

HISTORICAL COMMENTARY

Guadalcanal! One of the best known and least understood campaigns of the Second World War. In 1942, the Solomon Islands of which Guadalcanal is a part, New Guinea, the Bismarck Archipelago, and the surrounding waters hosted some of the hardest fought and most critical battles in the Pacific Theatre. The first real check to Japanese expansion (the Battle of the Coral Sea), and the first Allied offensive in the Pacific (Guadalcanal) took place here. Indeed, the Battles of the Coral Sea comprise one half of the carrier battles fought in history. These operations changed the course of the Pacific War, and saw the development of the weapons and tactics that would finally doom the Japanese Empire.

In World War II, the aircraft carrier was the newest advancement in naval weaponry and warfare. Of questionable effectiveness in its early development, proponents had seen its potential even during the First World War. Developments during the twenties and thirties saw the rapid evolution of seaborne airpower. By 1942, less than thirty-nine years after the Wright brothers' flight at Kittyhawk, even the critics were convinced and the aircraft carrier had become the prime capital ship of the world's navies.

Airpower dominated the Pacific Theatre, and an aircraft carrier (otherwise known as a FLAT TOP) represented airpower in its most mobile, flexible, and hard hitting form. Nothing more than a large, vulnerable, floating airfield, unable to stand up to a light cruiser in a conventional gunnery action, the carrier's strength lay in its planes and in its mobility that allowed it to strike hard and swiftly, then vanish into an endless expanse of ocean.

The Japanese were the first to realize the full potential of carrier borne airpower, as demonstrated by their surprise attack on Pearl Harbor by planes from six large fleet carriers. The Japanese then exploited their superiority, using their fast carriers as the spearhead in their early whirlwind victories and expansion across the Pacific. With their battleships sitting in the mud at Pearl Harbor, the United States Navy, in turn, were forced to rely on their carriers. And learning quickly, by 1942, had reached a rough parity with their Japanese counterparts in the techniques of carrier operations.

Tulagi was occupied on May 3rd. Japanese forces moved into position for the next step in the operations. The Japanese transports and their escorts were to pass through the Jomard Passage, and invade Port Moresby. Direct support was to be provided by the tender Kamikawa, which was to establish a seaplane base at Deboyne Island, and by the light carrier Shoho. Lurking at a greater distance, Rear Admiral Chuichi Hara's powerful Task Force containing the carriers Shokaku and Zuikaku would slip around the Eastern Solomons to cut off any American carriers that might try to interfere. No major opposition was expected by the Japanese. But, the Allies were reading the Japanese messages (having broken the Japanese Naval Code), and were fully aware of the Japanese plans. Two fleet carriers, the Lexington and Yorktown, under the command of Rear Admiral Frank J. Fletcher, were sent to turn back the invasion.

The battle opened with a devastating raid on Tulagi on the morning of May 4th by planes from the Yorktown. The first indication to the Japanese that an American flat top was in the area. The next few days passed with little action, as both sides fueled and the big Japanese carriers raced down the Solomons chain, around the eastern tip of San Cristobal. Now knowing that there were two American carriers present, the Japanese transports, which had finally left Rabaul, were circling slowly at sea to await the results of the carrier duel before sailing further.

On May 7th, sightings were made by both sides, and strikes were launched. The American strike, originally planned to attack the two big enemy carriers, found the Shoho instead, sinking her in a matter of minutes; an event commemorated with the phrase, "Scratch one flat top!". The Japanese strike was less impressive, finding and sinking one destroyer and one fleet tanker. Another Japanese strike, launched from Rabaul, attacked an Allied cruiser force that Fletcher had detached to block the Jomard Passage, and failed to score a hit. The last Japanese strike of the day, launched from the carriers, was a fiasco that failed to find any targets, ending with the loss of most of the planes which were forced to attempt night landings on the carriers (several pilots so lost they tried to land on the American carriers). At this point, the Allies were way ahead. Not only had the Japanese lost a light carrier and suffered severe plane losses, but their invasion fleet had finally turned back to Rabaul. The first Japanese invasion fleet of the war had been repulsed.

May 8th proved to be a day of decision. Sighting each other early in the day, both fleets rapidly launched strikes. The American strike bit into the Shokaku, severely damaging her. The Japanese strike, despite heavy plane losses, managed to inflict mortal wounds on the huge "Lady Lex" and damage the Yorktown.

That night the battered fleets pulled apart, ending the battle. For the first time in history, two fleets had fought a battle without any ship sighting an enemy ship. Both sides claimed a victory, the Allies because Port Moresby had been saved, and the Japanese because they had traded the 11,000 ton Shoho for the 36,000 ton "Queen of the flat tops", Lexington.

The defeat at Midway in June abruptly halted the Japanese expansion, handing the strategic initiative to the Allies. However, the Japanese continued a slow advance in the mapboard area, taking Buna in July, and entering the Eastern Solomons, with the start of construction of an air field on Guadalcanal. The Allied reaction was Operation WATCHTOWER (more accurately referred to as Operation SHOESTRING), an amphibious assault to capture the new airfield. The U.S. First Marine Division landed on August 7th, swiftly overcame light resistance, and renamed the airstrip Henderson Field, after a Midway hero. Thus began one of the most protracted and bitter struggles in military history.

Japanese reaction while swift and sharp was largely ineffective. A series of air raids from Rabaul failed to cause substantial damage to the Allied ships, while they crippled

Japanese land-based airpower. The disastrous Allied naval defeat at Savo Island failed to have lasting consequences, as the Japanese did not follow up. It was over two weeks before the Japanese were able to mount a serious full scale counterattack.

The Japanese reactions showed that they were more concerned with New Guinea and not yet overly concerned with the situation at Guadalcanal. Of three Japanese operations underway, the Guadalcanal operation was the smallest. Only 1500 troops were embarked to land on Guadalcanal, while two major operations were simultaneously underway in New Guinea. In the one operation, already begun a powerful Japanese column that had pushed from Buna across the Owen Stanley Mountains of New Guinea, was stalled by some Australian soldiers at the outskirts of Port Moresby. The other operation concerned two amphibious forces that were to land in Milne Bay to seize the new Australian fighter strip at Gili-Gili, gaining the flank of the Port Moresby position. To cover these diverse operations, the Japanese Combined Fleet, committed for the first time since Midway, was to sortie and destroy the American carrier forces. The Allied Intelligence system seemingly failed during this operation, and the American fleet, built around three fleet carriers, was caught while the Wasp Task Force was fueling. This left only the Enterprise and Saratoga and consorts under Fletcher (Vice Admiral by then), to face the whole Combined fleet under Vice Admiral Nagumo.

The Japanese plan was to bait the American carriers, then destroy them while their planes were away or in the midst of refueling and servicing. A force built around light carrier Ryujo steamed about sixty miles ahead of the main Japanese forces to serve as the lure for the trap. The Ryujo was to absorb a strike from the American carriers, while the Shokaku and Zuikaku launched their own strike, surprising and destroying the American flat tops. The trap failed to snap completely shut. A strike from the Enterprise and Saratoga duly sunk the Ryujo, but the Japanese strike, shot to pieces by a powerful American CAP and tremendous anti-aircraft fire, failed to hit the Saratoga, and only damaged the "Big E" (Enterprise). A late strike from the Saratoga damaged the tender Chitose before night ended the battle with a general Japanese retirement. The Japanese transports reached Guadalcanal during the night of August 24/25, and the 1500 troops were landed, while Henderson Field was bombarded by Japanese ship gunnery. The following morning planes from Henderson attacked these ships as they were retiring, sinking a destroyer and damaging the cruiser Jintsu. Later fighting saw the destruction of most of the 1500 Japanese reinforcements. In New Guinea, the Australian troops repelled the Japanese at Port Moresby, a defeat that eventually led to a Japanese rout all the way back to Buna. At Milne Bay, Australian P-40s armed with light bombs proceeded to sink or damage every Japanese transport and barge involved before they could complete landing operations. Ground fighting raged for over a week, but the operation had really been decided by the Japanese ship losses.

All through September and October the Guadalcanal campaign dragged on, generating crisis after crisis. By night the Japanese "Tokyo Express" would run supplies and reinforcements down The Slot, and by day the

"Cactus Air Force" at Henderson Field dominated the surrounding waters, allowing Allied ships to dock and unload. In the jungles of Guadalcanal itself there was fighting every day, and most nights the skies were lit by the fire of Japanese bombardment. At sea, Japanese submarines whittled down the American fleet, sinking the Wasp, and damaging both the Saratoga and BB North Carolina.

October saw the Japanese attempting to break the deadlock. The cruiser action off Cape Esperance on the night of October 11/12 saw the Toyko Express badly mauled for the first time. To remedy this, the Japanese sent battleships into action for the first time, with the Haruna and Kongo blasting Henderson on the night of October 13/14 and repeating the treatment with cruisers on the following night. Morning found the Cactus Air Force still strong enough to attack the Japanese transports though, so the Japanese countered again on the night of October 14/15 by pouring another eleven hundred shells into Henderson. Japanese troop strength on the island continued to climb, and the American situation was rapidly deteriorating.

On October 15, American Pacific naval commander Admiral Chester W. Nimitz gave his appreciation of the situation: "It now appears that we are unable to control the sea in the Guadalcanal area . . . supply of the position will only be done at great expense to us. The situation is not hopeless, but it is certainly critical." Stateside, steps were already being taken to prepare the American people for the loss of Guadalcanal. Every available ship and plane had already been sent to the theatre, and the best Nimitz could offer was to dispatch his most aggressive subordinate, Vice Admiral William F. Halsey to take command.

The Japanese hoped to soften up the Marine and Army troops on Guadalcanal for a week prior to 'Y-Day' (October 22), when a Japanese assault would finally recapture Henderson Field. The uncooperative U.S. troops refused to be softened up, and Y-Day was postponed from day to day. Troop strengths on the island were now roughly equal, the Americans being somewhat more numerous, but the Japanese being fresher and healthier than their fatigued counterparts. The Combined Fleet had again sortied, and was nervously loitering near Ontong Java Atoll, waiting for word that Henderson had been recaptured. Determined to do something, Halsey, recently reinforced by the repaired veteran "Big E" and the new battleship South Dakota, both bristling with new 40mm anti-aircraft guns, directed Rear Admiral Thomas Kincaid to sortie from New Caledonia. The bold decision was made not to send the American carriers to their normal patrol positions in support of Henderson Field, but to sweep far to the east, passing Santa Cruz Island in an attempt to flank the Combined fleet. At 0126 hours on October 25th, the Japanese ground forces radioed (mistakenly) that Henderson Field had fallen. Supremely confident, Admiral Kondo set the Combined Fleet into action, believing he could brush aside any Allied Naval forces that might be encountered (the Japanese knew that the Wasp had been sunk, and that the Enterprise and Saratoga were damaged, but not that the Enterprise was back). Halsey was sending Kincaid the order to, "Attack—Repeat—Attack". The stage was set for the last

great carrier battle of 1942, and the last carrier action until the Battle of the Philippine Sea in June of 1944.

Santa Cruz proved to be a very confusing battle. The action opened when two Enterprise Dauntless Dive Bombers found the Zuiho, attacked, and knocked her out of the battle. Both sides had now spotted each other, and the main strikes followed. The Enterprise was able to disappear into a rain squall as the Japanese strike hit the Hornet with full fury, inflicting heavy damage, but suffering severe plane losses (twenty-five of twenty-seven planes). The American strike was less costly, but also less successful. Hits were scored on the Shokaku and Chikuma, but neither ship was sunk. Later Japanese strikes hit the Hornet again, and also damaged the South Dakota (which was throwing up a fantastic amount of anti-aircraft fire, claiming twenty-six Japanese planes shotdown by the end of the day), San Juan, and Enterprise. Forced to retire, the Americans attempted to scuttle the Hornet, but the big flat top was still burning as Japanese surface units arrived to deliver the final torpedoes that sent the ship to the bottom. The American fleet had been defeated, but the Japanese had lost one hundred planes, and the last irreplaceable survivors of their excellent prewar aircrews. The battle proved to be indecisive, as the Japanese had no way to exploit their victory. To the surprise of almost everyone except maybe themselves, the American Soldiers and Marines on Guadalcanal had totally defeated all the Japanese attacks, and the constant bone of contention, Henderson Field, remained securely in American hands. The Cactus Air Force still dominated the local waters in daylight, and even managed to sink the cruiser Yura on October 25th.

But Santa Cruz had settled nothing. Both sides again began to prepare for further operations. The Japanese continued the nightly Tokyo Express runs down The Slot, and, by November 12th for the first time, outnumbered the Americans forces on the island. Carrier strength for both sides had reached the nadir of the war to date. The Japanese could make up only two understrength carrier air groups. The Americans, with Saratoga not due to return until the end of the month, had only the partially repaired Enterprise available, with an incomplete air group and a jammed elevator. However, due to the weakness of the available airpower, both sides were for the first time prepared to commit major surface forces for gunnery action.

The morning of November 12th found American transports and their escorts unloading troops and supplies at Henderson Field. And by the afternoon, despite heavy Japanese air attacks the unloading was completed. That night, the Japanese sent a Task Force including the battleships Hiei and Kirishima to bombard the American

position. They were met in a confused melee by an American cruiser force, with heavy losses on both sides. The Americans lost the Atlanta, Juneau (sunk the following day by a Japanese submarine), and four destroyers, plus the San Francisco, Portland, and another destroyer heavily damaged. The Japanese lost two destroyers and the Hiei, which was hit by over eighty 8-inch shells and left too heavily damaged to escape being sunk by planes from Henderson Field and Enterprise the following day; the first Japanese battleship lost in action in World War II. The "Big E", leaving part of her air group at Henderson, retired southward during the night.

A Japanese cruiser force bombarded the field during the night of November 13/14, but was slow in clearing the island and was still in range when the sun came up. The morning of November 14 saw repeated air strikes from Henderson Field and the Enterprise on the retiring ships, ineffectively covered by a CAP from the Hiyo. The Kinugasa was sunk, and Isuzu, Chokai, Maya, and a destroyer damaged. During the afternoon, a fleet of Japanese transports moving down The Slot came under heavy attack. Fighter cover from the Japanese carriers again proved ineffective, and the Rabaul air forces were too tied down with heavy fighting in New Guinea to be much help. By nightfall, seven Japanese transports were sunk.

That night, yet another Japanese Task Force, including the battleship Kirishima, moved towards Guadalcanal. The Americans were waiting, this time with the Washington, South Dakota, and four destroyers. Another confused night melee followed, with the U.S. losing three destroyers and South Dakota suffering damage, but the Japanese lost a destroyer and the Kirishima.

Morning found the surviving Japanese transports still unloading at Guadalcanal, and all four of these were promptly sunk by airstrikes and gunnery from a destroyer. The November battles were a total disaster for the Japanese. Their carriers retired with much reduced air groups, and, although they held on in Guadalcanal until February, 1943, the November effort proved to be the last Japanese attempt to retake the island. Facing the Allies on two fronts from Rabaul was proving to be too much for Japan, as November also saw the fall of Buna to Allied ground troops; the first Allied base on the north coast of New Guinea.

The battle for Guadalcanal continued for over two more years, but for all effective purposes, the Allies had won the island by the end of 1942. Around Guadalcanal, the Coral Sea was littered with the remains of some of the biggest carrier battles in history.