

## THE PIVA TRAIL EIGHT

### 8 UNRECOVERED MARINES ALONG THE MISSION AND PIVA TRAILS, BOUGAINVILLE, 1-9 NOV 1943

Company 'E', 2nd Battalion, 9th Regiment, 3rd Marine Division, KIA/MIA, 7 Nov 1943, Piva Trail Patrol:

1. ALEXANDER, Elbert Bernard, Pvt, 433730, (1927-1942), unburied, unrecovered.
2. BIBEE, Leonard Earl, Pvt, 433751, (1922-1943), buried, unrecovered.
3. GRAY, Ralph Frederick, Pvt, 466111, (1922-1943), buried, unrecovered.
4. \*PITTS, James Orland, Pvt, 424404, (1925-2943), unburied, unrecovered.

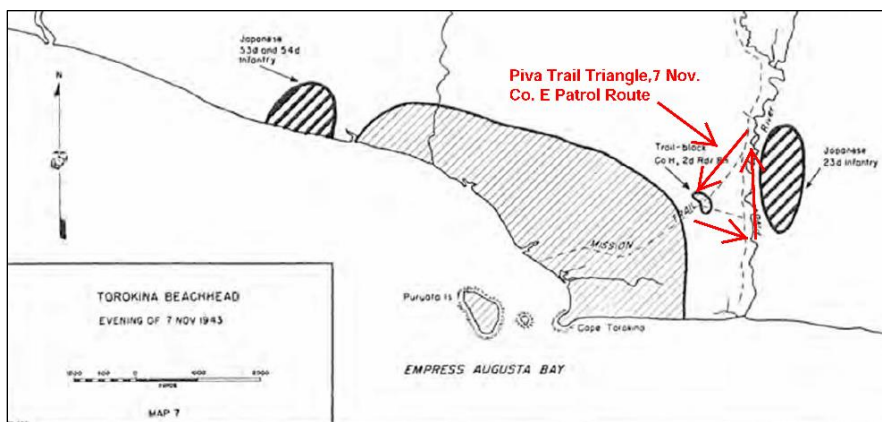
Marine Raiders, 2nd and 3rd Battalions, 2nd Regiment, 3rd Marine Division (attached), KIA/MIA, Mission and Piva Trails:

5. \*KAFUT, Walter Joseph, Pfc, 380430, M/3/2Raider/3, KIA 1 Nov 1943, Mission Trail, buried, unrecovered.
6. BEHNISCH, Lester Charles, Pfc, 388547, F/2/2Raider/3, KIA 2 Nov 1943, Mission Trail, buried, unrecovered.
7. GOEHRI, Homer Roy, Pfc, 423307, F/2/2Raider/3, KIA 9 Nov 1943, Piva Trail, buried, unrecovered.
8. \*KELLERMAN, Hugh William, Jr., Pfc, 516890, F/2/2Raider/3, KIA 9 Nov 1943, buried, unrecovered.

\*Classified by the Defense POW / MIA Accounting Agency<sup>1</sup> as 'Active Pursuit'<sup>2</sup>. DPAA website accessed 11 Nov 2025 and all 8 Marines were checked.

### BOUGAINVILLE, 1 NOV TO 9 NOV

The Bougainville campaign in the Solomon Islands began 1 Nov 1943 when the 3rd US Marine Division landed in the vicinity of Cape Torokina in Empress Augusta Bay and established a beachhead against the 17th Imperial Japanese Army. By 7 Nov, the Marine perimeter had advanced inland about 2,000-yards. On the right (east), the perimeter extended to the end of the Buretoni Mission Trail where a roadblock was established by the 2nd and 3rd Marine Raider Battalions attached to the 9th Marine Regiment. On the left (west), the perimeter extended slightly beyond the west bank of the Koromokina Lagoon and River. As the Marine Raiders moved north along Mission Trail to their roadblock objective, the advance cost the lives of Pfc Walter Kafut<sup>3</sup> on 1 Nov and Pfc Lester Behnisch<sup>4</sup> on 2 Nov. On Sunday, 7 Nov, at about 0600, 23 men from Co 'E' 9th Marines moved through the roadblock on a reconnaissance patrol. Their mission was to reconnoiter the Piva Trail Triangle (JFH term). From the roadblock they headed east-southeast about 0.25-miles to observe Piva Village #2, then north along the Numa Numa-Piva Trail about 0.55-miles to the intersection of the Piva Trail Connector (JFH term) and then headed south-southwest 0.4-miles back to the Marine roadblock. The entire route was about 1.2-miles and the sacred rule of combat to never return to your own lines over terrain you just patrolled was accomplished.



(L) 7 Nov roadblock and Co 'E' patrol route (Rantz, Pg-46). (R) Torokina 2025 Google aerial image showing Mission Trail and Piva Trail still exist (link below).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> DPAA search page, accessed 18 Nov 2025: <https://dpaa-mil.sites.crmforce.mil/dpaaOurMissing>

<sup>2</sup> DPAA Active Pursuit: Cases where there is sufficient information to justify field research, investigation, or recovery operations. <https://dpaa-mil.sites.crmforce.mil/resource/1492727229000/CaseCategorizationMemorandum>

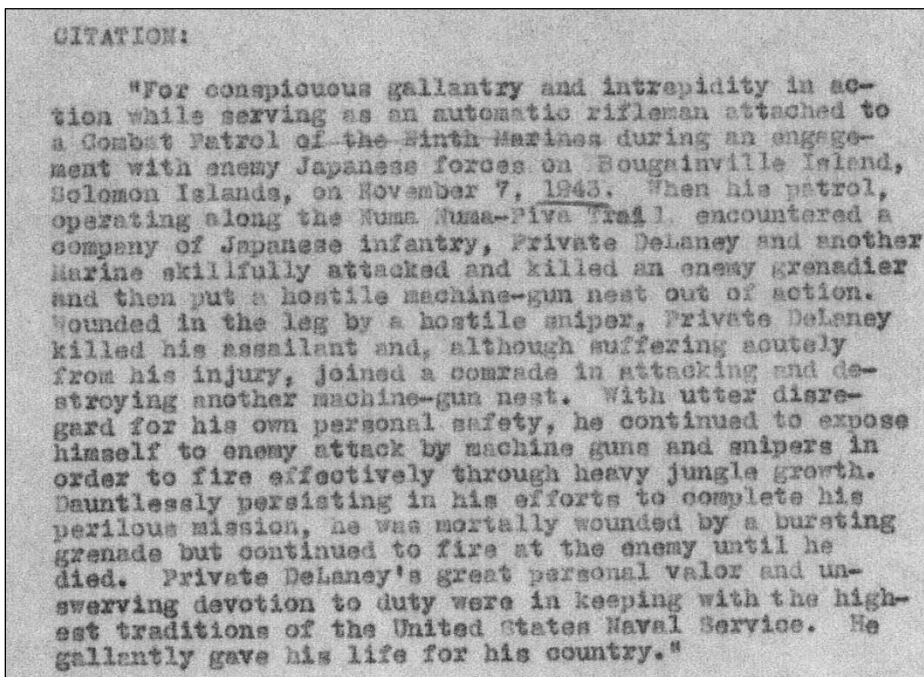
<sup>3</sup> Missing Marines, Kafut. See: two field burial grid maps in Gallery and notes in 'Attempted Recovery (1944) tab stating "grave lost due to clearing and construction of a road": <https://missingmarines.com/walter-kafut/>

<sup>4</sup> Missing Marines, Behnisch. See notes in 'Loss and Burial' tab stating his "body was buried in the field near where he fell...but...lost due to clearing and construction of a road": <https://missingmarines.com/lester-c-behnisch/>

<sup>5</sup> Google Aerial Imagery Map of Torokina: [https://www.google.com/maps/@-6.2343768,155.062282,3387m/data=!3m1!1e3?entry=ttu&g\\_ep=EgoyMDI0MDkwMy4wIKXMDSoASAFAw%3D%3D](https://www.google.com/maps/@-6.2343768,155.062282,3387m/data=!3m1!1e3?entry=ttu&g_ep=EgoyMDI0MDkwMy4wIKXMDSoASAFAw%3D%3D)

## PIVA TRAIL EIGHT, BOUGAINVILLE, 1-9 NOV 1943

When the Co. 'E' patrol departed their lines at the Piva Trail roadblock they did not know that at the same time, Imperial Japanese Navy destroyers were about to deliver 475 troops on the Marine's left flank, west of the Koromokina Lagoon and River about 3.5-miles away. The first enemy attack in the Battle of Koromokina Lagoon on the left began at 0820. On the right, the 23rd Japanese Infantry had attacked the roadblock the previous 2 nights, but today they would attack in daylight to coincide with the surprise west flank amphibious landing. At 1430, the roadblock attack began from the north, down the Piva Trail Connector. At about the same time, the Co 'E' patrol ran into Japanese ambush positions hidden in the dense jungle on opposite sides of the Piva Trail Connector at a distance of 10-yards. Pvt Leonard Bibbee<sup>6</sup> and Pvt Ralph Gray<sup>7</sup> were killed immediately by enemy fire. Their remains were unrecovered and unburied. One clue regarding the possible location of the remains of Easy Company members Bibbee and Gray, and perhaps others, is the known field burial location of Pvt. Donald Kenyon DeLaney who was posthumously awarded the Silver Star. His field burial map (next page) states that he was KIA at 1500 hours and was buried near where he fell at Hasty Terrain Map coordinates 135.15-215.23. His Silver Star citation (below) describes him as being in action for some time before his death, which suggests the Co 'E' patrol ambush may also have begun at about 1430, concurrent with the roadblock attack.



(L) Pvt. DeLaney's Silver Star Citation. (R) Delaney's field grave photo before reinterment on 13 Dec 1943. Note last line: "More than a dozen such graves line the trail".

DeLaney's citation describes the location as the Numa Numa-Piva Trail. Many official documents from the Bougainville campaign use this term generically to describe the network of trails that extended from Bougainville's west coast along the Piva River and Piva Villages (2 in 1943) to the Numa Numa River and Numa Numa Village on Bougainville's east shore. There are two Piva Villages labeled on most wartime Cape Torokina Marine Corp maps. Piva Village #2 is located about 0.25-miles east-southeast of the roadblock. Piva Village #1 is located about 1.4-miles north-northeast of the roadblock. Almost every references to Piva Village with regards to the Marine roadblock between 1 and 10 Nov are referring to Piva Village #2, which was taken by the Marines at noon on 10 Nov after an artillery bombardment and airstrike by 12 Avenger torpedo bombers. Piva Village #1 to the north was taken about 13 Nov.

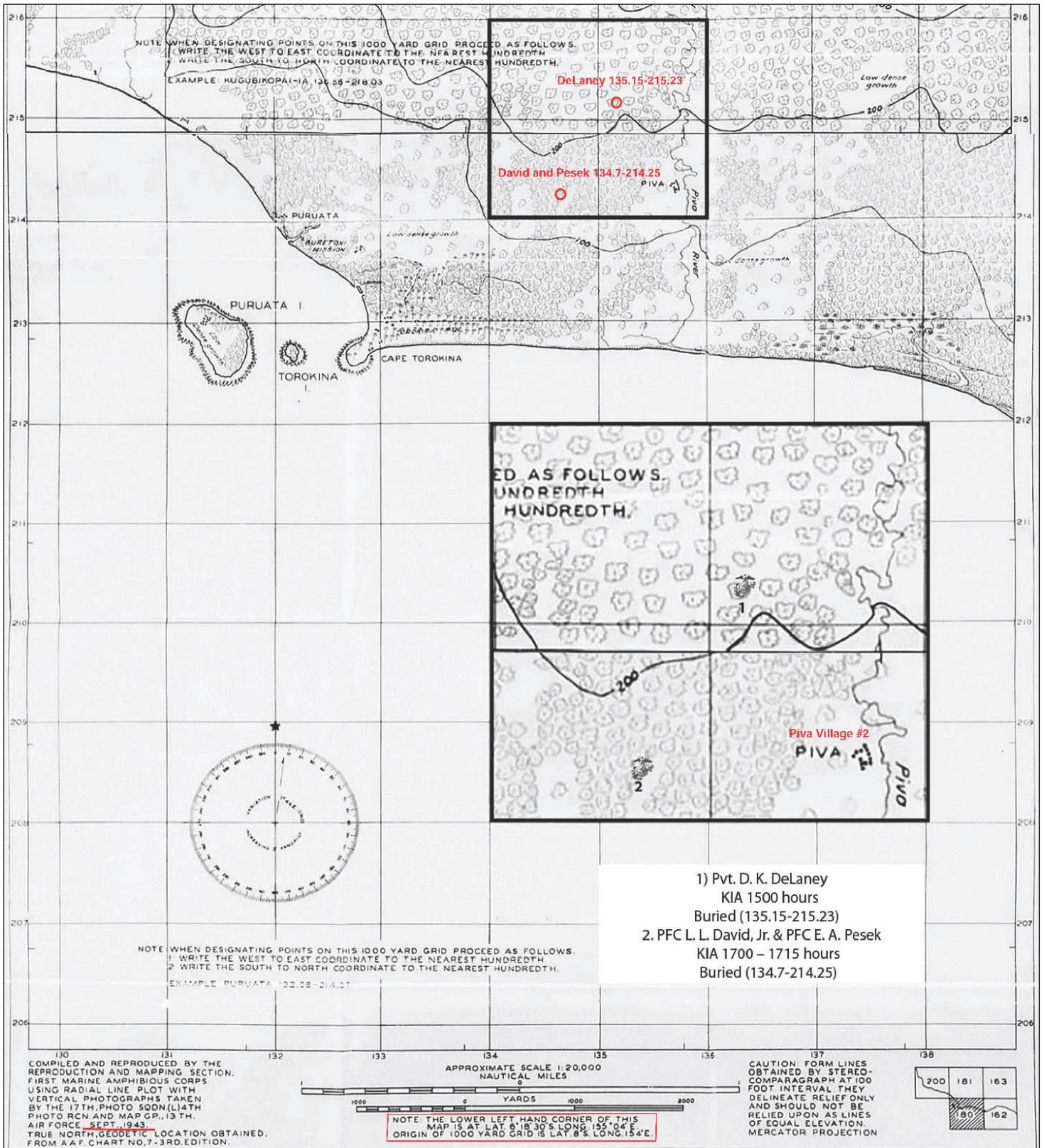
According to Missing Marines and burial maps, at about 1700 hours, 2 hours after Pvt DeLaney was killed, a firefight took the lives of Sgt. Jack Burton, Pfc Leuin David and Pfc Lloyd Petersen. Pfc Edwin Pesek may also have been killed at 1700 since he and Pfc David were buried in the same location alongside Mission Trail where the first Marine Raider roadblock

<sup>6</sup> Missing Marines, Bibbee. See "Lost Patrol Fatal Casualties" table; Co 'E' Nov 1-30, 1943 Muster Role of dead and Bibbee's "Data on Remains Not Yet Recovered" file in Gallery: <https://missingmarines.com/leonard-e-bibbee/>

<sup>7</sup> Missing Marines, Gray. See Gray's "Data on Remains Not Yet Recovered" file in Gallery: <https://missingmarines.com/ralph-f-gray/>

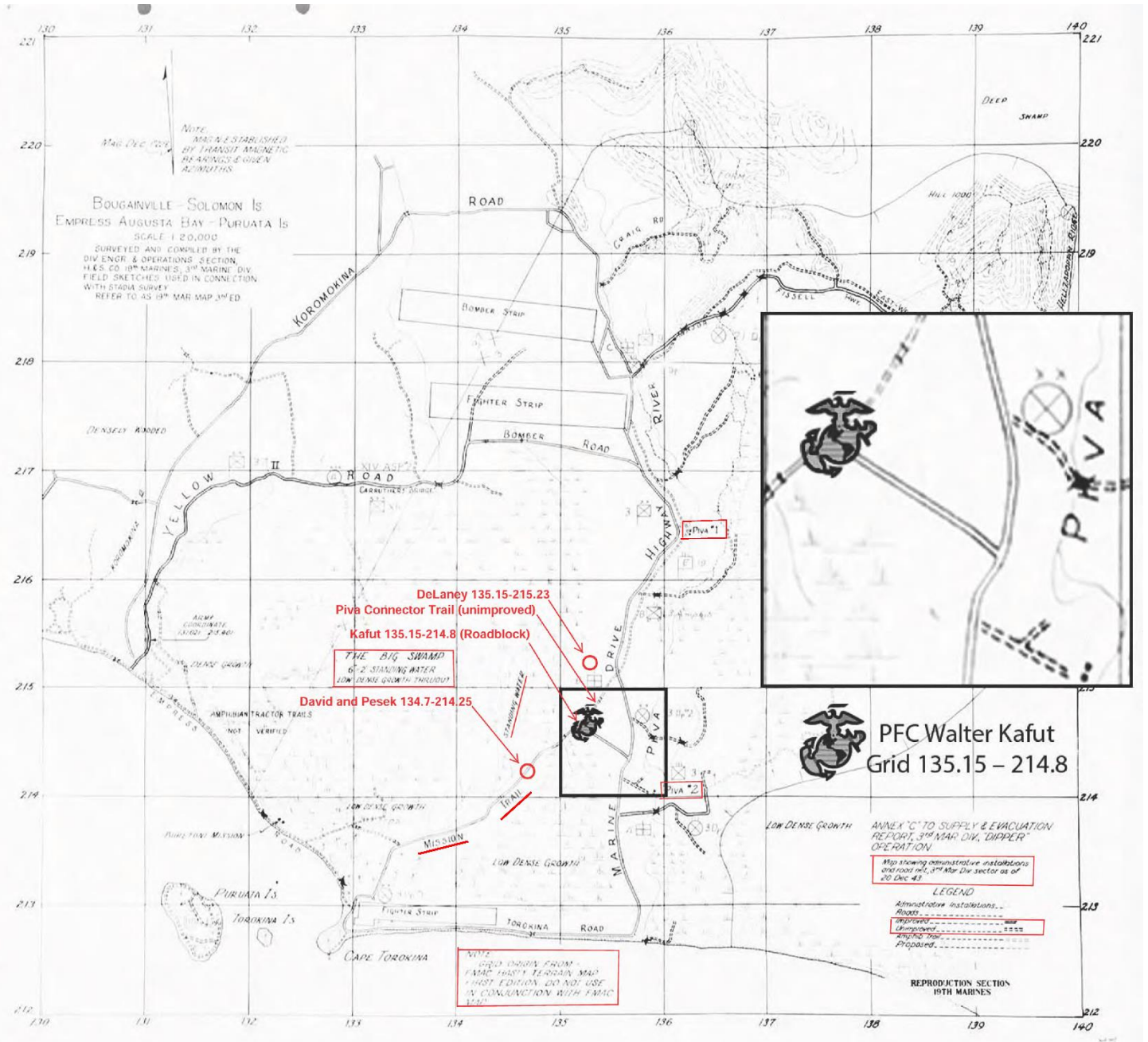
PIVA TRAIL EIGHT, BOUGAINVILLE, 1-9 NOV 1943

was established on the evening of 1 Nov about halfway to their final roadblock position. The author believes this first roadblock location became the temporary bivouac rear area for the Marines manning the final roadblock.

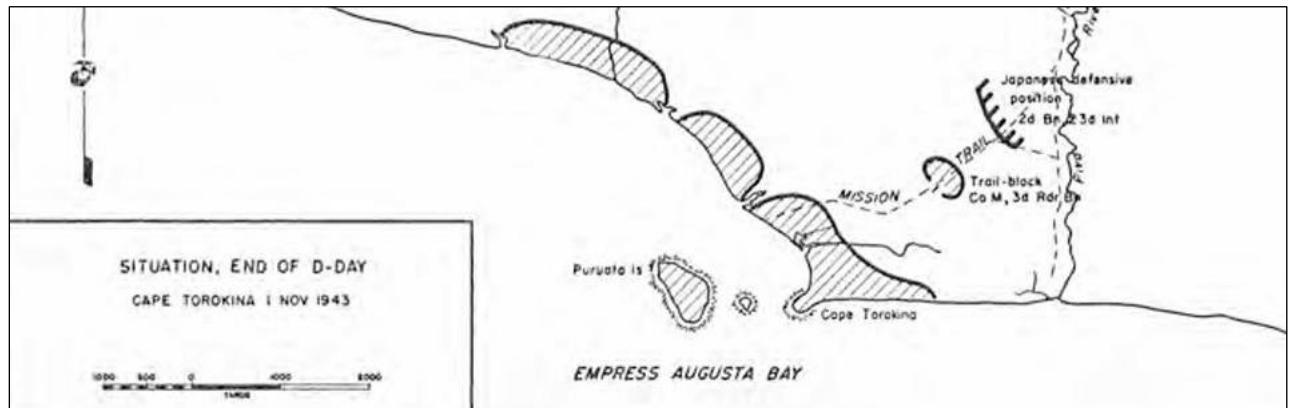


DeLaney, David and Pesek burial coordinates and locations on the 1st Edition 'Hasty Terrain Map' #180, using Sep. 1943 data.

PIVA TRAIL EIGHT, BOUGAINVILLE, 1-9 NOV 1943



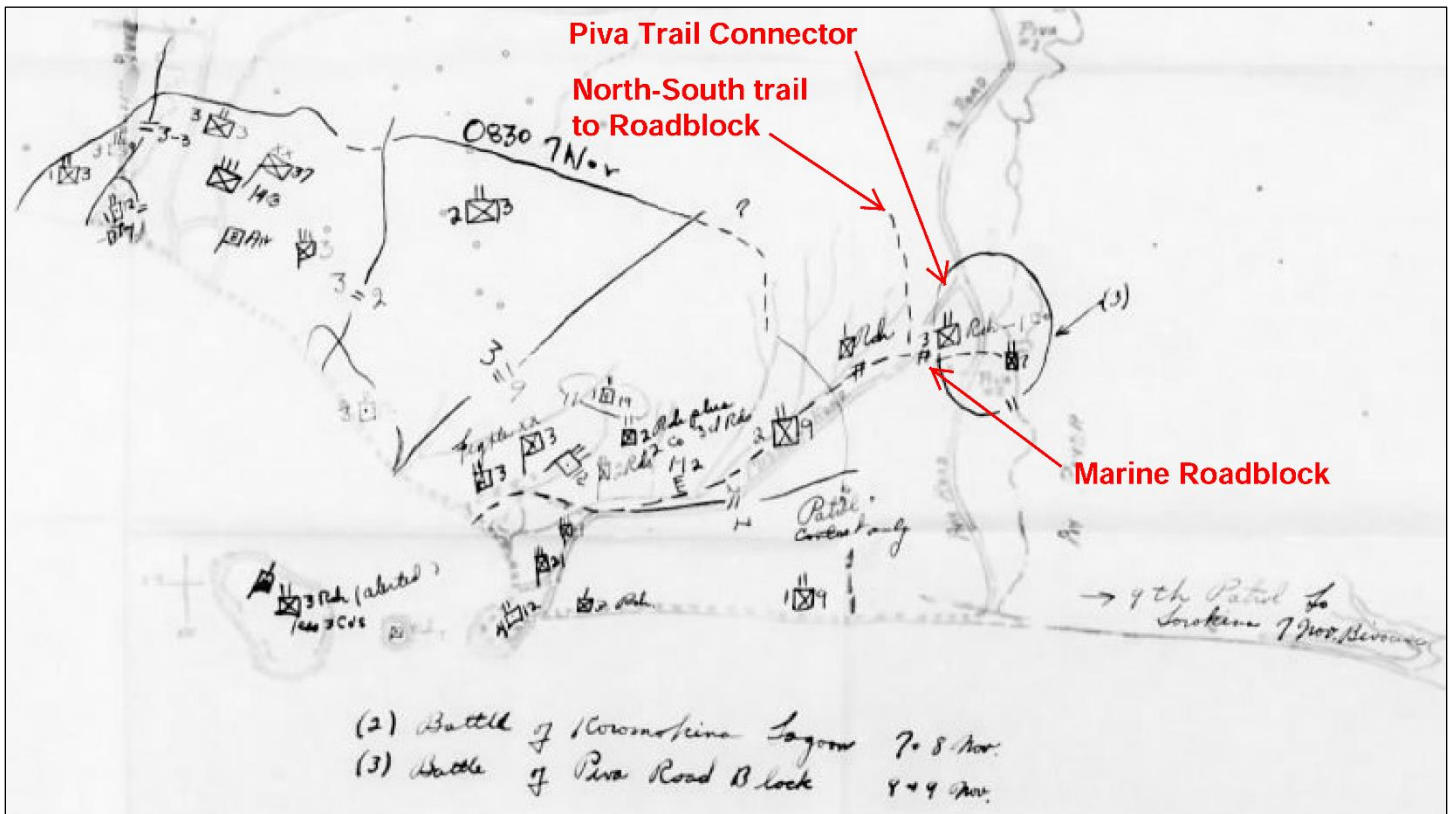
DeLaney, David, Pesek and Kafut field burial locations on 3rd Ed. map using 20 Dec. 1943 data and the same grid and grid origins as the 1st Ed. map above.



David and Pesek field burials (see previous map) are very near the first Marine roadblock location, night of 1 Nov, about midway up the Mission Trail.

## PIVA TRAIL EIGHT, BOUGAINVILLE, 1-9 NOV 1943

After the 1430 ambush on the Piva Trail Connector and the loss of several men, including DeLaney, Bibee, Gray and perhaps others, the surviving Co 'E' patrol members realized they had surprised a much larger enemy force from the rear while they attacked the Marine roadblock. There was no way they could reach their lines by moving south along the enemy-held Piva Trail Connector and they could not stand and fight a larger unit. The author believes their best route of escape was by heading west into a swampy area that was connected to another north-south trail leading to the Marine lines near the roadblock (see next map). Perhaps they were moving westerly from the Piva Trail Connector and were stopped by an enemy flanking maneuver on the roadblock. This might be the location and time when the patrol became separated into two groups that would evade until it was safe to move into their own lines. Pvt Orland Pitts<sup>8</sup> and Pvt Elbert Alexander<sup>9</sup> simply disappeared during the 2-day running firefight and are classified as 'Separated, failed to return'. Their remains are unrecovered. The patrol cost the lives of 9 Easy Company men, most likely along the Piva Trail Connector and to the west, 4 of whom were unburied and unrecovered - Privates Elbert Alexander, Leonard Bibee, Ralph Gray and James Pitts.



Third Marine Division Combat Report map showing the N-S trail (dashed line) heading north from the roadblock which may have been the trail Co 'E' would use to return to their lines by heading west from the Piva Trail Connector. Ray Merrell's book (see References) confirms that his Co. 'H' 2d Raider Bn defended this trail on 7 and 8 Nov. He writes about a walking wounded Marine who was shot through the mouth that came through their lines on 7 Nov: a Co. 'E' patrol member?

Pfc Homer Goehri<sup>10</sup> and Pfc Hugh Kellerman<sup>11</sup> of Co 'F', 2nd Raider Battalion (sometimes reported as attached to the 3rd Bn), were KIA/MIA on 9 Nov 1943 when their company was ordered to advance up the Piva Trail Connector to attack the opposing forces of the 23rd Japanese Infantry Regiment. At 0800 Companies 'L' and 'F' passed through the roadblock lines and began a slow advance through the jungle with 'L' to the left of the trail and 'F' to the right. By 0930 the attack had progressed only about 40 to 50 yards. A heavy fire-fight was in progress, the Japanese resisting the advance with light machine guns and knee mortars. Since a Marine flanking maneuver was inhibited by the swamps, the assault necessarily had to be frontal, up the Piva Trail Connector. In face of stubborn opposition, the advance continued slowly, until quite suddenly at 1230, for reasons unknown, enemy resistance collapsed and by 1500 Marines had reached the junction of the

<sup>8</sup> Missing Marines, Pitts: <https://missingmarines.com/james-o-pitts/>

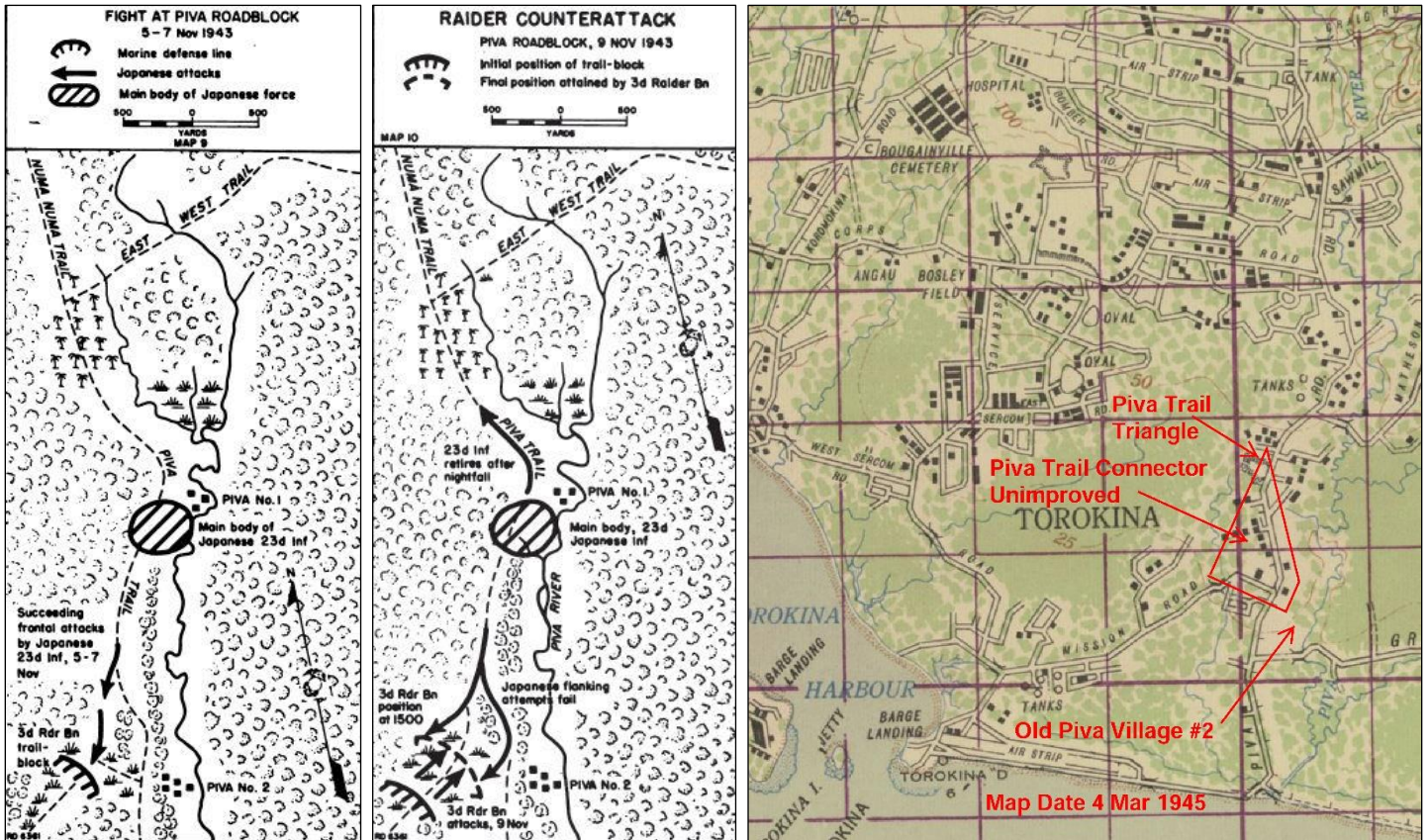
<sup>9</sup> Missing Marines, Alexander: <https://missingmarines.com/elbert-b-alexander/>

<sup>10</sup> Missing Marines, Goehri: <https://missingmarines.com/homer-r-goehri/>

<sup>11</sup> Missing Marines, Kellerman: <https://missingmarines.com/hugh-w-kellerman-jr/>

## PIVA TRAIL EIGHT, BOUGAINVILLE, 1-9 NOV 1943

Piva and Numa Numa Trails.<sup>12</sup> It seems likely that Goehri and Kellerman were KIA during the most intense combat about 40 to 50-yards north of the roadblock somewhere on the east side (left) of the Piva Trail Connector, and if not, the Marine advance on 9 Nov went no further than the intersection with the Numa Numa Trail, making it likely their remains are somewhere on the east side of the Piva Connector Trail. According to Missing Marines, they both received field burials near where they fell, but they were not recorded and never found. Kellerman's 'Loss and Burial' tab states that 'the grave was destroyed when engineers moved in to widen the trail into a usable road'. However, a 1945 topographic map shows no road at that location indicating that the Piva Trail Connector may not have been widened or improved by 1945. Goehri's Missing Marine comment states 'His remains were buried in the field in Isolated Grave #2 - however, no specific location was noted...and his...gravesite was lost in the ensuing campaign and occupation of Bougainville.' It might be important to note that Goehri's field grave was not destroyed by widening the trail.



(L) Rentz 5-7 Nov Japanese attacks down Piva Trail Connector (M) Rentz 9 Nov Marine attack up Piva Trail Connector (R) 1945 Topo of unimproved Piva Trail Connector.

Marine graves registration personnel did not arrive on Bougainville until 8 Nov 1943<sup>13</sup>, by which time many Marines had died. This research is about finding the 4 Co 'E' Marines and the 4 Marine Raider's along the Mission and Piva Trails that were KIA/MIA between 1 and 9 Nov 1943. It's estimated that 39 U.S. Marines who died in ground action on Bougainville are still unaccounted for. Perhaps the Piva Trail Eight could be included in a larger DPAA Bougainville recovery mission with DPAA partner, Texas State University's<sup>14</sup> cadaver dog training and research unit, known as F.I.R.S.T. Detection K9<sup>15</sup>. A complete list the Co 'E' patrol members follows so that others might request Individual Deceased Personnel Files (IDPF)

<sup>12</sup> Rentz, John N. 'Bougainville and the Northern Solomons'. Paraphrased from Pgs-48, 49.

[https://www.usmcu.edu/Portals/218/Rentz\\_Bougainville%20and%20the%20Northern%20Solomons.pdf](https://www.usmcu.edu/Portals/218/Rentz_Bougainville%20and%20the%20Northern%20Solomons.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Martin, Christopher J. 'The Aftermath of Hell'. MCH, Vol. 2, No. 2. Graves Registration Policy and U.S. Marine Corps Losses in the Solomon Islands During World War II.

<https://www.usmcu.edu/Outreach/Marine-Corps-University-Press/MCH/Marine-Corps-History-Winter-2016/The-Aftermath-of-Hell/#:~:text=Per%20these%20two%20lists%2C%2048,elsewhere%20in%20the%20Pacific%20theater.>

<sup>14</sup> DPAA partners 1 Feb 2025: [https://www.dpaa.mil/Portals/85/Current%20Active%20DPAA%20Partnerships%20-%20Feb\\_%202025.pdf](https://www.dpaa.mil/Portals/85/Current%20Active%20DPAA%20Partnerships%20-%20Feb_%202025.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> TSU Cadaver Dog Unit. <https://www.firstdetection9.org/>

## PIVA TRAIL EIGHT, BOUGAINVILLE, 1-9 NOV 1943

or the Official Military Personnel Files (OMPF) of any of the 23 Co 'E' Marines which might provide additional information beneficial to this research. The author has not requested any IDPF or OMPF records.

### CO. 'E' PIVA TRAIL KIA WHOSE BODIES WERE RECOVERED (5)

BURTON, Jack Duncan, Sgt, 306235, (1921-1943), KIA 7 Nov 1943. Recovered, cemetery burial.  
DAVID, Leuin Lenoir, Jr, Pfc, 462133, (1923-1943), KIA 7 Nov 1943. Field burial, recovered later.  
DELANEY, Donald Kenyon, Pvt, 416485, (1921-1943), KIA 7 Nov 1943. Field burial, recovered later.  
PESEK, Edwin Anton, Pfc, 462123, (1923-1943), KIA 7 Nov 1943. Field burial, recovered later.  
PETERSEN, Lloyd Eugene, Pfc, 335762, (1925-1943), KIA 7 Nov 1943. Recovered, cemetery burial.

### CO. 'E' PIVA TRAIL SURVIVORS (10)

HUNTER, Thomas Pitts, Jr, 1Lt, 13967, (1917-1944), Patrol Leader, KIA 21 Jul 1944 Guam.  
JOHNSON, Earle Warren, Sgt, (1913-1996).  
JONES, Robert Felix, Pfc, 324186, (1919-1985), WIA 26 Jul 1944 Guam.  
LANGSTON, Alton James, Jr, Pfc, 448980, (1922-1999).  
MEYERS, Howard Lenord, Sgt, 284509, (1928-2003), WIA 21 Jul 1944 Guam.  
NOLIN, Edward William, Pfc, 462085, (1923-1979), WIA 26 Jul 1944 Guam.  
POLEJEWSKI, Alexander, Pfc, 454549, (1923-2005), WIA 5 Mar 1945 Iwo Jima.  
POWELL, Marion Eugene "Bill", Cpl, 439219, (1922-1995), WIA 5 Mar 1945 Iwo Jima.  
RUCKEL, Mark Victor, Pfc, 426439, (1917-2000), WIA 25 Jul 1944 Guam.  
SHAW, Robert (nmn), Pfc, 426694, (1925-2011), WIA 23 Jul 1944 Guam.

**Marine Patrol Shoots Way Out of Ambush**

SOUTH PACIFIC ALLIED HEADQUARTERS, Wednesday, Nov. 24 (AP)—The exploits of a "lost patrol" of marines on Bougainville island in the northern Solomons, how they broke through a Japanese trap, killed 22 of the enemy and made their way back to their own lines, were related Wednesday by a marine corps combat correspondent.

Technical Sergeant Earl Johnson of North Little Rock, Ark., told the story, unfolding one of the comparatively small but daily series of dramas which are occurring on and around the American beachhead at Empress Augusta bay on Bougainville's west central coast.

There were 22 members of the marine reconnaissance party. Led by First Lieutenant Thomas Hunter Jr. of Margaret, Texas, the party had penetrated deep into enemy territory and was returning to its own lines when movements ahead clearly indicated a Japanese ambush.

The patrol spread out. Private First Class Alton Langston of Pecos, Texas, was the first to encounter a Jap. Both raised their rifles, but the marine was quicker. The Jap was killed.

**Other Japs Wounded**

A Jap machine gun nest opened fire at three marines, killing one. The other two, Private First Class Alexander Polejewski of Ulen, Minn., and Private First Class Robert Jones, Dallas, Texas, cut loose with their automatic rifles, silencing the nest.

One weaponless marine was killed while trying to cut a path for the patrol. Marines killed the two Japs who fired on him.

Lieutenant Hunter said, in addition to the more than 20 killed, many other Japanese were wounded while trying to encircle the patrol. Marines, while lying on their stomachs, picked off the enemy one by one.

Hunter was able to gather half the patrol and return with it the next day. Members of the other half, led by Sergeant Howard Meyers of Merrill, Wis., also became separated.

Private First Class Mark Ruckel, Clinton, Mo.; Private Robert Shaw, Galva, Kan., and Private First Class Edward Molin, Devine, Texas, traveled by night and hid by day, orienting themselves by the American air raid siren on Cape Torokina and by the sound of Higgins' boats on the bay. At times the three were so close to Japanese they could see the enemy burying their dead. The trio got back to camp.

(L) Salt Lake Tribune 24 Nov 43 article helped reconstruct patrol members but is not entirely accurate. (R) 18 US Armed Forces isolated burials & grid coordinates located in the Cape Torokina vicinity, 20 Jun 45.

### "MISSING MARINE" NARRATIVES IN KIA CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER

**KAFUT, 1 NOV.** "Kafut and Company M were detached from the rest of their battalion and ordered to land alongside the 2nd Battalion and advance inland as quickly as possible along a muddy track known as "Mission Trail." About 1500 yards from the shoreline, the path formed a junction with the "Piva Trail." The objective for Company M was to seize the junction and set up a roadblock to slow down any Japanese counterattack. The advance, accompanied by war dogs, was only lightly opposed, but it cost Pfc Walter Kafut his life. A history of the Raiders notes only that Kafut was killed on the way to the

## PIVA TRAIL EIGHT, BOUGAINVILLE, 1-9 NOV 1943

*roadblock. No other details are known.*” JFH: The evening of 1 Nov, the roadblock was established about halfway up Mission Trail. Kafut must have been killed south of, or perhaps at, the first roadblock and then buried later near the final roadblock location at the bottom of the Piva Trail Connector (bottom map on Pg-4).

**BEHNISCH, 2 NOV.** *“On 2 Nov 1943, the Second Raider Battalion began moving inland. The Japanese did not appear in force, but left machine guns in camouflaged positions to wait for unwary Marine patrols. Several of these ambushes were spoiled by alert war dogs, but a few casualties did result from scattered firefights. At about 0930, Pfc Lester Behnisch was shot multiple times and died of his wounds. Behnisch’s body was buried in the field near where he fell. The precise location was not written down; he was simply somewhere “in the Cape Torokina area.” A Graves Registration team operating in the area a short time later managed to glean enough information to mount a search, but found that Behnisch’s grave was “lost due to clearing and construction of a road.” Further searches after the war were similarly unsuccessful, and Lester Behnisch was declared non-recoverable in 1949.*” JFH: The Marine roadblock the night of 1 and 2 Nov was about halfway up Mission Trail. Since Behnisch was killed at about 0930 on 2 Nov, the location of his burial ‘near where he fell’ was likely between the first roadblock location and the final roadblock location at the bottom of the Piva Trail Connector, or perhaps near Kafut.

**ALEXANDER, BIBEE, GRAY, PITTS, 7 NOV.** *“On 7 Nov 1943, 1Lt. Thomas Hunter, Jr. led a 22-man reconnaissance patrol out from Easy Company lines towards Piva Village. Their job was to scout Japanese positions around the village itself and explore up the Piva/Numa Numa Trail, the main thoroughfare in the area. As they departed, the Marines little suspected they would soon earn some little-sought fame as a “Lost Patrol.” The mission reached its initial objective without incident, but as they prepared to return, “movements ahead indicated a Japanese ambush” in the words of a combat correspondent. The Marines spread out, and Pfc Alston Langston drew first blood when he out-drew a Japanese soldier. “A Jap machine gun nest opened fire at three Marines, killing one. The other two cut loose with automatic rifles, silencing the nest. One weaponless Marine was killed while trying to cut a path for the patrol. Marines killed the two Japs who fired on him.” The Japanese attempted to encircle the Americans, but Marine marksmen picked them off one by one. Lieutenant Hunter claimed his men accounted for no less than 22 Japanese. The Marines killed near Piva Village were Private Leonard Bibee and Private Ralph F. Gray. Although Elbert Alexander helped to carry the bodies to cover, neither man’s body could be carried to friendly lines. The patrol, split into two halves by the Japanese attack, was hard-pressed to find their way back. Occasional firefights broke out as the withdrawing Marines bumped into other Japanese outposts. Private Don DeLaney was killed at 1300 hours; Sergeant Jack D. Burton and Pfc Leuin L. David, Jr., were shot in a skirmish at 1700; Pfc Edwin A. Pesek died of bullet wounds at 1715. All bodies were left where they fell. Lt. Hunter brought his survivors to safety on 8 Nov. Four other Marines, led by Sgt. Howard Meyers, returned soon after. Two men, Private Elbert Alexander and Private James Pitts, did not return, and were never seen again. They had disappeared into the jungle, and their exact fates were never known. Over the following weeks, the bodies of Burton, David, DeLaney, Pesek, and Petersen were found along the Piva [Connector] Trail. Burton and Petersen were brought back to the Bougainville cemetery, while the other three received temporary field burials along the trail. When the area was fully secured in early 1944, Graves Registration personnel retrieved David, DeLaney, and Pesek. The remains of Bibee, Gray, Alexander, and Pitts were never positively identified. Alexander and Pitts were both declared dead on 8 November 1944.”* JFH: This description of the patrol route and general return agrees with the author. All other references found naming DeLaney’s time of death state 1500, which the author believes is correct. DeLaney’s documented burial location at Hasty Terrain Map coordinates 135.15 – 215.23 (Pg-3) is key to knowing the location of the first enemy action as described in his Silver Star citation, which places the patrol on or alongside the northern 1/3 of the Piva Trail Connector. Bibee and Gray likely fell near DeLaney. David and Pesek were recovered later and interred behind friendly lines near the first roadblock location the night of 1-2 Nov according to an official field burial map (Pg-3). The terms ‘killed near Piva Village’ or ‘killed in the vicinity of Piva Village’ is used several times to generically and generally describe a patrol member’s place of death - only because it is the nearest permanent feature depicted and labeled on Marine maps. For this patrol, those terms always (and only), refer to Piva Village #2 (never #1) and they are not in any way an accurate description of any field burial location or where a patrol member died. A purported ‘eyewitness account’ for Elbert Alexander (who enlisted at age 14 and died at 15) states: *“When we moved out I noticed [Elbert] joined the column, but left it almost immediately and crossed the trail in the direction of the enemy, evidently*

## PIVA TRAIL EIGHT, BOUGAINVILLE, 1-9 NOV 1943

*seeking out a sniper. The column soon moved out and I lost sight of Alexander in the dense foliage.*” This ‘quote’ was by patrol member Pfc Marion E. Powell given to Leon Alligood for his newspaper article titled ‘Ceremony at Last Honors the Boy Who Went to War’ in The (Nashville) Tennessean, 11 June 2005, Pgs-B1, B2 (URL link in References). Since Elbert Alexander helped carry the bodies of Bibee and Gray to cover between about 1530 and 1600 and then “*crossed the trail*” and disappeared “*in the dense foliage*”, his remains may also be near the Piva Trail Connector. No eyewitness account or any other information has been found regarding the time or place of Orland Pitts’s death.

**BIBEE EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT.** “*Bibee was observed by Pfc Mark V. Ruckel and Pvt. Robert Shaw, who were members of his patrol, to receive direct fire from enemy machine guns and rifles from a distance of approximately ten yards. Entry on Certificate of Death states remains not found. The above action took place in the vicinity of Piva Village, Bougainville. When this area was reoccupied by American forces the body could not be found.*” JFH: Missing Marine citation is from Quartermaster Form 371 and Bibee’s Individual Deceased Personnel File. Assuming Bibee was KIA near DeLaney along the northern 1/3 of the Piva Trail Connector, the search for his body could have commenced in 3 days on 10 Nov when the roadblock advanced to the top of the connector by the evening of 9 Nov and Marine Raiders ‘reoccupied’ this area. Please also see the comments for Gray next.

**GRAY EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT.** “*Private Gray was serving in a patrol against the enemy in the Piva Village area, Bougainville, where he was ambushed by two enemy forces who were concealed on both sides of a trail which he was following. He was observed by members of his patrol to receive direct fire from enemy rifles and machine guns at a distance of approximately ten yards. Due to the intense fire his body was not recovered.*” JFH: Missing Marine citation is from Quartermaster Form 371 and Gray’s Individual Deceased Personnel File. Based on the fact that Gray and Bibee are both described as being killed by an ambush that included machine gun and rifle fire that was positioned on both sides of the trail at a distance of 10-yards, it is probable they were killed by the same ambush and fell near one another, and likely not far from DeLaney, who according to his Silver Star citation (Pg-2), knocked out two machine gun nests – perhaps the same nests that killed Bibee and Gray.

**GOEHRI, 9 NOV.** *Pfc Goerhi was killed in action along the Piva Trail on 9 Nov 1943. On that date, his company was attached to the Third Raider Battalion and instructed to push out beyond a road block. However, the Japanese defenders managed to spoil the Marine attack and caused several casualties early in the day’s fighting. Company F in particular was subjected to “heavy, short-range rifle and machine-gun fire from concealed Japanese positions.” Pfc Goerhi was one of two Marines from F Company to die in action along the Piva Trail. His remains were buried in the field “in Isolated Grave #2”, however, no specific location was noted. Goehri’s gravesite was lost in the ensuing campaign and occupation of Bougainville. Postwar searchers had little more than a general idea of where to look, and were unable to find any traces of his burial.*

**KELLERMAN, 9 NOV.** *Pfc Kellerman was killed in action along the Piva Trail on 9 November 1943. On that date, his company was attached to the Third Raider Battalion and instructed to push out beyond a road block. However, the Japanese defenders managed to spoil the Marine attack and caused several casualties early in the day’s fighting. Company F in particular was subjected to “heavy, short-range rifle and machine-gun fire from concealed Japanese positions.” Kellerman fell victim to one such position; he was shot several times through the abdomen by a Japanese machine gun and died on the muddy jungle floor. He was buried near the spot where he fell, but the grave was destroyed when engineers moved in to widen the trail into a usable road. Pfc Kellerman’s remains were never recovered or identified from the Piva Trail area.*

Missing Marine also provides a table titled ‘Lost Patrol Fatal Casualties’ listing only members of Co ‘E’, both recovered and unrecovered. That table (below) has been edited by adding the 4 Marine Raiders that are part of the Piva Trail Eight: Kafut, Behnisch, Goehri and Kellerman. Also added is information from the Co ‘E’ KIA Muster Role listing patrol members

**PIVA TRAIL EIGHT, BOUGAINVILLE, 1-9 NOV 1943**

killed with important details included in footnotes I through N, filename 'A partial tally of KIAs on the Lost Patrol' found in the Gallery of several unrecovered patrol members.<sup>16</sup>

<b>CO 'E' PATROL FATAL CASUALTIES and PIVA TRAIL RAIDER CASUALTIES</b>			
<b>Full Name and Rank</b>	<b>Time &amp; Cause Of Loss if Known</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Remains Disposition</b>
KAFUT, Walter Joseph*	Pfc KIA on way to roadblock.	1 Nov 43	135.15 - 214.8 Field burial coordinates. Remains not recovered. Grave #7 declared lost to construction, 1944. Declared non-recoverable, 1949.
BEHNISCH, Lester Charles*	Pfc 0930 KIA on way to roadblock, GSW multiple.	2 Nov 43	Remains not recovered. Field burial near where he fell. Declared lost to construction, 1943. Declared non-recoverable, 1949.
ALEXANDER, Elbert Benard*	Pvt Separated, failed to return.	7 Nov 43	Remains not recovered. Missing in action.
BIBEE, Leonard Earl*	Pvt KIA, GSW chest, Piva ambush.	7 Nov 43	Remains not recovered. Burial isolated.
GRAY, Ralph Frederick*	Pvt KIA, GSW multiple, Piva ambush.	7 Nov 43	Remains not recovered. Burial isolated.
PITTS, James Orland*	Pvt Separated, failed to return.	7 Nov 43	Remains not recovered. Missing in action.
GOEHRI, Homer Roy*	Pfc KIA Piva Trail [Connector].	9 Nov 43	Remains not recovered. Buried in isolated grave #2 lost in ensuing campaign. No trace found postwar.
KELLERMAN, Hugh William, Jr.*	Pfc KIA Piva Trail [Connector], GSW machine gun, multiple, abdomen.	9 Nov 43	Remains not recovered. Field burial near where he fell. Declared lost to construction.
BURTON, Jack Duncan	Sgt 1700 KIA, GSW.	7 Nov 43	Buried Bougainville Cemetery 10 Nov 1943.
DAVID, Leuin Lenoir Jr.	Pfc 1700 KIA, GSW stomach, multiple.	7 Nov 43	134.7-214.25 Coordinates of field burial 23 Nov 1943. Chaplain McCorkle officiated. Disentered 13 Dec 43 buried Cemetery #3.
DE LANEY, Don Kenyon	Pvt 1500 KIA, GSW and shrapnel, entire body, multiple.	7 Nov 43	135.15 - 215.23 Coordinates of field burial on 23 Nov 43. Chaplain McCorkle officiated. Disentered 13 Dec 43 buried Cemetery #3.
PESEK, Edwin Anton	Pfc 1715 KIA, GSW chest, multiple	7 Nov 43	134.7-214.25 Coordinates of field burial 23 Nov 1943. Chaplain McCorkle officiated. Disentered 13 Dec 43 buried Cemetery #3.
PETERSEN, Lloyd Eugene	Pfc 1700 KIA, GSW forehead.	7 Nov 43	Field burial north of Piva Village 17 Nov 1943. Buried Cemetery #1 unknown date.

NOTES: \* Piva Trail Eight. Chaplain McCorkle is William Hart McCorkle, USNR (1900-1981). Table adapted from 'Lost Patrol Fatal Casualties' table and Co 'E' KIA Muster Role, footnotes 'I' through 'N', both found on Missing Marines website.

**POSSIBLE SEARCH AREA**

It is hoped this research might be sufficient to inspire further DPAA research which might then lead to a search mission on Bougainville along the Mission Trail (for Kafut 1 Nov and Behnisch 2 Nov), west of the Piva Trail Connector (for Alexander, Bibee, Gray and Pitts, 7 Nov) and east of the Piva Trail Connector (for Goehri and Kellerman, 9 Nov). DPAA might engage their currently active, non-federal partner, Texas State University and their FIRST Detection K9 Department that specializes in training canines to find osseous human remains at great depths and in adverse environmental conditions in archaic cases, including paleo remains. The program director, Dr. Michael Ben Alexander, told me their canines have found osseous remains that are 81-plus years-old and have found human remains up to 5,000-years-old. The search area would be defined by creating a 200-yard buffer on each side of the following features. In order of priority based on the authors best guess at locating subject osseous remains, those features are:

1. The Piva Trail Connector from the 7 Nov Marine roadblock north to the intersection with the Numa Numa Trail.
2. Mission Trail from the 7 Nov Marine roadblock south beyond the Pesek/David field burial location.
3. East-southeast road from the 7 Nov Marine roadblock to the former location of Piva Village #2.

<sup>16</sup> Missing Marines Bibee, see 'Gallery' for KIA Muster: <https://missingmarines.com/leonard-e-bibee/>

## PIVA TRAIL EIGHT, BOUGAINVILLE, 1-9 NOV 1943

4. North-northwest road from Piva Village #2 to the Piva Trail Connector.
5. North-south path from the 7 Nov Marine roadblock as indicated on the Pg-5 map.

The search area just described would encompass approximately 336-acres (136-hectares) as depicted on the attached map (last page). Searching large areas with metal detectors, ground penetrating radar and/or other labor intensive technology is time consuming and expensive. Perhaps with a slight sense of irony, because War Dogs were used extensively for the first time on Bougainville, the DPAA might consider using canines in hopes of finding the remains of these eight U.S. Marines? The FACTS website is: <https://www.txst.edu/anthropology/facts/workshops/k9.html>

### REFERENCES

- ALLIGOOD, Leon. “*Ceremony at Last Honors the Boy Who Went to War*” [Pvt. Elbert Bernard Alexander]. The Tennessean, Nashville, TN, June 11, 2005, Section B1-B2. Online at:  
<https://www.leatherneck.com/forums/showthread.php?20275-Ceremony-at-last-honors-the-boy-who-went-to-war>
- CHAPIN, John C. Captain, USMCR (Ret). “*Top of the Ladder: Marine Operations in the Northern Solomons.*” Commemorative Series, Marines in World War II. History and Museums Division, Headquarters U.S. Marine Corps, Washington, D.C. Online at:  
[https://www.marines.mil/Portals/1/Publications/Top%20of%20the%20Ladder-Marine%20Operations%20in%20the%20Northern%20Solomons%20PCN%2019000314100\\_1.pdf](https://www.marines.mil/Portals/1/Publications/Top%20of%20the%20Ladder-Marine%20Operations%20in%20the%20Northern%20Solomons%20PCN%2019000314100_1.pdf)
- CONKLIN, Jean. “*The Devil Dog of Floral Park.*” The Elks Magazine. February 2015. Page 30. Online at:  
<https://uswardogsheritagemuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/The-Devil-Dog-of-Floral-Park.htm#page/1>
- FIRST MARINE AMPHIBIOUS CORPS. “*A Report on the Activities in Connection with the Bougainville Operation, Phase I, Phase II, Phase III. March 21, 1944.*” 627 Pages including other affiliated Marine Unit Combat Reports. On Fold 3 at:  
<https://www.fold3.com/image/272857453/rep-on-bougainville-operations-11343-to-121543-page-1-us-world-war-ii-war-diaries-1941-1945>
- LOVELADY, Davis Tyre. “*The Marine Corps’ Third and Fourth Raider Battalions During World War II.*” A Thesis in History, Texas Tech University. 2002. Online at:  
<https://ttu-ir.tdl.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/36301d42-ae56-472f-b3ef-1dc9fc8cc854/content>
- MARTIN, Christopher J. “*The Aftermath of Hell, Graves Registration Policy and U.S. Marine Corps Losses in the Solomon Islands During World War II.*” Online at Marine Corps University:  
[https://www.usmcm.edu/Portals/218/Aftermath%20of%20Hell%20MCH%20Vol\\_%202%20No\\_%202-2.pdf](https://www.usmcm.edu/Portals/218/Aftermath%20of%20Hell%20MCH%20Vol_%202%20No_%202-2.pdf)
- MERRELL, Ray. “*My Three Years in the Marine Corps.*” Leathers Publishing, KS. 2003
- RENTZ, John N., Major, USMCR. “*Bougainville and the Northern Solomons.*” Historical Section, Division of Public Information, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps. 1948. Online at:  
[https://www.usmcm.edu/Portals/218/Rentz\\_Bougainville%20and%20the%20Northern%20Solomons.pdf](https://www.usmcm.edu/Portals/218/Rentz_Bougainville%20and%20the%20Northern%20Solomons.pdf)
- STROBRIDGE, Truman R. “*A Brief History of the 9th Marines.*” Historical Branch, G-3 Division, Headquarters U.S. Marine Corps, Washington, D.C. Revised 1967. Online at:  
[https://www.usmcm.edu/Portals/218/9th\\_Marines\\_History.pdf](https://www.usmcm.edu/Portals/218/9th_Marines_History.pdf)
- THIRD MARINE DIVISION. “*Combat Report of the Third Marines Reinforced, in the Bougainville Campaign, 1 November - 25 December 1943, Part One Operations, Part Two Tactics and Techniques. March 21, 1944.*” 352 Pages including other participating Marine Unit Combat Reports. On Fold 3 at:  
<https://www.fold3.com/image/273586328/combatt-rep-of-bougainville-ops-11143-to-122843-page-2-us-world-war-ii-war-diaries-1941-1945>
- TOROKINA Quad Map. 1945. Sheet 4895. Online at:  
<https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/items/2710a0b0-089e-4f93-89e4-79e936bb3663>

Joe F. Hamrick, 22 November 2025, Lufkin TX, [scrappinvalley@outlook.com](mailto:scrappinvalley@outlook.com)



**PIVA TRAIL and MISSION TRAIL, BOUGAINVILLE, 1 NOV - 9 NOV 1943, EIGHT USMC KIA/MIA  
1943 FIELD BURIAL and FEATURES OVER 2022 COLOR AERIAL IMAGERY**