



NORTHERN SOLOMONS

**The U.S. Army Campaigns
of World War II**

Introduction

World War II was the largest and most violent armed conflict in the history of mankind. However, the half century that now separates us from that conflict has exacted its toll on our collective knowledge. While World War II continues to absorb the interest of military scholars and historians, as well as its veterans, a generation of Americans has grown to maturity largely unaware of the political, social, and military implications of a war that, more than any other, united us as a people with a common purpose.

Highly relevant today, World War II has much to teach us, not only about the profession of arms, but also about military preparedness, global strategy, and combined operations in the coalition war against fascism. During the next several years, the U.S. Army will participate in the nation's 50th anniversary commemoration of World War II. The commemoration will include the publication of various materials to help educate Americans about that war. The works produced will provide great opportunities to learn about and renew pride in an Army that fought so magnificently in what has been called "the mighty endeavor."

World War II was waged on land, on sea, and in the air over several diverse theaters of operation for approximately six years. The following essay is one of a series of campaign studies highlighting those struggles that, with their accompanying suggestions for further reading, are designed to introduce you to one of the Army's significant military feats from that war.

This brochure was prepared in the U.S. Army Center of Military History by Stephen J. Lofgren. I hope this absorbing account of that period will enhance your appreciation of American achievements during World War II.

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Northern Solomons

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From the Allied vantage point early in the spring of 1943, progress clearly had been made in the wars against Germany and Italy in Europe and the Mediterranean and Japan in the Pacific. During the winter an entire German army had been killed or captured deep within the Soviet Union at Stalingrad. In Africa, once-invincible Axis forces were in full-scale retreat, eventually to surrender in mid-May. The specter of continued Axis expansion in Europe was no longer the threat it had been a year before.

Halfway around the world, the Japanese offensive in the Pacific also had crested. The May 1942 Battle of the Coral Sea, followed quickly by the great American victory at Midway, had cost Japan the strategic initiative. By February 1943 American and Australian troops had thwarted a Japanese pincer movement in Papua New Guinea, defeating an overland drive on Port Moresby, evicting the Japanese from Buna, and beating back an attack against Wau. That same month, hundreds of miles to the east in the Solomon Islands, American troops had wrested Guadalcanal from the Japanese. Victory required seven months of torturous fighting, but it secured the Allied line of communications to Australia. The Allied High Command now could take advantage of its improved strategic position.

Strategic Setting

As early as 1941 the United States and the United Kingdom had agreed that the defeat of Germany would be their top priority in any war with the Axis Powers. Until the Allies had defeated Germany, operations against Japan would be primarily defensive in nature. This strategic judgment, popularly known as the “Germany-first” decision, was based on the belief that Germany was the more dangerous enemy and became the cornerstone of Allied war strategy.

Once the United States entered the war, American strategists discovered that implementing the Germany-first policy was more complicated than they had anticipated. After Pearl Harbor the American public clamored for retaliation against Japan. Further, the stunning series of Japanese victories throughout the Pacific in the six months following 7 December 1941 demanded some military response lest Japanese

power in the Pacific was unchallenged. The ensuing counterstroke, the August 1942 invasion of Guadalcanal, grew into an unexpectedly large air-sea-land campaign that absorbed huge amounts of men and materiel. Meanwhile American and Australian Army units drove the enemy from easternmost New Guinea. Together the Guadalcanal and Papua Campaigns by early 1943 had committed more American troops to action against the Japanese than against the Germans, and American military strategists in the Pacific understandably wanted to follow their successes with additional operations to deny the Japanese any respite. Now, they argued, was the time to seize the initiative. Not only had Japanese momentum been halted, but the Japanese had not yet built elaborate defenses on their recently conquered islands. While the moment seemed propitious for an offensive, decisions of grand strategy constrained American operations against Japan.

The Allies faced logistic shortages worldwide. Virtually everything required for a Pacific offensive, from airplanes to riflemen to canned fruit, was also in demand for upcoming European operations. The most pressing shortage was in transport shipping, a primary requirement for any offensive in the vast Pacific Ocean. Thus, the Germany-first policy, with its priority on Allied resources, inhibited plans for operations in other theaters. Some American planners worried that unless offensive operations against Japan began soon, the inevitable Pacific offensive would become more difficult to launch and more costly to execute. Moreover, the U.S. Navy made little secret of its ambition to wage a climactic naval war in the Pacific. As early as March 1942 the Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Ernest J. King, was recommending major offensive action in the South Pacific.

When American and British leaders met in January 1943 at Casablanca in French Morocco to establish their strategic objectives for the war's next phase, they agreed that the Germany-first policy would continue. After substantial debate, they also agreed that American forces should maintain the initiative in the Pacific while preparing for a full-scale offensive against Japan after Germany's defeat. Four months later, in a conference in Washington, D.C., the American and British military leaders (known collectively as the Combined Chiefs of Staff) sanctioned an acceleration in the war against Japan. The Allies were going on the strategic offensive.

While Allied grand strategy evolved, the American Joint Chiefs of Staff planned the Pacific campaigns. This was in accordance with a 1942 decision by the Combined Chiefs to vest primary strategic responsibility for the Pacific in the American Joint Chiefs. American planning, however, stumbled over Army-Navy disagreements concern-

ing overall command and strategy for the war against Japan. In March 1942 the Joint Chiefs of Staff achieved a workable solution by dividing the Pacific into two theaters. Each service received overall command in a theater. General Douglas MacArthur became commander of the Southwest Pacific Area (SWPA). Admiral Chester W. Nimitz commanded the second, the much larger Pacific Ocean Areas (which, in turn, was subdivided into the North, Central, and South Pacific Areas). Although the Solomon Islands west of Guadalcanal and the Russell Islands were in MacArthur's theater, Admiral King refused to divide his fleet or to put Halsey under MacArthur's direct control. This created an awkward command arrangement in which Halsey had operational control of all units involved in the Solomons, while MacArthur provided strategic direction.

The two services also disagreed over Pacific strategy. General MacArthur argued that Allied forces already deployed in the Southwest Pacific Area (notably Australia) should undertake an offensive toward the Philippine Islands. In turn, Navy strategists called for a major offensive through the island chains of the Central Pacific Area, as had been called for in prewar iterations of War Plan ORANGE. Perhaps inevitably, the question of Pacific strategy was resolved through a series of compromises as each theater undertook its own offensive.

In the South and Southwest Pacific Areas, the port of Rabaul on the island of New Britain in the Bismarck Archipelago blocked any American offensive toward the Philippines or Japan. The bulwark of Japanese defenses in the area, Rabaul was fortified with a large garrison and a network of air bases that protected Japanese warships and merchant vessels in its great natural harbor. The Joint Chiefs had issued orders on 2 July 1942 directing the forces of the South Pacific Area (SPA) and SWPA "to begin the advance toward Rabaul." The directive called for a three-task process. Task One had been completed with the American victory in Guadalcanal (carried out under the SPA commander). Task Two was the capture of portions of northeast New Guinea and the remainder of the Solomons. Task Three was the seizure of Rabaul. Tasks Two and Three were to be achieved by SPA and SWPA forces under MacArthur's overall command.

The ultimate fate of Rabaul became an issue of debate. General MacArthur insisted that this Japanese bastion be conquered. Other American strategists disagreed, arguing that capturing Rabaul would cost too many lives and would require troops and ships slated for the U.S. Navy's Central Pacific offensive, which was scheduled to begin in mid-November 1943.



In early January 1943 the Joint Chiefs ordered MacArthur to prepare and submit detailed plans for the carrying out of their 2 July 1942 directive. In response, representatives of MacArthur, Admiral Nimitz, and Admiral William F. Halsey (commander, SPA, and subordinate to Nimitz) flew to Washington in March 1943 to present their plans to the



Joint Chiefs. During this meeting, known as the Pacific Military Conference, discussion of operational constraints posed by manpower and shipping limitations convinced the Joint Chiefs to hold operations in 1943 to the achievement of Task Two. MacArthur and Halsey were to begin the initial advance toward Rabaul and capture various points

along the northern coast of New Guinea, New Georgia and the northern Solomons, and the Bismarcks. A direct assault on Rabaul was postponed. The matter of timing was left to MacArthur and Halsey.

Admiral Halsey flew to MacArthur's headquarters in Brisbane, Australia, where they discussed campaign strategy. MacArthur's headquarters issued plans on 26 April that laid out a two-pronged offensive, code-named CARTWHEEL, which would envelop and isolate the Japanese at Rabaul. One prong (MacArthur) would advance along the northern shores of New Guinea and into the Bismarck Archipelago. The second prong (Halsey) would drive northwest from Guadalcanal and seize the remainder of the Solomon Islands.

The lengthy operational sequence designed to achieve the "reduction of Rabaul" initially consisted of thirteen separate, short, and often simultaneous advances. MacArthur would take Woodlark and Kiriwina Islands; then Halsey would take the New Georgia group in the Solomons. Next, MacArthur would move along the New Guinea coast, seizing Salamaua, Lae, and Finschhafen. Halsey would follow by attacking the Shortland Islands and southern Bougainville, and then, farther up the New Guinea coast, MacArthur would capture Madang. CARTWHEEL would conclude with MacArthur's moving on to Cape Gloucester and Halsey's establishing himself on Bougainville's eastern coast. These phased advances were due to the need to build airstrips at each stage, so that Allied air forces could counter Japanese air power operating from Rabaul. CARTWHEEL'S success rested on the ability of air, ground, and naval forces to work together in joint operations of unprecedented scope.

The Japanese military also recognized the importance of air power and airfields in the vast Pacific region. In November 1942 they had built an airfield at Munda Point on New Georgia as an advance base to support the Guadalcanal fighting. The airstrip, less than 180 nautical miles from Guadalcanal, had become operational in December 1942. Another strip was started shortly thereafter at Vila, on the nearby island of Kolombangara. However, by late 1942, the Japanese realized that their forces probably could not hold Guadalcanal. They correctly surmised that the Allies would strike next against Rabaul, but did not know what form the attempt would take. They thus decided to attack aggressively in New Guinea to improve their position there, while mounting an active defense in the Solomons. Hurriedly they prepared defenses against anticipated Allied offensives in the central and northern Solomons. Ground troops were brought in to reinforce New Georgia, Kolombangara, and Santa Isabel.

Imperial Japanese Army commanders, arguing that holding the islands south of Bougainville would be costly and ultimately futile, wanted to wait for the Allies to attack Bougainville and the northern Solomons. The *Imperial Navy* disagreed. Naval planners wanted to delay the Allied advance for as long as possible, maintaining that New Georgia and Santa Isabel constituted a vital forward line of defense. With no one to arbitrate, each service did as it wished: the navy assumed responsibility for land defense of the central Solomons (although the army had to provide troops to cover naval commitments), the army for the northern islands.

Early 1943, therefore, found the Japanese holding the line in the Solomons while undertaking an offensive in New Guinea. Although the grueling struggle for Guadalcanal had worn down Japanese strength in the Solomons, the Japanese were still a tough foe. On New Georgia were approximately 10,500 troops, entrenched, determined, and waiting.

Operations

On 30 June 1943, the same day that MacArthur's forces began attacking in New Guinea, Admiral Halsey's forces were landing four hundred miles away at several sites in the group of islands collectively known as New Georgia. Code-named TOENAILS, the invasion of the New Georgia islands presented several obstacles to the Army and Navy planners who had spent six months preparing for the operation.

Located in the central Solomons, New Georgia comprises about a dozen large islands and numerous smaller ones, all surrounded by coral reefs, barrier islands, and shallow lagoons. With only a few narrow passages through the offshore obstacles, the seas surrounding New Georgia proper are hazardous. Because reefs made Munda Point inaccessible to large ships, Halsey and his commanders chose to seize the offshore island of Rendova as a preliminary to the main invasion. Close enough to Munda for supporting artillery, Rendova would serve as a forward base from which the main invasion could be launched and supported.

Besides the Rendova invasion, the first phase of operations involved three simultaneous landings to capture and hold tactically significant sites on or near New Georgia: Segi Point (the best site for an airfield on the island), Viru Harbor, and Wickham Anchorage (on the nearby island of Vangunu). Possession of the latter two sites would protect supply lines and provide staging areas for New Georgia operations. The second phase consisted of invading New Georgia proper to



“Landing Artillery at Rendova Island, Solomons Group,” by Aaron Bohrod. (Army Art Collection)

seize Munda, while a supporting force invaded Enogai Inlet, several miles to the north, to cut Japanese communications running from Kolombangara through Enogai to Munda. The seizure of Munda and Enogai would be followed by operations against Vila airfield on Kolombangara and then by operations farther up the Solomons chain.

In the South Pacific Area, no individual had tactical command of the ground troops. Halsey had two principal ground commanders. Lt. Gen. Millard F. Harmon commanded all U.S. Army forces in the South Pacific Area, while the commander of the I Marine Amphibious Assault Corps, Maj. Gen. Clayton B. Vogel, led the marines. Afloat, Halsey’s deputy was Rear Adm. Theodore S. Wilkinson, and his amphibious commander was Rear Adm. Richmond Kelly Turner.

Admiral Turner commanded the TOENAILS attack force. He divided his ground forces into two groups: a Western Force, which would take Rendova, Munda, Enogai, and later Kolombangara; and an Eastern Force, which would seize Wickham, Segi, and Viru. Turner insisted on commanding the Western Force himself.

The ground troops for all TOENAILS attack forces were designated the New Georgia Occupation Force (NGOF). Since the 43d Division was the major ground unit slated for TOENAILS, Admiral Turner chose the division commander, Maj. Gen. John H. Hester, to be the NGOF commander. Turner declined to use the XIV Corps headquarters and staff available on Guadalcanal, instead requiring the 43d Division headquarters to perform double duty. Hester thus had to function as both division commander and NGOF commander and was responsible for all six ground operations. The 43d's staff section chiefs became the NGOF staff, while their assistants ran the division's staff sections. From the outset General Harmon was leery of this command arrangement. On 10 June he ordered the XIV Corps commander, Maj. Gen. Oscar W. Griswold, to keep himself informed and be ready to take command should the necessity arise.

As preparations for the invasion neared completion, coastwatcher Donald Kennedy reported on 20 June that the Japanese were moving against Segi Point and his coastwatcher organization. Although D-day was set for 30 June, Admiral Turner reacted immediately to this threat to the coveted airfield site, and by the following morning the 4th Marine Raider Battalion (less two companies) was ashore. Two companies from the 103d Infantry reinforced the marines the next day. Forestalled, the Japanese abandoned the effort. Airfield construction began on 30 June, and twelve days later an airfield was ready for limited use.

On D-day the 4th Marine Raider Battalion marched overland from Segi Point, wading through knee-deep mud and fighting Japanese during their trek, and seized Viru Harbor. At Wickham Anchorage, however, operations proved rougher. Reports that Japanese troops were occupying the landing site forced a hasty revision of plans. The assault force, a reinforced battalion from the 103d Infantry and two companies from the 4th Marine Raider Battalion, was ordered to land in the predawn morning, two and one-half miles from the targeted harbor, and march overland along a trail cut by Kennedy's men to attack the Japanese guarding the harbor. Heavy rains, however, reduced visibility almost to zero, and high winds and rough seas wreaked havoc with the landing operation. Amphibious vehicles had to follow the sound of breaking waves to find the shore. The operation, as the official Army history candidly recounts, "was exactly what might be expected from a night landing in bad weather," with the marines landing in "impressive disorganization." In the ensuing chaos, six landing craft became lodged on the coral reef, while others discharged troops at the wrong site and then had to reload. Over the next four days, marines and sol-



OPERATIONS IN NEW GEORGIA
21 June–25 August 1943

- ← Axis of Allied Advance
- ▨ Japanese Concentrations
- Airfields

ELEVATION IN FEET
0 1000 2000 3000 and Above

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Miles



diers, supported by 105-mm. howitzers from the 152d Field Artillery Battalion, rooted out the Japanese from Wickham Anchorage.

The Western Force's first landing on 30 June was the predawn insertion of two companies of the 169th Infantry on two small islands bracketing the passage through the coral reef to the future landing site on New Georgia Island. About 0700 the 172d Infantry began landing on Rendova. There was confusion and disorganization, but the regiment quickly overwhelmed a 120-man Japanese detachment and established a 1,000-yard-deep beachhead. All troops, including General Harmon, were ashore in half an hour. Moving supplies ashore and inland quickly became the main problem. As rain turned the ground into red clay mud, heavy traffic ruined the island's single mile-long road, making it so muddy that a bulldozer sank. Inadequately marked supplies, dumped on the beach by troops wading ashore, piled up and became intermixed. So many trucks became mired in the mud that Hester had to stop their shipment to the beachhead, and movement of supplies off the beach became slow and laborious.

The Rendova landing surprised the Japanese commanders on Munda and Rabaul, who had no counterattack force ready. Artillery fire from Japanese batteries on Munda, therefore, was the only Japanese response until late morning, when air attacks began. Three air attacks on 30 June damaged only Admiral Turner's flagship, the transport *McCawley* (which was accidentally torpedoed and sunk by American PT boats later that evening). A Japanese air strike against Rendova two days later killed 30 men, wounded more than 200, and exploded fuel dumps. An attempted encore performance on 4 July, however, provided the Americans with more gratifying fireworks. Sixteen Japanese bombers appeared unescorted. A mere eighty-eight rounds of antiaircraft fire brought down twelve, and waiting fighters shot down the rest.

Reinforcements, the majority splashing ashore on Rendova, continued to disembark at all four beachheads until 5 July, when virtually the entire New Georgia Occupation Force was assembled. The first phase of TOENAILS had succeeded.

Admiral Turner restructured the Western Force for the main invasion of New Georgia, renaming the ground forces the Munda-Bairoko Occupation Force (MBOF). Commanded by Hester, the force was subdivided into five parts, including two landing groups. The second was the Northern Landing Group, commanded by Col. Harry B. Liversedge, USMC, and consisting of one battalion each from the 145th and 148th Infantry, 37th Division, and the 1st Raider Battalion, 1st Marine Raider Regiment. Liversedge's mission was to invade New

Georgia's northwest shore at Rice Anchorage and defeat the Japanese in the area directly north of Munda between Enogai Inlet and Bairoko Harbor, called Dragons Peninsula. This would interdict the Japanese supply line to Munda and prevent Japanese troops on nearby Kolombangara from reinforcing Munda. The larger Southern Landing Group, under the command of assistant division commander Brig. Gen. Leonard F. Wing, consisted of the 43d Division (less one infantry battalion), the 1 36th Field Artillery Battalion, and elements of the 9th Marine Defense Battalion and the South Pacific Scouts. Wing's force would land some five air-miles east of Munda at Zanana beach, a site undefended by the Japanese, and attack westward.

To the north, Colonel Liversedge's forces landed after midnight on 5 July at Rice Anchorage, several miles northeast up the coast from the Bairoko-Enogai area. Shallow water and a narrow landing beach hindered the landing more than the inaccurate Japanese shelling. Liversedge planned for two companies from the 3d Battalion, 145th Infantry, to defend the landing site, while the rest of the battalion, the 1st Marine Raider Battalion, and the 3d Battalion, 148th Infantry, moved to Dragons Peninsula. There the 3d Battalion, 148th, would veer southwest and take up a blocking position along the Munda-Bairoko trail. Remaining forces would clear the peninsula and take Bairoko. Because speed was so important, Liversedge's force was lightly armed and provisioned, carrying only three days' worth of rations.

Moving out early on 5 July, the men soon learned that, contrary to earlier intelligence reports, following the rough trails, hacked out of the jungle by coastwatchers and native New Georgians, to Dragons Peninsula would be exceedingly tough. Constant rain plagued the first weeks of the campaign, making more dismal the task of struggling up and down jungle hills seemingly composed in equal parts of sharp coral and thick clinging vines. The rain also added unforeseen tasks; one stream soon became a nine-foot-deep river to ford. The men in the 148th's weapons company, laboring under the weight of their heavy machine guns and 81-mm. mortars, were soon far to the rear.

On 7 July the marines and the two companies of the 145th Infantry reached Enogai Inlet and, after heavy skirmishing, seized the village of Triri. There they spent the night and Liversedge established his command post. The next day, while the marines made an abortive effort to march to Enogai, several companies became involved in an extended firelight south of Triri along the trail to Bairoko, which left 120 Japanese dead. The next morning marines used an unguarded trail to approach Enogai. Although their afternoon assault was unsuccessful,

it provided enough information about the Japanese defenses to ensure a successful attack the following day.

Despite the capture of Enogai, Liversedge's tactical situation remained difficult. Already five days behind schedule and with many wounded, he was so short of supplies that he was receiving resupply by air. The marine battalion was at one-half of its effective strength. Liversedge needed to capture Bairoko to cut the Japanese line of communications to Munda.

Meanwhile the men of the 3d Battalion, 148th Infantry, had forced their way around the southern side of a series of hills, until they reached the Bairoko-Munda trail. On 8 July they established a camouflaged blocking position along the trail about eight miles north of Munda. There they remained for nine days. Although the battalion sustained eleven men killed and twenty-nine wounded in skirmishes, the Japanese did not make a determined attempt to eliminate the trail block. Willing to let an American battalion isolate itself deep in the jungle, they simply bypassed it by using more westerly trails to reinforce Munda. The unit's severest trial was its food shortage, and here, too, supplies had to be airdropped. Finally on 17 July Liversedge ordered the battalion to abandon the trail block and move north to assist with the attack on Bairoko.

Three days later, Colonel Liversedge's force, reinforced by the 4th Marine Raider Battalion, launched a prepared attack against Bairoko's fortified positions. Lacking artillery support and tactical intelligence, outgunned by Japanese 90-mm. mortars firing from across Bairoko Harbor, and unable to obtain timely close air support, the attack failed. Marine casualties alone totaled 46 killed and 161 wounded. With the forces available to him, Liversedge was unable to take Bairoko and retired to Enogai. Japanese supply lines would remain operating during the campaign against Munda.

The landing at Zanana began on 2 July, and both the 172d and 169th Infantry Regiments were fully ashore by 6 July. The 43d Division was ready to advance.

The plan for taking Munda was not complicated. General Hester envisioned the 169th and 172d marching from Zanana to the Barike River, a distance of no more than three miles. Using the river as a line of departure, his regiments would drive west (the 169th inland, the 172d along the coast), capture the high ground, and then take the airfield. The only passage through the jungle was a narrow footpath just north of Zanana that led west. Called Munda Trail, it wound through the middle of the high ground—a series of convoluted ridges that ran inland and northwest for 3,000 yards and concealed the main Japanese

defenses. On paper, the plan seemed simple. For the green troops, however, who would be using inadequate maps to find their way through a labyrinth of coral jottings, draws, and swamps, all so densely overgrown with exotic jungle flora that visibility was measured in yards and enemy positions were invisible, the reality proved quite different.

The 172d reached the line of departure with only minor trouble, but the 169th received a brutal introduction to jungle warfare. On 6 July the men spent an exhausting day following native guides along the narrow, vine-choked Munda Trail. That night the worn-out 3d Battalion failed to establish proper defenses and fell prey to Japanese harassment. The tired and nervous troops spent a sleepless night firing at imagined Japanese raiding parties. The next morning the battalion continued along Munda Trail, running into a well-camouflaged trail block established by a Japanese infantry platoon. Dug-in machine guns on high ground with supporting riflemen stopped the advance. Frontal assaults against hidden enemy positions resulted only in the loss of platoon leaders and a company commander. Finally, after the mortar platoon of the 3d Battalion, 169th, cut down trees to create fields of fire, observers crept to within thirty yards of the Japanese to direct 81-mm. mortar fire on enemy positions on what was now called Bloody Hill. The battalion spent another sleepless night as the target of Japanese harassment.

The 3d Battalion stormed the Japanese position the next day and eradicated it before advancing west with the remainder of the regiment and joining the 172d on the line of departure along the Barike River. That night the 3d Battalion, along with the rest of the regiment, endured yet another evening of Japanese torment. It was too much. Overwhelming fatigue and stress combined with imagination and anxiety to produce something resembling widespread panic. The official Army history recounts that

when the Japanese made their presence known to the three battalions, or when the Americans thought there were Japanese within their bivouacs, there was a great deal of confusion, shooting, and stabbing. Some men knifed each other. Men threw grenades blindly in the dark. Some of the grenades hit trees, bounced back, and exploded among the Americans. Some soldiers fired round after round to little avail. In the morning no trace remained of the Japanese dead or wounded. But there were American casualties; some had been stabbed to death, some wounded by knives. Many suffered grenade wounds, and 50 percent of these were caused by fragments from American grenades.

*Men of the 148th Infantry
carry hot food forward.*
(DA photograph)



Ominously, there now appeared the first large number of shaken, hollow-eyed men suffering from a strange malady, later diagnosed as “combat neuroses.” Before the end of July, the 169th would suffer seven hundred such cases of battle fatigue.

After an hour-long bombardment of suspected Japanese positions on 9 July, the offensive jumped off. Progress was slow. The difficult terrain, the absence of tactical intelligence regarding Japanese defenses, and the physical depletion of the troops all hindered the advance. Weighted down with equipment and ammunition, the men forded the rain-swollen river and its twisted tributaries. Between streams, they slogged through mangrove swamps, struggling to stay upright while trying to find their way without accurate maps. Soldiers in the lead platoons had to cut their way through the tangles of rattan vines that knotted the jungle. Narrow trails forced units to advance in single-file columns, churning the trails into mud and allowing a few hidden Japanese to slow the advance. By the late afternoon, the 172d had gained approximately 1,100 yards. Farther inland, the 169th made little progress, still shaken from the previous night. Advancing along Munda Trail the next day, the 169th struck the first line of the Japanese main defenses.

Despite the slow advance, both regiments soon had overextended

supply lines. The primeval jungles of New Georgia, and the Solomons in general, were thankless places to build roads. The 118th Engineer Battalion spared no effort to construct a road—more accurately, a jeep trail—from Zanana to the front, but even its indefatigable exertions could not speed road building in a jungle crisscrossed with streams. As the road's terminus gradually fell farther and farther behind the advancing troops, ammunition, food, water, and other supplies had to be hand-carried to the front and casualties carried to the rear. Half of the combat troops soon were performing such duties, and Allied cargo planes were pressed into service to parachute supplies to the troops.

General Hester recognized that logistical shortcomings were restraining his advance and decided to shorten his supply line. He ordered the 172d to push through the mangrove swamp behind Laiana, two miles east of Munda and establish a new beachhead. Concurrently, the 169th was involved in a savage fight to occupy the high ground north of Munda. The combat location was eerily reminiscent of World War I. More than once, infantrymen, following their artillery barrage, clambered over shattered trees and shell craters to attack Japanese machine gunners in pillboxes with only rifles and bayonets. Also evoking echoes of the Western Front were high casualties and progress that was measured in yards. After five days of attacks, the 169th's 3d Battalion had penetrated 500 yards into the Japanese defenses. The battalion paid for its achievement with 101 casualties in the first twenty-four hours after the penetration. There on Reincke Ridge, in the high ground south of Munda Trail, the regiment regrouped and prepared to assault the main defensive line on imposing Horseshoe Hill.

The offensive was sputtering, and Hester's superiors were upset with the lack of progress on New Georgia. General Harmon soon began pressing Admiral Halsey, over Admiral Turner's objections, to send part, if not all, of the XIV Corps headquarters to New Georgia. Recognizing that the workload of the 43d Division staff had to be reduced—it was conducting operations on New Georgia as well as preparing for the upcoming attack on Kolombangara—Harmon flew to Halsey's headquarters on New Caledonia to press the issue. Halsey agreed.

General Griswold arrived on Rendova with an advance section of his headquarters on 11 July and quickly assessed the situation. "Things are going badly," he radioed Harmon on the morning of 13 July. The 43d Division looked "about to fold up." He recommended that the remainder of the 37th Division, then in reserve, and the 25th Division on Guadalcanal be committed immediately to combat.

Harmon, whom Halsey recently had placed in charge of New Georgia ground operations, instructed Griswold to be prepared to assume command and promised reinforcements.

Griswold took command at midnight on 15–16 July. Earlier that day there had been another command change. Admiral Turner, who in Harmon's opinion had been "inclined more and more to take active control of land operations," left to assume a new command in the Central Pacific theater. His replacement was Halsey's deputy, Admiral Wilkinson, who quickly established better rapport with the Army commanders.

Ground operations were well behind schedule and the troops worn. Griswold decided not to renew the offensive until the supply situation improved and his troops were reorganized and reinforced. To improve logistics, he designated a specific offshore island to serve as a supply dump for each division. Griswold also accelerated expansion of the Laiana beachhead, as well as the engineers' furious road-building effort, which allowed supplies to be stockpiled nearer the front line.

Reinforcements were badly needed. By 17 July the 43d Division's casualties were 90 dead and 636 wounded. More than a thousand men had contracted diseases. Diarrhea was a common affliction, while dysentery cases and malaria relapses were prevalent. One-quarter of the men were suffering from varying degrees of skin fungus. Additionally, between fifty and one hundred men left the line each day as neuroses cases. In the opinion of the XIV Corps surgeon, who flew in on 14 July, there was no doubt that the major reason for these "nonbattle casualties" was combat fatigue—extreme exhaustion exacerbated by atrocious living conditions. Little could be done until rest camps could be built on the offshore islands; the high incidence of casualties due to disease and combat fatigue would continue throughout the campaign.

Griswold's corps offensive began on 25 July with five regiments attacking abreast. The 43d Division with two regiments in line (103d on the coast, 172d—later the 169th—on its right) moved along the coast. Farther inland, the 37th Division (north to south: 148th, 161st, and 145th Regiments) made the main attack, combining a frontal assault with a flanking movement designed to envelop the Japanese northern flank, take Bibilo Hill, and swoop down on Munda.

Achieving Munda would not be easy. In defense were approximately three Japanese infantry battalions in fortified positions. Also off the American right flank were survivors of a unit that had attacked the 169th Infantry during the night of 17–18 July. Driven off with heavy losses, they now lurked in the jungle awaiting an opportunity.



A typical Japanese pillbox. (DA photograph)

Most foreboding was information from the 172d Infantry, which, with the support of Marine tanks, had cleared the Laiana beachhead of Japanese during the logistic buildup. These operations revealed the nature of the main Japanese defenses: machine gunners and riflemen ensconced in sturdy pillboxes with interlocking fields of fire. The pillboxes were tough obstacles. Constructed with three or four layers of coconut logs and several feet of coral, they were largely subterranean. The few feet exposed above ground contained machine-gun and rifle firing slits, so well camouflaged that American soldiers often could not determine their location.

When the offensive resumed, therefore, so did the demanding, draining, and deadly task of assaulting hidden Japanese positions one by one—a style of warfare that chewed up rifle companies and became all too familiar to American ground troops in the Pacific. Because the enemy was virtually invisible in his pillboxes and rarely fired indiscriminately, reconnaissance squads and platoons frequently could not determine the extent of Japanese defenses; details of Japanese positions often remained unknown until the attack. Once infantrymen located an enemy position, they called in artillery fire



Flamethrowers in action at Munda. (DA photograph)

which made the position visible amidst the jungle growth, if not destroying it outright. Next 81-mm. mortars, using heavy shells with delay fuzes, would fire on visible positions. Finally, a platoon or company assaulted, supported by whatever heavy weapons were available. When full reconnaissance was not possible, troops had to attack the terrain—seize and occupy pieces of ground while calling in mortar fire on likely pillbox sites. A tactic of necessity, attacking the terrain could be risky against more than light opposition. The operations officer of the 145th Infantry noted, “Enemy strong points encountered in this fashion often times resulted in hasty withdrawals which were costly both in men and weapons.”

Further, although they lacked antitank guns, the Japanese soon adopted measures to knock out tanks lacking infantry support. American troops quickly learned the importance of close infantry-armor coordination for successfully assaulting Japanese positions. Likewise, although flamethrowers proved useful in attacking pillboxes, the operator had to expose his head and torso and was likely to be shot unless supporting infantry provided suppressive fire. Just as in tank-

infantry operations, troops learned that mutual cooperation and support between riflemen and flamethrower operators were vital to success. Once integrated with the infantry, both tanks and flamethrowers were important infantry-support weapons on New Georgia, especially because the irregular shape of the front line and the poor quality of available maps often made artillery support impractical.

Over the next several days, the regiments clawed their way forward through the Japanese defenses. The gritty, vicious fighting continued as small groups of men eliminated pillboxes and their supporting foxholes, but hard-won experience now began to pay dividends, and the pace of the American advance quickened. On 29 July Harmon replaced an exhausted Hester with Maj. Gen. John R. Hodge, the Americal Division commander. Hodge had been the assistant division commander of the 25th Division during the fighting on Guadalcanal and was experienced in jungle warfare; Harmon told Griswold that Hodge was the “best Div Comdr I have in area for this particular job.” Concurrent with the change in American command, the Japanese withdrew to a final defensive line in front of the airfield. They had suffered heavy casualties and, unbeknownst to the Americans, their main defenses had been shattered.

The Japanese withdrawal facilitated the XIV Corps advance, but did not make it any less dangerous. On 29 July the 172d was attacking the last high ground protecting Munda field, trying to break through the Japanese defensive line, when 1st Lt. Robert S. Scott almost singlehandedly blunted a Japanese counterattack. Although he was wounded in the head and had his rifle shot from his hand, Scott refused to retreat and inspired his company to seize the hill. Two days later, a medic in the 145th Infantry, Pfc. Frank J. Petrarca, who had repeatedly demonstrated his commitment to treating wounded soldiers without regard for his own safety, was killed when he went to the aid of a mortar victim lying in an area swept by enemy fire. Both were awarded the Medal of Honor.

To the north, at the far right of the American line, the 148th Infantry had not encountered prepared defenses. Moving far ahead of the regiment to its left, the 148th was attacked by the Japanese lurking off the American right flank. The Japanese were too few to destroy the Americans outright, but, divided into small groups, they managed to encircle and harass the American rear areas for several days. Slowed by the need to transport a growing number of wounded, the 148th stolidly worked back to the American line, fighting through innumerable ambushes and raids. It was in the midst of this withdrawal that a Japanese machine gun on higher ground fired on Pvt. Rodger W.

Young's platoon. Although wounded by the first bursts, Young attacked on his own initiative until he was killed, firing and throwing hand grenades and allowing his platoon to escape. Private Young was awarded the Medal of Honor.

The end came more quickly than any had foreseen. American troops reached the airfield's perimeter and encircled it on 3 August. On 4 August Bibilo Hill fell. The next day the Americans overran Munda, with 43d Division infantrymen killing or driving the remaining Japanese from their bunkers, tunnels, and pillboxes. From Bibilo Hill, General Wing informed General Hodge, "Munda is yours at 1410 today." Operational within two weeks, Munda's 6,000-foot runway soon made it the most-used airfield in the Solomons.

The capture of Munda airfield on 5 August was only one phase of the New Georgia campaign. There were still Japanese on New Georgia, as well as on the surrounding islands of Arundel, Baanga, Gizo, Kolombangara, and Vella Lavella. These islands had to be taken or neutralized before the Americans could continue up the Solomons chain. General Griswold had tried to prevent Japanese from escaping during the Munda operation by encircling the airfield to prevent withdrawals and trap Japanese troops, but this tactic proved only partially successful. After the airstrip was captured, Griswold sent the 27th and 161st Infantry Regiments of Maj. Gen. J. Lawton Collins' 25th Division in pursuit of the retreating Japanese north to Bairoko Harbor and northwest along the coast. Most Japanese moved to Arundel, Kolombangara, and Baanga, leaving behind only a small detachment to contest the American advance. U.S. troops spent two weeks eliminating these forces and finally occupied Bairoko on 25 August.

On 11 August the 169th Infantry moved onto Baanga, from where a pair of Japanese 120-mm. guns had been shelling Munda Point. When the Japanese resisted strongly, the 172d also was ordered onto the small island and into the fight. The two regiments spent ten days driving the Japanese from the southern part of Baanga, losing 52 killed, 110 wounded, and 486 nonbattle casualties. The remaining Japanese troops withdrew to Arundel.

Admiral Halsey also wanted Arundel taken because of its important position. But there, too, because of recent undetected reinforcements and because of the difficulty of its terrain—perhaps the worst in New Georgia—Japanese resistance proved stronger than expected. The 172d Infantry landed on 27 August, but additional troops were needed, and soon joining the 172d were the 169th Infantry, two battalions of the 27th Infantry, a 4.2-inch mortar company, and Marine

tankers. While combat on Arundel was viewed primarily as “mopping up small groups of Japanese,” one 43d Division battalion commander later described the fighting on Arundel as “the most bitter combat of the New Georgia campaign.” The fighting continued through the first three weeks of September, when, once again, remaining Japanese troops withdrew at night, this time to Kolombangara.

There were about 12,000 Japanese troops on Kolombangara, the next stronghold in the Solomons chain and site of another Japanese airfield. The difficulty, effort, and cost involved in ejecting the Japanese from fortified jungle defenses, as on Munda, however, were not lost on Admiral Halsey. Wary of Japanese strength on Kolombangara, he had no desire for “another slugging match.” There was an option. In mid-July as the advance toward Munda floundered and the Japanese reinforced Kolombangara, Halsey’s staff suggested a deviation from the original TOENAILS plan: seize, instead of Kolombangara, Vella Lavella, only fifteen miles northwest of Kolombangara and weakly held by the Japanese. Halsey endorsed the idea, recognizing that it exploited both American mobility and local air and sea superiority. He would gain his objective, a better airfield nearer to Bougainville, while avoiding a costly battle. Japanese forces on Kolombangara would be left to “die on the vine.”

On 15 August the 35th Regimental Combat Team, 25th Division, rushed ashore on Vella Lavella as aircraft from Munda and Segi airfields provided support. Under Admiral Wilkinson’s command, the amphibious assault was well organized and successful. American troops advanced steadily despite logistical hardships imposed by the environment. In mid-September Maj. Gen. H. E. Barrowclough, commander of the 3d New Zealand Division, took command of Vella Lavella, and his troops assumed the pursuit. The Japanese retreated to the northwest from where many were evacuated.

To the south, the bypassed Japanese troops on Kolombangara did not wither on the vine. During three nights between 28 September and 3 October, more than 9,000 troops escaped to southern Bougainville in a well-organized evacuation effort. The evacuation of Kolombangara largely ended the campaign for New Georgia and the surrounding islands, a joint campaign that had proved much more involved and costly in its ground operations than had been anticipated. American casualties were 1,094 dead and 3,873 wounded, excluding the even greater number of disease, combat fatigue, and neuropsychiatric casualties.

As the fighting raged in the central Solomons, Admiral Halsey and his staff were at SPA headquarters in Noumea busily revising their plan

to take Bougainville. Halsey had learned that, because of the Navy's Central Pacific offensive together with Washington's strategic decision to bypass Rabaul, he would not receive reinforcements for subsequent CARTWHEEL operations. In addition, extensive Japanese defenses in southern Bougainville augured that any ground operation there would be lengthy and costly. Halsey's solution was to neutralize the area without landing on Bougainville, but because MacArthur wanted Halsey's airplanes available to attack Rabaul and support his own advance to Cape Gloucester (scheduled for December), he directed Halsey to seize airfield sites on Bougainville around 1 November 1943.

In early October the Japanese had approximately 37,500 troops on Bougainville and nearby islands. There were 25,000 soldiers in southern Bougainville and the Shortland Islands, 5,000 on the east coast, 5,000 on Bougainville's northern end and on Buka Island, and a small number around Empress Augusta Bay on the west coast. After deliberation, Halsey targeted Torokina in the Empress Augusta Bay area. Despite the heavy surf at Empress Augusta Bay and its proximity to Japanese airfields on southern Bougainville (65 miles) and Rabaul (215 miles), Halsey surmised that the imposing mountain range surrounding the bay's coastal plain would delay the Japanese counter-attack three to four months.

As invasion preparations proceeded, Lt. Gen. George C. Kenney's Fifth Air Force flying from New Guinea conducted major air attacks against Rabaul during October and November, while the Air Command, Solomons, kept the five Japanese fields on Bougainville under such pressure that they were useless by invasion day. Meanwhile, on 27 October, New Zealand and American troops captured the Treasury Islands, south of Bougainville. That same day the 2d Marine Parachute Battalion landed on Choiseul, a large island in the Solomons near Bougainville. As part of a deception plan to mislead the Japanese as to where the main invasion would occur, the marines harassed the Japanese on the northern half of the island for twelve days before withdrawing. Perceiving threats everywhere except in the west, the Japanese concentrated their defenses accordingly, largely ignoring the western shore.

The Empress Augusta Bay invasion on 1 November, under the command of Admiral Wilkinson, showcased the growth of American skill in conducting and supporting amphibious assaults. Despite a heavy surf that caused one transport to run aground and eighty-six landing craft to swamp and that rendered some beaches too dangerous to use, most supply ships were emptied within eight hours and 14,000 marines landed before nightfall. By the end of D-day, the marines had

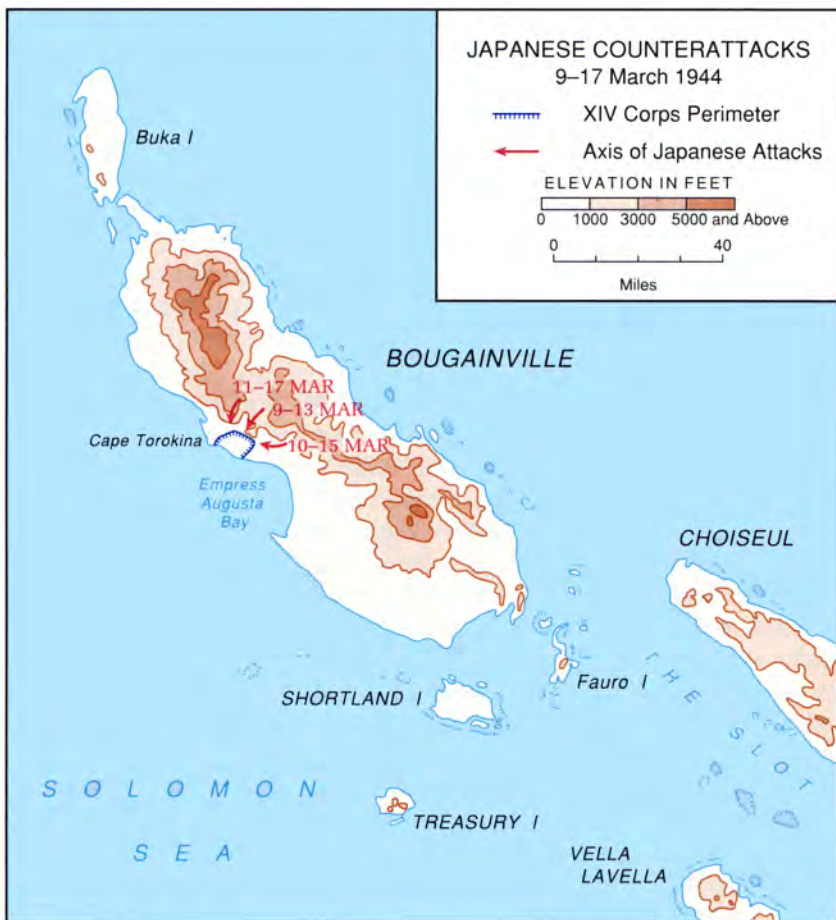
established a shallow, 4,000-yard beachhead.

For the next two months, as the marines expanded their beachhead, the Japanese continued to believe that the main assault on Bougainville would come elsewhere. By March 1944 the Japanese had realized their error and assembled a counterattack force. This force, some 15,000 to 19,000 strong, moved across the mountains to attack what Japanese intelligence had reported to be 30,000 Americans and their airfields within the beachhead. The movement of Japanese troops and supplies from all over Bougainville toward Empress Augusta Bay had been detected, however, and attack plans learned from decrypted *Japanese Army* messages and captured documents. There would be no surprise.

By this time, however, General Griswold's XIV Corps manned the perimeter. With a strength of approximately 62,000 men, including the Americal (General Hodge) and 37th Divisions (Maj. Gen. Robert S. Beightler), XIV Corps was a powerful force. While Griswold did not have as many troops as he might have wished to defend his 23,000-yard perimeter, he refused to abandon tactically important pieces of high ground to shorten the line. Remembering the lessons learned at Munda, General Griswold was content to let the Japanese come to him.

American manpower, combined with extensive defensive preparations and strong fire support, made the Japanese task almost hopeless. Unlike at New Georgia, now the Japanese would be assaulting prepared defenses. Attacking units would confront booby traps, illumination devices, and minefields, then concertina wire shielding rifle pits and pillboxes. In the latter were rifle squads with more than the usual number of automatic rifles and probably extra machine guns. Fields of fire fifty or more yards deep had been cleared to prevent the enemy from sneaking within hand-grenade range. Searchlights as well as oil drums—each containing a bangalore torpedo surrounded with scrap metal—provided additional obstacles for an attacker. Perhaps most important, the line was manned by six veteran U.S. Army infantry regiments.

There was no shortage of firepower. The Japanese would also be on the receiving end of available American artillery, which consisted of 8 howitzer battalions (6 105-mm. and 2 155-mm.), 2 155-mm. gun batteries, and 8 90-mm. gun batteries, along with 6 cannon companies with 75-mm. pack howitzers that arrived in early March. Also available was the "Bougainville Navy," which included all destroyers assigned for fire support under Griswold's command, as well as plentiful air support.



The Japanese plan called for two simultaneous preliminary attacks followed three days later by a major thrust. The attacks along the horseshoe-shaped perimeter were aimed at the middle (Hill 700), and at both points where the horseshoe's legs began to curve (low-lying creeks in the west, Hill 260 on the east side). The Japanese enjoyed possession of high ground beyond the perimeter, which permitted them to see American positions, but their wildly optimistic plans (one document specified the location on which General Griswold would surrender to the Japanese) negated any advantage. Overall, the Japanese plan called for dispersed and unsupported attacks and was governed by an unrealistic timetable and operational plan.



*Machine gun crew
awaits the Japanese
attack on Bougainville.*
(DA photograph)

Hill 700, the first Japanese target, was a commanding position with 65- to 75-degree slopes situated at the eastern end of the 145th Infantry's sector. The sector stretched 3,500 yards west past the southern shore of a lake and ended in low ground near the intersection of a major inland trail with the American perimeter. There, on its left, the 145th tied in with the 129th Infantry.

Near midnight during the night of 8–9 March, two Japanese companies attacked a platoon position on the northern slope of Hill 700. They were repulsed before they could reach the saddle between the hill's eastern and western high points. A few hours later an entire Japanese infantry regiment attacked the same position in columns of battalions. Artillery fire caught the third battalion in the open and decimated it, but the attackers seized the saddle, establishing mortar and machine-gun positions. From there the next day they were able to interdict the sector's major supply road, forcing the Americans to hand-carry supplies and hand-evacuate casualties.

For the next two days the 145th reduced the penetration, repelling a major exploitation attempt. On 11 March the 2d

Battalion, 148th, attacked and almost regained the top of Hill 700. Intense fighting raged all around the American perimeter on 12 March, as Companies E and F, 148th Infantry, resolutely and methodically laid waste to the Japanese positions, with sergeants leading after virtually all of the officers fell. Seventy-eight members of the 37th Division were killed fighting around and on Hill 700. Over three hundred Japanese lay dead around the top of the hill.

While the first Japanese attack was breaking on the defenses of the 37th Division, the second was threatening to overwhelm a 182d Infantry position on Hill 260 in the Americal Division's sector. Hill 260 was a geographically isolated outpost, garrisoned with eighty men and located 800 yards beyond the defensive perimeter. Just north of the hill a major jungle trail ran east-west, while to its rear a small river ran north-south. The hill ran northwest-southeast, and between two high points (called North Knob and South Knob) stretched a crest just wide enough for a trail. Hill 260 truly was, as the 182d Infantry commander said, "a sore thumb stuck out into the poison ivy."

During the night of 9–10 March, small numbers of enemy infiltrated between Hill 260 and the main line, while a larger force massed nearby. Shortly after 0600 a Japanese battalion stormed South Knob, capturing most positions and driving all but six of the garrison to North Knob. Those six, mortar and artillery observers, fortified themselves within two pillboxes and battled so fiercely that they held their position.

General Griswold ordered the hill held, and two companies promptly were dispatched from the perimeter. One company reinforced North Knob, and then pushed a platoon southward along the ridge while the second worked its way up from the southwest. Several flamethrower-supported assaults achieved partial success, but the Japanese strength on South Knob thwarted recapture.

Repeated American attacks over the next four days could not retake South Knob. Preceded by lavish artillery fire, and using flamethrowers, each attempt achieved some measure of success (one attack liberated the besieged artillery observers), but casualties from concealed Japanese machine guns, supply shortages, and the lack of additional troops all prevented the troops from consolidating a strong position. One company in the 182d was reduced from 150 to 25 men within a single day.

After another attempt failed on 14 March, the Americans changed tactics. Casualties already numbered 98 killed, 24 missing, and 581 wounded (including fatigue cases). Patrols had not detected any other Japanese troops in the area, and those on South Knob were

too few to attack elsewhere, so recapturing South Knob did not merit additional casualties. For the next several days, therefore, raids and artillery fire—including 10,000 rounds of 105-mm. fire—harassed South Knob. The Japanese survivors left behind 560 dead and retreated into the jungle, maneuvering to the north and west in a futile attempt to reinforce the third Japanese attack—the thrust against the 129th Infantry's position west of Hill 700 amidst the low-land creeks.

Four days before the Japanese abandoned South Knob, on the night of 11 March the major Japanese assault struck the 129th Infantry, 37th Division. Holding a frontage of 3,900 yards but lacking any major obstructions to fields of fire, the regiment's defenses were the most formidable of any sector. Although there had been little action in the sector previously, the third attack did not take the 129th Infantry unawares. General Beightler warned his troops late on 11 March to be ready, for captured documents suggested an impending attack. The assault was fierce, with the Japanese attempting to cut their way through the wire into the American positions. Daylight revealed that they had achieved minor success only in Company G's area. Concentrated fire held in check two small penetrations, and a counter-attack eliminated one. Another attack the following night netted the Japanese but one pillbox. Combined U.S. infantry-tank assaults during the day restored the line.

There was little action on the 14th, but as the 2d Battalion restored its defenses, patrols reported many Japanese beyond the perimeter. At 0400 the next morning, three Japanese battalions attacked, penetrating one hundred yards. After a counterattack partially restored the line, two consecutive American tank-infantry attacks, liberally supported with artillery and mortar fire, killed 190 of the enemy and drove off the remainder.

The Japanese regrouped in the jungle for several days, gathering the remnants of the three attacking forces for a last attempt against the 129th's position. By 23 March they were ready, but once again captured Japanese documents and decrypted communications allowed General Beightler to warn his troops of the attack.

Firing their remaining artillery, the Japanese attacked through the ravines and gullies. Although the 37th's artillery exacted a frightful toll, the Japanese again managed a minor penetration under cover of darkness. As before, the 129th mounted tank-infantry counterattacks while seven battalions of field artillery and twenty-four 4.2-inch mortars supported the effort, pounding Japanese troops in front of the American line. By midafternoon, it was over. The Japanese withdrew,

leaving behind their wounded and heavy equipment. They had suffered terribly, with over 5,000 men killed. In comparison, the veterans of XIV Corps, who had used their superior defenses and fought determinedly and shrewdly, lost 263 comrades killed.

The next few weeks brought sporadic fighting as XIV Corps pursued the beaten Japanese. During these operations the 1st Battalion, 24th Infantry Regiment, became the first black American infantry unit to engage in combat during the war. The 25th Regimental Combat Team of the 93d Division also joined in the final operations. For several months after major combat operations had ended, American troops patrolled and hunted the remnants of Japanese units through Bougainville's vast jungles. In November 1944 command of all island operations passed from General Griswold to Lt. Gen. Sir Stanley Savige of the Australian Army, and by mid-December Australian forces had relieved all American units in line. Although for the U.S. Army the Northern Solomons Campaign was declared officially concluded only in November 1944 (the Australians would conduct major campaigns in 1945), for practical purposes the end had come with the destruction of the Japanese counterattack in March. Long before November, the Allies were looking ahead to the Philippines.

Analysis

The Northern Solomons is one of the more unheralded of the U.S. Army campaigns of World War II, largely overshadowed by its predecessor, Guadalcanal, and by its more publicized successor, Leyte. Furthermore, with hindsight the campaign for the northern Solomon Islands might be described simply as bringing to bear preponderant American strength on isolated Japanese positions. Such a summary does describe accurately what American strategy skillfully achieved through sustained joint operations: the isolation and subsequent defeat in detail of Japanese forces. Nevertheless, such brevity fails to convey either the complexity or the totality of the American effort in the Solomons. Throughout the campaign, and often under barely tolerable conditions, American soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines of all ranks exhibited the skill, determination, and endurance that ensured victory. American forces had advantages in the Northern Solomons Campaign, which they exploited for the greatest benefit.

There were several reasons for the American difficulties during the campaign's early stages. First, the drive through the Solomons was not a top Allied priority, so Halsey's forces competed with other Allied theaters for resources. Competition prodded commanders to undertake

operations as soon as was possible to show that they deserved more resources. More significantly, American planners underestimated the task they faced in conquering New Georgia, miscalculating both the strength of Japanese defenses and the severe hardships that jungle fighting would impose on American troops. This grave failure to identify, and prepare for, the two most important external influences on the American ground campaign can hardly be overemphasized in explaining the ground offensive's subsequent breakdown. Considering the earlier savage and lengthy fighting on Guadalcanal and at Buna, this seems an incomprehensible lapse. The eventual commitment of XIV Corps, with its additional combat power and administrative and logistical capabilities, underscored recognition that the original task assigned to the 43d Division simply had been too great for its resources to accomplish.

Also contributing to the offense's woes were the overburdening of General Hester's staff, the virtual absence of useful intelligence, and, not least, the inexperience of some units like the 43d Division. Even after these problems were surmounted, the Navy's inability to stop nighttime Japanese troop movements meant that some of the fruits of the New Georgia campaign were lost. In the Solomons, Japanese soldiers who escaped generally fought another day.

But with hard-won experience came increased efficiency and effectiveness for American units, staffs, and commanders. Helping matters was the skill of important commanders. General Griswold inherited command at a critical moment and helped rescue a disintegrating tactical situation on New Georgia. Simultaneously, the replacement of Admiral Turner by Admiral Wilkinson brought to the fore an extremely talented amphibious commander, as evidenced by the Vella Lavella and Bougainville landings, who also could excel in a joint environment. Likewise, the decision to bypass Kolombangara was evidence of a mature theater headquarters staff at work, while the ever-increasing efficiency with which amphibious and ground operations were carried out illustrated the same high quality of subordinate staffs. Finally, the staunch and deadly repulse of the Japanese counterattack on Bougainville showed an experienced army corps functioning efficiently at all levels.

At the "sharp end," troops learned to counter enemy defenses as well as reduce the jungle environment's physical and emotional toll by swiftly applying lessons learned in combat. Among those strength-sapping hardships that all soldiers endured were utter physical and mental exhaustion, malnourishment, and poor sanitation, along with a host of debilitating diseases—dysentery, malaria, and jungle rot, to name

three—that flourished in the pernicious climate of the Solomons. Not for the last time, American soldiers learned that tough terrain and a determined foe make a potent combination. Words fail to convey the demands placed on the men who served at the front or to praise their efforts—men like Medal of Honor recipient S. Sgt. Jessie R. Drowley, 132d Infantry, who, in January 1944 during an action to expand the corps perimeter on Bougainville, rescued two wounded men under fire and then, despite being wounded horribly, led an assault on an enemy pillbox. Special mention, too, is deserved by the Army engineers and Navy Seabees. In extremely short periods of time, they constructed the numerous airfields that played a vital role in providing air cover for operations throughout the Southwest Pacific.

There are two requirements for defeating an enemy who occupies a strong defensive position: superior firepower and men willing to go forward and attack the enemy. On New Georgia in particular, the latter was often in greater supply than the former. Unlike the ground war in Europe, in which vast quantities of artillery often were employed at long range with devastating effect on visible targets, jungle fighting in the Solomons usually pitted small groups against a camouflaged enemy, occupying well-prepared defensive positions, at extremely close range. Irregular frontline positions often made artillery support equally dangerous to friend and foe. Only in a few cases, most notably the Bougainville counterattack, did the Americans have the advantage of fighting defensively in prepared positions, supported by artillery and without the need to navigate through the dense jungle foliage. Through experience, infantrymen learned to work closely with tanks and flamethrowers when attacking enemy positions. Allied superiority in men and materiel throughout the campaign never relieved the individual soldiers of the arduous and most dangerous job of moving forward and killing the enemy at close quarters.

Inexperienced troops, unfamiliar with the realities of Pacific island combat and the demands it placed on individual initiative and fortitude, did have difficulties. Such was the experience of the 43d Division on New Georgia, where the untested unit suffered one of the highest rates of neuroses casualties of any American division during the war. But the division's loss of 1,500 men in a three-month period reflected most of all the extreme hardship the troops endured. Poorly prepared, ill supplied, and surrounded by a fetid jungle that was almost as dangerous as the enemy, these men fought a grim war of attrition in the Pacific War's equivalent of World War I trenches. Acquiring their knowledge in combat, even men physically unscathed by combat paid dearly. Still, the 43d Division reconstituted after New Georgia and, as

a veteran unit, later fought well in the Philippines.

The risk that the United States incurred in the Pacific by dispersing its forces and conducting two strategic offensives brought substantial rewards. Especially at CARTWHEEL's operational level, the Japanese could not counter the Allied agility. Japanese efforts to use their "interior lines" in the Pacific, by shifting forces to block alternately MacArthur's and Halsey's offensives, were insufficient. Never more than a hindrance to Allied campaign progress, tactically such Japanese efforts only provided the Allies with many opportunities to inflict considerable damage on their off-balance foe. Allied forces generally made the most of these opportunities. As attrition depleted Japanese air and naval forces and interdiction of supply lines isolated ground units, the Japanese lost the initiative. Confronted with increasingly strong and aggressive Allied forces in the South and Southwest Pacific, they would never regain it. Allied destruction of Japanese men, materiel, and mobility throughout the northern Solomons and New Guinea left the Japanese mired in a multifront war they could not win.

During the nineteen months of the Northern Solomons Campaign, the measure of the war with Japan changed dramatically. The invasion of New Georgia in June 1943 had signaled a new phase of the war, the beginning of a sustained American strategic offensive. Less than a year later, the failed Japanese counterattack on Bougainville and CARTWHEEL's successful isolation of Rabaul heralded the beginning of the end—the eagerly awaited American return to the Philippines. The Northern Solomons Campaign constituted a major step toward that goal.

NORTHERN SOLOMONS 1943-1944

Further Readings

John Miller, jr., *CARTWHEEL: The Reduction of Rabaul*, from the official series *U.S. Army in World War II* (1959), on which this account has relied heavily, is the single best narrative of the ground operations in the central and northern Solomons. Ronald H. Spector, *Eagle Against the Sun* (1985), provides the best short account. Eric Hammel, *Munda Trail* (1989), tells the story of operations on New Georgia through the capture of Munda airfield. Harry A. Galley, *Bougainville, 1943-1945: The Forgotten Campaign* (1991), provides additional information on the battle for that island, including the post-November 1944 period when the island was under Australian command. Louis Morton, *Strategy and Command: The First Two Years, U.S. Army in World War II* (1962), places the Solomons in the context of evolving American strategy in the Pacific. For the Marine Corps, Maj. John N. Rentz's two official history volumes cover the events of this brochure: *Bougainville and the Northern Solomons* (1948) and *Marines in the Central Solomons* (1952). For naval operations see Samuel Eliot Morison, *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II*, vol. 6, *Breaking the Bismarcks Barrier: 22 July 1942-1 May 1944* (1950).

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Cover: *Soldiers of the 132d Infantry advance near the Torokina River, Bougainville..* (DA photograph)

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