

Tasimboko: Small Raid Changed Everything at Guadalcanal

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WORLD WAR II

Tasimboko:

Small Raid Changed Everything at Guadalcanal

By Capt Frank J. Guidone, USMC (Ret)

It was only a small action that met little resistance, but it can be argued that the raid on Tasimboko saved the First Marine Division on Guadalcanal and set up the turning point in World War II.

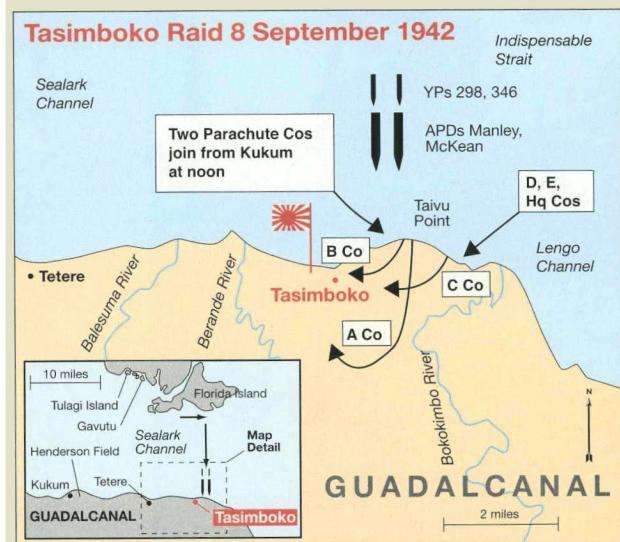
On 7 Aug. 1942, the First Marine Division went ashore unopposed on Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands of the South Pacific, beginning the long-awaited American ground offensive.

The Marines moved off the beach and through the jungle, taking an airstrip they later renamed Henderson Field. Guadalcanal would halt the Japanese expansion and provide a position from which America and her Allies could expand their foothold in the Pacific, the first step in the long march to Tokyo.

Division intelligence estimated Japanese forces on Guadalcanal to be 5,000. The Japanese knew the number was actually 2,230, mostly naval construction workers. Guadalcanal, the Japanese realized, must be reinforced immediately, and the Japanese high command directed Lieutenant General Harukichi Hyakutake, who commanded the Seventeenth Army, to retake Guadalcanal. Hyakutake was promised 50,000 men to be quickly cobbled together from throughout the Pacific.

By 8 Sept., the 1stMarDiv learned that a Japanese reinforced brigade, commanded by Major General Kiyotake Kawaguchi, had slipped ashore on Guadalcanal approximately 18 miles east of Lunga Point and was headed for Henderson Field. The Japanese had occupied a village near Tasimboko, set up a supply base along the shore and sent their forces inland, heading for the Marine perimeter and the airfield.

While this was happening, Colonel Merritt A. "Red Mike" Edson, commander of the 1st Marine Raider Battalion, Col Gerald C. Thomas, 1stMarDiv operations officer, and Lieutenant Colonel Merrill B. Twining, assistant operations officer, agreed that a probe to the east of their positions toward the village of Tasimboko was a possibility and would be an unpleasant surprise to the Japanese.



The 1stMarDiv's commander, MajGen Alexander A. Vandegrift, was hesitant about sending troops beyond his capability to support them, which would be the case on this patrol, and he would be gambling with the lives of the Marines involved. There also was a shortage of vessels to support such a move.

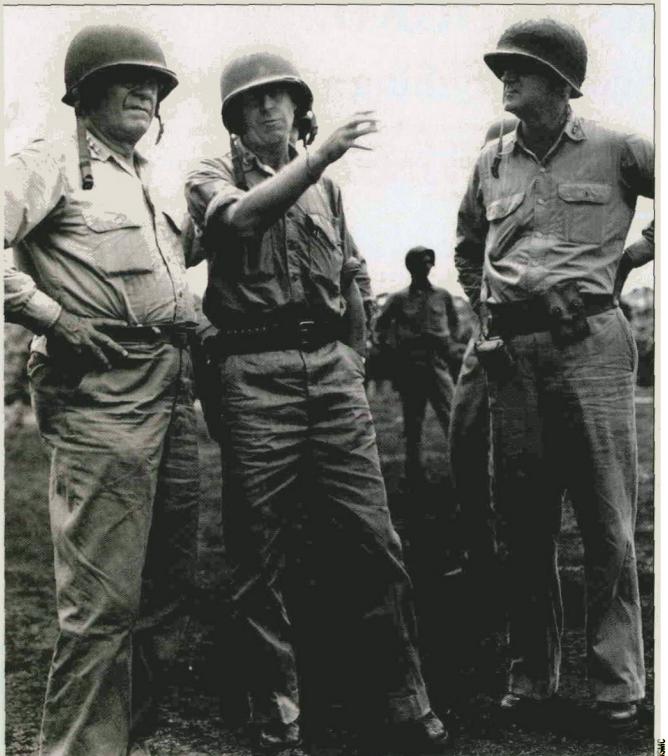
It would be a gamble.

After further discussions, the raid was approved and the embarking of troops began at Kukum near Lunga Point. Involved were two destroyer transports, USS *Manley* (APD-1) and USS *McKean* (APD-5), along with two wooden trawlers, or tuna boats, which were not designed to carry troops. These two diesel-powered "Yippies" (California tuna boats), YP-346 and YP-298, were involved with moving the men.

I boarded one of the tuna boats with my unit, Company A, 1st Raider Bn. Fortunately, it was a short ride, as it was very

MajGen Alexander A. Vandegrift was hesitant about sending troops beyond his capability to support them, which would be the case on this patrol.

Even with the enemy plans in hand, the Marines realized holding the ridge would be a bloody confrontation between two determined forces.



From left: The 17th Commandant of the Marine Corps, LtGen Thomas Holcomb; Col Merritt A. "Red Mike" Edson and MajGen Alexander A. Vandegrift during the Commandant's inspection on Guadalcanal, December 1942. Although MajGen Vandegrift was hesitant about sending Marines beyond the 1stMarDiv's capability to support them, Edson and other members of the 1stMarDiv staff convinced him that a probe toward the village of Tasimboko would be an unpleasant surprise to the Japanese.

bumpy. Some of us were in the forward part of the boat and, as we rocked to and fro, we would be doused with a wave of water after each roll. Of course, since it was not designed as a troop carrier, there were no facilities for troops.

As we approached our landing site, we saw ships on the horizon, and we hoped they were not ships of the Japanese fleet. We learned that they were an American convoy, which probably was heading for Kukum.

The Japanese on the beach also saw the fleet, plus our smaller fleet. They must have surmised that we were a part of a large landing. They immediately moved into the jungle, leaving their individual weapons, supplies and crew-served weapons. The support base was now undefended.

The guns of the destroyer transports and

planes from Marine Aircraft Group 23 shelled and strafed suspected strongpoints.

After we landed, two or three Japanese remaining behind fired their crew-served weapons at us. "Baker" Company soon destroyed these weapons and the crews. Able Co moved into the jungle and made a hard right to come in on Tasimboko from the south while Baker attacked from the west along the beach.

The resistance was light and quickly faded. Our casualties were six wounded and two Raiders killed: Corporal William Carney and Private Seraphine Smith. Smith was buried at Tasimboko, but later his body was recovered and reinterred at the division cemetery.

The vessels meanwhile returned to Kukum and boarded members of the 1st Parachute Bn and the remnants of the 1st Raider Bn. They again made their way to Tasimboko and landed the troops. It was a real tribute to the crews of those ships that both landings were successfully accomplished with perfect timing. Under the direction of the officers and noncommissioned officers, we began to destroy the enemy's ammunition, food and medical supplies. We also ate their food and drank whatever else available. The crew-served weapons were dragged out to sea, stripped and sunk off our Higgins boats.

There was one more important thing. During the raid, war correspondent Richard Tregaskis of International News Service, one of the reporters accompanying the Marines, gathered all the Japanese documents he could find; among those documents were the plans for the Kawaguchi brigade attack. The plans were promptly delivered to the division intelligence section. (Tregaskis later wrote "Guadalcanal Diary," which became a renowned book detailing the Marines in action during the first weeks of the Guadalcanal campaign.)

Inland and just southwest of Henderson Field, there was a gap in the division's perimeter, a ridge that both Col Edson and Col Thomas identified as the only decent avenue of approach the Japanese would want to use. The captured plans revealed that Kawaguchi's brigade was en route to the ridge.

The 1st Raider Bn returned from the Tasimboko raid and quickly was inserted into the gap known as the Bloody Ridge, or Edson's Ridge. The 2d Bn, Fifth Marine Regiment was placed as our support. The battalion had 81 mm mortars and heavy machine guns, was fully up to strength, rested and ready to fight.

Even with the enemy plans in hand, the Marines realized holding the ridge would be a bloody confrontation between two determined forces locked in a death struggle that might sway the outcome of the



COURTESY OF CAPT FRANK L. GUIDONE, USMC (RET)

INS correspondent Richard Tregaskis (left) accompanied Marines on the raid and gathered all the Japanese documents he could find at Tasimboko. Among them were the plans for the Japanese brigade-size attack on Bloody Ridge, sometimes called Edson's Ridge. Tregaskis is shown in this undated photo with LtGen Vandegrift after the raid.

war in the South Pacific.

The Japanese, however, were clearly at a disadvantage. In fleeing from Tasimboko, Kawaguchi lost the rear area support for his brigade. This was of tremendous importance since the Japanese brigade was near the point of launching its attack on Henderson Field when Edson's Raiders surprised the soldiers.

Further, MajGen Kawaguchi had been informed by Tokyo that he was trapped between two major forces. He had to make a decision to attack or march back and face the enemy at the beach. He decided to attack, which was quite fortunate for the small Raider unit. Kawaguchi reportedly toyed with the idea of sending a battalion to the beach to disrupt the landing.



MajGen Merritt A.
"Red Mike" Edson
(Col at Guadalcanal)



Gen Gerald C. Thomas
(Col at Guadalcanal)



LtGen Merrill B. Twining
(LtCol at Guadalcanal)

Fortunately, some members of the staff talked him out of it.

Kawaguchi's attack on the ridge was ineffective because his units were unable to attack simultaneously due to the jungle elements and the collapse of communication between brigade units. Kawaguchi stated that all he had was a stunned staff. He had never been in such a hopeless position. Kawaguchi's timetable was to coordinate his attack with a Japanese force attacking from the west toward the Matanikau River. This never happened.

Had the 1st Raider Bn not raided Kawaguchi's support area he would have had a much better shot at seizing the ridge. After losing the battle, Kawaguchi could not retreat to Tasimboko, but with his defeated troops made a long and difficult march hoping to contact Japanese troops in the west. These troops were burdened with the wounded and suffered greatly from hunger and thirst, many dying in the jungle. The 2d Raider Bn, led by LtCol Evans F. Carlson, on what became known as the "Long Patrol," managed to finish off quite a few of these desperate Japanese men.

For Edson's Raiders, the raid at Tasimboko was a feather in our cap. Although we were not heralded as we returned to

Kukum headed for the ridge, subsequent military writers and military schools noted the success of this raid. Our battalion executive officer, LtCol Samuel B. Griffith II, who became one of the Corps' top historians, said: "That little raid was one of the really very successful small operations of World War II."

LtCol Twining, later a lieutenant general, declared that Tasimboko "will stand as a classic example of the brilliant employment of hit and run tactics by Raiders."

Editor's note: Capt Frank Guidone retired from the Corps in 1960 after 20 years of service. He was a member of the 1st Raider Bn throughout its existence and participated in the battles for Tulagi, Guadalcanal and New Georgia. As a sergeant, he was a member of two lengthy patrols that operated behind enemy lines on New Georgia.

After his retirement, he served 17 years in the probation department of San Diego County and attained the rank of superintendent. He presently resides in San Diego with family and is an active member of the United States Marine Raider Association, www.usmarineraiders.org.



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Left: This is one of the Japanese warehouses at Tasimboko that was captured and burned during the raid.

Above: The Navy used two transport destroyers and two wooden California tuna boats, similar to the one shown here, to ferry the Raiders on their mission to Tasimboko, 8 Sept. 1942.