


Guadalcanal: Trial



After the invasion of Guadalcanal, the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, under Brig. Gen. Roy S. Geiger, took command of the composite organization that came to be known as the "Cactus Air Force."

USMC 108572

by Fire

Part 2



By Edward J. Marolda

Vice Admiral William F. Halsey, who took the helm of the South Pacific Command in mid-October 1942, was the right tonic for the hard-pressed defenders of Guadalcanal. The 60-year-old admiral with bushy eyebrows and the visage of a friendly "sea dog," inspired confidence in the men who fought under him. Having missed the Battle of Midway because of a debilitating case of dermatitis, he was eager to close with the Japanese and drive them from the island and the sea around it.

Halsey had little time to ease into the job, for the enemy was determined to force the Marines off Guadalcanal and destroy any U.S. naval forces that steamed to their assistance. From October 20 to 26, Japanese Lieutenant General Masai Maruyama's troops launched one frontal assault after another against the thin Marine-Army line protecting Henderson Field. In

bloody, hand-to-hand combat, the Americans beat off the attackers. Thousands of Japanese soldiers died in the assaults across the Mantanikau River and against what the Marines called "Bloody Ridge."

Undeterred by this setback, Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, Commander in Chief of the Combined Fleet, ordered his powerful armada of 4 aircraft carriers, 5 battleships, 14 cruisers, and 44 destroyers to seek out the American fleet and eliminate it as a fighting force.

That goal would not be easily achieved. For, although Japanese submarines had sunk *Wasp* (CV 7) and severely damaged *Saratoga* (CV 3) – temporarily knocking her out of the war – *Enterprise* (CV 6), the "Big E," joined *Hornet* (CV 8) in October. Newly assigned Rear Admiral Thomas C. Kinkaid led the two-carrier task force. In addition, the Navy reinforced the South Pacific Command with 24 submarines and the battleships *Indiana* (BB

58) and *South Dakota* (BB 57). Both ships bristled with a lethal array of the new 40-millimeter anti-aircraft guns. Determined to spare no resources in the death struggle for Guadalcanal, Washington also dispatched 2 Army B-17 bomber squadrons and 50 fighter planes to the combat theater.

Like bees roaming far from the hive, Japanese and American patrol planes searched for enemy fleets in the vast expanse of the Pacific north of the Santa Cruz Islands. Soon after American aircraft began sighting ships of the Japanese fleet, in the early morning hours of October 26, Adm. Halsey ordered his forces to "Attack – Repeat – Attack."

The Battle of the Santa Cruz Islands opened a few minutes before 0800 when two SBD dive-bombers struck Japanese light carrier *Zuiho* with their 500-pound bombs, knocking her out of the action. The Japanese got their licks in next. With *Enterprise* temporarily concealed by a rain squall, 27 enemy planes concentrated on

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Hornet. The valiant ship took hit after hit from bombs, torpedoes, and flaming aircraft piloted by self-sacrificing Japanese pilots. Dead in the water and burning fiercely, the carrier had to be abandoned. American attempts to scuttle her failed, but the Japanese later dispatched her with torpedoes.

Meanwhile, *Hornet's* air group, which had passed the Japanese air contingent heading in the opposite direction, jumped carrier *Shokaku*. Dive-bombers led by Lieutenant James E. Vose reduced the enemy ship's flight deck to a twisted, burning mass of metal and wood. *Shokaku* survived – at least until a U.S. submarine sent her to the bottom in June 1944.

Swarms of aircraft from the two remaining enemy carriers, *Junyo* and *Zuikaku*, then pounced on *Enterprise*, now bereft of cloud cover but defended by her superbly trained antiaircraft gunners and those aboard *South Dakota*. Even though they suffered bomb hits, the battleship and cruiser *San Juan* (CL 54) put up a lethal curtain of fire that decimated *Enterprise's* attackers. The fire from these ships and American fighters downed numerous Japanese "Val" dive-bombers and "Kate" torpedo planes, some of the 97 aircraft lost by the enemy that day.

Erroneously believing that his forces had by then sunk all of the Pacific Fleet's carriers, Adm. Yamamoto failed to move quickly in the Solomons. Instead, he methodically prepared for what he thought would be the final campaign against Guadalcanal. During the first week of November, Japanese cruisers and destroyers of the "Tokyo Express" reinforced the Guadalcanal garrison with thousands of infantrymen. The following week, Yamamoto dispatched a large convoy escorted by capital ships of his Combined Fleet.

Halsey learned of these Japanese movements from intercepted radio communications. Even though Halsey knew that *Enterprise* had not fully recovered from wounds she suffered in the previous fight, and that powerful enemy warships were steaming toward Guadalcanal, he again sought battle. He understood that in battle, fortune often smiles on the bold.

He deployed the still-scarred *Enterprise*, battleships *South Dakota* and newly arrived *Washington* (BB 56), 2 cruisers, 8 destroyers, and 24 submarines to the waters of the southern Solomons so they could cover his reinforcement task force. This latter formation consisted of

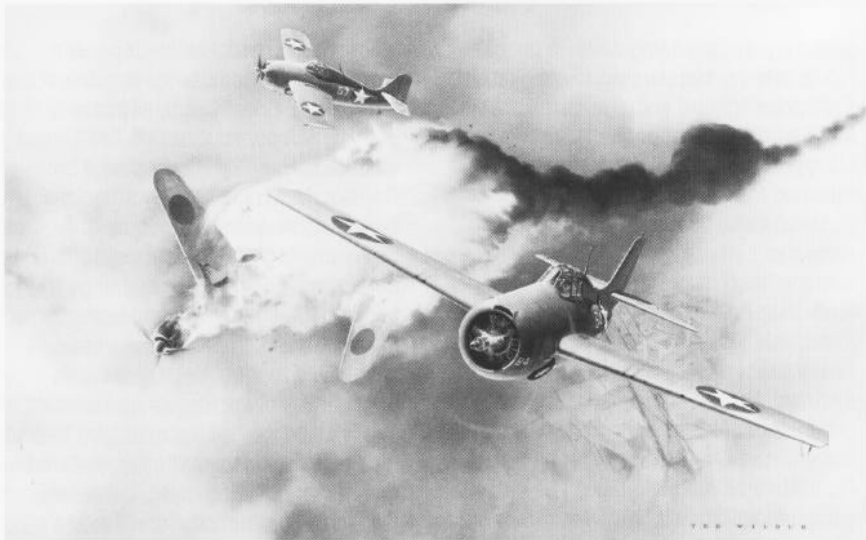
seven troop and cargo transports under the command of Rear Admiral Richmond Kelly Turner. These ships were escorted by 13 cruisers and destroyers led by Rear Admiral Norman C. Scott, victor of the Battle of Cape Esperance, and Rear Admiral Daniel J. Callaghan.

The Naval Battle of Guadalcanal opened with an attack on November 12 by Japanese two-engine bombers, "Bettys," on Turner's transports unloading at the island. F4F *Wildcats* of the joint-service "Cactus Air Force" based at Henderson Field and antiaircraft guns on the ships shot down many of the bombers. These Japanese forces, however, were only the tip of the iceberg, for Turner knew from intel-

ligence that battleships *Hiei* and *Kirishima*, light cruiser *Nagara*, and 14 destroyers were to bombard Henderson Field that night. Despite the unfavorable odds, Turner decided that he could not allow the aircraft and troops ashore to bear the full brunt of Japanese naval gunfire. He directed Callaghan, 15 days senior to Scott, to lead the American cruisers and destroyers in a night engagement against the Japanese. All understood that this was a desperate, if noble venture.

The American ships proceeded into "Ironbottom Sound" off Guadalcanal in single column, with 4 destroyers leading and 4 destroyers following cruisers





"Victory Over Guadalcanal" by Ted Wilbur. This painting depicts Marine ace Joseph J. Foss shooting down a Zero, one of 26 Japanese aircraft that he destroyed in the southwest Pacific between October 9, 1942, and January 25, 1943. When he retired in 1981, Capt. Wilbur was head of what is now the Naval Historical Center's Aviation History and Publication Division.

Atlanta (CL 51), Adm. Scott embarked; *San Francisco* (CA 38), Adm. Callaghan embarked; *Portland* (CA 33); *Helena* (CL 51); and *Juneau* (CL 52). Surprisingly, Callaghan did not position the latter three ships, equipped with state-of-the-art SG radar, in the van where they would be most useful for his management of the battle. Even though *Helena's* radar warned of the Japanese approach before the enemy had spotted the Americans, Callaghan did not exploit this advantage. Furthermore, he did not carry out his original intention to cross the enemy "T," a classic battle-winning naval maneuver. In fact, in the ensuing battle, the two opposing formations became intermingled and fought a confusing, close-range free-for-all. At 0124 on November 13, destroyer *Cushing* (DD 376) had to veer hard to port to avoid colliding with a Japanese combatant. For eight minutes, Callaghan would not allow his ships to open fire for fear they would shell one of their own wildly maneuvering ships. That delay was fatal for Adm. Scott and his flagship *Atlanta*, which was ripped open by shells from *Hiei's* 14-inch naval rifles (as well as a number of 8-inch rounds from *San Francisco*).

Soon afterward, the Japanese battleship sent *Cushing* to the bottom. To avenge this loss, destroyer *Laffey* (DD 459) sprayed *Hiei's* bridge with machine gun fire, killing her commanding officer. The Japanese ended this uneven match when one of their destroyers torpedoed and sank *Laffey*. Then, U.S. destroyer *Sterett* (DD 407) and Japanese destroyer *Yudachi* traded fire. Both ships were severely damaged. *Kirishima* joined the fracas, pouring a deluge of fire into *San Francisco*, killing Adm. Callaghan and devastating the cruiser. Cruisers *Helena* and *Portland*, although the latter was damaged by a torpedo strike, raked *Hiei*

The flak-filled sky over the U. S. carrier task force portrays the fury of the Battle of Santa Cruz.



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with their gunfire. In addition, U.S. fire ended the existence of destroyer *Akatsuki*.

The American ships in the rear of the column fared even worse than those in the van. Enemy torpedoes cut *Barton* (DD 599) in two and she quickly plunged to the bottom with many of her crewmen. The Japanese blasted *Monssen* (DD 436) with 37 rounds of naval gunfire, leaving her a twisted wreck. The last cruiser in the column, *Juneau*, was slightly damaged by a torpedo but she was able to retire from the scene.

The dawn of November 13 brought no respite from death and destruction for both sides. *Portland* dispatched *Yudachi* with six salvos of fire. Marine and Navy planes from Henderson, spared the devastating bombardment meant for the airstrip the night before, showed their appreciation for the fleet's sacrifices by sinking the enemy's flagship, *Hiei*.

The Americans suffered, too. *Atlanta*, beyond salvage, was scuttled by her crew. The wrecked and abandoned destroyers *Monssen* and *Cushing* finally slipped beneath the surface. The greatest disaster, however, befell *Juneau*. Japanese submarine *I-26* snuffed out her life and that of most of her crewmen, including the five Sullivan brothers. Sharks and a blazing sun claimed all but 10 of the sailors who survived the sinking.

When comparing the loss of 6 U.S. ships and 1,439 seamen to the Japanese loss of 6 ships and 552 sailors, one might conclude this was a Japanese victory. In a strategic sense, though, the Americans emerged victorious. The continued operation of Henderson Field enabled American aircraft to dominate the waters of the southern Solomons on the 14th and frustrate the enemy's last serious push to take Guadalcanal.

Teaming up with aircraft from *Enterprise*, which had steamed north from Noumea, Marine Major General Roy S. Geiger's "Cactus Air Force" planes sank Japanese heavy cruiser *Kinugasa* and damaged three other cruisers. Then, the Marine, Navy, and Army airmen pounced on enemy reinforcement convoys, sending six transports, most of their embarked troops, and desperately needed supplies to the bottom. The U.S. units were unable to prevent Rear Admiral Raizo Tanaka's four destroyers and four transports from disgorging some troops and supplies onto Guadalcanal, but the latter ships never

sailed again. Beginning at dawn on November 15, Henderson-based aircraft, *Enterprise* fighters and dive-bombers, Marine and Army shore batteries, and a Navy destroyer utterly devastated the beached transports.

Meanwhile, during the night, the American surface fleet had evened the score in the bloody waters near Savo Island. Vice Admiral Kondo had led a formidable force of battleship *Kirishima*, 2 heavy cruisers, 2 light cruisers, and 10 destroyers south to once again rain shells on Henderson. Beginning at 2317 on November 14, a U.S. task group under Rear Admiral Willis Augustus Lee and comprised of *Washington*, *South Dakota*, and destroyers *Preston* (DD 379), *Walke* (DD 416), *Benham* (DD 397), and *Gwin* (DD 433), exchanged salvos of gunfire and torpedoes. Japanese lookouts reported the first contacts, even though the American ships carried the advanced SG radars. Initially, the battle went against the Americans. For the loss of one of their own destroyers, the Japanese sank *Preston* and *Walke* and severely damaged the other two "tin cans." *South Dakota* lost electrical power and thereafter became a magnet, drawing enemy fire. Adm. Lee pressed ahead into the maelstrom with his flagship *Washington* and her powerful 16-inch, radar-assisted naval rifles soon found the range to *Kirishima*. Within minutes, American shellfire had reduced the enemy battlewagon to a flaming and rudderless hulk and before the night was out, her crew had scuttled her. With *Washington* on the rampage in the midst of his task force, Adm. Kondo wisely chose to withdraw.

The Naval Battle of Guadalcanal marked a turning point in the bitter struggle for the southern Solomon Islands. Thereafter, the Japanese were on the defensive on land, in the air, and at sea. Months of hard fighting, however, remained before the Allies could claim victory in the South Pacific. In fact, there were several setbacks that delayed the end of the campaign and revealed that American forces were still learning painful lessons of war.

One such lesson occurred late at night on the last day of November. RAdm. Tanaka, labeled "tenacious Tanaka" by naval historian Samuel Eliot Morison out of respect for his bravery and perseverance, once again

attempted to reinforce the Japanese garrison on Guadalcanal. His modest force of eight destroyers, all but two carrying troops, was met off Tasafaronga Point by Rear Admiral Carleton H. Wright's newly organized cruiser-destroyer striking force of 4 heavy cruisers, 1 light cruiser, and 6 destroyers. Despite the advantage of spotting the enemy first and launching torpedoes first, the Americans fared worst. Due to Wright's poor tactical direction, all of the torpedoes launched by his ships missed the mark and their naval gunfire concentrated on just one doomed enemy destroyer, *Takanami*. Conversely, torpedoes from Tanaka's destroyers hit all four of Wright's heavy



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A Mitsubishi Betty bomber in the water off Guadalcanal.

cruisers, and sank one of them, *Northampton* (CA 26). On the bright side, however, the Japanese had failed in their reinforcement efforts.

With growing superiority at sea and in the air, at least during daylight, the Allied command was able to pump troops and supplies into Guadalcanal. On December 9, Major General Alexander M. "Sandy" Patch, commanding officer of the Army's 24th Infantry Division, replaced the redoubtable Major Alexander A. Vandegrift as commander of the forces ashore, which included the 24th and elements of the 2d Marine Division. This occurred as the exhausted, but victorious Marines of the 1st Marine Division, the "Old Breed," boarded Navy transports for passage to Australia and well-deserved liberty.

On several occasions during January 1943, following Tokyo's con-

clusion that Guadalcanal could not be held, the Japanese evacuated their 11,000-man garrison. They successfully carried this off because the Allies believed the enemy to be still beefing up the island force, not withdrawing. Moreover, concentrations of Japanese naval and air forces in the northern reaches of the Solomons kept Halsey's rapt attention.

The Americans had one more lesson reaffirmed – the importance of air cover for surface naval operations – before the close of the Guadalcanal campaign. At the end of the month, Halsey dispatched four transports to the island with a covering force, under Rear Admiral Robert C. Giffen, of six cruisers and eight destroyers. Two escort carriers, recently assigned to the South Pacific Command, were available, but Giffen failed to keep them within supporting range of his surface formation. Hence, when Japanese torpedo planes dove on the flotilla north of Rennell Island on the evening of January 29, the enemy was able to put two "fish" into *Chicago* (CA 29), last survivor of the August Battle of Savo Island. The following day air units from carrier *Enterprise* arrived over the stricken ship, being towed by fleet tug *Navajo* (AT 64) at four knots, but they could not fend off all the determined Japanese attackers. The enemy torpedo bombers hit *Chicago's* starboard side with four more torpedoes and 20 minutes later she went down by the stern.

Despite the loss of this veteran cruiser, the American mission to deliver more troops and supplies to Guadalcanal succeeded. The diversion of the enemy allowed the four transports to unload safely off Lunga Point. Several days later,

Mar 1: A revision of the squadron designation system changed Inshore Patrol Squadrons to Scouting Squadrons (VS), Escort Fighting Squadrons (VGF) to Fighting Squadrons (VF), Escort Scouting Squadrons (VGS) to Composite Squadrons (VC) and Patrol Squadrons (VP) operating land-type aircraft to Bombing Squadrons (VB). This action also redesignated carrier Scouting Squadrons as VB and VC and, as a result, the number of squadrons on *Essex*-class carriers was reduced to three. In spite of this change, the aircraft complement of their Air Groups remained at the previous levels of 21 VF, 36 VSB, and 18 VTB.

Mar 4: Changes to the characteristics of *Essex*-class carriers were authorized by the Navy Secretary, including installation of a Combat Information Center and Fighter Director Station, additional anti-aircraft batteries, and a second flight deck catapult in lieu of one athwartships

another five transports did the same. At the same time, of course, the Japanese completed their evacuation of the island, unbeknownst to Halsey and Patch. Finally, on February 9, 1943, Gen. Patch's ground troops secured all of the island. He radioed Halsey the good news: "Tokyo Express' no longer has terminus on Guadalcanal."

The six-month battle for Guadalcanal proved a costly victory for American arms. Several thousand American fighting men gave up their lives in the epic struggle. The U.S. Navy lost 2 aircraft carriers, 6 heavy cruisers, 2 light cruisers, and 14 destroyers, which approximated in terms

on the hangar deck.

Mar 5: *Bogue* (ACV 9), with VC-9 on-board, joined Task Group 24.4 at Argentia, Newfoundland, and began the escort of convoys to mid-ocean and return. Although *Santee* (ACV 29) had previously operated on hunter-killer duty, *Bogue* was the center of the first of the hunter-killer groups assigned to convoy escort.

Mar 29: Tests of forward-firing rocket projectiles from naval aircraft were completed at the Naval Proving Ground, Dahlgren, Va., using an SB2A-4 aircraft.

Apr 1: The first Navy night-fighter squadron, VF(N)-75, was established at NAS Quonset Point, R.I., Cdr. W. J. Widhelm commanding.

Apr 21: Capt. Frederick M. Trapnell flew the Bell XP-59A *Airacomet* jet at Muroc, Calif., recording the first jet flight by a U.S. Naval Aviator.

of number of ships and tonnage the losses of the Imperial Japanese Navy. Allied air losses to all causes totaled 615 aircraft for the campaign, compared to about 682 for the Japanese. (The Japanese lost many of their experienced airmen during the campaign, a blow from which Japanese naval aviation never fully recovered.) But the lessons learned by the American sailors, Marines, soldiers, and airmen who fought on, over, and around the island were not forgotten. They became the foundation for the tactical and operational skills that enabled U.S. and Allied forces to win WW II in the Pacific.

Years after the war, retired Japanese Admiral Tanaka succinctly described what made the difference in the Japanese-American struggle for Guadalcanal: "We stumbled along from one error to another," he observed, "while the enemy grew wise." ■

Dr. Marolda is head of the Contemporary History Branch of the Naval Historical Center. He has authored several books on naval history.

Japanese torpedo and dive-bombers attack *Hornet* (CV 8) during the Battle of the Santa Cruz Islands, October 26, 1942. A moment later, the dive-bomber at upper left center crashed into the signal bridge of the carrier.

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