

THE SNLF IN COMBAT

EARLY WAR SCENARIOS FOR THE RIKUSENTAI

By Jon Cooper



A rare image of SNLF in Shanghai wearing gasmasks and rubber gloves. The Japanese did use chemical warfare in Shanghai although not during the fight for the bridge.

Presented here is an examination of one of the most unique and versatile units of the war, the Imperial Japanese Navy's SNLF (Special Naval Landing Force, or *Rikusentai*). Additionally, three scenarios are included, each involving a significant action by the the SNLF. Ranging from a daring push to take a vital bridge to desperate retreat and extraction by sea. The elite Japanese SNLF were prepared to fight wherever needed.

THE ORIGINS OF THE RIKUSENTAI

Japanese military planners preparing for Imperial expansion at the beginning of the 20th century faced a fundamental problem of geography. The potential theatre of operations covered thousands of square miles with oceans to the east and mainland Asia to the west. Their forces would have to master movement by land, sea and air.

The Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) would be the key. Any threat to the homeland would need to cross the oceans and any venture beyond the Japanese shores would require naval support. Once ashore and boots are on the ground, it would be down to the army to conquer territories and occupy new lands. Co-operation between the services was, however, at a low ebb. Traditional recruitment from different social groups, geographic regions and feudal families created and sustained an insurmountable rift between the two services. The strategic relationship was often strained and fractious.

This pig-headed and independent approach to combined operations drove the IJN planners to create an autonomous force capable of taking the fight to the enemy by any means. Force projection was deemed crucial, whether it meant landing from the sea or jumping from aircraft.

The early excursions into China, such as the Boxer Rebellion and the Russo–Japanese War, had proven the worth of shipborne

soldiers capable of launching raids ashore and defending naval coastal assets and the opening of free trade ports to the western colonial powers meant that Japanese anchorages and enclaves needed garrisoning. It was therefore logical, in the Navy's eyes, to raise shipborne soldiers to fulfil this role.

The Japanese invasion of Manchuria and the subsequent Sino-Japanese War in the 1930's proved to be the testing ground for the newly formed *Tokubetsu Rikusentai* – The Special Naval Landing Forces (SNLF) many of whom had been assigned as garrison troops to coastal facilities.

In 1937, as the Manchurian War spun out of control in the north of China, it was the SNLF garrison in Shanghai that were to take the brunt of the Chinese uprising in the city. They held their own barracks in 'Little China', the docks and the 'International Quarters' against attacks from the elite, German trained, Chinese regiments. Rapid deployment of reinforcements from other garrisons, tactical use of naval fire support and eventual domination of the air war over the city ensured not only that the SNLF held on to the city but also spearheaded the subsequent coastal assaults on the flanks of the surrounding Chinese forces that forced Chiang Kai-shek's generals to call off the siege. By the end of the campaign, over 200,000 Japanese troops had outgunned nearly 500,000 Chinese defenders.

SCENARIO 1 – FIRST BLOOD

EIGHT CHARACTER BRIDGE – SHANGHAI 1937

In the early hours of the fight for Shanghai both sides aggressively patrolled towards key strategic locations. The Bazi Bridge or 'Eight Character Bridge' (Named after the Chinese character for 'eight', near the SNLF's barracks on the road towards the Hongkou precinct, was one such key point. The bridge was only 60 ft wide and spanned the meeting of two minor creeks and the Chinese believed it was a potential choke point for the attacking columns making their way towards the barracks from the north. A Chinese patrol of around 200 men headed for the bridge but discovered that the SNLF had already reached the objective. The Chinese launched a concerted attack in which their weight of numbers eventually prevailed. However, the Japanese called in artillery support from naval vessels posted on the Yangtze River before retaking the bridge. By the evening both sides dug in to block any further incursions.

Details of the force selectors and special rules for the Sino-Japanese War of 1937 can be found in the *Empires in Flames* supplement.

FORCES

Japanese units should be taken from the IJA Kwantung Army 1937 Theatre Selector, using SNLF infantry options only and may not include vehicles with a damage value of 7+ or higher. The SNLF had access to a small number of Crossley M25 armoured cars in the early days of the battle but nothing heavier than that. The Japanese FOO can call up to three naval bombardments during the game to simulate the close support the SNLF established with IJN ships offshore.

Chinese platoons should also be taken from the Battle of Shanghai 1937 Theatre Selector. The Chinese player can select up to 25% more points worth of troops than the Japanese player.

Both sides can deploy infantry units to build temporary bridges across the creeks and lay charges to destroy the bridges.

BATTLEFIELD

The scenario is best played on a 6' x 4' board, following the layout as shown on the map. The shaded areas are designated as 'small villages' with a few shops and the odd urban family home. The Chinese cemetery has a small temple and a columbarium. As this is the opening phase of the battle there is no rubble. The creeks are crossable by infantry using the 'Shallow Water' rules.

SET-UP

History has it that the Japanese patrol made it to the bridge first. Therefore, 25% of the Japanese infantry force can be deployed on the board within 6" of the bridge. The rest are held off board as Reserves. Japanese reinforcements will arrive in the south-east quadrant along the edge of the board. They had no time to dig in.

The Chinese player enters play from the west table edge and all his units are deployed in the first wave. No units may be held in reserve or outflank. Snipers, scouts and forward observers may



forward deploy, but may not be placed within 12" of the bridge or on the Japanese side of the creek.

SPECIAL RULES

All City as a Battlefield rules apply (see *Empires in Flames*, page 122).

Digging In during the game is permitted to reflect both sides determination to secure the bridge for future use.

RESERVES

Japanese reserves can enter the battle into the south eastern quadrant of the player's table edge. They may not outflank in this scenario.

OBJECTIVE

Both sides have been tasked to secure the Eight Character Bridge but they may choose to deny the enemy the bridge by blowing it up, in which case they cannot win the game and can only hope to draw by placing infantry on remaining 'rubble' created by the explosion.

GAME DURATION

Keep a count of how many turns have elapsed as the game is played. At the end of turn 8, roll a D6. On a result of 1, 2 or 3, the game ends, on a roll of 4, 5 or 6 play one further turn. Use Night Fighting Rules for any extra turns

VICTORY!

If one player has a model from any infantry units on the bridge at the end of the game, he is declared the winner. If no-one has control of the bridge, or both players have models on the bridge, the game is declared a draw.





The SNLF fighting alongside the Imperial Japanese Army.

The lessons learnt in China were taken up with vigour by the IJN high command. The SNLF were recruited from four maritime regions in Japan and were named accordingly after their home port. Unlike their counterparts in the United States, the SNLF never evolved beyond regimental level. They were often deployed in battalion strength or as part of 'forces' allocated to specific operations under naval command. Despite the intense rivalry, they would get to fight, all be it reluctantly, alongside Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) units and depend on naval air power and shipborne artillery support. In addition, they also took to the air, giving over three battalions to the airborne assault role and ultimately carried out more airdrops than their army counterparts.

At the outbreak of WW2 there were 16 established SNLF units, the largest, 1st Sasebo, being 1,600 men strong. The remaining units numbered between 600 to 1,400 men. The first SNLF operations took place in the Philippines on 12 December 1942 at Legaspi on Luzon, where the 1st Kure landed just short of 600 men. The 2nd Kure landed in Davao, Mindanao a week later. Both assaults went in without too many issues and few casualties.

The first airborne landings by SNLF paratroopers took place on the island of Menado in the Dutch East Indies. The landings on Langoan Airfield by the by elements of the 1st Yokosuka Battalion were in support of a seaborne force led by the Sasebo Combined Landing Force.



SNLF and a Crossley armoured car in a pre-war photograph showing the men in their ship-board navy blue uniforms. SNLF units were fighting in their more practical combat green uniforms in Shanghai.

SCENARIO 2 – ‘GOING DUTCH’

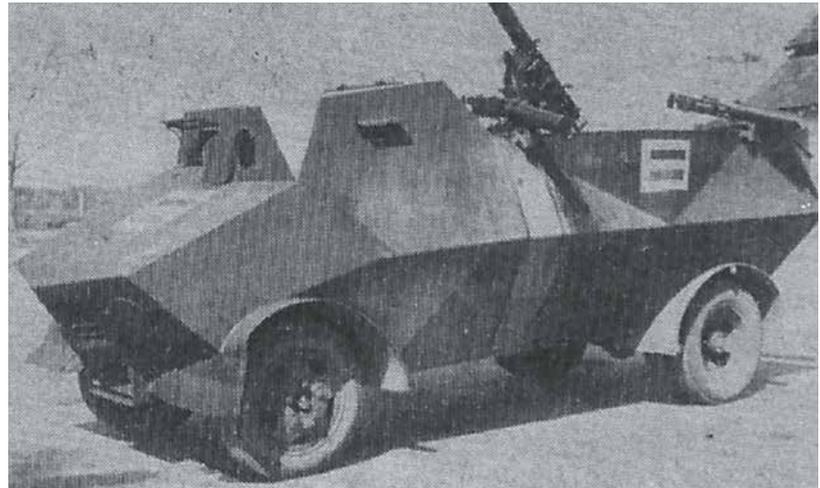
LONGOAN AIRFIELD

Shortly after 0900 on 11 January 1942, 334 SNLF paratroopers were dropped on and around the Longoan airfield. This was their first operation and their lack of experience was clear. They were dropped too high and the local winds scattered the troopers across the airfield. Individual units were picked off by the defenders and it took time to regroup forces for a co-ordinated attack. A KNIL (Dutch: *Koninklijk Nederlands Indisch Leger* or Royal Netherlands East Indies Army) counter-attack lead by two armoured cars and reinforcements from the local kampong (village) needed to be beaten back before the airfield could be secured.

A combination of surprisingly stubborn Dutch resistance and casualties from the drop caused the deaths of the detachments commander, two junior officers and 32 ranks, with 90 more sailors wounded. The Japanese, incensed by their losses, went on to execute many of the surrendering Dutch officers and men.

The KNIL forces assigned to the defence of the airfield was made up of a regular company of about 75 men posted to the airfield with an attachment of up to 7 Madsen light machine guns. The relief force of KNIL (Koninklijke Nederlands(ch)-Indische Leger) Infantry in Longoan Kampong numbered approximately 50 men. This formation was equipped with three armoured cars and one armoured lorry.

Also available and may have made an appearance on the battlefield was the Infantry Company of European *Militie* and *Landstorm*, comprised of approximately 100 Europeans. They were poorly armed and poorly



An Overalwagen APC

trained and had no automatic weapons. They fought alongside elements of the local volunteers for the Menadoan Militia and men of the *Stadsyacht* Infantry Company consisting of old men with hunting rifles.



Special Naval Landing Force



SNLF airborne units take cover at Longoan

FORCES

The Dutch KNIL ground forces should be taken from The Dutch East Indies Reinforced Platoons army list from the *Armies of France and their Allies*. However, the player should be encouraged to reflect the actual forces involved in the action:

At the Airfield

- 1 x Lieutenant – First or Second
- 1 x Medic team
- 2 x Infantry sections – Regular Infantry
- 1 x Indonesian Infantry Section
- 3 x Machine gun teams
- 1 x Anti-aircraft gun: Bofors 40mm anti-aircraft gun

Reserves HQ at Longoan Kampong

- 1 x Captain or Major
- 2 x Regular Infantry sections
- 1 x Armoured Car or Recce vehicle: Overalwagen patrol truck,
- Transport vehicles per infantry unit: 1 x Truck,
1 x Overalwagen APC

Japanese platoons should be taken from the 1st Yokosuka SNLF Paratroopers at Menado, 1942 in the *Armies of Imperial Japan* supplement.

BATTLEFIELD

The battlefield layout is based on war time aerial reconnaissance images of the airfield and is best played on an 8' x 4' board to encourage the dispersal of units.

The terminal area should be populated small workshops, small hangars, a control hut and terminal buildings. The runway and should provide a 12" wide strip of open ground devoid of cover. The surrounding area should consist of Dense Terrain with the odd track breaking through to the board edge. The relief column will enter along the road from the Longoan Kampong in the bottom left (south-west) corner of the board.

SET-UP

The Dutch Airfield guard will set up first. All units can be 'dug in'.

You can simulate the paratroop as you see fit but there is always the Combat Jump Rules [here](#).

To simulate the inexperience of the pilots in flying in too high, use three dice rather than two to determine the distance travelled by the

SNLF
troopers



paratrooper during the descent. If they land off the board then they are considered arriving too late to take part in the action and removed from the game.

The Longoan Kampong command for the KNIL will be released in accordance with the reserve rules and will enter from the south-west corner of the board along the road.

GAME DURATION

Keep a count of how many turns have elapsed as the game is played. At the end of turn 8, roll a D6. On a result of 1, 2 or 3, the game ends, on a roll of 4, 5 or 6 play one further turn.

OBJECTIVE

The Dutch must clear the board of all Japanese Units. The SNLF must destroy all Dutch elements on the airstrip to allow reinforcements to use the runway the next day.

VICTORY!

The side that inflicts the most damage on the opposition wins. It's a fight to the death.

The SNLF paratroopers were also engaged in similar operations in Timor. Notably the The 3rd Yokosuka Battalion dropped behind the Australian and Dutch lines at Kupang to cut off their line of retreat from the beachhead. Unfortunately, the 2/40th Infantry Battalion of the Australian Imperial Forces (AIF) was in no mood to surrender and launched an aggressive counter-attack, overpowering the blocking paratrooper force and killing all but 78 of the SNLF. However, the delaying action had slowed the Australian retreat and the survivors were finally captured at Usua. This proved to the Allies that aggressive counter-attacks against a weaker parachute force could be successful.



TURNING THE TIDE

The defeat of the IJN at Midway in June 1942 marked a turning point in the fortunes of the SNLF as the 'lightning strikes' they had trained for became fewer in number. The SNLF strategy required ships and targets, but with the growing losses due to the interdiction of the US submarine forces, and fewer opportunities to invade new territories, their future as an aggressive assault force looked in doubt.

The final straw for the SNLF was the assault on the Australian forces in Milne Bay at the end of August 1942. Operation *Re* was to be undertaken by 1,500 men from the 3rd and 5th Kure, the 5th Sasebo and 5th Yokosuka battalions against an Allied force of what was thought to be no more than a company strong. Things went wrong from the start as the Japanese plans had already been intercepted by Allied intelligence. The reinforced Milne Bay garrison was on full alert as the SNLF task force approached. The attack got off to an ignominious beginning as the flanking unit of 350 SNLF were marooned in Goodenough Bay after

they initially landed at the wrong beach, on what proved to be an island and then had their barges sunk by Allied aircraft.

The main assault force landed as planned and with the help of two Ha Go tanks pushed the Australian militia inland. However, regular units from the 2nd AIF were brought in to stabilise the line and drive the SNLF back to the sea. Despite some ferocious counter-attacks, the SNLF pocket was slowly overrun and, on 7 September, the 600 survivors were taken off the beaches to awaiting corvettes with scenes reminiscent of the evacuation of Dunkirk.

Milne Bay has been labelled as the first battle in the Pacific War where the Allies repelled a Japanese landing force. The SNLF had up till then fought some hard-won encounters but had not been beaten. Milne Bay showed the cracks in the Japanese strategy as intelligence failings and sheer weight of manpower proved their undoing. Allied moral significantly improved and Milne Bay became a major staging post for future operations in the area. The tide had turned against the SNLF.

SCENARIO 3 – SIMPLY NOT GOODENOUGH!

The 350 stranded SNLF men on Goodenough Island had little to do but await rescue – the weather was bad as monsoon season approached and the island was a malaria hotspot. However, the IJN did not give up on their men.

Messages and food supplies were airdropped on 10 and 12 September and on 3 October, a submarine arrived delivering rations, ammunition, medical supplies, a radio, and a landing craft. 71 sick or wounded men were crammed into the submarine and brought back to Rabaul, along with the bodies of 13 dead, lost in the initial strafing. This left 285 Japanese troops on the island, most of whom were suffering from malaria. The submarine returned on 13 October with more rations and medical supplies and a second landing craft. Two days later, the Japanese received a radio message from command saying that their presence had been spotted by the Australian coast watchers and an invasion force was on the way.

The Australian garrison at Milne Bay felt that the small force of SNLF at Goodenough posed no real threat but high command was eyeing up the island as a site for a new airfield. Operation *Drake* was formulated for the reconquest and 2/12 Battalion AIF was assigned the task. Taking some local craft and captured Japanese barges the small task force split into two and landed on either side of the southern tip of the island, where the SNLF were believed to be holding out. Hampered by bad weather, poor communications and illness the two forces moved into contact with the outlying Japanese positions. There followed a series of probes towards the SNLF lines around Kilia Mission which were met by fierce resistance from prepared positions and ferocious counter-attacks. The Australians, shaken by the resilience of the castaways, pulled back to their landing beaches to regroup.

In the meantime, the SNLF used the two new landing craft to take advantage of the lull in the action to evacuate their wounded and most of their fighting force to Fergusson Island, where they were rescued by an IJN destroyer. The SNLF had taken over 40 casualties in the action but had inflicted twice that number on the Australians.

This final scenario is based around a hypothetical contested evacuation of the stranded SNLF.

FORCES

The Japanese forces are taken from the Assault on New Guinea Reinforced Platoon Selector from the *Campaign: New Guinea* supplement, using the SNLF options only. 25% of the Japanese force selected are to be declared 'wounded or ill' and therefore cannot attack or move towards the enemy. They can however defend themselves if assaulted. Split these into at least four units and place them in the hospital at the Kilia Mission

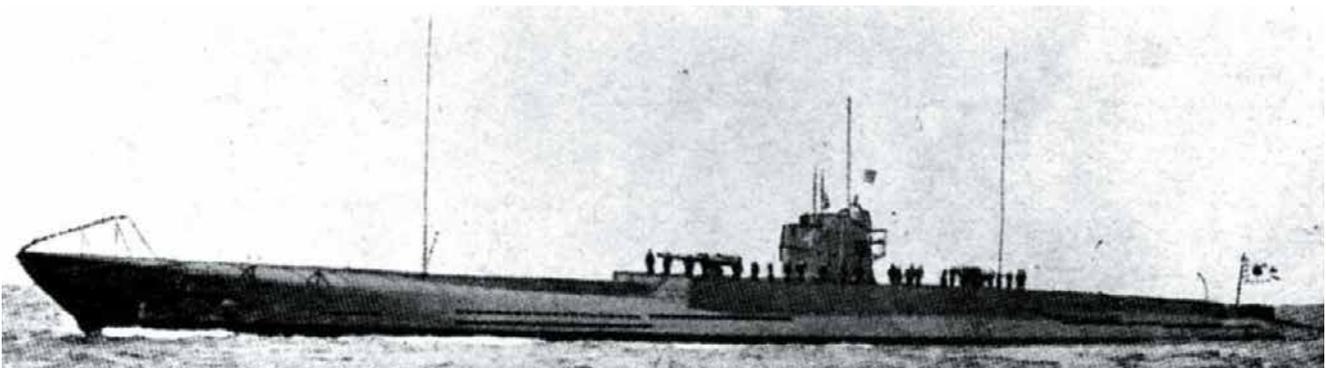
There are no vehicle or artillery options for this SNLF force but they must take up to the two barges in their force selection.

Japanese may take two Minefield options.

All Japanese are Exhausted having been on the island without proper food and suffering from Malaria for the preceding month.

The Australians will be chosen from the Defence of Milne Bay Reinforced Platoon Selector from the *Campaign: New Guinea* supplement. There are no vehicle or artillery options for this force. The Australians are to have twice as many points than the Japanese player.

FOO (aircraft) is an option for both sides unless playing the scenario at night.



An I-1 Class Submarine was used to bring in supplies to Goodenough and take out wounded men

SET-UP

Japanese place 50% of their troops in *Ambush* and Hidden anywhere in the central third of the board. The wounded men are placed in the assigned hospital. The remaining 25% are placed in the eastern end of the board around the Kampong. Australians enter from the western end of the board. Any Australians held in reserve can flank attack on the western side of the creek. The creek is treated as Rough Terrain.

Two barges or landing craft are to be placed in the Deep Water zone of the beach board

The game is best played on a 6' x 4' board. However, an extension can be added for the beach. Alternatively, this could be considered as remote site and located on a separate table taking one full turn to reach from the eastern end of the main board. The board is crossed by a number of ridges each heavily wooded, with a single-track path running from east to west from the ocean. A kampong sits by the beach amidst the palm trees. Nominate one house as a hospital from which the wounded start the game before heading out to the barges.

SPECIAL RULES

Japanese may Dig In to gun pits and may have a single bunker position.

Amphibious Operations rules apply (see *Empire in Flames*, page 118), but in reverse as you are trying to load the barges instead. Two barges should be able to take all the men. The barges can move on and off the board as they see fit to avoid enemy fire. If the barge stays off the table for a full round it is assumed any men on board have been transported to safety on Fergusson Island. The landing craft can then return the next turn to take off more evacuees.

Monsoon Season and the Mud rule applies (see *Empire in Flames*, page 108). You may be very ambitious and play this as a night action.

OBJECTIVES

The SNLF must save as many of their men as possible by moving them to the barges and off the board to the east. The Australians must kill as many of the enemy as they can before the SNLF slip away.

GAME DURATION

Keep a count of how many turns have elapsed as the game is played. At the end of turn 10, roll a D6. On a result of 1, 2 or 3, the game ends, on a roll of 4, 5 or 6 play one further turn.



Mud and Malaria in Paradise – Milne Bay

VICTORY!

It's all about the numbers. Total up the amount of SNLF that escape in the barges, with each man saved counting as two men. Add on the number of Australians killed. The Australians count the total amount of Japanese killed and, to reflect the sense of self-preservation among the attackers, add on the number of Australians who survive the action. The highest score wins.

HOME ON THE EBB TIDE

After Milne Bay, the SNLF found themselves tasked as garrison troops to hold the islands taken in the early days of the war or returning home to be amalgamated into larger units. Replacements were poorly trained and lessons learnt from previous operations were forgotten. Smaller units were simply abandoned on atolls and islands across the Pacific as the US Navy and Marine Corps bypassed the Japanese positions. While those that did take on the might of the Allied invasion fleets paid dearly for their loyalty to the Emperor.

