

Guadalcanal: Trial by Fire

Part 1

By Edward J. Marolda



Guadalcanal, an isolated and unremarkable island of the Solomons group in the South Pacific, witnessed the Allies' first extended offensive operation of WW II against the Empire of Japan. The fight for Guadalcanal put the U.S. Armed Forces' operational doctrine, battle tactics, ships, aircraft, and weapons under a microscope. More importantly, this campaign thoroughly tested the professional skill, perseverance in great adversity, and bravery of American fighting men. The U.S.

Pacific Fleet's aircraft carrier and surface ship forces and its Marine ground and air units were often bloodied and sometimes beaten by their able, determined, and courageous foe. Indeed, during the first three months of the struggle for Guadalcanal, the issue was clearly in doubt. The Allies' coordination of ground, sea, and air operations, tactics, and use of intelligence, however, ultimately proved superior to that of the Japanese. By the end of January 1943, the American flag and those of its allies flew permanently

over the battered island of Guadalcanal.

Few American leaders were confident of this outcome in mid-1942 when Admiral Ernest J. King, Commander in Chief, U.S. Fleet and Chief of Naval Operations, advocated offensive action to oust Japanese forces from the southern Solomon Islands. Allied code breakers and other intelligence analysts knew that the enemy was constructing an airfield on Guadalcanal and seaplane facilities on nearby Tulagi Island to support

F4F Wildcats line up at Henderson Field, Guadalcanal.

Photo courtesy of John M. Elliott

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Japan's ongoing attempt to seize New Guinea and then Australia. In a larger sense, though, King saw an Allied attack on these positions as the first phase of a larger campaign to liberate Asia and the Pacific from the Japanese and to destroy their war machine.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff issued a July directive authorizing the offensive operation, named *Watchtower*. Soon afterward, Vice Admiral Robert L. Ghormley, Commander South Pacific Area, established his headquarters at

Espiritu Santo in the New Hebrides, developed supporting plans, and concentrated forces to carry it out. There was little time for preparation, however, because Washington wanted Guadalcanal and Tulagi captured in early August, before the enemy was expected to deploy air units there.

On August 7, Allied forces converged on the two Solomon islands. Rear Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher, a veteran of the Coral Sea and Midway battles, was responsible for tactical control of Operation *Watchtower* as

commander of the Expeditionary Force. Rear Admiral Leigh Noyes directed the Air Support Force, consisting of aircraft carriers *Enterprise* (CV-6), *Saratoga* (CV-3), and *Wasp* (CV-7), battleship *North Carolina* (BB-65), 6 U.S. and Australian cruisers, 16 destroyers, and 3 oilers. South Pacific Area land-based aircraft dedicated to the operation came under Rear Admiral John S. McCain. Rear Admiral Richmond Kelly Turner, a brusque, rough-edged but tactically gifted naval officer, led the Amphibious Force, com-

posed of 8 U.S. and Australian cruisers, 9 destroyers, and 23 transports; the latter were crewed by Navy and Coast Guard seamen. Also under Turner's control, while at sea, was the untested, 19,000-man 1st Marine Division commanded by Major General Alexander A. Vandegrift.

Before dawn that day, Turner's transports rounded Cape Esperance at the western end of Guadalcanal, moved silently past gloomy Savo Island, and disembarked Marines into landing craft for the movement ashore. The Marines who landed on Guadalcanal expected a fierce Japanese reaction to the American intrusion. Instead, Vandegrift's men discovered that the enemy had vanished into the ominously quiet jungle. The Marines quickly secured the airstrip and established a perimeter around it.

This experience was not repeated on Tulagi and two nearby islets. It took the Marines two days of fierce fighting, with the close air support of *Enterprise* and *Wasp* planes and the gunfire of light cruiser *San Juan* (CL-54), to destroy the dogged Japanese garrisons. The struggle in the air was just as furious. Fletcher lost 20 percent of his fighters as they fended off enemy air attacks on August 7 and 8. While the Japanese sank only one of Turner's ships, their aerial assaults delayed the unloading of supplies and equipment from the transports, which would soon have serious consequences.

Japanese Vice Admiral Gunichi Mikawa, Commander of the Eighth Fleet, after he was informed of the American landing, led a force of 5 heavy cruisers, 2 light cruisers, and a destroyer south from Rabaul through what came to be called the "Slot," the seaway between the many islands of the Solomon chain. Although an Australian pilot spotted the group, the Allied naval commanders at Guadalcanal did not take appropriate defensive measures.

Thus, when Mikawa's force approached Savo Island in the early hours of August 9, they found the cruisers and destroyers of Turner's force separated in the waters off Guadalcanal, soon to be aptly named "Ironbottom Sound." Moreover, by the time U.S. destroyer *Patterson* (DD-392) sounded the alarm at 0143, it was too late. The Japanese warships had already loosed a spread of their lethal Long Lance torpedoes and



Henderson Field, Guadalcanal, 1942. Note the many bomb and shell craters.

opened fire on the first of two Allied cruiser groups. Almost simultaneously, enemy torpedoes and 24 shells hit Australian cruiser *Canberra*, mortally wounding her, while another torpedo slammed into *Chicago* (CA-29). Shortly afterward, Mikawa's ships closed on the rear of the second group of cruisers, consisting of *Astoria* (CA-34), *Quincy* (CA-39), and *Vincennes* (CA-44), as they proceeded in column to the northwest. Illuminated by enemy searchlights and flares, the American ships took hit after hit. *Astoria* and *Canberra* survived until the following day, but *Quincy* and *Vincennes* sank that night. The Battle of Savo Island, in which 1,077 American and Australian sailors were killed and 700 wounded, ranked as one of the worst defeats in the history of the U.S. Navy.

Had Adm. Mikawa pressed his advantage, destroying or chasing off Turner's transports and stranding the Marines ashore, the Allies might have declined another offensive campaign for some time. That Japanese officer, however, fearing a daylight attack by Fletcher's carrier aircraft, ordered his victorious ships back to Rabaul. Unbeknownst to Mikawa, on the 8th, Fletcher had ordered his ships to the south out of range of Japanese aircraft. The American admiral rightly felt that after the sinking of *Lexington* (CV-2) at Coral Sea and *Yorktown* (CV-5) at Midway, he could not risk losing any of the remaining operational carriers, the Pacific Fleet's primary strategic weapon.

Bereft of air cover and minus four major combatants, Turner had to



Photo courtesy of John M. Elliott

Set afire by a Japanese bomb hit on Guadalcanal in 1942, this F4F Wildcat was saved by a Leatherneck who used dirt and chemicals to extinguish the flames.

withdraw his gunfire support ships and transports, many still unloaded, from the waters off Guadalcanal. As a result, the 1st Marine Division would come dangerously close to running out of ammunition, aviation fuel, and food in the months ahead. Meanwhile, Marines on the island set up a defensive perimeter and worked feverishly to make the unfinished Japanese airstrip, soon named Henderson Field after a Marine officer killed in action at Midway, ready to receive shore-based aircraft. On August 12, a PBV-5A flying boat carrying Adm. McCain landed at the new field, and he promptly ruled it operational. Three days later, the first Marine planes touched down on Guadalcanal. On the 20th, Marine squadrons flying Grumman F4F-4 *Wildcat* fighters and Douglas SBD-3 *Dauntless* dive-bombers launched from aircraft escort vessel

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Long Island (AVG-1) and within hours landed at Henderson. During the next several months, Army Air Forces Boeing B-17 *Flying Fortress* bombers and Bell P-400 *Airacobra* fighters (export versions of the P-39) and a host of Navy aircraft operated from Guadalcanal. Adopting the code name for Guadalcanal, the aviators based at Henderson Field soon called themselves the "Cactus Air Force."

Overconfident and misled by faulty intelligence, the Japanese frittered away the advantage they had gained so convincingly after the Savo Island battle. On the night of August 18-19, Rear Admiral Raizo Tanaka's destroyer squadron delivered to the island a small, 1,000-man infantry unit, whose purpose was to throw the Marines into the sea. Instead, several nights later, Vandegrift's infantrymen utterly destroyed the Japanese army unit, whose tactics displayed none of the skill shown by the enemy naval forces at Savo Island.

Following this setback on land, Fleet Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, Commander in Chief of the Combined Fleet, decided that the Imperial Japanese Navy would once and for all establish control of the lower Solomon Islands. During the third week of August, he sent south a formidable force of 3 carriers, 3 battleships, 9 cruisers, 13 destroyers, and 9 submarines under Vice Admiral Nobutake Kondo. The objectives of this force were to divert attention from the landing of reinforcements on Guadalcanal



Ordnancemen of Scouting Squadron 6 load a 500-pound demolition bomb on an SBD dive-bomber aboard *Enterprise* (CV-6) during the first day of attacks on Guadalcanal and Tulagi, August 7, 1942.

by a destroyer-transport group and, more importantly, to sink Fletcher's carriers.

American cryptanalysts in Hawaii and Australia, whose work was a key to Allied successes throughout the Pacific war, were unable in this instance to provide timely intelligence of this movement of the Japanese fleet. Adm. Fletcher was told that Yamamoto's carriers steamed north of the island bastion of Truk, far from Rabaul. Australian coast watchers and U.S. reconnaissance planes, however, did report the convoy bringing enemy troop reinforcements to Guadalcanal. To intercept this force, Fletcher sortied

with *Enterprise*, *Saratoga*, and *Wasp* on August 23 to waters some 150 miles to the east of Henderson Field. Believing that battle would not be joined for a few days, the admiral instructed *Wasp* to move off line for refueling.

In mid-morning of August 24, a Navy PBY discovered Japanese light carrier *Ryujo*, sent ahead of the larger carriers *Shokaku* and *Zuikaku* to serve as bait for the Americans. Fletcher took the bait, dispatching *Enterprise* and *Saratoga* air groups against the foe. The 38 Navy SBD dive-bombers and TBF torpedo planes sent the hapless *Ryujo* to the bottom in the



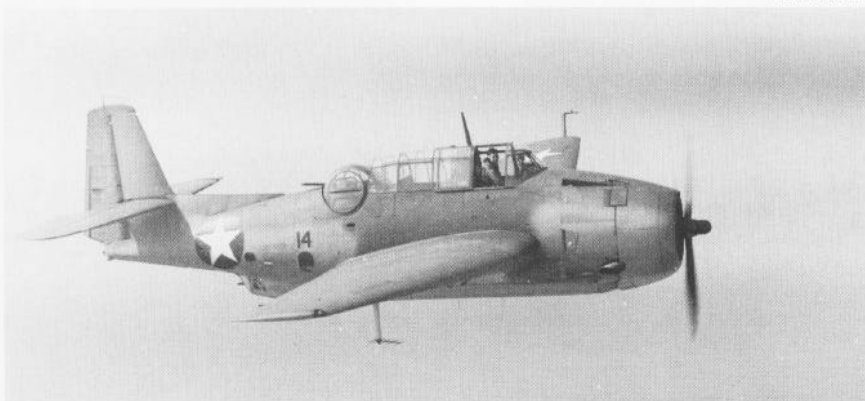
Marine and Navy air headquarters at Henderson Field. After surviving numerous Japanese bombings, this structure had to be torn down when a near miss rendered it useless.

opening act of the Battle of the Eastern Solomons.

Meanwhile, Kondo tried to spring the trap, launching an aerial assault force against the Americans. Vigilant U.S. search planes, however, had already spotted *Shokaku* and *Zuikaku* to the north of *Ryujo* and raised the alarm. Fletcher's combat air patrol of Grumman F4F-4 *Wildcats* met the Japanese attackers 10 miles from his position and shot down many of them. The antiaircraft weapons of battleship *North Carolina* and *Enterprise* splashed or drove off 14 "bogies." Nonetheless, two dozen enemy dive-bombers made it through the defensive screen. The bombs dropped by several of these planes holed *Enterprise's* flight deck, jammed her rudder, and killed 74 sailors. Their shipmates turned to, and by the end of the day damage control efforts had paid off. *Enterprise* remained operational. With Kondo's force closing on him, Fletcher retired to the south, but Kondo soon broke off his pursuit.

The following day, August 25, Marine planes from the newly operational Henderson Field heavily damaged a transport and the flagship of Adm. Tanaka, whose destroyers landed 1,500 reinforcements on Guadalcanal. That same day, B-17 bombers of General Douglas MacArthur's Army Air Forces, which were based in New Caledonia, Fiji, and the Santa Cruz Islands, sank a Japanese destroyer. Fortune still smiled on the Japanese in the Solomons, for on the last day of that momentous month, submarine I-26 torpedoed and damaged *Saratoga*, one of the pioneers of U.S. Naval Aviation. The temporary loss of *Saratoga*, Fletcher's flagship, marked the end of the admiral's command of the Expeditionary Force. Adm. King had been dissatisfied for some time with Fletcher's performance. Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Fleet, previously supportive, now agreed that Fletcher, who had been involved in Pacific combat operations since the beginning of the war, lacked the energy to continue leading the carrier force in battle. Nimitz transferred Fletcher to a less stressful command after well-deserved leave.

In September, both sides used fast dashes by destroyers and other vessels, protected by warships and aircraft, to reinforce and resupply their troops on Guadalcanal. The Americans operated by day, while the



Grumman TBF-1 Avenger.

Photo courtesy of John M. Elliott

Japanese stalked at night in Ironbottom Sound. The American and Japanese infantrymen ashore needed all the help they could get, for combat in the sodden, sweltering, and leech-infested island jungle demanded the utmost in courage and perseverance. Quarter was neither asked nor given in this no-holds-barred struggle.

Between September 12 and 14, Major General Kiyotake Kawaguchi, commander of the Japanese garrison, launched a series of attacks against the thin Marine line on "Bloody Ridge," where 1,000 Japanese soldiers and 59 American Marines were killed.

The war at sea was not as one sided. On September 5 alone, the Japanese sank *Little* (APD-3) and *Gregory* (APD-4), high-speed transports bringing supplies to the beleaguered defenders of Guadalcanal. This was a minor setback, however, compared to the U.S. Navy's losses in mid-month. On the 14th, Adm. Ghormley directed carriers *Wasp* and *Hornet* (CV-8) to provide cover for a force of six transports under Adm. Turner that was to beef up Vandegrift's division with the 4,000-man 7th Marine Regiment. Next day, en route Guadalcanal from Espiritu Santo, *Wasp* was torpedoed by a Japanese submarine, I-19, that infiltrated the carrier's destroyer screen. The ship was so badly damaged that she had to be sunk by U.S. forces. Another enemy sub, I-15, put torpedoes into battleship *North Carolina* and destroyer *O'Brien* (DD-415). The latter warship never made it back to the U.S. West Coast for repairs. She broke in two and sank off Samoa. Undeterred by these losses, Turner ordered his transports to stay the course to Guadalcanal. On the 18th, the ships offloaded the welcome Marine reinforcements and the first am-

munition and aviation gas to reach the island since August 7.

Once again, on October 9, Turner led a convoy of two transports and eight destroyers that carried the 164th Regiment of the Army's Americal Division to "the Canal."

Protecting this vulnerable group of ships was a force of cruisers under Rear Admiral Norman Scott. Patrolling off Cape Esperance west of Savo Island on the night of October 11, Scott was warned by an Army Air Forces B-17 pilot that two Japanese task forces were headed for Guadalcanal. The first group consisted of two seaplane carriers and six destroyers, under Rear Admiral Takaji Joshima, that were ferrying troops, artillery, ammunition, and supplies. Rear Admiral Aritomo Goto led the other formation of three cruisers and two destroyers.

Stealthy float planes from the U.S. cruisers tracked Goto's force as it approached Ironbottom Sound, so when Scott's four cruisers and five destroyers opened fire about 15 minutes before midnight, only the enemy was surprised. Scott temporarily ordered cease-fire, thinking one of his ships might have been mistakenly targeted. But he had trained his ship commanders so well in night operations that, sure of the targets, they kept their guns pumping out shells. This fire mortally wounded Adm. Goto and set fire to his flagship, cruiser *Aoba*. The Americans then concentrated on the other enemy warships and sank, by gunfire and torpedo, cruiser *Furutaka* and destroyer *Fubuki*. Despite these victories, three of Scott's ships were badly damaged and destroyer *Duncan* (DD-485) was lost.

This surface action enabled Turner's transports to reach the island with the Army reinforcements. At the

same time, Joshima's force delivered its precious cargoes to the Japanese garrison.

Undeterred by their losses in the Battle of Cape Esperance, the Japanese stepped up the activity of what the Americans called the "Tokyo Express," the almost nightly sortie of warships into Ironbottom Sound to deliver troops and supplies to the island and to bombard the American Marines. On the night of October 13-14, the enemy force included Vice Admiral Takeo Kurita's battleships *Kongo* and *Haruna*, which spent one and a half hours lobbing huge 14-inch shells into the American enclave at Lunga Point. This gunfire heavily cratered Henderson Field, wrecked 48 "Cactus Air Force" aircraft, and wiped out the field's aviation fuel supply. Moreover, the shellfire killed many Marines and soldiers. The big ships withdrew only when U.S. torpedo boats, newly based at Tulagi, unnerved Kurita with their wild torpedo and gun fire. The next night was much the same. While destroyers landed troops on the island, cruisers *Chokai* – with Adm. Mikawa, the victor of Savo Island, embarked – and *Kinugasa* poured another 752 rounds into Henderson.

Confident that his Eighth Fleet ruled the waters around Guadalcanal at night, Adm. Mikawa now mounted a daylight challenge to the American defenders. When sunlight first filtered through the Nipa palm on the morning of October 15, the Marines spied enemy transports, protected by destroyers and aircraft, disembarking troops and supplies at Tassafaronga Point, only 10 miles to the west. Siphoning aviation gas from disabled airplanes and retrieving drums of fuel from hiding places in the swamp, the Marine aviators at Henderson cobbled together an aerial response to the Japanese seaborne incursion. They were joined by *Wildcats* from *Hornet*, now the only operational U.S. carrier

in the South Pacific, and Army Air Forces B-17 bombers from *Espiritu Santo* in a day-long assault on the enemy force. At a cost to themselves of three dive-bombers and four fighters, the Americans shot down 17 Japanese aircraft. In addition to shooting up the escort ships and the troop units coming ashore, the Americans forced the enemy to abandon three of their disabled ships on the shoreline.

Still, the enemy had been able to provide badly needed reinforcements and material to the island garrison while that same day the Allies failed in a similar effort. The enemy spotted a convoy of six American vessels, each towing aviation fuel and ammunition barges, 75 miles from Guadalcanal. Four of the ships immediately reversed course. Destroyer *Meredith* (DD-434) and tug *Vireo* did the same a short time later. But *Vireo* was too slow and had to be abandoned once her crew was transferred to *Meredith*. Soon after this, 27 planes from Japanese carrier *Zuikaku* arrived overhead and within minutes sent the destroyer to the bottom.

Capping the day's events, the Tokyo Express ran on schedule that night, with Japanese cruisers *Myoko* and *Maya* and destroyers raining over 1,000 8-inch and 5-inch shells on Vandegrift's Marines.

By mid-October, Adm. Nimitz was concerned about the trend of events in what had become a fight to the death with the Japanese for Guadalcanal. He observed: "It now appears that we are unable to control the sea in the Guadalcanal area. Thus our supply of the positions will only be done at great expense to us." He concluded that "the situation is not hopeless, but it is certainly critical." In the words of Samuel Eliot Morison, the distinguished naval historian, this period "marked the nadir of misery for the Americans at Guadalcanal."

Nimitz was unhappy with Adm. Ghormley's conduct of operations. He

felt that while competent, Ghormley lacked the skill and dynamism needed to reinvigorate the struggling South Pacific Command. The Commander in Chief of the Pacific Fleet concluded that more aggressive leadership might be the key to turning the tide in the Solomons. Accordingly, on October 15, he named to succeed Ghormley a strong-willed, inspiring naval officer with a promise of greatness – Vice Admiral William F. Halsey. ■

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50 Years Ago – WW II

Jan 1: Air Force, Atlantic Fleet, was established, RAdm. A. D. Bernhard commanding, to provide administrative, material, and logistic services for Atlantic Fleet aviation in place of the former separate commands Fleet Air Wings, Atlantic, and Carriers, Atlantic, which were abolished.

Jan 14: *Independence* (CV-22), Capt. G. R. Fairlamb, Jr., commanding, was placed in commission – the first of nine light carriers of her class constructed on *Cleveland*-class cruiser hulls.

Jan 17: Following tests conducted at NAS San Diego, Calif., by six experienced pilots flying F4U-1s, the commanding officer of VF-12, Cdr. J. C. Clifton, reported that anti-blackout suits raised their tolerance to accelerations encountered in gunnery runs and other maneuvers by three to four Gs.

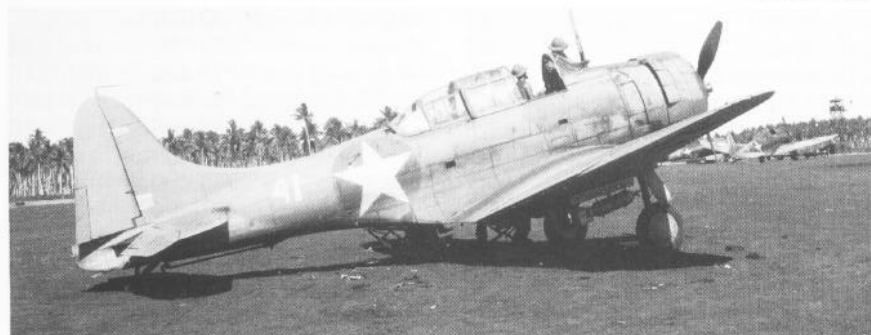
Feb 1: A new specification prescribing color and marking of naval aircraft became effective. A basic camouflage color scheme was provided for use on fleet aircraft which consisted of semi-gloss sea blue on surfaces viewed from above and nonspecular insignia white on surfaces viewed from below.

Feb 1: Regulations governing display of national insignia on aircraft were again revised by the order to remove those on the upper right and lower left wing surfaces.

Feb 11: The Vought F4U *Corsair* was flown on a combat mission for the first time when 12 planes of VMF-124 based on Guadalcanal escorted a PB2Y "Dumbo" to Vella Lavella, in the western Pacific New Georgia Islands, to pick up a downed pilot.

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Photo courtesy of John M. Elliott



The "Cactus Air Force" flew a host of aircraft out of Henderson Field, such as this Douglas SBD Dauntless, 1943.