

Guadalcanal:

An Ultimately Lopsided Clash of Arms

By Joseph Miranda



US Marines coming ashore on Guadalcanal on the first day of the campaign

Disproportionate Casualties

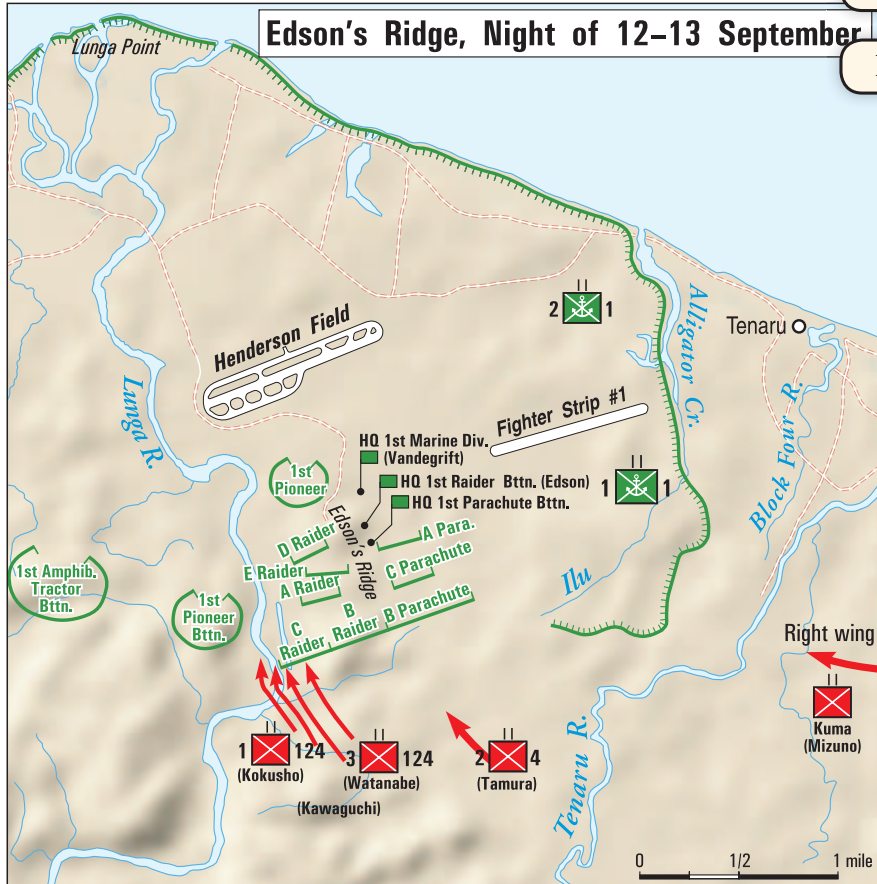
The battle for Guadalcanal, fought between United States and Japanese forces from August 1942 through February 1943, ended with a decisive US victory. The island was secured and thereafter served as a springboard for continuing Allied offensives in the South Pacific Area of Operations. One of the more remarkable things about the victory was the final lopsided ratio of casualties. Japanese ground forces lost an estimated 14,800 killed in action, with another 9,000 dying of disease and malnutrition. In comparison, the US lost just 1,770 KIA and another 4,700 wounded.

At first glance those statistics seem to indicate the Americans had a massive tactical superiority or that Japanese ground forces were inept. Yet there is no evidence for either of those conclusions. It took American Marines and soldiers six months of grueling struggle to win on the island. Moreover, in the air and at sea both sides' losses were remarkably similar: the US lost 436 aircraft, the Japanese 439; the Allies lost 25 warships, the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) 24. In order to understand the final lopsided outcome of the land battle, then, it's necessary to look at the forces that fought on Guadalcanal.

The Japanese Army

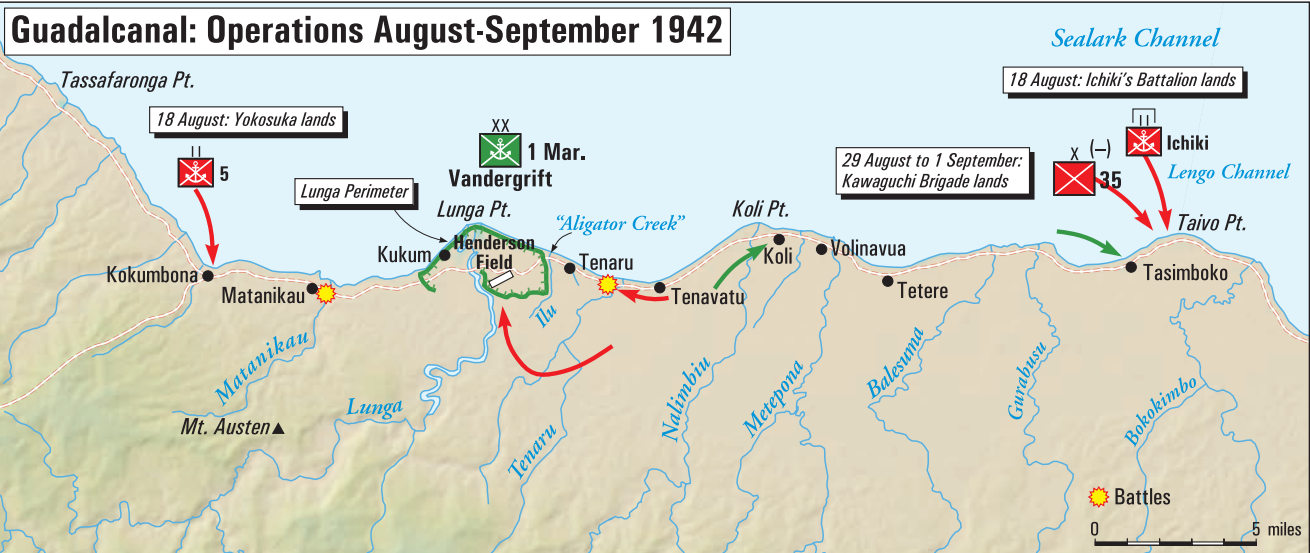
The Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) had run up an impressive string of victories prior to Guadalcanal. That included defeating much more numerous enemy forces in China in the 1930s, as well as the sweep through Southeast Asia, the East Indies and the Philippines in the opening months of World War II against British, Dutch and American forces. The main instrument of those victories was the IJA infantry division. Those units in turn reflected an important overarching factor in terms of their armament: the relatively low level of Japanese industrial capacity

compared to that of the US. Further, even within that smaller manufacturing framework, production of warships and aircraft was given precedence over armored vehicles and artillery. In place of unobtainable material superiority, the IJA therefore emphasized morale. The idea was a force with superior "spirit" would triumph on the battlefield when its foes became demoralized. That was demonstrated in China and Southeast Asia when lightly armed IJA formations moved fast and exploited enemy weaknesses, winning stunning tactical and operational victories. Another factor in the Japanese run of victories was their air force. Both the IJA and IJN had their own air arms (there was no independent air force as with the *Luftwaffe* or RAF). IJA aircraft worked in close cooperation with ground forces to provide air cover, reconnaissance, combat support and operational interdiction, as well as striking targets in and behind enemy lines. Japanese air superiority was critical in gaining the early victories by providing additional combat power to supplement that of the divisions on the ground. Within the infantry divisions training was thorough, particularly at regimental level and below. The troops were generally well led, disciplined and dedicated to the emperor. Each unit was made up of recruits from the same geographic area in order to promote cohesion within the ranks. Discipline, while harsh, was based on integrating recruits into their units as if they were members of a family. In the bigger picture, troops were indoctrinated with their obligations as members

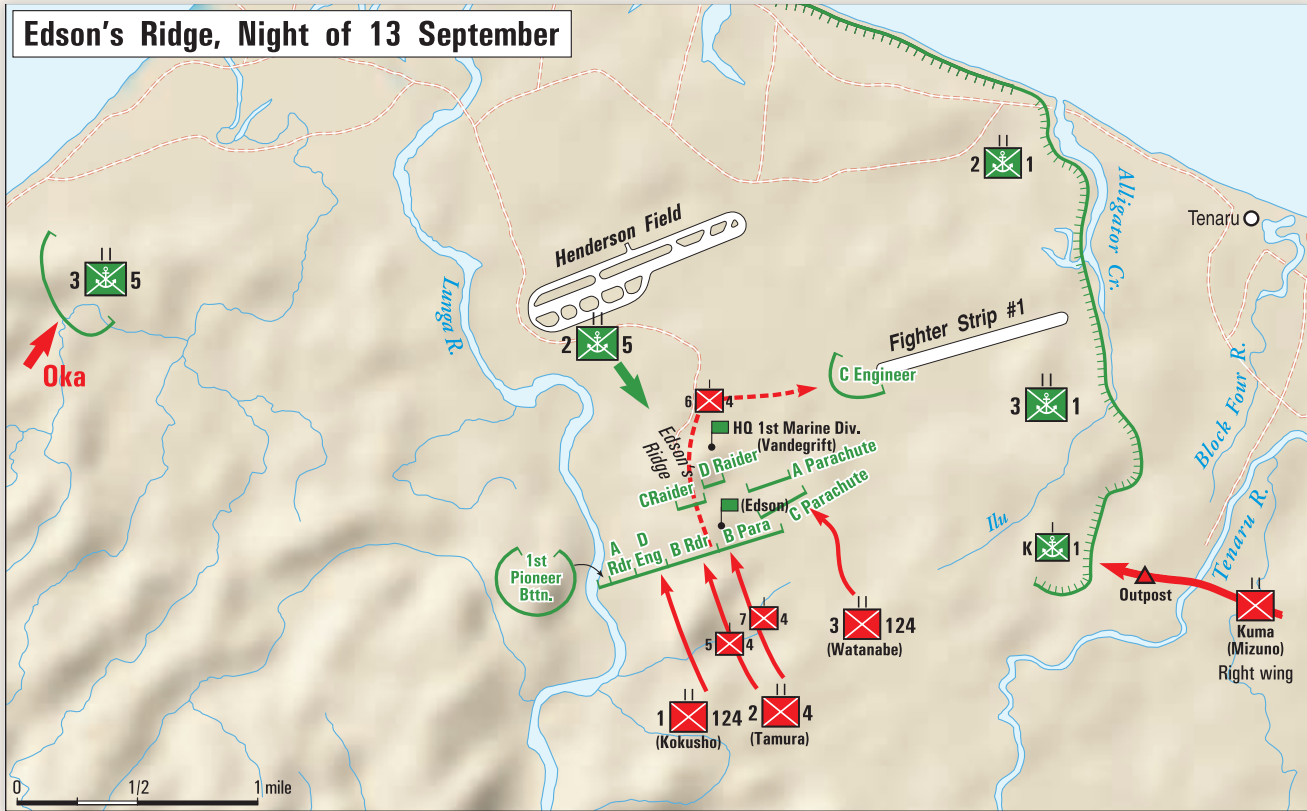


of the Japanese "race" and nation. Officers and NCOs usually led from the front. Failing to accomplish a mission, or surrendering, were considered admissions of failure both before one's peers and the emperor. That often led to what appeared to be suicidal tactics, such as *banzai* charges, in which units would make desperate frontal assaults when all else had failed. Actually, higher-level commanders often prohibited such tactics as being wasteful of lives, but they often still became the last resort in

the face of defeat. (In classic Samurai doctrine, death in battle – or via ritualized suicide after a defeat – works to erase all shame otherwise inescapably resultant from such failures.) Infantry tactics were more commonly based on infiltration, flank attack and nighttime maneuver preliminary to battle. There were also, at least on the official tables of organization, large numbers of support weapons up front to enhance firepower at the point of attack. Those tactics were meant to continued on page 11 »



Edson's Ridge, Night of 13 September



Chronology

3 May 1942, Tulagi. Japanese SNLF and engineers land on the island off Guadalcanal in order to establish a seaplane base there. The landing is part of the overall operations that result in the Battle of the Coral Sea off to the west.

2 July, Washington, DC. The US Joint Chiefs authorize a combined naval-land-air operation in the lower Solomons, codenamed Operation Watchtower. Adm. Robert Ghormley is to be in command of that South Pacific Area of Operations. The expeditionary force is to consist of *Task Force 61*, commanded by Adm. Frank Fletcher and consisting of a carrier task group (Adm. Noyes) and an amphibious task group (Adm. Turner). Long-range air support is from Espiritu Santo (Adm. McCain).

6 July, Guadalcanal. Japanese engineer units land on Guadalcanal and begin constructing an airfield.

7 August, Guadalcanal, Tulagi & Gavutu. *Task Force 61* lands the *1st Marine Division* (commanded by Mar. Gen. Archer Vandergrift). The Japanese defend Tulagi and Gavutu, but on Guadalcanal they fall back into the jungle. The Marines capture the Guadalcanal airfield, which they later rename Henderson Field (after the first USMC aviator killed during the Battle of Midway). The Japanese launch several air attacks against US shipping near the island, but they fail to cause much damage.

9 August, Battle of Savo Island. An IJN cruiser squadron wreaks havoc on Allied naval forces around Guadalcanal. As a

result, Adm. Fletcher withdraws his naval force, temporarily leaving the Marines isolated.

13 August, Tokyo. Japanese Imperial General Headquarters realizes the seriousness of the American threat on Guadalcanal and orders *17th Army* to retake the island. The codename for the effort is Operation KA.

19 August, First Battle of the Matanikau. A US battalion-sized force attacks the Japanese.

20 August, Henderson Field. The US begins Guadalcanal-based air operations.

21 August, Battle of the Tenaru. The IJA *Ichiki Detachment* attacks USMC positions at Alligator Creek and is repulsed with heavy losses.

23-25 August, Battle of the Eastern Solomons. The IJN again clashes with the USN, this time resulting in a carrier battle. One IJN carrier is sunk with no US losses.

27 August, Second Battle of the Matanikau. A USMC battalion's attack is halted by Japanese resistance. The battalion commander requests permission to break off the action, but is relieved by the regimental commander and replaced by his executive officer. The attack is resumed the next day, but finds the Japanese have withdrawn. (This was the basis for the similar incident depicted in the book and film *The Thin Red Line*.)

Late August, The Slot. The USN returns to the Solomons, covered by airpower from Henderson Field. The IJN organizes its Reinforcement Unit to provide emergency resupply for the ground force on Guadalcanal. The Americans

term those convoys the Tokyo Express.

8 September, Tasimboko Raid. USMC raiders and paratroopers attack the *35th Brigade* supply dump, causing heavy damage.

12-14 September, Bloody Ridge. The IJA *35th Brigade* attacks USMC positions around Henderson Field, but is repulsed with heavy losses by a combined Marine raider and paratrooper battalion under the command of Col. Merrit Edson.

23 September – 9 October, US Matanikau Offensive. Marines drive against the Japanese to expand their perimeter, but make little progress.

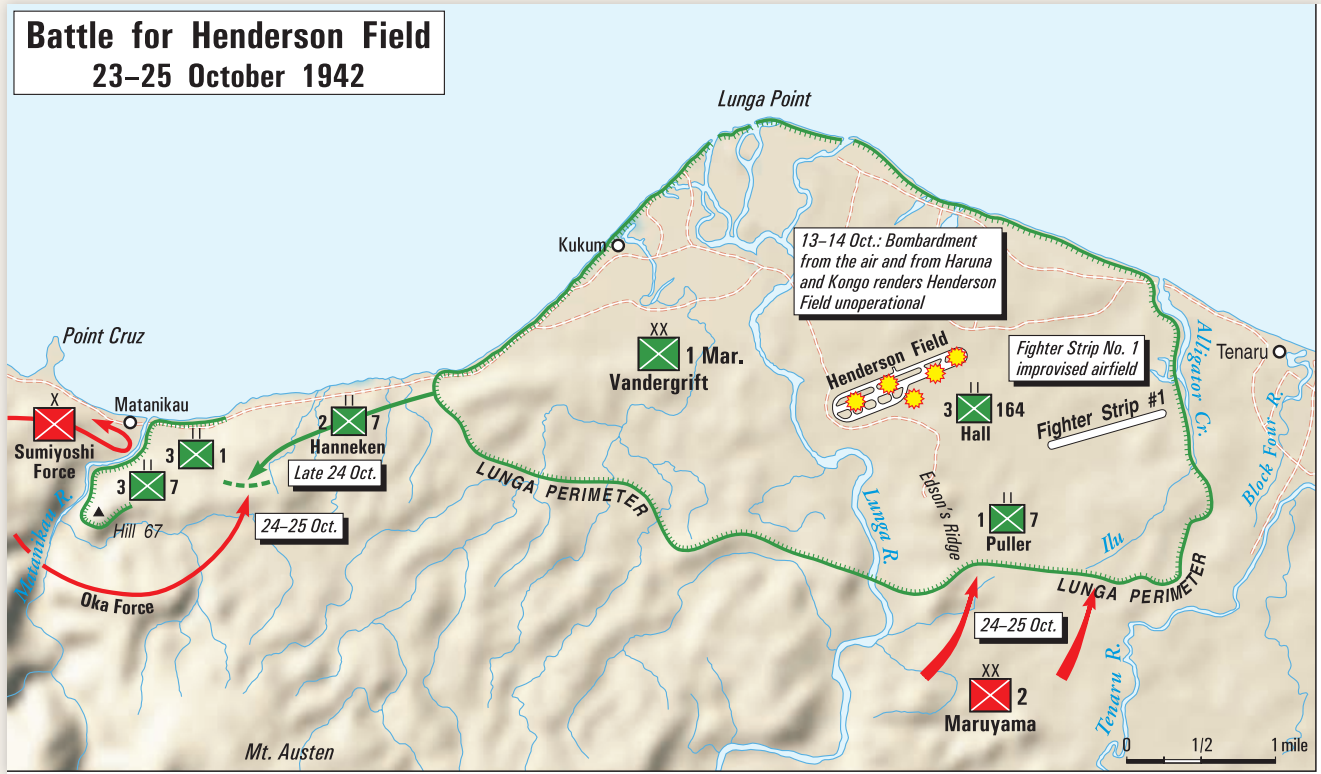
11-12 October, Battle of Cape Esperance. A USN squadron sinks one IJN cruiser and one destroyer while losing one destroyer. The USN starts to gain ascendancy off Guadalcanal.

13-14 October, The Bombardment. Japanese aircraft, artillery and battleships attack Henderson Field, causing heavy damage. The bombardments are to prepare the way for the Japanese *17th Army's* coming offensive.

16 October, US Command Shakeup. Adm. William Halsey is appointed commander of the South Pacific Area of Operations, replacing Ghormley. Halsey brings a new aggressiveness to Allied operations.

23-26 October, Battle of Henderson Field. The *17th Army*, now reinforced on Guadalcanal, launches large-scale attacks. They're poorly coordinated, though, and the Japanese are once again repulsed with heavy losses.

Battle for Henderson Field 23-25 October 1942



26 October, Battle of the Santa Cruz Islands. Adm. Yamamoto makes a concerted effort to gain naval superiority, resulting in the USN losing one carrier and one destroyer while two IJN carriers are damaged. Santa Cruz is a Japanese tactical victory, but at its conclusion the IJN withdraws to friendly air cover.

31 October – 24 November, Guadalcanal. US ground forces continue their offensive, fighting against fierce Japanese resistance as well as the terrain. The *2nd Raider ("Carlson's") Battalion* strikes into the enemy rear area.

12-15 November, Naval Battles of Guadalcanal. The IJN makes a last attempt to gain superiority in the waters off Guadalcanal, resulting in a series of surface actions. The Japanese lose two battleships and three destroyers, while the US loses two light cruisers and seven destroyers. US planes basing from Henderson Field contribute to the IJN defeat.

30 November, Battle of Tassafaronga. An IJN destroyer squadron inflicts heavy damage on a US cruiser force.

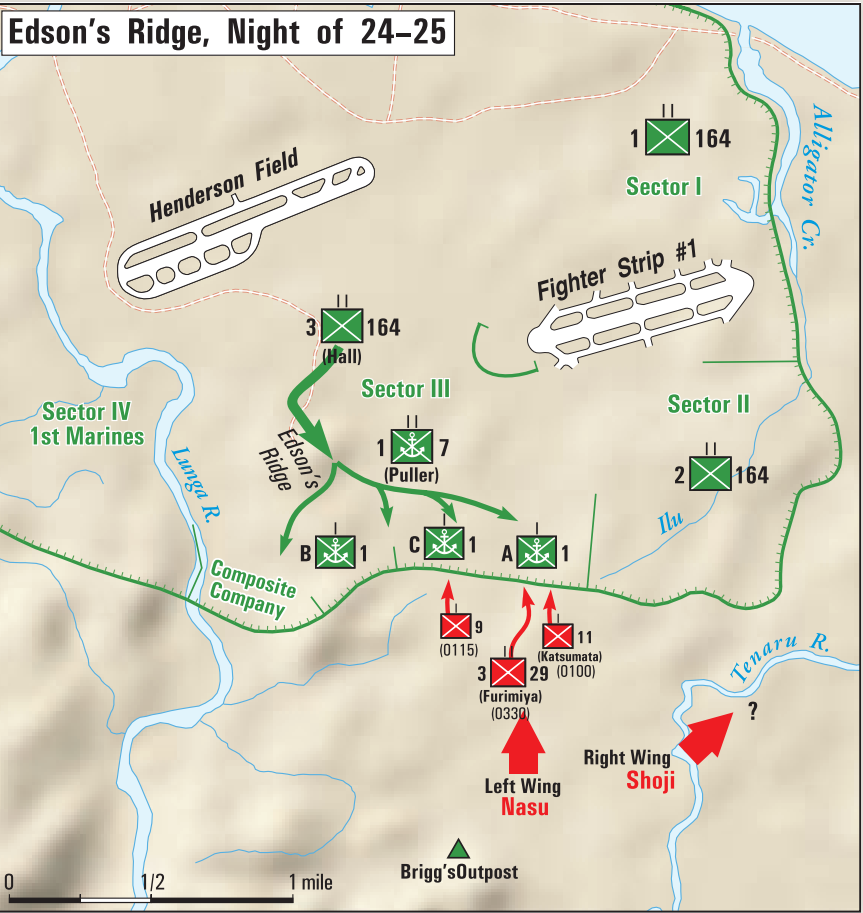
2 January 1943, Tokyo. Imperial General Headquarters orders the IJN to begin evacuating Japanese ground forces from Guadalcanal (Operation KE).

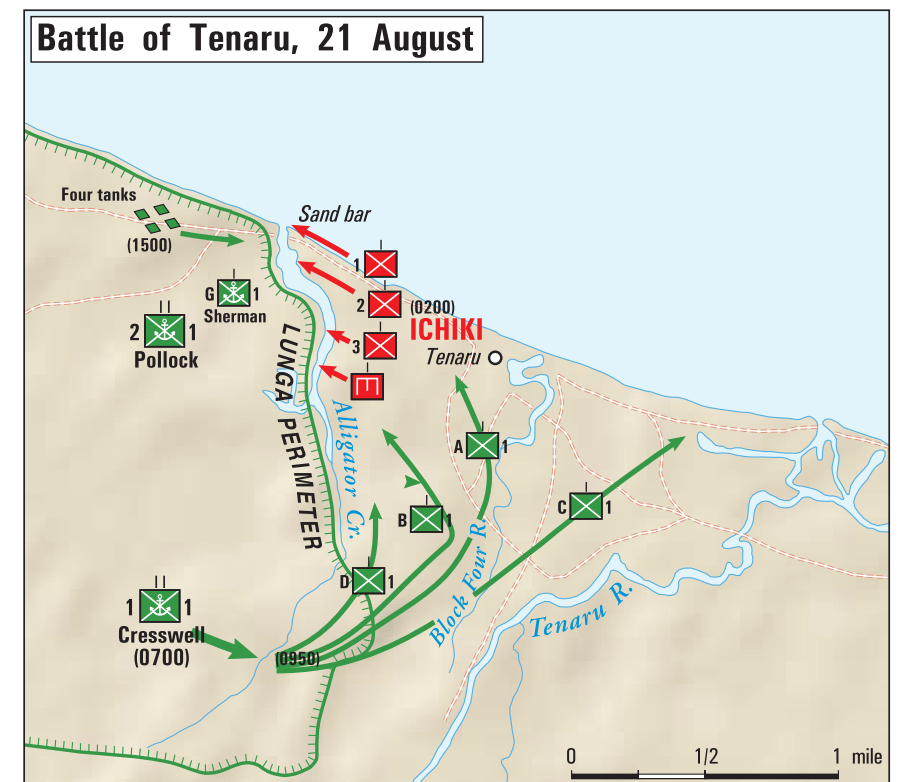
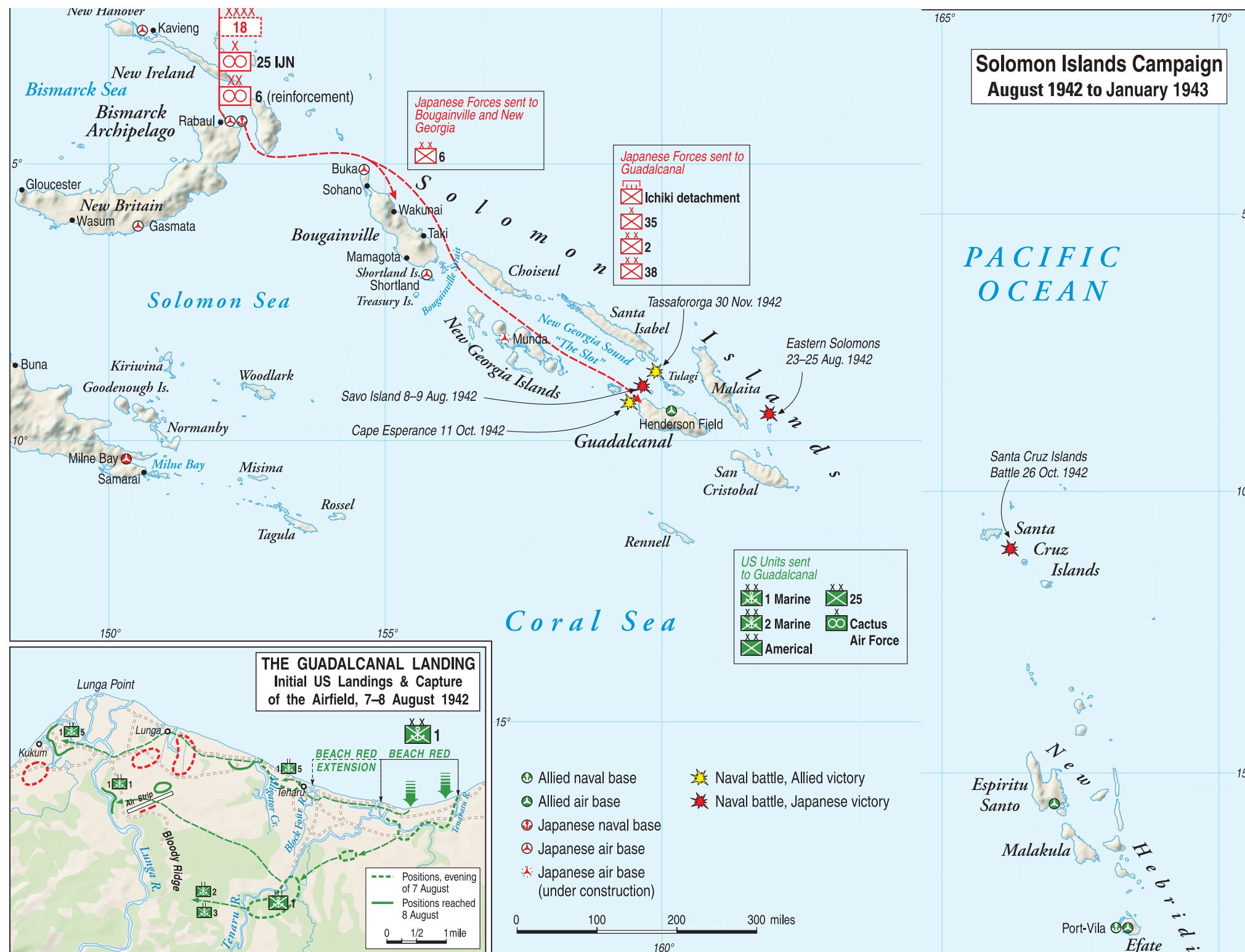
17 December - 23 February 1943, Mount Austen. US ground forces assault Japanese positions, gradually clearing them.

1-8 February, Guadalcanal. The Japanese evacuate the island using destroyers as emergency transports.

9 February. The US high command declares Guadalcanal secured. ★

Edson's Ridge, Night of 24-25





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demoralize a foe by having large numbers of heavily armed Japanese troops appear nearby and seemingly out of nowhere. Certainly that was the case in the Malayan campaign, where the IJA continually outflanked British forces.

One weakness of the IJA system was it lacked tanks and heavy artillery. That meant, when confronting well organized defenders backed up by considerable amounts of artillery, Japanese attacks were often shot to pieces. Added to that was the sometimes poor staff work, and an attitude among many commanders that held logistics and intelligence functions to be secondary considerations at best. Spirit was supposed to overcome such shortfalls.

On the defense the IJA was tenacious, again owing to discipline and cohesion factors. Large numbers of machineguns, automatic cannon and infantry guns were assigned to units in such roles. The Japanese also exploited terrain features such as caves, which made them difficult to dig out. While it was understood defense alone couldn't win a battle, the idea was to make it expensive for enemy forces in both men and materiel to dislodge the Japanese, who often literally fought to the last man.

Japanese infantry divisions came in three main varieties: standard, strength-

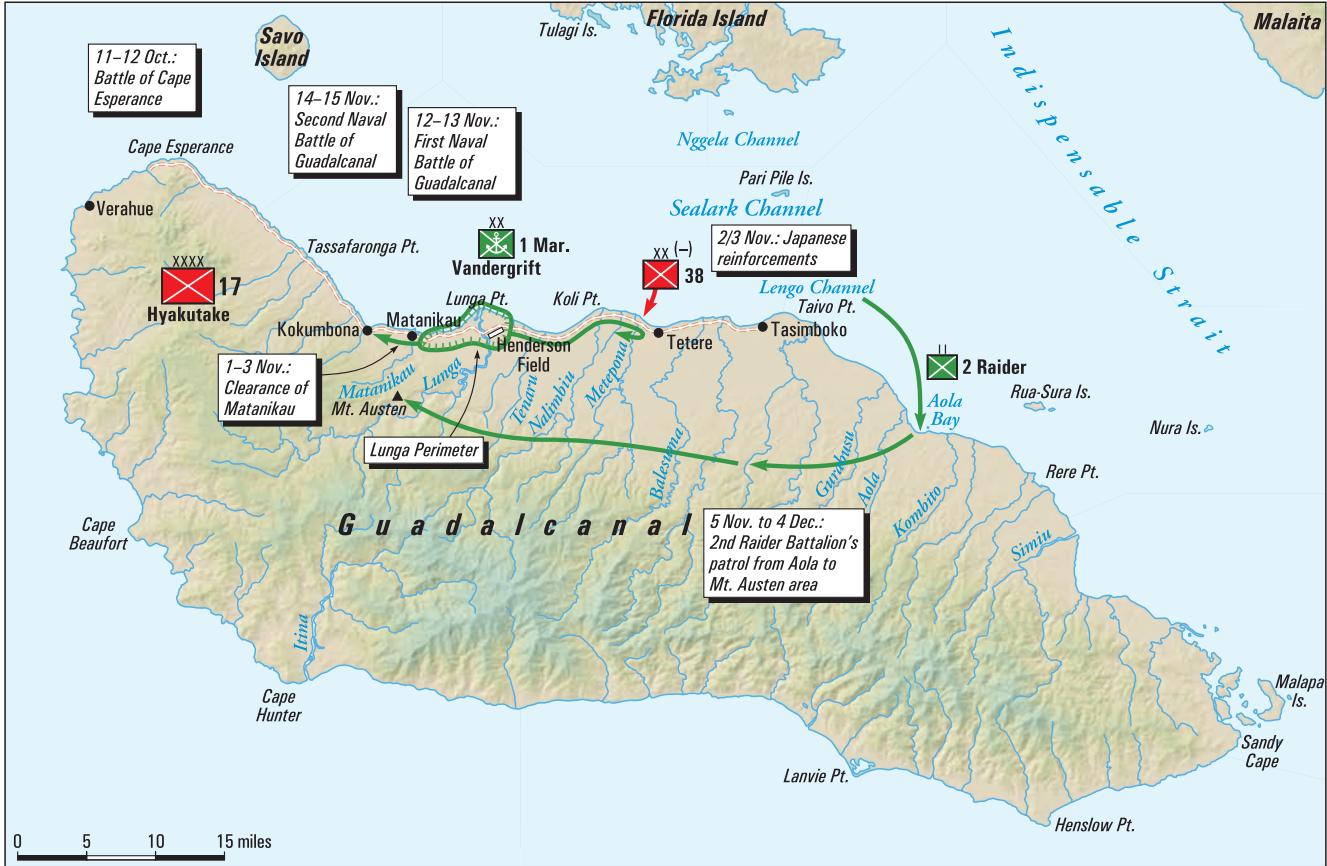
ened and modified. Strengthened divisions would have additional artillery and some armor assigned to them. The table of organization (see sidebar) shows typical configurations. In practice, equipment could vary greatly, depending on what was available. The reconnaissance regiment (actually a battalion-sized formation), for example, might be horse cavalry or light tanks, or it might not be present at all. Similarly, the divisions committed to Guadalcanal went in without organic tanks; the one Japanese armored unit on the island was a non-divisional formation.

Divisional organization was deliberately flexible. The infantry “group” (brigade) headquarters was often used to form special task forces with regiments and battalions cross-attached. That let commanders tailor units for specific missions.

The Japanese also had several types of infantry brigades. Some of them were only lightly armed and used for garrison duties. Others, such as the 35th *Kawagachi* on Guadalcanal, were heavily armed combined-arms formations.

Japanese Special Naval Landing Forces (SNLF) were part of the IJN. They were amphibious units organized as reinforced infantry battalions. The Japanese had considerable experience in amphibious landings, notably in China and then throughout the Pacific. SNLF were usually named after the base

November 1942 Battles on Guadalcanal



at which they'd been organized. Later in the war, two or more SNLF battalions would be combined into regimental-sized groups. When placed in the defensive role, they would be given numerous additional heavy weapons. As can be seen, then, the Japanese brought an experienced and successful military organization to Guadalcanal.

The USMC
The US Marine Corps (USMC) had developed a doctrine for amphibious warfare during the decade prior to World War II. The basic concept was the Marines would seize advanced bases for the US Navy (USN), which would then be turned into forward logistical depots and airbases to support the

Navy's further advance into enemy waters. Various units were organized for that mission, and in 1933 they became the Fleet Marine Force (FMF). FMF doctrinal publications gave major consideration to command control, the need for fire support, coordination with naval and air forces, and logistics. Another emphasized concept was "combat loading," by which supplies

were to be placed on cargo ships with the most vital items (such as ammunition) the most accessible for unloading. Dedicated air support became the purview of Marine aviation. Each division was to have a Marine Air Wing (MAW) assigned for support missions. An issue that had to be hashed out in practice was the coordination of forces once on the beach. The solution arrived at was the creation of a "shore party command," responsible for defining unit sectors, offloading supplies, controlling prisoners of war and stragglers, and the logistical aspects of moving troops off the beach and inland.

The USMC also developed a specialized landing craft. It was actually based on the famous shallow-draft Higgins Boat, which had originally been used by Caribbean oil drillers and rum runners. It became the LCVP (Landing Craft, Vehicle & Personnel), which could move to the beach on its own power and then debark troops and equipment via its front hull ramp. Guadalcanal saw the first combat deployment of full USMC divisions. Until then the largest unit fielded had been the brigade. The 1942 "D" series division was over-built, containing para-marine (airborne) and raider battalions. The idea was those units would be used for specialized missions such as long-range patrols, but the experience of the campaign showed Marine rifle units could perform them. Divisional artillery was built around the 75mm pack howitzer, a light but useful weapon in situations such as jungle warfare. Also, Marine riflemen entered the campaign still carrying

the bolt action 1903 model Springfield rifle. It was a fine weapon, though with a slower rate of fire than the Army's M-1 Garand semi-automatic rifle. The Marines were, however, also liberally supplied with automatic weapons including submachineguns. Each division had an engineer regiment that included a combat engineer battalion, a "pioneer" battalion (to offload supplies on beaches), and a USN construction battalion ("Sea Bees"). The special weapons battalion had self-propelled guns on halftracks. The amphibious tractor battalion provided for movement along coastlines. Another specialized unit was the defense battalion, there to provide protection in the event an enemy force made a counter-landing into a beachhead. As the events of the Guadalcanal campaign showed, that wasn't an unrealistic concern. All in all, the 1942 USMC division had the elements necessary to conduct successful amphibious operations. Further experience would result in some of the divisional elements being removed and placed at corps echelon, but given that in August 1942 the 1st Marine Division was the only available combat unit of that size ready for deployment, the organization worked.

The US Army
The US Army infantry division was intended as a general purpose organization, deployable for mobile warfare in a range of conditions. Various configurations had been experimented with, such as specialized motorized

and jungle organizations, but they were found to be inadequate. The basic idea became to have one standardized type, with individual divisions then trained for specific theaters of operations. Thus a division committed to the Pacific might receive special training and equipment for amphibious operations and jungle warfare. The Army also organized armored and airborne divisions, plus a unique mountain division, but none of those were deployed in the Solomons. On the eve of the US entry into the war, the Army was in the midst of reorganizing. The older "square" divisional organization carried over from World War I had two brigades, each composed of two infantry regiments. That kind of division was large but not easily maneuverable. (They had been constituted to facilitate the breaking of the near-static trench-war deadlock of the western front.) Consequently, the brigade headquarters were eliminated and one infantry regiment removed, making for a three regiment "triangular" division. Army doctrine was to substitute firepower and mechanization for manpower, thereby avoiding the kind of mass casualties that had been prevalent in World War I. The US industrial production system could provide large numbers of weapons and vehicles, as well as the petroleum to run tanks, trucks, self-propelled guns and aircraft. Divisional artillery was powerful, with three battalions of 105mm howitzers and another of 155s. There were also self-propelled guns at regimental level for direct support of the infantry. Those units were all tied



One of the American survivors of the Ichiki Detachment's attack later sketched this impression of it.



A view from the beach near Henderson Field at the end of the campaign



A US patrol moves into the jungle beyond the Henderson Field perimeter



Some of the Ichiki Detachment's many dead, photographed the day after the attack.

together by a communication network that allowed for concentration of not only divisional guns, but also of corps-echelon fires as well as those of adjoining divisions. On Guadalcanal, however, the Army still didn't have the large numbers of non-divisional guns it would deploy later in the war.

The US infantry division didn't have organic armor. Instead, units being sent into combat were supposed to draw on corps-level and army-level pools of tank, self-propelled anti-tank and armored reconnaissance battalions. Similarly, logistical services were

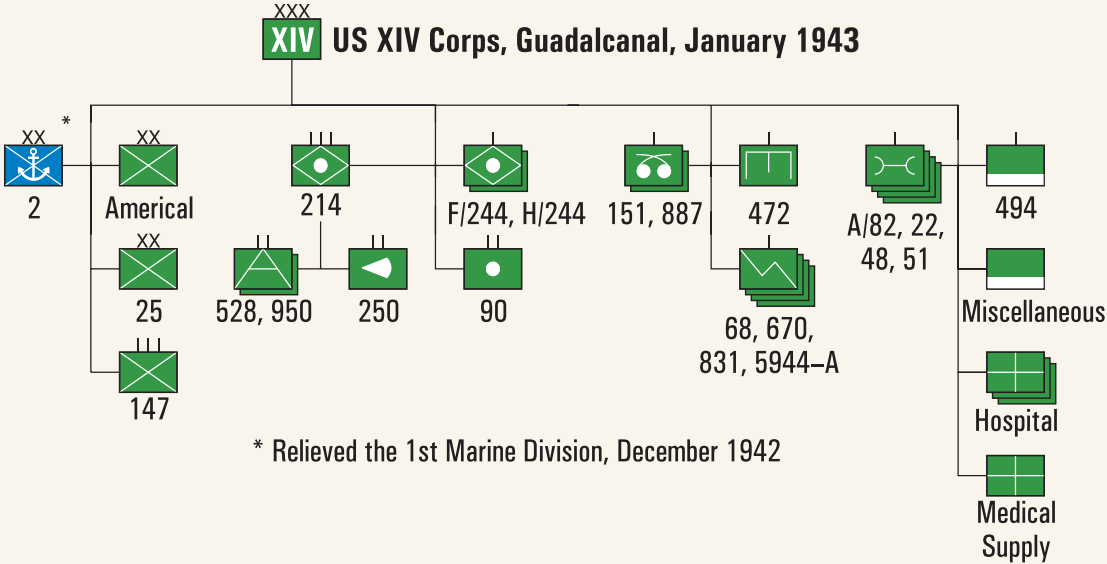
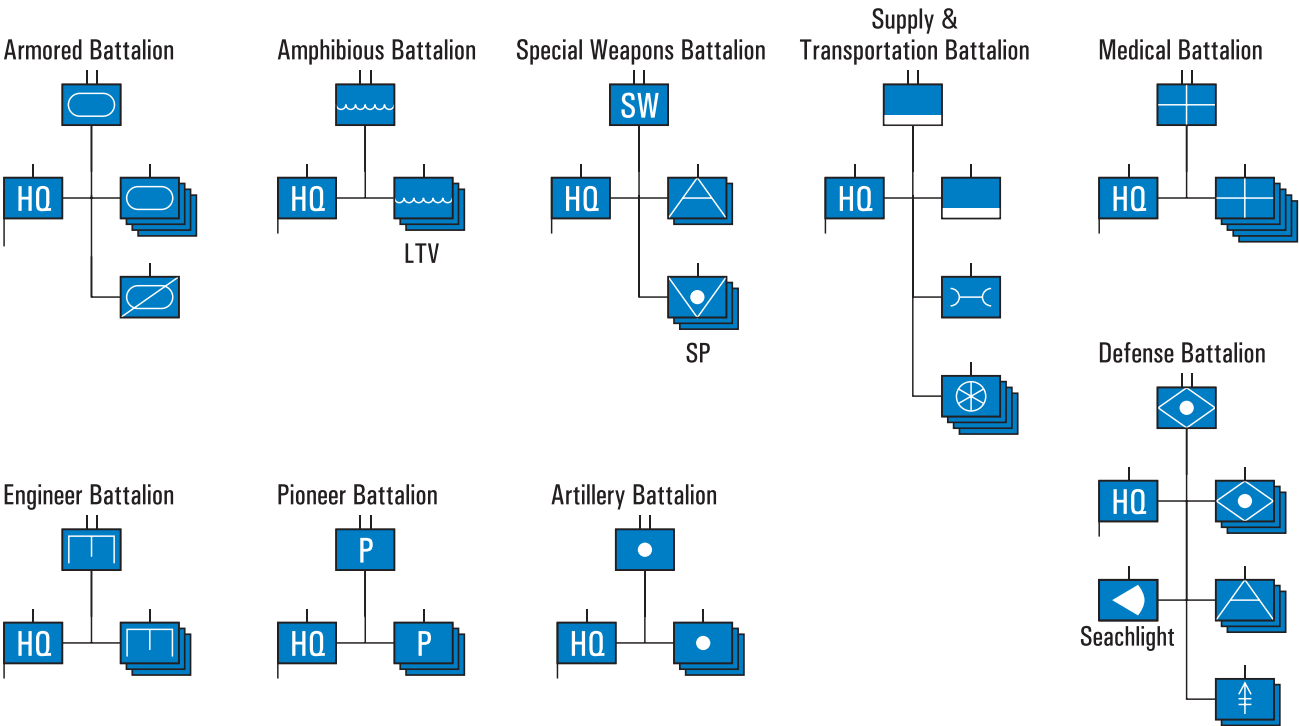
kept to a minimum at the divisional level, but were provided lavishly at corps and army echelons. The idea was units would receive additional firepower, supply, transportation and medical support on an "as-needed" basis. While on paper Army divisions looked "lean" compared to their USMC and IJA counterparts, in the field they could actually have considerably more assets assigned or attached to them.

Another advantage the US Army and Marine divisions had over the Japanese was a high degree of motorization: all transport was by

motor vehicle. In comparison, the Japanese still made considerable use of horse-drawn vehicles to move supplies and men. While motor vehicles could be at something of a disadvantage in the jungles and mountains in the interior of Guadalcanal, they nonetheless remained useful for establishing logistical bases. Added to that was the extensive use of construction equipment by American engineers, which facilitated the building of airfields, bases and roads. All that gave US forces a considerable edge in the logistics battle.

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USMC Units



Orders of Battle

Japanese

Seventeenth Army was responsible for operations in the Solomons. It was the equivalent of a Western corps in strength, though its scope of operations was larger. Its commander was Gen. Harukichi Hyakutake, who moved his headquarters to Guadalcanal on 10 October 1942 to personally direct the fighting. The army's artillery was under Gen. Tadashi Sumiyoshi; who also commanded a unit in the Battle of Henderson Field.

Ichiki Detachment was formed from the 28th Infantry Regiment of the 7th Infantry Division, and was reinforced by the 5th Yokohama SNLF. The unit landed on Guadalcanal on 14-15 August, and went on to make its ill-fated attack a few days later. The Kuma ("Bear") Battalion was the detachment's second echelon, arriving later in August.

Thirty-Fifth Kawaguchi Brigade was a task force built around the reinforced 124th Infantry Regiment. It included considerable artillery, anti-aircraft, armor and engineer support, and it landed on Guadalcanal in late August.

Second Sendai Infantry Division was one of the oldest units in the IJA. In January 1942 it overran Java, and was sent to Guadalcanal in late September. It included the 4th, 16th and 29th Infantry Regiments.

Thirty-Eighth Nagoya Infantry Division was another veteran unit, leading the attack on Hong Kong at the start of the war and then participating in the conquest of the Dutch East Indies. Elements of this division were committed to Guadalcanal throughout October, including the 228th, 229th and 230th Infantry Regiments.

Special Naval Landing Forces. The 3rd Kure SNLF started the campaign on Tulagi, with some elements on Guadalcanal. The 5th Yokohama landed on 18 August, and the 4th Maizuru in October. There was also a Naval Guard Force unit on Guadalcanal, as well as some engineer units at the start of the campaign.

Yano Battalion was a special Japanese unit, organized when they made the decision to implement Operation KE, the evacuation of Guadalcanal. It was named after its commander, Maj. Keiji Yano, and it provided the rearguard for withdrawing units.

United States

Fourteenth Corps was activated in December 1942, under Gen. Alexander Patch, to direct all operations on Guadalcanal. It included both Army and Marine units.

First Marine Division was organized in February 1941. Personnel quality was high, as many of the men had long years of service or were volunteers who'd joined eager to fight. Still, at the start of the campaign the unit had teething problems affecting its overall cohesion, as the USMC hadn't previously deployed division-sized units into combat. While officially composed of the 1st, 5th, 7th (rifle) and 11th (artillery) Marine Regiments, the 7th was replaced by the 2nd at the start of the campaign. The division had assigned to it some specialized units, such as para-marines and raiders, which were later found to be redundant. Regardless, the 1st Marine landed on Guadalcanal on 7 August 1942, fighting there until withdrawn on 10 December to be rebuilt and retrained for operations elsewhere. Commander of the 1st was Mar. Gen. Archer Vandergrift, who was responsible for all operations on Guadalcanal until Gen. Patch and the XIV Corps took over.

Second Marine Division was organized at the same time as the 1st. It relieved the 1st on Guadalcanal in December and included the 2nd, 6th, 8th (rifle) and 10th (artillery) Marine Regiments.

Americal Division, US Army, was a unique unit, at least for the American Army. It was organized in May 1942 from units on New Caledonia, when general American practice was to form divisions only on US soil and then give them numbers. "Americal" was a contraction of "American New Caledonian." It included the 132nd, 164th and 182nd Infantry Regiments, as well as the usual divisional artillery and service units. The 147th Infantry Regiment from the 37th Division was attached. Lead elements of the division landed on Guadalcanal in October, with follow-on echelons arriving in November and December. The Americal was later redesignated the 23rd Infantry Division.

Twenty-Fifth Infantry Division, US Army, was a regular Army outfit, activated on 1 October 1941 at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii. Following Pearl Harbor it was given training in amphibious and jungle warfare and then committed to Guadalcanal, arriving in December. It included the 27th, 35th and 161st Infantry Regiments.

CAM Division was an abbreviation for Combined Army Marine Division. It was an ad hoc task force combining the Army's 147th and 182nd Infantry Regiments with the 6th Marines. ★

Unit	Japanese Standard Division	Japanese Strengthened Division	Japanese SNLF Battalion	US Marine Corps Division	US Infantry Division
Men	20,000	29,408	1,069	19,514	15,514
Rifles	9,000 (1)	10,000 (1)	800	13,147	6,233
Submachineguns	-	-	-	4208	-
Automatic rifles	--	-	-	513	567
Light machineguns	340	411	35	87	147
Heavy machineguns	112	114	16	360	133
AT Rifles	-	-	-	-	-
Grenade dischargers	453	457	33	-	-
60 mm mortars	-	-	-	63	81
81mm Mortar	-	-	-	36	57
20mm	78	72	-	54	-
37mm + 47mm antitank guns	22	40	-	20 SP	109
40mm AAA/AT guns	-	-	-	16	-
70mm guns	18	36	4	-	-
75mm guns + howitzers	48	36	4	36 + 12 SP	18 sp
90mm AAA guns	-	-	-	6	-
105mm howitzers	-	24	-	-	36
150mm / 155mm howitzers	-	12	-	-	12 + 6 sp
AFV	7	81	2	72	-
Amphibian tractors	-	-	-	100	-
Motor transport	(2)	502	5	1,394	2,149
Horses	7,500	9,906	-	-	-

Notes:
AFV: Total of tanks, tankettes and armored cars.
(1) estimate
(2) not known
(3) sp = self-propelled guns

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Combat

Given the strengths and weakness of all three major ground forces engaged on Guadalcanal, we can begin to see the factors that led to the lopsided final casualty count as well as the final American victory.

Part of the Japanese dilemma was they were in a strategic position from which they could only react to American moves. For the first time in the Pacific War the Allies seized and maintained the operational and strategic initiative. The IJA first committed only a reinforced battalion (*Ichiki Detachment*), then a brigade (*35th Kawagachi*), then the better part of two divisions (*2nd* and *38th*). The Japanese, with their major units entering the campaign piecemeal, were therefore usually outnumbered on the ground. That in itself might not have been fatal, since the Japanese were used to attacking while outnumbered and still winning. On Guadalcanal, though, too many other things were going against them.

There were higher-level staff and planning factors. The Japanese had demonstrated they could put together meticulously planned operations and provide their forces with extensive logistical support. Certainly that had been the case during their offensives in 1941-42. Yet such planning was more the exception than the rule, and generally required intervention and supervision from the highest level in order to be brought about. Alternatively, as in the case of Malaya, Gen. Tomoyuki Yamashita had the force of personal-ity to push through the necessary preparations to set up the campaign that led to his capture of Singapore.

The tendency otherwise was for army and division commanders to emphasize combat operations, with staff planning, logistics, intelligence and inter-service cooperation viewed as things nice to have but that nevertheless could be dispensed with. Superior spirit and the shock impact of night attacks were to carry the day. That approach went back to Japanese officer training, in which the main emphasis was invariably on tactics. It had worked against the Chinese, whose military system was largely in disarray and who were divided politically. It had even worked against the Allies in the early months of the war, whose forces then often lacked training and



A view of US troops coming ashore during the campaign. Coordinating the flow of men and materiel in amphibious operations is still considered the single most complex of all military operations

a realistic appreciation of Japanese capabilities. It failed on Guadalcanal because the Americans had by then become better prepared to face the exigencies of combat against them.

That can be seen in the ways the Japanese executed their major attacks. The *Ichiki Detachment* attacked USMC positions at Alligator Creek (sometimes known as the Battle of the Tenaru River, owing to ambiguities in the island's mapping). The *Detachment* consisted of a reinforced battalion under the command of Col. Kiyono Ichiki, an experienced tactician. Japanese intel-ligence had reported the Americans on the island were only a small raiding party on the verge of withdrawal. It wasn't until Ichiki's men ran into the full firepower of the *1st Marine Division* they realized the error of that intelligence assessment, and by then it was too late.

Similarly, the attacks of the *35th Brigade* on 12-14 September ("Bloody Ridge") and the efforts of the *2nd* and *38th Divisions*, along with the *35th* survivors, on 23-26 October (Battle of Henderson Field), all suffered from lack of preparation. Night marches through the jungles led to units becoming separated and assaults launched piecemeal. Making matters worse for

the Japanese was that trails had to be hacked out of the jungle. Troops were exhausted simply traversing them, and heavy weapons had to be left behind. The result was attacks made by masses of riflemen with little fire support.

There was a possibility, had those operations been better coordinated, Japanese infiltration tactics might've won through by penetrating the American line. Scattered units making separate attacks stood no chance against American firepower.

Alternatively, had the Japanese been able to bring forward sufficient artillery and, more critically, plenty of ammunition for it, they could've rendered the American airfield unus-able via bombardment. Yet they were never able to do so, owing to the failure of their logistical system. Incidentally, that was one reason the struggle for Mount Austen became a central feature of the campaign: it was important as an artillery observation post.

That points up another Japanese shortfall. While they were able to get some heavy guns to the island, such as 150mm howitzers, they weren't able to supply them with sufficient ammunition to challenge the Americans. Further, their artillery



A – perhaps the – critical element: US airpower basing from Henderson Field

pieces were often rendered inoperable due to lack of maintenance. While the Japanese order of battle shows them having considerable artillery strength on Guadalcanal, the reality was batteries were often reduced to just one or two firing pieces. What that meant was their infantry were going into attacks without adequate firepower. As a result, those units' firepower was often only a fraction of that of their American counterparts. In contrast to the Japanese, all services of the US armed forces placed considerable effort on planning, making that staff function a critical part of every command. That was true even though much of the American effort on Guadalcanal was fought with what would be considered minimal logistical support by late-war standards. That was further emphasized by the difficulties simply keeping the forces on Guadalcanal supplied during the first few weeks after the landing. Nonetheless, US planners overcame those difficulties. For example, Army logisticians on Guadalcanal created a system that pushed supplies through the jungle via a chain of vehicles, boats and portage. In contrast, the Japanese often had a difficult time getting forward their supplies. That meant their units were often out of ammunition, food and medicine. Consequently the Japanese suffered numerous losses owing to an inability to deal with their wounded and provide the basics of nutrition to the men. It was not for nothing Guadalcanal became known to their troops as "starvation island." When Gen. Harukichi Hyakutake, commander of 17th Army, arrived

on Guadalcanal in October, he was shocked at the debilitated condition of the men. He ordered reinforcements of infantry be halted until sufficient food stocks could be built up in order to restore those already committed to fighting condition. All that's not to say the Americans didn't suffer from problems. Malaria in particular was debilitating, and early efforts to deal with the disease were inadequate. The Americans, though, were in a better position to resupply their forces and, just as importantly, to evacuate their wounded. The result was they didn't suffer as much from the kind of attrition that weighed so heavily on the Japanese. Indeed, Japanese losses on Guadalcanal due to disease and malnutrition seem a grim throwback to the days of pre-industrial armies. Another area where the Americans had an edge was intelligence. In the bigger picture there were the Allied cryptographic and signals intercept services; locally there was a network of coast watchers, as well as the reconnaissance performed by aircraft from Henderson Field. That's not to say the American intelligence picture was perfect: going into the operation the Marines lacked good maps as well as a tactical appreciation of the terrain. For instance, one initial report described Mount Austen as only a "low rise." In reality it was a rugged precipice.

Sea & Sky

Henderson Field was the pivot on which turned much of the campaign, and the American seizure of it on its opening day proved a major

operational milestone in itself. The squadrons based there were given the sobriquet "Cactus Air Force," after the codename for the island. The CAF provided support that was always available and on-call. The Japanese had considerable airpower theoretically available to them, but it was based on Rabaul and Bougainville under the command of the IJN's 11th Air Fleet. Its aircraft often attacked US positions on Guadalcanal, but they had to fly over long stretches of open sea to do so. Moreover, communication between the involved IJN and IJA headquarters weren't conducted efficiently, which often led to lapses in combined planning. Therefore one of the essential elements of the IJA system that had resulted in the early war victories—close support from airpower—was denied them on Guadalcanal. In December 1942 the IJA's 6th Air Division was committed to the campaign, but by then it was too late. It all kept coming back to Henderson Field. Aside from close air support, Allied aircraft based there would sweep over the sea surrounding the island and attack enemy reinforcement and supply convoys. The Japanese were therefore forced to rely on emergency runs by destroyers, submarines and various improvised means officially called the Reinforcement Unit but that became known to the Americans as the Tokyo Express. Those measures couldn't provide a consistent source of men and materiel to support operations on the island. Control of the air meant the Americans would eventually gain control of the sea. That took several major naval actions to finally accomplish, but by November 1942 the USN dominated the lower Solomon Sea. That also meant the Navy could provide gunfire support to the troops ashore, further enhancing American firepower. The Japanese made several attempts to contest the waters around Guadalcanal. Those efforts resulted in the Battles of Savo Island (9 August), the Eastern Solomons (23-25 August), Santa Cruz (26 October), and Guadalcanal (12-15 November). Among other things, their battleship bombardment of Henderson Field (13-14 October) indicated what might've been accomplished had the IJN been able to *stay* in the southern Solomons. As a result of the "Night of the Battleships" (as it became known to the Marines), Henderson Field was

rendered temporarily unusable, its aircraft wrecked, and the troops there were stunned psychologically—though actual casualties were low. The dilemma for the IJN came back to the reality that it couldn't maintain itself off Guadalcanal in the daytime as long as the US possessed Henderson Field. That was understood by the Japanese, and they therefore made several attempts to capture the airbase from the ground. Those attempts failed, in considerable part due to the lack of cooperation between IJA forces on the island and IJN forces that were supposed to be supporting them.

Final Tally

The lack of a combined IJN/IJA command for most of the campaign undermined the entire Japanese effort. Added to that was the collapse of Japanese logistics on Guadalcanal, which decreased their combat power and resulted in large numbers of otherwise unnecessary casualties. On the other side, US and Allied ground, naval and air forces worked together, never perfectly but well enough, and logistics were always made a central part of operations. The result



An American "walking wounded" haltingly begins his evacuation from the fighting front to rear-area medical services. Few Japanese wounded had that option

was the Allies inflicted large numbers of casualties on the Japanese ground force—which was comparatively uncoordinated, lacking in supply, and not supported by air and naval power. While the Japanese fought tenaciously, they couldn't hold Guadalcanal against such a better organized foe. ★

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