Welcome to the September session of the Dr. Harold C. Deutsch World War II History Round Table. Tonight’s speaker is Trent Hone, author of *Learning War*. He will discuss the improvisation of the Guadalcanal Campaign that stopped the advance of the Japanese “Centrifugal Offensive” in the South Pacific and set up the turning points of the war in the Pacific. Veterans of the South Pacific Campaigns will join him.

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. This accelerated the anticipated American pincers offensive (Gen. Douglas MacArthur working from New Guinea to the Philippines while Adm. Chester Nimitz seized key islands across the Pacific) substantially, and the First Marine Division, newly arrived in New Zealand to prepare for combat was tasked with seizing the airfield and turning it into an American base. Their organizationally loaded transports had to be reloaded for combat, which the Marines had to do themselves since New Zealand longshoremen would not work outside union hours.

Ninety miles long and averaging twenty-five mile wide, Guadalcanal’s jungle terrain is rugged and mountainous, steep ravines and deep streams flank dormant volcanoes that rise up to 8,000 feet. There are no natural harbors, and miles of coral reefs protect the south shores. Only the north central beaches were suitable landing zones. 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.

**Operation Watchtower** began 7 August 1942 with simultaneous landings on Guadalcanal, Tulagi, Gavutu, and Tanambogo, opening the American counter-offensive in the Pacific. Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) forces on the three small islands fiercely resisted to the last man. The main landings on Guadalcanal’s “Red Beach” met little resistance, established their beach-head and seized the airfields. Nothing after that went right. Supplies were haphazardly off-loaded onto the beach. Congestion prevented some landing craft from discharging cargo. Fearing attack, Vice Admiral Frank J. Fletcher, commanding the naval task force, pulled his carriers out of the area almost immediately after landing and left Rear Admiral Richmond Turner’s amphibious force unprotected. Unloading as much materiel and equipment as they could, the amphibious force departed, leaving the Marines without most of their food and moving equipment, 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). In a night attack on 8-9 August, the IJN was able to sink four cruisers, damage two destroyers, and one heavy cruiser – the “Battle of Savo Island.” 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 67th Fighter Squadron, the “Cactus Air Force” gained air superiority over the Island.

US commanders made mistakes, but Japanese miscalculations and arrogance, believing that winning was their destiny, 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 21st, 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 24th, the Americans sank the small carrier *Ryujo*, and the USS *Enterprise* received three bomb hits that put it out of action. On September 13th, the Japanese tried to break through to Henderson Field, but the Marines held. In early October the Navy was able to get the 164th 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.

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 Fleet Admiral Chester Nimitz (CincPac) fired Vice Admiral Robert 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 bombarded 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 14th, 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 troops, efforts which ended by mid-December.

In January 1943, the Americans were able to take the upper hand, as the 2nd Marine Division replaced the 1st and the 25th Army Division and the remainder of the Americal Division arrived. Finally, despite American efforts to defeat them, the Japanese 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 we won, and the growing American industrial ability to replace lost ships, planes, and personnel, collectively turned the tide in the Southwest Pacific.

FURTHER READINGS:


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


FURTHER READINGS:
Twin Cities Civil War Round Table - 18 Sept. 2018 – Battle for Culp’s Hill- www.tc cwrt.com - info@tcwrt.com

St. Croix Valley Civil War Round Table - 24 Sept. 2018 – 2 Families in War: Bullochs & Roosevelts - 715-386-1268 - rossandhaines@comcast.net

Civil War Symposium - 6 Apr. 2019 - info@tcwrt.com


Minnesota Air Guard Museum - www.mnangmuseum.org 612-713-2523

Friends of Ft. Snelling, www.fortsnellie.org


Military History Book Club, Har Mar Barnes & Noble: - Hue 1968: a Turning Point - sdaultenspezek52@gmail.com

Winston Churchill Book Club: Info: lin.hopkins@hotmail.com

Honor Flight - Jerry Kyser - crazyjerry45@hotmail - 651-338-2717

CAF - Commemorative Air Force - www.cafmn.org 651-455-6942

We need volunteers to drive our veterans to and from meetings. Please contact Don Patton at cell 612-867-5144 or coldpatton@yahoo.com

Round Table Schedule 2018-2019

2018

13 Sept. Guadalcanal
11 Oct. POWs in WWII
25 Oct. WWI Relative to WWII
8 Nov. Consocracies vs. Hitler
13 Dec. Pearl Harbor

2019

10 Jan. Inside Hitler’s Headquarters
14 Feb. Economics of War
14 Mar. Aerial Reconnaissance of the Reich
28 Mar. WASPs
11 Apr. General with Six Stars: J. H. C. Lee
9 May D-Day

See our programs on YouTube at http://youtube.com/ww2hrt