

ISOLATION OF RABAUL
History of U.S. Marine Corps
Operations in World War II



VOLUME II

HISTORICAL BRANCH, G-3 DIVISION, HEADQUARTERS, U.S. MARINE CORPS

Isolation of Rabaul

HISTORY OF U.S. MARINE CORPS
OPERATIONS IN WORLD WAR II

VOLUME II

by USMC

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Historical Branch, G-3 Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps

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I

LtCol Frank O. Hough, Maj Verle E. Ludwig, and Henry I. Shaw, Jr.

Pearl Harbor to Guadalcanal

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Foreword

This book, the second in a projected five-volume series, continues the comprehensive history of Marine Corps operations in World War II. The story of individual campaigns, once told in separate detail in preliminary monographs, has been largely rewritten and woven together to show events in proper proportion to each other and in correct perspective to the war as a whole. New material, particularly from Japanese sources, which has become available in profusion since the writing of the monographs, has been included to provide fresh insight into the Marine Corps' contribution to the final victory in the Pacific.

The period covered in these pages was a time of transition in the fighting when the Allied offensive gradually shifted into high gear after a grinding start at Guadalcanal. As the situation changed, the make-up of the Fleet Marine Force changed, too. We passed through the era of hit and run and through the time for defensive strategy. Our raider and parachute battalions were absorbed in regular infantry units, the seacoast batteries of our defense battalions became field artillery, and our air squadrons were re-equipped with newer and deadlier planes.

In the converging drives that made the Japanese fortress Rabaul their goal—one under Navy command and the other under Army leadership—Marines played a significant part well out of proportion to their numbers. In those days, as in these, the use of trained amphibious troops in a naval campaign overloaded the scale in our favor.

As one hard-won success followed another in the Solomons and on New Guinea, a progression of airfields wrested from island jungles gave us the means to emasculate Rabaul. While the enemy garrison waited helplessly for an assault that never came, we seized encircling bases that choked the life out of a once-potent stronghold.

Once the front lines passed by Rabaul, other island battles seized the headlines—battles of the great two-pronged advance on Japan, which was made possible in large part by the victories of 1943 in the Southwest Pacific. For thousands of Americans, Australians, and New Zealanders, however, the campaign against Rabaul never ended until the last day of the war. In this unheralded epilogue of blockade and harassment, Marine air units took the lead just as they had in the all-out aerial battle that preceded.

The outstanding aspect of all the operations covered in this volume, one evident in every section of the narrative, was the spirit of cooperation between

different services and national forces. No finer example exists in recent history of the awesome combined power of distinct military forces pursuing a common goal.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "David M. Shoup". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the printed name and title.

DAVID M. SHOUP
GENERAL, U.S. MARINE CORPS
COMMANDANT OF THE MARINE CORPS

Reviewed and approved
16 May 1963

Preface

The Allied campaign to reduce Rabaul was not an uninterrupted series of flawless operations. It had, like most human enterprises, a share of mistakes to match its successes. Since we learn by both errors and accomplishments, the lessons, good and bad, absorbed during the fighting on New Georgia, Bougainville, and New Britain were priceless in value. They undoubtedly saved the lives of many Marines who went on to take part in the Central Pacific drive that culminated in the battle for Okinawa.

Our purpose in publishing this operational history in durable form is to make the Marine Corps record permanently available for study by military personnel and the general public as well as by serious scholars of military history. We have made a conscious effort to be objective in our treatment of the actions of Marines and of the men of other services who fought at their side. We have tried to write with understanding about our former enemies and in this effort have received invaluable help from the Japanese themselves. Few peoples so militant and unyielding in war have been as dispassionate and analytical about their actions in peace.

This volume was planned and outlined by Colonel Charles W. Harrison, former Head, Historical Branch, G-3 Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, working in conjunction with Mr. Henry I. Shaw, Jr., the senior historian on the World War II historical project. Major Douglas T. Kane wrote the narratives of the New Georgia and Bougainville operations, using much of the research material gathered for the monographs prepared by Major John N. Rentz, *Marines in the Central Solomons* and *Bougainville and the Northern Solomons*. The remainder of the narrative was written by Mr. Shaw, who in treating the story of operations at Cape Gloucester and Talasea drew upon the research data assembled for the monograph, *The Campaign on New Britain*, by Lieutenant Colonel Frank O. Hough and Major John A. Crown. The appendices concerning casualties, command and staff, and chronology were prepared by Mr. Benis M. Frank. Colonel Harrison, Major Gerald Fink, Colonel William M. Miller, Major John H. Johnstone, and Colonel Thomas G. Roe, successive heads of the Historical Branch, did most of the final editing of the manuscript. The book was completed under the direction of Colonel Joseph F. Wagner, Jr., present head of the branch.

A number of leading participants in the actions described have commented on preliminary drafts of pertinent portions of the book. Their valuable assistance is gratefully acknowledged. Several senior officers, in particular General

Alexander A. Vandegrift, General Lemuel C. Shepherd, Jr., and Vice Admiral Daniel E. Barbey, made valuable additions to their written comments during personal interviews. General Vandegrift, in addition, made his private correspondence with senior commanders in the Pacific available for use and attribution.

Special thanks are due to the historical agencies of the other services for their critical readings of the draft chapters of this book. Outstanding among the many official historians who measurably assisted the authors were: Dr. John Miller, Jr., Deputy Chief Historian, Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army; Mr. Dean C. Allard, Head, Operational Archives Branch, Naval History Division, Navy Department; and Dr. Robert F. Futrell, Historian, U.S. Air Force Historical Division, Research Studies Institute, Air University, Maxwell Air Force Base.

Chief Warrant Officer Patrick R. Brewer and his successor as Historical Branch Administrative and Production Officer, Second Lieutenant D'Arcy E. Grisier, ably handled the many exacting duties involved in processing the volume from first drafts through final printed form. The many preliminary typescripts and the painstaking task of typing the final manuscript for the printer were done by Mrs. Miriam R. Smallwood. Much of the meticulous work demanded by the index was done by Mrs. Smallwood, Miss Mary E. Walker, and Miss Kay P. Sue.

The maps were drafted by Chief Warrant Officer Brewer and Corporal Robert F. Stibil. Official Defense Department photographs have been used throughout the text.



R. E. CUSHMAN, JR.
MAJOR GENERAL, U.S. MARINE CORPS
ASSISTANT CHIEF OF STAFF, G-2

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PART I

Strategic Situation—Spring 1943

Setting the Stage

World War II had the dubious distinction of being the first truly global conflict. The Allied and the Axis Powers clashed on a dozen widely separated fronts and a thousand different battlefields. Six years, lacking only 26 days, passed between the fateful dawn when Nazi tanks rumbled across the Polish border and the solemn moment when the *Enola Gay* released its bomb load over ground zero at Hiroshima. The United States was in this war from the beginning, perhaps not as an active belligerent, but certainly as an open and material supporter of its friends and allies.¹

Germany was tagged “the predominant member of the Axis Powers” and the Atlantic and European area “the decisive theatre” eight months before the Japanese struck at Pearl Harbor.² The stark fact of that surprise attack and its resulting havoc did not alter the basic decision made by the responsible American military and naval chiefs to give priority of men, equipment, and supplies to the campaign

against Germany. Their analysis of the situation boiled down to the simple conclusion that Germany was more dangerous to the United States than Japan.

The “Germany-first” decision was made in terms of overall war potential, not solely in terms of fighting men. Indeed, the sobering succession of Allied reverses in the Pacific during the early days of 1942 gave ample evidence of the formidable fighting qualities of Japanese soldiers and seamen. Japan was no pushover; her defeat would require years of all-out effort. However slim the allotment of resources to the Allied troops that faced the Japanese, constant military pressure had to be maintained. Casualties and costs would soar if ever the enemy was allowed time to consolidate his hold on the strategic islands, to dig in and construct defenses in depth.

The United States had the primary responsibility for halting the Japanese advance south and east through the Pacific. The fact that the battleground included thousands of open miles of the world’s largest ocean added immeasurably to the logistic problem involved and made mandatory the assignment of amphibious-trained troops to the fighting. In such a situation, the Marine Corps, which had argued and coaxed, sweated and struggled, to develop workable amphibious techniques in the 20’s and 30’s, soon proved the worth of its findings and training.

¹ See Parts I and II of Volume I of this series for an examination of the extent to which the U.S. was prepared for and participating in World War II prior to 7 December 1941.

² Para 13, ABC-1, dtd 23Mar41, quoted in Navy Basic War Plan—Rainbow No. 5, dtd 26May41. The “Rainbow” plans outlined possible courses of action in the event of a multi-nation war, the term deriving from the custom of giving color names (Japan was Orange) to war plans involving one major enemy. Rainbow-5 was the basic American war plan at the time of Pearl Harbor.

A Marine occupied a unique position among American servicemen during World War II. While his country battled a coalition of enemies, and most of his countrymen in arms were fighting halfway across the globe from him, the Marine trained to meet only one enemy—Japan. As the war moved inexorably onward, the men who flocked to join the Corps in unprecedented numbers were literally and consciously signing up to fight the Japanese. This orientation toward a single enemy and towards one theater, the Pacific, colored every Marine's life in and out of battle and had an incalculable but undeniably beneficial effect on the combat efficiency of the Fleet Marine Force (FMF).

A glance back over the first year highlights of the Pacific war will set the stage for the stirring events to follow—for the story of the Marine Corps' vital part in the all-out Allied shift to the offensive.

*THE FIRST YEAR OF THE PACIFIC WAR*³

The homespun philosophy of America furnishes an apt saying that described Japan's plight in World War II: "she bit off more than she could chew." Not only did the Japanese militarists grossly underestimate the staying power and counter-punching ability of the United States and its allies; they also failed to make a rea-

listic appraisal of their own nation's capabilities. Compounding their original error of starting the war, the enemy leaders indulged in some wishful thinking about the

Certainly the Japanese had cause to view their parade of early victories with chauvinistic pride. There were only a few moments during the first half year of fighting when the Allies were not faced with the alternatives of retreat or defeat. But even then, for every outpost like Guam or Hong Kong where token garrisons had no choice but to lay down their arms, there was a Wake or Bataan where a desperate last-ditch defense was fought. True, the Japanese prevailed on all fronts, but the bitter nature of the fighting should have furnished a clue to the spirit of the defenders and the certainty of retaliation.

In Tokyo, the staff members of *Imperial General Headquarters* ignored or misread the warning signs. Japan had caught the Allies off balance and ill-prepared; she had taken all of her original objectives and held the "Southern Resources Area," the Netherlands Indies and Malaya, in a tight grip. Ostensibly, she now had the means to make herself self-sufficient, and she needed every bit of time and every man she could muster to consolidate her hold on her prize. Her next logical move, and the one called for in original war plans, was to strengthen defenses. A line along which she would make her stand had been picked out: a long, looping arc that ran south from the Kuriles through Wake to the Marshalls and Gilberts and then west to include the Bismarck Archipelago, Timor, Java, Sumatra, Malaya, and Burma. The defense of this perimeter was probably a task beyond Japan's resources, even with the help of the newly seized territories. At the war's end, one

³ Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: USSBS (Pac), Nav-AnalysisDiv, *The Campaigns of the Pacific War* (Washington: GPO, 1946), hereafter USSBS *Campaigns*; USSBS (Pac), JapIntelSec, G-2, *Japanese Military and Naval Intelligence Division* (Washington: GPO, Apr46); *The War Reports of General of the Army George C. Marshall—General of the Army H. H. Arnold—Fleet Admiral Ernest J. King* (Philadelphia and New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1947).

senior Japanese officer described this perimeter as "just about the limit, the maximum limit of our capability."⁴

The natural clairvoyance of hindsight similarly aided a number of enemy officers to recognize the fact that Japan had overextended herself by early spring of 1942. At that time, however, the headquarters faction that had authored the original ambitious war plan was still in the saddle and their aggressive philosophy prevailed. Orders went out from Tokyo to continue the advance, to seize further positions that would shield the initial perimeter. It was this decision more than any other taken by *Imperial Headquarters* during the course of the war that hastened the downfall of the Japanese Empire. In less than a year's time, enemy forces were reeling back all across the Pacific, and the reserves that would have bolstered the original perimeter were dissipated in a fruitless effort to continue the offensive.

The new expansionist plans called for the occupation of strategic islands, suitable for air and naval base development, in the North, Central, and South Pacific. The grand prize sought was Midway; it was hoped that a thrust there would bring out the American fleet for a decisive engagement. Closely linked to this projected attack was the movement of an occupation force into the Aleutians to seize Kiska, Attu, and Adak Islands. The two operations would be conducted simultaneously, and both enemy supporting fleets would be available to combine against the American ships. In the south, the objective was

⁴ USSBS (Pac), NavAnalysisDiv, *Interrogations of Japanese Officials*, 2 vols (Washington: GPO, 1946), Interrogation No. 393, FAdm Osami Nagano, IJN, II, p. 353, hereafter USSBS, *Interrogation* with relevant number and name.

to strengthen the Japanese position in the Bismarcks and on New Guinea. Plans were laid to take Port Moresby in southeastern New Guinea and to move outpost garrisons into the Solomons. After the successful conclusion of the Midway operation, the Japanese planned to move against New Caledonia, Fiji, and Samoa, and sever Australia's lifeline to the States.

The enemy timetable for expansion listed the seizure of Port Moresby for early May, followed in a month's time by the attack on Midway. In both cases the carefully selected occupation troops never got a chance to set foot on their objectives. Seen in retrospect, the issue was decided at sea, and the decision was final.

On 7-8 May in the Coral Sea, an American carrier task force intercepted the invasion fleet bound for Port Moresby and was successful in turning it back. In "the first major engagement in naval history in which surface ships did not exchange a single shot,"⁵ carrier aircraft inflicted all the damage. Each side lost a carrier, each had one severely damaged, but the honors of the field fell justly to the American pilots who forced the Japanese to withdraw. The Port Moresby operation was put off until July, but the outcome of the Battle of Midway ensured a permanent postponement. (See Map I, Map Section.)

Midway could hardly have been called a surprise target. The intelligence available to Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, Commander in Chief, Pacific Fleet (CinCPac), regarding where and when the enemy would strike next was conclusive. When the Japanese carrier attack force approached within launching distance of the atoll on 4 June, it ran into a whirlwind of

⁵ King, *War Reports*, op. cit., p. 523.

American planes. Nimitz had brought up all his available carriers, had added long-range bombers staging from Hawaiian fields, and had given the Midway garrison's Marine Aircraft Group 22 (MAG-22) new planes to meet the enemy threat. The result of these preparations was electrifying; all four of the Japanese carriers were sent to the bottom and the invasion force streaked back for the relative safety of home waters. The Battle of Midway was a disaster from which the Japanese naval air arm never recovered. The battle has frequently been termed *the* decisive engagement of the war in the Pacific and its results were certainly far reaching. The severe and sudden cut in enemy carrier strength put a crimp in all plans for further offensive action.⁶

The immediate reaction of Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, Commander in Chief of the *Combined Fleet*, to the news of his Midway losses was to recall the Aleutian occupation forces. Then, almost immediately, he reversed himself and ordered the operation to continue but with the modification that only the two westernmost targets, Kiska and Attu, would be seized. Perhaps Adak Island was too close to the U.S. base at Dutch Harbor for comfort. Although Yamamoto's exact reasoning in ordering the operation to continue is not known, it is probable that he gave a great deal of weight to the fact that more American territory would be occupied, a definite boost to Japanese morale that would be needed if the truth of the Midway battle leaked out. On 7 June, occupation troops landed on the two bleak islands, there to

⁶ See Part V of Volume I of this series for details of the Marine participation in the Midway battle.

stay until the Allies could spare the men, supplies, and equipment which were needed to drive them out. Although there was considerable public alarm in the States, especially the Pacific Northwest, over the presence of Japanese in the Aleutians, actually the new enemy bases were not much of a threat. The rugged island chain, cursed with more than a fair share of the world's miserable weather, was no avenue for conquest.

Midway's results went far to redress the balance of naval strength in the Pacific and to give the Allied leaders a chance to launch a limited offensive. The logical target area was the South Pacific, where the Japanese, despite their Coral Sea misadventure, were still planning to take Port Moresby and were continuing their encroachment into the Solomons. The enemy field headquarters for this two-pronged approach to the Australia-United States supply route was Rabaul on New Britain, a prize whose capture dominated Allied planning. But Rabaul was far too ambitious an objective for the summer of 1942, when almost any offensive effort severely strained available resources.

The calculated risk of the first offensive—a "shoe-string" operation—was made at Guadalcanal, a hitherto obscure jungle-clad island in the lower Solomons. The Japanese first moved into the area in April, when they occupied tiny Tulagi and set up a seaplane base and anchorage in the fine natural harbor between that island and neighboring Florida. A stretch of some 20 miles of open water, which was soon to earn the grim name of "Iron Bottom Sound," separated Tulagi from Guadalcanal. The larger island was one of the few places in the Solomons where

terrain favored rapid airfield development, and the Japanese, soon after Midway, began to clear ground and construct a fighter strip along its northern coastal plain.

Guadalcanal's airfield and Tulagi's harbor became prime objectives once Washington okayed the opening offensive in late June. In contrast to the months of meticulous planning that characterized later amphibious operations, this first effort, code-named WATCHTOWER, was surrounded by an aura of haste. The unit picked to do the job was the one most likely to be successful, one which had more of the requisite amphibious training and indoctrination than any other at this stage of the war—the 1st Marine Division (Reinforced). The division was in the process of completing a move to New Zealand, its rear echelon still at sea, when warning orders were received designating it the WATCHTOWER assault force. In less than a month, the division had changed its orientation from routine training to preparation for jungle fighting, had prepared its tactical plans in light of the scanty information available on enemy and terrain, and had unloaded its ships and then reloaded them for combat. A rendezvous was made at sea in the Fiji rehearsal area with the convoy of the 2d Marines, which had been sent out from San Diego to take the place of the 7th Marines, one of the division's regular regiments detailed to Samoa's garrison.

On 7 August, assault elements of the 1st Division landed on Guadalcanal and moved inland according to plan without meeting any opposition. Simultaneously, Marines stormed ashore on Tulagi and its neighboring islets, where the landings were

opposed violently. Several days of hard fighting were needed to secure Tulagi's harbor, but when this first battle was over the scene of ground action shifted to Guadalcanal. There, engineers worked feverishly to put the partially completed airstrip in shape to receive friendly fighters. And the Marine defenders desperately needed aerial reinforcement, in fact any kind of reinforcement that they could get, for the Japanese reaction to the Guadalcanal landing was swift and savage.

For six hectic months, during which it often seemed that WATCHTOWER would prove a fiasco, the 1st Division and an all-too-slowly swelling number of Army and Marine reinforcements stood off a series of sharp enemy counterattacks. The Japanese poured thousands of crack troops into the jungles that closed on the Marine perimeter, but never were able to put ashore enough men and equipment at one time to overcome the garrison. From the captured airfield (Henderson Field), a weird and wonderful composite force of Navy, Army, Marine, and New Zealand planes fought the Japanese to a standstill in the air and immeasurably strengthened the Allied hand at sea by attacking enemy transport and surface bombardment groups as they steamed from bases in the upper Solomons to Guadalcanal.

Although Allied naval forces lost heavily in the series of sea battles that were fought for control of Solomons' waters, the American and Australian ships kept coming back on station. The Japanese admirals strove mightily to seize the advantage when it was theirs, but the opportunity faded. By the end of November, enemy losses had increased so sharply

that capital ships were no longer risked in Iron Bottom Sound.⁷

When the anniversary of Pearl Harbor rolled around, the Japanese situation on Guadalcanal was desperate. A steady parade of men, ships, and planes had been committed to drive out the Americans and every effort had failed. Even the firebrands in *Imperial General Headquarters* were now convinced that Japan had overreached herself. By the year's end, the decision had been made to evacuate Guadalcanal and orders were sent out to consolidate positions on the original perimeter.⁸

GUADALCANAL AND PAPUA⁹

By the time of the Guadalcanal landing the Japanese held effective control of all the Pacific islands they had invaded but one—New Guinea. In March of 1942, the enemy had occupied positions along the northeast coast of the enormous island at

Lae and Salamaua, and their local naval superiority gave them the means of moving in wherever else they wished along this virtually undefended coast. Allied air, operating from carriers or staging from Australia through Port Moresby, was the principal deterrent to further Japanese encroachment. When, during the Battle of the Coral Sea, the *Port Moresby Invasion Force* was forced to turn back to Rabaul, the obvious capability of the enemy to attack again prompted the Allies to make a countermove to ward off this threat. In June and July, Australian ground units and fighter squadrons supported by American engineers and anti-aircraft artillery moved to Milne Bay on the eastern tip of New Guinea to build and hold an air base that would cover Port Moresby's exposed flank.

The Japanese thwarted a further Allied advance planned for early August when they landed their own troops near Buna Mission on 22 July. Buna was the northern terminus of the Kokoda Trail, a difficult 150-mile route over the Owen Stanley Mountains to Port Moresby. The superior enemy landing force soon fought its way through the light Australian defenses and reached Kokoda village, about 30 miles inland, where it held up. This first move by the Japanese into Papua, the Australian territory which comprised most of the eastern part of New Guinea, was essentially a reconnaissance in force to test the feasibility of an overland drive on Port Moresby. Thousands of enemy reinforcements arrived from Rabaul in August to strengthen the Buna position and add weight to the proposed attack. By 26 August the Japanese were ready, and they jumped off from Kokoda in a determined assault that quickly overpowered the few

⁷ The story of the Navy's bitter struggle for control of the Guadalcanal waters is well told in Samuel E. Morison, *The Struggle for Guadalcanal, August 1942–February 1943—History of United States Naval Operations in World War II*, v. V (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1949).

⁸ MilHistSec, G-2, FEC, Japanese Monograph No. 45, IGHQ Army High Command Record, Mid-1941–Aug45, 2d rev. 1952 (OCMH), p. 67, hereafter *IGHQ Army Record*.

⁹ Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: *IGHQ Army Record*; Part VI of Volume I of this series; John Miller, Jr., *Guadalcanal: The First Offensive—The War in the Pacific—United States Army in World War II* (Washington: HistDiv, DA, 1949); Samuel Milner, *Victory in Papua—The War in the Pacific—United States Army in World War II* (Washington: OCMH, DA, 1957); Morison, *Struggle for Guadalcanal*, *op. cit.*; USSBS, *Campaigns*.

Australians who tried to block their advance. The problem of supporting these defending troops was a logistician's nightmare, but it was a nightmare that the Japanese inherited as the distance from the front line to their base at Buna increased.

The enemy troops attacking along the Kokoda Trail were operating with minimal air cover, in fact the Allied air forces were doing their best to cut them off completely from Buna and to sever Buna's supply lines from Rabaul. These Japanese were now making an isolated effort since the secondary operation planned to complement the overland drive had miscarried.

Originally, the enemy operation plan had called for the seizure of Samarai Island, off the eastern tip of New Guinea, as a seaplane base and staging area for an amphibious assault on Port Moresby, timed to coincide with the Kokoda Trail approach. When reconnaissance planes discovered the Allied activity at Milne Bay, the target was shifted to this new base. The Japanese, in a move characteristic of their actions in this period, underestimated their opposition and assigned a grossly inadequate landing force for the operation. On 25 August, about a thousand enemy troops from Kavieng began landing in the bay and immediately made contact with the Australians. A reinforcement of 500 men came in on the 29th, but by that time they were only enough to fill the gaps in the ranks of the first unit. The Milne defense force, a reinforced brigade almost 10,000 strong, first blunted, then smashed the Japanese attack. The dazed survivors were evacuated on the nights of 4-5 September, victims of an Australian victory that did much to hearten Allied morale.

The failure at Milne Bay, coupled with similar disasters on Guadalcanal, prompted *Imperial General Headquarters* to check the overland advance on Port Moresby and concentrate its efforts on achieving success in the lower Solomons. The Japanese troops on the Kokoda Trail had reached a point so close to Port Moresby that "they could see the lights of the city,"¹⁰ but it is doubtful if they could have ever reached their objective. An outpouring of Allied troops from Australia into Port Moresby had strengthened the position to the point that preparations were underway to mount an offensive when the enemy fell back with the Australians hot on their heels. Throughout October the pressure was increased until the Japanese position had contracted to a perimeter defense of Buna and Gona (a native village about seven miles north of Buna Mission).

The Australian 7th Division and the American 32d Infantry Division closed on the perimeter. The Australians came overland for the most part, the majority of the Americans by air and sea. The fighting was bitter and protracted in jungle terrain even worse than that encountered by the Marines on Guadalcanal and against a deeply dug-in enemy who had to be gouged out of his bunkers. Gona fell to the Australians on 9 December and Buna Mission to the Americans on 2 January; the last organized resistance was overcome on the 22d, six months to the day after the Japanese had landed in Papua.

On the same day that the Australians drove the Japanese out of Gona, the 1st

¹⁰ Interrogation of Gen Hitoshi Imamura and LtGen Rimpei Kato, IJA, in USSBS (Pac), NavAnalysisDiv, *The Allied Campaign Against Rabaul* (Washington: GPO, 1946), p. 89.

Marine Division was officially relieved on Guadalcanal, its mission completed. The tide of battle had swept full course to the Allied favor, and strong Army and Marine forces of the XIV Corps were now capable of annihilating the remaining Japanese. When evacuation orders were received from Tokyo, however, the Japanese Navy in a series of high-speed night runs managed to bring off about 13,000 men from the island. On 9 February, Guadalcanal was cleared of enemy units and the campaign was ended. American losses in dead and wounded by ground action were close to 6,500, but more than 23,000 enemy lay dead in the jungles around Henderson Field, victims of combat and disease. The loss of additional thousands of enemy sailors and pilots, hundreds of planes, and more than a score of warships and transports increased the wastage of Japanese strength that marked the fruitless effort to retake Guadalcanal.

With the victories in Papua and on Guadalcanal, the Allies had flung down the gauntlet. The Japanese had to accept the challenge; they had lost the initiative.

*JAPANESE STRATEGY*¹¹

The original impetus for the Japanese move into the Solomons and Eastern New Guinea came from enemy naval officers who felt "that a broad area would have to

¹¹ Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: MilHistSec, G-2, FEC, Japanese Monograph No. 35, SE AreaOpsRec, Seventeenth Army Ops—Part II (OCMH), hereafter *Seventeenth Army Ops—II*; MilHistSec, G-2, FEC, Japanese Monograph No. 99, SE Area NavOps—Part II (OCMH), hereafter *SE Area NavOps—II*; *IGHQ Army Record*; USSBS, *Campaigns*.

be occupied in order to secure Rabaul."¹² Although the Navy promoted the advance, the Army accepted the concept readily enough, and both services began to develop outlying bases which would cover the approaches to New Britain. When the Allies struck at Guadalcanal, the Japanese Navy "was willing to stake everything on a decisive fight"¹³ to regain the island and turn back the offensive thrust. Army leaders, interested mainly in the war on the Asian mainland and in the spoils of the Netherlands Indies, woke up too late to the realities of the Guadalcanal campaign.

Two months passed before realistic estimates of the strength of Henderson Field's defenders began to figure in enemy reinforcement plans. By the time the Japanese were ready to commit enough men to retake Guadalcanal, the chance for them to reach the island in decisive numbers had passed. The Allies were able to choke off most attempts, and the shattered units that did reach shore were seldom in shape to mount a sustained attack. The situation called for a reevaluation of Japanese strategic objectives in the light of Allied capabilities.

At the year's end, military planners in Tokyo, acting on the discouraging reports from the field, projected accurately the course of Allied action for the next months, pointing out that:

. . . the enemy plans to attack Rabaul since it is the operational base for Army, Navy, and Air Forces. The enemy will try to accomplish this task in the Solomon Is. Area by driving our units off Guadalcanal Is. and advancing northward on the Solomon Is. In the Eastern New Guinea Area, the enemy will secure the Buna Vicinity and attack the Lae and Salamaua Areas from

¹² USSBS, *Interrogation* No. 503, VAdm Shigeru Fukudome, IJN, II, pp. 524-525.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 526.

the sea. After penetrating Dampier [Viti] Strait, they will attack Rabaul in joint operations with forces on the Solomon Is. After this, planning to attack the Philippine Is., they will continue operations along the northern coast of New Guinea.¹⁴

On 3 January, the text of the "Army-Navy Central Agreement on South Pacific Area Operations" was radioed to Rabaul; it laid down Tokyo's newly approved strategy. Although expressed in the bombastic language characteristic of the spirit of the offensive permeating Japanese military documents, the "Agreement" was in fact the outline of a defensive pattern. Key points, mainly airfields and anchorages, were to be occupied or strengthened in the North and Central Solomons and in Eastern New Guinea after the first order of business, the evacuation of the troops on Guadalcanal, had been completed. Some of the names that were to figure prominently in the war news—Lae, Salamaua, Wewak on New Guinea; New Georgia, Bougainville, and Buka in the Solomons—were emphasized in the allotment of defensive sectors. The Japanese Army and Navy had divided the responsibility for base defense along service as well as geographic lines, a factor that was to have considerable influence on the conduct of the fighting.

The enemy naval planners, running true to form, wanted to get the main defenses in the Solomons as far away from their major base at Rabaul as possible. The Army authorities, made cautious by the outcome of the attempt to reinforce Guadalcanal over a long, exposed supply route, were

¹⁴ IGHQ *Army Record*, p. 71. Although this record was assembled after the war, Japanese defensive actions agreed with the quoted estimate and it very probably represents contemporary thought.

willing to move only major forces into the Northern Solomons. As the Army already had primary responsibility for ground defense of the Bismarcks and New Guinea, the additional task of conducting the defense of Bougainville, Buka, Choiseul, and the Shortland-Treasury Islands was considerable. Since the Navy wanted the New Georgia Group and Santa Isabel included in the defended area, it received operational responsibility for these islands and their garrisons. Land-based naval air squadrons were to operate primarily in the Solomons and Bismarcks, while most Army air units were assigned to the defense of the New Guinea area. The *Combined Fleet*, its main strength concentrated at Truk, stood ready to engage any Allied striking force moving north through the Solomons or west from Hawaii.

One of the fundamental differences between the Japanese and the Allied conduct of the war in the Pacific was pointed up by the high command setup established in the "Agreement." There was no area commander appointed with authority to exercise final control of all defensive measures; consequently, there was no joint staff with the function of preparing and executing an overall defense plan. Instead, the senior Army and Navy commanders in the field were responsible directly to their respective headquarters in Tokyo.¹⁵ This duality of command was a feature of the Japanese military system, and to a great extent it also existed in Tokyo at the heart of the enemy war effort. *Imperial General Headquarters* was only the term used to connote the co-equal existence of the general staffs of the two services. Any order tabbed as coming from the *Headquarters*

¹⁵ Imamura-Kato Interrogation, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

was simply an Army-Navy agreement. In operation, this system could mean, as one Japanese admiral expressed it, that:

. . . as far as questions of Army operations are concerned, if the Chief of the Army General Staff says we will do this, that is the end of it; and so far as the Navy operations are concerned, if the Chief of the Naval General Staff says we will do this, that fixes it. . . .¹⁶

Obviously, decisions involving inter-service operations had to be made; stalemate was unacceptable, but the opportunity for unnecessary delay and uncoordinated unilateral action was inherent in the system.

Fortunately for the Japanese, the two commanders at Rabaul got along well together and were determined to cooperate. The single aim of both General Hitoshi Imamura and Vice Admiral Jinichi Kusaka was to hold their portion of Japan's defenses with all the men and material at their disposal. Imamura's command, the *Eighth Area Army*, comprised the *Seventeenth Army* in the Bismarcks and Solomons and the *Eighteenth Army* defending Eastern New Guinea. Both were supported by the *6th Air Division*. Kusaka, as Commander of the *Southeast Area Fleet*, controlled the land-based planes of the *Eleventh Air Fleet* and the ships and ground units of the *Eighth Fleet* which were strung out from New Guinea to New Georgia. Both men expected that the next Allied targets would be found in the area under their control. The choice of the time, place, and strength of those attacks was made, however, by planners in Brisbane, Noumea, Pearl Harbor, and Washington.

¹⁶ USSBS, *Interrogation* No. 379, Adm Mitsumasa Yonai, IJN, II, p. 328.

ALLIED STRATEGY¹⁷

In World War II the military fortunes of Great Britain and the United States were so closely enmeshed that it was imperative that a workable inter-Allied command system be developed both in the field and at the national level. Meeting in Washington five days after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the political and military leaders of the two major Western powers agreed to adhere to the principle of unity of command in the various theatres of operations. The same basic decision was reached in regard to the higher direction of the military effort of the two nations and of the numerous other Allied powers that they perforce represented. While the concept of a single commander who would control all national forces committed was accepted for limited areas and specific operations, there was no inclination to trust overall command to one man, if indeed such a superman existed. The chosen instrument for the direction of what might

¹⁷ Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: ComSoPac WarDs, Jan-Mar43 (COA, NHD), hereafter *ComSoPac WarDs* with appropriate months; CinCSWPA Plan for the Seizure of the New Britain-New Ireland-New Guinea Areas—ELKTON, dtd 28Feb43 (COA, NHD); FAdm Ernest J. King and Cdr Walter M. Whitehill, *Fleet Admiral King—A Naval Record* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1952), hereafter *King and Whitehill, King's Naval Record*; Richard M. Leighton and Robert W. Coakley, *Global Logistics and Strategy 1940-1943—The War Department—United States Army in World War II* (Washington: OCMH, DA, 1955); Samuel E. Morison, *Breaking the Bismarcks Barrier, 22 July 1942-1 May 1944—History of United States Naval Operations in World War II*, v. VI (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1950), hereafter *Morison, Breaking the Bismarcks Barrier, 22 July 1942-1 May Roosevelt and Hopkins—An Intimate History* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1948).

best be called the Western war effort was the Combined Chiefs of Staff (CCS); its membership, the chiefs of the land, sea, and air services of Great Britain and the United States.

Washington was selected as the site of the new headquarters and Field Marshal Sir John Dill, as the senior on-the-spot representative of the British chiefs, was permanently stationed in the American capital with an executive staff. In order to represent adequately the military views of the United States in CCS discussions, it was necessary that the American chiefs meet regularly and air the problems of their respective services. In short order, a series of inter-service staff agencies came into being to support the deliberations of the American chiefs, and a flexible working organization, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), became the right hand of the President, acting as Commander in Chief.¹⁸

Admiral Ernest J. King, Chief of Naval Operations and Commander in Chief of the United States Fleet, was the naval representative in the JCS. The Army was represented by two officers, its Chief of Staff, General George C. Marshall, and its senior airman, General Henry H. Arnold, whose opposite numbers on the British Chiefs were the heads of the Imperial General Staff and the Royal Air Force. Through most of the war there was a fourth member of the JCS, Admiral William D. Leahy, who acted as Chief of Staff to the President.

The Combined Chiefs, working directly with Churchill and Roosevelt, established

¹⁸ As a result of a British suggestion at the ARCADIA Conference (23Dec41-14Jan42), the term "combined" was applied thereafter to collaboration between two or more nations, while "joint" was reserved for collaboration between two or more services of the same nation.

spheres of strategic responsibility best suited to national interests and capabilities. In mid-April, the United States was given responsibility for directing operations in the Pacific from the mainland of Asia to the shores of the Western Hemisphere. This decision had the effect of placing all Allied troops and materiel allotted to the Pacific under control of the Joint Chiefs and of the two men they selected for command.

The JCS divided the Pacific into two areas of command responsibility, one including Australia, the Netherlands Indies, and the Philippines and the other the rest of the ocean and its widely scattered islands. To head the relatively compact Southwest Pacific Area, where most operations could be conducted under cover of land-based air, the JCS chose the colorful commander of the defense of the Philippines—General Douglas MacArthur. The appointment of MacArthur, made with the assent of the Australian government, was announced on 18 April 1942 after the general was spirited out of beleaguered Corregidor; his new title was Supreme Commander, Southwest Pacific Area (CinCSWPA). For Commander in Chief, Pacific Ocean Areas (CinCPOA) the logical choice was Admiral Nimitz; his concurrent command of the Pacific Fleet as CinCPac recognized that the war in his area would be essentially a naval one.

The initial boundary line between the SWPA and POA included all of the Solomon Islands in MacArthur's command; however, the fact that Nimitz' forces were going to mount the first offensive at Guadalcanal made a shift of the line westward a matter of practicality. The new boundary just missed the Russell Islands, ran north to the Equator, turned west to 130° north longitude, then north and west

again to include the Philippines in the SWPA. The line hugged the tortuous Indochinese, Thai, and Malayan coastlines to Singapore and then cut south between Sumatra and Java to divide the American area of responsibility from the India-Burma sphere of operations, which came under the British Chiefs of Staff.

The JCS issued a directive on 2 July 1942 to govern offensive operations in the Southwest Pacific, setting forth a concept that included three tasks: 1) the seizure and occupation of the Santa Cruz Islands, Tulagi, and adjacent areas; 2) the seizure and occupation of the rest of the Solomons and the northeast coast of New Guinea; and 3) the seizure and occupation of Rabaul and surrounding positions. A subordinate command, the South Pacific Area, was established under Admiral Nimitz and charged with responsibility for executing Task One—the Guadalcanal operation. The post of Commander, South Pacific (ComSoPac) was held first by Vice Admiral Robert L. Ghormley and then by Vice Admiral William F. Halsey. Task One was completed under Halsey with the evacuation of Guadalcanal by the Japanese, but neither Nimitz nor MacArthur considered that he had available the forces or supplies necessary to initiate Task Two immediately. The relatively few Australian and American infantry divisions assigned to the Southwest Pacific were either committed to forward garrisons, still forming and training, or badly in need of rest and rehabilitation as a result of hard campaigning.¹⁹

¹⁹ CinCPac msg to CominCh, dtd 8Dec42, Subj: Future Ops in the Solomons Sea Area (COA, NHD); CinCSWPA msg C-251 to CofSA, dtd 27Jan43 (WW II RecsDiv, FRC Alex).

Equally as important, though hardly as well publicized as the feats of the fighting troops and ships, were the accomplishments of the service and supply agencies furnishing logistic support to the combat operations. The South and Southwest Pacific are certainly not areas that would be voluntarily chosen for amphibious campaigns. When the fighting started, there was almost a total lack of ports and bases suitable for support of large scale operations. In a surprisingly short time, however, islands like Espiritu Santo and Efate in the New Hebrides and New Caledonia sprouted vast compounds of supplies, tank farms for fuel storage, and a host of vital maintenance, repair, and service facilities. Hardly had the smoke and dust of battle settled before Tulagi was turned over to the engineers, base personnel, and defense troops who quickly converted it into an essential advance naval base. Guadalcanal in its turn underwent extensive development as the Japanese were driven off. A full stride forward in terms of the 2 July JCS directive could be taken only after an adequate stockpile of military materiel had accumulated in the forward dumps and depots of an expansible logistic network.

A good part of the supply and manpower difficulties of the Pacific commanders were traceable directly to the favored apportionment given to the European and North African theaters of operations. The basic war policy of the Western Allies was affirmed by the Combined Chiefs in January at the Casablanca Conference where their outline of action for 1943 emphasized again the primacy of the defeat of Germany. First priority of resources was allotted to the campaign to wipe out the U-Boat threat in the Atlantic; the occupation of Sicily, a stepped-up bomber

offensive against Germany, and "the sending of the greatest volume of supplies possible" to Russia were among the other priority programs. Offensive operations in the Pacific were to be kept within limits that would not jeopardize the chance for a decisive blow against Germany.²⁰ In their report to the President and Prime Minister, the CCS indicated a number of prospective lines of action in the Pacific, including an advance west from Midway toward the Marianas and Carolines and a drive north from Samoa into the Marshalls. Implicit in these projections of possible offensive action was the successful completion of a campaign to capture or neutralize Rabaul.²¹

In early February, Admiral Halsey was queried by King on his reaction to an operation to seize the Gilbert and Ellice Islands using South Pacific forces. Halsey strongly recommended against it, preferring instead to continue pressure in the Solomons. Admiral Nimitz supported Halsey's opinion, but asked if South Pacific operations could be depended upon to pin down the Japanese Fleet. On 17 February, ComSoPac replied that he believed "that the best way to pin down the Japanese Fleet is to threaten Rabaul," and went on to indicate that he intended to occupy the Russell Islands inside of a week and move into the New Georgia Group "as soon as possible."²² He soon set early April as his target date for the New Georgia operation, but a re-evaluation of Pacific strategy forced a revision of his plans.

²⁰ CCS 155/1, dtd 19Jan43, Subj: Conduct of the War in 1943 (COA, NHD).

²¹ CCS 170/2, dtd 23Jan43, SYMBOL—Final Rept to the President and Prime Minister (COA, NHD).

²² *ComSoPac Feb43 WarD*, p. 33.

Under terms of the JCS directive of 2 July 1942, General MacArthur had been given responsibility for strategic direction of all operations against Rabaul, including those undertaken by South Pacific forces after completion of Task One. On 28 February 1943, his staff completed a plan (code-named ELKTON) that reflected MacArthur's conviction that the Japanese were now much stronger in the Southwest Pacific than they had been the previous summer. The situation prompted him to submit a new concept of operations calling for a more deliberate advance than had once been contemplated and a substantial increase in all categories of forces.

Under ELKTON, the command position of Admiral Halsey as ComSoPac was an unusual one. The operations contemplated in the Solomons would of necessity get their logistic support from SoPac bases and be executed in the main by SoPac forces. Naval officers were strongly of the opinion that these forces should remain under command of Halsey, but did not question the need for MacArthur to continue to give strategic direction to the overall campaign against Rabaul. Halsey's plan to attack New Georgia in April, tentatively approved by Nimitz, clashed with the sequence of operations thought necessary by SWPA planners. The upshot of the submission of ELKTON to the JCS was that a Pacific Military Conference of representatives of SWPA and POA was called together in Washington to resolve differences and to try to find the additional troops and equipment that MacArthur thought necessary.

En route to Washington, MacArthur's representatives, headed by his chief of staff, Major General Richard K. Sutherland, stopped at Noumea to talk with Halsey and hear his plan for New Georgia.

They then flew on to Pearl Harbor where in a round of conferences with Nimitz' staff they learned the views of that commander on ELKTON. On 10 March, the conferees arrived in Washington to begin two weeks of discussion in an atmosphere where the requests from the Pacific could be best assessed against the world-wide commitments of the United States.

The sequence of operations called for in the ELKTON Plan listed the capture of airdromes on the Huon Peninsula of Eastern New Guinea as a necessary preliminary move to closing in on Rabaul. Bomber squadrons operating from fields in the Lae-Salamaua-Finschhafen area would then control the Vitiaz (Dampier) Strait and could neutralize the Japanese strong-points at Kavieng, New Ireland, and on New Britain, Buka, and Bougainville. With this assistance from SWPA air, SoPac forces would seize and occupy positions in the New Georgia Group. Next would come a simultaneous drive on western New Britain from New Guinea and on Bougainville from the lower Solomons. The two-pronged attack would then converge in the capture of Kavieng, or if the situation seemed favorable, the last step, the capture of Rabaul, would be attempted directly.

General Sutherland and Major General Millard F. Harmon, commander of Army forces in Halsey's area, agreed that in order to accomplish ELKTON as outlined, all the men, ships, and planes asked for would have to be made available.²³ There was no chance that this would be done, since the JCS was already engaged in a re-examination of the resources available for all the strategic undertakings decided on

²³ 4th PMC meeting, dtd 15Mar43, Anx A (COA, NHD).

at Casablanca. It was now apparent that there just was not enough to go around to give full coverage to every scheme; forces requested for ELKTON would have to be cut drastically.²⁴

The requirements of the heavy bomber offensive against Germany changed one aspect of ELKTON immediately. The planned aerial interdiction of Japanese rearward bases from the Huon Peninsula depended on more long range planes reaching the Southwest Pacific. Since these planes could not be made available; airbases closer to Solomons' objectives within range of medium bombers would have to be taken. Woodlark and Kiriwina Islands in the Solomon Sea east of Papua were agreed upon as suitable objectives. Despite this modification of the ELKTON concept, General Sutherland still considered that the Huon Peninsula operations would have to precede all others; on the other hand, Halsey's Chief of Staff, Captain Miles R. Browning, USN, maintained that the seizure of Woodlark and Kiriwina would allow Halsey to make his move into New Georgia without waiting for the capture of Huon airfields. The varying points of view were presented to the JCS for decision.²⁵

The solution arrived at by the JCS was workable and retained elements of both the unity of command concept and that of cooperative action. Subject to the check-rein authority of the JCS, General MacArthur was given overall control of the campaign. Admiral Halsey would have direct command of operations in the Solo-

²⁴ JCS 238, Memo by the JSP, dtd 16Mar43 (COA, NHD); JSSC 11, Surv of the Present StratSit, dtd 22Mar43 (COA, NHD).

²⁵ Minutes of the JCS 68th meeting, dtd 21 Mar-43 (COA, NHD).

mons within the scope of MacArthur's general directives. Any Pacific Ocean Area forces not specifically approved by the JCS for inclusion in task forces engaged in ELKTON operations would remain under Admiral Nimitz.

On 28 March 1943, the Joint Chiefs issued a new directive that cancelled that of 2 July 1942 and outlined the new scheme of operations for the campaign against Rabaul. The schedule of tasks now called for establishment of airfields on Woodlark and Kiriwina Islands, to be followed

by seizure of bases on Huon Peninsula concurrently with Halsey's move into New Georgia. Western New Britain and southern Bougainville were the next steps toward the goal of Rabaul. The purpose of these operations was set down as "the ultimate seizure of the Bismarek Archipelago."²⁶

²⁶ JCS 238/5/D, dtd 23Mar43, Directive—Plan for the Seizure of the Solomons Islands-New Guinea-New Britain-New Ireland Area (COA, NHD).

The Opening Moves

AREA OF CONFLICT¹

Prior to the outbreak of war, the strategic area centered on Rabaul was a slow-paced frontier of Western civilization. Economic development of the Bismarck Archipelago, the Solomon Islands, and Eastern New Guinea was pretty well limited to the cultivation of coconut palms for copra. The coconut plantations, together with a scattering of trading posts, missions, and government stations, housed the relative handful of non-native inhabitants. The islands had little in the way of climate or terrain to attract tourists or anyone else without a surpassing good reason for visiting them. For the most part the area remained as it had been when the first European explorers visited it in the middle of the sixteenth century.

More than 300 years passed before a Western nation thought it worthwhile to lay claim to any of the islands. Then Germany, as part of her belated attempt to build a colonial empire, followed her traders and missionaries into Northeast New Guinea, the Bismarcks, and the Northern Solomons, proclaiming them the protectorate of Kaiser-Wilhelmsland in

¹ Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: MID, WD, *Surv of the Solomons Islands* (S30-677), 2 vols, dtd 15Mar43, hereafter *Solomons Survey*; MIS, WD, *Surv of NE New Guinea and Papua* (S30-678), dtd 15Jul43; MID, WD, *Surv of Bismarck Archipelago* (S30-675), 2 vols, dtd 5Oct43, hereafter *Bismarcks Survey*.

1884. Britain countered by establishing her own protectorate over the Southern Solomons and by annexing the rest of Eastern New Guinea. As the Territory of Papua, with a capital at Port Moresby, this latter area was turned over to Australia in 1905. At the outbreak of World War I, the Australians occupied Kaiser-Wilhelmsland and kept it, under a League of Nations mandate following the peace, as the Territory of New Guinea. The mandate capital was established at Rabaul,² and the territory divided into government districts of Northeast New Guinea, New Britain, New Ireland, Manus (the Admiralty and Northwest Islands), and Kieta (Buka and Bougainville). South of Bougainville, the Solomons, including the Santa Cruz Islands, formed the British Solomon Islands Protectorate, administered by a resident commissioner at Tulagi.

Each island in the Rabaul strategic sphere, with the exception of a few outlying atolls, has a basic similarity of appearance which holds true regardless of size. High hills and mountains crowd the interior, sending out precipitous spurs and ridges to the coasts. A matted jungle canopy of giant trees covers all but the highest peaks, and the sun touches the ground only along the banks of the numerous streams

² The capital of the New Guinea Territory was transferred to Lae in Northeast New Guinea on 1 December 1941 because of the danger of volcanic activity in the Rabaul area.

that slice the slopes. Where fire or water forces a temporary clearing, the vine and bush barrier of second growth springs up to add to the difficulties of transit. Along the shores most of the low-lying ground is choked with rank second growth, and vast stretches of fetid mangrove swamp mark the mouths of streams and rivers. Easily accessible and well-drained land is at a premium and on most such sites coconut plantations had been established. Years are required to grow the trees and constant attention is needed to prevent the encroachment of jungle. These plantations, together with the few significant reaches of grassland scattered throughout the larger islands, were the potential airfields that figured so prominently in Southwest Pacific planning.

Along with tropical forest and rugged hills, the area shares a common climate—hot, humid, and unhealthy. There is a rainy season around December when the northwest monsoon blows, but the “dry months” of the southeast trade winds, April through October, are wringing wet by temperate zone standards. Although the amount of precipitation varies considerably according to locale, an average rainfall of more than 200 inches in the uplands and 100–150 inches along the coasts is not unusual. The islands lie in the only latitudes in the world where evaporation is greater over land than water.³ The temperature of the moisture-saturated air stays in a steady range of 75–90 degrees the year around. Constant high heat and humidity sap a man’s strength and make him prey to a wide variety of tropical diseases.

³ G. T. Trewartha, *An Introduction to Climate* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1954), p. 112.

Strange though it may seem, this uninhabited area has well over a million inhabitants. The majority are Melanesians, the dominant race in the islands northeast of Australia. Primitive in habit and appearance, these people have dark brown, almost black, skins, small but solidly-built bodies, and frizzled, upstanding mops of hair. The natives of Papua belong to a related but separate race, shorter, darker, and more Negroid in aspect. In the atolls around the periphery of the area there are a few thousand Polynesians, tall, fair, and fine-featured members of the race that occupies the Central Pacific islands. Mixed marriages among these peoples are not uncommon; the Melanesians themselves are thought to be the product of a merging of Papuan and Polynesian strains.

Tribalism is the way of life in the islands; there is no native national spirit or tradition. The frankly paternalistic British and Australian administrations respect the tribal organization and govern through the local chiefs. Almost all the natives live in small villages, their outlook limited to what they can see, feel, or hear. Village garden plots, temporarily wrested from the jungle, grow only enough taro, yams, and sweet potatoes for local needs; fruit and fish supplement an otherwise monotonous and starchy diet. Although Christian missionaries have been moderately successful in gaining converts, the basic religion of these simple people is a natural animism. The diversity of dialects is so great that the traders’ jargon of pidgin English is the only universally understood language. By Western standards, the natives live a severely limited life, but this simple existence has the sanction of centuries.

In general, a view of life outside the village is sought and seen only by the laborers who work the coconut plantations and the relatively few natives who serve in the government or police. These men, especially the "police boys," are capable of great personal loyalty to those who can understand and lead them. The evidence for this statement is easily found in the existence of the spy system that operated behind Japanese lines in the Southwest Pacific.

Years before the enemy invaded the New Guinea Territory and drove south toward Port Moresby and Tulagi, the probability of hostile approach through the island screen had been foreseen by the Australians. In 1919, their Navy began to set up a network of observers along the sparsely settled northeastern shores of the continent. As compact and reliable radios were developed, the observer system spread northward into the islands where strategically located officials and planters were recruited and trained to send coded reports of enemy movements. Many of these veteran islanders, famed as the coastwatchers, remained behind when the Japanese advanced, and from vantage points deep in the midst of enemy-controlled waters, sometimes even from enemy-held islands, fed a steady stream of valuable intelligence into Allied hands. The natives who stayed with the coastwatchers were in many cases their eyes and ears in the enemy camp. Though the opportunity for betrayal was great, it was seldom seized.⁴

⁴ Cdr Eric A. Feldt, RAN, *The Coastwatchers* (New York & Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1946). p. 4ff, hereafter Feldt, *The Coastwatchers*.

While the success of the coastwatching system was a tribute to human courage and resourcefulness, it was equally an acknowledgment of the complex geographic factors making it possible. Each island and island group that figured in the Allied drive on Rabaul has its own peculiar character, and its detailed description is part of the narrative of the operations that concern it. A general sketch of the whole strategic area is needed, however, to set in mind the relationship of these islands to each other.

On the map, New Guinea, the world's second largest island, dominates the sea north of Australia. More than 900,000 natives live in the scattered villages of Papua and Northeast New Guinea, an area roughly the size of California. Lofty mountains, some ranging well above 13,000 feet, form a spine for the Papuan Peninsula which juts out into the Coral Sea. In the bulging midsection of the island near the border of Dutch New Guinea, thousands of square miles of soggy ground and tangled swampland spread out along the wandering courses of torpid rivers coming down out of the highlands. The Huon Peninsula, which harbors near its base and southern flank the airfield sites so prominent in the ELKTON planning, thrusts east toward New Britain, less than 50 miles away across Vitiaz (Dampier) Strait. (See Map I, Map Section.)

The tip of western New Britain, Cape Gloucester, has enough low grassland near the coast to allow airfield development. Thus, from the Cape and from the Huon Peninsula, directly opposite on New Guinea, control could be easily maintained over Dampier Strait, the only entry into the Solomon Sea from the northwest. New

Britain, an elongated and crescent-shaped island, 370 miles long and 40-50 miles wide, is heavily forested and has the usual prominent jumble of mountains and hills ridging its interior. Midway along the coasts, Talasea in the north and Gasmata in the south offer way-point airdrome sites for a drive on Rabaul, which "has by all odds the best natural harbor and base for military operations in the entire New Guinea-New Britain-Solomon Islands area."⁵

Curving to the northwest from the waters off Rabaul's Blanche Bay, scimitar-like New Ireland parallels New Guinea's coastline 300 miles away and closes one side of the Bismarck Sea. The airfields and harbor at Kavieng on the slim island's northern point made the small colonial town a prime strategic objective. The Bismarck Sea is outlined by a staggered arc of islands which swings north from New Hanover off Kavieng to the Saint Matthias group, then west to the Admiralties and on to the atolls known as the Northwest Islands, which dip south toward New Guinea. The native population of the whole area of the Bismarck Archipelago is approximately 150,000, the largest number by far living on New Britain and New Ireland.

Planes based at Rabaul and at airfields on Buka or Bougainville can effectively close off the passage between New Ireland and Buka, the second major gateway to the Solomon Sea. Politically speaking, these two northern islands are part of the New Guinea Territory; geographically, they are one with the rest of the Solomons. The principal islands of the Solo-

mons constitute a double mountain chain running northwest and southeast for about 700 miles between the Bismarcks and the New Hebrides; the width of this central grouping is 100 miles. Several offshoot islands well away from the main chain—Ontong Java atoll to the northeast, Rennell due south of Guadalcanal, and the Santa Cruz group to the southeast—are also considered part of the Solomons.

In all the islands there are some 165,000 natives living in a total land area equivalent to that of West Virginia. The terrain fits the general pattern of the whole strategic area—jungle and hills extremely difficult to traverse which tend to localize land combat and put a premium on air and sea power. The major islands of the northeast chain, Choiseul, Santa Isabel, and Malaita, have few natural military objectives, and the same lack characterizes San Cristobal, the southernmost of the southwest chain. The other large islands of the Solomons, Guadalcanal, New Georgia, and Bougainville, have sizable harbors and airfield sites sufficient to make them logical stopping points in a deliberate advance on Rabaul. Each of these major island objectives has several smaller islands nearby which also class as potential targets: Tulagi and Florida are coupled with Guadalcanal; Vella Lavella and Kolombangara with New Georgia; and Buka and the Shortland-Treasury Islands with Bougainville.

Typical of the smaller island groups in the Solomons is the Russells, which lie 30-35 miles northwest of Cape Esperance on Guadalcanal. The accident of location rather than any considerable strategic advantage made them Admiral Halsey's first objective after Guadalcanal was secured.

⁵ *Bismarcks Survey*, p. 1.



SIMPSON HARBOR AND RABAU appear in a composite aerial photograph taken during an Allied air raid prior to the Bismarck Sea battle. (USAF F23272AC)



MARINES OF THE 3D RAIDER BATTALION land from rubber boats on the beach at Pavuvu to take part in the seizure of the Russells. (USMC 54468)

*OCCUPATION OF THE RUSSELLS*⁶

The Russell group consists of two main islands fringed by a scattering of lesser islets. Pavuvu, the larger island, is very irregular in shape and no more than ten miles across at its widest point. The low land along the shoreline of many of its coves and bays is clear of undergrowth and lined with coconut trees, but these plantings only edge the jungle and mark the steep rise towards the hills of the interior. On the north coast, several deep water bays provide sheltered anchorages which will accommodate large ocean-going vessels. Only a narrow channel separates Pavuvu from its smaller neighbor to the east, Banika, which has unusual terrain for the Solomons. Except in its southwestern portion, where hills rise to 400 feet, the island is low and rolling and suitable for military development. Banika's north coast is cleft by Renard Sound, a deep inlet that provides access to the low ground. (See Map 1.)

In January 1943, when it was evident that the Japanese were losing their fight to regain control of Guadalcanal, the possibility of moving forward to the Russells was given serious consideration at ComSoPac headquarters. To Halsey's staff,

⁶ Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: *ComSoPac Jan-Apr43 WarDs*; ComPhibSoPac Rept of Occupation of the Russell Islands (CLEANSLATEOp) 21Feb-17Apr43, dtd 21Apr43; 43d InfDiv FO No. 2, dtd 15Feb43; 3d RdrBn Rept of the Russell Islands (CLEANSLATEOp), dtd 9Apr43; Russell Islands Det. 11th DefBn Jnl; LtCol E. S. Watson, G-3, 43d InfDiv, "Movement of a Task Force by Small Landing Craft," dtd 17Apr43; *Solomons Survey*; Morrison, *Breaking the Bismarcks Barrier*. Documents not otherwise identified are located in the Russell Islands Area Operations File of the Archives, Historical Branch, G-3 Division, Headquarters Marine Corps.

the island group seemed a desirable objective and one that could be taken and held with the limited resources available in the South Pacific. A presentation of this concept was made to Admiral Nimitz when he visited Noumea for conferences with Halsey on 23 January. The Pacific Fleet commander gave oral approval to the idea and before the month was out he gave specific authorization for the operation.

The Japanese had not occupied the Russells when they moved into the lower Solomons, but once the decision was made to pull out of Guadalcanal about 300 troops were sent to tiny Baisen Island off Pavuvu's northwest tip, Pepesala Point, to set up a barge-staging base.⁷ The enemy unit left when its job was done; the withdrawal was reported on 11 February by a coastwatcher who had been landed in the islands earlier to keep tab on Japanese activity. The prospect of an unopposed landing was cheering to Allied planners, but it resulted in no reduction in assault troop strength for the proposed operation. A healthy respect for Japanese offensive capabilities kept the figure high.

South Pacific Area planners felt that a further "attempt on the part of the enemy to reestablish himself on Guadalcanal was a distinct possibility," and that if this happened the reaction to Allied occupation of the Russells would be violent.⁸ The landing force allotted under these circumstances had to be strong enough to

⁷ HistSec, G-2, FEC Japanese Monograph No. 48, SE Area NavOps—Part I, n.d. (OCMH), p. 61, hereafter *SE Area NavOps—I*.

⁸ CGUSAFISPA 1st Ind, dtd 1May43, to 43d InfDiv Summary of the Occupation of the Russell Islands, dtd 17Apr43, in Watson Rept, *op. cit.*

sustain a major counterattack. A further consideration in determining the size of the force was the belief that the assault troops would be favorably disposed to take part in future operations against New Georgia.

On 7 February, Halsey's directive for CLEANSLATE, the Russells operation, was issued. Named to overall command was Rear Admiral Richmond K. Turner, who headed South Pacific Amphibious Forces. The 43d Infantry Division, less its 172d Regimental Combat Team (RCT), was designated the principal component of the CLEANSLATE occupation force. Major reinforcing units were the Marine 3d Raider Battalion, antiaircraft elements of the Marine 11th Defense Battalion, half of the 35th Naval Construction Battalion, and Acorn 3.⁹ Once the acorn unit had an airfield in operation on Banika, MAG-21, then en route to the South Pacific, would move in its fighter squadrons for intercept and escort missions.

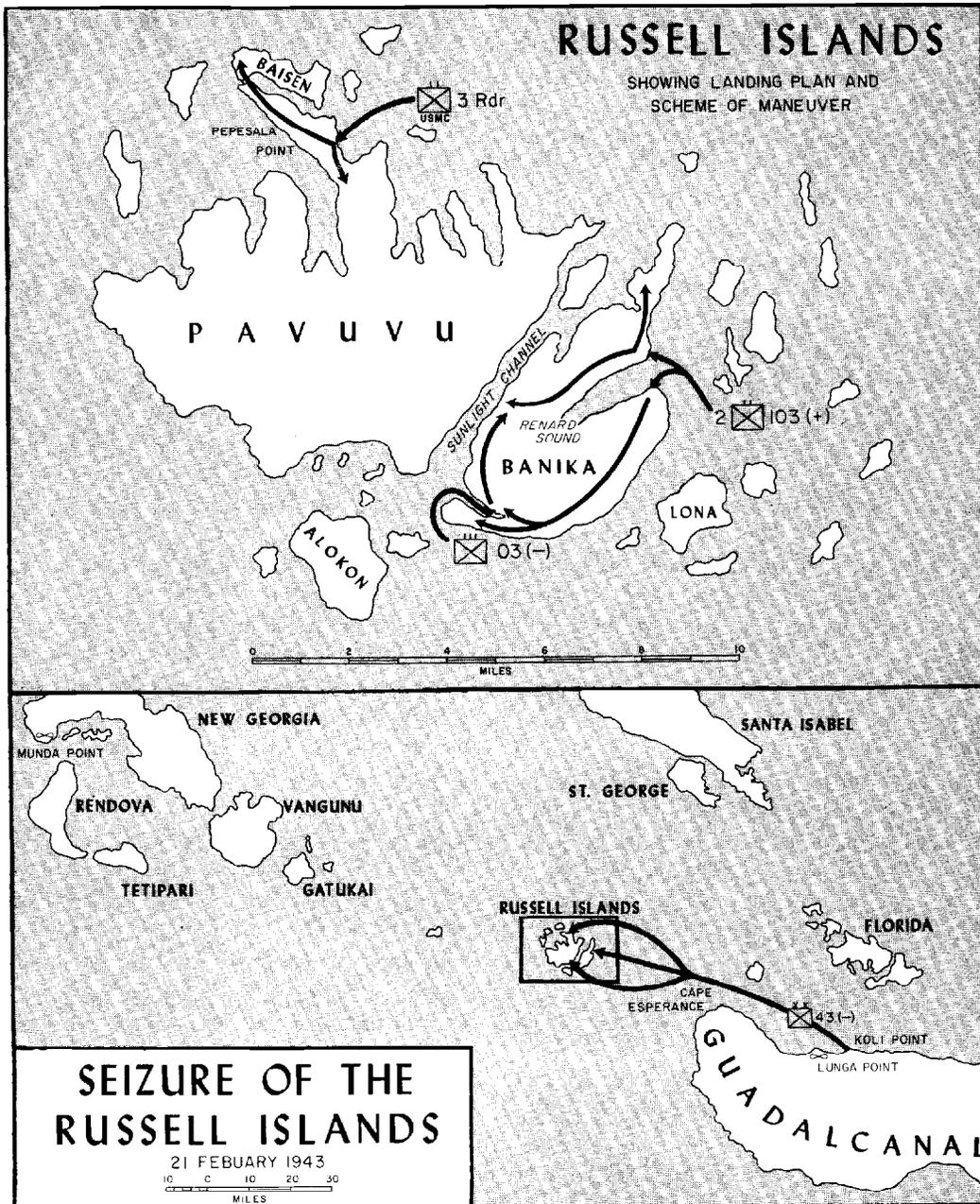
The assembly of the CLEANSLATE task force was hard to detect. No ship larger than a destroyer was assigned to transport troops or supplies; most of the workload fell to newly arrived landing ships and craft getting their first offensive test in the South Pacific. While larger vessels brought the 43d Division from New Caledonia to Guadalcanal, the movement was made in normal-sized convoys. Japanese planes located and unsuccessfully attacked one of these convoys near San Cristobal on the 17th, but the enemy pilots saw nothing about the transports to indi-

⁹ An acorn was a naval unit designed to construct, operate, and maintain an advanced land-plane and seaplane base and to provide facilities for operations.

cate that they were anything more than another reinforcement-replacement group headed for the Guadalcanal garrison. Ships arriving off Koli Point, staging area for the operation, unloaded immediately and cleared the vicinity. Only a cluster of innocuous small vessels, mainly LCTs (landing craft, tank) and LCMs (landing craft, medium), and a screen of destroyers stood by for the run to the Russells.

The projected D-Day for planning purposes was 21 February; four days before, when it was evident that the operation was proceeding on schedule, Admiral Halsey confirmed this date. Late on the 19th loading out began, LCTs first, followed by the smaller craft, and topped off by the destroyer types. Only the APDs (high speed transports) were equipped to hoist on board landing craft, and the destroyers and destroyer mine-sweepers assigned as transports each took a quartet of small boats under tow. Near midnight on 20 February, the strange flotilla got underway. Destroyers were in the van, throttled down to the speed of a dozen squat LCTs that followed in trace, with the rear brought up by a tug-drawn barge loaded with ammunition and barbed wire.

The support given CLEANSLATE was impressive. Bombers from SWPA hit Japanese rearward bases in the Northern Solomons and Bismarcks. Aerial cover over the target and interdiction missions against enemy installations in the Central Solomons were flown by squadrons from Henderson Field, temporarily reinforced by the *Saratoga's* air group. Nearly every combat ship in Halsey's command put to sea, ready to meet a Japanese surface attack; four cruisers and four destroyers steamed up New Georgia Sound (aptly nicknamed "The Slot") as a covering



force. The precautions paid off; no enemy scout plane or vessel spotted the task force and the landing was made without opposition.

Reconnaissance parties sent to the Russells several days before the landing had selected suitable beach exits, gun sites, and camp and dump areas. On the morning of the 21st, the Army battalions landing on the two beaches of Banika and the Marine raiders going ashore on Pavuvu's Pepesala Point were met by guides who led them to pre-selected positions. One hour after the waves of assault troops landed from their destroyer transports, the LCTs nosed ashore and began unloading. The first echelon of antiaircraft guns and crews of the 11th Defense Battalion were in position on Banika by noon. The raiders and infantrymen were dug in to meet a counterlanding attempt before night-fall.

Marine antiaircraft gun crews and the Army field artillerymen whom they had retrained for the air defense job¹⁰ were the only ones to see action during the ensuing weeks. On 6 March, the first Japanese attack occurred when a dozen fighters and bombers made a low-level strike on the main islands. Early warning radar was not yet in operation and the first enemy bombing and strafing run caused some casualties before the antiaircraft defenses were manned; at least two enemy raiders were shot down. Sporadic air attacks followed this first effort, but none were of serious import.

The Marine elements of the original CLEANSLATE landing force were only temporarily assigned to the operation.

¹⁰ Maj Joseph L. Winecoff ltr to CO, 11th DefBn, dtd 22Feb43.

The 11th Defense detachment was used only until the 10th Defense Battalion arrived in the Russells; on 15 March, the new unit began taking over the 11th's battery positions. The changeover was completed by 17 March, and the detachment's gun crews returned to Port Purvis on Florida Island the following night. The 3d Raider Battalion pulled out on 20 March and returned to Espiritu Santo; 43d Division units occupied the raiders' defensive positions.

The withdrawal of the Marines was about the only rearward movement of troops from the Russells during this period. Each day after D-Day, LCTs loaded at Guadalcanal and under cover of darkness made the run to the new forward base; succeeding echelons of Turner's task force arrived at the islands for 50 nights running. By the end of February over 9,000 men were ashore and by 18 April, when responsibility for logistic support and defense of the Russells passed to the commanding general at Guadalcanal, 16,066 men and 48,517 tons of supplies had been brought in by the LCT shuttle. Banika now boasted an operating airfield for MAG-21's three fighter squadrons, a motor torpedo boat base, extensive base defense installations, and the start of a considerable supply handling capacity.

Admiral King in Washington was somewhat dubious of the value of putting so much into the Russells, but Halsey defended his policy as necessary for the protection of the new air base. As far as ComSoPac was concerned, CLEANSLATE was merely the completion of the first stage of his move toward New Georgia, and the troops and supplies stationed there were earmarked for the continued advance up the Solomons chain.

*BATTLE OF THE BISMARCK SEA*¹¹

While ComSoPac was consolidating his hold on the new Russells airdrome, an event occurred in the Southwest Pacific Area that emphasized dramatically the importance of land-based air in the campaign against Rabaul. On 2-3 March, a Japanese troop convoy headed for Lae at the base of the Huon Peninsula was engaged in a running fight by Australian and American squadrons based on New Guinea. The results of this Battle of the Bismarck Sea were so significant that General MacArthur stated:

We have achieved a victory of such completeness as to assume the proportions of a major disaster to the enemy. Our decisive success can not fail to have most important results on the enemy's strategic and tactical plans. His campaign, for the time being at least, is completely disrupted.¹²

The convoy was an attempt initiated by *Eighth Area Army* to strengthen its defenses in the Lae-Salamaua area and to insure continued control of both shores of Dampier Strait. Eight transports, varying in size from 500 to 6,800 tons, and eight escort destroyers made the run. On board

¹¹ Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: HistSec, G-2, FEC, Japanese Monograph No. 32, SE Area AirOps Nov42-Apr44, n.d. (located at OCMH), hereafter *SE Area AirOps*; *SE Area NavOps—II*; Wesley F. Craven and James L. Cate (eds), *The Pacific: Guadalcanal to Saipan, August 1942 to July 1944—The Army Air Forces in World War II*, v. IV (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1950), hereafter Craven and Cate, *Guadalcanal to Saipan*; Morison, *Breaking the Bismarcks Barrier*.

¹² Quoted in MajGen Charles A. Willoughby and John Chamberlin, *MacArthur 1941-1951* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1954), p. 112.

were approximately 6,000 soldiers of the *51st Division* and 400 replacements for Special Naval Landing Force units.¹³ A canopy of fighter planes, both Army and Navy, was provided for overhead protection.

The enemy convoy cleared Rabaul on 1 March, steaming at slow speed along the northern coast of New Britain, partially hidden by lowering skies which made observation difficult. A reconnaissance bomber of MacArthur's Fifth Air Force sighted the ships and escorting fighters, however, and radioed in its find; a flight of B-17s was unable to locate the target when the weather closed. The following morning the convoy was spotted again and this time the Flying Fortresses found their quarry, broke through the screen of planes and antiaircraft fire, and sank one transport, the *51st Division* command ship. Survivors were transferred to two destroyers, which separated from the main convoy and steamed ahead to Lae. Australian and American planes continued to seek out the ships throughout the day, but the continued bad weather helped to foil these attacks and further damage was minor.

Despite the aerial harassment, the Japanese adhered to their original sailing schedule, which was to bring them off Lae about 1700 on 3 March. By early morning of the 3d, the convoy was well within Huon Gulf and also well within range of Allied airbases on New Guinea; for all practical purposes the enemy had sailed into a trap. MacArthur's air commander, Major General George C. Kenney, sprang it with a coordinated attack led by low-level fighter-bombers specially practiced in

¹³ USSBS, *Campaigns*, p. 174.

anti-shipping strikes, backed up by medium- and high-level bombers and an escort of fighters. The resulting melee was disastrous for the Japanese. Every transport was burning and in a sinking condition in less than half an hour; two destroyers were sunk and a third heavily damaged. The attacks continued until a fourth destroyer, engaged in rescue operations, was hit that afternoon. Motor torpedo boats reached the scene during the night and finished off one of the cripples, and the next morning the bombers completed the score. After rescuing 3,800 men, four destroyers, all that was left of the original convoy, made it back to Rabaul; fewer than 900 men got through to Lae.

The overwhelming Allied success had, as General MacArthur observed, important results. Not only did the Japanese fail to get a substantial reinforcement through to the Huon Peninsula area, but the transport losses forced them to abandon large-scale reinforcement attempts altogether. Dampier Strait did not belong to the Allies yet, but Kenney's fliers made it clear that the Japanese had no clear title either. Supplies and men slated for enemy garrisons in Eastern New Guinea or the Solomons—for any base within effective range of Allied planes—were now moved forward by destroyers, whose high speed, excellent maneuverability, and antiaircraft guns gave them a measure of protection, or by small craft hugging the island coasts. The Japanese had been decisively defeated, but a battle is not the war, and the sorry record of their defending aircraft prompted an all-out effort to restore at least a parity of airpower in the Rabaul strategic area.

JAPANESE "I" OPERATION¹⁴

Following the Bismarck Sea debacle, Japanese scout planes reported increased activity in Papua and the lower Solomons. Allied troop and material strength was clearly increasing, and all intelligence pointed to the imminence of offensive operations. Allied air raids and antishipping strikes seriously disrupted enemy defensive preparations and curtailed the movement of reinforcements to forward bases. The Japanese decided that a strong counter-stroke was needed to blunt the Allied air spearhead and to gain a respite for their own defense build-up. Tokyo assigned the task, designated *I Go* ("I" Operation), to Admiral Yamamoto and his *Combined Fleet*.

In order to bolster the strength of Rabaul's *Eleventh Air Fleet*, Yamamoto ordered forward from Truk the planes and pilots from four of the carriers of his *Third Fleet*. On 3 April, the admiral himself flew to Rabaul to take personal command. The combined force available for *I Go* was at least 182 fighters, 81 dive bombers, and 72 medium-range land bombers, plus a few torpedo planes. The 15-day operation was planned to proceed in two phases, the first incorporating a strike against the Solomons and the second, attacks on Allied positions in Papua.

The busy cluster of ships, large and small, in the vicinity of Tulagi and Guadalcanal was the initial *I Go* target. Near noon of 7 April, 67 enemy Val dive bombers with an escort of 110 Zeke fighters

¹⁴ Unless otherwise noted, material in this section is derived from: HistSec, G-2, FEC, Japanese Monograph No. 122, SE Area NavAirOps—Part III, Nov42–Jun43, n.d. (OCMH), hereafter *SE Area NavAirOps—III*; *SE Area NavOps—II*; Morison, *Breaking the Bismarcks Barrier*.

took off from staging airfields on Buka and Bougainville to make the attack. Their departure was duly noted and reported to Henderson Field by coastwatchers on Bougainville; at 1400, radar in the Russells picked up the oncoming flights and 76 interceptors, Guadalcanal's typical joint-service mixture, scrambled and tangled with the Zeke escort over The Stot. The Japanese bombers, hiding behind a blanket of heavy black clouds that covered Indispensable Strait between Malaita and Florida, headed for Tulagi. Almost all the ships were out of Tulagi harbor when the raiders struck; only a fleet oiler and a New Zealand corvette were caught in the confined waters. Both were sunk. The attack continued against the rapidly maneuvering vessels in Iron Bottom Sound, but ship and shore antiaircraft fire kept the Vals high and the bombing inaccurate. The destroyer *Aaron Ward*, attempting to protect an LST that had become the focus of enemy attention, was seriously damaged; she later sank under tow. The bombers caused no other significant damage and drew off soon after they loosed their loads. The Zekes scored just as lightly as the Vals, accounting for only seven planes, all of them Marine. The welter of conflicting claims for enemy aircraft shot down was winnowed to an estimate that less than 25 Japanese were lost,¹⁵ a figure that argued well with the highest official enemy report of 24 planes downed.¹⁶

Aside from the relatively light damage to Allied ships and aircraft, the 7 April attack had one other tangible result for

the Japanese. It enabled them to slip reinforcements into Kolombangara by destroyer transport while ComSoPac concentrated his air strength at Guadalcanal to meet further attacks. Similar reinforcement efforts were executed for Western New Britain and the Huon Peninsula under cover of the trio of attacks on New Guinea targets that made up the second phase of *I Go*.

On 11 April, 94 *Third Fleet* carrier planes attacked shipping in Oro Bay, 20 miles southeast of Buna. Fifty Allied fighters fought them off but not before Japanese Val pilots had sunk one merchantman, beached another, and damaged an Australian minesweeper. On the following day, 174 Japanese naval planes, including 43 medium bombers, made a mass attack on the airfields surrounding Port Moresby. While defending fighters took on the Zeke escort, the bombers plowed up the airstrips, but otherwise did little damage. The third *I Go* raid was made on ships and airfields at Milne Bay on 14 April. The Japanese again attacked in overwhelming force, 188 planes; only 24 Australian fighters were available to meet them, but all ships were forewarned and underway, firing their antiaircraft guns to make the enemy pilots shear off. The major result of the attack was the sinking of a merchantman and some minor damage to other shipping. In all three attacks, 5 Allied planes were lost, and the Japanese admitted the loss of 21 aircraft.

On 16 April, Admiral Yamamoto called off the "I" Operation, ordering the remaining *Third Fleet* planes back to Truk. He had been completely misled by the glowing reports of his pilots into believing that *I Go* had been a tremendous success. The total damage claim for the four raids was

¹⁵ CinCPac, Ops in the POA for Apr43 (COA, NHD), p. 14.

¹⁶ Morison, *Breaking the Bismarcks Barrier*, p. 124, indicates that Japanese postwar records confirm the loss of only 12 Vals and 9 Zekes.

staggering: 1 cruiser, 2 destroyers, and 25 assorted transports and cargo vessels sunk, with heavy damage to 2 more transports and several smaller vessels; 134 planes shot out of the air (including 39 probables). Matched against these totals was the actual loss of 1 destroyer, 1 corvette, 2 merchantmen, and less than 20 aircraft. It would seem that the *Third Fleet* pilots had adopted the penchant for reporting "gross exaggeration of damage inflicted" that was rampant in the ranks of the *Eleventh Air Fleet*.¹⁷ Whatever the explanation for pilot error, be it willful exaggeration or wishful thinking, the premature ending of *I Go* without any significant results was chilling to Japanese hopes of delaying Allied offensive preparations.

ALLIED RAIDS¹⁸

The prime targets of Halsey's pressure tactics in the early months of 1943 were the enemy airfields at Munda on New Georgia and Vila on Kolombangara. The tempo of air raids against these bases increased steadily as Allied strength mounted. Coupled with these air strikes was a limited program of naval bombardment made possible by the fact that SoPac planes and ships had wrested control of the waters immediately north of Guadalcanal from the Japanese. The Japanese could and did risk their warships within range of Henderson Field's bombers, but the need had to be great as in the evacuation of Guadalcanal. The chance for a showdown sea battle still brightened the hopes of enemy naval officers, but there was little desire

¹⁷ USSBS, *Interrogation* No. 601, Cdr Ryoske Nomura, IJN, II, p. 532.

¹⁸ Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: *SE Area NavOps—II*; Morison, *Breaking the Bismarcks Barrier*.

any longer to seek this critical fight in the confined waters of the lower Solomons. Halsey's cruisers and destroyers had time to get some experience at shore bombardment, thus exposing enemy garrisons to a bit of the bitter medicine dished out by Japanese naval gunners in the darkest days of the struggle for Guadalcanal.

Rear Admiral Walden L. Ainsworth took a cruiser-destroyer force against Munda on 5 January and again on the 24th brought his bombardment group up to New Georgia, this time to shell the field at Vila. On both occasions, fires started by naval gunfire lit up the night and the results of the bombardment were at least spectacular. Follow-up attacks by Allied air caused more damage, according to the Japanese, but neither bombing nor shelling had any lasting effect on the progress of the enemy airbase construction. Admiral Ainsworth noted that, while these air-sea attacks might render the fields unusable for critical periods of time, "the only real answer is to take the field away from them."¹⁹

Admiral Halsey was in complete agreement with this sentiment; he expected little more from his attack pattern in the Central Solomons than the harassment and delay he achieved. The Japanese became expert at filling in the craters in the runways and dug-in their scattered dumps and shelters to minimize the effect of the Allied raids. Life was mighty unpleasant under the constant round of attacks, however, and the portents were hardly encouraging for the success of Japanese arms.

Another of Ainsworth's shore bombardment groups was underway for New Georgia after dark on 5 March when he received

¹⁹ CTF 67 Rept of Vila-Stanmore Bombardment 22-24 Jan 43, dtd 28 Jan 43 (COA, NHD).

word from Guadalcanal that two enemy ships had left Bougainville headed south earlier in the day. Guadalcanal's seaplane scouts spotted the ships, two destroyers that had just delivered supplies to the Vila base steaming north on a return course. Fire control radar screens pinpointed the location of the targets for ships' batteries, and the enemy vessels were buried in a deluge of shells. Both quickly sank; only 49 crewmen survived to tell their harrowing tale to the garrison on Kolombangara.²⁰

The cruiser-destroyer force was slated to hit Munda and Vila again on the night of 7-8 April and was already out of port when Admiral Yamamoto launched his "I" Operation with the assault on Tulagi. The Japanese planes failed to sight the bombardment ships, but the prospect of further enemy attacks prompted Halsey to call off the mission and concentrate his forces. The temporary slackening-off of

²⁰ USSBS, *Interrogation* No. 138, LCdr Horishi Tokuno, IJN, I, p. 142; Morison, *Breaking the Bismarcks Barrier*, p. 110, indicates that other sources show there were 174 survivors.

surface and air raids made necessary by this assemblage of power may have been instrumental in convincing Yamamoto that *I Go* was a success. The enemy admiral had no time to discover his mistake.

On 18 April, two days after Yamamoto ended *I Go*, he left Rabaul with his staff on an inspection trip to Bougainville. As a result of a message intercept, Allied intelligence knew the itinerary of the inspection party and a killer group of Army long-range fighters from Henderson Field met the Japanese planes over their destination, Buin airfield. The execution was swift and sure; a few moments after the interceptors attacked, the staff transports crashed in flames and the enemy's most famous naval commander was dead. Yamamoto died primarily because Nimitz' staff evaluated him as the best man the Japanese had to command their *Combined Fleet*; had he been less competent, less of an inspiration to enemy morale, he might well have lived. His death dealt a telling blow to the spirit of the defenders in the Solomons, and furnished grim warning of the downward course of Japanese fortunes.

Order of Battle

*FLEET MARINE FORCE*¹

By 30 April 1943, the Fleet Marine Force in the Pacific had reached formidable strength in comparison to the few battalions and squadrons that had been its aggregate at the outbreak of war. Over 110,000 Marines and sailors were serving in three divisions, three air wings, and a wide variety of supporting units positioned at Allied bases along a broad, sweeping arc from Midway to Australia. The majority of combat troops were located in the South Pacific under Admiral Halsey's command, where the highest Marine ground echelon was Major General Clayton B. Vogel's I Marine Amphibious Corps (IMAC). The senior Marine aviator, Major General Ralph J. Mitchell, wore two hats as commander of a newly estab-

lished area headquarters, Marine Aircraft, South Pacific (MASP), and of its principal operating component, the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing (1st MAW). Neither IMAC nor MASP had any substantial tactical function; both commands were organized primarily to serve as administrative and logistical headquarters.

From his command post at Noumea, General Vogel controlled the 2d and 3d Marine Divisions, then in training in New Zealand, as well as a strong body of supporting troops either attached to the divisions or encamped in New Caledonia, the lower Solomons, and the New Hebrides. General Mitchell's units, all temporarily assigned to the 1st Wing, were stationed at airfields from New Zealand to the Russells. Guadalcanal was the focal point of air activity as a steady rotation of squadrons was effected to maintain maximum combat efficiency in the forward areas. Also part of MASP was Headquarters Squadron of the 2d MAW, newly arrived in New Zealand to prepare for a command role in future operations.

In addition to the troops assigned to IMAC and MASP, there was still another sizeable body of FMF units in the South Pacific—those units which were part of the garrisons of American and British Samoa, Wallis Island, and Funafuti in the Ellice Group. American bases on these islands were all included in Major General Charles F. B. Price's Samoan Defense Command. For ground defense, Price

¹ Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: CMC AnRept to SecNav for the Fiscal Year Ending 30Jun43; "Historical Outline of the Development of Fleet Marine Force, Pacific, 1941-1950 (Preliminary)," MS official history written at FMFPac Hq about 1951; Kenneth W. Condit, Gerald Diamond, and Edwin T. Turnbladh, *Marine Corps Ground Training in World War II* (Washington: Hist-Br, G-3, HQMC, 1956); 1stLt's Robert A. Aurthur and Kenneth Cohlma, *The Third Marine Division* (Washington: Infantry Journal Press, 1948), hereafter Aurthur and Cohlma, *3d MarDivHist*; C. W. Proehl (ed.), *The Fourth Marine Division in World War II* (Washington: Infantry Journal Press, 1946); Robert Sherrod, *History of Marine Corps Aviation in World War II* (Washington: Combat Forces Press, 1952), hereafter Sherrod, *MarAirHist*.

had two rifle regiments, one (3d Marines) under orders to join the 3d Division, and four defense battalions. In special combat training centers were two replacement battalions learning the fundamentals of jungle warfare.² Price also had operational control of the squadrons of Marine Aircraft Group 13 (MAG-13), which was administratively part of the 4th Marine Base Defense Aircraft Wing (4th MBDW).

The remaining squadrons of the 4th Wing were stationed in the Central Pacific, on Oahu, and at the outpost islands, Midway, Johnston, and Palmyra, that guarded the approaches to the Pacific Fleet's main base. Ground garrisons for these outposts were furnished by Marine defense battalions administered from a headquarters at Pearl Harbor. The remaining major unit of the FMF in the Pacific, the 1st Marine Division, was in Australia assigned to General MacArthur's command, and just beginning to feel fit again after its ordeal on Guadalcanal.

There was no single headquarters, operational or administrative, for all FMF organizations in the Pacific, although Marine air units did have an administrative headquarters on Oahu—Marine Air Wings, Pacific under Major General Ross E. Rowell. Senior ground commanders, like Vogel and Price, had to consult the Commandant directly on many organiza-

tional, administrative, and logistical matters that could well have been handled by a type command at the fleet level. As the FMF grew in size, and its components' missions in complexity, the lack of a higher Marine headquarters to support and coordinate the activities of the air-ground team was to be felt more acutely. The lessons to be learned in the fighting in the Solomons and Bismarcks and on the atolls of the Central Pacific would have to be absorbed before such a headquarters was established.

Most Fleet Marine Force activity in the States was concentrated in a complex of neighboring bases on each coast. In the east, the major ground training center was Camp Lejeune at New River, North Carolina, a site incorporating thousands of acres of tangled, stream-cut forest backing 11 miles of dune-topped beaches. The sprawling Marine Corps Air Station at Cherry Point, less than 40 miles north of Lejeune, controlled a number of smaller airfields scattered throughout the Carolinas. On the west coast, most ground training was carried on at Camp Elliott, a relatively small area just outside San Diego, or at Camp Pendleton, which stretched north from Oceanside for 18 miles along the coastal highway—a vast area of rolling hills, steep-sided canyons and arroyos, and frequent thickets as dense as tropical jungle. A network of air stations and auxiliary fields, the largest being El Toro near Los Angeles, housed the squadrons training for Pacific duty.

These bases, like the Marine Corps itself, were feverishly building at the same time they performed their function of readying men for combat. The 1st Marine Division developed the New River area for amphibious training, and when it shipped out in April 1942 it left behind cadres which

² In the fall of 1942, it was decided to season the Marine replacement battalions organized on the east coast of the U.S. in Samoa, where they could receive advanced combat training under climatic conditions and over terrain matching the battle area. Beginning with the 1st Replacement Battalion, which arrived 17 December 1942, seven battalions were trained before the high incidence of filariasis forced a discontinuance of the program in July 1943.

formed the nucleus of the 3d Marines, organized in June. In like manner, the 2d Marine Division, which gave Camps Elliott and Pendleton their baptism as combat training areas, furnished the cadres for most of the units of the 3d Division, which was activated at Elliott on 16 September 1942. The 4th Marine Division was not scheduled for formal activation until August 1943, but its major components were in being by midyear, again by the process of building on a skeleton of veteran officers and enlisted men.

On the air side, the picture of experienced cadres forming the core of new units was much the same as with ground organizations. In contrast to the division and the regiment, however, the Marine aircraft wing and group were essentially task forces shaped to the job at hand and constantly changing their make-up. The 1st MAW, for example, joined a number of squadrons of the 2d Wing during the air battles over Guadalcanal, while the 2d MAW operated largely as a training command in the States. When the 2d Wing left California for the South Pacific in January 1943, its training functions were taken over by Marine Fleet Air, West Coast—a subordinate command of Marine Air Wings, Pacific, in Hawaii. Additional squadrons tentatively assigned to the wings already overseas were in training at every Marine air base in California in 1943.

On the east coast, the 3d MAW was activated in November and its component units grew up with the new airfields then building. Nearly a year's forming and training time was needed before the first of the wing's squadrons was combat ready.³

³ See Appendix E for a location and strength breakdown on the FMF on 30 April 1943.

The overall growth of the Marine Corps matched the rapid swelling of the ranks of the FMF. Although the lion's share of new officers and men ended up in FMF units, thousands of Marines were needed for sea duty, guard assignments, and the supporting establishment. Beginning in February 1943, a steady stream of young women entered the Corps to free men for combat by taking over a host of administrative and technical jobs in non-FMF units. Their performance of duty as Marines "proved highly successful in every way."⁴ The enlisted strength of the Marine Corps rose from 222,871 at the start of 1943⁵ to 287,621 within six months; on 30 June the number of officers had reached 21,384. Projected total strength for the end of the year was more than 355,000 officers and men,⁶ a far cry from the 66,000-man Marine Corps that existed on 7 December 1941.⁷

The second year of fighting saw a cherished tradition of the Marine Corps, its all-volunteer composition, become a war casualty. A Presidential executive order of 5 December 1942 put an end to voluntary enlistment of men of draft age in any of the services. The intent of the directive was to give manpower planners in Washington a greater measure of qualitative control over the influx of men into each service in keeping with the quantitative control already exercised through a quota system. Starting with the intake of February 1943, the recruit depots at

⁴ LtGen Keller E. Rockey ltr to CMC, dtd 6Nov55.

⁵ M-1 Sec OpDiary 7Dec41-31Dec44, dtd 20Mar45, p. 8.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ For a location and strength breakdown of the Marine Corps on the eve of WW II, see Volume I, Part I, Chapter 5 of this series.

Parris Island and San Diego saw only a sprinkling of men (mainly draft-exempt 17-year-olds) who did not come in through the Selective Service System. It was still possible, however, for many draftees who anticipated their call-up to enter the service of their choice. The Commandant, Lieutenant General Thomas Holcomb, assigned liaison officers to state governors and draft boards to encourage the deferment of those men who wanted to be Marines until they could fit into the Corps' quota.⁸ This program, which was quite successful, resulted in the seeming paradox that most of the draftees in Marine uniforms were still volunteers, in fact if not in name.

The intangible but clearly evident atmosphere of a volunteer outfit was retained by the Marine Corps throughout the war. This spirit was especially evident in the units of the Corps' striking arm—the Fleet Marine Force—where officers and men alike were intolerant of anyone attempting to get by with a marginal performance. The prevailing attitude was that every man had asked to be a Marine and no complaints were expected when the going got a little rough. Each Marine assigned to a unit earmarked for the impending Central Solomons operations seemed quietly determined to equal, even if he could not better, the fighting record of his fellows on Guadalcanal.

*THE BATTLE LINES ARE DRAWN*⁹

ComSoPac anchored his ELKTON attack against enemy positions in the Solomons on a trio of islands, New Caledonia,

⁸ Rocky Itr, *op. cit.*

⁹ Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: RAdm Charles M. Cooke memo for Pacific Conferees, "Availability

Espiritu Santo, and Efate. On each there grew up a complex network of port installations, air bases, supply depots, and salvage and repair facilities geared to operate at a pace that meshed well with Halsey's aggressive offensive philosophy. Like the tactical task forces which actually closed combat with the Japanese, the logistic organizations formed an integrated whole in which the various services cooperated to solve supply and support problems. All units were under orders to "consider themselves as part of the same team rather than Navy, Army, or Marine services in a separate and independent sense. . . ."¹⁰

The hustling bases in the New Hebrides and at Noumea fed a growing stream of supplies forward to the Guadalcanal area to meet the immediate needs of the garrison and to build a stockpile for future operations. In combat training camps scattered throughout the South Pacific, the interservice exchange and cooperation characteristic of the logistic agencies was repeated. A sense of impending action was high; there was a distinct "get the job done" atmosphere.

At this stage of the war—spring of 1943—no Allied position in either the South or Southwest Pacific could yet be considered a "safe" rear area. As a consequence, large ground garrisons, kept

of Naval Forces," in notes of 3d PMC Meeting, dtd 13Mar43 (COA, NHD); Army-Navy Central Agreement on SE Area Ops, dtd 22Mar43 in IGHQ NavDirective No. 213, dtd 25Mar43 (OCMH), hereafter *IGHQ Agreement of 22Mar43*; *Seventeenth Army Ops—II*; *SE Area NavOps—II*: RAdm Worrall R. Carter, *Beans, Bullets and Black Oil* (Washington: NHD, ND, 1953); Morison, *Breaking the Bismarcks Barrier*.

¹⁰ Carter, *Beans, Bullets and Black Oil*, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

strong in tribute to Japan's offensive capabilities, were immobilized at key points well away from the prospective center of conflict: *e.g.*, Samoa, Fiji, Tonga. Adding to this drain of offensive strength was the slow recovery of battle-tested units from the debilitating effects of sustained jungle warfare. The troops available for an offensive, therefore, were quite limited in view of the considerable job at hand. In all, MacArthur and Halsey could count on having only 14 divisions, both veteran and untried, ready for offensive action by mid-year.¹¹ Of this total the SoPac share was six divisions, four Army and two Marine.

Although the manpower squeeze brought on by the shipping demands of the two-front war set a low ceiling on Pacific ground forces, Allied plane and ship strength were on the upswing. American war production made the difference. Over 2,000 combat aircraft would be available for the campaign against Rabaul,¹² a fair match for anything the Japanese could put up against them. At sea, the Pacific Fleet was rapidly approaching a position of absolute superiority over the Japanese as new ships of every type, including the carriers and landing craft vital to amphibious operations, reported to CinCPac for duty.¹³ The naval elements of Halsey's and MacArthur's area commands, now designated Third Fleet and Seventh Fleet respectively,¹⁴

could be reinforced from Nimitz' mobile striking force as strategic requirements dictated.

Japanese preparations to meet the offensive that they knew was pending in the Solomons began to take shape concurrently with the evacuation of Guadalcanal. The *Southeast Area Fleet* set naval defense troops to building bases on New Georgia, Kolombangara, and Santa Isabel. In March, the first of several reinforcing units from the *Eighth Area Army* was added to the naval forces in the New Georgia Group. On Buka and Bougainville in the Northern Solomons, the *6th Division* was moved in from Truk to provide the bulk of the garrison.

A steady build-up of defenses, with troops and supplies brought in by barge and destroyer, took place despite the incessant and telling attacks of Allied planes and submarines. Enemy air stayed north of New Georgia except for occasional raids on Guadalcanal; enemy combat ships stuck close to Truk and Rabaul waiting for the opportune moment to strike.

Defense of the Solomons took second place in Japanese plans to measures for continued retention of the Lae-Salamaua region of New Guinea. On 22 March, the Army and Navy staffs in Tokyo agreed on a new directive for operations in the Rabaul strategic area, replacing the one that had governed during the Guadalcanal withdrawal. The new order spelled out the primacy of defensive efforts in New Guinea, but its general tenor was the same as that of its predecessor. In emphatic language, the senior commanders in the field, General Imamura and Admiral Kusaka, were enjoined to hold all the positions that their troops then occupied.

Although the Japanese retained a dual command structure in Rabaul under the

¹¹ CCS 239/1, dtd 23May43, Subj: Ops in the Pacific and Far East in 1943-44 (COA, NHD).

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ King and Whitehill, *King's Naval Record*, pp. 491-495.

¹⁴ Admiral King established a numbered fleet system on 15 March 1943 with all fleets in the Pacific having odd numbers, those in the Atlantic even.

22 March directive, Imamura and Kusaka were told to cooperate closely and elements of both services were ordered to "literally operate as one unit."¹⁵ In the field, the senior Army or Navy ground commander in an area would take charge of the operations of troops of both services. Until the first Allied assault force attacked, those operations consisted, in the main, of constructing defensive positions skillfully

¹⁵ *IGHQ Agreement of 22Mar43.*

wedded to the terrain. Although Japanese soldiers and sailors were deeply imbued with an offensive spirit, they seemed to have a special affinity for defensive fighting where the pick and shovel often rated equal with the rifle. On New Georgia, South Pacific forces were due to get their first real taste of the burrowing, grudging, step-by-step advance that characterized the later stages of the Pacific War.

PART II

TOENAILS Operation

Objective: New Georgia

BACKGROUND OF MUNDA¹

Occupation of the Russells, following closely on the heels of the Guadalcanal victory, seemed to whet the appetite of Allied forces in the South Pacific for more action, more show-downs with the Japanese. In Admiral Halsey's New Caledonia headquarters, optimism and enthusiasm ran high. Singleness of purpose and a spirit of camaraderie united all representatives on ComSoPac's staff; and, charged by Halsey's impatience to get on with the war, his staff busied itself planning for the next major offensive in the Solomons. The objective: seizure of the New Georgia Group.² (See Map II, Map Section.)

¹ Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: Allied GeographicalSec, GHQ, SWPA, Study of New Georgia Group—Terrain Study No. 54, dtd 26Mar43; IntelSec, SoPacFor, ObjectiveRept 25-13, New Georgia Group, dtd 15Feb43; SoPacFor PhotoInterpretationU Repts Nos. 37-39, 42, 43, and 47, 24Nov-17Dec43; Morison, *Breaking the Bismarcks Barrier*; Maj John N. Rentz, *Marines in the Central Solomons* (Washington: HistBr, G-3, HQMC, 1952), hereafter Rentz, *Marines in the Central Solomons*. Documents not otherwise identified in this part are located in the following files of the Archives, Historical Branch, G-3 Division, Headquarters Marine Corps: Aviation; Monograph and Comment; New Georgia Area Operations; Publications; Unit Historical Reports.

² In the succeeding chapters, the term "New Georgia Group" will refer to the entire island group. The term "New Georgia" will refer only to the island of that name.

A compact maze of islands separated by shallow, coral-fouled lagoons or narrow reaches of open water, the New Georgia Group lies on a northwest-southeast axis between Bougainville, 110 miles to the northwest, and Guadalcanal, 180 miles to the southeast. Nearly 150 miles long and 40 miles wide, it comprises 12 major islands outlined by many smaller islands and formidable reefs. A dense, forbidding jungle growth covers the rugged terrain and accents the abruptly rising, conical mountains which mark the volcanic origin of the group.

Largest island in the group is its namesake, New Georgia. It is hugged closely on the north by the islands of Wana Wana, Arundel, and Baanga and guarded to the southeast by Vangunu and Gatukai. Standing off to the south are Rendova and Tetipari, with two islands—Vella Lavella and Ganongga—in a line to the northwest. Gizo Island chains Vella Lavella to Wana Wana and blocks the southern end of Vella Gulf. Completing the New Georgia Group is the circular, 5,450-foot mountain peak, Kolombangara, which juts out of the sea between Vella Gulf and Kula Gulf, only a few miles northwest of Arundel.

The group centers on New Georgia. A tortuous, misshapen mass with a spiny ridge of peaks, it lies pointing north in a big inverted V, 45 miles in length and 20 miles wide. Its southern coastline is bordered for nearly 20 miles by Roviana

Lagoon, a coral-laced and treacherous stretch of water varying from one to three miles in width. Only small boats can safely trace a channel between the narrow openings in the reef and around the shallow bars of the lagoon. Viru Harbor, southeast of Roviana, is one of the few easy-access points on the southeast coast. A land-locked anchorage, it has an unobstructed but zigzag channel.

The entire east and northeast side of the island is reef-lined, with Marova and Grassi Lagoons bordering that coast almost as Roviana does on the south. As the coastline turns south at Visuvisu Point—apex of the V—Kula Gulf swells directly into three deep-water anchorages formed by jungle rivers rising in the mountains on the north coast. Rice Anchorage and Enogai Inlet are short and mangrove-lined with deep forest crowding the shores; Bairoko Harbor, deeper and longer, is partially blocked by reefs but is the best anchorage along the gulf. Past Bairoko, Hathorn Sound connects the gulf with the passage through to the south, Diamond Narrows. Only 224 feet wide at its narrowest point and 432 feet across at its widest, the Narrows separates New Georgia from Arundel and is the northern entrance to Roviana Lagoon. Its twisting channel is navigable, however, only by small boats.

The dank, oppressive nature of the island characterized even the life of the New Georgia natives. Theirs was a scrubby existence from small gardens, native fruits, some fishing, and occasional trading. One-time headhunters, they became aggressive sailors who moved from point to point through the lagoons by canoe, avoiding the rugged inland travel. As a result, they were, in 1943, excellent guides

to the coastlines of the islands but almost completely ignorant of the interiors.

In November 1942, while still contesting possession of Henderson Field on Guadalcanal, the Japanese sought another airfield which would bring their fighter planes within shorter striking distance of the southern Solomons. They found it at Munda Point on New Georgia, about two-thirds of the way from Rabaul to Guadalcanal. It was a natural selection. Munda Point was relatively flat and could be reached from the sea only through one narrow break in its barrier reef, which was risky even for shallow-draft ships at high tide, or through several openings in the string of islets locking Roviana Lagoon to the island. An overland approach required an arduous jungle trek either from river inlets 10 miles to the north or from points to the east in Roviana. The position of the proposed airfield made an ally of the entire island, utilizing in protection all the reefs and islets which ringed New Georgia and the matted canopy of jungle growth which covered it.

The Japanese came to Munda in force on 13 November 1942. Their transports stopped off Munda reef late that day and, by early morning of the 14th, troops completed debarking by small boats. The occupation unit immediately sent out armed patrols to "subjugate" the natives and inform them of the Japanese intentions. Kolombangara, Rendova, Vangunu, and surrounding smaller islands were visited and quickly put under control. The construction of an airfield began with the arrival of additional troops and engineers on 21 November.

Coastwatcher Donald G. Kennedy at Segi Plantation on the extreme southeastern tip of New Georgia was one of the first

to hear of the occupation. In October, a month previous, when the Japanese first reconnoitered New Georgia, Kennedy organized a band of natives to help him defend his post. When they informed him of the Munda landing, he sent Harry Wickham, a half-native co-worker, to Rendova to watch Munda and report on the progress of the airfield.

Wickham's report of Japanese activity at Munda was investigated immediately by Allied air reconnaissance. The first report, on 24 November, was negative. Photographs clearly showed a plantation area, a small cluster of buildings at Munda, and a similar cluster of buildings at Kokengola Mission north of Munda. There was no activity which could be classed as enemy, no evidence of airfield construction. Allied planes bombed the area anyway. It was a gesture of confidence in Kennedy and Wickham.

Then photo interpreters picked up interest. New buildings began to show up in later photo strips, and a strange white line appeared beneath the plantation trees. On 3 December, SoPac interpreters announced their discovery: a possible landing strip under construction. Two distinct strips, 125 feet wide and about 1,000 feet apart in a direct line with each other, were visible in the prints. One strip was about 175 feet long, the other about 200 feet. Natural camouflage, it was decided, partially shielded the construction. Two days later the field was 2,000 feet long. No trees had been cut down, but piles of either loose earth or coral appeared beneath each tree. New buildings, obviously control towers, had been built adjacent to the field. On 9 December, photos showed the field nearly clear, the trees apparently pulled up and

taken away, and the holes filled in with coral. The Japanese, alerted by the continued interest of Allied planes over Munda, had abandoned further camouflage attempts.³

By 17 December, after only a month at Munda and despite multiple bombing raids, the enemy had an operational airstrip 4,700 feet long. A series of revetments and a turn-around loop eventually finished the field. An advance echelon of 24 aircraft was moved to Munda upon its completion, but all were destroyed or badly damaged by bombing raids within a week after arrival. Thereafter, the Japanese used the field mainly for servicing planes after raids on Guadalcanal and the Russells, and few pilots dared Allied bombings to tarry at Munda very long. Repair of the strip was easy; bulldozers quickly filled in the holes. Despite the rain of bombs and occasional shellings, the field was never out of operation longer than 48 hours.⁴

New Georgia, the Allies had decided, would be the target of the next offensive in the South Pacific. Munda airfield was the bull's-eye. As a military prize, it held the enemy's hopes for a re-entry into the lower Solomons and the Allied hopes for another step towards Rabaul.

³ One of the popular but unverified stories about the camouflage of Munda field is: "The Japanese had spun a web of wire cables between the tops of the palm trees. The trunks were then cut out from under the branches which remained suspended exactly in place, held by the cables." Capt Walter Karig, USNR, and Cdr Eric Purdon, USNR, *Battle Report, Pacific War: Middle Phase* (New York: Rinehart and Company, Inc., 1947), p. 201.

⁴ USSBS, *Interrogations* No. 195, LCdr S. Yunoki, IJN, I, p. 192.

*NEW GEORGIA
RECONNAISSANCE*⁵

Halsey had intended to be in New Georgia by mid-April. His planning date scrapped by the JCS and his offensive tied to construction of airfields at Kiriwina and Woodlark, the admiral waited for the go-ahead signal. While waiting, he sent reconnaissance patrols probing the Central Solomons.

Guadalcanal land operations had been plagued by a dearth of information on terrain and topography. New Georgia was likewise unmapped and hydrographic charts were badly out of date. Since aerial photography revealed only thick jungle growth, actual physical scouting by trained men was the only answer. A combat reconnaissance school with experienced Marine and Army personnel and selected coastwatchers as instructors was organized at Guadalcanal, and about 100 men were trained and formed into scouting teams. Halsey found their reports invaluable, and beginning with ELKTON planning, "never made a forward move without their help."⁶

First terrain information on New Georgia had been received from a patrol of six Marines and a ComSoPac staff officer that had prowled Roviana Lagoon and the

⁵ Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: *ComSoPac Apr-May42 WarDs*; *ComPhibFor, SoPacFor WarD*, 17-30Jun43; Col William F. Coleman, "Amphibious Recon Patrols," *Marine Corps Gazette*, v. 27, no. 12 (Dec43); Sgt Frank X. Tolbert, "Advance Man," *Leatherneck*, v. 28, no. 3 (Mar45); Feldt, *The Coastwatchers*; Rentz, *Marines in the Central Solomons*.

⁶ FAdm William F. Halsey and LCdr Julian Bryan, III, *Admiral Halsey's Story* (New York: Whittlesey House, 1947), p. 158, hereafter Halsey and Bryan, *Halsey's Story*.

Munda area in late February, contacting coastwatchers, scouting and mapping trails, and selecting possible landing beaches. Their report helped the admiral reach a decision on hitting the Central Solomons and gave SoPac planners the information for tentative strategy.⁷

On 21 March, a group of Marine scouts drawn from the raider battalions and graduates of the combat reconnaissance school landed by PBY (Catalina flying boat) at Segi Plantation.⁸ With Kennedy's natives as guides, the group split into patrols and set out to scout possible landing beaches, landmarks, and motor torpedo boat (MTB) anchorages. Traveling by canoe at night and observing during daylight hours, the patrols checked travel time from point to point, took bearings on channels, scouted enemy dispositions and installations, and sketched crude maps to help fill in the scanty information already available. One group had the mission of "collecting information about the Viru garrison, armament and accessibility to the area, both by way of direct attack up the harbor cliffs and by inland native trails through the jungle,"⁹ which marked

⁷ A member of that first patrol said that Halsey, after hearing the reports on New Georgia, declared, "Well, gentlemen, we're going to hit that place. I don't know when or how, but we're going to hit it." Maj Clay A. Boyd interview by Maj John N. Rentz, dtd 16Feb51.

⁸ The senior member of this patrol group later commented: "I never heard of the 'combat reconnaissance school' and know that I and the other two members of the patrol from the 3d Raider Bn. didn't graduate from it." Col Michael S. Currin ltr to Head, HistBr, G-3, HQMC, dtd 11Oct60, hereafter *Currin ltr*.

⁹ Maj Roy D. Batterton, "You Fight by the Book," *Marine Corps Gazette*, v. 33, no. 7 (Jul49), hereafter Batterton, "You Fight by the Book."

it as a possible target in the assault. Other patrols ranged from Roviana Lagoon to Arundel and Kolombangara, along the northern shore of New Georgia from Enogai Inlet to Marova Lagoon, and around the coast of Vangunu. Another patrol contacted the Rendova coastwatcher, Harry Wickham.¹⁰ The missions were virtually the same: to bring back all possible data on the enemy and terrain.

At this early date in the spring of 1943, tentative invasion plans envisioned a divisional landing at Segi Plantation followed by a sweep overland to capture Munda field. The patrol reports confirmed the growing suspicions of the ComSoPac war plans staff: Segi's beaches would not accommodate a large landing force, and a sizable body of troops could not move through untracked jungle to Munda with any hope of success. Another method of attack would have to be developed.

The patrols continued to shuttle back to New Georgia for more information. Coastwatchers A. R. Evans on Kolombangara, Dick Horton and Harry Wickham at Rendova, and Kennedy at Segi played hosts to furtive guests who slipped in by native canoes from submarines, fast destroyers, or PBYS. The patrols searched openings in the barrier reef of Roviana, checked overland trails from Rice Anchorage on the north coast to Zanana Beach on the south in Roviana, and looked for easy access to Munda field. In this connection, Wickham—who had lived on New Georgia most of his life—“was particularly valuable.”¹¹

The reports on Munda were discouraging. Hathorn Sound had no beaches and

shallow landing craft could pass safely only halfway through Diamond Narrows.¹² LSTs might possibly skirt the west shore of Baanga Island to get to Munda, but it would be a hazardous, obstacle-lined trip. Crossing the reef at Munda bar was another risk. Soundings indicated that the opening, through continued coral deposits, had become more shallow and restricted than admittedly outdated reports indicated. A direct assault over Munda bar, the closest entrance to Munda, was patently the most dangerous course and held the least chance of success.

Final assault plans were a concession to the terrain. They provided for landings off-shore from Munda, followed by a troop buildup on New Georgia and then a strong attack on the airfield from all sides. The last reconnaissance patrols went into the New Georgia Group on 13 June. Landing at Segi they took off in log canoes for the four landing spots finally selected: Rendova, Rice Anchorage, Viru Harbor, and Wickham Anchorage. Teams of Marine Corps, Army, and Navy officers studied the designated beaches and sought artillery positions, observation posts, water points, bivouac areas, and interior trails. Some of the patrols skirted Japanese defenses, noting the strength and habits of the enemy, before striking inland for terrain information. When the teams paddled back to Segi, some of the members stayed behind with natives to

¹² In the later stages of the campaign, some LSTs made it through the Narrows with 25th Infantry Division troops and equipment on board, but the division's chief of staff remembers the trip as “a tight squeeze w/fast tidal flow—no picnic.” MajGen William W. Dick, Jr. USA, ltr to ACofS, G-3, HQMC, dtd 31Oct60, including comments by MajGen David H. Buchanan, USA.

¹⁰ *Currin ltr.*

¹¹ Feldt, *The Coastwatchers*, p. 149.

guide the landing parties to the beaches with lights flashed from the shore.

*AWAITING ASSAULT*¹³

Munda assumed a new role in enemy strategy during the spring of 1943. Instead of the proposed springboard for recapture of Guadalcanal, it became a key-stone in Japan's decision to build up the Lae-Salamaua defense line while maintaining the Solomons as delaying positions.

Japanese engineers, after rushing Munda into completion, hurried to Kolombangara to construct another field at Vila Plantation on the southeast shore. Here they did not attempt concealment. The task went ahead despite almost daily bombings and occasional naval bombardments. The enemy now had two strips from which they could stage attacks against Allied positions on Guadalcanal and the Russells; but the air over The Slot was a two-way street, and most of the traffic was from Henderson Field.

¹³ Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: MilHistSec, G-2, FEC, Japanese Monograph No. 34, Seventeenth Army Ops—Part I (OCMH), hereafter *Seventeenth Army Ops—I*; *SE Area NavOps—II*; CIC, SoPacFor Item No. 635, New Georgia Area DefButai SecretO No. 16, dtd 23Mar43, Item No. 647, Kolombangara Island DefO A No. 5, dtd 2Jul43, Item No. 672, Outline of Disposition of SE Det, dtd 20Jun43, Item No. 690, Kolombangara Island DefTaiO, dtd 1Mar43, Item No. 702, New Georgia DefOpO "A" No. 8, c. late Jun43, Item No. 711, Seventeenth ArmyO No. 244, dtd 27Apr43, Item No. 753, SE DetIIq Intel-Rec No. 2 (Middle June Rept), dtd 24Jun43; SoPacFor POW Interrogation Repts 105 and 106, dtd 9Oct43, and 138 and 140, dtd 24Nov43; USAFISPA OB G-2 Rept No. 27, 17-24Jul43; Reptz, *Marines in the Central Solomons*.

Buildup of troop strength in the Vila-Munda area was steady but slow. Air supremacy was still contested, but the initiative was with the Allies. Japanese plans for reinforcing the Central Solomons were slowed by the continual harassment from planes of Commander, Aircraft Solomons (ComAirSols), and the enemy was eventually reduced to scheduling troop transfers "from the end of the month to the beginning of the following month to take advantage of the new moon."¹⁴ Then, too, the transport losses in the Battle of the Bismarck Sea on 3 March and the steadily mounting attrition of naval craft from air attacks was slowly sapping Japanese sea power.

By the end of April, land defenses in the Central Solomons had been strengthened with Army and Navy troops, and additional reinforcements were standing by in the Buin-Shortland area for further transportation. The *8th Combined Special Naval Landing Force (CSNLF)*, which included the *Kure 6th Special Naval Landing Force* and the *Yokosuka 7th SNLF* was the Navy's contribution to the defense of Vila-Munda.¹⁵ After Japan lost the initiative in the Pacific, these amphibious assault troops were changed to defense forces. Named for the naval base at which the unit was formed, an SNLF generally

¹⁴ *Seventeenth Army Ops—I*, p. 6.

¹⁵ The total ordnance of the *8th CSNLF* included: 8 140mm coast guns; 8 120mm coast guns; 16 80mm coast guns; 4 120mm AA guns; 8 75mm AA guns; 12 40mm AA guns; 2 75mm mountain (artillery) guns; 2 70mm howitzers; 40 13mm AA machine guns; 38 heavy machine guns; 102 light machine guns. MilIntelDiv, WarDept, Handbook on Japanese Military Forces (TM-E 30-480), dtd 15Sep44, pp. 76, 78; GHQ, SWPA, MilIntelSec, Organization of the Japanese Ground Forces, dtd 22Dec44, p. 299.

included: a headquarters unit; two rifle companies; a heavy weapons company with howitzer, antitank, and machine gun units; an antiaircraft company; a heavy gun or seacoast defense unit; and medical, signal, supply, and engineer troops.

The *Yokosuka 7th* landed at Kolombangara on 23 February with 1,807 men, and was followed on 9 March by the *Kure 6th* with 2,038 men. This unit went into positions between Bairoko and Enogai and around the airfield at Munda. Rear Admiral Minoru Ota, commanding the *8th CSNLF*, assumed responsibility for the defense of the New Georgia sector.

By prior agreement between the *Seventeenth Army* and the *Eighth Fleet*, Army and Navy strength in the Central Solomons was to be about even. After sending the *8th CSNLF* to the New Georgia area, the Navy was determined to hold the Army to its end of the bargain. Following a number of conferences, the Army reinforcements began arriving in late March. The original force at Munda consisted of two companies from the *2d Battalion, 229th Regiment* of the *38th Division* with two antiaircraft battalions for protection for the naval base construction troops. Kolombangara was garrisoned early in 1943 with troops from the *51st Division* including an infantry battalion, an artillery detachment, and engineer and air defense units.

The remainder of the *229th Regiment* at Buin, with supporting troops, began to filter into New Georgia late in April and the *51st Division* troops on Kolombangara were relieved. The *229th* moved to the Munda airfield area, and a battalion from the *13th Infantry Regiment, 6th Division*, took over actual defense of Kolombangara. As opportunities arose, the Japanese moved in more troops.

Guadalcanal had been a well-learned—albeit painful—lesson. The reinforcement of the Vila-Munda area reflected Japan's new strategy:

Our fundamental policy was to bring the desired number of troops into strategic key points before the enemy offensive, in spite of manifold difficulties; and in event of an enemy offensive, to prevent our supply transportation from being hampered; to throw in our entire sea, land, and air strength at the first sign of an enemy landing to engage it in decisive combat; and to secure completely the strategic key positions linking the Central Solomons, Lae, and Salamaua, which formed our national defense boundary on the southeastern front.¹⁰

On New Georgia, the Japanese prepared defenses for all eventualities. Munda Point and the airfield vicinity bristled with antiaircraft and artillery weapons. The enemy did not discount the threat of a direct assault over Munda bar and sited some of their armament to cover that approach; but the bulk of the weapons pointed north toward Bairoko—from which an overland attack might come—and toward Laiana Beach on Roviana Lagoon—where an attack seemed logical. The Japanese believed, however, that the next Allied objective was to be Kolombangara in an attempt to attack Munda from the rear; so Vila likewise was prepared to repulse any assault. Increased Allied air activity, the presence of a great number of troop transports in the Guadalcanal area, and increased reconnaissance convinced the enemy that an attack was imminent. Their intelligence reports of about 50 cargo-type airplanes at Henderson Field also prompted speculation on the possibility of airborne operations against Vila-Munda.

¹⁰ *SE Area NavOps—II*, p. 4.

With both Army and Navy troops occupying identical Central Solomons positions, a more unified command arrangement was sought. Admiral Ota, the senior commander in the area, had been responsible for both Army and Navy land defenses in the Vila-Munda area. On 2 May, however, *Imperial Headquarters* directed that a command post be established in New Georgia, and on 31 May, Major General Noboru Sasaki of the *38th Division* arrived at Kolombangara to head the new *Southeast Detachment*, a joint Army-Navy defense force. Administratively attached to the *Seventeenth Army* but under the operational command of the *Eighth Fleet*, General Sasaki was assigned responsibility for all land defenses in the New Georgia sector and command of all Army troops in the area. Admiral Ota, still in command of Navy troops, was directed to give him fullest cooperation. It was a command structure which criss-crossed Army and Navy channels, but with Sasaki's assignment spelled out, and with Ota's cooperation assured, a unified force was established.

By late June, as Japan waited for an Allied thrust she believed was coming, the defensive positions in the New Georgia Group were set. To obtain greater coordination, General Sasaki divided his defense area into three zones of responsibility: the Central (Munda); the Western (Kolombangara); and the Eastern (Viru-Wickham). The task of defending Munda Point he gave to Colonel Genjiro Hirata and the *229th Regiment*, augmented by two batteries of the *10th Independent Mountain Artillery Regiment*. Air defense would be provided by the *15th Air Defense Unit* which combined the *41st Field Antiaircraft Battalion* (less one

battery), the *31st Independent Field Antiaircraft Company*, the *27th Field Machine Cannon Company*, and the *3d Field Searchlight Battalion* (less one battery). One company of the *229th Regiment* was dispatched to Rendova.

To aid Sasaki in the defense of the airfield, Admiral Ota established three sea-coast artillery batteries at Munda with 140mm, 120mm, and 80mm guns. Also based there was an antiaircraft machine gun company of the *Kure 6th SNLF*, the *21st Antiaircraft Company* and the *17th* and *131st Pioneers* (labor troops). Ota also sent a rifle company from the *Kure 6th* to Rendova. The remainder of the *Kure 6th*, under Commander Saburo Okumura, was to defend the Bairoko Harbor area. Kolombangara's defense was entrusted to a battalion of the *13th Regiment*, reinforced by a battery of the *10th Independent Mountain Artillery*. Air defense of Vila airstrip rested with the *58th Field Antiaircraft Battalion* (less one battery), the *22d* and the *23d Field Machine Cannon Companies*, and a searchlight battery. The main detachments of the *Yokosuka 7th SNLF* and the *19th Pioneers* were also based on Kolombangara.

Viru Harbor was garrisoned by the *4th Company* of the *229th*, less one platoon which went on to Wickham Anchorage to augment a seacoast defense battery from the *Kure 6th*. To complete the defensive picture, lookout platoons were scattered about the coastline of New Georgia and on some of the small adjacent islets to act as security detachments.

In all, as Sasaki's reinforcement and defense plans raced right down to the wire with Allied offensive preparations, the Japanese had about 5,000 Navy and 5,500

Army troops in the New Georgia-Kolombangara area. Although the *8th CSNLF* was not combat tested, the *229th Regiment* and the *13th Regiment* were another matter. The *229th* had participated in the capture of Hong Kong before taking part in the occupation of Java. Committed to combat again, the regiment had one battalion nearly annihilated on New Guinea and another battalion suffered heavy casualties at Guadalcanal. Reinforced by fresh troops at Rabaul and Bougainville, the survivors had been formed into new battalions to join the *2d Battalion* at New Georgia. The elements of the *13th Regiment*, before being sent to Kolombangara, were part of the *6th Division* which garrisoned the Northern Solomons. One of Japan's oldest divisions, the *6th* was likewise hardened by combat in China before being sent to the Solomon Islands.

SEA OFFENSIVES¹⁷

Expanding sea and air offensives by the Allies in the late spring of 1943 had a definite bearing on Japan's outlook toward her defenses in the South Pacific. Widening the scope of the war, a large-scale bombing attack in mid-May plastered the Japanese-held atoll of Wake in the Central Pacific. This strike followed a landing in the Aleutians on 11 May by

¹⁷ Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: CinCPac Ops in POA, May43, dtd 15Aug43; CinCPac Ops in POA, Jan43, dtd 6Sep43; ONI, *Combat Narratives, Solomon Islands Campaign: IX—Bombardments of Munda and Vila-Stanmore, January–May 1943* (Washington, 1944), hereinafter cited as ONI, *Combat Narratives IX; SE Area NavOps—II*; Morison, *Breaking the Bismarcks Barrier*; Miller, *Reduction of Rabaul*; Sherrod, *MarAir-Hist.*

U.S. Army troops covered by naval forces. The enemy believed that the counter-landings in the North Pacific were a direct threat to the Home Islands, and plans for the southeast area were immediately curtailed. About 20 per cent of the troops earmarked for the Solomons and New Guinea were shifted to the northeast area; and Admiral Mineichi Koga, successor to Admiral Yamamoto, pulled his *Combined Fleet* headquarters out of Truk and moved to Tokyo so that he could better control operations throughout the Pacific. His main fleet units, however, remained at Truk.

True to his promise to the JCS at the time of the 28 March directive, Admiral Halsey kept the pressure on the Japanese in the Central Solomons. Under the pounding of bombs and sea bombardments, the Vila-Munda area never had the opportunity to develop past its use as a refueling point for enemy planes. The Allied strikes scored few casualties among the Munda defenders, relatively secure in underground defenses near the airfield, but kept enemy engineers busy repairing the cratered runways. The attacks lowered morale, however, by keeping the Japanese "sleepless and fatigued,"¹⁸ and occasional hits were scored on fuel and supply dumps. Prior to May, Munda and Vila had taken nearly 120 bombing raids, and four major naval bombardments had rained shells on the two airfields.

The Tokyo Express—fast destroyers carrying troops and supplies to the New Georgia Group—still steamed on. The Allies found they could not possibly cover all avenues of supply, and that to halt the traffic entirely would require more planes

¹⁸ USSBS, *Interrogation No. 224, Cdr Yasumi Doi, IJN, I, p. 210.*

and ships than South Pacific forces could muster at this stage of the war. On 6 May, however, the express runs were abruptly, if only temporarily, disrupted. Rear Admiral Walden L. Ainsworth, heading a Third Fleet task force of three cruisers, five destroyers, and three converted destroyer-mine layers, steamed up the gap between Gizo and Wana Wana Islands into the Vella Gulf. As Ainsworth's cruisers and four destroyers blocked the northern entrance to Vella Gulf, the three mine layers escorted by a radar-equipped destroyer laid three rows of mines across the straits between Kolombangara and Gizo. Then the entire force turned for home bases at Guadalcanal. (See Map II, Map Section.)

Dividends were almost immediate. The next night, four Japanese destroyers slipped into Blackett Straits with Vila as their destination. They never reached it. The trap was sprung. Blundering into the mine field, one ship went down almost immediately; two others were badly damaged. The fourth ship stood by to pick up survivors. And that's the way Allied planes, somewhat delayed by adverse weather, found them the next day. The two damaged ships were sunk by bombs, but the fourth ship, heavily bombed and strafed, managed to limp back toward Bougainville. Gleeful coastwatchers radioed the box score to Guadalcanal.

Heartened by the success, the Third Fleet planned another surprise. This time, Vila would be shelled as the northern entrance to Kula Gulf was mined. On the night of 13 May, Admiral Ainsworth led a force of three cruisers and five destroyers in firing runs past Vila, steaming in from the north, while a destroyer and three fast mine layers planted mines off

the east coast of Kolombangara. As each of Ainsworth's ships completed her run past Vila, she turned and pumped heavy fire into the Bairoko and Enogai-Rice Anchorage areas.

At the same time, a force of one cruiser and three destroyers plastered Munda on the opposite side of New Georgia. The airfield had not been included in the original bombardment plans, but a last-hour switch in orders—accomplished by dispatch and a message drop from planes to the ships designated—had added that stronghold. Vila was hit by a total of 2,895 six-inch and 4,340 five-inch shells, Munda by 970 six-inch and 1,648 five-inch. The operation was covered by an air strike in the Northern Solomons and additional fighter planes flew cover and reported bombardment results.

The mine-laying did not produce the earlier results. It slowed the Japanese supply chain by forcing it to be more cautious, but it did not halt it. The bombardment was a bigger disappointment. Less than 12 hours after the last shell had been fired, a flight of 26 Japanese fighters staged from Munda-Vila was chasing the attack force back to Guadalcanal. Coastwatchers radioed the warning; 102 Allied aircraft formed a welcoming committee. Seventeen enemy planes were reportedly shot down; 16 of them were claimed by Marine fighters. Five Allied planes and three pilots were lost in the action. The bombardment was the last scheduled before the actual invasion; the results, it was apparent, were not worth the price. A harassing bombardment, CinCPac later advised, was not justified when "all ships were subjected to the hazard of enemy MTB and SS [submarine]

attacks with no prospect of equal opportunity to damage the enemy.”¹⁹

Air activity increased during June. Airfields in the Russells gave the Allies a shorter range to targets in the Northern and Central Solomons, as well as providing another launching area for getting planes into the air to repel attacks. Attracted by the concentration of shipping in the Guadalcanal area, the Japanese tried a new one-two punch of heavy flights of fighters followed by large numbers of bombers, but three major strikes on 7, 12, and 16 June resulted in staggering losses. The enemy had hoped to break even in fighter tolls, which would then give their bombers opportunity to attack unmolested. The maneuver boomeranged. Each time, ComAirSols was able to meet the threat with from 105 to 118 aircraft and in the three strikes, a total of 152 enemy airplanes was claimed. The Allies lost 21.

PREPARING TO STRIKE²⁰

The assault of New Georgia, viewed in optimism contagious at the time, seemed an easy assignment despite the inaccessibility of Munda. Reconnaissance had virtually pinpointed Japanese strong points, and the combat effectiveness of the Vila-Munda airfields had been reduced considerably by the Allied pounding. Intelligence sources, which later proved remarkably accurate, estimated that there were only about 3,000 Japanese at Munda, with another 500 troops at Bairoko and

a detachment of 300 men at Wickham Anchorage and about 100 more at Viru Harbor. The bulk of the forces, estimated at 5,000 to 7,000 troops, was on Kolombangara, together with an additional 3,000 laborers.

Japan's reinforcement ability from points in the Northern Solomons was noted, but there was no ready estimate of the numbers available for quick assignment to combat. Her sea strength in the Solomons was believed to be 6 destroyers, 5 submarines, and 12 transports, with a cruiser, 5 destroyers, 7 submarines, and 25 attack transports at Rabaul. Japanese air strength was put at 89 land-based aircraft in the Solomons with another 262 at Rabaul. While troop estimates were near the actual enemy totals, ComSoPac guesses on air and sea numbers of the enemy were low. The entire *Eighth Fleet* was in the Shortlands area, while a part of the *Combined Fleet* at Truk was committed to lend assistance in Southeast Area operations. The Japanese Navy had 169 land-based planes available for combat from a total of nearly 300 deployed in the Bismarck Archipelago and the Northern Solomons. The *Eighth Area Army* had about 180 aircraft attached directly to it; however, most of these were supporting operations against the Allies in New Guinea.

The target had been marked. Early in June, Admiral Halsey published his orders for the seizure and occupation of New Georgia. The improbable code name TOENAILS masked Halsey's part in the CARTWHEEL offensive. The missions: capture Wickham Anchorage and Viru Harbor as small-craft staging areas; seize Segi Plantation as a possible airfield site; seize Rendova as a base for the neutralization of Munda by artillery fire. Orders for the actual assault of Munda airfield

¹⁹ ONI, *Combat Narratives IX*, p. 74.

²⁰ Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: ComSoPac OPlan 14-43, dtd 3Jun43; ComThirdFlt OPlan 12-43, dtd 5Jun43; CTF 31 OpO A8-43, dtd 4Jun43; NGOF FO No. 1, dtd 16Jun43 and No. 2, dtd 24Jun43; Rentz, *Marines in the Central Solomons*.

would be issued by ComSoPac after the successful completion of the first phase of TOENAILS.

Task units of the Third Fleet were assigned covering missions which would insure success of the operation by blocking any enemy force attempting to disrupt the landings with a counteroffensive. While one force of destroyers and cruisers moved in to mine the main sea channels around the Shortland Islands, another heavier force of battleships and destroyers was to stage a bombardment of Japanese strong points in the Northern Solomons and Shortlands. Air units of the South Pacific Air Command, under Vice Admiral Aubrey W. Fitch, were assigned strikes against shipping in the Shortlands area and bombing missions on airfields on Bougainville. Carrier air groups were to intercept any enemy ships or aircraft heading for the New Georgia Group. SoPac submarines were to range into the Northern Solomons for interception and early warning of any Japanese force, and destroyer units would provide close-in support for the transport groups engaged in the actual landing operations. Thus, with Admiral Halsey's forces guarding the northern and eastern approaches to New Georgia, and General MacArthur's operations in New Guinea shielding the western flank, the assault forces could proceed with the seizure of TOENAILS objectives.

The Army's 43d Infantry Division, part of Major General Oscar W. Griswold's XIV Corps, was named as the assault and occupation troops. The 2d Marine Aircraft Wing headquarters under Brigadier General Francis P. Mulcahy was assigned to direct tactical air support over the target during the operation. Rear Admiral Turner, commander of amphibious forces

in the South Pacific, was given overall responsibility for New Georgia operations. Detailed planning for the actual seizure and occupation of the objectives outlined in Halsey's broad plans would be Turner's job.

To accomplish the TOENAILS missions, Turner divided his command into two units. He would personally direct the larger Western Force in the main landing at Rendova and would be responsible for movement of troops and supplies to the objective and for their protection. The Eastern Force, under the direction of Rear Admiral George H. Fort, would seize Viru, Segi Plantation, and Wickham Anchorage. Admiral Fort would be responsible for movement to these targets and for embarking troops and supplies from the Russells for subsequent operations.

Admiral Turner's ground commander, Major General John H. Hester, headed the New Georgia Occupation Force (NGOF). Its combat units consisted of Hester's own 43d Infantry Division, including the 172d and 169th Regiments and one battalion of the 103d Regiment; the Marine 9th Defense Battalion; the 136th Field Artillery Battalion from the 37th Infantry Division; the 24th Naval Construction Battalion (NCB); Company O of the Marine 4th Raider Battalion; the 1st Commando, Fiji Guerrillas;²¹ and assigned service troops.

Fort's Eastern Force would include the 103d RCT (less the battalion with Hester); Companies N, P, and Q from the 4th Raider Battalion; elements of the 70th Coast Artillery (Antiaircraft) Battalion; parts of the 20th NCB; and service units.

²¹ Central Office of Information, *Among Those Present* (London, 1946), pp. 53-56.

The landing force would be headed by Colonel Daniel H. Hundley, commanding the 103d RCT. Selected as ready reserve for the operation was the 1st Marine Raider Regiment (less the 2d, 3d, and 4th Battalions), commanded by Colonel Harry B. Liversedge. The Army's 37th Infantry Division (less the 129th RCT and most of the 148th RCT) would be in general reserve at Guadalcanal, ready to move on five-days' notice.

Execution of the assigned tasks looked easy. Turner's original concept was to seize the southern end of New Georgia simultaneously with Rendova. Artillery based on Rendova and offshore smaller islands would soften Munda field while the buildup of assault forces began. Four days later, it was planned, Munda would be attacked through Roviana Lagoon and over Munda Bar, while Bairoko would be struck either from the Russells or by a force hitting overland from Roviana Lagoon. This maneuver would block reinforcements for the airfield. Capture of Munda would then trigger the next shore-to-shore jump to Kolombangara, the last phase of Operation TOENAILS.

These were the first plans. ComSoPac orders stressed their successful completion with a minimum of forces. It could not be foreseen at the initial planning conferences that, before Munda could be captured and the New Georgia Group occupied, elements of four infantry divisions would be committed and extensive changes in plans would be required. The problems mounted early. Laiana Beach on Roviana Lagoon east of Munda was heavily defended, although the best landing area. The channel through Roviana, scouted from canoes, was too shallow for LCMs.

The islands near Rendova originally considered for artillery positions were not within effective 105mm howitzer range of Munda airfield. And coastwatcher reports indicated that the enemy—despite Allied efforts—was slipping reinforcements into the Vila-Munda area. Further, a reconnaissance team reported that a strike at Bairoko from Roviana was impossible within the time limits planned.

The solutions plagued Turner's staff. Zanana Beach, about 5,500 yards east of Laiana, was smaller but virtually undefended, the scouts reported. While it would hold only a few landing craft, the Piraka River mouth 1,000 yards farther east could permit beaching of additional boats. Hester decided on Zanana as his landing beach, and Turner gave his approval. Reaching Zanana would be a problem, however. Landing boats would have to slip through narrow, coral-choked Onaiavisi Entrance that threaded between the small offshore islands and then follow a twisting channel to the beaches. The selection of Zanana was based as much on its undefended nature as on its capability of being reached by LCMs. It had, however, one apparent drawback. The attacking troops would be unloaded at a considerable distance from their objective. (See Map 5.)

The planning problems were unexpectedly magnified by an emergency. An urgent call for assistance by Coastwatcher Kennedy at Segi resulted in the premature commitment of two Marine raider companies and two companies from the 103d RCT on 21 June. Admiral Turner made the decision. The speedup in schedule upset previous planning, but it was deemed necessary. It required a change in basic

strategy, a shuffling of troops, a change in the transport plans—and some around-the-clock supply duty by the Marine 4th Base Depot in the Russells—but the decision retained possession of Segi for the Allies until the actual New Georgia invasion.²²

General Hester, who would direct the operations ashore, continually faced thorny problems. To deal with the mounting complexities, he delegated the planning for the Rendova landings to a 43d Division staff headed by his assistant division commander, Brigadier General Leonard F. Wing. A second staff, the NGOF staff, completed the New Georgia attack planning. Hester retained command of both staffs. The final assault plans evolved from the best solutions to a multiplicity of problems. In the scheme of maneuver, part of the Western Force would hit at Munda through Onaiavisi Entrance with two regiments landing at Zanana and pivoting to the west in an overland attack with one flank resting on the lagoon. This force, designated the Southern Landing Force, would be commanded initially by General Wing.

Liversedge's raiders—now titled the Northern Landing Group—would strike directly at Bairoko from Kula Gulf. This would be coordinated with the landings at Zanana and would block reinforcements to Munda. It was not expected that the Munda forces would attempt to reinforce the Bairoko defenders. This half of a pincer movement faced one handicap; the area was not as well scouted as that of Roviana Lagoon. The Hester plan of attack envisioned a short campaign during which the Japanese would be caught be-

tween a hammering force from the south and a holding force in the north. Thus, the enemy would be pushed back towards an area where, ringed by Allied troops, they could be pounded into submission by aircraft and Rendova-based artillery. To insure success, additional 43d Division artillery (the 192d and the 103d Field Artillery Battalions) was added to the NGOF.

D-Day assignments were set. Troops of the 172d Infantry would seize two small islands guarding the approaches to Rendova and then establish a beachhead on Rendova itself. Through the secured passage, Hester and Wing would funnel the rest of the landing force, with the 103d Infantry given the task of expanding the beachhead and mopping up the island, reported to be lightly defended. Simultaneously, two companies of the 169th Infantry would land on islets flanking Onaiavisi Entrance and a detachment of Fiji guerrillas and Marine raiders would mark the channel with buoys to Zanana Beach and the nearby Piraka River. Four days later, the 172d Infantry would make the Rendova-Zanana move and establish a beachhead for the landing the following day of the 169th Infantry from the Russells. The 169th was to move inland to the north of the 172d, then face to the west. This would put two regiments abreast, ready to launch an attack from a line of departure along the Barike River, some 2,000 yards closer to Munda. Artillery on the offshore islands and Rendova would support the attack. Five days later, it was planned, the 3d Battalion of the 103d Infantry and the eight tanks of the Marine 9th Defense Battalion would cross Munda bar for the final, direct assault on Munda airfield.

²² The capture of Segi is related in the following chapter.

*MARINE CORPS SUPPORT*²³

Marine units which were to participate in the seizure of Munda were fulfilling a number of tasks and training missions prior to the operation. The actual job of pushing the enemy from New Georgia belonged mainly to General Hester's 43d Division; contributions to the campaign by the Marine Corps would be in support of the main effort. The 9th Defense Battalion was given a dual mission of making enemy positions on Munda untenable by artillery fire and of providing antiaircraft protection for the landing forces. The 1st Marine Raider Regiment, at first intended as a reserve element, was thrust into an active role with its mission of wedging a block on Dragons Peninsula between the Munda defenders and reinforcements at Bairoko Harbor.

Colonel Liversedge's raiders were a cocky, confident group which prided itself on being a volunteer unit within a volunteer Corps. Carrying only 60mm mortars and light machine guns as supporting wea-

pons, each battalion was generally organized with four rifle companies, an engineer and demolition platoon, and a headquarters company. Smaller in authorized strength than the regular Marine infantry battalion, the actual strength of the raider battalions varied between 700 and 950. Specially trained for jungle fighting, amphibious raids, and behind-the-lines guerrilla action, the raiders had participated in the Tulagi assault, a hit-and-run raid at Makin Island in the Gilberts, the defense of Midway, and jungle warfare on Guadalcanal. These Marines thus brought to the New Georgia campaign considerable combat experience plus the conviction that the fighting ahead would follow no orderly lines of battle. The vexing problems presented by the jungle in maintaining communications and supply would demand the utmost in courage, ingenuity, and stamina; but the raiders felt up to the task. They were firm in the belief that these difficulties, inextricably complicated by the terrain and enervating climate, could be overcome by their tough physical training, combat experience, and high morale.

At the time of consolidation of the four battalions under one command on 15 March 1943, the raiders were scattered throughout the South Pacific with regimental headquarters and the 2d and 4th Battalions at Espiritu Santo, the 1st at Noumea, and the 3d in the Russells. Upon assignment to the TOENAILS operation, the regiment (less the 2d and 3d Battalions) moved to Guadalcanal, arriving there the first week in June. Here the raiders had only a few days to go over their orders, iron out organizational kinks, and practice as a single unit before the 4th Battalion was abruptly assigned to Kennedy's assistance.

²³ Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: 1st MarRdrRegt WarD 15Mar-30Sep43, dtd 6Oct43; 9th DefBn RecofOps 1-28Jun43, dtd 3Oct43; 9th DefBn Rept on AA Ops 18Jun-18Sep43, hereafter *9th DefBn AA Ops*; 9th DefBn NarrativeHist 1Feb42-14Apr44, dtd 2May44; 4th BaseDep OrgHist 1Apr-31Jul43, dtd 24Aug43; HistSec G-2, SoPacBaseComd, MS Hist of the New Georgia Campaign, 2 vols., c. 1947 (OCMH), hereafter *New Georgia Campaign*; LtCol Wilbur J. McNenney, Observers Rept New Georgia Ops to CG, IMAC, dtd 17Jul43; LtCol Wright C. Taylor ltr to CMC, dtd 4Mar52; Col Archie E. O'Neil ltr to CMC, c. 1Mar51; LtCol Robert C. Hiatt ltr to CMC, c. 26Feb52; Maj Cyril E. Emrich ltr to CO, 10th DefBn, dtd 1Jul43; Maj John L. Zimmerman, *The Guadalcanal Campaign* (Washington: Hist-Div, HQMC, 1949); Rentz, *Marines in the Central Solomons*; Sherrod, *MarAirHist*.

The 9th Defense Battalion commanded by Lieutenant Colonel William J. Scheyer, had particular reason to be proud of its assignment in the TOENAILS operation. With a quick conversion of its seacoast batteries to field artillery units, the 9th would be in an offensive role against the Japanese at Munda and the prospect pleased the entire battalion. One of 14 such highly specialized defense forces scattered from Cuba to New Zealand, the 9th was providing antiaircraft protection for Guadalcanal forces when picked for the New Georgia offensive. Activated early in 1942, the 9th trained extensively in Cuba before arriving at Guadalcanal on 30 November 1942. The battalion was in defensive action almost immediately, and its 90mm batteries bagged a total of 12 enemy aircraft in the following months.

Organizational changes had to be made, however, to get the unit ready for its part in the capture of Munda. In 21 days, the seacoast batteries, augmented by 145 new men, were trained in field artillery fire direction methods and had test-fired newly arrived 155mm pieces. The change from seacoast sights to field artillery sights and different fire commands was only part of the problem, though. As one battalion officer reported:

Our problem was not one of training but one of obtaining the necessary equipment and ammunition so that a relative calibration could be fired to obtain some idea as to the relative velocity errors of the new weapons in order to mass their fires. We were plagued throughout the operation with this equipment and ammunition problem. When the ammunition did arrive from Noumea, there were 19 different powder lots in a shipment of 25 rounds. Obviously, calibrations could not be conducted with propellents of different powder lots and about all that was accomplished was test firing of

the weapons so that the men could be familiar with them.²⁴

The battalion, with an assist from its relieving Army unit, the 70th Coast Artillery (Antiaircraft) Battalion, picked up new 90mm antiaircraft guns equipped with power rammers and remote control equipment in exchange for the old guns which were left in position. In addition, power-operated mounts were placed on spare 20mm guns, increasing speed and efficiency over the standard mounts which were pedal-operated. The 9th also borrowed 12 amphibian tractors from the 3d Marine Division, and Griswold's XIV Corps exchanged new trucks and jeeps for old. As the 9th readied itself for its mission, its armament included a platoon of 8 light tanks, 8 155mm guns, 12 90mm guns, 16 40mm guns, 28 20mm guns, and 35 .50 caliber antiaircraft machine guns.

Relieved of its defensive role on Guadalcanal on 17 June, the battalion spent the remaining time in familiarization firing of weapons, gun drills which included reconnaissance, selection, and occupation of positions, and practice landings. Gunners and loaders from the antiaircraft batteries turned riflemen to give the tankmen practice in tank-infantry tactics. The amphibian tractors were test-loaded until a loading arrangement was obtained which would provide enough 40mm, 20mm, and .50 caliber ammunition for all three types of antiaircraft guns to go into action immediately upon landing. The 9th also took advantage of a liberal interpretation of its orders to get more ammunition for the 90mm batteries. Loading orders specified three units of fire were to be carried. Since an Army unit of fire for the 90mm guns was 125 rounds and a Marine unit of

²⁴ Hiatt ltr, *op. cit.*

fire 300 rounds, the 9th interpreted the orders to mean Marine Corps units of fire and carried the extra ammunition. Despite some misdirected trucks and some confusion as to unmarked dock areas, the eager 9th was aboard ship and waiting hours before the scheduled departure.²⁵

In time, elements of the 10th and the 11th Defense Battalions would be called upon to augment the 9th in its mission at Rendova and Munda, but until placed on alert, they continued to assist in the defense of Guadalcanal and the Russells. A fourth unit, the 4th Defense Battalion, which had been in the New Hebrides before going to New Zealand, was soon to be recalled to Guadalcanal for participation in the final phase of the campaign in the Central Solomons. The employment of these battalions as offensive elements instead of defense forces illustrated the change in the character of the war.

Although not carried on the orders as part of the New Georgia Occupation Force, another Marine Corps element was to provide invaluable support to the operation. This was the 4th Base Depot, a supply organization which had been activated at Noumea on 1 April 1943 as the direct result of a logistics logjam in the South Pacific. Prior to the New Georgia operation, the Army had responsibility for unloading all supplies, but as the size of forces in the area grew, the inadequate and limited facilities and the understaffed corps of laborers in the Pacific were strained to maintain a smooth and uninterrupted flow of necessary supplies. Despite the Army's best efforts, the result was

a confused backlog of equipment and supplies at New Caledonia and Guadalcanal which almost sidelined the New Georgia operation.

Shipping to the lower Solomons, except for vital aircraft engines and spare parts, motor transport spare parts, rations, and medical supplies, was curtailed for a time, and all other goods were routed to Noumea for transshipping to Guadalcanal on call. Supplies necessary for the New Georgia operation were then plucked from the stockpiles at Noumea and assembled at Guadalcanal. Other war materials were directed to the Southwest Pacific forces, added to the growing dumps in the New Hebrides, or stored in New Zealand.

The 4th Base Depot, under the command of Colonel George F. Stockes, and with personnel gleaned from the 1st, 2d, and 3d Base Depots and the Marine 12th Replacement Battalion, moved with 61 officers and 1,367 men to Guadalcanal to help relieve the congestion. Placed under the command of the XIV Corps, it was ordered by Griswold to relieve the service elements of the 43d Infantry Division in the Russells, and to bring order out of the general confusion. The 4th Base Depot was then to receive and store all supplies for the New Georgia operation and the Russells garrison; maintain a 60-day level of supplies for TOENAILS forces; and handle and load aboard ships all supplies as called for by the 43d Division and supporting troops on New Georgia.

The assignment was insurance that logistical problems would not slow the attack. It was a timely move. Shortly after the 4th Base Depot began working on the jumbled stockpiles of material, the initial phase of TOENAILS began with the Segi Plantation occupation, and the Marines were called upon for supply as-

²⁵ Emrich ltr. *op. cit.* In order to avoid similar misunderstandings and to facilitate logistical planning, Nimitz' headquarters subsequently published a CinCPac order listing units of fire for all types of weapons.

sistance. By the time the main operations started at Rendova, the depot had the necessary material ready for forward movement, and in the following months it funneled a steady stream of lumber, cement, ammunition, rations (including fresh fruit and meats), clothing, tires, spare parts, gasoline, lubricants, sand bags, tents, engineer equipment, post exchange items, and many other types of supplies into New Georgia.

For Marine Corps aviation units, establishment of an exact date for the start of the New Georgia campaign is difficult. The conflict for air superiority was constant and continuing, not bounded by beachheads or D-Days. The struggle for undisputed possession of the lower Solomons phased directly into the New Georgia campaign, and it is hard to differentiate between the squadrons which supported the consolidation of the Solomons and those which directly took part in the capture of Munda airfield. In any event, most Marine squadrons then based at Guadalcanal or in the Russells participated in both campaigns, either in part or in whole.

Rear Admiral Marc A. Mitscher, as ComAirSols, had an Allied force of 627 planes with which to support operations in the Central Solomons. It was a composite of Marine, Army, Navy, and New Zealand aircraft, and included 290 fighters, 94 scout bombers, 75 torpedo bombers, 48 heavy bombers, 26 medium bombers, 30 flying boats, 24 seaplanes, and a miscellany of 40 search, rescue, and transport planes.²⁶

²⁶ ComAirPac to ComSoPac ltr ser 00517 of 4Jun43, quoted in *New Georgia Campaign*, p. 60.

Although plans for garrisoning New Georgia were still in the tentative stage, a number of Marine squadrons were to be based at Munda airfield following its capture and would become an integral part of the New Georgia Air Force. Prior to the campaign, however, this term was a paper designation for a forward echelon of the 2d Marine Aircraft Wing, attached to the NGOF; its commanding officer, General Mulcahy, would "exercise operational control of aircraft in flight assigned to air cover and support missions in the New Georgia area."²⁷ Requests for air support strikes would be made to liaison parties with each landing force, and General Mulcahy as ComAir New Georgia would approve, disapprove, or modify. It was, in effect, a fighter-bomber direction center for both air defense and direct support missions. Control of the assigned aircraft would pass to ComAir New Georgia when the planes took off from their home fields.

Available for such tactical air support missions as would be assigned them in the months ahead were seven Marine fighter and four scout bomber squadrons, backed up by three utility squadrons and a photo reconnaissance detachment. For the most part, though, the role of the Marine squadrons in the seizure of Munda is part of the bigger story of how Allied air strength reduced the Japanese stronghold at Rabaul to impotency. This will be related in Part V of this volume.²⁸

²⁷ NGOF FO No. 1, *op. cit.*

²⁸ Stationed in the Solomons in June 1943 were VMF-112, -121, -122, -123, -124, -213, and -221, with several more squadrons due to arrive as replacements later; VMFB-132, -143, -144, and -234; VMJ-152, -153, and -253; and a photographic detachment from VMD-154.

ELKTON Underway

WOODLARK-KIRIWINA¹

The planned moves of the Allied forces in the Central Solomons—Papuan area in the summer of 1943 resembled pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Each operation in itself did not represent a serious threat to the enemy's defense line, but, as part of a bigger picture, each was important and contributed to the success of all. The pieces fitting together formed a pattern of coordinated, steady advance.

D-Day (30 June) for ELKTON was practically a planning date only. ComSoPac operations began at Segi on 21 June; and Woodlark-Kiriwina landings two days later opened the action by Southwest Pacific forces, well in advance of the date

¹ Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: VII PhibFor, SWPA, ComdHist 10Jan43-23Dec45, n.d.; MIS, WD, Survey of North East New Guinea and Papua (S30-678), dtd 15Jul43; 12th DefBn WarD, 30Jun-31Jul43, dtd 2Aug43; OCE, USAFPac, *Airfield and Base Development—Engineers in the South West Pacific, 1941-1945*, v. VI (Washington, 1951), *Engineer Supply—Engineers in the South West Pacific, 1941-1945*, v. VII (Washington, 1950), and *Critique—Engineers in the South West Pacific, 1941-1945*, v. VIII (Washington, 1950); Jeter A. Isely and Philip A. Crowl, *The U.S. Marines and Amphibious War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), hereafter Isely and Crowl, *Marines and Amphibious War*; George C. Kenney, *General Kenney Reports* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1949), hereafter Kenney, *Reports*; Morison, *Breaking the Bismarck Barrier*; Halsey and Bryan, *Halsey's Story*.

set. The near-concurrent start was a coincidence; a two-pronged attack by Halsey and MacArthur had been postponed three times before 30 June as a mutual D-Day was accepted. A number of factors forced the delay, chief among which was the scarcity of amphibious troops required by the missions of ELKTON. The 43d Division was the early choice as the New Georgia assault force, and that unit was scheduled for extensive ship-to-shore training prior to the operation. In the Southwest Pacific, an entire new command—the VII Amphibious Force (VII PhibFor)—was activated to assemble and train the needed troops.

Marine Corps divisions, whose specialty was such amphibious movements, were not available for assignment to CARTWHEEL operations. Two divisions were undergoing rehabilitation and training; a third was not yet combat-ready; and a fourth was still forming in the States. The result was that Marine raider and defense battalions were at a high premium to augment available Army units for the twin operations of TOENAILS in New Georgia and CHRONICLE at Woodlark-Kiriwina.

A tentative lineup of forces for the planned attacks was made in April. Admiral Halsey made a quick trip to Brisbane on the 18th to meet the general under whom he would be operating, and he and MacArthur quickly came to an agreement based upon mutual respect. MacArthur

needed some help in his amphibious venture; Halsey offered it. He ordered his Noumea headquarters to assign the 20th NCB (Acorn 5) to Brisbane and to select one combat-ready RCT plus one Marine defense battalion for further transfer to SWPA. Assignment of the Marine unit was easy; the 12th Defense Battalion had arrived in Pearl Harbor in early January and was awaiting further transfer. But the many needs of the expanding South Pacific defense area had left few Army regiments without active assignments. It was finally decided, after a musical-chair shuffle of troops, that the 112th Cavalry (dismounted) on New Caledonia would join the 12th Defense Battalion, Acorn 5, and other naval base and service units in a transfer to SWPA. Here they would serve as the Woodlark defense force. Lieutenant General Walter Krueger's Sixth Army troops would garrison Kiriwina.

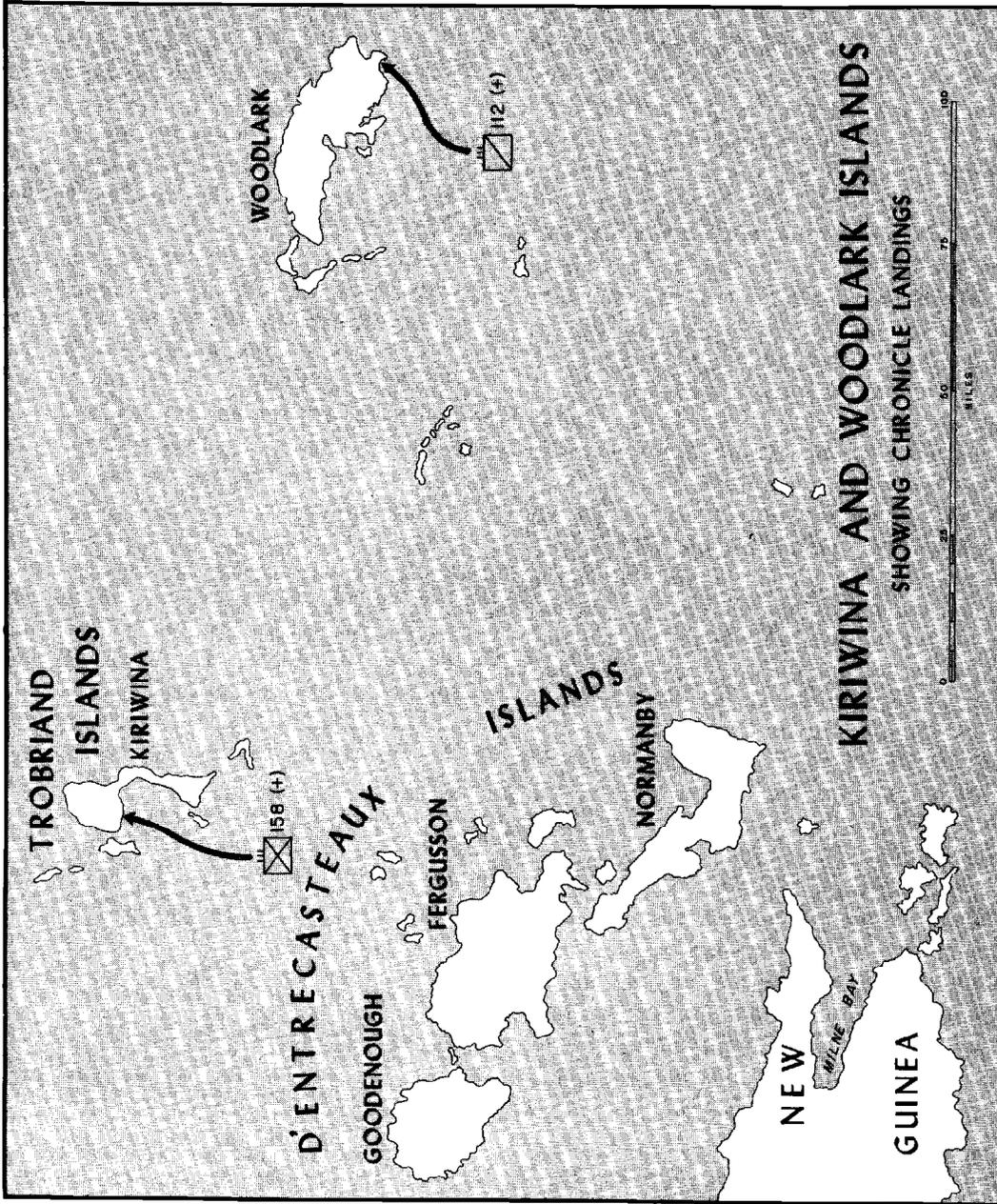
MacArthur's targets, Woodlark and Kiriwina Islands, lay in the Coral Sea off the southeastern shore of New Guinea, about 60 miles north and east of the D'Entrecasteaux Islands. Kiriwina, in the Trobriand Group, is about 125 miles directly south of New Britain; Woodlark is about 200 miles southwest of Bougainville. Their designation as future airfield sites to support operations in both New Guinea and the Solomons sent Army engineers scrambling over them to obtain beach and terrain information to supplement native reports and aerial photography. The reconnaissance teams were wary, but prior information was correct—the Japanese had not occupied the islands. (See Map 2.)

Kiriwina, shaped like a bent toadstool, was ringed by an extensive coral reef broken by only a few narrow openings for

shallow-draft boats. Twenty-five miles in length, and from two to eight miles wide, the island held about 7,500 natives, had a sub-surface coral base which would support an airstrip, and had many good trails for jeep roads. But there were no good beaches. Woodlark, about 100 miles southeast of Kiriwina, was nearly 44 miles long and from 10 to 20 miles in width. Curved in shape, it held a number of good anchorages tucked within the protected shorter arc. The beaches, however, ran inland only a few hundred yards before bumping into a coral cliff. Sparsely settled, Woodlark was covered with a thick jungle growth and dotted with large outcroppings of coral.

Together, these islands could provide bases for fighter escorts of Lieutenant General George C. Kenney's Allied Air Forces hitting at New Guinea, New Britain, and New Ireland, and for SoPac strikes against the Northern Solomons in subsequent operations. Their capture, the JCS had decided earlier, would provide the first test of the newly formed VII Amphibious Force.

This force had come into being under the direction of Rear Admiral Daniel E. Barbey, who opened his headquarters at Brisbane in mid-January 1943. By April, it was apparent that the task of forming and training an amphibious force was far more difficult than had been supposed at first. An assortment of United States and Australian ships formed the transport division, and Sixth Army troops, recuperating from the hard fighting in the Buna-Gona campaign, were trained in amphibious operations. Practice landings which were sandwiched between troop lifts to New Guinea were never realistic. Few troops, ships, or pieces of heavy



MAP 2

R.F. STIBIL

equipment could be spared from that operation for practice purposes. With an operational deadline pressing, Admiral Barbey scoured the Southwest Pacific for more ships. Some new LSTs were assigned him; others he borrowed from ComSoPac. The USS *Rigel*, a repair ship with none of the desired command facilities, was pressed into service as a flagship.

MacArthur, in his first conference with Halsey, had tentatively set 15 May as D-Day for the combined operation. Late in April, MacArthur announced that he could not meet this date and directed its postponement to 1 June. It was later changed to 15 June as logistical and shipping problems piled up in the Pacific. On 26 May, the general proposed the 30th of June as D-Day and requested ComSoPac concurrence. This date, MacArthur pointed out, would also coincide with landings by other SWPA forces at Nassau Bay on New Guinea, about 10 miles south of Salamaua. Halsey agreed.

The CHRONICLE forces assembled, Kiriwina's garrison (code-named BY-PRODUCT) at Milne Bay on New Guinea and Woodlark's garrison (code-named LEATHERBACK) at Townsville, Australia. On 21 June, nine days ahead of schedule, the advance echelon of the 112th Cavalry, with heavy bulldozers and operators from the 20th NCB, set off for Woodlark. The next night, troops and equipment were landed. The speedup resulted because the troops were ready, there would be no enemy to oppose the landing, and Barbey's transports would need the extra time to carry two landing forces to their destinations. Kiriwina's advance echelon was landed on the nights of the 23d and the 25th, the last group landing across the reef over a coral causeway 300

yards long and 7 feet high which had been built by combat engineers and natives.

The main landing of the Kiriwina force, which included the 158th RCT, the 46th Engineer Combat Company, and antiaircraft artillery and service troops, was made on the night of the 29th according to the ELKTON schedule. Additional Woodlark advance echelons had been landed on the nights of the 25th and 26th, with the main landing of support elements coming on the 30th, also as scheduled. Woodlark's garrison, in addition to the troops transferred from ComSoPac, included the 404th Engineer Combat Company as well as other service and ordnance troops.

Enemy opposition was neither expected nor received, although a fighter cover of General Kenney's forces provided assurance of success. The landings at Woodlark proceeded smoothly throughout. With a better area in which to land and with experience gained in a last-minute rehearsal, the LEATHERBACK force went ashore with a minimum of effort. The Kiriwina operation, however, left much to be desired. Lack of prior training and insufficient equipment, complicated by poor landing areas, contributed to the confusion. In addition, the island's coral circlet made resupply of the island difficult. Regardless of these handicaps, VII PhibFor carried 12,100 troops to Woodlark and 4,700 to Kiriwina without a casualty, while a total of 42,900 tons of supplies and equipment were unloaded without loss of a ship or landing boat.

For the Marine 12th Defense Battalion, the Woodlark landing was anticlimactic. Organized in San Diego in August 1942 under the command of Colonel William H. Harrison, the battalion trained extensively and test-fired all its armament before moving to Pearl Harbor and further combat

training. The battalion joined the LEATHERBACK force in Australia prior to the operation. Two 90mm antiaircraft batteries went ashore from LCIs on 30 June and the remaining batteries and groups followed them ashore during the next 12 days. The first two 90mm batteries were ready to fire by 1300 on 1 July, and the other units were in firing positions in equally short order once ashore. But the opportunity for combat firing seldom came. It was not until 27 July that a solitary Japanese plane, after making several false attempts, hurried over Woodlark to drop five small bombs. There was no damage, and the plane escaped. After that, only occasional alerts were noted in the 12th Defense Battalion's log. Kiriwina, however, was bombed several times during construction with some damage to equipment and installations and some casualties to the BY-PRODUCT troops.

Construction of the airstrip on Woodlark progressed speedily; the Kiriwina field was slowed by heavy rains and the fact that much of the heavy equipment had seen too much prior service and was deadlined for repair within a few days. On 14 July, Woodlark was declared operational with a strip 150 feet wide and 3,000 feet long available. The first fighter squadron from South Pacific forces arrived on 23 July. The runway at Kiriwina was operational in late July, and on 18 August, a Fifth Air Force fighter squadron arrived on station. Kiriwina staged its first strike against enemy forces on New Guinea in late August, and later was a base for a Fifth Air Force fighter group.

No Allied strike was ever staged from Woodlark's strip, and South Pacific aircraft commanders lost interest almost as soon as it was completed. In fact, after the capture of Munda, Woodlark was

turned over to the Fifth Air Force. Kiriwina remained for a time as a fighter plane base, but later the war moved northward toward the Bismarck Archipelago and the Admiralties and left both fields far behind. However, the Woodlark-Kiriwina operation gave needed experience to a new amphibious force and provided a protective buffer to the New Georgia operation which was concurrently underway.

OCCUPATION OF SEGI AND SEIZURE OF VIRU²

The man who was to call the shots in the defense of Munda airfield unknowingly tripped the alarm which set the ELKTON plans into action. Major General Sasaki, in his area headquarters at Kolombangara, was irked at Coastwatcher Kennedy at Segi Plantation near Viru Harbor, and—after months of tolerating Kennedy's presence—determined to get rid of him. Sasaki had good reasons: Kennedy's station was the center of resistance on New Georgia, and his air raid warning activities had contributed greatly to the lack of success of Japanese strikes against Guadalcanal. On 17 June, Sasaki sent re-

² Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: *New Georgia Campaign*; TF 31 ltr to holders of EasternFor LoadingO 1-43, dtd 22Jun43; TG 31-3 OpO AL 10-43, dtd 21Jun43; TG 31.3 LoadingOs 1-4, dtd 16Jun-7Jul43; 4th RdrBn SAR 10Jun-10Jul43, dtd 14Sep43; 4th RdrBn WarD, 26Feb-31Aug43, hereafter *4th RdrBn WarD*; *SE Area NavOps-II*; *Seventeenth Army Ops-I*; Col Michael S. Currin ltr to CMC, dtd 8Feb51; LtCol Anthony Walker ltr to CMC, dtd 23Feb51; Batterton, "You Fight by the Book;" Feldt, *The Coastwatchers*; ONI, *Combat Narratives, Solomon Islands Campaign: X—Operations in the New Georgia, 21Jun-5Aug43* (Washington, 1944), hereafter ONI, *Combat Narratives X*; Rentz, *Marines in the Central Solomons*.

inforcements to the Viru Harbor garrison with orders "to pacify that area."³ (See Map 3.)

Prior to Sasaki's decision to reinforce Viru, Segi Plantation on the southeast coast of New Georgia had been important only to the Allies. Segi was an ideal entry-way into the island. Amphibious patrols had landed here, and the plantation had been a haven for many downed aviators. For the new advance, the Allies planned to build an airstrip here, but Kennedy reported on 18 June that he would not be able to hold this position if he did not get help in a hurry. The Japanese were closing in on him.

Admiral Turner ordered an immediate occupation of Segi. If Kennedy said he needed help, he was to be taken at his word. This determined New Zealander, the former District Officer for Santa Isabel Island across The Slot from New Georgia, was no alarmist. He had moved to Segi Point after the Japanese occupied the Solomons and there he had been completely surrounded by enemy garrisons. But he had held on, and his position 160 miles northwest of Lunga Point had fitted in admirably with the system of air raid warnings. His reports on Japanese flights meant that their arrival over Guadalcanal could be forecast within a minute or two. Kennedy had told the natives of New Georgia that Britain was not going to give up these islands, and the success of the Allies at Guadalcanal and Tulagi gave convincing evidence of this. He continued to live almost openly in the plantation house at Segi. There were no trails leading to his station, and the approach along the beach could be watched. But Kennedy

³ CIC SoPac Item No. 786, 8th CSNLF Operational Rad and TgOs, translated 17Dec43.

and his natives had been forced to ambush Japanese parties to keep the the position secret. Some enemy had escaped Kennedy's attacks, however, and Sasaki had issued the order which made Kennedy the most wanted man on New Georgia.

Already at Viru Harbor was the 4th Company of the 1st Battalion, 229th Regiment, plus a few assorted naval personnel from the Kure 6th and Yokosuka 7th SNLF, a 3-inch coastal gun, four 80mm guns, eight dual-purpose guns, and a varying number of landing craft. To augment the Viru garrison, Major Masao Hara was to take another infantry company and a machine gun platoon from his 1st Battalion and comb southeastern New Georgia for the coastwatcher's hideout.⁴ When this force came close, Kennedy faded into the hills and radioed:

Strong enemy patrol has approached very close, and by their numbers and movement, it is believed they will attack. Urgently suggest force be sent to defend Segi.⁵

The message reached Turner at Koli Point, Guadalcanal, during the night of 18-19 June, and the admiral decided to send a force to Segi at once rather than wait until 30 June, the D-Day established by ELKTON plans. Fortunately, the admiral had combat units ready. The destroyer-transports *Dent*, *Waters*, *Schley*, and *Crosby* were standing by in Guadalcanal waters for the operations against New Georgia, and Lieutenant Colonel Mi-

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ 4th RdrBn SAR, *op. cit.*, p. 9. Kennedy had good reason for his suspicions. A diary later taken from the body of Second Lieutenant Harumasa Adachi at Viru Harbor indicated that the Japanese had discovered Kennedy's hideout and that an attack was being planned. ICPOA Item No. 598, Translation of Captured Japanese Document, dtd 6Jul43.

chael S. Currin's 4th Marine Raider Battalion, which included personnel who had been to New Georgia on prelanding reconnaissance missions, was also completely combat-ready. With these ships and men, Turner could mount out a force to protect Kennedy and also thrust a toe in the Central Solomons door that the Japanese were trying to slam shut.

Currin's battalion (less Companies N and Q, scheduled to attack Vangunu Island on 30 June) went on board the *Dent* and *Waters* on 20 June for a night run to Kennedy's aid. This force was followed the next night by Companies A and D of the Army's 103d Infantry Regiment. Initially, these units would defend Segi, and then carry out the planned attack on Viru Harbor on 30 June as scheduled. With the exception of raider Company O, previously detached to duty with Turner's Western Force but now returned to Currin, these units were part of Admiral Fort's Eastern Force and were scheduled for use in this area of New Georgia. Thus the landing at Segi on 21 June, which set off the CARTWHEEL operations, amounted only to stepping up the timetable.

All was not smooth sailing for the *Dent* and *Waters*. The natural obstacles which had contributed to Kennedy's security at Segi Point were hazards for these ships. There is deep, sheltered water off Segi, but the channels to this anchorage were uncharted, dismissed on the charts as "foul ground." There are so many reefs and coral outcroppings in these waters that Vangunu appears to be almost a part of the larger island of New Georgia. There is no suitable route to Segi from the north, and only the natives and a few local pilots were acquainted with the passages to

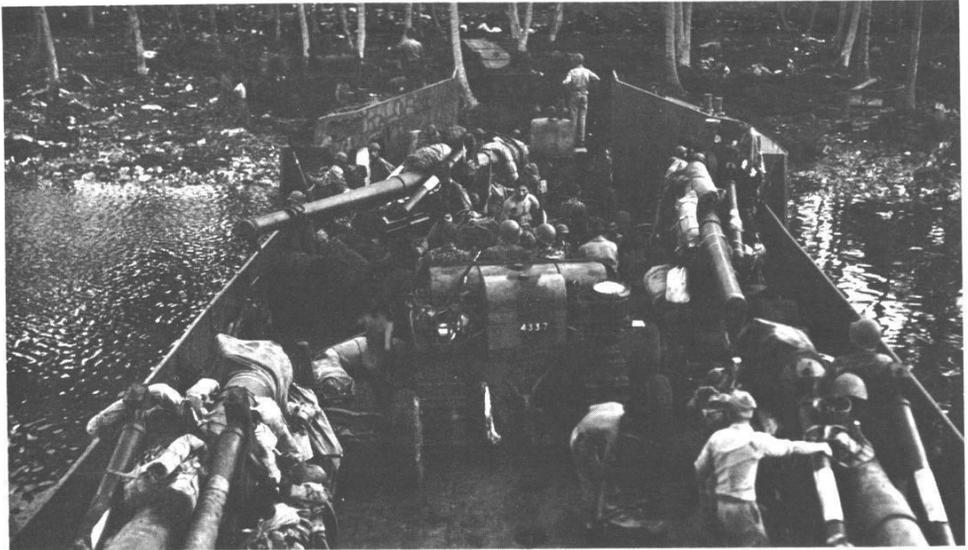
the south. Even with a local pilot sighting on Kennedy's bonfire signal on the beach, the transports scraped bottom and rode over reefs. At 0530 on 21 June, the Marines went over the side and into ships' boats for the landing, and by 1030, all supplies had been brought ashore and the transports were picking their way through the coral heads and reefs for a speedy return to Guadalcanal. Currin immediately established defensive positions and sent out patrols, but there was no contact with the enemy. At 0600 on the following day, the two Army companies plus an airfield survey party from Acorn 7 came ashore from the *Schley* and *Crosby*.

Kennedy was grateful that these troops had come to his rescue, but both his pioneer spirit and his scouting routine were pinched by this population influx. For peace and quiet, and to re-establish a schedule of unrestricted movements for his native scouts, he moved across the narrow channel to Vangunu Island. Currin kept contact with the coastwatcher, and, with natives provided by Kennedy, sent out patrols to determine the most suitable means of approach to Viru Harbor. At the same time, Seabees began converting Segi's uneven and muddy terrain into an airstrip. With bulldozers and power shovels, working at night under floodlights, the men had an airstrip ready for limited operations as a fighter base by 10 July. It was the intentions of ComSoPac to have the field capable of servicing 20 planes an hour at first, and then—by 25 September—of basing about 60 light bombers.⁶

⁶ ComSoPac Ltr ser 00534, dtd 10Jun43, Subj: "Proposed Master Plan for Construction of Airfields and Seaplane Bases in the South Pacific Area, Guadalcanal Island, Koli Point Section," quoted in *New Georgia Campaign*.



BURIAL CEREMONY at Viru Harbor honors Marines of the 4th Raider Battalion killed in the first American offensive on New Georgia. (USMC 57581)



155MM GUNS of the 9th Defense Battalion on board an LCT off Rendova's beach as they move to a new firing position. (USMC 60658)

The Allies had plans for Viru Harbor, too. This small, landlocked cove 35 miles from Munda was to be developed into a minor naval base for small craft. The best anchorage on the New Georgia coast, it had an entrance 300 yards wide and 800 yards long, outlined on both sides by coral cliffs. The inner harbor widened, and was fed by three small rivers, the Mango, Tita, and Viru. Previous amphibious patrols had reported the bulk of the Viru defenders to be located on the high headlands on the west side of the harbor at the village Tetemara, with another detachment at Tombe, a village facing Tetemara across the channel. But intelligence reports on the size of the Viru garrison conflicted. Early estimates had ranged from 20 to 100 men; an early-June reconnaissance patrol revised these figures to 200 enemy troops. (See Map 3.)

As Companies A and D of the 103d set up a defense against any further attempts by the Japanese to wipe out Kennedy's station, raider amphibious reconnaissance teams concentrated their attention on finding the most suitable route to Viru. Several times they narrowly missed bumping into Japanese patrols or sentries as the Marines examined a number of small river inlets searching for a beach which would exit to an overland route to the rear of Viru Harbor. While Currin's raiders scouted the area between Segi and the proposed landing site, a member of the staff, Captain Foster C. LaHue, slipped by native canoe through the bay to Hele Islands in Blanche Channel to meet the *Schley* and receive Admiral Fort's orders for the Marines' attack on Viru.

Currin had hoped to land during the night of 27 June at Regi, a village just seven miles from Viru Harbor and considerably west of Segi Plantation. From

here his force could move overland to a point east of the Viru River, and there split for attacks down both sides of the inlet to seize the village of Tombe on the east bank and Tetemara on the west. Fort's orders, however, directed only Company P to land on the 28th at Nono village, just a few miles west of Kennedy's station. Currin was then to strike through the jungle to attack Tetemara at 0700 on 30 June, and capture the seacoast guns reported to be in Tetemara. The APDs *Kilty* and *Crosby* would then sail into the harbor and put ashore a 355-man occupation force consisting of Company B of the 103d; one-half of Company D, 20th NCB; Battery E (less one platoon) of the 70th Coast Artillery (Antiaircraft) Battalion; and a naval base unit.

Additional paragraphs of the order gave details concerning the proposed seizure of Wickham Anchorage and the development of Segi Point, but contained no instructions for Company O of the Raiders and that portion of the 4th Raider Battalion headquarters already at Segi.⁷ At 1600 that afternoon, Colonel Currin radioed Admiral Fort for permission to land at Regi, to use Company O as well as Company P, and to begin the operation on 27 June rather than 28 June. The raider commander had spent 20 days in this area with amphibious patrols during March and April, and he estimated that even if he started a day earlier he would be hard-pressed to make the D-Day of 30 June at Tombe and Tetemara. An overland trek would mean tortuous trails over ridges, rivers, and swamps, and the hiking distance was considerably more than map

⁷ TG 31.3 OpO AL-10, dtd 21Jun43; TF 31 ltr FE25/LI over 0013b, dtd 22Jun43; TG 31.3 LoadingO 1-43, dtd 16Jun43.