



THE GUADALCANAL CAMPAIGN

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On 7 December 1941 the Japanese opened the war in the Pacific with simultaneous attacks on Pearl Harbor, the Philippines, Wake Island, Guam, and Malaya. They soon expanded their empire through East Asia, the Indies, and Melanesia, establishing advance bases to protect their captured resources. By May 1942 enemy forces held the Bismarcks, the Solomons, and most of New Guinea, and stood poised by Rabaul to dominate the Southern Pacific. These moves threatened Australia, whose eastern coast lay exposed to raids from the Solomons, and jeopardized lines of communication from the United States to New Zealand and the southern continent. Despite a commitment to defeat Germany first—and despite the complication of ship, troop, and supply shortages—the Allies vowed to contain the Japanese advance.

For strategic purposes, the British–U.S. Combined Chiefs of Staff had divided the world into areas of military responsibility, with the United States assuming the primary burden for war in the Pacific. On 30 March 1942 the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff divided the Pacific Ocean into two separate commands, the Southwest Pacific Area and the Pacific Ocean Areas, placing the former command under General Douglas MacArthur,

who had just escaped from the Philippines to Australia, and the latter under Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Fleet, with headquarters at Pearl Harbor. On 20 April 1942 the Joint Chiefs established the South Pacific Area as a subdivision of the Pacific Ocean Areas with the mission of containing the Japanese advance toward Australia and New Zealand, and preserving the lines of communication between those countries and the United States.

To halt the enemy advance and prepare for the offensive, the United States established bases and sent troops to the South Pacific. The Americal Division deployed to New Caledonia and the 37th Infantry Division to the Fijis; smaller forces secured the Tonga Islands and the New Hebrides Group. Elements of the 1st Marine Division arrived in Wellington, New Zealand, in mid-June. That month the Joint Chiefs committed more Marine and Army air squadrons to the area. The increase in Army troop strength and the imminence of combat led the U.S. War Department to reorganize Army forces into a single command—the U.S. Army Forces in the South Pacific Area.

In July 1942 the Joint Chiefs approved a plan to dislodge

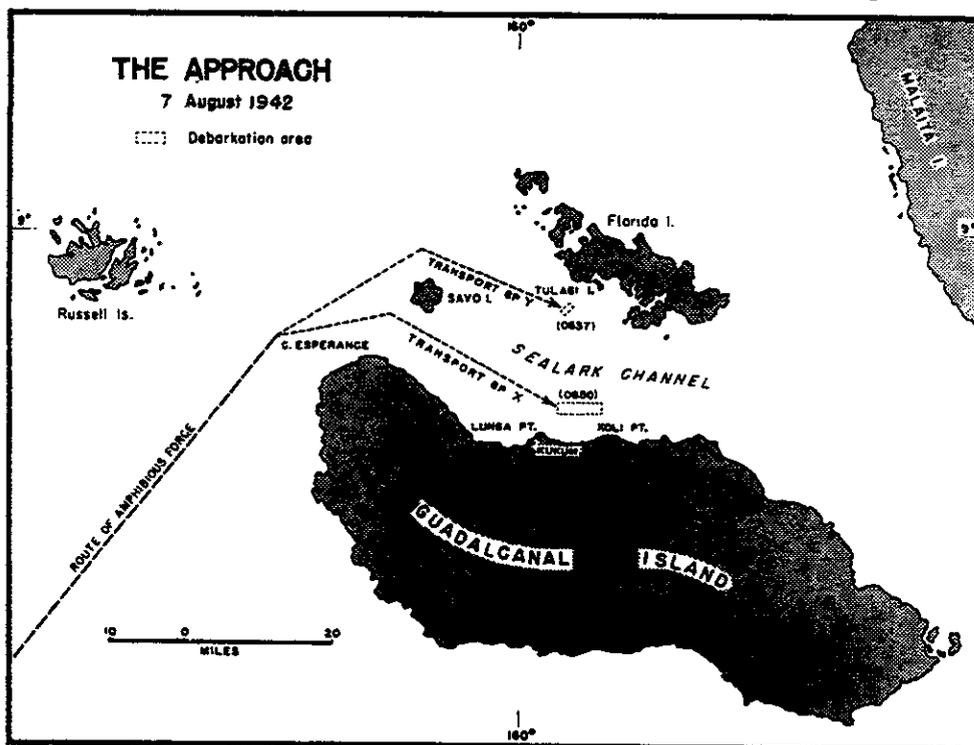
the Japanese from New Guinea, the Bismarcks, and the Solomons. Allied air and naval forces had blocked Japanese progress and restored naval balance in the Pacific in the battles of the Coral Sea (May) and Midway (June), destroying five carriers and hundreds of aircraft and pilots of the Imperial Japanese Navy. The Joint Chiefs proposed a two-pronged assault, one up the Solomons chain and the other toward northern New Guinea from Port Moresby, with the recapture of Rabaul (the center of the Japanese defense perimeter) as the final objective. Admiral Nimitz and General MacArthur were to support each other's operations with naval and air forces. The first step in the offensive, the recapture of the Guadalcanal-Tulagi area, could not be executed until August for want of transport ships.

On 6 July 1942 Japanese troops and construction personnel had landed on the north shore of Guadalcanal and had begun constructing an airfield and a base for subsequent operations. The U.S. objective was to seize these installations and retake the island from the Japanese. The overall direction of the campaign was in the hands of Admiral Nimitz, Commander in Chief, Pacific Ocean Areas. In early July 1942 he appointed Vice Admiral Robert L. Ghormley Commander, South Pacific, with headquarters at Auckland, New Zealand. Simultaneously, the Army designated Major General Millard F. Harmon, Chief of the Air Staff, Commanding General, South Pacific, also headquartered in Auckland. General Ghormley's South Pacific force was to capture the Santo Cruz islands and the Tulagi-Guadalcanal area in the Solomons. Vice Admiral Frank J. Fletcher would command the invasion force, consisting of aircraft carriers, other warships, and the amphibious force (which included transports, cargo vessels, and the troops who would make the landing) under Rear Admiral Richmond K. Turner. The landing force was to consist of the reinforced 1st Marine Division (minus the 7th Marines), the rein-

forced 2d Marines (then enroute to the South Pacific), and other troops totaling 19,500 men, commanded by Major General (later General) Alexander A. Vandegrift. Land-based aircraft (291 planes including those of the Army) under Rear Admiral (later Vice Admiral) John S. McCain, Air Commander under Admiral Ghormley, were to cover movements of the Expeditionary Force and perform scouting missions. Later, Army forces not yet selected were to relieve the Marines. Navy forces were to support the campaign and construct air bases for Army and Navy aircraft. General MacArthur promised to use Southwest Pacific air forces to counter Japanese attempts to send reinforcements to Guadalcanal from their base at Rabaul, and Admiral Nimitz was to use submarines of the Pacific Fleet to prevent the Japanese from reinforcing Guadalcanal with troops from Truk.

Admiral Ghormley and his successor, Admiral William F. Halsey, consulted General Harmon on the design and execution of the campaign, particularly in the preparation and execution of plans involving Army forces. Although Harmon was to have no operational control over these forces, the Navy would later delegate to him authority over specific operations, and for limited periods of time, making him much more powerful than had been intended. From the first, however, Harmon was responsible for the administration, training, and logistical support of all the Army ground and air forces that were to participate in the campaign.

Guadalcanal was not the picturesque paradise one envisions when speaking of a South Pacific island. Ninety miles long and 30 miles wide, the volcanic island had jungled mountains; a hot, wet climate with temperatures between 70 and 95 degrees; and a monsoon season that lasted from November until March. Sandy coasts lined with coconut palms contrasted sharply with the interior of humid rain forests, crocodile-inhabited river deltas, and mosquito-infested swamps. Here,



two-thirds of the U.S. forces would become ill, and more than one-third of the Japanese fatalities would be from sickness.

The primitive Melanesian people who inhabited the British protectorate were generally loyal to the Allied cause. They assisted the coast-watchers; served as scouts, guides, and laborers; and rescued pilots and sailors from the sea.

Information about the terrain and enemy strength and dispositions was difficult to obtain. There were no good maps of the island, a deficiency that would not be remedied during the campaign. Similarly, there was no opportunity for ground patrols to reconnoiter the island before invading. For data on the terrain, landing beaches, and climate, the 1st Marine Division's intelligence section relied on U.S. Navy and Army monographs, extracts from the Pacific Islands Yearbook, and reports of the British Navy and Colonial Office. The division based its estimates of enemy strength and dispositions on aerial reconnaissance and reports from coast-watchers, both of which proved highly inaccurate. By 20 July the intelligence section estimated 1,400 enemy troops in the Tulagi area and 7,000 on Guadalcanal. In early August only 780 Japanese were in the Tulagi region and 2,230 on Guadalcanal.

Logistics proved as difficult as intelligence. Although the division had come overseas with nearly all its equipment and supplies, shortages of shipping meant inadequate space in which to combat-load the whole division with its supplies and equipment. Ammunition allowances were reduced by half, rations and fuel by one-third, and office and mess equipment severely curtailed. Seventy-five percent of the heavy vehicles had to be left behind in Wellington.

More serious was the high command's lack of confidence and sense of common purpose. Several senior commanders gave the campaign only half-hearted support. Admiral Fletcher did not want to risk the few carriers within range of Japanese land-based aircraft; he said he would keep his carriers at Guadalcanal no longer than two days, even though he knew the landing would take five days, and no one overruled him. General MacArthur and Admiral Ghormley recommended delay until enough strength could be accumulated to allow a continuous sweep to Rabaul. Admiral Ghormley thought his primary mission was to safeguard the lines of communication between the United States and Australia and New Zealand. Therefore, he opposed risking his rear bases by depleting their garrisons for an extended operation on Guadalcanal. On the other hand, Admiral Ernest J. King, the Joint Chiefs' executive officer for the Pacific Ocean Area, wanted to seize the initiative and begin, as soon as possible, a step-by-step drive into the Solomons. The Joint Chiefs backed Admiral King.

Despite hurried planning, order was achieved. For combat, the 1st Marine Division was organized into two regimental combat groups. Each had about 4,500 men and consisted of three battalion combat teams plus headquarters and support forces. Three battalions were to land on Tulagi and other small islands and the remainder of the division on the undefended beaches of Guadalcanal's north coast.

The area selected lay between the Tenaru and Tenavutu Rivers, about 6,000 yards west of the Lunga airstrip—a major objective, and far from Lunga and Koli Points where the

Japanese were thought to be located. Since there were not enough landing craft to execute all the landings simultaneously, the troops would go ashore at intervals on D-day and D-plus-1. The first Allied offensive in the Pacific, one of the largest amphibious operations in the history of the United States up to that time, was about to begin.

After rehearsals in the Fiji Islands, the invasion fleet approached Guadalcanal from the south on 6 August. Heavy naval and air bombardment preceded the landings, which went in on schedule the next morning. By 9 August the 2d Marines and elements of the 1st Marine Division captured the islands in the northern group—Tulagi, Gavatu, and Tanambogo—and small islands nearby despite hard fighting by the Japanese. Lacking special equipment such as flamethrowers, which later became standard equipment in the Pacific war, the Marines had to improvise demolition charges to seal cave openings or flush out the Japanese.

The landings on the northern coast of Guadalcanal were unopposed, and by 8 August the Marines had taken the airfield against light opposition, renamed it Henderson Field, and established a defensive perimeter around it. Tactical operations were satisfactory, considering that the Marine division was understrength, undertrained, and underequipped. It helped that the enemy, two-thirds of whom were laborers, did not oppose the advance and actually fled from the nearly completed airfield.

In contrast with tactical developments, logistical operations had bogged down. Too few troops were on hand to unload the boats and move materiel to the beach. Since many of the landing craft did not have bow ramps to aid the removal of supplies from the boats, supplies had to be lifted up and over the gunwales. On the other hand, although amphibian tractors could move directly from shipside to the inland dumps; there were, unfortunately, too few of these tractors. Enemy air assaults on the transports also forced a delay in the unloading operations.

Beginning on the afternoon of 7 August and continuing through the next day, attacks from Japanese bombers out of Rabaul—despite the efforts of General MacArthur's planes to keep Rabaul neutralized—forced the amphibious fleet to move south, leaving the Marines without naval or air support, and with only meager supplies. Under these circumstances, General Vandegrift could do little but concentrate his forces around Henderson Field and await reinforcements, which could be brought in only by blockade-running ships or by air.

Early on 9 August enemy warships surprised the U.S. armada off Savo Island, sinking four U.S. cruisers and damaging one cruiser and two destroyers. The Japanese ships were unharmed. Faulty U.S. reconnaissance and the fact that the carriers had already retired southward contributed to American losses.

The withdrawal of naval forces from Guadalcanal left the Japanese free to land reinforcements on the island. On 24 August U.S. carrier planes discovered the enemy fleet transporting about 1,500 troops to Guadalcanal. Admiral Fletcher's carriers engaged the Japanese carriers east of Guadalcanal in a fight that became known as the Battle of the Eastern Solomons.

The Japanese carrier *Ryuju*, a transport, and a destroyer were sunk and the USS *Enterprise* damaged. The Japanese transports were turned back, and enemy reinforcements had to wait for another chance to land, at night, from destroyers. This delay gave the 1st Marine Division time to strengthen its defenses.

To improve security, the Marines completed the airfield (which opened on 20 August) and worked on extending the perimeter westward. The latter led to skirmishes with elements of General Haruyoshi Hyakatake's 17th Army—veterans of the China, East Indies, Philippines, and Truk campaigns—headquartered at Rabaul. Meanwhile, U.S. air squadrons began to build up on the newly opened airfield, which enemy planes out of Rabaul bombed almost daily and Japanese warships and submarines shelled repeatedly.

The defense of the airfield became first priority and involved the integration of U.S. land, sea, and air power. Ground forces protected the perimeter from infantry attack; air forces of the Cactus (the code name for Guadalcanal) air force (a miscellaneous lot of Army and Marine squadrons and Navy aircraft) kept enemy ships and planes away from Guadalcanal during the day; and U.S. Navy ships brought supplies and reinforcements (Marines, soldiers, and air crews) to the island.

Since the Americans dominated the sea and air around Guadalcanal during the day, the Japanese began to reinforce the island at night, landing men and equipment from destroyers, landing craft, transports, and cargo ships. By these means, they were able to land a force of more than 6,000 men, under the command of Major General Kiyotake Kawaguchi, between 29 August and 11 September 1942.

The Japanese plan was to attack the Marines from the east, west, and south, while the aerial and naval bombardment of Henderson Field distracted its defenders. General Vandegrift, hearing of General Kawaguchi's presence to the east, ordered a Marine Raider Parachute Battalion to take up positions on a 1,000-foot-long open ridge that overlooked Henderson Field. On 13-14 September the Japanese attacked the Marine positions east of the Lunga River on this low ridge, later called Bloody Ridge, in one of the most brutal battles of Guadalcanal. Heavy Marine artillery fire was able to repulse the Japanese troops, despite their infantry attacks, calcium flares, mortar barrages, and infiltration behind American lines. General Kawaguchi grimly withdrew, having lost about one-fifth of his force. One-third of the valiant U.S. Marines were either killed, wounded, or missing. The Japanese decided that more men, tanks, and artillery were needed to dislodge the Americans from their Lunga defenses.

During late September and early October, Japanese forces built up on Guadalcanal. (The swift-moving convoys of destroyers and cruisers ferrying men and equipment from the northern Solomons came to be known as the "Tokyo Express.") Meanwhile, the Marines also received more troops and supplies. On 18 September the reinforced 7th Marines (4,180 men) of the 1st Marine Division arrived along with additional ammunition, vehicles, equipment, and stores.

The division attempted to clear the enemy out of the west in the Matanikau River area and to keep them beyond artillery

range of Henderson field. Two regiment-strength offensives occurred:

The first offensive was conducted 24-27 September by the newly arrived 1st Battalion, 7th Marines; the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines; and the 1st Raider Battalion. The hastily conceived plan, which provided for little artillery support and no air cover, ultimately failed. During the attack, enemy planes bombed Marine positions in the Lunga area, disrupting the division's communications with the front. All the troops were withdrawn to the Lunga perimeter when they failed to dislodge the Japanese from their strongly entrenched positions.

The second offensive, 7-9 October, by the 5th Marines, 7th Marines, trailed by the 3d Battalion, 2d Marines, and the division's scout-sniper detachment—received air cover from the 1st Marine Air Wing and met with partial success. Casualties were heavy on both sides in fighting that consisted of small arms fire, grenades, and hand-to-hand combat.

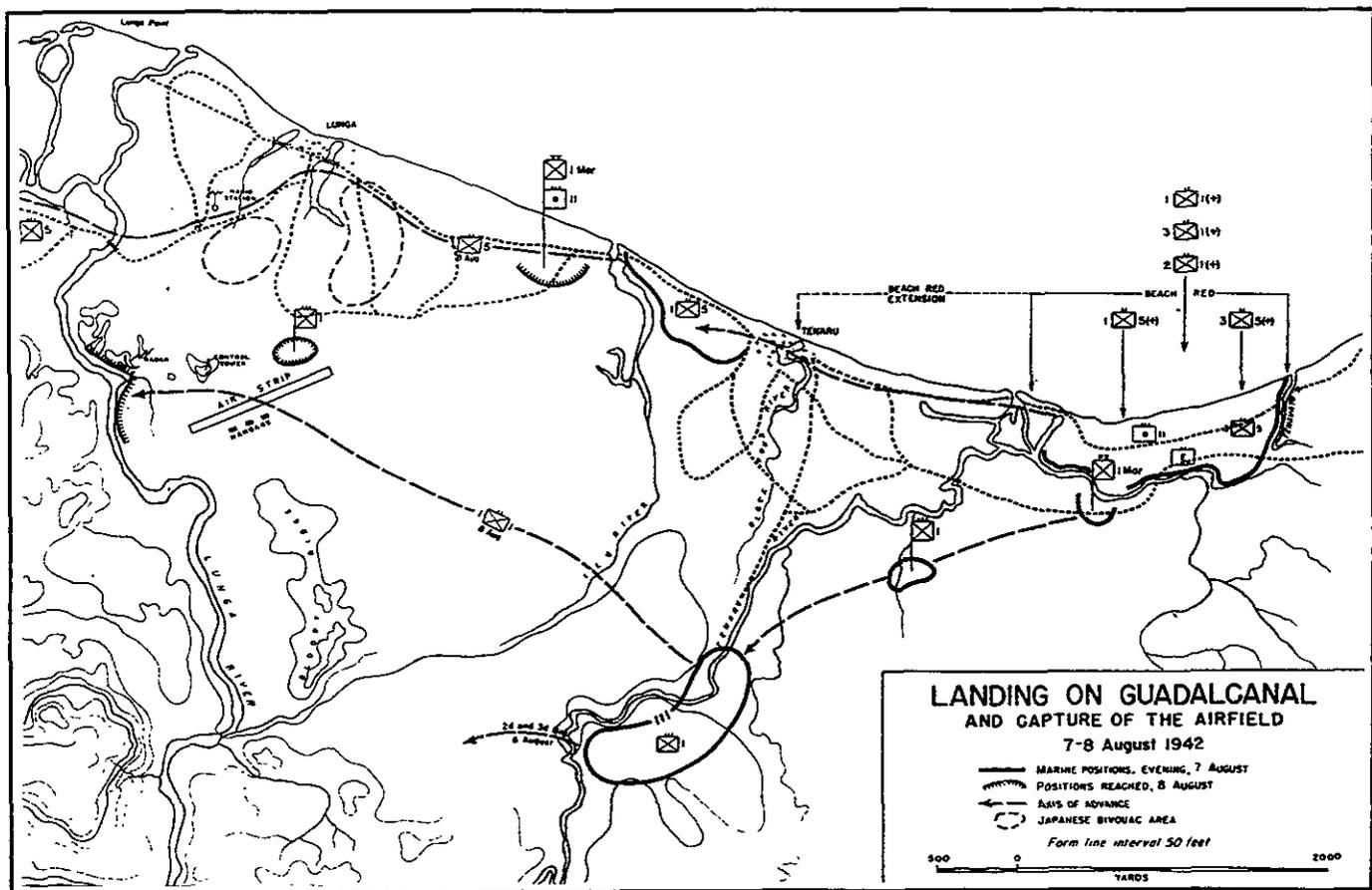
By 9 October the remaining enemy east of the Matanikau had been killed, and the Marines held the east bank of the river, which was essential to the defense of Henderson field. As it seemed likely that the Japanese would again try to take the airfield, Guadalcanal was reinforced by the 164th Infantry Regiment of the Americal Division, which arrived from New Caledonia on 13 October. With these reinforcements, U.S. troop strength on the island reached 23,088 men.

Two days before the first Army unit arrived on Guadalcanal, Admiral Norman Scott, in an attempt to stop the Tokyo Express and the nightly naval bombardment of Henderson Field, intercepted Japanese naval units in the channel between Cape Esperance and Savo Island. The sea battle, named after Cape Esperance, only temporarily achieved its objectives. Enemy transports landed more troops on October 15, and the onslaught on the airfield continued, making it unusable as a base for heavy bombers.

From 23 to 26 October the Japanese conducted their last offensive to dislodge the Americans from their defenses around Henderson Field. The Japanese planned a three-pronged attack on the Marine perimeter, supplemented by air strikes and naval gunfire—more of the same, familiar tactics. And like previous Japanese plans, this one was too ambitious, too complex, and too dependent on perfect communications.

The Japanese Sendai Division, nine infantry battalions and 5,600 men under General Masao Maruyama, made its main attack south of the Lunga perimeter in torrential rain. The attack developed into a series of tank-infantry assaults without supporting artillery and mortars. The Japanese had abandoned this equipment during the difficult march east through mountains and jungle. The Americans remained at their posts concentrating small arms, heavy weapons, and artillery fire on the charging Japanese troops, and eventually routing them. Casualties on both sides were heavy in these frequent and violent attacks.

The Army's 164th Infantry, in battle for the first time, helped the 7th Marines hold the line east of Bloody Ridge. Communications among the Japanese forces began to break down as they faced a foe with superior numbers and weapons. On the night of 25-26 October, General Hyakatake made a



last futile attempt to retake Henderson Field and three days later began a general withdrawal. The Japanese counteroffensive had failed. General Vandegrift resumed the move westward to drive the enemy out of artillery range of Henderson Field.

On the last day of the counteroffensive, a Japanese armada engaged a much weaker U.S. task force off the Santa Cruz Islands in a battle that proved less decisive than the ground action of the same day. Both fleets were forced to withdraw after suffering lost or damaged ships and planes.

The United States was committed to holding Guadalcanal, and during November more ground, air, and naval forces arrived on the island. The Americal Division's 182d Infantry landed on November 12, followed by the 3d Battalion of the 147th Infantry on November 29. The 8th Marines of the 2d Marine Division, artillery troops, Seabees, and aviation units also arrived. By the end of the month, Marine and Army aviation units at Henderson field operated a total of 188 planes of all types.

During the first half of November, the Americans fought local offensives in an attempt to extend the line westward to Kokumbona. Troops of the 164th Infantry and the 2d and 8th Marines assaulted Japanese positions on a three-battalion front but made little headway. The Americans, however, succeeded in preventing a small Japanese force that had landed east of the perimeter at Koli Point from establishing an airfield there.

In mid-November Vandegrift halted the ground attack to

concentrate his forces on preventing the Japanese from landing their 38th Division on Guadalcanal for a counteroffensive. Between 12 and 15 November, the U.S. Navy and the Cactus air force fought the Imperial Japanese Navy in a series of engagements known collectively as the Naval Battle of Guadalcanal. Although the Japanese sank nine U.S. warships and lost six of their own, thousands of their troops drowned when eleven transports were sunk. This engagement marked the last major effort of the Japanese Army and Navy to conduct a coordinated attack on the Lunga airfield.

The battle also demonstrated a new aggressive spirit on the part of U.S. higher headquarters. Admiral Halsey, who had taken over command from Admiral Ghormley in late October, had sent the battleships in despite doctrine that discouraged their use in narrow waters with little sea room for maneuver.

After the mid-November naval victory, General Vandegrift resumed the offensive toward Kokumbona and the Poha River. The attack, which lasted from 18 to 25 November, was conducted by the 164th Infantry, all under the tactical command of Brigadier General Edmund Sebree, assistant division commander of the Americal Division. The battleground consisted of the flat area in front of Point Cruz and a series of hills and ravines west of the Matanikau River in which the Japanese had built strong positions. Protected from U.S. artillery and mortar fire, the Japanese covered the entire American front with small arms, automatic weapons, artillery, and mortars. Although U.S. forces were able to establish permanent positions west of the Matanikau, they were unable to advance. The

attack ended in a stalemate, with the Americans and the Japanese facing each other at close range. This dangerous situation continued until U.S. reinforcements could be delivered in preparation for a XIV Corps offensive in January.

In December 1942 higher headquarters decided to relieve the sick and battle-weary 1st Marine Division and send them to a healthier climate. During months of infantry attacks, air raids, naval assault, inadequate diet, malaria, and dysentery, the division had suffered 10,635 casualties, only 1,472 of which were battle casualties; illness, especially malaria, accounted for the rest.

The 25th Infantry Division on Hawaii was ordered to Guadalcanal to replace the Marines, who left the island on 9 December. Major General Alexander M. Patch, Commander of the Americal Division, succeeded General Vandegrift as commander of U.S. forces on Guadalcanal, and the Army assumed responsibility for the campaign. General Harmon received tactical authority over operations from Admiral Halsey. The 132d Regiment of the Americal Division had landed on the island on 8 December, and the Army's 43d Division was already enroute to the South Pacific.

The first half of December became a period of transition, as the Army awaited reinforcements and assumed responsibility for tactical operations. Control of the sea and air enabled American troops and supplies to land easily. For the remainder of December, soldiers and Marines held on to the ground they had already gained and launched small, tough offensives to capture Mount Austen, the apex of a series of steep, rocky, jungled ridges lying six miles southwest of Henderson Field. The capture of this peak that dominated the Lunga perimeter and the hills to the west was in preparation for the major January offensives west of the Matanikau River.

Between 24 December 1942 and 2 January 1943, the 132d Infantry, supported by artillery and dive bombers, attacked the Gifu—the Japanese strong point on Mount Austen, which lay on the jungled slopes between Hills 31 and 27 west of the summit. The soldiers fought for each piece of ground against an invisible enemy in thick well-camouflaged pillboxes. A coordinated attack from the north by the 1st and 3d Battalions, coupled with a wide envelopment by the 2d Battalion, captured Hill 27 on 2 January. The soldiers then encircled the eastern portion of the Gifu, denying observation of the perimeter to the Japanese who still held part of Mount Austen. The Americans' move enabled them to operate west of Mount Austen in the upcoming major offensive.

On 2 January 1943 General Harmon activated the XIV Corps consisting of the Americal and 25th Divisions with the 2d Marine Division and other Marine ground forces attached. General Patch became commander of the XIV Corps with tactical authority over operations, and General Sebree became commander of the Americal Division. By 7 January 1943 Allied air, ground, and naval forces in the Guadalcanal area totaled about 50,000 men, enough for large-scale operations. The Americal Division numbered about 16,000; the 25th Division, 12,692; the 2d Marine Division, 14,733.

In the major January offensive to drive the Japanese from the island, the 25th Division was to reduce the Gifu strong

point (eliminating organized enemy resistance east of the Matanikau), and capture the high ground south of the Point Cruz–Hill 66 line, beginning the envelopment of the Point Cruz–Kokumbona area, and extending the western U.S. lines far enough inland to allow a clean sweep of the Japanese. The 2d Marine Division was to advance along the coast and prepare to assist the 25th Division. The Americal Division was to hold the perimeter defense from 9 to 26 January. Only its artillery, the reconnaissance squadron, the 182d Infantry, and the 2d Battalion of the 132d Infantry were to take part in the attack.

The attack commenced on 10 January 1943, when the 27th Infantry of the 25th Division assaulted Japanese positions in the 900-foot hill mass called the Galloping Horse (from its appearance in aerial photographs), which dominated the Point Cruz area to the north. From well-camouflaged positions dug into the coral rock, the Japanese covered all approaches of the American infantry, advancing in companies, and a long hard fight ensued. In support of the ground troops, U.S. aircraft and artillery fire struck enemy positions before every attack. The infantry capitalized on the shock effect of the preparatory fires by charging immediately after the artillery fire ceased. By the fourth day, the Galloping Horse was in U.S. hands, and the infantry could concentrate on cleaning out the jungled gorges to the north and south, building defensive positions, and preparing for the next assault.

While the 27th Infantry was achieving success over the open hills of the Galloping Horse, the 35th Infantry of the 25th Division was subduing the Japanese on the Gifu and in the hilly jungled area south of the southwest fork of the Matanikau. This area was named the Seahorse (again from its appearance in aerial photographs). Between 10 and 23 January, the 35th Infantry captured the Sea Horse, advanced to the Matanikau, and cleared the Gifu in a tough battle involving infantry, armor, artillery, and antitank guns. The destruction of the Gifu wiped out the last effective Japanese force east of the Matanikau River, and the 35th Infantry became the reserve of the 25th Division, which was then advancing rapidly to the west.

Before the 35th Infantry had completed the assault on Mount Austen, the 2d Marine Division—supported by Americal Division and 2d Division artillery and the 2d Marine Air Wing—advanced westward along the coast from the Hill 66–Point Cruz line, gaining about 1,500 yards. This advance gave the XIV Corps a position from which it could start its drive into Kokumbona, which had been a major objective for some time.

The 25th Division's capture of the Galloping Horse on 13 January doubled the length of the Corps' west front, enabling the Corps to advance westward on a broad front without much danger of having its left flank enveloped. General Patch prepared for a second coordinated attack that was designed to carry through Kokumbona to the Poha River, about 9,000 yards west of Point Cruz.

In this second offensive, the Americans pursued the retreating Japanese 17th Army all the way to Cape Esperance. The Composite Army Marine (CAM) Division—formed from the 6th Marines, the 182d and 147th Infantry Regiments, and the

2d Marine and Americal Division artillery units—drove up the northwest coast. The Marine Air Wing and the U.S. Navy supported the advance by bombarding coastal positions. The 25th Division attacked inland in a southwesterly direction enveloping the Japanese south flank, while a reinforced infantry battalion (the 2d Battalion, 132d Infantry), which had landed in the enemy's rear on the southwest coast, operated out of Verahue toward Cape Esperance.

Most of the fighting was light, with none of the nightly attacks that had characterized earlier Japanese operations, and the Americans were able to capture Kokumbona on 23 January and reach the Poha River two days later. West of the river, U.S. forces met stiff rear-guard action from fleeing troops using machinegun and antitank gun fire to slow the coastal advance. Nevertheless, the retreating, starving, and diseased Japanese could not hold out for long. While the Americans consolidated their positions, the Japanese skillfully withdrew to Cape Esperance, where destroyers miraculously evacuated them between 1 and 8 February. More than 13,000 Japanese troops escaped Guadalcanal in this way, completing their evacuation during the night of 7-8 February. The next day, the U.S. forces met at the village of Tenaro on Cape Esperance, bringing the campaign to a close.

Although the Japanese skillfully and shrewdly evacuated their troops from Guadalcanal, the essential significance of the campaign remained unchanged. In executing the task prescribed for them by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the U.S. forces stopped the Japanese advance toward the U.S.-Australian line of communications, acquired a base from which to attack Rabaul, and took the initiative away from the previously victorious Japanese.

The cost of defeat to the Japanese can be measured in other than strategic terms. In manpower alone, the Japanese suffered 14,800 killed or missing, 9,000 dead of disease, and 1,000 taken prisoner. Although both navies lost the same number of ships (24), the Japanese could not afford to lose these ships, because they could not match the massive U.S. shipbuilding program. The loss of more than 800 aircraft and pilots was to hinder Japanese operations for the rest of the war.

The 60,000 Army and Marine ground forces suffered less. Casualties amounted to about 1,590 killed and 4,245 wounded. Thousands more U.S. soldiers suffered from diseases, especially malaria. Navy losses, never compiled to this day, were greater than the ground losses, and several score fliers from all three forces lost their lives.

The American cost might have been less and victory might have come sooner if the campaign had begun under more advantageous circumstances. The operation commenced despite inadequate training, meager intelligence about target areas, the difficulties of hasty combat-loading, and the lack of time for coordinated planning among all the forces involved. Commanders at different levels had different views of the operation's purpose and how it should be carried out. Ground commanders viewed Guadalcanal as a normal amphibious operation with naval forces controlling the sea and air. The Navy saw the campaign as a hit-and-run raid, which is exactly what it turned out to be. Two days after being put ashore,

the Marine division found itself stranded without the equipment or supplies needed to withstand major counterattacks. Fortunately for the Americans, the Japanese waited for reinforcements before conducting major offensives, giving the Marines time to complete Henderson Field and obtain troops, planes, ammunition, and supplies.

An early U.S. move to eliminate the Japanese from Guadalcanal would have required bold initiative and risk, characteristics Admiral Ghormley lacked. He was reluctant to strip rear bases of their garrisons for fear of losing the fallback positions he would need if the Japanese should recapture Guadalcanal. Admiral Halsey, on the other hand, showed aggressive leadership and a willingness to take great risk. Replacing Admiral Ghormley's defeatism and conservatism with a fighting spirit quickly changed the course of the battle.

In protecting Henderson Airfield, fighter planes of the Cactus air force consistently shot down more planes than they lost. U.S. air tactics had evolved beyond the World War I-style dogfighting of the Japanese planes, and the U.S. aircraft had superior maneuverability. The fighters and bombers of the Cactus air force prevented the field from falling into enemy hands and enabled the ground forces to complete their objectives.

In achieving those goals, the half-trained men of the Marine division showed a courage second to none. Despite constant enemy attacks, the Marines seized and held the Guadalcanal port and airfield, the campaign's main objectives. They performed brilliantly at Bloody Ridge and during the late-October offensive on Henderson Field. The Army's Americal and 25th Infantry Divisions performed equally well in the violent frontal assaults on Mount Austen and in the major ground offensives of January 1943. They cleared the enemy from Guadalcanal, including his strongest position—the Gifu—and all areas west of the Matanikau.

Tactically, Guadalcanal was a virtual lesson book. The campaign became a model for studying amphibious operations, tank-infantry attacks, cave assaults, artillery support, jungle fighting, and coordination of air, sea and ground forces—all of which characterized later operations in the Pacific. The recommendations from Guadalcanal commanders became doctrine for Allied fighting men the world over.

Strategically, Guadalcanal was worth every ship, plane, and life lost there. At Guadalcanal, the Americans struck back in a genuine offensive and meted out to the Japanese a defeat that halted the advance of their striking power against Australia and the United States. Even many Japanese, in postwar interrogations, spoke of Guadalcanal as the turning point—the changeover from offense to defense.

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