GUADALCANAL 1942–1943

Guadalcanal: The Naval Campaign

By H. P. WILLMOTT

Beached enemy transport burning on Guadalcanal as SBD bomber flies overhead.

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To borrow and amend a saying, some are born joint, others achieve jointness, and some have jointness thrust upon them. It sometimes appears that the search for a joint approach to warfare has become an end in itself, a mantra that substitutes for serious thought. One suspects that much of what is written or spoken on this subject—paraded as authoritative and deserving of serious consideration—would fail rigorous scrutiny, yet at the same time one would not seriously question the importance and relevance of joint warfare.

At a lecture given in summer 1942 at Camberley, the British army staff college, an officer lately returned from Washington remarked that Britain was light years ahead of the United States in terms of joint planning, a state of affairs he attributed to the fact that America lacked a Royal Air Force. The establishment of an independent air service in April 1918 forced joint planning on the British military because thereafter no single operation could lie within the private domain of a single service. Across the water the U.S. Navy, however, by virtue of possessing

Summary

The Guadalcanal campaign in the lower Solomons is a paradox in the history of joint warfare. It was the first American offensive of World War II and purely Navy in design. Yet the impact of the campaign in the southwest Pacific on joint operations was far-reaching. Above all, it underscored the real interdependence of the services: the supply of forces on land relied on escorts; the cover of escort forces depended on fleet units; and the denial of enemy sustenance of their troops ashore was largely accomplished by shore-based airpower. Thus, to a surprising degree, Japanese forces were displaced from the lower Solomons by virtue of a singularly joint effort.

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its own private army and air force, had the means—not to mention the will—to go its own separate way and to frustrate the cause of interservice cooperation.

Guadalcanal stands as the first American campaign of World War II. As a Britisher it has always been a source of wry amusement to me that the initial U.S. offensive of the war was staged in the southwest Pacific. American condemnation of an alleged British predilection with peripheral campaigns, so unacceptable when it came to crafting strategic policy for the war against Germany, would seem to sit uneasily alongside this offensive: few theaters can be more peripheral to even the war against Japan, still less the European war, than the southwest Pacific. More relevantly, however, this first American offensive was most certainly never considered in terms of joint warfare: indeed, at least in part, the Navy sought offensive action in the southwest Pacific for interdepartmental, bureaucratic reasons to forestall its sister service both in Washington and in the Pacific. The move against Japanese positions in the lower Solomons was perhaps the means whereby joint warfare could be avoided or crafted on terms dictated by the Navy, yet it was a campaign in the course of which concepts of joint warfare were imposed upon the services by effect and need. The campaign brought home two inescapable facts, that the services could not achieve their missions by separate efforts but were interdependent—even in their specific areas of competence and responsibility—and that when the American high command authorized landings in the lower Solomons it had no understanding of the nature of the campaign on which it embarked.

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ADM William F. Halsey, USN, Commander, South Pacific Force, and MajGen A.A. Vandergrift, USMC, American Occupation Commander in the Solomons, January 1943.

Perhaps the simplest and most obvious example of this lack of understanding can be gauged by reference to the fact that in 1943 when the combined planners in Washington considered plans for the invasion of the Japanese home islands their provisional estimates suggested the use of between 120 and 157 fleet, light fleet, and escort carriers. These calculations were committed to paper at a time when every fleet action had cost the Navy a carrier, either sunk or badly damaged. Undoubtedly these figures to some extent reflected an overstatement of requirements based on this experience. At this stage, in September and October 1943, the Navy had yet to become familiar with "the-more-you-use-the-less-you-lose" formula. But the main interest in the 1943 figures lies in the fact that they were calculated in the aftermath of the Guadalcanal campaign and, perhaps even more importantly, on the premise that the invasion of Japan would come about after the Pacific Fleet had fought its way into the western Pacific, and would have won control of the skies over, and the seas that washed, the home islands in the process. When U.S. forces came ashore on Tulagi and Guadalcanal on August 7, 1942, at a time when Americans had not won air superiority over the lower Solomons, the Navy had an order of battle in the southwest Pacific that consisted of the fleet carriers *Saratoga, Enterprise,* and *Hornet* and the escort carrier *Long Island*. In other words, and even allowing for differing scales of anticipated resistance and the obvious differences between a campaign in the southwest Pacific and one off the home islands, four carriers in 1942 were to do with respect to Guadalcanal what planners in 1943 believed would require the services of 157 carriers when it came to Hokkaido and Honshu.

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Marines unloading supplies on Guadalcanal.

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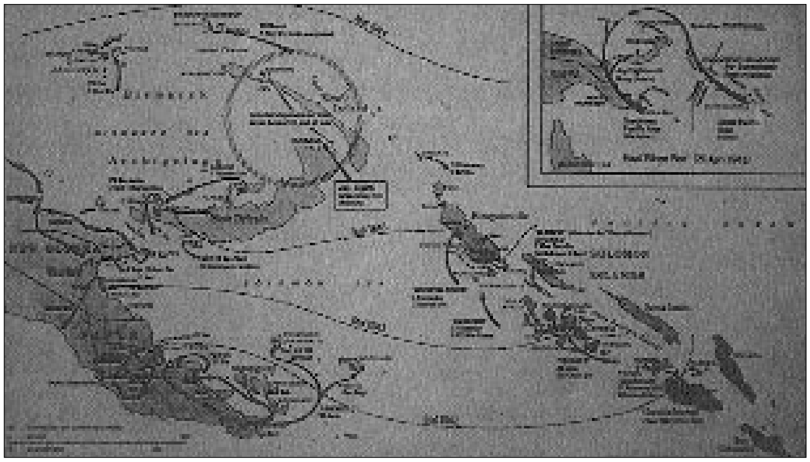
The Southwest Pacific Theater Campaigns, 1942–1944.



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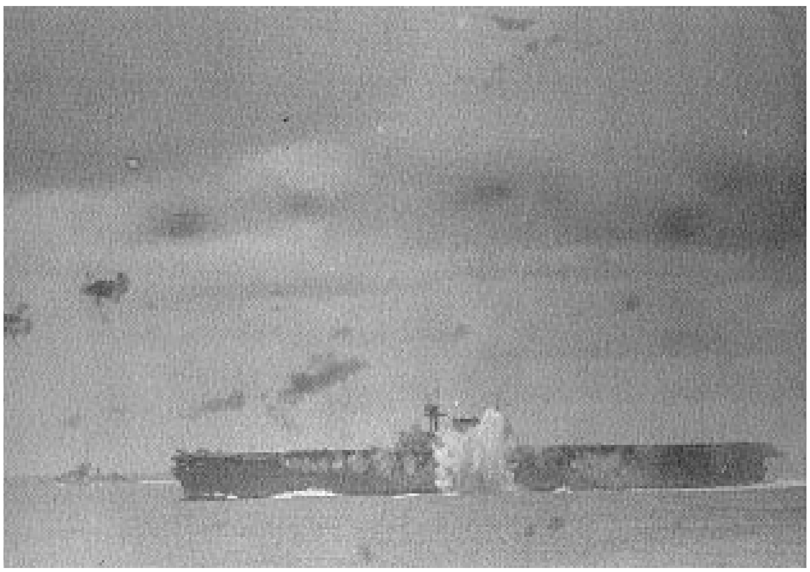

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USS Enterprise **under attack.**

Although the United States both moved some aviation fuel to and evacuated some wounded from Henderson Field by air, the Americans and Japanese moved every soldier, ration, basic load, and gun to Guadalcanal by sea. It was the U.S. ability to maintain convoys to Lunga Point and the Japanese inability to sustain their forces on Guadalcanal that decided the outcome of this campaign. In the course of the campaign American ground forces on the island remained fed, medically treated, and supplied with ammunition whereas the Japanese were not. U.S. units on Guadalcanal were reinforced and rotated on a full-strength basis unlike the Japanese. American air units at Henderson Field were maintained and however weak (with the possible exception of October 13) were never prevented from meeting the enemy in the air. In the crisis of mid-November it was air units operating from Henderson Field in conjunction with carrier groups that inflicted prohibitive losses on Japanese shipping: discounting seaplane operations based at Rekata Bay on Santa Isabel the Japanese had no air units closer than Rabaul—and after October 11, Buin, though it is hard to believe that the haste with which the airfield was prepared, rendered it anything other than marginal to requirements—and never had the opportunity to develop forward bases for units. These facts of life which define the difference between victory and defeat in the lower Solomons provide terms of reference for examining three aspects of the conduct of operations at sea: the supply of forces on land which essentially involved escorts; the provision of cover for forces from enemy attack which necessarily called on fleet units; and the denial to the enemy of the means to sustain forces on the island which concerned primarily shore-based airpower, although it should be noted from the outset that this airpower—or rather its most effective single part—consisted of naval airpower.

Supply

With regard to maintaining the flow of supplies and reinforcements the interdependence of forces is obvious. Although the main task of shepherding shipping from New Caledonia and other places fell to the escorts, the period of maximum danger for this shipping came in the waters that washed Lunga Point which were exposed to attack by enemy aircraft and warships; throughout the campaign U.S. transports and supply ships took losses in these waters. But in making their way forward from New Caledonia the transports and supply ships enjoyed immunity from loss in part because of the effectiveness of their escorts, and losses incurred off Guadalcanal fell primarily on warships or destroyer-transports. Thus Japanese warships accounted for the destroyer *Blue* and APDs *Gregory* and *Little* off Lunga Point on August 22 and September 5, respectively, while APD *Calhoun* was sunk by Japanese aircraft on August 29. Damage to

THE GUADALCANAL CAMPAIGN

Vice Admiral Robert L. Ghormley, USN,
Commander in Chief South Pacific Area
versus
Admiral Shieyoshe Inouye,
Commanding Imperial Japanese Forces at Rabaul

Surface Action—November 13, 1942

U.S. Battle Force: destroyers *Cushing, Laffey, Sterett, O'Bannon, Aaron Ward, Barton, Monssen,* and *Fletcher*; heavy cruisers *San Francisco* and *Portland*; light antiaircraft cruisers *Atlanta* and *Juneau*; and light cruiser *Helena.*

Japanese Battle Force: battleships *Hiei* and *Kirishima*; destroyers *Akatsuki, Amatsukaze, Asagumo, Harusame, Inazuma, Ikazuchi, Murasame, Samidare, Teruzuki, Yukikaze,* and *Yudachi*; light cruiser *Nagara.*

Surface Action—November 15, 1942

U.S. Battle Force: battleships *Washington* and *South Dakota*; destroyers *Walke, Benham, Preston,* and *Gwin.*

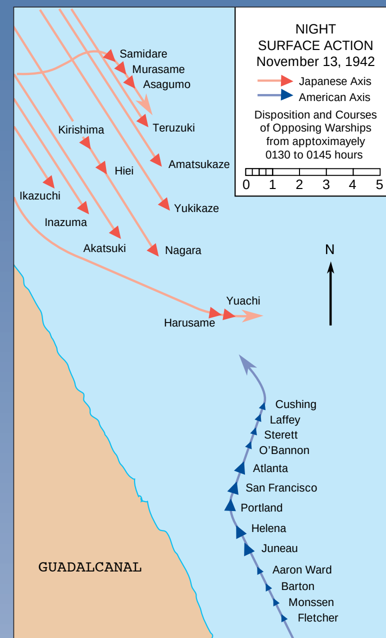
Japanese Battle Force: battleship *Kirishima*; heavy cruisers *Takao* and *Atoga*; light cruisers *Nagara* and *Sendai*; destroyers *Asagumo, Ayanami, Hatsuyuki, Ikazuchi, Samidare, Shikanami, Shirayuki, Teruzuki,* and *Uranami.*

Ships Sunk or Scuttled—November 13 and 15, 1942

United States: *Cushing, Laffey, Atlanta, Juneau, Barton, Monssen, Walke, Benham,* and *Preston* [total crew on board: 2,984].

Japan: *Hiei, Akatsuki, Yudachi, Kirishima,* and *Ayanami* [total crew on board: 3,451].

Sources. Bryan Perrett, *The Battle Book* (New York: Arms and Armour Press, 1992); Eric Hammel, *Guadalcanal: Decision at Sea* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1988).



The night surface action off Lunga Point in Sealark Channel (between Guadalcanal and Savo Island) on November 13, 1942 disrupted the planned Japanese bombardment of Henderson Field.

Source. Eric Hammel, *Guadalcanal: Decision at Sea* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1988).

Alhena on September 29 and accounting for *Alchiba* and *Majaba* in November were exceptions rather than the rule, and the effectiveness of escorts and fleet units in ensuring the safe and timely arrival of shipping can be gauged by the landing of reinforcements on September 18 and November 11, the former involving the 7th Marines and consisting of six transports escorted by three cruisers and seven destroyers. The point would seem clear: even in a period of Japanese superiority the combination of escort forces and shore-based patrol and escort aircraft ensured the security of shipping to Guadalcanal while off the island shore-based airpower conferred a large degree of immunity from losses during daylight hours while fleet units ensured the same in hours of darkness. In fact, U.S. shipping off Guadalcanal enjoyed a high degree of immunity from loss: the Japanese were remarkably ineffective in accounting for shipping in Ironbottom Sound, in part because their forces—whether air, fleet, or submarine—had to divide their respective efforts against different targets.

> it was the U.S. ability to maintain convoys and the Japanese inability to sustain their forces that decided the outcome

Cover

The support of the beachhead against enemy bombardment was obviously the least satisfactory part of the proceedings from the American point of view. The effectiveness of the cover provided for forces ashore and the issue of superiority were obviously linked: satisfactory cover could not be provided unless and until U.S. fleet formations met and defeated their opposite numbers in battle. Once they did and Americans gained command of the waters north of Lunga Point the problems of cover resolved themselves. From this premise two matters would seem to arise. The first is the interdependence of the naval effort involved in wresting the initiative away from the Imperial navy. Carrier forces neutralized their opposite numbers and were themselves neutralized in the process, and surface forces, in the climactic battles of mid-November, broke the back of the Japanese effort. Nevertheless, the issue of superiority was resolved over a three-month, not a three-day, period.

Japanese sub sunk in Kamimbo Bay by the New Zealand corvettes *Kiwi* and *Moa*.

U.S. Army

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Officers confer on board *USS Wasp*, August 7, 1942.

The second point, obvious though it might be, nonetheless demands recognition: the cover provided from Henderson Field limited Japanese freedom of action in the lower Solomons in that they could not operate *en masse* or in daylight and were restricted to night operations that in the final analysis were of limited effectiveness. For all the superiority the Imperial navy exercised in the first three months of the campaign, the degradation of American capacity as a result of fleeting, furtive bombardments in these months was small. This was the result in part to other tasks that surface forces were called on to discharge and because Japanese ships did not have time for the deliberate systematic bombardment that might have worn down American resistance. But in the interest of balance the effectiveness of individual Japanese actions and the narrowness of the margin by which the Imperial navy failed to neutralize Henderson Field in October should be noted. It is probably accurate to state that in terms of action by surface warships against airfields the Japanese operations of mid-October were the most effective by any navy during World War II, although it should also be noted that these operations were directed against a single airfield and that the naval efforts with which comparisons can be made were seldom orchestrated in that way.

The Japanese lacked time for this effort mainly due to the broods perched on Henderson Field. Admittedly the willingness of

USS Wasp with SB2Us and F4Fs on the flight deck.

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U.S. surface forces to contest the Japanese superiority in Ironbottom Sound at night was a growing factor, but it was not until November that this was properly recognized as a result of a defeat that was critically important to breaking the will of the Imperial navy. But the fact was that from August 20—and certainly after August 28—the Japanese were fighting a losing battle not so much with the Americans as with time, and as time worked to the Japanese disadvantage so the cohesion of their forces and efforts was dissipated. While this was not obvious then, the effectiveness of the threat presented by U.S. shore-based airpower at Henderson Field to Japanese operations off Guadalcanal undoubtedly was apparent to both sides.

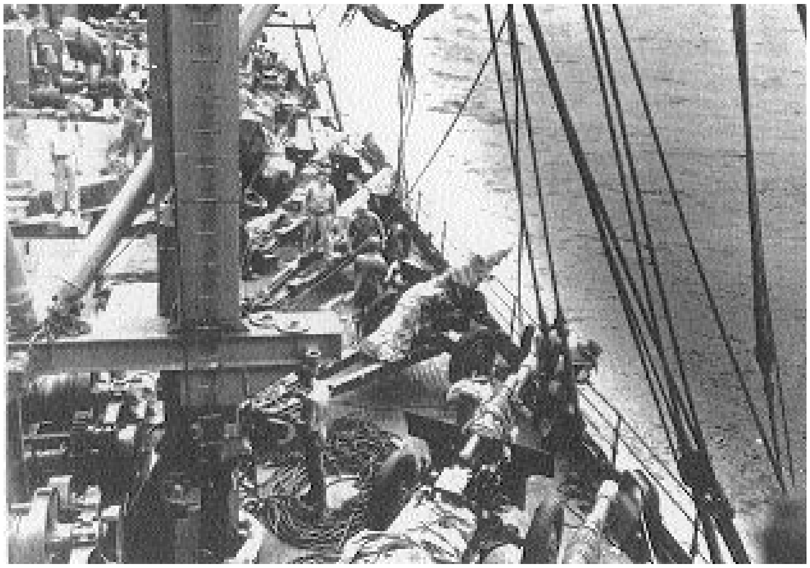
Interdiction

In terms of disrupting Japanese lines of supply, the importance of shore-based airpower is self-evident and well known, hence the need to examine the reverse side of the coin. From the fact that between August 1942 and February 1943 Japanese shipping losses in the southwest Pacific amounted to 60 ships (285,419 tons) out of the total of 214 ships (979,190 tons) lost in all theaters and from all causes, two points immediately emerge. First, U.S. warships and submarines played only a minor direct role in ensuring the isolation of Japanese forces on Guadalcanal. Carrier-based aircraft accounted for just two merchantmen in this period, the only two that carrier-based aircraft sank between May 1942 and October 1943, while warships accounted for three and shared in the destruction of a fourth during this same 18-month period. Second, the role of U.S. submarines, though obviously more substantial, was nevertheless marginal to the outcome of the campaign: crucially, the 24 submarines deployed to the Solomons failed to account for a single merchantman in the critical month of November 1942. Their real value lay not in this theater but elsewhere: in a 7-month period U.S. submarines accounted for 120 ships (578,210 tons) or, in percentages, 56% of Japanese losses in this seven-month period, both by ships and tonnage.

The submarine returns are of interest in that within one or two points they are the same as those for the entire war; in other words, between August 1942 and February 1943, the submarines maintained a rate of sinkings that accorded with their overall returns despite a major and, for much of the time growing, commitment to the Solomons where they were singularly ill-suited to conduct operations. Narrow and restricted waters—although the subs were not committed in the slot—and fast-moving enemy ships were a hard combination with which to contend, not to mention poor intelligence, questionable doctrine, and unreliable torpedoes. Perhaps significantly it was not until January and February 1943, when the main Japanese naval effort had passed its peak and shipping was reduced and less well defended, that U.S. submarines recorded 12 of their 18 sinkings in the southwest Pacific theater between August 1942 and February 1943.

Japanese forces put ashore were fed into the battle piecemeal, without proper support and with minimal, erratic supply

Nevertheless, the main effort against Japanese shipping was borne by the aircraft based at Henderson Field, and it is worth noting from the outset that shore-based air affected the integrity of organization more than causing physical damage. The Japanese forces put ashore on Guadalcanal were fed into the battle piecemeal, without proper support and with minimal, erratic supply, while the Imperial navy only maintained even this line of communication at the expense of time and the cohesion of formations. Attrition invariably involves seldom-acknowledged aspects of war such as time, distance, and the balance of formations and command. They are complemented by more obvious and no less important aspects though in the end, of course, the process of attrition must be physical. Thus the significance of the battles of November 12 through 15 was the defeat in a short time of the main Japanese attempt to use heavy transports to bring forces to Guadalcanal after the main workhorse of this effort had traditionally been destroyers of very limited logistical capacity. Between October 1 and 20, for example, the delivery of nearly 10,000 Japanese troops involved 92 destroyer, 7 cruiser, and 4 seaplane/carrier missions, and however great the handicaps under which American ships



Naval Historical Center (Ashman)

Artillery tubes heading for Guadalcanal.

operated the presence of U.S. airpower at Henderson Field ensured that the handicaps under which the Imperial navy operated were greater—and in the long term that Japanese capital resources were smaller.

The extent of these problems can be understood by considering two sets of data. First, although it was estimated that a 5,000-ton transport could move 2,000 second-echelon troops with equipment or a full regiment with personal equipment, the 5,458-ton *Oyo Maru* was able to carry only 987 soldiers and assorted munitions between Rabaul and Kolombangara in January 1943—such was the erosion of capacity imposed by the haste of loading and the lack of handling facilities at the destination. Second, the circumstances under which the Japanese abandoned the struggle for Guadalcanal—the unacceptable losses sustained in November—is deceptive. In November 1942 the Japanese lost 15 transports of some 94,000 tons in the southwest Pacific, and the fact that most of the losses were concentrated over a matter of days and among some of the better ships available made the losses grievous. The Japanese most certainly could not have tolerated such losses had they been repeated over a protracted period of time but the loss of 15 transports was small when compared with the British loss of 44 transports, supply ships, and auxiliaries (222,824 tons) in April and May 1941 during the course of the evacuation of Greece and Crete.

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Soldiers moving forward on Guadalcanal in January 1943.

The real blow lay in the fact that, according to Japanese sources, the losses in October and November 1942 totalled some 345,000 tons of shipping and that in January 1943 operations in the Solomons required 710,000 tons. One must admit a certain disbelief in these statistics: my own calculations indicate that the statement of Japanese losses of 345,000 tons of merchant shipping in October and November 1942 is overstated though not by much, and one suspects that the figure of 710,000 tons of shipping refers to all operations based on Rabaul, not just those in the Solomons. But accepting these figures at face value, one can note the aspect of attrition imposed by time and distance because such shipping had to be found from a total of some 5,900,000 tons available to Japan at a time when she could not meet her import requirements and, for the first time, her losses exceeded replacement capacity (in October or November 1942 shipping tonnage showed the first real decline since the start of the Pacific war). Moreover, in November 1942 the Imperial army, having returned shipping to trade throughout the early summer but thereafter having stopped transfers, for the first time had to requisition merchant shipping to cover its losses. Herein, one suspects, is the real reason why the losses of November 1942 were so unacceptable, not so much for themselves as for the loss relative to theater resources and to national requirements.

In conclusion, a number of points could be made about the naval campaign off and over Guadalcanal, some relating to wider aspects of war and others to aspects of joint warfare. The only World War II campaign with which Guadalcanal can be compared is Malta, and whereas the Americans triumphed in the lower Solomons in large measure because of the successful employment of different aspects of operations, in the Mediterranean the fate of Malta was to be decided in very large measure because the Axis powers were unable to do the same. With regard to wider aspects of the war, the period of maximum danger for a fleet is

Avenger being readied for takeoff from *USS Enterprise.*

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when it is tied to the operations of forces ashore: the danger exists irrespective of whether the army advances or retreats, but the period of greatest peril is when the army is not moving at all. Obviously this was the case for both the American and Japanese navies, and one is tempted to consider the Japanese naval effort against Henderson Field in an historical context framed by the Nelsonian dictum that only a fool attacks forts. To assert this, however, may stretch certain definitions, especially when there are other more immediate and important matters at hand. One vital factor would be the critical importance of position and time in deciding the issue of battle, and it could be noted that the U.S. victory was not a result of strategic or tactical superiority—quite the contrary—but of an adherence to basic principles of concentration, offensive action, and maintaining the objective. The Americans traded ships for the security of the airfield and safety of its transports, just as the *Serapis* had done so successfully long ago. American forces ensured victory through loss. The United States achieved this in part because of what today would be called "reconstitution" in the form of the new warships that were to come into service in 1943; but if victory in the Pacific was the result of supremacy in 1942 that supremacy was to be gained by victory.

the Americans traded ships for the security of the airfield and safety of its transports

In terms of joint warfare the points that emerge from any consideration of the naval aspects of the Guadalcanal campaign would be the critical importance of the integrated effort involving warships, submarines, and both carrier- and shore-based airpower; the elusiveness of the single "decisive battle"; and the relevance of recognizing in the search for a joint approach to war the importance of diversity. With regard to the latter, and at a time when budgetary stringencies stress the attractiveness of general-purpose aircraft, the significance of air operations from Henderson Field is too easy to miss: the American aircraft which carried the burden of operations against Japanese warships and

THE GUADALCANAL CAMPAIGN

August 7, 1942–February 7, 1943

Land Forces

United States: 1st Marine Division; relieved in December 1942 by XIV Corps (2d Marine Division and the Army's Americal and 25th Divisions) [1,600 killed, 4,200 wounded, and 12,000 incapacitated by disease].

Japan: 17th Army, plus reinforcements, totalling approximately 20,000 [14,000 killed in action, 9,000 died from disease or starvation, an unknown number wounded, and 1,000 captured].

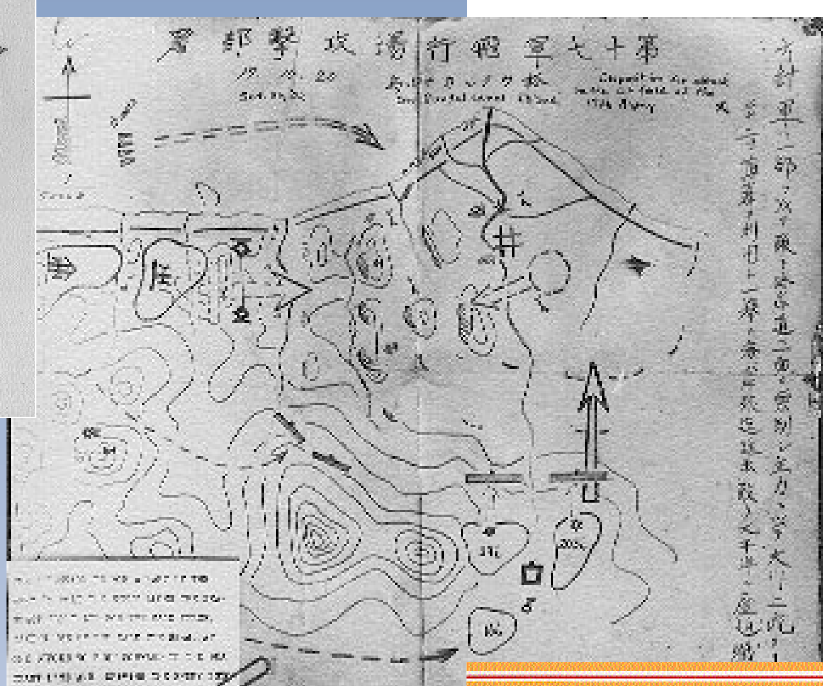
Source. Bryan Perrett, *The Battle Book* (New York: Arms and Armour Press, 1992).

1st Marine Division patch.

transports were purpose-built naval strike aircraft operating from a base ashore, not land-based Army Air Force aircraft. These points aside, the actions of November 12–15 were the most important single episodes of the Guadalcanal campaign—in terms of their psychological importance in that American forces for the first time outfought the Japanese at night and in terms of these actions coming at the end of a 3-month period in which the Japanese skin had been drawn ever more tightly over an American drum. To the warships, most obviously to the *Washington*, went the final credit for the destruction of the Japanese effort in the lower Solomons, but perhaps more significant than the sinking of the *Kirishima* was that of the *Hiei*. She may well have been saved had it not been for incessant attacks by carrier- and shore-based aircraft on the day after being mauled in the course of a night action with U.S. cruisers and destroyers. Somehow, that the action which marked the ebbing of the Japanese tide in the lower Solomons saw the destruction of an Imperial navy battleship as a result of the combined efforts of warships, carrier-based, and shore-based aircraft seems an appropriate, even ecumenical, comment on the naval dimension of the Guadalcanal campaign. **JFQ**

Courtesy of the Marine Corps Historical Center

Sketch of a marine on Guadalcanal by Donald L. Dixon.



Courtesy of the Marine Corps Historical Center

A map discovered on Guadalcanal depicting a Japanese plan to push American forces into the sea with a three-pronged attack by elements of the 16th, 29th, and 203d regiments.