

2-Front Fighter

A general who has battled Japs in the Solomons and Germans in western Europe compares two theaters and two enemies.

By Sgt. MACK MORRISS
YANK Staff Correspondent

ON THE WESTERN FRONT—The general was speaking about foxholes. "I'm not saying," he said, "that men in the theater are living in the lap of luxury, but most of the time they can find straw to line their holes with.

"In the Solomons they could take their choice between a foxhole in the soft mud or a foxhole in hard coral. That was all."

The general with a keen insight on GI tastes in foxholes is a two-star named J. Lawton Collins, sometimes called Joe Lightning.

A year ago he commanded the 25th Division, just finishing up the New Georgia campaign. Before that it had fought at Guadalcanal.



"The Jap is tougher than the German. Even the fanatic SS troops can't compare with the Jap."

Now Joe Lightning is CO of the VII Corps, which has moved eastward from the D-Day beaches by way of Cherbourg, the St. Lo breakthrough, the Mortain counterattack and then the rat race across France toward Germany.

In the Solomons he earned himself a reputation for personal combat by prowling around in the jungle, occasionally dueling with Jap snipers. Over here he has had less time for duels, but his corps has become known as a "spearhead" outfit and his enthusiasm hasn't suffered because of the greater responsibility.

Because he's seen war in islands and hedge-rows, Maj. Gen. Collins, an iron-graying West Pointer, speaks with authority on the relative merits of the Japs and Germans in combat. He rips rather fearlessly into the much-disputed question: "Which is tougher—the Pacific or the ETO?" He speaks quickly and with force.

"From the purely physical standpoint, the Pacific campaigns have been infinitely worse for the private soldier. There he's had to live in the heat and filth of the jungle, worrying about malaria and the fact that a scratch may develop into a tropical ulcer.

"The natural character of the country alone—the climate, the civilization of Europe, the lack of it in the islands, problems of supply—these things are entirely opposed to each other in the two theaters.

"In the Solomons the terrain of the jungle made road nets as we know them here impossible. There was a lack of roads, and the rain and mud made the few we had almost impassable. In some instances our only transportation in the islands was small boats.

"We had enervating heat in the day and damp chill at night. We've had rain in France but nothing like the rains in the tropics.

"Here we've been fighting in civilized country in which we can and do take advantage of the shelter of buildings. There we had heat, rain, mud, jungle and nothing else.

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"At one time the men had to be supplied by parachute. The parachutes hung in trees so they had to be shot down by a burst of automatic fire. The men took the parachute silk and made loin cloths which they wore while their other clothes dried. They used silk as blankets. I've slept wrapped in parachute silk. I was glad to have that much protection.

"On New Georgia we used cannon companies and antitank people as carrying parties. Food, ammunition, heavy weapons—everything delivered to the line—went on the backs of soldiers. Two-and-a-half-ton trucks went forward as far as possible, then jeeps. But finally it was up to the men who used haversacks as harnesses to carry C-ration cases and five-gallon water cans."



"In the civilized country of Europe we can take shelter behind the buildings."

JOE LIGHTNING got up from his desk and paced across the carpeted floor of the room that was his office. It was a paneled room bigger than a couple of pyramidal tents, but it was part of Corps headquarters in the field.

"The Jap is a helluva sight tougher than the German," Maj. Gen. Collins said, "but he's not as smart.

"Even the fanaticism of the SS troops we've hit is nothing to compare with the Jap's. We've had to use bulldozers to cover Jerry pillboxes once in a while; if they'd been Jap pillboxes the use of bulldozers would have been common.

"Cut off an outfit of Germans and nine times out of 10 they'll surrender. Not the Jap. On Guadalcanal we counted 2,300 Japs lying out in front of the division; we captured 22. But we've captured Germans by the thousands. I'd say we've probably captured 10 to every one we've killed.

"But the Japs are dumb. The Germans are much more skillful tactically.

"In the New Georgia campaign the Japs made one terrible blunder. To land on New Georgia we had to go in and out between a number of small islands to reach our beaches. Those islands weren't defended. If it had been the Germans instead of the Japs, Jerry would have been sitting on every little island in the passageway waiting for us.

"The Japs in the Solomons didn't organize on the high ground overlooking our positions in every case. Toward the end of the Guadalcanal campaign, during our push toward Kokumbona, they should have been sitting on the hills looking down our throats, but they weren't. We took the high ground and drove them down into the ravines so we were looking down their throats.

"Over here we've had to fight for high ground and fight hard for it. Whereas the Japs missed the key terrain features, the Germans don't.

"Jap equipment in the Solomons was almost childish but they could move faster than we could. They didn't have so much to carry.

"I used to go into bivouac areas to talk to officers. I'd tell 'em: 'Look around you. Everything you can see, the Japs can do without.' We had a great deal more equipment than the Japs had but we had to have these things to survive in the jungle. Our men slept on cots when off the line, for example. The Jap didn't have a lot of these things but he died more often.



"In some instances the only kind of transportation we had in the Solomons was by small boat."

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THE Germans are much better equipped than the Japs, particularly with artillery. The Japs are lousy artillerymen but the Germans know how to use it. We are better than either of 'em.

"Over there in the jungle, in a mass of hills where visibility was almost nil, you could never tell where the front line was. There were no accurate maps. That made it extremely difficult to adjust artillery fire.

"So we put our forward artillery observers up on the front line with the Infantry and they adjusted their fire by the sound. They would put the first round far out in front, then walk it back until it was falling on the Japs right in front of them. They could never see where it was hitting but when it sounded close enough they'd fire for effect.



"Cut off a German outfit and nine times out of 10 they surrender. Not Japs."

"We've had some fighting here in very heavy forest. We reverted back to the policy of fire adjustment by sound for that phase.

"In the Pacific we're fighting the toughest kind of warfare—amphibious warfare—the most difficult military operation. In the Solomons we tried to 'land where they ain't.' It worked. But on some of the smaller islands there is no escape from landing on defended beaches. The death battle at Tarawa was a result.

"Most of the American Army training is based on warfare in civilized country. We've trained the bulk of men in the States. They've been taught combat lessons on terrain similar to terrain over here that isn't as strange as the jungle.

"There's been a lot of talk about jungle fighting versus hedgerow fighting. We had a combination of hedgerows and swamps west and southwest of Carentan in France that was the closest to the kind of thing we hit in the jungles.

"It was hard to maneuver in that area. It was difficult to outflank the hedgerows because of the swamps, so we had to use frontal attack. That was about all we ever got in the islands.

"We've enjoyed the same air superiority over here that we had in the Pacific. It's been just as vital to our operations. As a matter of fact, however, we were bombed more often over there than we have been here. I haven't been in a fox-hole yet over here. On New Georgia I was in one 15 times in one night."

The general grinned in recollection.

"The worst part of it was that the Japs were such rotten bombers you couldn't tell where they were going to hit."



j. Gen. J. Lawton Collins, veteran Guadalcanal, New Georgia, France.

Sgt. Morriss, who interviews Maj. Gen. Collins, covered Guadalcanal and New Georgia for YANK before going to the Western Front.