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The United States Marines in the Guadalcanal Campaign

The first American ground offensive in the Pacific during World War II took place at an obscure island in the southern Solomons--Guadalcanal. There, the high tide of Japanese conquest was reached and the ebb began. Until the decisive naval Battle of Midway (4-6 JUN 42), Allied forces could do little more than hold what they had, wait, and prepare. After Midway, the U. S. Joint Chiefs of Staff decided that the strategic situation had improved enough to risk the mounting of a limited offensive. The target chosen was Tulagi, a small island once the headquarters of the British Solomon Islands Protectorate, and with it such parts of surrounding islands as seemed necessary to hold the objective. A fine deep-water anchorage existed between Tulagi and neighboring Florida Island, and on Guadalcanal, 20 miles south across Sealark Channel, kunai grass plains amidst the jungle were suitable for extensive airfield development. In July, when aerial reconnaissance showed that the Japanese had begun to build an airfield on Guadalcanal, the larger island became the principal target.

The division of the Pacific into operational command areas made by the JCS on 30 MAR 42 placed all of the Solomons chain in General Douglas MacArthur's Southwest Pacific Area. In reviewing the forces available for the Guadalcanal-Tulagi operation, however, the Joint Chiefs determined that all of the ships and most of the assault troops would have to come from Admiral Chester W. Nimitz' Pacific Fleet and Pacific Ocean Areas. Accordingly, on 2 JUL, the boundary between Nimitz' and MacArthur's commands was shifted west just far enough to bring the lower Solomons within the admiral's South Pacific Area. At the same time, the JCS agreed upon a series of operations in the Solomons and Bismarcks that would lead eventually to the capture of the Japanese stronghold of Rabaul on New Britain. General MacArthur was given responsibility for planning and coordinating the advance and command of all its phases after Guadalcanal was secured. On 25JUN, Vice Admiral Richard L. Ghormley, Nimitz' South Pacific Area commander, was told to begin preparations to take the Solomons objectives, with a tentative D-Day of 1 AUG. At least a division of trained amphibious assault troops was needed for WATCHTOWER, the code-name of the Guadalcanal-Tulagi operation, and only one such unit was available in the Pacific--the 1st Marine Division. Other divisions that might have been assigned the task lacked the amphibious experience or were spread thinly to hold vital strategic bases. The reinforcements that were tentatively slated for WATCHTOWER would be available only when garrison forces came out from the States to relieve combat troops in New Caledonia, Samoa, and Hawaii. Initially, the 1st Division would go it alone.

When he got the word that his division was headed for action in the Solomons, Major General Alexander A. Vandegrift was just getting set up in New Zealand where the 1st was scheduled to undergo six months of intensive combat training. With Vandegrift at Wellington were his command post, the 5th Marines, and elements of the 11th Marines; at sea en route to New Zealand were the division rear echelon, the 1st Marines, and the remainder of the 11th. Since one of the division's infantry regiments, the 7th Marines, was already committed to the defense of Samoa, the 2d Marines of the 2d Division was dispatched from San Diego to bring Vandegrift's command up to strength. Other major elements attached to the 1st Division had to be assembled from overseas bases, the 1st Raider Battalion from New Caledonia and the 3d Defense Battalion from Hawaii. Faced with the task of assembling and loading out a reinforced division within a month's time, Vandegrift asked for and got a week's delay of D-Day to 7 AUG. Feverishly, improvising as necessary, the Marines in Wellington unloaded the transports as they arrived, sorted and repacked equipment and supplies for combat, and loaded ship again. There was not enough room for all the division's motor transport, and most of the heavier cargo trucks were left behind to come up with a rear echelon. Re-embarkation was completed by 22 July and the convoy sailed from Wellington the same day. As finally loaded, the Marines carried along 60 days supplies, enough ammunition for 10 days of heavy fighting, and the minimum individual baggage actually required to live and fight.

Unsatisfactory and incomplete rehearsals were conducted at Koro in the Fiji Islands, where the various components of the forces assigned to take Guadalcanal and Tulagi assembled for the first time. Rear Admiral Richmond K. Turner, the commander of the amphibious force which included the Marine division, its transports, and the bombardment and escort vessels, was given responsibility for the conduct of the operation. The Marine Corps' point of view, one that prevailed and became standard amphibious doctrine in later stages of the war, was that the landing force commander should have complete control of operations ashore. During WATCHTOWER,

however, the command setup of an earlier era held forth, and the naval commander continued to have the last word in the employment of ground troops. The plan for WATCHTOWER called for two separate landings, one by the division's main body near Lunga Point on Guadalcanal and the other on the Florida side of Sealark Channel by an assault group built around the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, and the 1st Raider and Parachute Battalions. According to intelligence of the enemy gleaned from Allied coast watcher reports and reconnaissance flights, the strongest resistance could be expected from Japanese defending Tulagi and two nearby fortified islets, Gavutu and Tanambogo. Enemy air and naval reaction to the assault was expected to be violent and strong.

On 7 August, the prelanding estimates of Japanese defenses proved accurate. After a preliminary bombardment by cruisers and destroyers, the assault waves boated in ships' landing craft raced ashore on both Guadalcanal and Tulagi. On the big island there was no enemy response; naval gunfire had driven the labor troops working on the airfield into the hills that rimmed the kunai grass plain. The primary obstacles to the Marine advance were the jungle and the enervating effect of the hot, humid climate on men not used to the tropics. By nightfall on D-Day, General Vandegrift's men were dug in in positions just short of the airfield site and had yet to contact their first enemy soldier. The capture of Tulagi and its neighboring islets took three desperate days of fighting during which the three battalions of the 2d Marines were committed to add weight to American attacks. The Japanese defenders, about 1,000 naval landing, aviation, and labor troops, holed up in caves and pill-boxes and fought to the death against tank-infantry attacks, point-blank artillery fire, and close-in grenade and small arms assaults. Twenty-seven prisoners and a sprinkling of survivors that swam to Florida Island were all that was left of the enemy garrison when the last shot had been fired.

The strongest Japanese countermoves were launched from air and sea. On D-Day afternoon, enemy bombers attacked and scored a hit on an American destroyer. Daily for months thereafter, except when foul weather gave the Marines a respite or Allied aircraft intercepted, Japanese planes raided, concentrating on shipping when it was present off the beaches but turning frequent attention to the division beachhead on Guadalcanal. The unwelcome intrusions of enemy warships had an even more important effect on the course of the campaign. Seven Japanese cruisers attacked on the night of 8-9 AUG and the havoc wrought was staggering. Torpedoes and gunfire sank four Allied cruisers and badly damaged another and two destroyers. The attacking force sailed away intact. The grave risk posed by enemy air and naval attacks prompted Admiral Turner to withdraw the transports and cargo vessels standing off the beaches late on 9 AUG. On board the ships that left was a good part of the rations and ammunition that the 1st Division had counted upon having in its supply dumps and nearly 1,400 Marines of ships' unloading details and reserve units. The men and supplies returned to Espiritu Santo and New Caledonia, two of the nearest forward bases, eventually reaching Guadalcanal again but not before their absence was sorely felt.

Cast loose, or at best promised only a tenuous lifeline back to rear areas, the 1st Marine Division set out to make do with what it had. Captured enemy materiel was used to the fullest extent; weapons were made part of the defenses, food stocks were added to the ration dumps, and trucks were put to work hauling supplies. General Vandegrift posted his troops to hold perimeter defenses along 5,000 yards of the coast between Alligator Creek and Kukum village and along an arc inland which encompassed the airfield site. Within the perimeter, engineers worked around the clock, finishing the job the Japanese had begun, in order to ready an airstrip to handle planes. By 18 AUG, it was ready, but an enemy bombing raid knocked it out, and it was the 20th before the first Allied air units landed. Fundamental to success of WATCHTOWER plans was the concept that aircraft would form part of the defending force and eventually the means of carrying the fight up the Solomons chain to enemy bases. The initial runway, and the airfield complex that was gradually built within the Marine perimeter, was named Henderson Field after a Marine flyer who was killed at the Battle of Midway. The first flying units to reach Henderson were Marine Fighter Squadron 223 and Marine Scout-Bomber Squadron 232 which flew in from the escort carrier Long Island. Succeeding flights of Marine and Army planes staged through the New Hebrides to reach the field, and Navy dive bombers from the damaged carrier Enterprise joined the growing force.

On 3 SEP, Headquarters of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing under Brigadier General Roy S. Geiger arrived on Guadalcanal and took command of the composite organization that came to be known as CACTUS Air Force after the code name of the island. Although Geiger's command was always predominantly a Marine outfit, it never lost the joint service make-up of its early days. The flight echelons of 21 Marine squadrons served in the forward area during the battle to hold Guadalcanal, but only a few of the unit ground echelons reached the island. The resulting burden thrown on the under strength ground crews that kept the miscellaneous collection of patched and shot-up aircraft flying was tremendous, but the job was accomplished with ingenuity and dispatch. The isolated nature of

the first months of fighting on Guadalcanal bred a comradeship of adversity with an attitude that the 1st Marine Division and its supporting air could accomplish the impossible.

The Japanese high command at Rabaul assigned the task of erasing the American position on Guadalcanal to the Seventeenth Army, but made the mistake of underestimating the strength and tenacity of the Marines ashore and in the air. The number of enemy troops available and uncommitted in August and September, many of them combat veterans of the fighting in China and the Philippines, was more than enough to have overwhelmed the Henderson Field defenses. But the Seventeenth Army sent its forces to the island piecemeal, a battalion or a regiment at a time, never in sufficient force to mount and sustain a prolonged attack. General Vandegrift, on his part, kept strong and aggressive combat patrols forward of his lines and launched limited offensives to keep the Japanese off balance. He never over-committed his men or undertook tasks that would place a severe strain on his resources. He had a mission--hold Henderson Field--and he fulfilled it. The Japanese method of building up their forces on Guadalcanal, and the impetuosity of Japanese leaders, furnished the pattern of the six-month-long battle to retake the island. A few thousand men at a time would land from transports outside the perimeter and then would attack almost immediately. The action at the threatened point would be bitterly fought with local advantage whipsawing back and forth, but with the defenders always able to concentrate enough reserve strength to beat the Japanese back with staggering losses.

The ground action on Guadalcanal revolved around a series of highpoints of intense fighting with intervals marked by vigorous patrol combat. In mid-AUG, the Marines located and engaged the original island garrison in positions about 6,000 yards west of Kukum beyond the Matanikau River. Then on the 21st, a reinforced enemy battalion which had just landed east of the perimeter rushed the Marine defenses along Alligator Creek, often misnamed the Tenaru River. The Japanese force was destroyed. The same fate befell a brigade of 6,000 men which landed on both sides of the perimeter in late August and early September. Moving through the jungle with his main body, the enemy commander attempted to launch a three-pronged attack from inland and both flanks. The spot chosen for the inland drive through to the airfield was a ridge manned by the original assault troops at Tulagi whom General Vandegrift had brought over to reinforce his defenses. Marine raiders, parachutists, infantrymen, pioneers, and artillerymen all had a hand in the two-day battle to hold the ridge, but when the last enemy soldier withdrew on 14 SEP, the position was still in American possession. The enemy flank attacks planned to accompany the main assault faded away in the face of strong Marine defenses near the coast.

While the 1st Division was holding its own, helped along by the faulty reinforcement strategy of the Japanese, the American Navy was suffering the worst series of reverses in its history. The Japanese and the Americans, the latter bolstered on occasion by Australian and New Zealand ships, tangled repeatedly in the waters off Guadalcanal and in the Solomon Sea. Sealark Channel won a new title, Iron-Bottom Sound, in dubious tribute to the number of ships that sank there during frequent and costly night battles. The over-all score of ships lost from AUG thru DEC was staggering, but in the final analysis hurt the Japanese more than the Americans because of the differing replacement potential of the two nations. Two American carriers, 6 cruisers, 13 destroyers, and a score of smaller vessels were sunk; many more ships were severely damaged. The Japanese lost one carrier, two battleships, three cruisers, and eleven destroyers and had at least an equal number damaged. The decisive factor in the sea battles in the Solomons was Allied air. The CACTUS Air Force and carrier squadrons exacted a heavy toll of transports during Japanese reinforcement attempts, and often evened the tally when enemy warships that had come out ahead in an exchange of gunfire and torpedoes at Guadalcanal were caught retiring toward Rabaul.

On 18 SEP, the 7th Marines arrived on Guadalcanal from Samoa, just in time to test themselves against a Japanese force that had landed west of the Matanikau. In a succession of sharply fought engagements lasting through 9OCT, the 1st Division turned back the enemy attackers, exacting a heavy toll of dead and wounded for the attempt to break through the perimeter. The arrival of the division's missing regiment was followed on 13 OCT by the landing of the first infantry regiment of the Army's Americal Division to reinforce the Marines. The soldiers were assigned their own sector of the defense line to hold and took part in the repulse of the heaviest Japanese offensive of the campaign during attacks which lasted from 21-28 OCT. The enemy strength at the start of the October offensive had reached 20,000 men, while General Vandegrift's command had grown to 23,000. Many of the combatants on both sides were in poor health, however, and the figures do not reflect men at peak combat efficiency. Tropical diseases found easy prey among men weakened by mental and physical strain and a shortage of rations; both the Japanese and Americans had difficulty keeping any more than a bare subsistence level of supplies on the island. Thousands of the Marines within the perimeter and in the front-line positions suffered repeated

attacks of malaria and other fevers, yet they held on because they had to. For the Japanese in the jungle, the case was even worse as medicine and doctors were in short supply, food often failed to reach assault troops, and hundreds of the enemy died of malnutrition and disease.

November was the critical month in which the issue of the campaign was decided. Despite terrible losses, the Allied naval forces, aided by CACTUS Air Force, won a four-day sea and air battle for control of the waters of the lower Solomons. The 1st Division received further reinforcement from the Americal Division and from the 2d Marine Division and used these fresh troops to hammer at the Japanese positions. A month of continuous fighting with artillery, air, and naval gunfire support all playing a part in the destruction, virtually finished one Japanese division and elements of another. On 9 DEC, General Vandegrift turned over command of the forces on Guadalcanal to Major General Alexander M. Patch, commander of the Americal Division, as the 1st Marine Division was officially relieved. The battle-weary Marines of the 1st, many of them badly in need of hospitalization as a result of their bouts with tropical diseases, departed in the next few days for Australia and a much-needed rest. During December and the first few days of the new year, General Patch regrouped his forces for a drive calculated to push the Japanese off the island. The 25th Infantry Division and the remaining units of the 2d Marine Division arrived to join the soldiers of the Americal in the final offensive.

The XIV Army Corps was organized under General Patch's command to control the actions of the three divisions. On 10 January, the corps launched its attack west along the coast toward Cape Esperance, the tip of the island. The advance was hotly contested in its first days, but the Japanese gave way steadily before the combined Army-Marine offensive. Late in January, when intelligence was received of a build-up of enemy shipping at Rabaul, the American advance was slowed. Thinking that this news might presage a large-scale reinforcement attempt as it had many times previously, General Patch wanted to keep his combat forces concentrated enough to repel a counter landing. But the Japanese ships were being readied for another reason--the evacuation of Guadalcanal. The enemy had had enough. He wished only to rescue the troops still alive on the island to fight another day. In the first week of February, during a series of daring night runs by destroyer transports, about 13,000 Japanese were taken off Cape Esperance. On 8 FEB, General Patch could report "Total and complete defeat of Japanese forces on Guadalcanal...."

In winning control of the island, Marine and Army units had over 1,500 officers and men killed and 4,700 wounded in action. The Japanese lost 14,800 killed and counted another 9,000 dead from wounds or disease; a thousand prisoners, most of them labor troops, were taken. Both sides lost about the same number of fighting ships and crewmen in the battle for control of the seas, perhaps the most costly naval campaign in modern history. In the air, the balance weighed heavily in favor of the Allies who accounted for 600 enemy planes and pilots and lost less than half as many in return. An accounting of comparative losses during the Battle for Guadalcanal only emphasizes the importance of the campaign. The seizure of the island from the Japanese was the all-important first step forward on the road to Tokyo, the signal of the end to a year of retreat and the switch to the offensive.

[Source: Marine Corps Historical Reference Series No. 29 Henry I. Shaw, Jr. article 14 Jun 1962 ++]