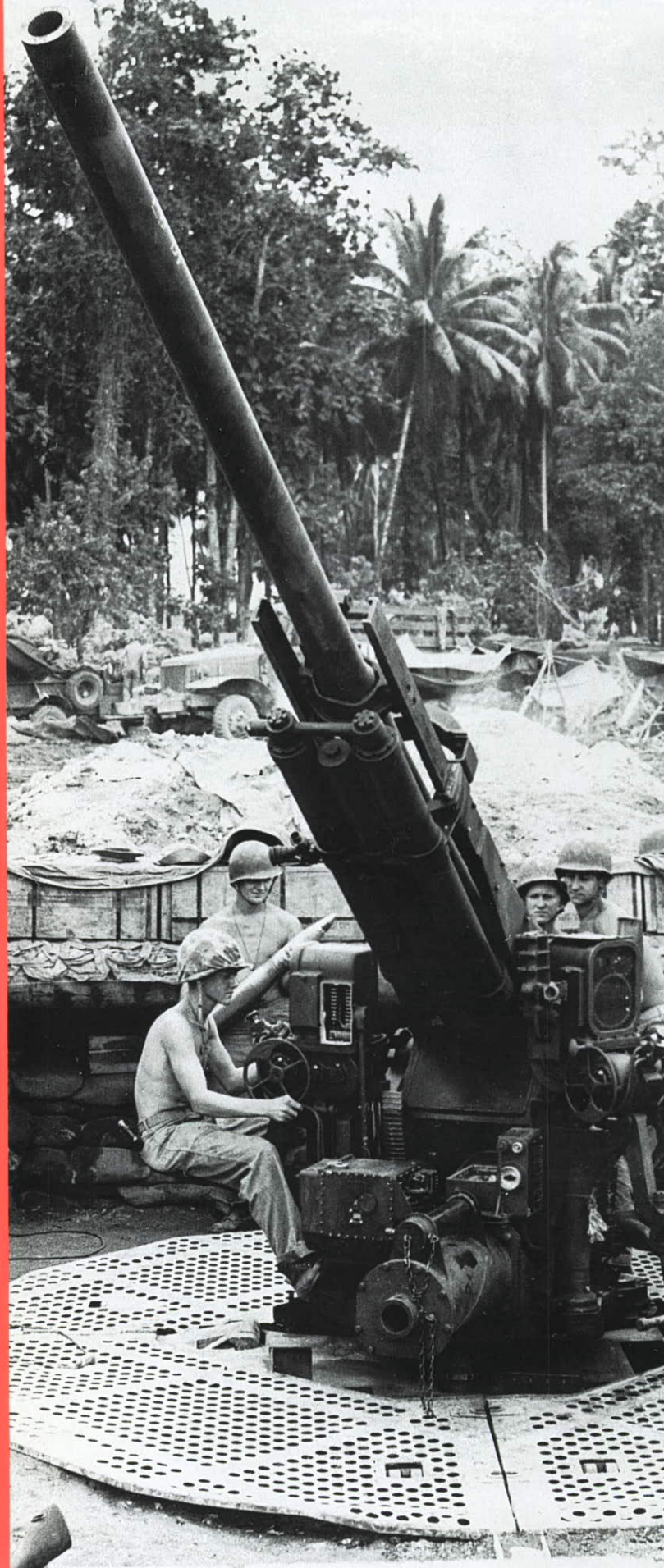
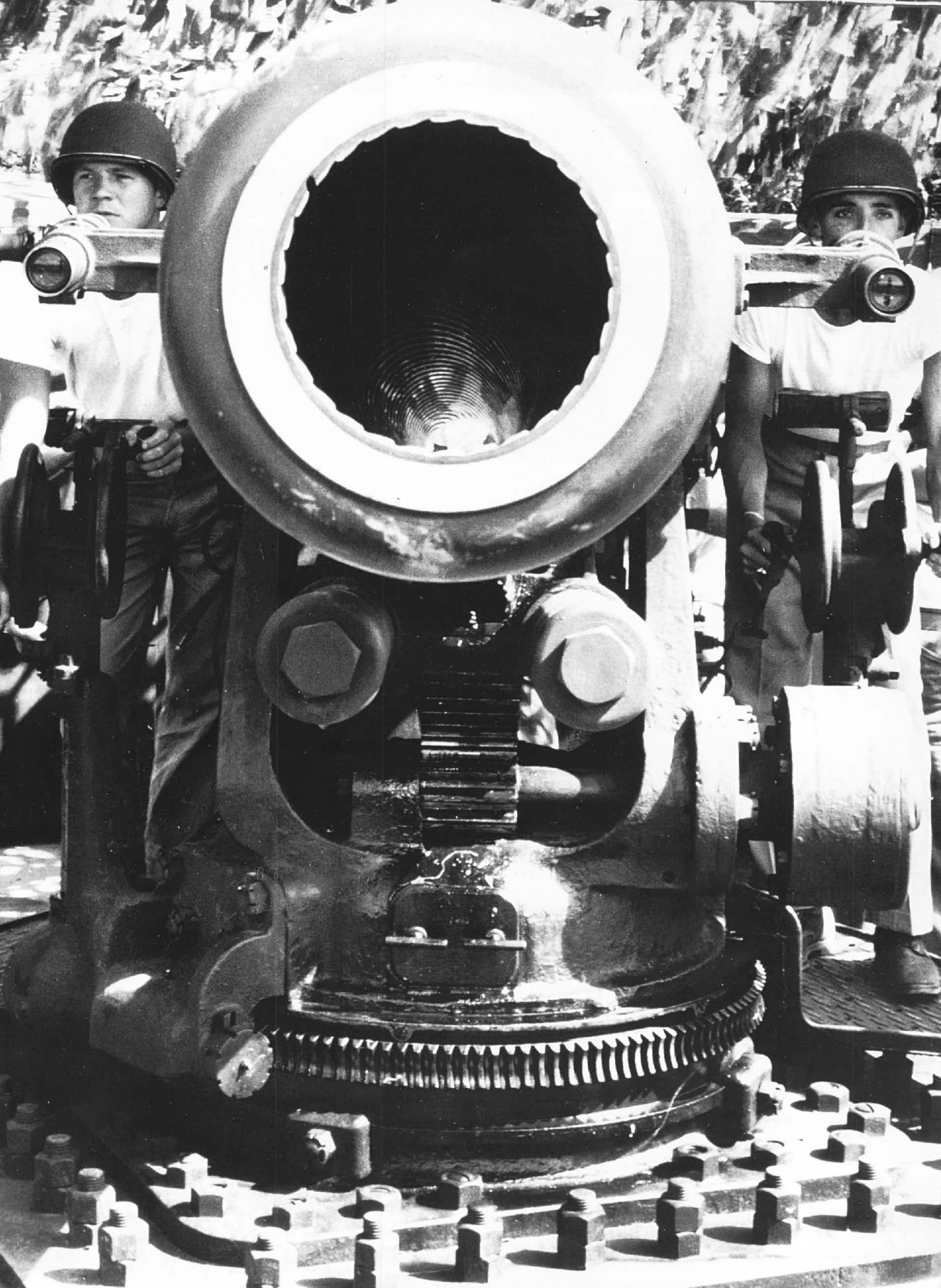


CONDITION RED:
MARINE DEFENSE
BATTALIONS IN
WORLD WAR II

MARINES IN
WORLD WAR II
COMMEMORATIVE SERIES

BY MAJOR CHARLES D. MELSON
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Japan, its military leaders confident they could stagger the United States and gain time to seize the oil and other natural resources necessary to dominate the western Pacific, attacked Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, sinking or badly damaging 18 ships, destroying some 200 aircraft, and killing more than 2,300 American servicemen. Though caught by surprise, Marines of the 1st, 3d, and 4th Defense Battalions standing guard in Hawaii fought back as best they could. Few heavy weapons were yet in place, and ammunition remained stored on shipboard, along with many of the guns. Nevertheless, these units had eight anti-aircraft machine guns in action within six minutes after the first bombs exploded at 0755. By 0820, 13 machine guns were manned and ready, and they cut loose when a second wave of Japanese aircraft began its attack a few minutes later. Unfortunately, shells for the 3-inch anti-aircraft guns did not reach the hurriedly deployed firing batteries until after the second and final wave of attacking aircraft had completed its deadly work. The Marines responded to the surprise raid with small arms and an eventual total of 25 machine guns, claiming the des-

truction of three aircraft during the morning's fighting.

As the Japanese aircraft carriers withdrew after the raid on Pearl Harbor, a pair of enemy destroyers began shelling Midway Island shortly before midnight on 7 December to neutralize the aircraft based there. A salvo directed against Midway's Sand Island struck the power plant, which served as the command post of the 6th Defense Battalion, grievously wounding First Lieutenant George H. Cannon. He remained at his post until the other Marines wounded by the same shell could be cared for and his communications specialist, Corporal Harold Hazelwood, had put the battalion switchboard back into action. Cannon, who died of his wounds, earned the first Medal of Honor awarded a Marine officer during World War II. Hazelwood received a Navy Cross.

Base Defense in a Possible War with Japan

For decades before Japan gambled its future on a war with the United States, the Marine Corps developed the doctrine, equipment, and organization needed for just such a conflict. Although the Army provided troops for the defense of the Philippines, the westernmost American possession in the Pacific, the Marine Corps faced two formidable challenges: placing garrisons on any of the smaller possessions that the Navy might use as bases at the onset of war; and seizing and defending the additional naval bases that would enable the United States to project its power to the very shores of Japan's Home Islands. A succession of Orange war

plans—Orange stood for Japan in a series of color-coded planning documents—provided the strategy for the amphibious offensive required to defeat Japan and the defensive measures to protect the bases upon which the American campaign would depend.

As a militaristic Japan made inroads into China in the 1930s, concern heightened for the security of Wake, Midway, Johnston, and Palmyra Islands, the outposts protecting Hawaii, a vital staging area for a war in the Pacific. (Although actually atolls—tiny islands clustered on a reef-fringed lagoon—Wake, Midway, Johnston, and Palmyra have traditionally been referred to as islands.) By 1937, the Marine Corps was discussing the establishment of battalion-size security detachments on the key Pacific outposts, and the following year's War Plan Orange proposed dispatching this sort of defense detachment to three of the Hawaiian outposts—Wake, Midway, and Johnston. The 1938 plan called for a detachment of 28 officers and 428 enlisted Marines at Midway, armed with 5-inch coastal defense guns, 3-inch anti-aircraft weapons, searchlights for illuminating targets at night, and machine guns. The Wake detachment, similarly equipped, was to be slightly smaller, 25 officers and 420 enlisted men. The Johnston Island group would consist of just nine officers and 126 enlisted men and have only the anti-aircraft guns, searchlights, and machine guns. The plan called for the units to deploy by M-Day—the date of an American mobilization for war—"in sufficient strength to repel minor

On the Cover: *The crew of a 90mm gun stands by for action in the Solomons during November 1943. (Department of Defense photo [USMC])*

At left: *Defense battalion Marines man a 5-inch seacoast gun at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. (Department of Defense photo [USMC])*



Department of Defense photo (USCG)

Fires started by bombs dropped by Japanese aircraft are still burning at Pearl Harbor as Marines set up a 3-inch anti-aircraft gun on the parade ground of the Marine Barracks. By the end of 1942, 14 Marine defense battalions were in existence.

naval raids and raids by small landing parties." In the fall of 1938, an inspection party visited the sites to look for possible gun positions and fields of fire and to validate the initial manpower estimates.

Meanwhile, a Congressionally authorized board, headed by Admiral Arthur J. Hepburn, a former Commander in Chief, Pacific Fleet, investigated the need to acquire additional naval bases in preparation for war. While determining that Guam, surrounded by Japanese possessions, could not be defended; the Hepburn Board emphasized the importance of Midway, Wake, Johnston, and Palmyra. As a result, during 1939 and 1940, Colonel Harry K. Pickett—Marine Officer, 14th Naval District, and Commanding Officer, Marine Barracks, Pearl Harbor Navy Yard—made detailed surveys of the four atolls.

In 1940, the Army and Navy blended the various color plans, including Orange, into a series of Rainbow Plans designed to meet a threat from Germany, Japan, and Italy acting in concert. The plan that seemed most realistic, Rainbow 5, envisioned that an Anglo-American coalition would wage war against all three

potential enemies, defeating Germany first, while conducting only limited offensive operations in the Pacific, and ultimately throwing the full weight of the alliance against Japan. Such was the basic strategy in effect when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor.

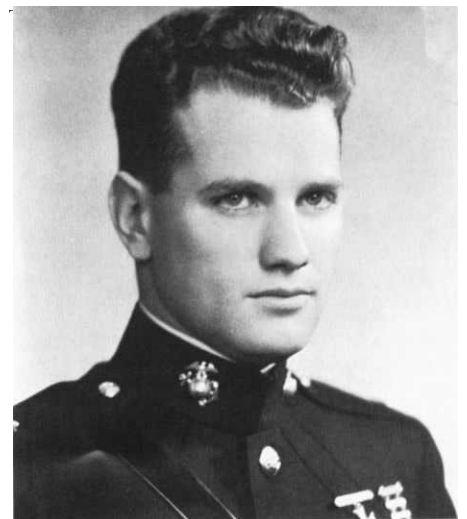
An Organization for Base Defense

The interest of the Marine Corps in base defense predated the proposal in the Orange Plan of 1937 to install defense detachments at Wake, Midway, and Johnston Islands. Although the spirit of the offensive predominated over the years, both the Advanced Base Force, 1914-1919, and the Fleet Marine Force, established in 1933, trained to defend the territory they seized. In 1936, despite the absence of primarily defensive units, the Marine Corps Schools at Quantico, Virginia, taught a 10-month course in base defense, stressing coordination among aviation, anti-aircraft, and artillery.

The increasingly volatile situation in the Pacific, which led ultimately to war, the evolving Orange plan for a war against Japan, and the long-time interest of the Marine Corps in base defense set the stage for the cre-

ation of defense battalions to garrison the crescent of outposts stretching from Wake and Midway to Samoa. Influenced by American isolationist attitudes, Major General Commandant Thomas Holcomb decided to ask for funds to form new defensive—rather than offensive—units. In carrying out the provisions of the plan for a conflict with Orange, the Commandant intended 1stLt George H. Cannon of the 6th Defense Battalion, though mortally wounded by fire from a Japanese submarine on 7 December 1941, refused to leave his post on Midway. After the war, he was awarded the Medal of Honor.

Department of Defense photo (USMC) 11158



to make the best use of appropriated funds, which had only begun to increase after the outbreak of war in Europe during September 1939. In doing so he reminded the public that the Marine Corps would play a vital role in defending the nation. After the war, General Gerald C. Thomas recalled in his oral history that General Holcomb realized that Congress was unlikely to vote money for purely offensive purposes as long as the United States remained at peace. At a time when even battleships and heavy bombers were being touted as defensive weapons, Holcomb seized on the concept of defense battalions as a means of increasing the strength of the Corps beyond the current 19,432 officers and men.

Two officers at Marine Corps headquarters, Colonel Charles D. Barrett and Lieutenant Colonel Robert H. Pepper, turned concept into reality by drawing up detailed plans for organizations expressly designed to defend advance bases. The Kentucky-born Barrett entered the Marine Corps in 1909, served in the occupation of Vera Cruz, Mexico, in 1914, and during World War II would become a major general; in 1943, while commanding I Marine Amphibious Corps, he died as a result of an accident. Pepper, would

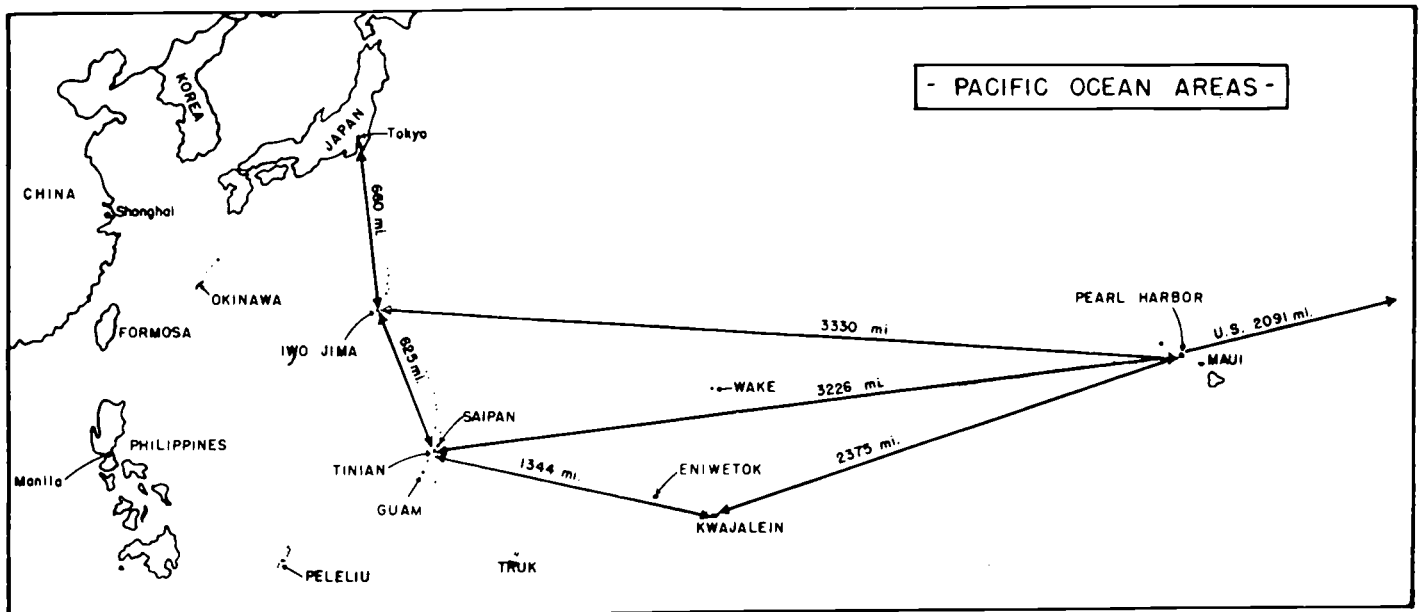
rise to the rank of lieutenant general, assuming command of Fleet Marine Force, Pacific, after the war. Aware that isolationism still gripped the United States in 1939, the two planners emphasized the defensive mission of the new units, stressing their ability to "hold areas for the ultimate offensive operations of the Fleet." As the danger of war with Japan increased, the first of several 900-man defense battalions took shape in the United States. Each of the new outfits consisted of three anti-aircraft batteries, three seacoast batteries, ground and anti-aircraft machine gun batteries, and a team of specialists in administration and weapons maintenance.

In late 1939, when the Marine Corps formed its first defense battalions, the future was still obscure. Japan remained heavily engaged in China, but a "phony war" persisted in western Europe. At Marine Corps headquarters, some advocates of the defense battalions may have felt that these new units were all the service would need by way of expansion, at least for now. On the other hand, within the G-3 Division of Holcomb's staff, officers like Colonel Pedro A. del Valle kept their eyes fixed on a more ambitious goal, the organization of Marine divisions. Eventually, the Marine Corps would expand,

creating six divisions and reaching a maximum strength in excess of 450,000, but the frenzied growth occurred after Japan attacked the Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941.

In the immediate aftermath of the outbreak of war in Europe and President Franklin D. Roosevelt's declaration of a limited national emergency, the Marine Corps grew by small increments that included the defense battalions. To explain the role of these units, General Holcomb in 1940 circulated throughout the Corps a classified document drafted by First Lieutenant Robert D. Heinl, Jr., who would serve in a wartime defense battalion, become the author of widely read articles and books and active in the Marine Corps historical program, and attain the grade of colonel. Heinl declared that "through sheer necessity, the Marine Corps has devised a sort of expeditionary coast artillery capable of occupying an untenanted and undefended locality, of installing an all around sea-air defense, and this within three days."

In his annual report to the Secretary of the Navy for the fiscal year ending in June 1940, General Holcomb stated that four battalions had been established and two others authorized. "The use of all six of these defense battalions can be fore-



seen in existing plans," he wrote, adding that the fleet commanders had already requested additional units of this type. The new organizations took advantage of the latest advances in automatic weapons, radios, tanks, coast and antiaircraft artillery, sound-ranging gear, and the new mystery – radar. Teams of specialists, which had mastered an array of technical skills, it was hoped would enable a comparatively small unit to defend a beachhead or airfield complex against attack from the sea or sky. As time passed and strategic circumstances changed, the defense battalions varied in strength, weaponry, and other gear. As an official historical summary of the defense battalions has pointed out, their composition also reflected "the geographic nature of their location and the availability of equipment." Consequently, the same battalion might require a different mix of specialists over the years.

Organization and Equipment for the Defense Battalion

Envisioned as combined arms teams capable of delivering intense firepower, defense battalions were expected to have their greatest impact in the kind of campaign outlined in the Orange plan. The Navy's seagoing transports provided strategic mobility for the defense battalions, but once ashore, the units lacked vehicles and manpower for tactical mobility. Because the battalion became essentially immobile when it landed, each member had a battle station, as on a ship, to operate a particular crew-served weapon or other piece of equipment. As configured in 1939 and 1940, a defense battalion could achieve mobility on land only by leaving its artillery, searchlights, and detection gear and fighting as infantry.

Marine Corps defense battalions could operate as integral units in support of a base or beachhead, positioning their weapons and equipment



Department of Defense photo (USMC) 61403 MajGen Charles D. Barrett, while a colonel, together with LtCol Robert H. Pepper, played a major role in the development of the defense battalion.

to cover assigned sectors and meet specific threats. Moreover, they might form detachments with a size and armament suitable for a particular task, such as defending various islets within an atoll or protecting separate beachheads. Although relatively static when in place, the ability of the battalions to divide in this fashion provided a kind of flexibility that may not have been fully appreciated in 1939, when the basic concept placed one battalion, though of variable size, at a given place.

Because a defense battalion could, in effect, form task organizations, it somewhat resembled the larger infantry regiment, which could employ battalion combat teams. According to Lieutenant Heintz, in terms of "strength and variety of material," the defense battalion "might well be a regiment. Actually, the seacoast and antiaircraft artillery groups are almost small battalions, while the other three separate batteries (searchlight and sound locator and the two machine gun units) are undeniable batteries in the accepted sense of the word."

Despite the lieutenant's enthusiasm

for the defense battalions, they had definite weaknesses, particularly in infantry and armor for mobile reserves in the event of a large-scale enemy landing. The failings, however, seemed acceptable to the General Board of the Navy – roughly comparable to the War Department's General Staff – which felt that the battalions could nevertheless protect outlying bases against raids by aircraft, ships, and comparatively small landing parties. Concern that the defense battalions, in their current configuration, might not be able to repulse more ambitious hostile landings caused the Marine Corps to debate, during the spring of 1941, the feasibility of creating separate infantry battalions to fight alongside the defense units.

The proposed 850-man infantry battalions would forestall any possible need to detail infantrymen from the regiments to reinforce the defense battalions. Consequently, Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox approved the creation of separate infantry battalions to serve with the defense battalions. After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the regiments and divisions – and for a time the specialized units such as the raiders – demanded a lion's share of manpower, and with few exceptions, the defense battalions had to fend for themselves without the planned infantry battalions, though occasionally with an organic rifle company. Every Marine in a typical defense battalion had to train to fight as an infantryman in an emergency, with the members of gun and searchlight crews leaving their usual battle stations. Rifle companies served at various times with the 6th, 7th, and 51st Defense Battalions, and such a component was planned for the 52d, but not assigned. Those battalions that included a company of infantry bore the title "composite."

Improvements in equipment, a changing strategic situation, and deployment in areas that varied from

desolate coral atolls to dense jungle ensured that no single table of equipment or organization could apply at all times to every defense battalion. Each of the organizations tended to be unique—"one of a kind," as a battalion's history stated. Weapons and personnel reflected a unit's destination and duties, much as a child's Erector set took the shape dictated by the person assembling the parts, or such was the view of James H. Powers, a veteran of the 8th Defense Battalion. The selection and assignment of men and equipment proved a dynamic process, as units moved about, split into detachments, underwent redesignation, and traded old equipment for new. Much of the weapons and material came from the stocks of the U.S. Army, which had similarly equipped coast and anti-aircraft artillery units. The first 155mm guns dated from World War I, but the Army quickly made modern types available, along with new 90mm anti-aircraft guns that replaced the 3-inch weapons initially used by the defense battalions. In addition, the Army provided both primitive sound-ranging equipment and three types of Signal Corps radar—the early-model SCR268 and SCR270 and the more advanced SCR268, which provided automatic target tracking and gun-laying.

By October 1941, the tables of organization for the new defense battalions had certain features in common, each calling for a headquarters battery, a sound-locator and searchlight battery, a 5-inch seacoast artillery group, a 3-inch anti-aircraft group, and a machine-gun group. The specific allocation of personnel and equipment within each battalion depended, however, on where the battalion deployed and the changes "prescribed by the Commandant from time to time." In brief, the defense battalions adhered to certain standard configurations, with individual variations due to time and circumstance. The average battalion

strength during the war was 1,372 officers and men, including Navy medical personnel. Like manpower, the equipment used by the defense battalions also varied, although the armament of the typical wartime unit consisted of eight 155mm guns, twelve 90mm guns, nineteen 40mm guns, twenty-eight 20mm guns, and thirty-five .50-caliber heavy machine guns, supplemented in some instances by eight M3 light tanks.

The Approach of War

Beginning early in 1940, the defense battalions operated independently, or in concert with larger units, to secure strategic locations in the Atlantic and the Pacific. Colonel Harry K. Pickett's 3d Defense Battalion undertook to support the current War Plan Orange by occupying Midway Island on 29 September 1940, setting up its weapons on two bleak, sandy spits described by one Marine as being "inhabited by more than a million birds." Contingency plans for the Atlantic approaches to the Western Hemisphere called for deploying defense battalions in support of a possible landing in Martinique during October 1940, but the crisis passed. In February of the following year, the 4th Defense Battalion, under Colonel Jesse L. Perkins, secured the rocky and brush-covered hills overlooking Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. A composite unit of infantry and artillery, the 7th Defense Battalion, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Lester A. Dessez, landed at American Samoa in March 1941 and became the first element of the Fleet Marine Force to deploy to the Southern Hemisphere during the prewar national emergency. Besides securing naval and air bases, the battalion trained a self-defense force of Samoan Marines.

Plans to forestall a German invasion of the Azores by sending a mixed force of soldiers and Marines, including defense battalions, proved unnecessary, but the most ambitious of the prewar deployments occurred

in the Atlantic. In June 1941, Colonel Lloyd L. Leech's 5th Defense Battalion, less its seacoast artillery component, arrived in Iceland with the 1st Marine Brigade, which included the 6th Marines, an infantry regiment, and the 2d Battalion, 10th Marines, an artillery outfit. The brigade took over the defense of Iceland from British troops, releasing them from the protection of this critical region for even more important duty elsewhere. Once in place, the defense battalion and the other Marines assumed responsibility for helping keep open the Atlantic sea lanes to the United Kingdom.

The 5th Defense Battalion set up its anti-aircraft weapons, 3-inch guns and machine guns, around the Reykjavik airfield and harbor, where it became the first Marine Corps unit to make operational use of the Army-developed SCR-268 and -270 radars. After-action reports covering the battalion's service in Iceland, declared that only "young, wide-awake, intelligent men" could operate the temperamental sets satisfactorily. Thanks to the efforts of the crews, the Marines proved able to incorporate their radar into the British air-defense and fighter-control system for "routine watches and training." Even though the battalion played a critical role in defending against long-range German patrol planes, its members also had to engage in labor and construction duty, as became common in other areas. Replaced by Army units, the last elements of the Marine garrison force left Iceland in March 1942.

Of the seven Marine defense battalions organized by late 1941, one stood guard in Iceland, five served in the Pacific—including the 4th, posted briefly at Guantanamo Bay—and another trained on the west coast for a westward deployment. The first Pacific-based defense battalions were nicknamed the "Rainbow Five" after the war plan in effect when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. The



Photo courtesy of the U.S. Naval Institute

On Iceland, 5th Defense Battalion Marines, attached to the 1st Provisional Marine Brigade, man a 75mm pack howitzer as British officers of the Iceland garrison look on. Note the polar bear patches on the right shoulders of the onlooking Marine officers. In the background are truck-mounted .50-caliber anti-aircraft machine guns on special tripods.

five units were: the 7th in Samoa; the 6th, which took over from a detachment of the 3d at Midway Island; the 3d and 4th at Pearl Harbor, and the 1st divided among Pearl Harbor and Johnston, Palmyra, and Wake Islands. A sixth defense battalion, the 2d, remained in training in California.

The Saga of Wake Island

The first real test of the base defense concept in the Pacific War began with savage air attacks against Wake Island on 8 December and lasted 15 days. Wake's defenders lacked radar and sound-ranging equipment, forcing the 400-man Marine garrison to rely on optical equipment to spot and identify the attacking aircraft, which inflicted heavy losses on the Americans during the first bombing raids. Commander Winfield S. Cunningham, who headed the Wake Island naval base, later insisted that "one radar" could have turned defeat

into victory. In contrast, Technical Sergeant Charles A. Holmes, a fire-control specialist, believed that radar "would never have affected the outcome of the situation . . ." The set, moreover, might have fallen into Japanese hands sufficiently intact to yield useful intelligence.

On 11 December, the fire of the 5-inch guns of Major George H. Potter's coastal defense batteries forced the withdrawal of the first Japanese naval assault force consisting of three cruisers, their escorting destroyers, and a pair of troop transports. A Marine communications officer vividly remembered the repeated attacks by Japanese aircraft throughout the siege. During each raid, he said, "one or two would be smoking from machine gun or anti-aircraft fire." Captain Bryghte D. Godbold's 3-inch anti-aircraft group seemed especially deadly, and sometimes one or two aircraft would be missing from a Japanese formation as it flew out of

range. Gun crews stayed with their weapons during the increasingly stronger air raids, while those Marines not needed at their battle stations were "hotfooting it for shelter."

Early on, the Marines realized they were fighting a losing battle, although, as Technical Sergeant Holmes pointed out, "We did our best to defend the atoll . . ." and to prevent the Japanese from establishing themselves there. With limited means at their disposal—the weapons of the defense detachment and a few fighter planes—the Marines sank one warship with aerial bombs and another with artillery fire, and during the final assault inflicted hundreds of casualties on the Japanese who stormed ashore from self-propelled barges and two light transports beached on the reef. On the morning of 23 December, before a relief expedition could get close enough to help, the defenders of Wake Island surrendered.

While the Wake Island garrison fought against overwhelming numbers and ultimately had to yield, Japanese naval forces began a short-lived harassment of Johnston and Palmyra that lasted until late December and stopped short of attempted landings. On 12 December, shells from a pair of submarines detonated a 12,000-gallon fuel storage tank on Johnston Island, but fire from 5-inch coast defense guns emplaced there forced the raiders to submerge. Similarly, a battery on Palmyra drove off a submarine that shelled the island on Christmas Eve.

A Defensive Buildup

The delays and confusion attendant upon organizing and mounting the relief expedition, which included the 4th Defense Battalion and ships that had survived the onslaught against Pearl Harbor, demonstrated the limits of improvisation. As a result, the Marine Corps acted promptly to reinforce the outlying garrisons still in American hands. The defense battalions at Pearl Harbor provided additional men and material for Midway, Johnston, and Palmyra Islands, and defense battalions fresh from training deployed to

the Pacific. The war thus entered a defensive phase that contained the advancing Japanese and lasted into the summer of 1942.

On 21 January, the 2d Marine Brigade (the 8th Marines and the 2d Battalion, 10th Marines, the latter recently returned from Iceland) arrived in Samoa, along with Lieutenant Colonel Raymond E. Knapp's 2d Defense Battalion. The newcomers built on the foundation supplied by the 7th Defense Battalion and were themselves reinforced by the newly activated 8th Defense Battalion under Lieutenant Colonel Augustus W. Cockrell. The Marines in Samoa anchored a line of bases and airfields that protected the exposed sea routes to Australia and New Zealand, which were judged likely objectives for the advancing Japanese.

On 27 May 1942, the 8th Defense Battalion moved southwest from Samoa to the Wallis Islands, a French possession. Tanks, field artillery, motor transport, and infantry reinforced the defense battalion, which remained there through 1943. The stay proved uneventful except for a visit from Eleanor Roosevelt, the President's wife, who was touring the Pacific theater of war.

Elsewhere in the Pacific, Lieutenant Colonel Harold D. Shannon's 6th Defense Battalion strengthened the defenses of Midway where, by the spring of 1942, reinforcements arrived in the form of the antiaircraft group of the 3d Defense Battalion, plus radar, light tanks, aircraft, infantrymen, and raiders. The Palmyra garrison was redesignated the 1st Marine Defense Battalion—of which it had been a detachment before March 1942—under Lieutenant Colonel Bert A. Bone, with the detachment on Johnston Island reverting to control of the island commander. During March, the flow of reinforcements to the South Pacific continued, as Army troops arrived in New Caledonia and the New Hebrides, while Marine aviators and Colonel Harold S. Fassett's 4th Defense Battalion established itself on the island of Efate in the latter group.

West of Midway Island, between 4 and 6 June 1942, the course of the war changed abruptly when an American carrier task force sank four Japanese aircraft carriers and destroyed the cadre of veteran fliers who had won the opening naval battles of the war from Pearl Harbor to the In-

The 5th Defense Battalion lived in Nissen hut camps as this and weatherproofed by the Marines upon their arrival and throughout the unit's stay in Iceland. Most of them were built before the onset of the exceptionally cold Icelandic winter.

Department of Defense photo (USMC) 528669





Marine Corps Historical Collection

Smoke rises from Wake Island after a Japanese air attack. The command post used by the detachment of the 1st Defense Battalion lies in the right foreground.

dian Ocean. A reinforced defense battlion, though hundreds of miles from the actual sinkings, contributed greatly to the American victory. Since the fall of Wake Island, American reinforcements had poured into Midway. Colonel Shannon's 6th Defense Battalion, now 1,700-strong, helped build the island's defenses even as it stood guard against an anticipated Japanese attack. The labor projects included constructing underwater obstacles, unloading and distributing supplies, and building emplacements for guns and shelters for ammunition and personnel. Shannon told his Marines that "Our job is to hold Midway . . . Keep cool, calm, and collected; make your bullets count."

On 4 June, the Japanese opened the Battle of Midway by launching a massive air strike designed to soften the island for invasion. Radar picked up the attackers at a distance of 100 miles and identified them at 93 miles, providing warning for Midway-based fighters to intercept and anti-aircraft batteries to prepare for action. The struggle began at about 0630 and had ended by 0700, with the deadliest of the fighting by the defense battalion compressed into what one participant described as a "furious 17-minute action." The Marine anti-aircraft gunners claimed the destruction of 10 of the attackers, but damage at Midway

proved severe, with flames and smoke billowing from a fuel storage area and aircraft hangars. The island's defenders remained in the fight, however, causing the Japanese naval commander to decide on a follow-up attack. His ordnance specialists were in the midst of replacing armor-piercing bombs, designed for use against ships, with high explosives for ground targets, when the American carrier pilots pounced in the first of their devastating attacks. The resistance by the Marines at Midway, both the aviators and the members of the defense battalion, thus helped set the stage for one of the decisive naval battles of World War II.

After making this contribution to

Defense battalion commander Maj James P. S. Devereaux pressed this ammunition bunker into service as his command post during the defense of Wake Island.

Photo by the author



eventual victory over Japan, the 6th Defense Battalion remained at Midway for the rest of the war. As one of its Marines, Ned Tetlow, pointed out, the long stay enabled the unit to develop a "distinct identity."

During the defensive phase of the Pacific War, the defense battalion underwent conceptual changes back in the United States. Two new tables of organization and equipment received official approval in the spring of 1942. One called for a battalion of 1,146 officers and men that had a headquarters and service battery, a 155mm artillery group of two batteries, a 90mm anti-aircraft artillery group of three batteries, plus a searchlight battery, and a special weapons group, made up of one battery each of Browning machine guns, Oerlikon 20mm cannon, and Bofors 40mm cannon. The other document called for a slightly smaller composite unit, in which a rifle company and a pack howitzer battery replaced some of the less mobile weapons. Moreover, plans called for one of the composite defense battalions organized in 1942 to be manned by African-Americans under command of white officers.

Two African-American Defense Battalions

The wartime demand for manpower and the racial policy of the



Department of Defense photo (USMC) 55863

Under a heavily clouded sky, Marines of the 16th Defense Battalion man a 3-inch anti-aircraft artillery position on Johnston Island. Note the absence of protective parapets or camouflage. Johnston was not seriously threatened in the course of the war.

Roosevelt administration caused the Marine Corps to agree in February 1942 to accept African-American recruits for the first time since the Revolutionary War, when a few blacks had served in the Continental Marines. The Commandant, General Holcomb, insisted that racial segregation – not only lawful in most places at the time, but enforced throughout much of American society – would prevail and that the African-Americans would perform useful military duty. To gain a military advantage from these recruits, without integrating the races, the Marine Corps decided to group them in a black unit that could train largely in isolation and fight almost independently. Holcomb's policy resulted in the creation of the 51st Defense Battalion (Composite), com-

manded by whites but manned by African-Americans who had trained at the Montford Point Camp, a racially segregated facility at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina.

A decision to use the draft, beginning in January 1943, as the normal means of obtaining manpower for all the services brought more blacks into the Marine Corps than a single battalion – plus its training base and administrative overhead – could absorb. The transition of the 51st from a composite unit to an ordinary defense battalion released infantrymen and howitzer crews to help form a cadre for a second African-American defense battalion, the 52d. Because the nature of the conflict was again changing as the advance toward Japan accelerated, the Marine Corps organized no additional black

defense battalions, instead creating numerous independent companies to provide logistics support for amphibious operations.

The steps taken in May 1942 toward standardized equipment began bringing order to a sometimes bewildering array of new and old, simple and complex. When a veteran master sergeant joined one of the defense battalions as a replacement, he asked to see the "new 155mm guns," but, to his astonishment, was shown a weapon fabricated in 1918. "I thought we had new guns here!" he bellowed. The radio gear and radar required unceasing maintenance and fine-tuning by specialists who themselves were fresh from training. Radar, in particular, seemed a mystery to the uninitiated and a challenge to the newly minted technicians. In

In the 4 June 1942 Japanese air raid on Midway a number of Marines in the garrison, including some from the 6th Defense Battalion, were killed. Here, the surviving Marines prepare to bury their buddies with full military honors.

Department of Defense photo (USN) 12703



Shoulder Insignia

Marines serving with the Army's 2d Division in World War I wore the Indian-head shoulder patch, and during the occupation of Iceland, in late 1941 and early 1942, members of the Marine brigade adopted the polar-bear flash worn by the British garrison they were relieving. The Marines who sewed on the polar-bear insignia included men of the 5th Defense Battalion. Marine shoulder insignia proliferated after the official recognition of the 1st Marine Division's patch in 1943.

The designs chosen by the wartime defense battalions might either reflect the insignia of a Marine amphibious corps or of the Fleet Marine Force Pacific, but they might also be created by the individual battalion. Worn on the left shoulder of field jackets, overcoats, service blouses and shirts, the patches identified individual Marines as members of a specific unit. On 1 August 1945, Marine Corps headquarters recognized 33 such designs, although others existed.



evaluating the radar specialists, Captain Wade W. Larkin explained that the device was "technically complex enough for them to be justifiably proud of what they were doing," even though they could not talk openly about so "confidential" a piece of equipment. At the time, radar was cutting-edge technology; Vern C. Smith, who helped operate one of the new sets in the Wallis Islands, recalled that his SCR-268, acquired from another battalion, was so new that its serial number "was a single digit."

The South Pacific

The demarcation between the defensive phase and the beginnings of the counteroffensive proved blurred at the time. Despite the American victory at Midway, the enemy seemed dangerous, aggressive, and capable of resuming the offensive. To forestall the threat to the sea lanes between Hawaii and Australia, the 4th Defense Battalion in July 1942 provided a detachment to protect Espiritu Santo. However, the invasion of the southern Solomon Islands and its immediate con-

sequences clearly reversed the tide of war in the Pacific.

On 7 August 1942, the 3d Defense Battalion, commanded by Colonel Robert H. Pepper, who had been so instrumental in creating this kind of unit, landed in support of the 1st Marine Division's attack on Guadalcanal and the subsequent defense of the island against Japanese counterthrusts. The machine gun and anti-aircraft groups landed "almost with the first waves" at Guadalcanal, although the seacoast artillery did not arrive until late August. Once the coastal



Department of Defense photo (USMC)

African-American Marines of the 51st Defense Battalion are shown here in training at Montford Point, Camp Lejeune, before their deployment to the Pacific War.

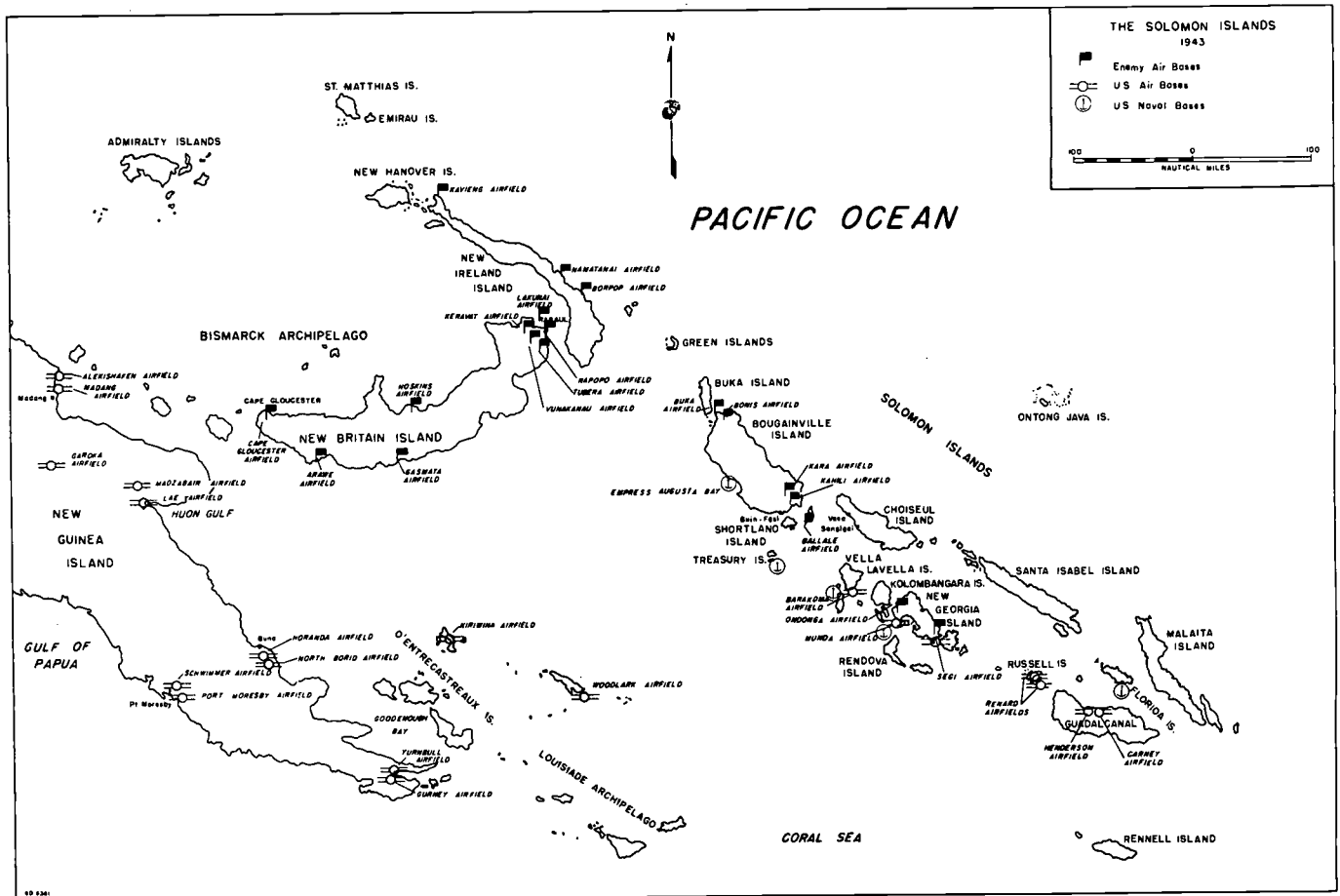
defense guns were ashore, they scored hits on three enemy ships that had beached themselves to land troops. In general, the 3d Defense

Battalion lent strength to the defenses of Lunga Point, Henderson Field—named for Major Lofton R. Henderson, a Marine aviator killed in the

Battle of Midway—and the naval base established on the nearby island of Tulagi. In early September, the 5th Defense Battalion, led by Lieutenant Colonel William F. Parks, supplied a detachment that took over at Tulagi.

A combat correspondent with the 1st Marine Division, Technical Sergeant George McMillan, described the initial lodgment on Guadalcanal as a “stretch of beach, acres of straight-lined coconut grove, the fields of head-high kunai grass, and jungle-covered foothills.” Six months of violent counterattacks by Japanese air, ground, and naval forces shattered the appearance of calm. Throughout the fighting “malaria, jungle rot, and malnutrition” plagued the Americans, according to Second Lieutenant Cyril P. Zurlinden, Jr., of the 2d Marine Division, which replaced the 1st Marine Division in January 1943, after the 1st had left the previous December.

Elements of the 5th Defense Battalion not needed at Tulagi occupied





Department of Defense photo (USMC) 62095

The 3d Defense Battalion operated this SCR268, the first search radar established on Guadalcanal after the 1st Marine Division landed there on 7 August 1942.

Funafuti in the Ellice Islands on 2 October 1942. The Ellice force set up its weapons hundreds of miles from the nearest major American base and for the next 11 months held the northernmost position in the South Pacific, just short of the boundary between that area and the Central Pacific. The battalion's commanding officer, Colonel George F. Good, Jr., recalled that his ragtag anti-aircraft and ground defenses "stuck out like a sore thumb." The Ellice Islands served as a staging area for raids on the Japanese-held Gilbert Islands and consequently bore the brunt of some 10 Japanese air attacks, during which the 90mm anti-aircraft guns downed at least six bombers. Meanwhile, elements of the 5th Defense Battalion on Tulagi combined in January 1943 with a 5-inch battery from the 3d to become the 14th Defense Battalion.

The 9th Defense Battalion, under Colonel David R. Nimmer, reached Guadalcanal in December 1942, set up its weapons around the airfield complex at Koli Point, and promptly destroyed a dozen enemy aircraft. Francis E. Chadwick, a member of the artillery group, recalled that the unit "met only stragglers upon landing and found an undersize, beaten

enemy battalion." The Marine defense battalion thereupon began reequipping in preparation for the next move up the Solomons chain. In January 1943, the 11th Defense Battalion, commanded by Colonel Charles N. Muldrow, relieved the 9th Battalion of its responsibilities at Guadalcanal.

South Pacific Tales

Marines serving in the defense battalions learned lessons—some of them immortalized in legend—not

Searchlights and anti-aircraft weapons of the 3d Defense Battalion on Guadalcanal point upwards to detect and destroy Japanese aircraft bombing Allied forces.

Department of Defense photo (USMC) 63327



taught in training or in the manuals. They learned about "air-raid coffee," strong enough to "lift one's scalp several inches per gulp." Coffee pots would go on the fire when things were quiet; then the air-raid alarm would signal Condition Red, which meant that an air raid was imminent, and the Marines would man their battle stations, sometimes for hours, waiting for and fighting off the attackers as the coffee boiled merrily away. The resulting brew became thick enough to eat with a fork, and Master Technical Sergeant Theodore C. Link claimed that the coffee "snapped back at the drinker."

Veterans also learned to take advantage of members of newly arrived units, lavishly supplied but inexperienced in the ways of the world. A widely told story related how "wolf-hungry" Marines, who had been subsisting on canned rations, smelled steaks cooking at a field galley run by another service. As Technical Sergeant Asa Bordages told it, a Marine shouted "Condition Red! Condition Red!" The air raid signal sent the newcomers scrambling for cover, and by the time they realized it was a false alarm, the Marines were gone, and so were the steaks.

While American forces secured



Department of Defense photo (USMC) 51652

An aging M1918 155mm gun, manned by the 5th Defense Battalion, stands guard over the Pacific surf from amid the beach-

front palms at Funafuti in the Ellice Islands, the first stop in the Pacific following the unit's departure from Iceland.

Guadalcanal and improved the security of the supply line to Australia and New Zealand, increasing numbers of Marines arrived in the Pacific, many of them members of defense battalions. The number of these units totaled 14 at the end of 1942, and the Marine Corps continued to form new ones into the following year. Three other divisions were activated during 1943, and a sixth would take shape during 1944. As the Pacific campaigns progressed, the various divisions and other units were assigned in varying combinations to corps commands. Eventually the V Amphibious Corps operated from Hawaii westward; the I Marine Amphibious Corps had its headquarters on Noumea but would become the III Amphibious Corps on 15 April 1944, before it moved its base to the liberated island of Guam.

From Guadalcanal, the Marines joined in advancing into the central and northern Solomons during the summer and fall of 1943, forming

one jaw of a pincers designed to converge on the Japanese base at Rabaul on the island of New Britain. While General Douglas MacArthur, the Army officer in command in the Southwest Pacific, masterminded the Rabaul campaign as an initial step toward the liberation of the Philippines, Admiral Chester W. Nimitz prepared for a thrust across the Pacific from Hawaii through the Gilbert and Marshall Islands. By the end of 1943, Marines would gain a lodgment in the northern Solomons and land in the Gilberts and on New Britain; clearly the United States was on the move.

Once the American counteroffensive got under way in earnest, the mission of the typical defense battalion changed. Initially, the defense battalions were expected to land at a site already under friendly control—either a previously developed base or a beachhead secured by assault troops—and remain until relieved. In actual practice, this con-

cept did not work, for it overlooked the vulnerability of amphibious forces, especially to aerial attack, during and immediately after a landing. Experience dictated that the defense battalions land with the assault waves, whenever possible, and immediately set up their weapons. Besides protecting the beachhead during its most vulnerable period, the battalions freed other elements of the Fleet Marine Force from responsibility for guarding airfields and harbors. Whatever their role, the defense battalions received less coverage in the press than airmen, infantry, or raiders. A veteran of the 11th Defense Battalion, Donald T. Regan, who would become Secretary of the Treasury in the cabinet of President Ronald Reagan, remembered the anonymity that cloaked these units. "I felt," he said, "we were doing quite a bit to protect those who were doing the more public fighting."

In providing this protection, in which Regan took such pride,



Department of Defense photo (USMC) 59215

This 3d Defense Battalion 90mm anti-aircraft gun, dug in at Guadalcanal, served in a dual role with its ability to engage targets on the ground as well as in the air.

defense battalions on Guadalcanal operated long-range radar integrated with the control network of Marine Aircraft Group 23. Lieutenant Colonel Walter L. J. Bayler – the last

man off Wake Island, who had carried dispatches to Pearl Harbor on the only Navy plane to reach Wake during the siege – declared that the group's fighters were "highly success-

ful in the destruction of enemy aircraft" whenever the improvised warning system was functioning. This experience may well have influenced a decision to convene a radar board at Marine Corps headquarters.

Formed in February 1943, the board was headed by Bayler and included Lieutenant Colonel Edward C. Dyer, who was thoroughly familiar with the techniques and equipment used by Britain's Royal Air Force to direct fighters. The board standardized procedures for "plotting, filtering, telling, and warning," as the radar specialists fed information to a direction center that integrated anti-aircraft and coastal defense, the primary responsibilities of the defense battalions, with the interception of attacking aircraft by pilots of the Marine Corps, Army, or Navy. The radar board refused, moreover, to lift the veil of secrecy that concealed the radar program, directing that "no further items on the subject would be released" until the Army and Navy were convinced the enemy already had the information from some other source.

Into the Central and Northern Solomons

On 21 February 1943, the 43d Infantry Division, the 3d Raider Bat-

Antiaircraft Artillery

The defense battalions employed several different weapons against the attack of enemy aircraft.

The M3 3-inch anti-aircraft gun, initially used in shipboard and ground defense, was the heaviest weapon available to the Marines when the defense battalions were organized. When positioned, the gun rested on a folding M2A2 platform, dubbed a 'spider' mount, which had four long stabilizing outriggers. The gun fired a 12.87-pound high explosive round which had a maximum horizontal range of 14,780 yards and could nearly reach a 10,000-yard ceiling. The weapons, each having an eight-man crew who could fire 25 rounds per minute, were organized in the battalions in four-gun batteries. They were successfully employed at Wake, Johnston, Palmyra, and Midway Islands. By the summer of 1942, however, the M-3 was replaced

by the Army's 90mm anti-aircraft weapon.

This excellent M1A1 gun had an increased range and a greater killing power than the M3. It became the standard anti-aircraft artillery piece for the defense and AAA battalions. This gun could fire a 23.4-pound projectile, with a 30-second time fuze out a horizontal distance of 18,890 yards and had a vertical range of 11,273 yards. The 10-man crew could crank off 28 rounds-per-minute. The M1A1 could be towed on its single axle, dual-wheel carriage. It had a distinctive perforated firing platform. The Marine Corps' 90mms generally landed early in an amphibious assault to provide immediate AAA defense at the beachhead. It had a dual role in that it could be directed against ground targets as well.



Photo courtesy of the U.S. Naval Institute

An LST brings the 9th Defense Battalion to Rendova Island, where the unit helped overcome Japanese resistance and then set up its artillery and anti-aircraft guns to support the assault on heavily defended neighboring island of New Georgia.

talion, and a detachment from the 11th Defense Battalion secured the Russell Islands as a base for further operations in the Solomons and elsewhere. Seacoast and anti-aircraft artillery landed at Banika, and two weeks later, when the Japanese launched their first air strikes, the anti-aircraft weapons were ready. The 10th Defense Battalion, under Colonel Robert Blake, arrived on 24 February to reinforce the detachment. The Russells soon became a boomtown—a jerry-built staging area for Allied units arriving in the South Pacific, reorganizing, or moving to other battlegrounds.

The 12th Defense Battalion, commanded by Colonel William H. Harrison, covered the occupation of Woodlark Island, northeast of New Guinea, by Army ground units on 30 June 1943. In just 16 days, Army engineers built an airfield, which the battalion protected until the end of the year. The main purpose of the Woodlark operation was to screen the landings on New Georgia in the central Solomons.

Elements of the 9th, 10th, and 11th

Defense Battalions supported the Army's XIV Corps in the central Solomons campaign. The strongly reinforced 9th Defense Battalion, now commanded by Lieutenant Colonel William J. Scheyer, participated in various aspects of the fighting. The 155mm and anti-aircraft artillery groups landed on 30 June at Rendova Island, just off the coast of New Georgia. In the confusion of the Rendova landings, during which the assault waves arrived off schedule and out of sequence, anti-aircraft gunners doubled as infantry in eliminating light opposition, and members of the 155mm unit, looking for firing positions, clashed with Japanese patrols. The heavy guns set up and registered in time to support the main landings at New Georgia's Zanana beaches on 2 July. The 90mm anti-aircraft guns also were ready that same day, fortunately so, since the Japanese launched the first of 159 air raids carried out during the campaign. The battalion's anti-aircraft weapons downed 46 aircraft, including 13 of 16 in one formation. Edmund D. Hadley, serving with the anti-aircraft group, helped fight off

one of the heaviest raids. "I will always think of July 4, 1943, as the day the planes fell," he said, his memory sharpened by the fact that he and his 90mm gun crew had to dive into a mud hole to escape a Zero fighter strafing Rendova.

The curtain of anti-aircraft fire that protected Rendova and the Zanana beaches had an unintended effect on one of the two secondary landings on New Georgia—Rice Anchorage and Wickham Anchorage. Fragments from anti-aircraft shells fired from Rendova rained down upon Rice Anchorage, to the north, where elements of the 11th Defense Battalion guarded a beachhead seized by the Marine 1st Raider Regiment. The commander of a raider battalion recalled setting Condition Red whenever the 90mm guns cut loose on Rendova, for their "shrapnel was screaming in the air above the trees," as it tumbled to earth.

The main landing on Zanana beach, New Georgia, took place on 2 July under the cover of fire from anti-aircraft guns and 155mm artillery on Rendova. Machine guns and light anti-aircraft weapons promptly



Department of Defense photo (USMC) 58419

Splattered by mud from a near-miss, Marines operating an optical gun director check the equipment for damage as they prepare for the next Japanese air attack on Rendova. On Vella Lavella, Marines downed 42 enemy aircraft in 121 raids.

deployed from Rendova across the narrow strait to New Georgia to help protect the beachhead there. Light tanks from the 9th, 10th, and 11th Defense Battalions helped Army troops punch through the Japanese defenses barring the way to the principal objective, Munda Point airfield. The M3A1 Stuart light tanks and their crews defied jungle, mud, and suicidal counterattacks in spearheading a slow and deliberate attack. The tank gunners fired 37mm canister rounds to strip away the jungle concealing Japanese bunkers, followed up with high-explosive shells to penetrate the fortifications, and used machine guns to cut down the survivors as they fled. Captain Robert W. Blake, a tank commander who earned the Navy Cross in the central Solomons, noted that "death on the Munda Trail" was noisy, violent, and far from romantic. "I trip the seat lever," he wrote, "and drop down behind the periscopic sight. I level the sight dot at the black slot and press the firing switch. Wham, the gun bucks, a wad of smoke billows

through the trees. The concealing branches are left raw and broken." According to one analysis of the fighting, "A handful of Marine tanks, handicapped by difficult jungle, had spearheaded most of the successful attacks on New Georgia."

On 4 August, the Marine tanks that had survived Japanese fire, formidable terrain, and mechanical breakdown, moved onto Munda Point airfield, littered with wrecked airplanes and pockmarked with shell craters. The infantry mopped up on the next day, and the 9th Defense Battalion moved its anti-aircraft weapons into position to protect the captured airdrome, while its 155mm guns prepared to shell the Japanese garrison on nearby Kolombangara.

The 4th Defense Battalion covered a landing by Army forces on 15 August at Vella Lavella, the northwesternmost island in the central Solomons. The battalion's anti-aircraft weapons, concentrated near Barakoma harbor, shot down 42 Japanese aircraft during 121 raids. Attempts to land cargo elsewhere on

the island, and thus speed the distribution of supplies, triggered a savage reaction from Japanese air power. Speed proved less important than security, and after the sinking of an LST on 1 October, I Marine Amphibious Corps directed that all ships would unload at Barakoma under an anti-aircraft shield provided by the 4th Defense Battalion.

The tank platoons of the 9th, 10th, and 11th Defense Battalions—veterans of the conquest of New Georgia—boarded landing craft and sailed due west to Arundel Island, where Army troops landed on 27 August. As had happened during the earlier capture of Munda Point, the Stuart tanks used their 37mm guns to breach a succession of defensive positions, suffering steady attrition in the process. On 19 September, all the surviving armor formed two ranks, the rear covering the front rank, which plunged ahead, firing 37mm canister to strip away the jungle concealment as the tanks gouged paths for advancing soldiers. This charge proved to be the last major