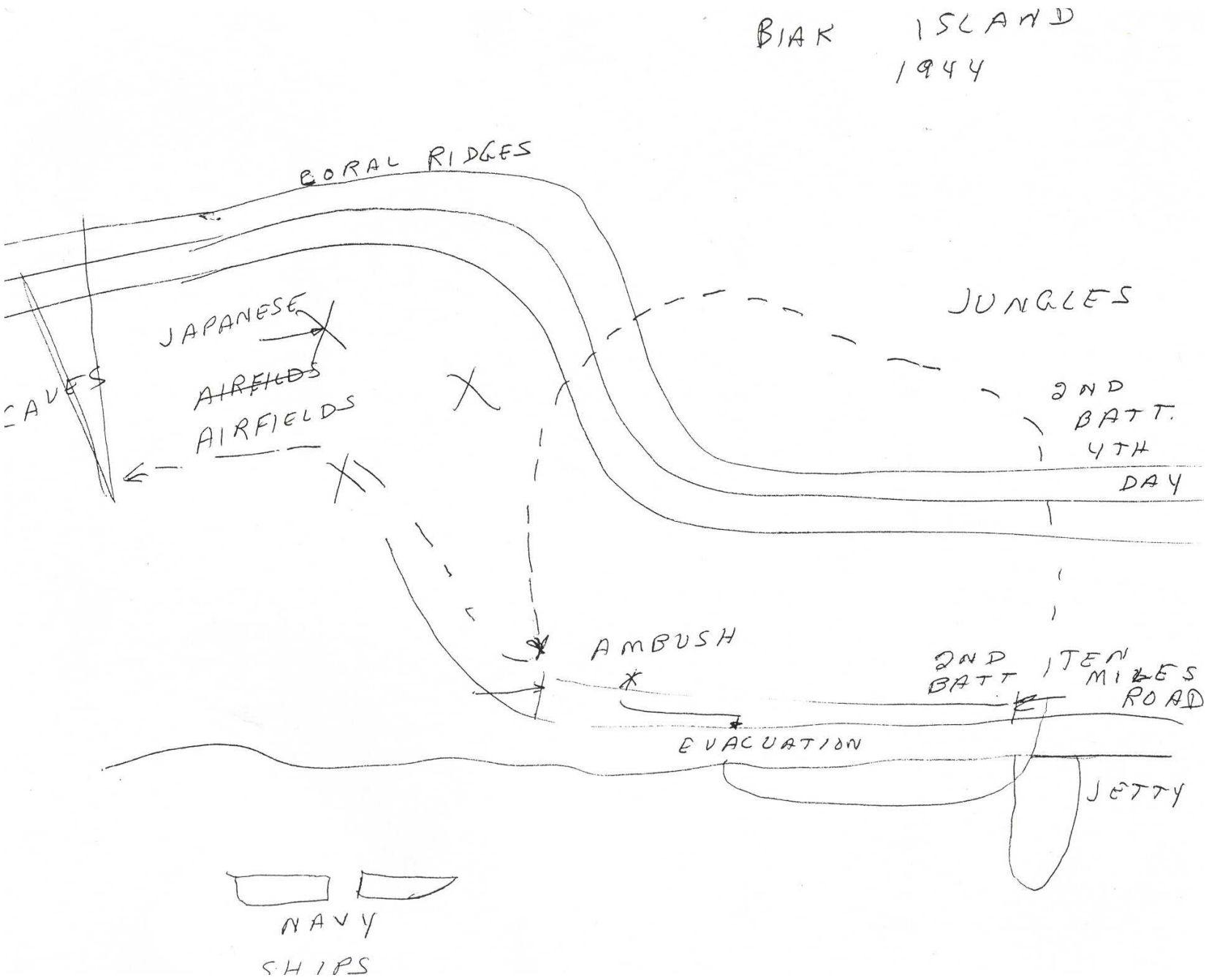
Chapter 10

D-Day Plus Two… The morning engagement and first Banzi charge



Map of Engagement on Biak Island

This day G Co. takes the lead followed by. F. and then E. G moves out cautiously since the map shows that we are getting close to the airfields. I can feel the tension mount. We no longer joke. Scouts move up the road and on the right flank. We are hindered there because the ridges angle more and more to the left; in effect limiting our maneuverability.

As a result we cannot deploy and are forced to stay in file formation. I then notice that there are now two navy ships and that both of them have moved closer to shore. We can feel danger all around us. All talking ceases. We hold our weapons at the ready. My throat feels dry all of a sudden. My heartbeat ratchets up a notch or two. I have difficulty with my breathing. I grip my weapon more tightly. My eyes move up and down the ridges. I become afraid.

The road dips down into a hollow and goes along that way for perhaps a quarter mile before gradually rising onto the plateau upon which are located the three airfields. At that point the beach disappears into steep cliffs. G moves cautiously, slowly into the depression. The scouts increase their vigilance, methodically feel their way ahead, clamber over obstacles. We feel that the ridges are impassable so no G.I. is up there. Big mistake!! I have a premonition of disaster, as if we are about to be overwhelmed by a calamity.

I look back and feel relief to see medium “Sherman” tanks following close behind. The order comes through: keep alert, close up the order of march. I can feel the adrenaline pumping a bit faster. My pulse rate increases. At mid-morning the invisible Japanese make their presence known and the 2nd battalion, 162nd Inf., is in a deadly fight for its existence.

First to be hit is G. As it emerges onto the plateau and before it can deploy into open order, the well-trained Japanese smash into it like a whirlwind. First to go are the lead scouts. The enemy troops circle around and slip between G and F. To the crackling of rifle fire are added the deep devil”s tattoos of heavy Japanese machine guns as their bullets search for unlucky G.Is and the whomping of murderous mortar shells as they fall among us like angels of death.

It is no contest. G never has a chance. In minutes, literally, it is overwhelmed and ceases to exist as a fighting unit. The few survivors, those nearest the cliffs, take refuge there and await relief. The navy crews become aware of the situation, pump shells from their twin 20 mm. guns upon the onrushing enemy infantry and rake the ridge tops with covering fire. But the human tornado moves on.

F Company has a little time to get ready and since it is on softer ground the men are able to dig in a bit. It slows down the juggernaut, just enough for E to deploy and form a line from the beach to the ridges. By this time the artillery has been alerted and soon the “long toms”(155 mm. rifles) back at the landing area start searching for targets.

Their heavy shells sound like freight trains as they pass overhead; the ground shakes as they land. F”s machine guns go into action. The air is rent with the noise of exploding shells, the sharp reports of rifle fire, the crash of destroyed tree tops, the cries of the wounded. All is bedlam. But F cannot hold and it receives orders to fall back through E. By this time E has dug in and has established a solid defense line and the weary survivors of F stream through to serve as a reserve.

I remember thinking about the unexplained courage of soldiers everywhere who without hesitancy hurl themselves upon enemy guns knowing full well they have no chance to survive. The attacking Japanese are no exception. With that in mind I crouch in my foxhole waiting, watching, praying, hoping that I would prove capable of being called soldier. We do not wait long.

We hear the war cry that has guided and animated the Imperial forces to conquest after conquest. From hundreds of voices comes the dreaded “Banzai”. Without being given an order to do so, we open fire with every weapon at our command. The noise is ear splitting. To the whomp whomp of the navy guns is added the shriek of heavy artillery shells.

By a stroke of dumb luck my foxhole is next to the road. So I have a clear view. The Japanese come on with fixed bayonets. We are not able to contain the charge entirely. Some get through, but are dealt with by the reserves. Dead enemy bodies lie next to me on the road. I hear a clanking noise. Two “Shermans” move into position adding their firepower to ours. I do not look up when I hear a crunching noise. I pray it isn’t what I fear it is.

Fortunately for the average soldier a firefight usually does not last long and he is too busy to be afraid. The fright comes before and after. I am too occupied to think of fear. My main thought is about survival. The Japanese wave washes up to our guns, hesitates, recoils, rolls forward again and then falls back-but only for a short while. Twice more the courageous enemy soldiers move forward screaming their blood curdling battle cry. Dead bodies cover the ground in front of our foxholes. The Japanese do not hesitate to climb over their fallen comrades to get at us.

But E has not escaped unscathed. I hear cries for medics and stretcher-bearers. A call comes in from the navy: “You have company on the ridges. We think the enemy is trying to circle around you”. We thank the sailors. F co. men are sent up to prevent further encroachment.

During the excitement the non-coms are everywhere: directing fire, keeping the men calm, pointing out targets. None is more visible than T.J. Brown. He is an inspiration and a rock. He is the quintessential soldier, the reassuring voice, and the glue holding the company together. But we caution him to keep down a bit. He has to be reminded from time to time about his worth to us.

Websites About Present Day Biak Island:

Biak
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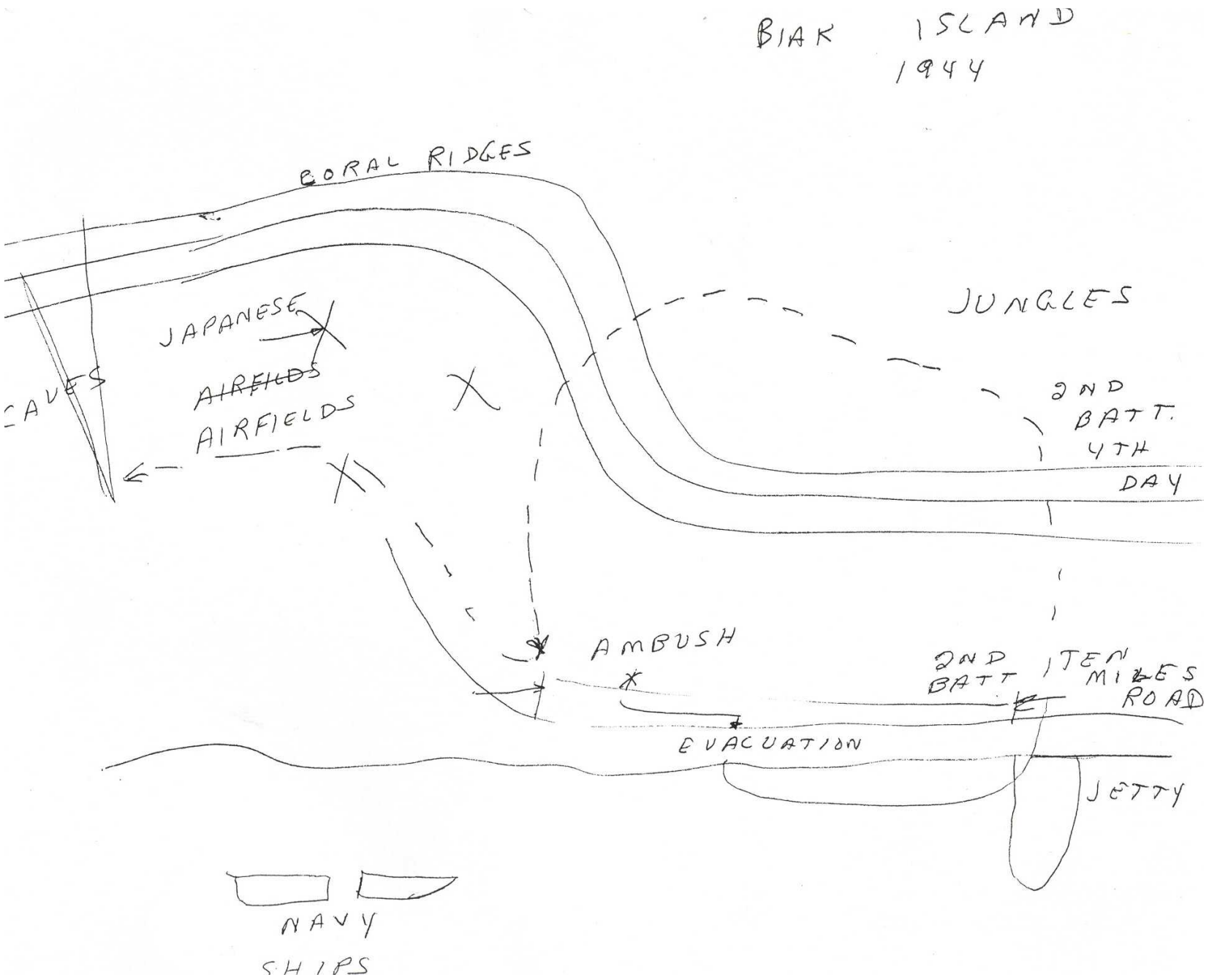
Chapter 11

D-Day Plus Two… The afternoon engagement



Map of Engagement on Biak Island

By mid-afternoon there is a break in the fighting. The enemy pulls back to regroup. Treetops lie everywhere-covering friend and foe alike. The smell of cordite hangs heavy in the air. Navy guns cease firing. Our heavy artillery keeps up a desultory fire. We count heads, drink some water, replenish our ammunition supply, and take some rest.

Our friends will come back: we know this through bitter experience. T.J. is his usual self, cracking jokes, looking to the men"s needs, counseling and advising the living, comforting the injured. He is a true father figure to the new men. Even though there aren't as many of us now, Sgt. Brown assures us that we can hold. We believe him. A few scouts go forward, report that the Japanese are re-grouping, massing for another attack.

They return with tanks this time. They throw everything at us. I"m very busy for a while. I cannot describe adequately the noise and confusion, the bravery and discipline of the attackers, the resolute defense of E, the glory and terror of war. True, it is a minor skirmish and not too important in the greater picture, but I have had a bellyful of war by that time, enough to last me a lifetime.

The Navy guns come alive, join in the cacophony of sounds filling our world. My iron and steel neighbors are unremitting in their cannon and machine gun fire. They concentrate on the enemy tanks, put them out of action. I am a ringside spectator to the first tank action in the area. Dante could never have pictured this kind of inferno. We take a frightful toll on the enemy. To this day I have no knowledge of how long the battle lasted. When the Japanese finally retire in the gloomy twilight, we get the idea that they will not soon return. We have no idea how wrong we were!

The silence that follows the cease firing order is eerie and mind-boggling.

Our ears still resonate; it takes a while to adjust. We flinch as we survey the immediate area. Bodies are stacked everywhere in debasingly grotesque positions. I feel that I"m in a giant cemetery. We talk in hushed tones as we once again count heads.

The sailors blink some kind of message; we thank and congratulate them in return. The ships do not leave. I"m happy to see that T.J. is still on his feet. Now I feel that he is truly indestructible. It is time to rest, but we make our positions stronger, remove the wounded and the dead; more men move up to the ridge as a precautionary measure.

A quick count shows that the 2nd battalion has absorbed about four hundred casualties. Only E is still intact out of the three line companies. We do not have the desire to check the Japanese dead. We leave that unpleasant task to the Intelligence people. G and F companies are merged with E. A quick foray to the cliffs brings in the G survivors.

We spend a very disquieting night. It rains, of course. During all my time in combat, this situation never changed. Rain always fell after a battle making friend and foe equally uncomfortable. We could not have slept, anyway; we were all so keyed up. There was no need to post guards. No one talked, not even in whispers. The enemy showed no activity. Even they had had enough for one day.

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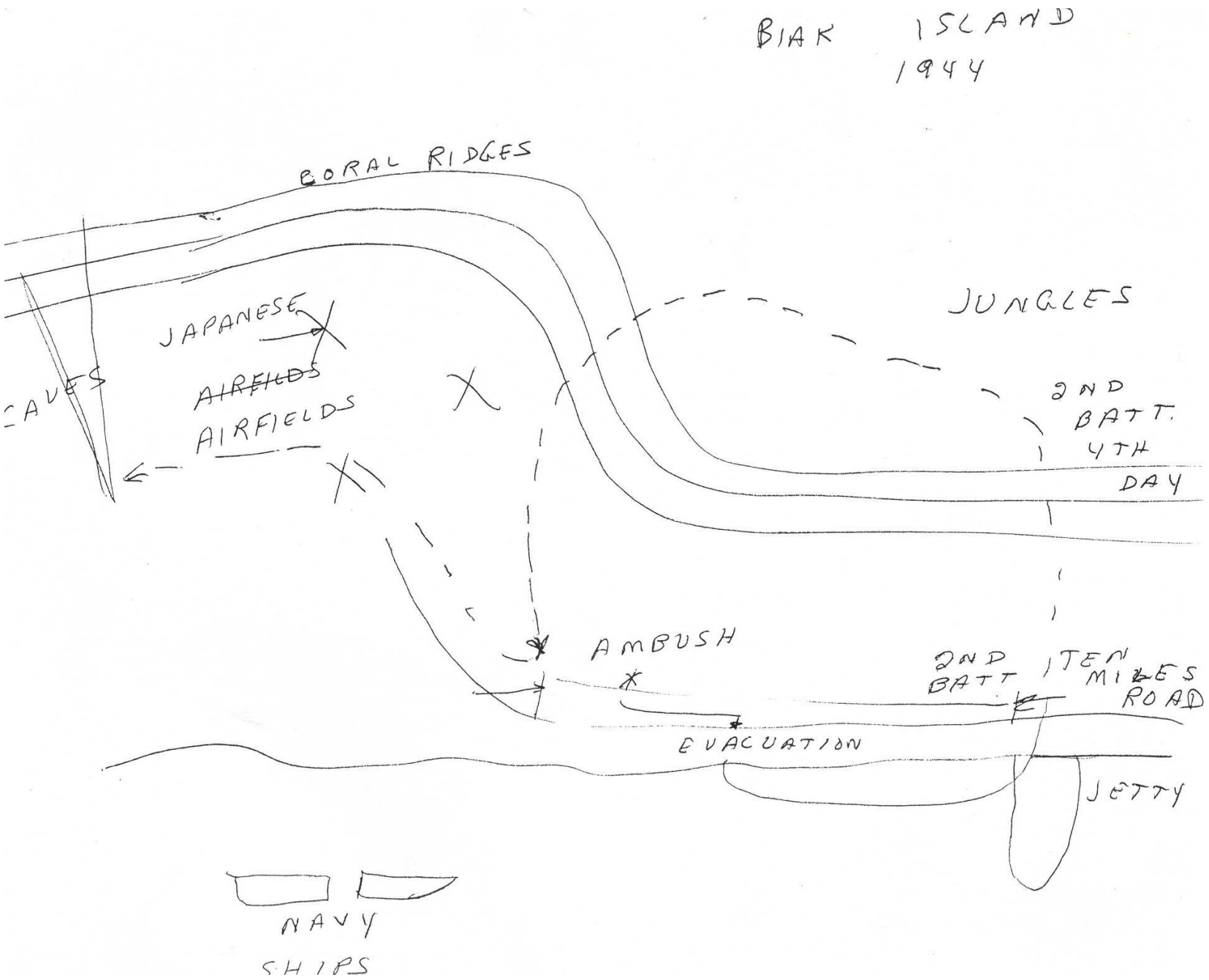
Chapter 12

D-Day Plus Three… Retreat and Regroup



Map of Engagement on Biak Island

Just after dawn the call goes out for volunteers. A reconnaissance patrol is needed to check on the enemy's dispositions. Naturally Sgt. Brown is first in line. The Captain frowns on this, believes that T.J. takes too many chances. The Sgt. insists on going.

A dozen men step forward. At the same time the Japanese resume mortar fire. That is ignored for the most part since that weapon is notoriously ineffective and inaccurate. The consequences are tragic and unforgettable. As the patrol is forming up, one shell lands in the middle of the group. Five men are killed and the rest wounded. The dead are: Able, Anderson, Grove, Miller and one Sergeant Brown.

I'll never forget the shock that swept through E at the news:

"T.J. bought it"
"The Japs finally got Brown"
"You're joking, not Brownie"
"He was indestructible!
"Oh God, no."

The patrol is called off as the Japanese move forward once more. By this time the heavy machine guns of H Co. have finally arrived, so the attack is blunted quite easily. We do not realize that the frontal attack is a diversion, however. The enemy has succeeded in turning our flank and is now positioned in back of E Co, cutting it off from regimental support. F or all intents and purposes E Co. are surrounded on three sides. The only escape is by sea!

After a conference between the company commander and regimental headquarters, it is decided that E Co. will pull back to a staging area where

Amphibious engineers will be waiting to take it off the beach. The high command has also arranged for the air corps to give E Co. cover from the air in the form of B-25 bombers, the best plane for that operation. At two P.M. E Co. leaves the foxholes and moves to the rear. The tank crews will take their tanks through the rear Japanese lines. They cannot be evacuated by sea.

At 2:10 the planes come roaring down the road with their four nose machine guns spewing hundreds of bullets per minute. From the air friend and foe look alike, so the air gunners in the lead plane make a terrible mistake. Bullets meant for the pursuing Japanese hit American G.Is. For some mysterious reason I am spared but men on each side of me are hit. Their heads disintegrate. I freeze in place. A Sergeant gives me a shove and I resume the march. Fortunately, someone from the ground reaches the pilots so the mistake does not recur as following planes move further up the road before opening fire.

We finally reach the beach and climb aboard the amphibious boats for the long trip back to the starting point. We have no idea what will happen next, but we are sure of one thing. The fight for Biak Island has just started.

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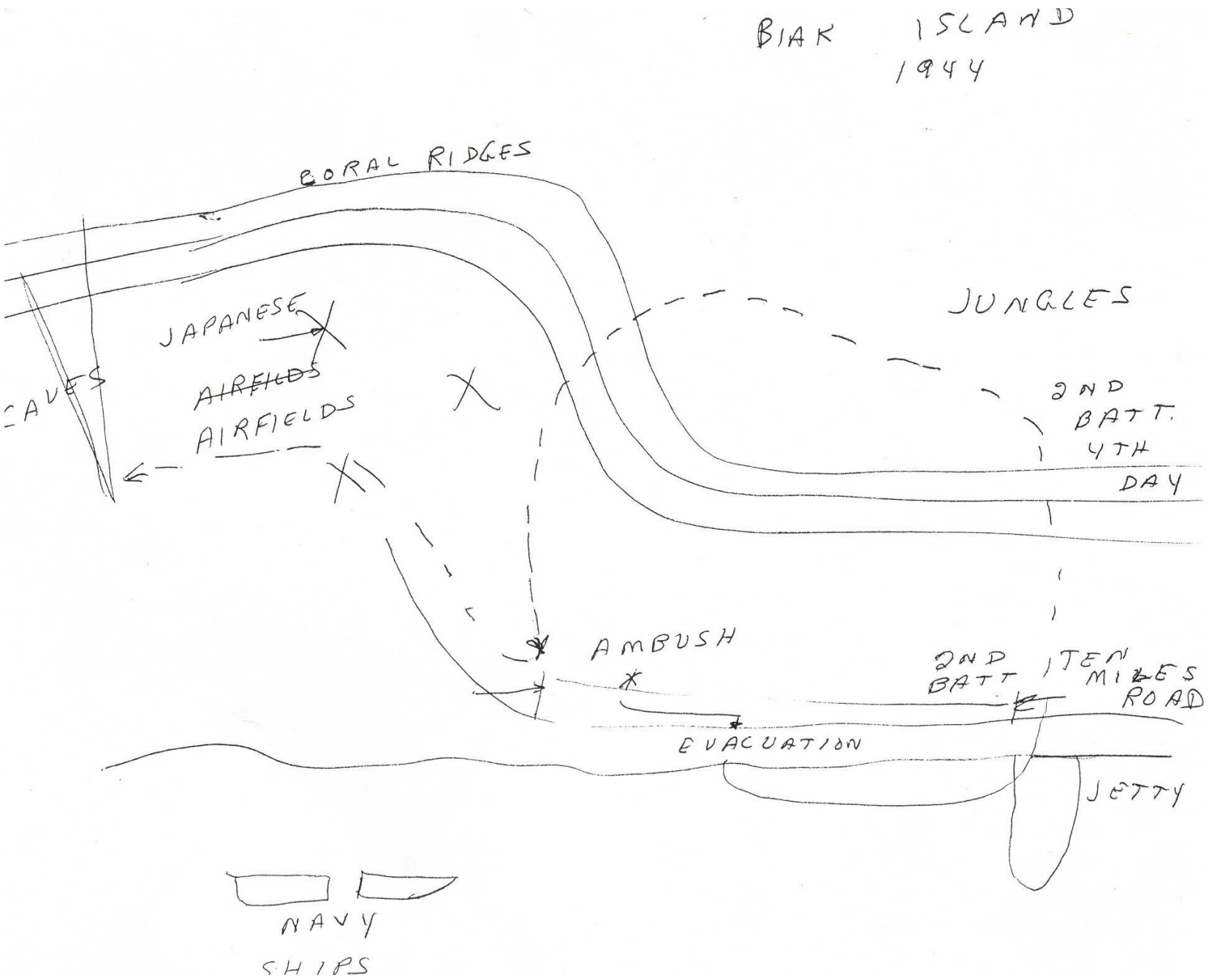
Chapter 13

D-Day Plus Four… The Morning Engagement



Map of Engagement on Biak Island

We were in a foul humor when we disembarked on the jetty, our initial landing spot. To make matters worse, a torrential downpour blanketed the entire beach area so that we had no idea where we were. Not only did we feel humiliated we were also hungry. Sergeant Duncan put things in perspective when he announced that hot coffee and donuts were waiting for us thanks to the good ladies of the Salvation Army. He lightened the moment and made life bearable again.

It was complete dark and still raining when we disembarked for the second time. We filed up to empty shacks that afforded shelter from the rain. The k-rations were still k -rations, nothing had changed. We did have Canned Heat cans that heated up our coffee. So we spent another night listening to the raindrops beat a crazy tattoo on the roofs. We could hardly wait for the morning and get back to the war (Huh?).

This time the top command decreed that the 2nd battalion (what was left of it) would follow the First over the ridges and come onto the fields from the rear. The rain had let up, something that cheered us up, but not for long. The ridges are straight up and straight down. The coral raises hell with our shoes and clothing.

We pass through guard detachments provided by the engineers. Let me say something about engineers. The war could not possibly have been won without the engineers. Their main reason for existence was to provide the infantry with drinking water and food. That they did admirably and without complaints. My hat is off to them!

As we move up to the ridges, we are overjoyed to see the Third Battalion come ashore. It will move back over the beach road, clear the roadblock and make contact with the Second battalion. It is not long before we run into trouble again. A patrol from the 3rd platoon is sent forward to scout the next ridge. All goes well until it reaches the ridge top. Somehow, the Japanese infiltrate the patrol”s rear and cuts off its retreat route.

Once again, E CO. is ambushed. The Captain brings up the two light machine guns and sets them up to clear away the ambushes. Soon, the ridges resound to the deafening noise of staccato machine gun fire. Runners bring up all available ammunition. The first platoon sends a patrol around the right flank; the second platoon sends one around the left flank. The boys scramble up the ridges and surprise the enemy soldiers who find it unpleasant to remain. The trapped patrol returns bringing back casualties, among whom is young Quinones from New York. He has both kneecaps shattered. Mercifully, he is under sedation and does not feel the pain—at that point. I never learned what became of Jose.

We move on past the dead Japanese. We heel grateful in a way that we will not have to deal with the corpses. I never learned who had the un-envious job of disposing of corpses. Soon we clear the ridges only to run headlong into a worse enemy—the jungles.

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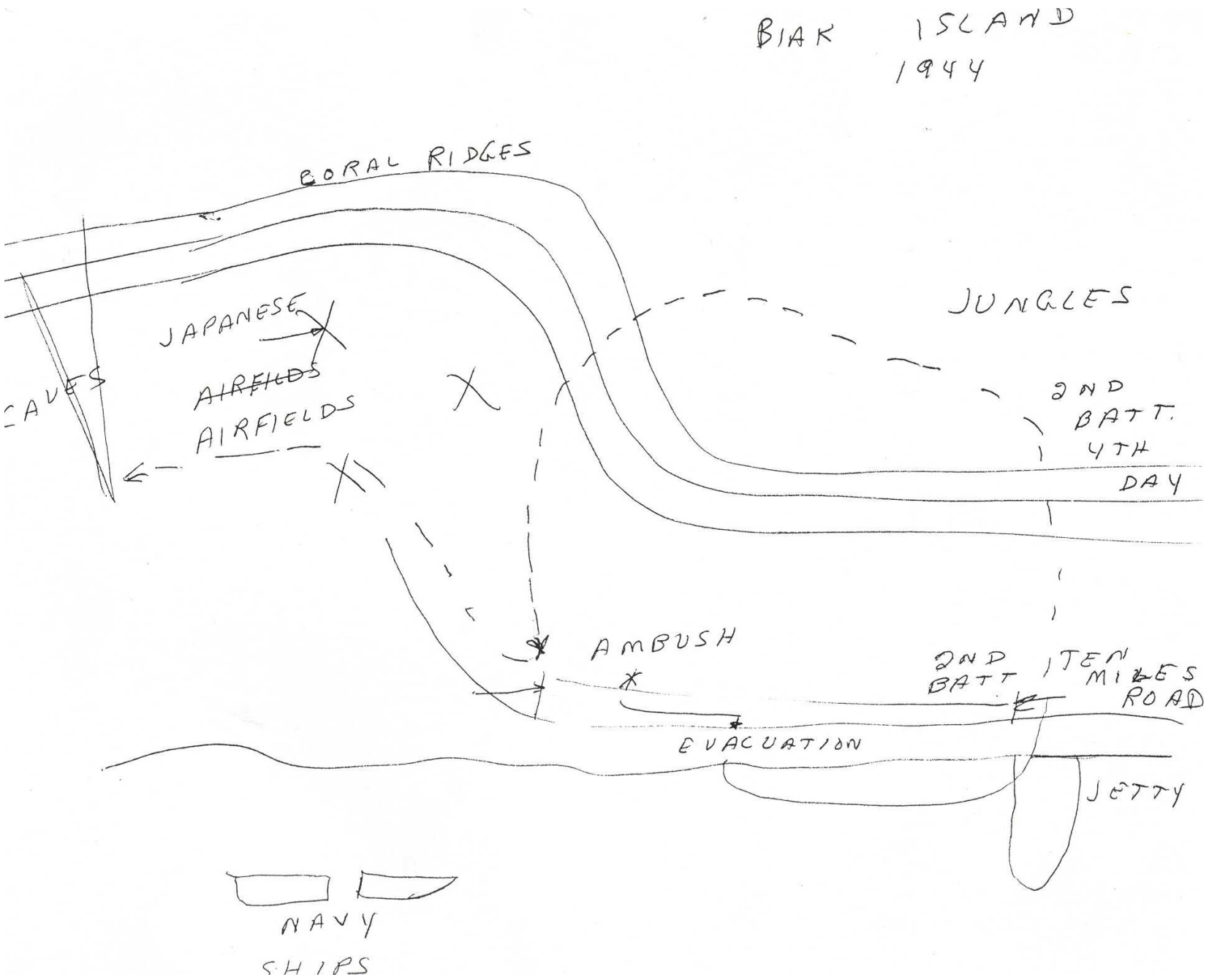
Chapter 14

D-Day Plus Four… The Afternoon Engagement



Map of Engagement on Biak Island

It is noon as we start chopping our way through the rain forest but already we cannot see the SM. No sunlight filtrates through the thick foliage and we are in semi-darkness. The work is crippling and debilitating. We cannot use the First Battalion"s route since the enemy has closed it off. So we must create another way to the eastern ridges to bypass the initial point of contact on the beach road which is now in Japanese hands. No one can hack away at the thick foliage longer that ten minutes.

We cannot send any patrol forward, so we must trust to luck. We cannot maintain road silence, of course. But we believe that the Japanese have moved all their troops forward to protect the airfields. We feel safe, somewhat. In any case there is nothing else to do; we must reach the ridges before nightfall, so we redouble our efforts.

It is complete darkness when we hit the eastern ridges. We bivouac for the night trying to find flat spots among the rocks. It is an uneasy night. The Navy is shelling Japanese positions and we listen apprehensively as the shells pass overhead. We jump from the shock as they hit their objectives, we hope. We sleep the sleep of the dead since we are completely exhausted. No one bothers to make coffee; we are not in the mood.

We begin to climb the ridges again the following morning. This time we follow the First battalion"s route. There is evidence of a fierce fight: dead Japanese soldiers are sprawled all over the landscape, on top of rocks, in crevasses, off the main trail. Here and there we spot cloth-covered bodies. We know who they are. We hurry past the dead American soldiers. We do not wish to look at ourselves.

The plan of attack is a simple one. The Second will move out onto the plateau but will turn south and move back over the site of the ambush and connect with the Third battalion moving up the coast road. It works perfectly. E Company heads for the coastal cliffs by cutting across one of the airfields. It receives attention from the enemy from the back ridges. We ignore machine gun and artillery fire coming from caves in which the Japanese have hidden them. Since E has the largest amount of riflemen, it concentrates on the coast road. The remains of F and G Companies concentrate on the caves.

By late afternoon we hit the coast road and find ourselves in the same ambush area as on the second day, but this time we face the other way. It is an eerie feeling. We feel dispirited. This time we send scouts on top of the cliffs from which the Japanese punished us so severely. They report that the enemy is not there. They return to the company. By nightfall we

occupy our old foxholes. At two A.M. the Japanese send in greetings in the form of an unremitting mortar attack. Once again E Company suffers casualties. The Navy is still out there. Two destroyers move in close to shore and return an extensive counter-fire. The night is illuminated by gun flashes, streaks of light from outgoing shells. We discover much later that the island is honeycombed with caves that the enemy cleverly exploits to move around us at will.

We move quickly to other, safer areas because we realize that the Japanese have our positions zeroed in. The company medic gets no rest. I must say a word Or two Or one thousand about the roles played by certain support troops, notably the company medics, the engineers and the Navy Seabees, the construction outfits. Never in my days overseas were we ever refused food, coffee or shelter at anyone of those support troop camps.

Dawn brings very little relief. We are told that the Third battalion needs help. So we form quickly and move on to help. We hit the enemy by surprise, for a change. The fight turns nasty. We are forced to use hand grenades and flame-throwers, wicked, devilish weapons. Some unlucky riflemen carry a double tank on their backs: one contains gasoline; the other contains a chemical. When the soldiers depress a button, both products mix and shoot out the nozzle of a long flexible tube in the form of liquid fire. The stream is directed at the mouth of caves, dugouts or fortifications.

The result is predictable. Enemy soldiers come running out as burning bodies. Out of compassion they are shot to put an end to their misery. No soldier in his right mind volunteers to carry a flame-thrower; the act of using one is suicidal.

By nightfall the Second and Third battalions link up. We forget the war as we collapse in complete exhaustion and we settle down for a good night”s rest. The artillery troops in the rear also take time out. We are all tired of the war!

Websites About Present Day Biak Island:

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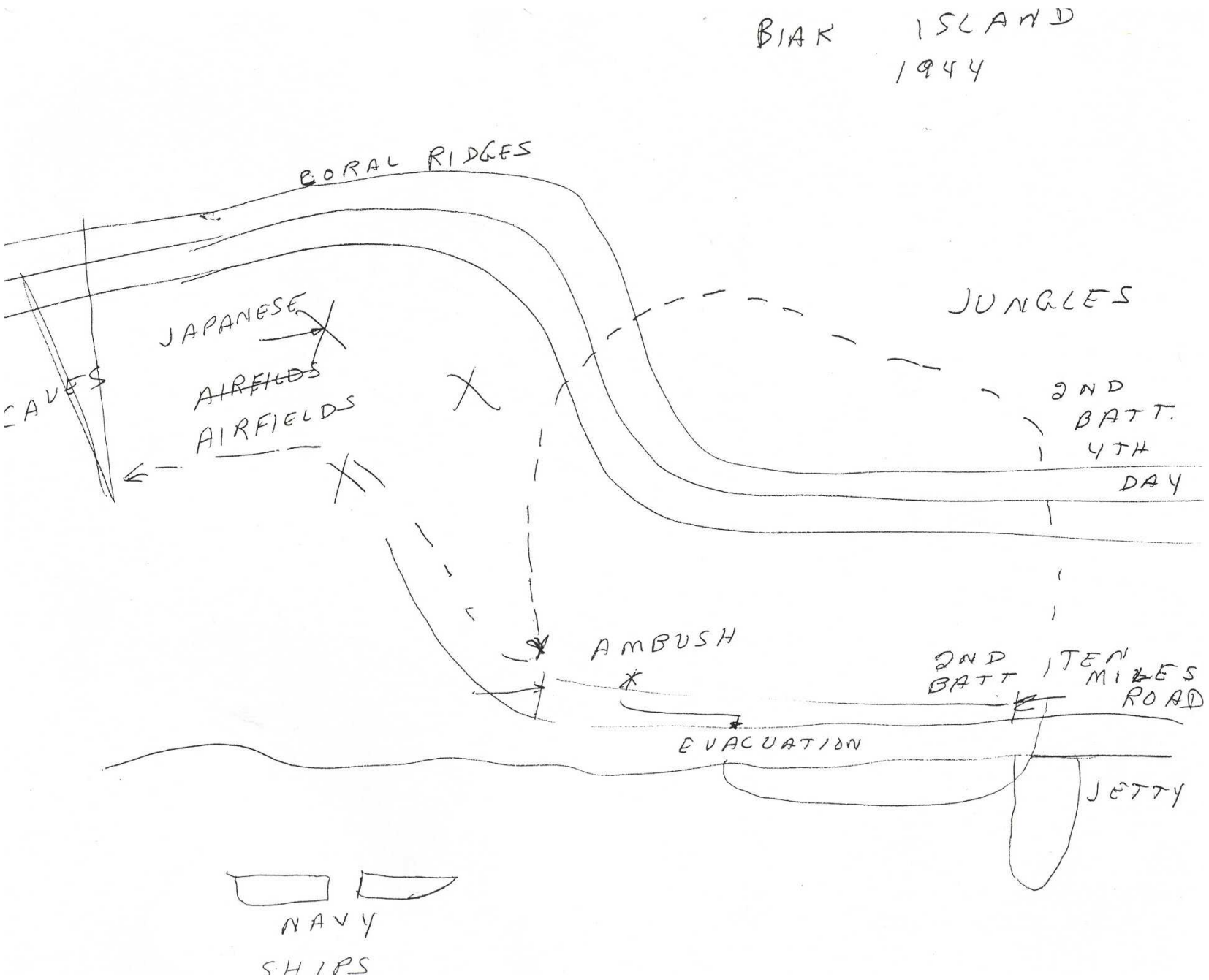
Chapter 15

D-Day Plus Five… First Platoon is Ambushed



Map of Engagement on Biak Island

By noon that day the Second battalion or, what is left of it, receives new orders.

It is to turn around and retrace its way back up the coastal road, climb some new ridges and take up positions on the First battalion"s left flank. It seems that the enemy troops have retired to caves and prepared themselves for a final stand The Third battalion heads for the lower ridges and concentrates on eliminating the Japanese guns that prevent the Air Corps from using the three fields. We receive rations, ammunition and pep talks. There is nothing said about human reinforcement. In the meanwhile the 34th Regiment of the 24th Division comes ashore at the jetty. It will be used when necessary. That comes soon.

It rains, of course. In my time in the South Pacific I never saw it fail: a move was always accompanied by rain, not ordinary rain but usually either a downpour or a deluge. This time it is a combination of the two. We march along with our rifles pointed downwards to keep them free of water. Our so-called waterproof ponchos, which are actually rubber sheets with a hole for the head, soon prove to be ineffective. To this day I remain amazed that a country that could produce so many efficient weapons could never produce decent shoes or rain gear for its army.

When we come under attack from hidden guns along the beach, a patrol from the first platoon locates them and puts them out of action. The medics do another superb job with the wounded. They can do nothing for the dead.

At noon we take a break. Then comes the news we all dread: it"s time to make contact with the First battalion on the ridge to our right. E Co. is assigned the task of taking the lead; the first platoon, again, is told to provide the scouts. Sergeant Doescher looks to the first squad, his "favorite" as he calls it. Guess whom he picks? You guessed it. I am now the first scout, entrusted with the company"s safety. My job will be to move up a makeshift road and make contact. I am told the password. I will repeat it a million times during the march.

In some instances the scouts had the safest jobs. The Japanese had adopted tactics that were very simple. Since there was limited visibility on each side of jungle trails because of the thick concentration of trees and underbrush, they would let the scouts through and then attack the oncoming patrol. Sometimes it worked; other times it did not. I had no way of knowing if or when the Japanese would attack. So I told myself a short prayer and took position up front. There was a second scout behind me to whom I would relay messages such as stop or come ahead.

The rain continues as I lead off. Twenty paces behind me is Burke, one of my trusted buddies. We run into occasional patches of sunlight that throws false shadows to my eyes. I look constantly to right and left stopping occasionally to listen to strange noises. That is probably the wrong word to say since a jungle is always full of strange noises whether from tree swinging monkeys or parrots or other unidentified animals. Let me say one word in favor of monkeys and parrots. We came to know that as long as they scampered about treetops while chattering, then the safer we were from marauding enemy troops. They served as unofficial sentries.

By mid-afternoon the animals are quiet. The rain ceases. I stop and take inventory. I send Burke back to check with the Company Commander about the possible location of C Company, our target. He returns with the news that C should be about four miles off to the right, another two hours" march. I figure that we should get there just at sundown.

The quiet is getting on my nerves. I motion to Burke that he should move closer to me. We now move steadily ahead. I watch the left; Burke checks out the right. My eyes move about constantly. We try to be on complete alert. It proves worthless. I hear a familiar noise. It is that made by a Japanese soldier cocking his machine gun. I signal back to the company. We all hit the ground as bullets rip through the jungle and pin down Burke and myself.

We cannot see the enemy gunners, but we can feel their presence. Fire now comes in from the other side. E Company is neatly ambushed—again. Burke and I lob a few grenades toward the suspected locations. We only have two apiece. I begin to wonder what has happened to the rest of the company. I soon get an answer.

Two patrols fan out to either side of the trail and come close to the enemy before being detected. A firefight takes place. Burke and I snuggle deeper into the ground as bullets rip through the covering foliage. The sound of exploding grenades fill the air. The fight lasts only a few minutes. Company E suffers some more casualties, but the Japanese disappear into the jungles, leaving dead and wounded behind. American wounded and Japanese prisoners are escorted back to Battalion headquarters. The Army always insisted on picking up prisoners to get important information. But prisoners are few. The Japanese soldiers are

Indoctrinated from an early age in the belief that American soldiers will kill them if they surrender, thus explaining the high ratio of dead Japanese soldiers to captured soldiers. I believe I have done my job of first scout.

We take up the march again. Just before sundown I make contact with C Company. That company was decimated by a previous enemy attack. The survivors leave at first light. Company E takes responsibility of covering three converging trails and prevent the enemy from escaping the battle of annihilation occurring in the valley below where the First and Third Battalions have pushed the remnants of the 10,000 man Japanese garrison into caves.

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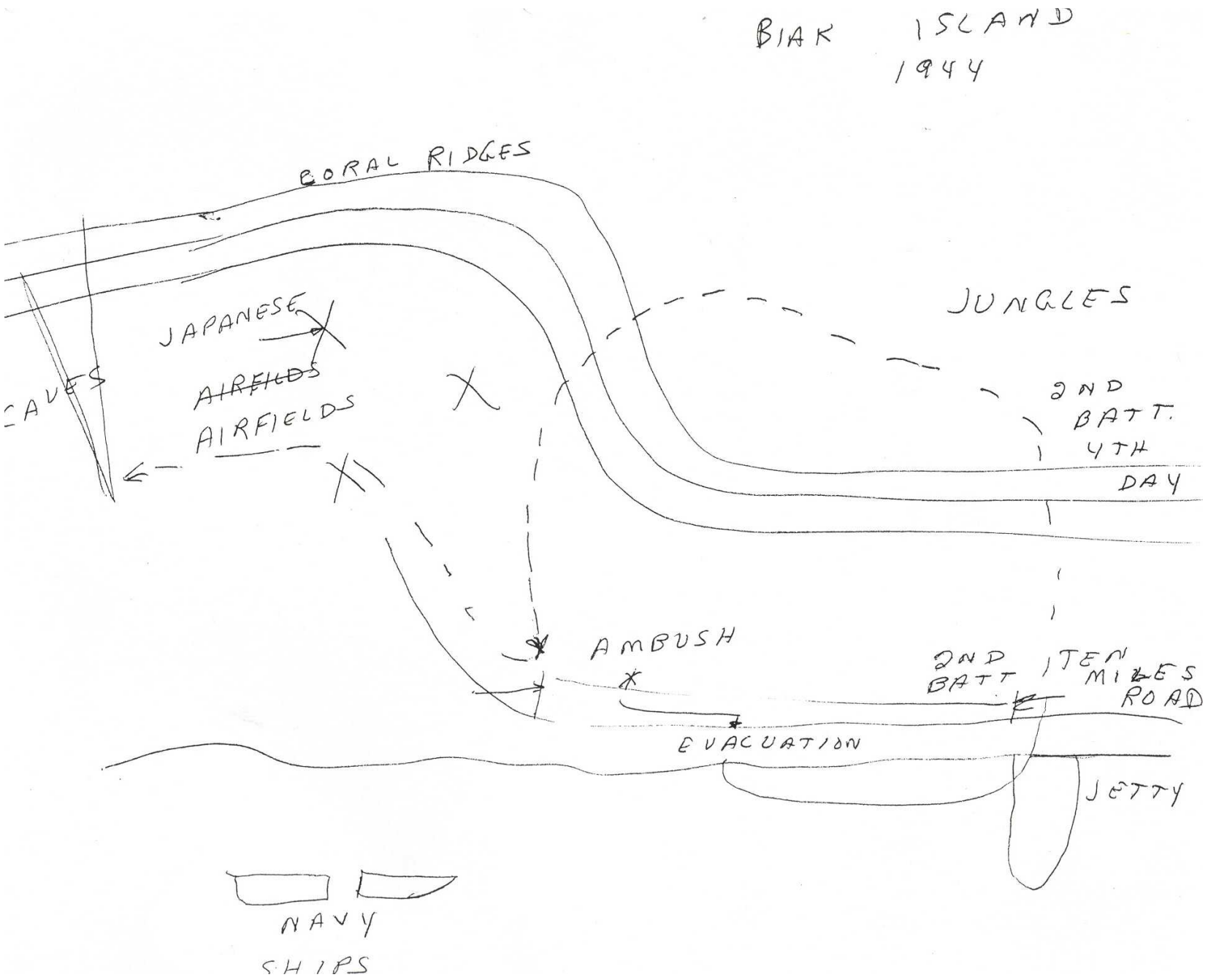
Chapter 16

D-Day Plus Six… The Cave Battles



Map of Engagement on Biak Island

E Company, now down to less than twenty-five men, is now witness to the strangest battle of the War in the South Pacific. For the first time the infantry has to deal with enemy soldiers taking refuge in caves.

I am told that when this particular island rose from the ocean bottom, it was primarily a hunk of coral that through centuries of ocean corrosion had developed an extensive system of interlocking caves. That explained why the enemy soldiers always infiltrated our rear and attacked supply and engineering outfits. They made their way through the caves!

In this situation a long but narrow valley led up to mountains honeycombed with caves. The two attacking American battalions blocked the only exit at the lower end of the valley. The Japanese could not escape, but they tried, oh how they tried. Every day, the division band members, trained to be gunners, turned their quadruple truck-mounted .50 caliber machine guns on the cave entrances. I can still see ricocheting bullets climbing the steep mountain walls and screaming into the air. In the intervening quiet spells, Australian civilian Japanese speakers relayed messages to the enemy soldiers through their bullhorns. According to the American soldiers with whom we talked, the Japanese could be heard arguing among themselves. Then, our boys said, they could hear shots inside the caves. Then there was complete silence.

Then the Royal Australian Air Force came in for some action. Their daredevil pilots were a cocky group as was the ground army. In my opinion the two best armies in the war were the German army and the Australian Imperial Forces also known as the A.I.F. composed of volunteers who went overseas to fight for England. They were very equally effective in North Africa and the jungles of New Guinea. The pilots flew antiquated but marvelous airplanes, the P-40 Kittyhawks, whose nose sections were decorated with Tiger shark teeth. The idea was for the pilots to leave the neighboring airstrip, come up the valley and skipbomb their bombs into the caves. It was a great idea, but it did not work.

We watched the planes fly low and drop their bombs, watched in fascination as the bombs skipped along the valley much like a stone skipping on water, watch in disappointment as the bombs hit the mountain face and exploded. Plane after plane tried it with no luck. No bomb entered the cave. When one plane could not climb away from the mountain in time and hit the wall, the exercise was called off.

Next came the engineers. Somehow they managed to drag barrels of heavy oil to the mountaintop. Since fissures were evident everywhere, pouring the oil into the cracks was a simple operation. This they did with alacrity. Next came the

torches. The engineers just tossed them down and we watched as burning oil came cascading through the cave openings. This was done for the following three or four days. The Japanese did not surrender.

Meanwhile, E Company had its hands full maintaining its position at the crossroads. The survivors ran patrols every day while keeping lines of communications open to other companies. At the same time we had to deal with Japanese soldiers trying to escape from the caves. The night brought the sounds of war very close as the enemy soldiers tried time after time to escape. They came onto American positions in waves only to be cut down by concentrated machine gun and artillery shells know as canisters, deadly shells that were nothing more than enlarged shotgun shells. They died by the hundreds. First thing every morning, bulldozers would chug up to the First Battalion lines and push the corpses into shallow trenches.

Company E soldiers soon became victimized by a severe attack of diarrhea, known as the G.Is. Most of the boys were incapacitated, too weak for patrolling. The dozen men still operating, Burke and myself included, now ran three patrols per day. The came a fateful decision by the high command.

The Regimental Commander ran out of patience. He ordered the caves to be sealed. He said that we had used up enough time and his regiment was too decimated. So, once again the engineers climbed the mountain. This time they carried explosives that they set at intervals on the mountain face. At a signal they set off the charges. We watched as once again man demonstrated his infinite capacity to harm his fellow man.

The whole mountain face came crashing down, effectively blocking the cave entrances. The remnants of the 162nd Regiment along with the reinforcing 34th Regiment left to establish a perimeter defense of the three airfields which the Allied Air Forces were already using to bomb Japanese targets further North. Thus ended the battle of the caves and the official campaign for the island of Biak, off the New Guinea coast. The Second Battalion started the campaign with 500 infantrymen. Less that two weeks later, we could only muster about fifty. E Company had less than twenty men still on their feet.

Was the enterprise worth it? Who knows. Were those islands worthy of the sacrifices of thousands of young allied lives, mere boys who never had a chance to live? Once again, who knows. We continued with patrols for several months, bringing in Japanese survivors but also losing some boys as well.

I thought of Sergeant Brown for many years. I never forgot my reaction as the medics carried his body past us. I cried like a baby.

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- The Memoirs of Armand Charest Part II
- The Memoirs of Armand Charest Part III

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