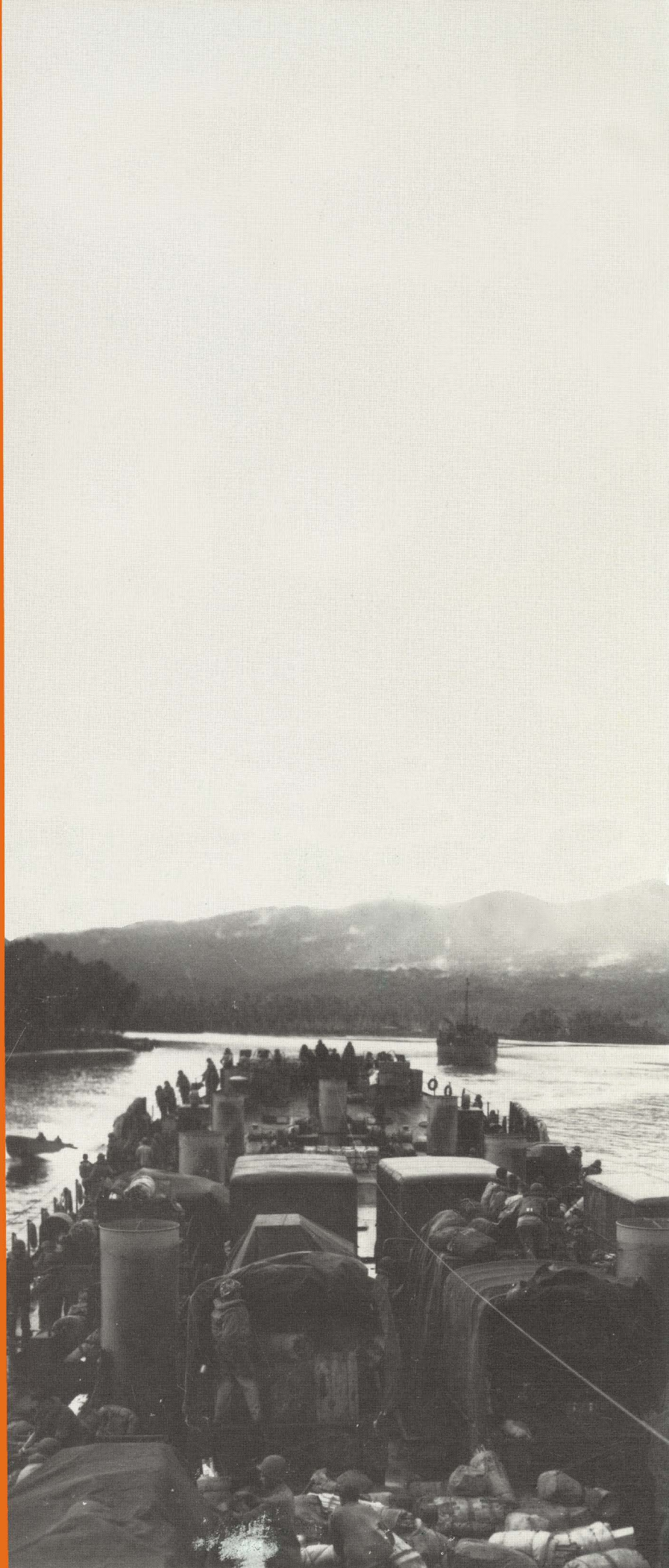


UP THE SLOT:
MARINES IN THE
CENTRAL
SOLOMONS

MARINES IN
WORLD WAR II
COMMEMORATIVE SERIES

BY MAJOR CHARLES D. MELSON
U.S. MARINE CORPS (RET)





Up the Slot: Marines in the Central Solomons

by Major Charles D. Melson, U.S. Marine Corps (Ret)

Operation Watchtower was the codename assigned by the Joint Chiefs of Staff for the reduction of the Japanese stronghold at Rabaul, on the easternmost tip of New Britain Island in the Bismarck Archipelago. The plan called for the South Pacific Area forces of Vice Admiral Robert L. Ghormley (relieved in November 1942 by Vice Admiral William F. Halsey) to move up the chain of the Solomon Islands toward Rabaul, beginning with the Guadalcanal landings on 7 August 1942. In December that year, patrol flights taking off from Henderson Field on Guadalcanal and from the decks of U.S. fleet carriers in the waters around the Solomon Islands discovered the Japanese hard at work on a well-camouflaged airfield at Munda on the northern end of New Georgia. This new field posed a definite

threat to the Allies still fighting to wrest Guadalcanal from the enemy. It had to be taken, or at the very least, neutralized. U.S. pilots also reported another field being completed on Kolombangara across the Kula Gulf from New Georgia.

In response to these potential threats, Operation Toenails, landings in the New Georgia Islands in the Central Solomons with the capture of Munda as the primary objective, were planned, scheduled, and mounted. The first step leading to the invasion of New Georgia was the occupation of the Russell Islands, 65 miles northwest of Guadalcanal, which would serve as a forward base on which airfields would be constructed. Operation Cleanslate on 21 February 1943 saw the Marine 3d Raider Battalion (Lieutenant Colonel Harry B. Liverseed) land on Pavuvu, and the 43d Infantry Division (less a regimental combat team) invade Banika. Both landings were unopposed. The 11th Defense Battalion landed on Banika the same day and had its guns in place by noon. By 15 April, Allied aircraft began operating from the first of two new airstrips the Seabees constructed on Banika.

The primary objective of Operation Toenails was the capture of the airfield on Munda in the New Georgia group. Preliminary landings to support the main effort were to be made at Wickham Anchorage on Vangunu Island, Viru Harbor, and the Bairoko Harbor areas of New Georgia. Rendova Island and smaller islands nearby, across Blanche Channel to the south of New Georgia, were to be occupied

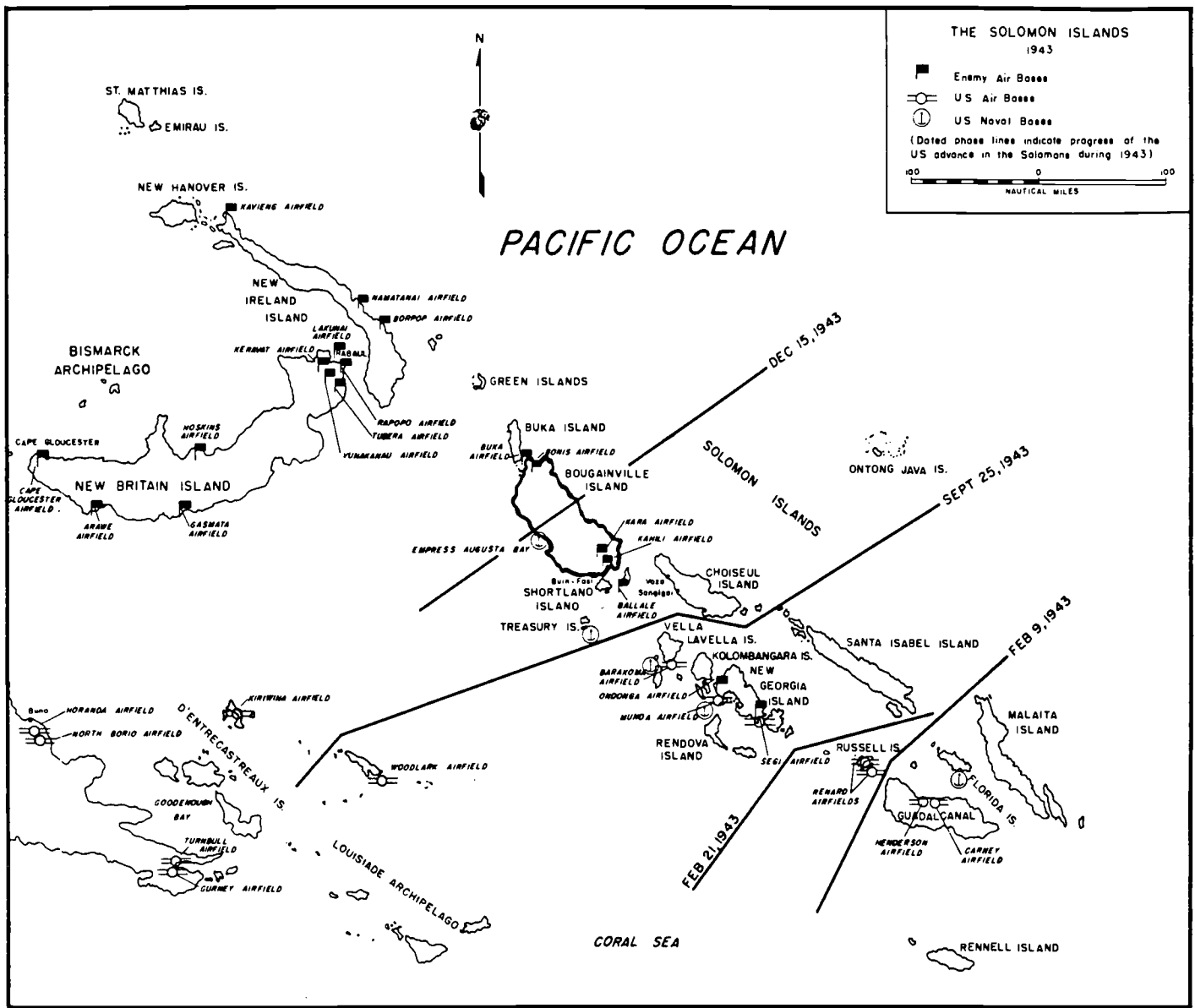
next and used as supply bases and also as artillery positions for delivering supporting fire for the main attack on Munda. The plan called for ground forces then to drive the Japanese into the Munda Point area and once they were there, Allied air, artillery, and tanks could support the main landing. The enemy "would be annihilated or forced into a costly withdrawal," according to the Allied concept of the operation.

For Toenails, Rear Admiral Richmond Kelly Turner, Amphibious Force Commander, divided his assigned forces into two task groups: Western Force, which he would personally command, was to seize Rendova, Munda, and Bairoko. The Eastern Force, under Rear Admiral George H. Fort, also an experienced amphibious force commander, was directed to capture Wickham Anchorage, Segi Point, and Viru Harbor. Turner's ground commander was Army Major General John H. Hester, who headed the New Georgia Occupation Force (43d Infantry Division; Marine 9th Defense Battalion; the 136th Field Artillery Battalion from the 37th Infantry Division; the 24th Naval Construction Battalion (Seabees); Company O of the 4th Marine Raider Battalion; the 1st Commando, Fiji Guerrillas; and assigned service troops). Fort's Eastern Force included Army Colonel Daniel H. Hundley's Army 103d Regimental Combat Team (RCT), less a battalion with Hester; Companies N, P, and Q of the 4th Raider Battalion; elements of the 70th Coast Artillery (Antiaircraft) Battalion; parts of the 20th Seabees;

On the Cover:

The approach to Rendova Harbor as seen from the deck of an LST carrying Marines ashore. It sails through the narrow Renard Entrance with Rendova Peak in the background and the Lever Brothers' landing at the right just around the bend. (Marine Corps Historical Collection)

At left: *The objective of the Central Solomons campaign was the Japanese airfield on Munda Point, which, in friendly hands, would be a stepping-stone in the conquest of the Solomon Islands chain. The airfield runs west to east and a taxi-way snakes through both sides of the field. Kokengolo Hill is on its north side. This photograph records the results of a Marine dive-bomber attack, which resulted in a hit on a gas or ammunition dump in the center of the picture. (Department of Defense Photo [USMC] 55454)*



Col Harry B. Liversedge commanded the 1st Marine Raider Regiment and the XIV Corps Northern Landing Group. His mixed Army and Marine command was used as infantry rather than in the special operations role for which the raiders had been trained and equipped. Isolated from the main attack on Munda, he had to commit his forces to supporting operations.

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and service units. Colonel Harry B. Liversedge's 1st Marine Raider Regiment (less the 2d, 3d, and 4th Battalions) was designated ready reserve for the operation, while the Army's 37th Infantry Division (less the 129th RCT and most of the 148th RCT) was held in general reserve on Guadalcanal ready to move on five days' notice.

Hester's corps headquarters was formed by taking half of the 43d Division staff, the rest remaining with the Assistant Division Commander, Brigadier General Leonard F. Wing, USA. Over 30,000 men were in the units assigned to the New Georgia Occupation Force, the majority of which were Army troops, Marine and Seabee units, patrol-torpedo (PT) boat squadrons, and naval

base personnel. Marines from the 10th and 11th Defense battalions were in reserve as reinforcements.

Defending the New Georgia Island Group were the *Southeast Detachment* of Major General Noboru Sasaki and the *8th Combined Special Naval Landing Force* under Rear Admiral Minoru Ota (later to die as commander of Japanese naval forces at Okinawa); subordinate units included the *13th Infantry Regiment*, *229th Infantry Regiment*, *Kure 6th Special Naval Landing Force*, and the *Yokosuka 7th Special Naval Landing Force*. New Georgia and Kolombangara, and enemy outposts on Rendova, Santa Isabel, Choiseul, and Vella Lavella, were strongly defended. The number of Japanese occupying the outlying islands was



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LtCol William J. Scheyer, third from the left, was the 9th Defense Battalion commander. He is shown at his New Georgia command post with Col John W. Thomason, Jr., second from the

left, from Admiral Nimitz' CinCPac headquarters at Pearl Harbor, and Maj Zedford W. Burriss of the 10th Defense Battalion on the left.

comparatively small. The forces on Kolombangara were "estimated" at 10,000 troops while those on New Georgia were figured to be between 4,000 and 5,000.

1st and 2d Marine Aircraft Wing squadrons based in the Russells and Guadalcanal under the control of Brigadier General Francis P. Mulcahy's 2d Marine Aircraft Wing forward echelon staff would provide air support for the operation. The staging areas for the attack on New Georgia were Guadalcanal and the Russell Islands, where the

Marine 4th Base Depot, commanded by Colonel George F. Stockes, established a supply dump for XIV Corps.

In mid-Spring 1943, reconnaissance parties from the units slated to take part in the New Georgia campaign began patrolling in the areas designated for landings. Solomon Islanders acted as guides and scouts led by British resident administrators and Australian navy intelligence personnel, who, as Coastwatchers, hid in the hills in the enemy rear areas. From here

they radioed information about Japanese troop, air, and naval sightings and movements to Allied listening stations. With the exception of two or three members from each patrol party who remained behind to arrange for guides and to give homing signals to Allied vessels on their approach, all patrols returned to their parent units by 25 June 1943. For these individuals, the campaign was already underway.

The Solomon Islands were some of the least known and underdeveloped areas in the world. John

The Central Solomons campaign was launched by the raiders at Viru Harbor before the landings at Rendova and the Dragons Peninsula. A burial detail renders honors to those Marines who were killed in action. The Marines here are clothed in both the

familiar sage-green herringbone twill and camouflage utility uniforms which were worn during the campaign by the raiders. The firing squad is armed with Garand M-1 rifles.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 57581



Under The Southern Cross

Marine Troop List

I Marine Amphibious Corps**	Marine Transport Squadron 253	2d Separate Wire Platoon*
Forward Echelon	Flight Detachment	3d Special Weapons Battalion**
Medical Battalion	Marine Fighter Squadron 121*	4th Defense Battalion**
Company A	Marine Fighter Squadron 122*	Headquarters & Service Battery
Company B	Marine Fighter Squadron 123**	155mm Artillery Group
Motor Transport Battalion	Marine Fighter Squadron 124***	90mm Antiaircraft Group
Company A	Marine Scout-Bomber Squadron 132*	Special Weapons Group
Signal Battalion	Marine Scout-Bomber Squadron 141***	9th Defense Battalion*
1st Medical Battalion**	Marine Torpedo-Bomber Squadron 143***	Headquarters & Service Battery
Detachment	Marine Scout-Bomber Squadron 144*	155mm Artillery Group
1st Marine Raider Regiment*	Marine Fighter Squadron 214***	90mm Antiaircraft Group
Headquarters Company	Marine Fighter Squadron 215***	Special Weapons Group
1st Raider Battalion	Marine Fighter Squadron 221***	Tank Platoon
Headquarters Company	Marine Fighter Squadron 222**	10th Defense Battalion*
Company A	Flight Detachment	Tank Platoon
Company B	Marine Scout-Bomber Squadron 232**	11th Defense Battalion*
Company C	Marine Scout-Bomber Squadron 233***	Battery E
Company D	Marine Scout-Bomber Squadron 234***	Battery K
4th Raider Battalion	Marine Scout-Bomber Squadron 235**	Marine Scout Bomber Squadron 236**
Headquarters Company	Flight Detachment	Marine Night Fighter Squadron 531*
Tank Platoon	Company N	2d Platoon, Battery A
Marine Aircraft Group 25***	Company O	4th Base Depot**
Headquarters	Company P	
Marine Service Squadron 25	Company Q	
Marine Transport Squadron 152	2d Marine Aircraft Wing*	*New Georgia only
Marine Transport Squadron 153	Forward Echelon	**Vella Lavella only
		***New Georgia and Vella Lavella

Miller, Jr., himself a former Marine, veteran of Guadalcanal, and after the war an Army historian, considered it "one of the worst possible places" to fight a war. All the is-

lands had much in common, he went on, and "much that is common is unpleasant." The islands were mountainous, jungle covered, pest-ridden, and possessed a hot-

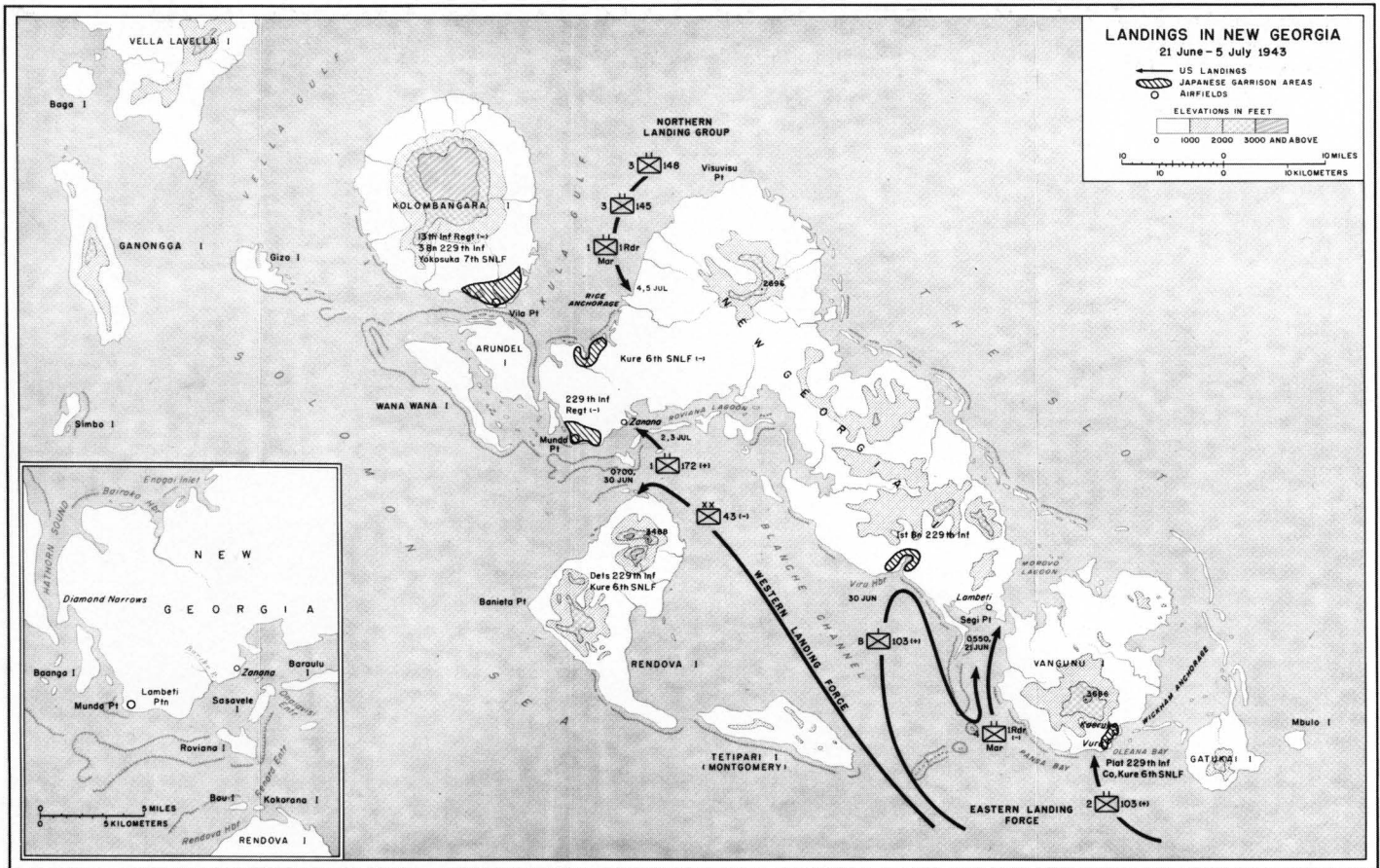
wet tropical climate. There were no roads, major ports, or developed facilities. New Georgia was all of this, and more.

The New Georgia campaign began for the 1st Marine Raider Regiment when Admiral Turner received a request for support and/or rescue from the resident coast-watcher at Segi Point, Donald G. Kennedy. The Japanese were moving into his base area where the Allies planned to build an auxiliary fighter strip. Responding to the request for help, Turner loaded Lieutenant Colonel Michael S. Currin's 4th Raider Battalion on high speed destroyer transports (APDs) and sent it north to Segi Point. Captain Malcolm N. McCarthy met the raiders in a dugout canoe to guide the ships in. McCarthy felt certain that Company P's commander, Captain Anthony Walker, would have

Allied landings were met by ground and air defense, as seen in this photograph taken from the USS Algorab (AKA 8) on D-Day, 30 June 1943. Japanese were bombing Rendova Harbor in the background while the transport group moves to sea under "Condition Red." During this raid the flagship USS McCawley (AP 10) was hit, but Allied air cover kept most of the enemy aircraft away.

Marine Corps Historical Collection





his men's weapons at the ready, and "I kept hollering, 'Hold Your Fire!'"

Currin went ashore with part of his headquarters and Companies O and P, followed by Army and Navy forces to begin the airstrip. After

linking up with Kennedy, Currin turned his attention to his initial goal, the seizure of the protected anchorage at Viru Harbor. He had to accomplish this prior to the arrival of the invasion force on 30

June, and on the night of 27 June, he and his Marines set out by rubber boats across the mouths of the Akuru and Choi rivers for Viru.

After an eight-mile paddle, the raiders arrived at Regi Village early on 28 June. Led by native guides, Currin began the approach march to Viru Harbor. Fighting a stubborn combination of terrain, weather, and Japanese patrols, the raiders were short of their objective on 30 June. Meanwhile, the landing force arrived on schedule and stood off the beach after taking fire from Japanese coastal defense guns.

The raiders launched their attack at 0900, 1 July, to seize Tetemara and Tombe Villages. Captain Walker attacked Tombe with part of his company, while the remainder attacked Tetemara with First Lieutenant Raymond L. Luckel's Company O. After six hours of fighting and a Japanese counterattack, the objectives were captured. Sergeant Anthony P. Coulis' Company P machine gun squad finished mopping up and searched for food and

The approach to Rendova Harbor as seen from the deck of an LSD carrying Marines ashore. It sails through the narrow Renard Entrance with Rendova Peak in the background and the Lever Brothers' landing at the right just around the bend.

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