

---

# Never Raised to Be a Soldier

## John Hagen's Memoir of Service with the 164th Infantry, 1941-1943 (Part Two)

by John Hagen

Edited and annotated by Terry L. Shoptaugh

### Editor's Note:

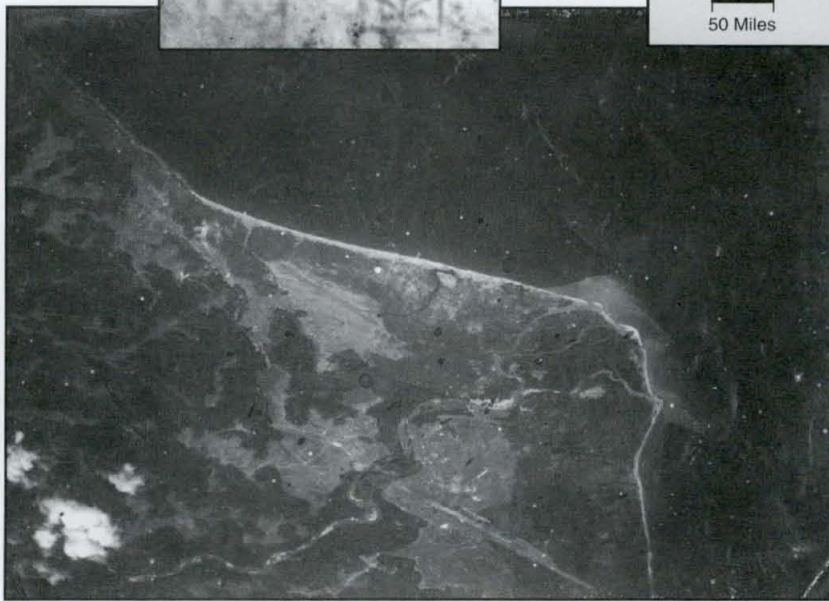
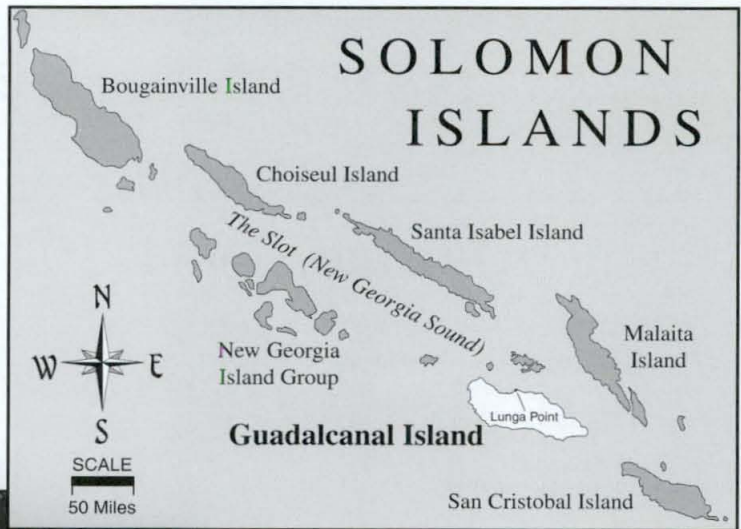
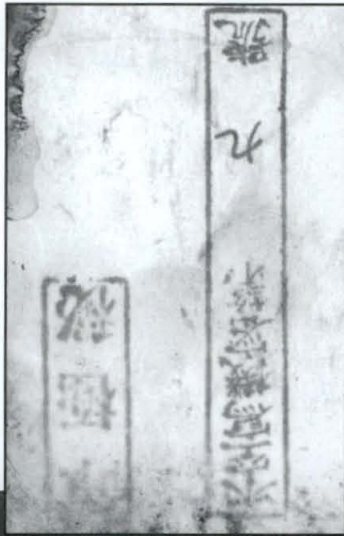
Part one of John Hagen's memoirs of serving on Guadalcanal appeared in the winter 1999 issue (volume 66, number 1, pages 2-15). Copies of that issue are available by contacting the State Historical Society of North Dakota at 701-328-2666 or by checking the Society's Web Site Catalog. The address is [www.state.nd.us/hist](http://www.state.nd.us/hist).

Unless otherwise indicated, all of Hagen's remarks quoted here are taken from tape recordings of his memoirs of World War II. Some readers may be offended by Hagen's reference to the Japanese soldiers as "Japs" and his use of curse words, but we decided it was editorially important to render the terms as he used them or remembered the conversations of others.

Hagen and his friends were about to face experienced Japanese combat troops. The Japanese plan for attack was complex, consisting of two separate assaults: a strike against the marine lines along the Matanikau River west of Henderson Field, and a second, hopefully simultaneous, strike across the same ridge the Japanese had attacked on September 13. In order to make this second attack, the Japanese forces had to move through dense jungle to get into position. This proved to be very difficult, so the Japanese command postponed the attack from October 18 to October 22. This date, too, proved impossible for a coordinated strike from two directions. Communications between the two forces broke down; the Matanikau attack was launched on October 23 and collapsed with heavy Japanese casualties before the southern force was even in position. It was this southern force that the 164th faced on October 24-26.<sup>1</sup> Before that event, Hagen and much of the 3rd Battalion were sent to clean up the Matanikau sector:



John Hagen (1918-1985) joined the North Dakota National Guard in the fall of 1940 and was called to active federal duty just a month later. He and his unit, the Headquarters Company, 164th Infantry, were sent to basic training at Camp Claiborne, Louisiana, where this photograph was taken in 1941. The 164th landed on Guadalcanal on October 13, 1942, to reinforce the 1st Marine Division. His tape-recorded memories of those wartime experiences are the basis for this article, part two of his memoirs. Courtesy of Terry L. Shoptaugh.



Above: Guadalcanal Island (in white) and the other Solomon Islands. Map by Brian R. Austin. The aerial photograph (left) was removed from the body of a dead Japanese soldier; it shows the shoreline around Lunga Point before the Japanese bombing began. The date at the bottom is 10/13/42. The Japanese writing on the obverse has been translated "Military Top Secret. Ki [Kisarazu?] Aerial Photo Classified No. 9-16." Courtesy of James M. Fenelon, Marshalltown, Iowa. Bottom: A map of the same shoreline of Guadalcanal as in the Japanese photograph, showing Lunga Point, prepared by the Historical Division of the Department of the Army, October 23-26, 1942.



✱ First, we were sent up to the Matanikau [River] after we had secured the perimeter around Henderson Field. We got up there, we attacked [the Japanese] and pushed them back. We crossed the Matanikau River and kept advancing up north, but we were stopped. We were still in sight of the beach and Sealark Channel but we got stopped up on a ridge there. I jumped into a foxhole, and the foxhole was kind of hidden. There were two holes, spread out kind of fan-like, one going left, one going right at an angle, like a "V," towards the Jap lines. I jumped in and there was a dead marine lying in one. He had been dead for a long time because he was all very thin. In the other foxhole there's another dead marine, his helmet, rifle and the whole bit. Nobody had taken the stuff. The Japs just ran back right through there again but evidently missed those two foxholes or they would have skimmed those rifles and whatever paraphernalia the men had. We called back to the grave registration for the marines, after we got our phone line through, and they came up and took the bodies we found. That's kind of weird crawling in with a dead marine. They'd both been shot, and one was bayoneted.

As I told you, our 1st and 2nd Battalions had been taken up and added to the marines. The perimeter there was very thinly guarded, longer, frankly, than the marines could handle because of its length around Henderson Field. It was very important we kept Henderson. So [after the Matanikau action] we [in the 3rd Battalion] went to the Lunga River front. We were stretched out way around from just north of where we had landed all the way around Henderson Field and almost way back toward the other side of the island. You might say that if we were in a three-mile-square ring, half of the ring [was held] by soldiers and [half by] marines. Next to our battalions was the 1st Battalion of the 7th Marines, commanded by Colonel [Lewis] Puller.

Later on, I spent half a night in a foxhole with that guy. He was something else. He wasn't any bigger than I was, and he had a chest that measured about forty-six inches. I'll tell you, when he gave an order, you obeyed it. He and our battalion colonel [Hall] and Major Tenborg, the guy that was in the dugout with me right at the beginning on the beach, they got to be real buddies. Puller, Hall, and Tenborg put together that firepower arrangement for those perimeter lines with the marines. Hall had worked out this cross fire. He and Tenborg had sat down and worked out fire lanes for being attacked from the jungle.<sup>2</sup> They got together with Colonel Puller and worked out this idea. Actually, that's what saved that line when the Japs attacked really in force.

I wasn't in the group next door to the marines. I was still back in the bivouac area; we [the 3rd Battalion] were held in reserve to be put in wherever we were needed, depending upon where the heaviest attack came from. Usually what happened in that type of situation would be that the Japanese would throw out a feint here and throw out a feint there and then pretty soon the main attack would come at a certain point. Then they would vector all their forces into this one area and try to pour them through to break up our front lines. That's when we would throw in our reserves.

That first night [October 24] they wanted to hit our line in two places. The heaviest weapons they had supporting the infantry were machine guns. All their artillery pieces and mortars had been abandoned along their line of march. Some of these [machine] guns were close to .50 caliber. I've forgotten what they called those things but they would strap them to their backs. The gun was practically as long as the soldier but it was a machine gun that they'd feed this clip into it, which is a flat clip with exposed shells laying on top of it. The clip would feed through the chamber as they pulled the trigger. That was a two-man gun and it was air-cooled. The guy that had the gun strapped on his back would lie down, prone, and the other one would jump between his legs and start firing the gun over the top of his head. Pretty effective but he'd have to feed the clip in and shoot. They had some of them, and they had a lighter machine gun, I think it was .25 caliber. I saw one of them. A lot of their rifles were .25 caliber. But they had .30's also, and they had been smart enough to machine them so they could use our ammunition in their guns. They'd try to capture our ammunition. Any belt they could get off a dead soldier, they'd grab and use in their own guns.

There were a lot of clouds that night and heavy rainfall and the night was really dark. I will never forget it. I'll tell you, those guys liked to attack at night, and I've never in my life ever witnessed a Fourth of July celebration that equaled that, at any fairgrounds. They had to bring us up in the blackest dark and just fill us in wherever they could, to bolster the line. We were approaching those lines going up over this ridge and down into those lines. The fire was heavy, and the Japs used an awful lot of tracers. A tracer would hit a stone or a rock or a tree or something and go straight up in the air and it was just streamers, red tracer shells hitting stuff and going straight up in the air. You couldn't believe all the racket. Barrages, mortars, from both sides, and rifle fire and machine gun fire plus all these tracers dancing all



*"American troops getting hot chow after returning from front lines. Guadalcanal, 1943." Hagen recounts coming under fire from a Japanese nambu machine gun while waiting in line at a field kitchen. Courtesy of North Dakota National Guard Historical Holding and Archives.*

over the place. It was really something to behold. That was a wild night, but we didn't break and they finally gave up.

I wasn't in the line that first night. When we moved up, I went into a dugout about 60-70 yards back from where all this firing and these attacks were taking place. These infiltrated Japs would climb up these palm trees and hide in the palm fronds, and just lay up there against the trees and sleep until everybody started to come out of their holes in the morning. Then they would start sniping at us. Some of these Japs had these light nambu machine guns.<sup>3</sup> We had moved our field kitchen up, and we crawled out of our holes and the field kitchen was back over the hill a little behind us. We grabbed our mess gear and took turns going back to stand in line to get some stew or whatever it was they had. Usually it was a stew; they usually took C rations, opened a bunch of cans of them, meat and beans or whatever and mixed it with something else. We'd tear back there and get a mess kit full and then get back into our post again down in the dugout.

I tore back there and there was a bunch of marines and so forth around our kitchen. I was standing in line waiting to get something to eat and all of a sudden there was a burst from a nambu. It had kicked up dirt right beside me and went right on by me just like it was stitching a hole in the ground. Of course, everybody ran for cover and some of the marines were whipping around there with their rifles looking for the Jap. They finally found him about 30 yards down past the field

kitchen, down toward the front lines. I'll tell you, everybody in the camp was shooting at the top of that tree and pretty soon he just tipped upside down and the gun fell and hit the ground. It was like a machine pistol. He just hung up on that tree upside down.

The field kitchen was right behind our dugout. We had our telephone switchboard connected to the mortar firing line, the front lines and the fire direction center, which was way back almost to the airfield. We had sound power units going up to the front lines. These were telephones which hooked to each other with a line of varying length. It was real small wire, gray. The switchboard line wires were heavier wire that would go to the field phones. The sound power phones were supposed to have been used between the units. When you talked into the sound powers, some kind of cell in there would produce power immediately whenever the sound hit the speaker. Therefore you didn't use batteries or anything so it was just called sound power. They worked pretty darn good. They were small, very light, seemed like plastic to me. Those were supposed to have been used within the rifle companies to the different sectors of the rifle company, like A squad, B squad, C squad. Each squad had a second lieutenant. The first lieutenant was a line lieutenant, an exec officer of the rifle company, and the captain was the head of the rifle company.

That was the day my rifle was stolen. I had a 5 series, M-1, the best rifle made in the war. I still remember the serial number—88699. When I

went to the field kitchen, I had a pistol on my belt so I figured I would leave the rifle at the entrance of the dugout. When I got back from getting my mess kit full of food and some coffee, there was an old '03 bolt action rifle laying where my M-1 had been.<sup>4</sup> So a marine took off with that M-1 and left his rifle. But he was doing more with a rifle than I was anyway. It was a heck of a good gun. I couldn't have taken it home with me anyway.<sup>5</sup>

Now the 25th [of October] everything was kind of quiet at first. It was that night that was really wild for me. The Japanese artillery and Japanese aircraft were still active during the day, however, and the veterans of Guadalcanal named the day "Dugout Sunday." They all stayed down in those dugouts. The Japs were determined to bust that line, so we got shelled and bombed on and off all day. You have to realize, we normally pulled our whole fleet out of there so these guys [i.e. Japanese ships] had a field day—or a field week you might say. . . .

These marines and GIs had to cut out their own field of fire in that jungle. They had to go out there with axes and whatever they could get hold of – machetes – and cut out a strip of about 30 yards in front of them so that they had a field of fire when the Japs appeared. We had strung barbed wire all along the whole thing to try to hold them back, but I don't think we had any land mines. So, there was that line, and this setup of crossfire and support fire, Colonel Hall had dreamed it up and set it up with Colonel Puller. Colonel Puller was using the same thing with his battalion as Hall was using with his after he once saw how valuable it could be.

I'll tell you, the Japs were raising hell. Once they started, they didn't quit. They opened up with machine guns and hit our lines from out of the dark. We'd been hit by one regiment the night before. Now we had two more, two together



On the left, Ralph Major (Williston, N. Dak.); on the right, Clifford Gustafson (Alexander, N. Dak.), 164th Infantry Regiment. Courtesy of North Dakota National Guard Historical Holding and Archives.

coming in on this one area for which I was running the switchboard. They came screaming through there hollering "Banzai!" This Maruyama and his officers were waving their swords over their heads and screaming. You never heard so much racket in all your life.<sup>6</sup>

They hit us the same way they had the night

1. See Miller, 152-159, for a detailed account.

2. Here, Hagen's memory fails him, for as Hammel's book makes clear, it was Lt. Col. Arthur Timboe, commander of the 164th's 2nd Battalion, who worked with Puller and Hall in laying out troop positions and fire lanes. See also, Hammel, 347-348, 356-357. Over the passage of years, Hagen had confused Timboe with Tenborg.

3. Hagen's term "nambu" refers to several models of light machine guns used by the Japanese soldiers in the war. Most widely used were the model 11 and the model 96 guns, each weighing about twenty pounds, easily operated by one man, and firing 6.5mm shells fed into the gun's chamber from clips. See the U.S. War Department's *Handbook on Japanese Military Forces* (reprinted by Presidio Press, 1991), 193ff. for details.

4. The 1903 model rifle, issued by the Springfield Armory had been the standard rifle for American ground forces until the mid-1930s. It was a bolt-action, single-shot rifle, extremely accurate, and

a favorite of veteran soldiers. But the army wanted a semiautomatic rifle, one that fired accurately and quickly, and could be used by large numbers of conscript soldiers. In 1936 the army adopted John Garand's design for such a weapon and designated it the "M-1." The 164th Infantry was armed with the M-1 at Guadalcanal. The marines of the 1st Marine Division, by contrast, had continued to use the Springfield '03 model. See Geoffrey Perret, *There's a War to be Won: The United States Army in World War II* (New York: Random House, 1991), 80-85.

5. Another veteran of the 164th remembered that his M-1 "was a matter of much curiosity" with the marines. He noted that after seeing the M-1 in use, one marine swore "he was absolutely going to get one of those rifles . . . even if he had to steal it." See Harry Weims, *My Own Little Corner of the War*, 1992 typescript copy, State Historical Society of North Dakota Collections, 79, 93-94. After Guadalcanal, the marines rearmed their divisions with M-1 rifles.

before. Think they'd learn, wouldn't you? I'll tell you we had a tough night, but we held that line. This book credits us with showing "an overwhelming superiority over the enemy."<sup>7</sup> In other words, our 3rd Battalion actually was the instrumental force that held that line. Not that the marines weren't doing anything, don't kid yourself, but frankly we got there at the right time. Colonel Hall's analysis of the situation, the way he set up his field of fire and so forth, was the key.<sup>8</sup> Those Japs lost over 3000 men that night.

When it came to describing his own actions during the fighting on the nights of October 24 and 25, John Hagen's memories combined general remarks about the combat and specific details that he remembered vividly. This was not unusual for a situation that was both exciting and terrifying:

✪ I was on the switchboard. Billy [Boyd] came jumping into the dugout and said we were getting hit again pretty heavy. I could hear that we were. He said the line was out to 'K' Company, and we had to get it in right away. I said, "I have sound power [i.e. battery phones] going down." He said, "Forget the goddamn sound power, we have to have a heavy line down there." I said, "I can't pull a heavy line down there." "No," he said, "go find the break in it." The other boys were out. I don't know where they were. There was Pete Burns and Ed Goff, but everybody was doing something. I had to go out and repair the line.

It was dark. That crap [shrapnel and bullets] was flying through the air like you wouldn't believe. All I had was my repair kit, which was wire pliers and tape. I had to find where the line was broken and then tie it up again. K Company was the middle company [in the line]. We had a line open to I and L but K was right in the middle and was where the heaviest attack was hitting. I got down to that area and saw the break. It was right behind the command post.

On the way down there was a guy by the name of Rilie Morgan. His dad was a judge in North Dakota. Rilie was in our fraternity house at the University of North Dakota. I would see him every once and a while. He was with the Grand Forks national guard, as I recall. He had been

promoted to second lieutenant in the field, which wasn't really a blessing in that outfit. He was put in the line company. I have forgotten if he originated in a service company or heavy weapons. Anyways, they stuck him in there.

I came crawling through the woods. The Japs were really raising hell and overrunning positions and everything else. I was sneaking along tracing that wire. You had to lay them on top of the ground because the Japs were so good at climbing trees. They would climb the trees and cut the wire and we could not get up there in the middle of the night to try to repair them. We would crawl on the ground and be guided by the wire. I was guiding myself by the wire towards K Company. I didn't have a rifle. I had lost my rifle. I did not want it anyway. I had a pistol. That is all I ever had time to use anyway.

Here I was sneaking along the ground and I saw this guy leaning against a palm tree. I stopped and looked. Rilie was maybe an inch or two taller than I, but not much. He was a law student at the University of North Dakota. Rilie was the all-business type. I saw that helmet and I knew it was one of our people, unless a Jap had put on one of our helmets and was just leaning against this palm tree. It was so dark down there you couldn't tell. I went "psst," like that, and he said, "Who is it?" "Hagen. I'm looking for a break in the wire." "Oh, John, get up here. I want to show you something." I crawled up there to him by this tree. He was about maybe ten yards away from me by the time I spotted him.

It was so damn dark. You know, the Japs would throw up a flare, and you would have to freeze right to the ground. Sometimes we'd fire off one of ours, looking to see if there were any more out there alive. Then, of course, you would blast them. Our lines weren't all that far apart. So, I was leaning up against a tree with Rilie and he said, "Look down there." It was kind of a pathway. There was a flare in the sky down by the front lines. You could just barely see with the glow of light down there. I said, "My God, it looks like a dump." He said, "Those are all Jap soldiers." "What in the hell is going on?" "Well," he said, "I'll tell you. I can see them. I sit against this tree." He was just like an old farmer leaning back, sitting on

---

6. Although General Masao Maruyama commanded the Japanese 2nd Infantry Division, he was not present at this attack by the division's 16th Regiment and remnants of the 29th Regiment, already decimated from the previous night's battle.

7. Hagen is quoting from the citation written by General Vandegrift.

8. Hagen's remarks implying that the 164th had prevented the

marines from being overrun echoed those of his fellow soldier in the 164th, Bill Burns, who told a reporter in 1943 that the marines would have lost the battle "if we hadn't come when we did." See "Burns of Fargo Objected to Marine's Idea that the Japs were 'Softened Up' For Army," undated newspaper clipping in John Hagen papers, NMHC. This army-marine argument continues among veterans of Guadalcanal to this day.



*A Japanese soldier captured by E Company at Koli Point, Guadalcanal, in November 1942 is interrogated by Capt. Wolfe of the Marine Corps, who spoke fluent Japanese. Standing left, Staff Sgt. James M. Fenelon (Devils Lake, N. Dak.) and — Cossette (carrying Thompson submachine gun), posted to guard the prisoner, and Lt. Ackley (Boston, Mass.), writing down the interrogation results. Courtesy of James M. Fenelon, Marshalltown, Iowa.*

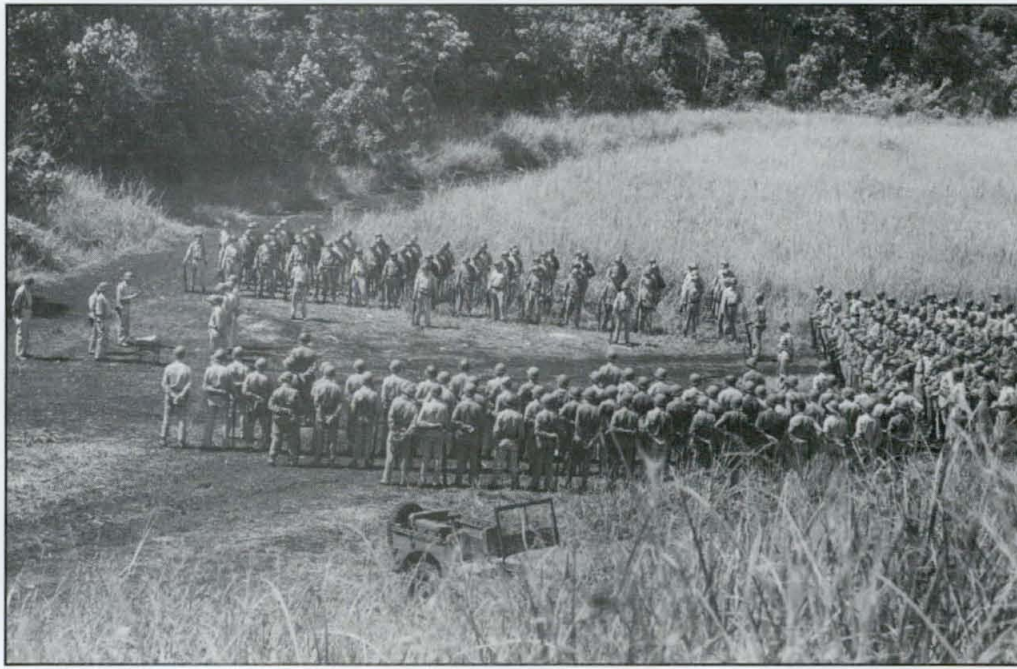
the ground leaning against the tree with his rifle between his legs. He said, "Watch this now. Pretty soon another one will jump out into the path." He was sitting looking straight down a path, which ran parallel to the front lines about forty yards back. I had only gone twenty or thirty yards from my dugout so far. We almost had to shout to each other, the noise was so weird. Explosions all around, hearing those 37's go "whomp." You knew that was canister shot and then the mortars were coming down. Billy [Boyd] was sitting on the board then. I finally told Rilie, "Jeez, I got to repair this damn line. K isn't in communication with the front lines at all. K is on sound power to us thru L and I [companies]. I strung those lines myself. But I've got to get down there."

He said, "Wait a minute, what the hell. This is

fun." He was actually enjoying piling up those bodies. These guys would run out into the trail and stop. He would nail them. There was just kind of a trail running through that jungle. I watched him dump a couple. I said, "Rilie, I got to get going. Your name is mud if you keep sitting here." He said, "Yah, I think they are going to get wise to me pretty soon. I'll go with you." We start creeping along the wire through the jungle again. We finally came to the dugout, and both of us were glued to the ground. Shells were flying all over the place. I snaked down into the dugout. I have forgotten the lieutenant's name. He had red hair. The captain, I can never forget him. He was wiped out. He was sitting down there in shock. The lieutenant was telling the captain everything would be all right. I asked him what was the problem. Rilie was standing there in the dugout doorway with me, just shaking his head. He turned around and went back out, sneaked around the corner in back of the dugout. The dugout was kind of a mound, covered up with palm logs and a lot of dirt on top, sand bags and stuff like that, reinforced.

The Japs had knee mortars. They called them knee mortars. They were about a 60mm mortar. They had a little platform and they carried these on their back. When they wanted to shoot a mortar shell, they would whip them around and set them on the ground, put their knee on the plate on the bottom attached to a ball and socket joint. They held it with their one hand and with the other hand they would throw a mortar shell in it and it would fly through the air. They would go about a hundred yards. Pretty effective in close-range fighting. They were using a lot of them. Rilie and I were standing down in the doorway of the K Company dugout. One round went off just outside the door and kind of sideways. It threw dirt all over our backs and down in the dugout. That is the only one that came close right then. This lieutenant said, "My God." I said, "I found the break and it is fixed, so you can call back." He rang switchboard right away. He got a hold of Boyd and said he wanted some [artillery] fire. Boyd plugged him into the fire control.

Then came the start of another lull in the fighting. The Japs had withdrawn and it was kind of quiet. Then the lieutenant talked to his captain—I am not going to mention his name—because I had never seen a man in such shock before, that was supposed to be in command of a couple hundred other men. More than three hundred by the time you got heavy weapons and whatever all together. Anyways, quite a few men. This first lieutenant was cool as a cucumber. He looked like a typical North Dakota Norwegian farm boy. The captain was a nice guy to talk to and very nice to his troops.



*Members of the 3rd Battalion of the 164th Infantry in formation for the presentation of decorations to men who acted beyond the call of duty to action on Guadalcanal. U.S. Army Photograph. Courtesy of North Dakota National Guard Historical Holding and Archives.*

But that night he was mentally wiped. This lieutenant said we had to get him out of there. Rilie took him. In the lull of that fighting he crawled out and took him to the rear area. I didn't see Rilie again until a couple of weeks later.

Later that night I crawled out again. I forgot whether it was to L or I Company, whichever was on the left of K. This first lieutenant had called back and said "Corporal, we have a problem here." I said, "What's wrong?" He said, "Sound power is out. There is something wrong with the phone. I can't contact the 37's." They were down facing the Japs to the left. "You have got to get down there and see if you can fix that phone." I said I'd sneak down that way to see if I could help.

So I crawled down to the 37mm guns. They were dug in deep so that all that was sticking out were the muzzles. They had a pretty good hole and could traverse that gun back and forth pretty quick. They had rifle men on both sides. I got down there and found out what the problem was. One of the wires had come loose in the phone itself. I didn't have a tool to fix it. I was going to go back and get another sound power phone and fix it because they weren't fighting at the moment. Everything had quieted down and everyone was lying quiet. Every place you went, you had to say what the password was whenever you approached an infantry foxhole. You had to keep saying the password or get shot. I would say the password and then "wire repair, phone repair." I kept right on snaking by those guys back to get another phone.

Every once and a while a flare would go off, and

I would have to sneak into a foxhole and lay alongside one of these guys. Some of them I knew. I did this until the flare would go out. I would climb out and start down again towards the guns.

About the time I got back there to the guns, here they came again. The guns poured canister into those Japs, but they kept coming until they were all mowed down.

The 3rd Battalion of the 164th had been placed to the left of the marine positions on the ridge, that is, on the marines' eastern flank. When Maruyama's forces tried to assault that flank, they ran straight into the 3rd's combined firepower of nearly 1000 M-1 semi-automatic rifles, supplemented by machine guns and a couple of 37mm antitank guns that fired canister shot into the attacking ranks.

The 3rd also drew on artillery fire via telephone lines. Hagen played out his part of the battle by keeping those lines open. When one of the companies called for artillery fire, Hagen relayed the request to a fire direction center closer to the beach. When the phone lines were broken by shell fire or Japanese infiltrators, he had to crawl out of his dugout and trace the break. "My head was going 360 degrees around every thirty seconds that night," he remembered. But after his second trip to the front lines, the worst was over for him. He stayed at the switchboard for the rest of the attack, relaying calls for artillery support.

When Hagen wrote his father on November 3—his first chance to write Dr. Hagen in some six weeks—his remarks barely hinted at what he had experienced:

★ Dear Papa, So we leave the beautiful isle of



New Caledonia and sail northward to the more tropical isle of Guadalcanal. What a hole. Stinks—not only from inanimate objects. Right now your season for ducks and pheasants is open. Oh, me, you have nothing on us. Some of the boys even have their day's limit before sundown, so tell those peacetime hunters that they're not the only one able to draw a bead on a ribbed sight. Enough of that. Everyone here is quite well. Billy [Boyd] got his picture taken for some magazine and so did the medics. Too bad someone didn't try to get the comm[unications] section in one, but they certainly have been doing a good job. . . . We're doing our damndest to clean this situation up as soon as we can. The marines here don't ever have to take a back seat to any other unit in the armed service. I believe the same for the 3rd [Battalion of the 164th]. I'll tell you the particulars when I see you. Censorship you know. . . . seen everything now, at least I hope it's everything. Tell you about it someday. They can give this jungle back to the natives any time as far as I'm concerned. Never gave it a thought when I looked at those pictures in the geography book in grade school—now I'm living in one.

In a subsequent letter, John admitted that he had "taken a few chances which seem foolish now, but who hasn't." But nothing more. Of course, censorship prevented the mention of any specifics, and soldiers were regularly counseled to say very little about combat in order to avoid worrying their families. Young Hagen subsequently had special reason to play down any dangers he faced: Dr. Hagen had a mild heart attack in early November. When John learned of this, he dashed off a letter on December 12 to assure his dad: "I hope it isn't because of worry or the like because my situation. I am very safe and secure."<sup>9</sup>

Bill Boyd, speaking in 1993, related some further incidents about John's service on Guadalcanal:

★ [John] was not born a military man. But he became one, like the farmers of North Dakota. I wouldn't say he was afraid or frightened [on Guadalcanal] because I think it was more apprehensive. You know when you are in a situation

like that, you know you can get hit from anywhere. They [the Japanese] were in the trees all around us and there were snipers shooting. You lived in a state of apprehension, but didn't really reach a peak until something happened. Then, of course, the adrenalin would flow. . . . [In combat] John was as steady as the Rock of Gibraltar. He was with me a good deal of the time. He had to expose himself a lot of the time. We had only a small area, just around Henderson Field at the air base, and anywhere you went you were in enemy fire. It was tough [for communications men] to get out there ahead of the [phone] lines. We would lose a line in the middle of the night. When you lose contact with the people [in the front line] you didn't know what was going on there, you had to know. They had to go out [to repair breaks in the line] and anything that moved, our men shot at it. John and the others would go out [to repair the lines] and at night it was murder. . . . When a guy went out on an old path, running line down, he didn't know what he was going to run into out there. That is why they went out a-cussing and swearing.<sup>10</sup>

There were few jobs more dangerous than crawling on all fours in pitch dark trying to trace a broken phone line, knowing all the while that you had an equal chance of being shot by a nervous GI or having your throat slit by a Japanese infiltrator. John Hagen's battles on October 25 were silent struggles, splicing lines in the mud, pushing his nerves to keep moving—and cursing—when every flare burst threatened to expose him to someone's gun sight, knowing all the while that his friends in the 3rd Battalion were relying on him to keep open the communications that allowed them to call down artillery fire on the waves of General Maruyama's determined attackers. But, he wrote his dad not to worry: "I've been moving too fast . . . nothing could have caught me, even Glen [sic] Cunningham."<sup>11</sup> It was a lie and a denigration of his own courage. In fact, for his actions on the night of October 25-26, Hagen received a letter of commendation for repairing the phone lines under fire.<sup>12</sup>

Although the battle in late October represented the climax of the Guadalcanal campaign, the 164th was

---

9. John's letters, dated November 3, November 10, and December 12, 1942, are in the Hagen Papers.

10. Boyd interview, 15. Cronin, 96-99, praises the performance of the Americal's communications units throughout the Guadalcanal campaign.

11. Hagen to his father, November 10, 1942, John Hagen Papers. Glenn Cunningham was a famous American track star of the late 1930s, renowned for his speed.

12. In his memoir, Hagen noted that the records center for the AAF in Corsica was damaged by fire in 1944. His file was among the materials destroyed in the blaze.

13. Boyd interview, 25-26. Also earning the Silver Star for carrying these wounded men to safety were John's friends Ed Goff, Ed Burns and Bill Burns. See also, "Corporal Hagen Gets Silver Star," *Fargo Forum*, June 15, 1943.

involved in more combat as the combined army and marine forces expanded the American perimeter on the island. John Hagen was fully involved in this, and indeed was decorated for actions in November. Bill Boyd again: "Our medics were so overworked, which we didn't know because we all had to work. We were up on this ridge [in November] and we had about 14 wounded men. We called the medics to get them and take them back, and they said there weren't any, no medics were available." Boyd asked for volunteers to help carry some of the most severely wounded back to the beach, and John Hagen stepped forward and took a corner of one of the litters—made from ponchos—holding one of the wounded:

✪ It was about a two mile haul to carry those people [Boyd remembered]. The only way to get there was over the ridges and the Japs were shooting at you from both sides. You'd get up on a ridge and they would zero in on you, so you would go over to the other side of the ridge. They'd shoot at you from that side so you'd go back to the other side. The ridges were muddy so the men were slipping and falling in addition to everything else.



First Lieutenant  
William S. Boyd.  
Courtesy of NDNGHH&A

Boyd remembered how his group fell, tossing the wounded man they were carrying off the litter. The man "rolled down the ridge," so they had to retrieve him under fire. "John was with me and the guy up in front of him got hit in the back with a small caliber bullet . . . he insisted in keeping on and carrying his load. We finally carried those guys in and got them down, shot at most of the way until we got towards the American lines. John and those several others got the Silver Star, for that."<sup>13</sup>

The 1st Marines left Guadalcanal in December, leaving the army to complete the job of driving the remaining Japanese off the island. The Japanese were in a poor supply situation, their troops were often hungry and short on ammunition. But they were still deeply dug in on hills surrounding the American positions. From mid-November until January 1943, the 164th, joined by the remaining regiments of the Americal Division, elements of the 2nd Marine Division, and later, the 25th Infantry Division, fought a series of grim actions to push Japanese further away from the beachhead and the airfields. These actions were bloody, often with only small gains to show for the costs.

Throughout these battles, John remained attached to the battalion's communications unit. While the Japanese remained entrenched in the high ground, even headquarters areas were combat zones. On one occasion, a new officer in the unit ordered a radio antenna placed up in a tree. The antenna was quickly spotted and Japanese mortar shells began falling on the headquarters. John, a veteran combatant after late October, thought someone should have relieved "that idiot" for so amateurishly giving away "our position as a headquarters." A few weeks later, the 164th was taken out of the line for a rest. "We were absolutely worn out," John

14. The 182nd Regiment was built around the bulk of the Massachusetts National Guard units. Cronin, 65-68, has a good account of this November action.

15. Perret, 491, notes that in 1942-1943 the Americal Division had a casualty rate "of over 100 percent . . . nearly every man had come down with at least one attack of malaria." See also Eric Bergerud, *Touched With Fire: The Land War in the South Pacific* (New York: Viking, 1996). For a recently published, detailed memoir of the brutality of combat at Guadalcanal, written by a reporter for *Yank* magazine, see Mack Morris, *South Pacific Diary, 1942-1943* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1996).

16. Harry R. Tenborg to Dr. H. O. Hagen [January 1943], John Hagen Papers, NMHC. See also the Naval Medical bulletin quoted in Larrabee, 302, noting that weight loss at Guadalcanal "averaged about twenty pounds per man."

17. Hagen to his father, February 22, 1943, John Hagen Papers. Cronin, 98-99, describes the departure of the 164th.

18. Rilie Morgan was subsequently awarded a posthumous Silver Star for actions taken in late October. He was killed on November

22, 1942, and is buried in Grafton, North Dakota. His father was not a judge as Hagen recalled, but the editor of the *Walsh County Record*. See "Citations Tell How Three in 164th Braved Heavy Fire to Carry Out Jobs," undated *Forum* clipping in Hagen Papers. The wounding of the Burns brothers is described in "3 Fargo Brothers Wounded by Explosion of Same Shell," undated *Forum* clipping in John Hagen Papers, NMHC.

19. For an incisive account of the racial aspect of the Pacific war, see John Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986). Harriet Hagen Geib commented in 1997 that as a result of Dr. Hagen's influence, she was "bothered terribly" by segregation when her husband was stationed at an army hospital in Louisiana: "One thing I learned in Louisiana that irritated me terribly was the way they treated Blacks," See Geib interview, 14.

20. In a 1997 telephone conversation with the author, John's son Jim Hagen (named for John's brother) said that his father "almost never" talked about the war years.



*Ceremonies at the cemetery on the day the marines left Guadalcanal. Officiating is Father Tracy of the 164th Infantry Regiment, one of the Catholic chaplains of the army, navy and marines. Courtesy of North Dakota National Guard Historical Holding and Archives.*

*Members of the 164th Infantry Regiment Color Guard on Guadalcanal. From left, Staff Sgt. James M. Fenelon (Devils Lake, N. Dak.), Cpl. Leonard Betchel (Cavalier, N. Dak.), Staff Sgt. Clifford Ottinger (Jamestown, N. Dak.), and Cpl. Walter Ensminger (Manango, N. Dak.). The railing enclosing the cemetery on Guadalcanal was made of cocomut logs. Courtesy of James M. Fenelon, Marshalltown, Iowa.*



remembered. "A lot of us had problems with malaria, exhaustion, malnutrition, you name it." The regiment's respite was short lived however. On November 20, several companies of the 182nd Infantry, another of the Americal Division's regiments, were struck hard by a Japanese counterattack. The next day, division command ordered the 164th back into action to stiffen the 182nd's positions. John remembered vividly how angry the tired men were at these orders: "there were some pretty pissed off North Dakota farmers up there, as mad at those Massachusetts boys as at the Japs."<sup>14</sup>

Slowly, the combined effects of the combat and the jungle environment began wearing down the soldiers of the 164th. Until late in February 1943, the American perimeter at Guadalcanal was too small for a real "rear echelon" area. Even noncombat personnel were in danger from Japanese artillery fire and infiltration. Men seldom had more than a few hours of sleep per day. Tropical diseases were also a problem, as was growing weakness from insufficient medical and food supplies. By February, the men of the 164th, like the marines before them, were wasting away from illness and

exhaustion.<sup>15</sup> Some idea of the strain is found in a letter sent to Dr. Hagen by Harry Tenborg, the man who shared a dugout with John the night the Japanese battleships shelled the beach. Tenborg was in a hospital in California at the time he wrote, a victim of malaria and jungle fever. He wrote the elder Hagen for both professional and personal reasons:

★ I saw John daily while on duty with the regiment in Guadalcanal. I left there on Dec. 7th as a patient. He was well, but tired, yes very tired. He had worked and worked hard. He has grown up in the course of a few months, Doctor. He has the serious demeanor of an older man. . . . There are other matters for the good of the regiment, which mutual medical friends of ours in the regiment and myself wish to solve. . . . They are contracting malaria. Over 60% of the personnel has had malaria from one time to two or three times. Our medics state that more cases are showing up daily. It really is pathetic and also dangerous.

Tenborg asked Dr. Hagen to use what influence he had to get the 164th withdrawn from Guadalcanal before it was decimated by disease.<sup>16</sup>

On that count, Dr. Hagen did not have to worry, for a couple weeks later he received a brief letter from John, together with a note from John's military censor, Bill Boyd. Boyd told the elder Hagen that the battle for Guadalcanal was, to all intents and purposes, over. "Nerves are frayed," he admitted and soon the regiment could look forward to "a little rest in a civilized country." As for John's message, he gave some indication of his future intentions by asking his father to send him a copy of his high school diploma. John planned to use the next months pursuing a transfer to the Army Air Force.

The 164th left Guadalcanal on March 1, 1943. The Americal's other regiments stayed on until close to the end of the month. Also staying on to finish the battle were the 25th Infantry Division and the 8th Marines. The 164th had teased this last regiment as "Hollywood Marines" because the 8th had staged a landing in California for an American newsreel feature. "They came ashore with their shining faces, pink cheeks, brand new uniforms, brand new rifles and real shiny boots," John later scoffed—a grizzled veteran's routine disparagement of green troops.<sup>17</sup>

But John had seen enough of the infantry war. He had lost friends at Guadalcanal; the death of Rilie Morgan, shot down in an assault on a Japanese position in November particularly bothered him. He was also shaken when Pete Burns and both his brothers, Ed and Bill, were wounded by the same mortar burst. Pete Burns received a deep shoulder wound while his brother Ed had his jaw broken. Bill Burns' hip wound left him with a permanent limp.<sup>18</sup> The dehumanizing affects of the combat further depressed John, particularly when he saw old friends "pull gold teeth from Jap corpses and collect them in Bull Durham [tobacco] bags. I couldn't do that, it was desecration." Racial hatred of the Japanese was a regular part of the Pacific war, and has been well documented by historians. John Hagen, influenced perhaps by his father, was less inclined to think of his enemies simply as inferiors or animals to be exterminated. But his combat experience left its mark

*The youngest son of Olaf Hagen, Jimmy Hagen attended Princeton and planned to become a physician. Listed as "missing in action" in 1944, it was not until 1945 that the Hagen family learned he actually had been killed in a bombing mission over Austria. Courtesy of Terry L. Shoptaugh.*



on his racial attitudes nevertheless. In his taped memoirs, he admitted to his nephew that, as a result of the war, "I never did care for Orientals."<sup>19</sup>

The regiment was sent to Fiji, and there John went to work getting his transfer. When John went to visit Ed Burns at a field hospital on the island, he had a stroke of good luck. Ed introduced him to an air officer he had met on Fiji, and through this fellow, John got his transfer underway. By spring he was back in the states, still suffering from malaria (he said he was "yellow as a legal tablet" from taking the atabrine) and on his way to a second stint of basic training. After being assessed for pilot training in Santa Ana, he went to Salt Lake City in June 1943. There, at Kearns Field, he began to fly.

John Hagen had every reason to believe that, after earning his wings, he could look forward to pleasant duty for the rest of the war. As a combat veteran he could readily qualify for a position as a flying instructor. John liked the idea of being an instructor. But, in August 1944, as John was working on his instrument flying, his brother Jim's B-24 aircraft was shot down over Austria. Jim Hagen was listed as "missing in action." No further information was forthcoming, and Jimmy remained listed as missing for the rest of the war. Then, in 1945, one of Jim Hagen's crewmen, who had recently returned home from a German POW camp, contacted the Hagen family to tell them he had seen

*As John Hagen describes in his memoirs, Rilie R. Morgan, Jr., fought bravely and was killed in action on Guadalcanal in November 1942. After his son's death, Rilie R. Morgan, Sr., who was the editor of the Walsh County Record, published a poignant eulogy in which he memorialized his namesake. It ended with these words:*

**"And so, my son, hail and farewell. You lived abundantly, you fought valiantly, you kept the faith, you died bravely, you gave your life that we who live may enjoy the blessings of freedom, democracy, individual liberty, and the American way of life. No man can give more. God bless you for the precious memories you have left us."**

Jimmy killed on his last flight. Jim's remains were found in 1949 and returned to the United States. He is buried in Moorhead.

Jimmy's disappearance hit John hard. He decided to give up the choice assignment as an instructor and instead volunteered for combat flying. Late in 1944 he joined a B-26 squadron in the Mediterranean and began flying missions against German targets in northern Italy and southern Germany. He was in his second tour of duty, with nearly seventy bombing missions to his credit, when the war ended in 1945. The boy who had not found his way, who joined the national guard in 1941, left the Army Air Force in 1945 as a veteran of both the Pacific and European theaters. He kept a commission in the Air Force Reserve for a year or so, then severed his connections to the military. He went on to study chiropractics, established a practice in Florida, then moved to Washington State.

The John Hagen who left the service in 1945 was a very different man than the one who joined up in 1941. Dr. Hagen told John after the war that he had "always been a fatalist" and that the war made him only more so. John replied that, while he "didn't know about being fatalistic," he knew the war had changed him. He seldom said anything about his war service to his sons. Nor did he attend reunions of the Americal Division, although he was always happy to meet another North Dakotan from the 164th. And in his memoirs to his nephew, dictated five years before his death in 1985, John told many more colorful stories about the times when he was on leave than he spoke about combat. "When you look back on it," he said, "a lot of [the

service] was hilarious." Too much, he admitted however was "grief and strife." He concluded his memoirs with the words, "I wasn't interested in any more war."<sup>20</sup>

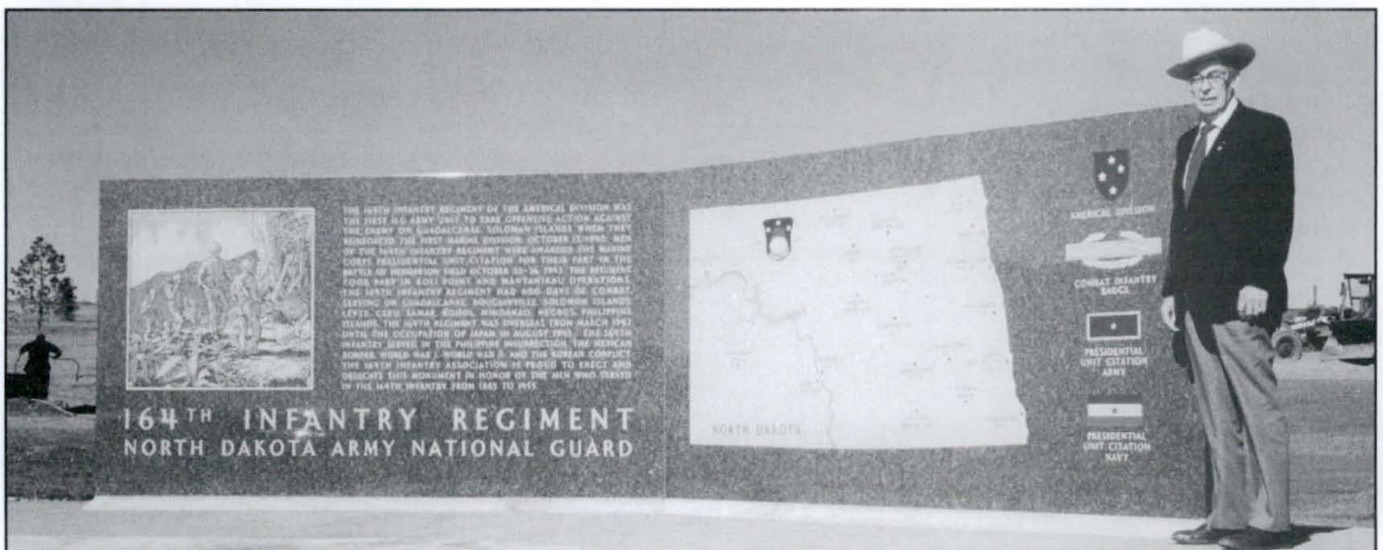
ND

## Acknowledgments

I wish to thank Dr. Peter Geib, a professor of Business Administration at Moorhead State University, for his assistance in obtaining copies of his uncle's tapes. John Hagen's sister, Harriet Hagen Geib, deposited copies of the original tapes in the collections of the Northwest Minnesota History Center at Moorhead State University in 1994.

## About the Author

Terry L. Shoptaugh is the archivist for the Northwest Minnesota Historical Center at Moorhead State University. He holds a Ph.D. in American history from the University of New Hampshire. He has written two other articles for *North Dakota History*, the most recent of which received the Editor's Award for Best Article published in the journal in 1997: "'You Have Been Kind Enough to Assist Me': Herman Stern's Personal Crusade to Help German Jews, 1932-1941." His latest book is *Roots of Success: History of the Red River Valley Sugarbeet Growers* (Fargo: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1997).



This memorial to the 164th Infantry Regiment of the North Dakota Army National Guard, Veterans Cemetery, Mandan, North Dakota, was designed by Walter Johnson, AIA, pictured here. Johnson, who died in December 1998, was a Fargo architect and had served with the 164th from 1941 to 1945.