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# The Round Tablette

*Founding Editor: James W. Gerber, MD (1951–2009)*

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**Welcome to the September session and to the 24<sup>th</sup> year of the Harold C. Deutsch World War II History Roundtable.** Our speaker tonight is author Jon Hoffman, joined by veterans attending the National Guadalcanal Veterans' Reunion.

On 3 July 1942, one of MacArthur's reconnaissance B-17s discovered an airfield under construction on Guadalcanal. Bombers and fighters flying off the field could interdict US shipping to Australia. The First Marine Division, arriving in New Zealand to prepare for combat, found itself preparing for a combat landing. The transports were not combat loaded, and New Zealand longshoremen refused to work outside of union hours. Marines did the work and prepared for a practice landing in .

Ninety miles long and averaging twenty five miles wide the island of Guadalcanal consists of rugged mountainous terrain of dormant volcanoes up to 8,000 feet, steep ravines, and deep streams. There are no natural harbors, and miles of coral reefs protect the south shores. Only the north central beaches are suitable for invasion. Rife with malaria and other mosquito borne illnesses, the hot and humid jungle climate made disease the greatest single factor in reducing troop effectiveness. For every casualty in combat, five fell to disease.

The Tulagi- Guadalcanal operation that began on August 7, 1942 opened the American counter-offensive in the Pacific. The Marines (Major-General Alexander A. Vandegrift) landed on Red Beach and met little resistance. After establishing their beach-head and seizing the airfields, nothing went right. Supplies were haphazardly off loaded onto the beach. Congestion prevented some landing craft from discharging cargo. On August 9<sup>th</sup>, the Marines land on Savo Island to the north of Guadalcanal. Fearing attack, Vice-Admiral Frank J. Fletcher, commanding the naval task force, pulled his

forces out of the area almost immediately after landing, leaving the Marines without most of their food and prime movers, and only 4 days of ammunition. Disaster followed.

Australian patrol aircraft failed to quickly report Japanese warships headed south out of Rabaul into 'the Slot' (the area between the parallel line of islands making up the Solomons). The Japanese Navy (IJN) was able to sink four cruisers, damaged two destroyers, and one heavy cruiser before breaking off action in the dark.

Fortunately, the airfield on the island (re-named Henderson Field) was nearly finished and within two weeks Navy SeaBees completed it. On 20 August the first Marine aircraft flew in. Joined by the Army Air Force 67<sup>th</sup> Fighter Sqdn, the "Cactus Air Force" gained air superiority over the Island.

US commanders made mistakes, but Japanese arrogance and miscalculations also aided the Americans. Misled by Savo Island, the Imperial General Staff believed the Guadalcanal landing was just a raid, and sent in only a regiment to regain the airfield. This led to an ill-prepared Japanese assault on August 21<sup>st</sup>, in which the Marines almost wiped out the attackers in a night of savage fighting. Subsequently, both sides rushed to build up forces on Guadalcanal, the Japanese by night, and the Americans by day.

As the forces were built up a series of naval battles were going on around Guadalcanal, on August 24<sup>th</sup>, the Americans sank the small carrier *Ryujo*, and the USS *Enterprise* received three bomb hits that put it out of action. On September 13<sup>th</sup> the Japanese tried to break through to Henderson field but the Marines held. In early October the Navy was able to get the 164<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the Americal Division, under the command of Major-General Millard F. Harmon into Guadalcanal. The Japanese, with one division ashore, attempted a three-pronged attack on American positions. Over two nights of fighting, the Americans were able to hold off the Japanese.

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At the same time as these attacks on land were being carried out, naval battles continued at a fever pitch even though they were less than decisive. The Japanese sank the carrier *Wasp* and badly damaged the carrier *Saratoga* and the new battleship *North Carolina*. The Americans were able to get the better of the Japanese because of the use of radar and Japanese confusion. The indecisiveness of the naval battles caused a change in leadership as Nimitz fired Ghormley and replaced him with Vice Admiral William F. "Bull" Halsey, who was considered a more aggressive combat sailor.

In November, the Japanese attempted to land more reinforcements on Guadalcanal and their heavy cruisers and battleships bombard Henderson Field. On November 12-13 the IJN attacked US ships off Guadalcanal to protect an attempt to land troops. US forces were able to turn the Japanese back and the Navy sank the battleship *Hiei*. On the 14<sup>th</sup>, the Japanese returned but the US sank seven out of eleven troop transports. In a rare clash of battleships, the *South Dakota* and *Washington* defeated the *Kirishima*. After this, the IJN refused to risk more capital ships, while trying to land troop; efforts which ended by mid-December.

In January 1943, the Americans were able to take the upper hand, as the 2<sup>nd</sup> Marine Division replaced the 1<sup>st</sup> and the 25<sup>th</sup> Army Division and the remainder of the Americal Division arrived. Finally, despite American efforts to defeat them, the Japanese from evacuated 13,000 troops off the island at Cape Esperance.

The Guadalcanal campaign turned back the Japanese drive to Australia and secured supply routes across the South Pacific. It cost the Japanese Navy almost half of its fighter pilots and undermined the IJN's capacity to fight on near-equal terms with Allied forces. The air, land, and naval battles, won because of the growing American industrial ability to replace lost ships, planes, and personnel, collectively turned the tide on Japan.

**Further Readings:**

- ◆Richard B. Frank, *Guadalcanal: The Definitive Account of the Landmark Battle* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992)
- ◆Samuel B. Griffith II, *The Battle for Guadalcanal* (Champaign, IL: University of

Illinois Press, 1991)

◆Jon Hoffman, *Chesty: The Story of Lieutenant General Lewis B. Puller, USMC* (New York: Random House, 2002)

◆Jon Hoffman, *Once a Legend: Red Mike Edson of the Marine Raiders* (New York: Presidio Press, 2001.)

◆Stanley Coleman Jersey, *Hell's Island: The Untold Story of Guadalcanal* (College Station, TX: Texas A & M University Press, 2008)

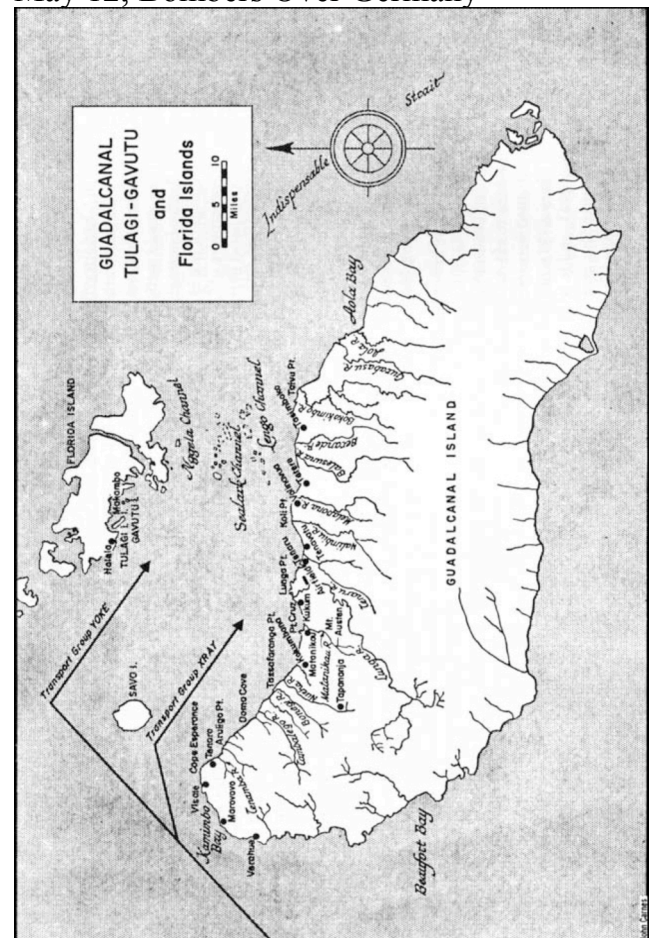
◆Jon Parshall, [Japanese] Combined Fleets [http://www.combinedfleet.com/battles/Guadalcanal\\_Campaign](http://www.combinedfleet.com/battles/Guadalcanal_Campaign) website

◆Richard Tregaskis, *Guadalcanal Diary – Modern Library Edition* (New York: Random House Inc, 2000)

◆US NPS, *Marines in WW2 Series* online <http://www.nps.gov/archive/wapa/indepth/xtcontent/usmc/pcn-190-003117-00/sec1.htm>

Round Table Schedule 2010-2011

- Sept. 9, Guadalcanal Veterans Reunion
- Oct. 14, Rhone Valley Campaign
- Oct. 28, MIA Recovery Operations
- Nov. 11, HCD Lecture: Yalta Conference
- Dec. 12, Pearl Harbor
- Jan. 13, 2011 Eastern Front Tank Battles
- Feb. 10, Relief of the Philippines
- Mar. 10, Coast Guard Role In Naval Ops
- Apr. 14, Battle of Cassino
- May 12, Bombers Over Germany



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BOOK SALE – DR. JIM GERBER’S ESTATE WILL BE SELLING SOME OF HIS BOOKS AT THE

OCT. 14 ROUND TABLE