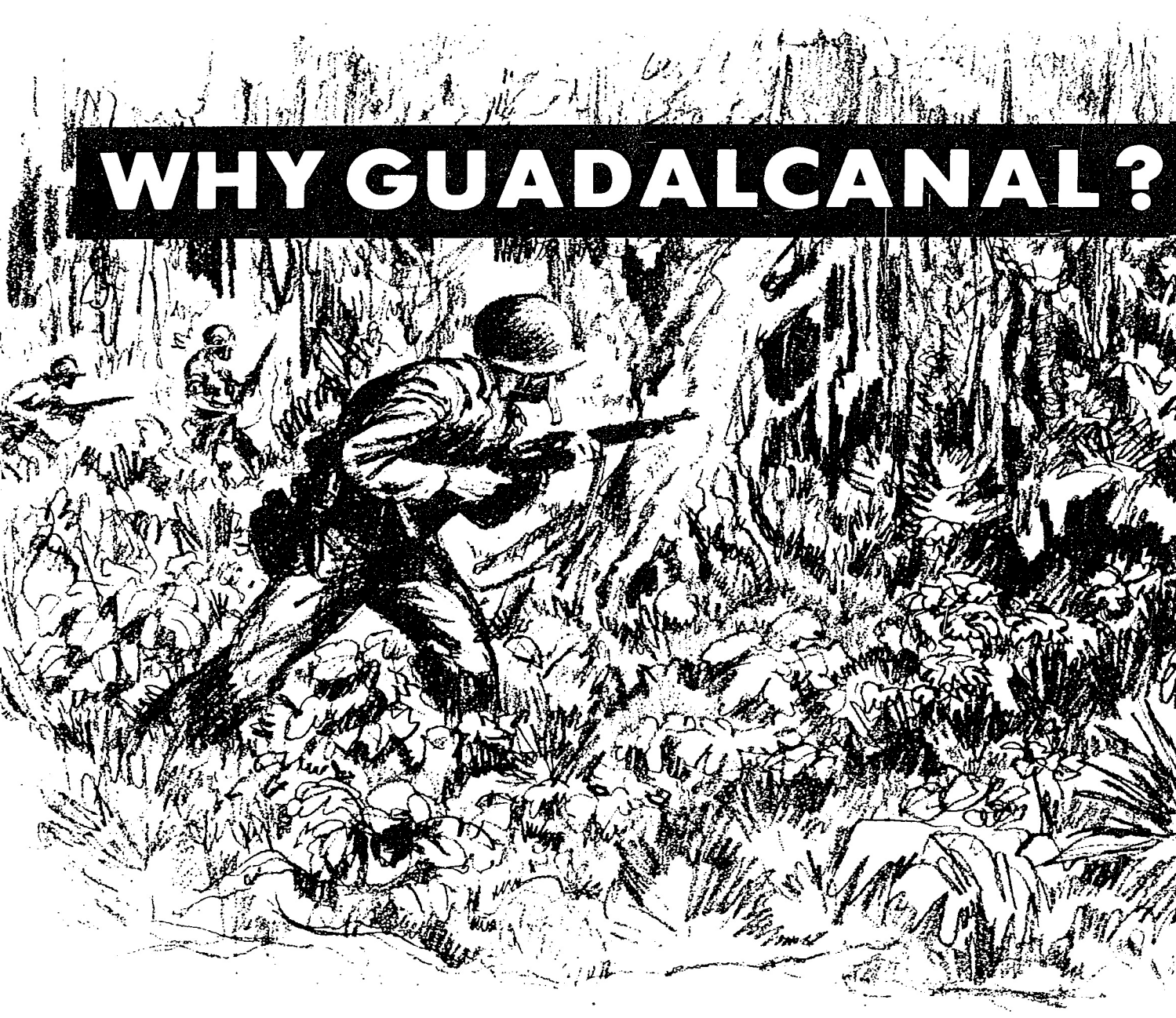
WHY GUADALCANAL?



Guadalcanal....

Time was when members of the First Marine Division proudly wore a shoulder patch that read "Guadalcanal," and everybody knew what it meant. But the years have slipped away, and today most recruits would be hard put to provide the background on how Guadalcanal earned its bloody immortality.

It was in 1942....36 years ago.

Indeed, people may have forgotten the specifics about Guadalcanal—where it was, what happened there and why it was important. Still, the name will always live in that curious way the world remembers certain names without really knowing why. Names like Tripoli, Inchon, Trafalgar, The Marne, Bastogne, El Alamein.

But why Guadalcanal? What was so special about it? To get a fuller picture, imagine this situation:

It is mid-1942. The Japanese dominate nearly half of the entire Pacific Ocean—roughly everything west of the International Date Line, from the Aleutian Islands in the north, perilously close to Australia in the south. This immense domain is presided over by the Imperial Japanese Navy. Its opposition is the crippled American fleet, still well below strength as a result of losses at Pearl Harbor.

The Japanese strategy is to establish such an enormous front in the Pacific that the Allies will wear themselves out trying to attack it and negotiate for peace from simple exhaustion. The current objective is to start strangling Australia and New Zealand into submission, basically by the process of encirclement and blockade.

To accomplish this the Japanese needed an airfield in the Southwest Pacific. Their choice of a spot: Guadalcanal, a British-owned island about 90 miles

Story by Irwin Ross

Official USMC Photos

An aerial photograph, taken in November 1942, showed Henderson Field after it had been captured from the Japanese on Guadalcanal in World War II.

Admiral Chester W. Nimitz awarded Navy Crosses to Marine pilots John Smith, Robert Galer and Marion Carl for downing 46 Japanese planes at Guadalcanal.

long and 30 miles wide, some 1,000 miles northeast of the Australian coast.

Thus, without really knowing it, the Japanese had chosen the battleground. For the Allies, it was a case of now or never if the enemy were to be checked.

The Japanese also had chosen the time, in a sense. By June of 1942 they had taken over Guadalcanal and had begun work on their airfield, which was scheduled to be in operation within two months. And though the Americans were hardly prepared for the undertaking, it nevertheless fell to them to invade Guadalcanal Island—at the precise moment that work on the airfield was almost completed but not yet usable by Japanese planes. Our invasion was beautifully timed to take place on August 7, 1942.

Guadalcanal is divided into three main parts: The southern shore is a hot jungle belt, wet and fertile. (At the time of the invasion, most of the island's 12,000 natives lived there.) Next is a central mountainous zone, the Kavo Range, with some peaks rising to a height of 8,000 feet. Along the northern shore is a level, hospitable, comparatively treeless plain, extending 15 miles inland in some places. Here, until the Japanese began their airfield, were large coconut palm plantations, many of them operated by the parent company of Lever Brothers, the soap manufacturers. It was this northern shore that we invaded.

Make no mistake—Guadalcanal was no ordinary invasion. It was our first. Even more...it was the first United States ground force offensive anywhere in World War II.

The 4,000 fighting men of the First Marine Division, assigned to this unprecedented test of the enemy's mettle, approached the undertaking with an air of

bravado. It was no secret: Casualties were expected to be heavy. The island was known to be an enemy "stronghold." (Even so, it was a shock to learn later that there were 7,500 Japanese troops on the island--nearly twice the number of Americans who went ashore.) The Marines were well trained, but they had never fired a shot in battle.

At 0614 on August 7, the first salvos from the naval support squadron reverberated across the water and our dive bombers shelled the beach as the "softening up" process began. Two hours later the landing barges headed toward shore. By then all signs of bravado had long since disappeared.

But then a wonderful surprise—something so unexpected that even today people are astonished to learn it: The landing on Guadalcanal was not one of the terrible bloodbaths that marked later assaults, such as Iwo Jima and Tarawa. We took our beachhead on Guadalcanal almost without firing a shot.

The Japanese had been caught entirely by surprise, and they had run—abandoning virtually everything behind them. Everything, that is, from stocks of canned crab meat to one nearly completed airfield, our primary objective.

The invasion was so easy that at first the Marines suspected they had been sucked into a gigantic ambush. But no trap was sprung, even though we knew from the mass of captured booty that thousands of enemy troops were on the island. There were even grumblings from the Marines, "Why don't they come out and fight?"

Thus, by most standards, the worst was over. But by Guadalcanal's standards, the battle had not even so much as begun. We had our beachhead and the airfield. And while we never lost either, it was to be six grueling, horror-filled months before we could actually call them our own.

The Marines had occupied a narrow coastal patch along the northern shore of Guadalcanal. It was an area roughly seven miles long and three miles deep—or about 21 square miles out of the island's total mass of 2,700. The remainder of Guadalcanal was wide open for the Japanese. There they could roam at will, and they could land, unopposed, anywhere along the 250 miles of coastline outside our little foothold.

Even more important were the seas offshore. Troops are effective only insofar as they can be supplied, and on Guadalcanal all supplies had to come in by sea. Thus, whoever controlled the waters, would in fact control the fate of the island. The Japanese were all too aware of this and acted with almost breathtaking speed. Early on the morning of August 9, we suffered a stunning defeat in the naval Battle of Savo Island, northwest of Guadalcanal.

A task force of Japanese cruisers and destroyers bore down on our warships and transports. In the action we lost the Australian cruiser *Canberra* and the American ships *Astoria, Vincennes* and *Quincy*. Worse still, the transports were now unprotected, and they had to withdraw before their unloading was complete.

For the sake of morale, it was just as well for the combat Marines ashore that they were generally unaware of what had happened, because, for all practical purposes, they were now marooned. However, there is some bliss in ignorance, and during the next two weeks, the men of the First Marine Division dug into strategic locations and amused themselves by swimming in the surf and even barbecuing the few Lever Brothers' cows that still roamed the copra plantations.

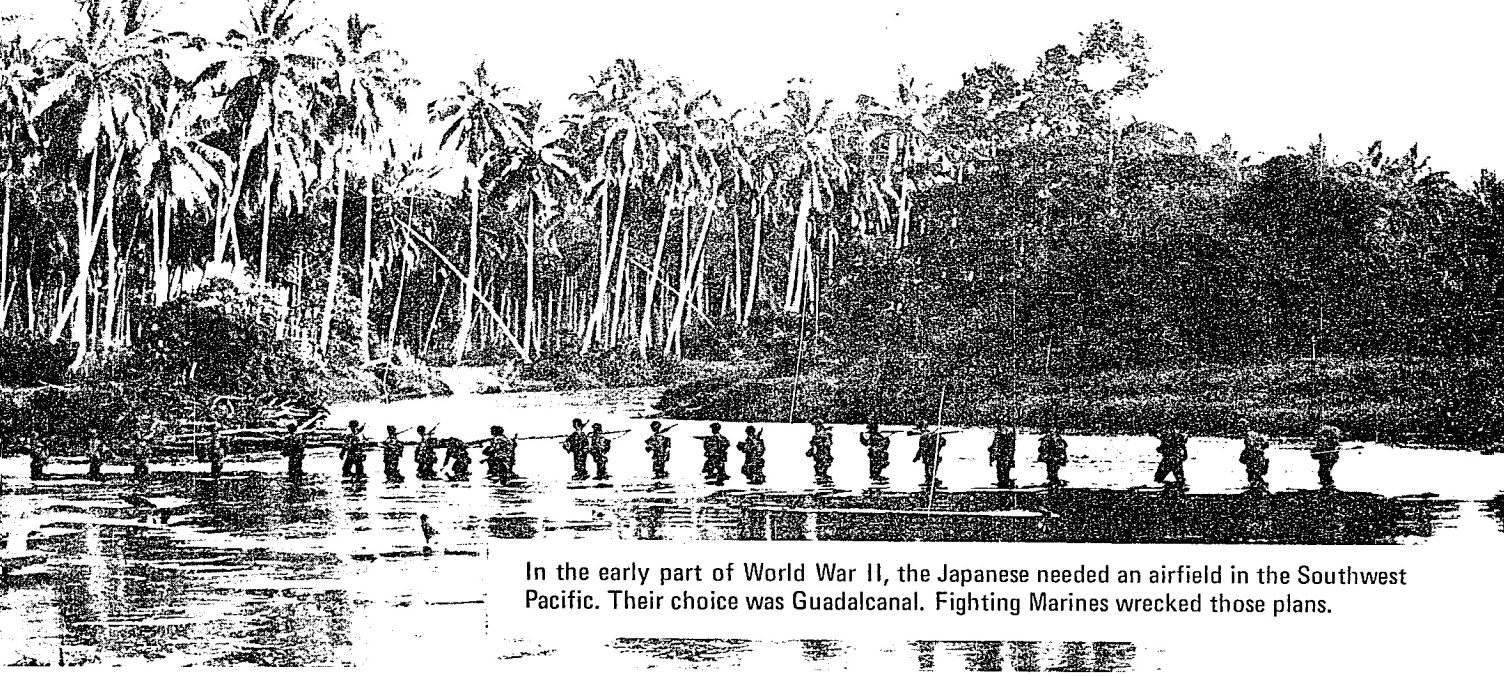
LtCol Evans F. Carlson (C) changed his socks in the Upper Lunga River while the 2nd Raider Bn. was on a 30-day patrol behind Japanese lines.

The finishing touches were put on the Japanese-built airfield, and there, on August 20, just 13 days after the original invasion, the first flight of American fighters and dive bombers landed, providing an even greater sense of security.

That was about three o'clock in the afternoon. Ten hours later the peace on Guadalcanal was abruptly shattered by the eruption of the wild terror of a full-fledged *banzai* charge. It was certainly one of the earliest of these suicide assaults experienced by Americans. From across the tiny Tenaru River, just east of the airfield, hundreds of Japanese began to shriek and to fire their weapons wildly. Flares exploded, bullets ripped off the bark of trees and thunked into the sandbags on our side of the river.

At 1:30 a.m. the enemy started across—wave after screaming wave. There was no finesse to the attack. It was an onslaught by the simple weight of numbers. The brunt of the attack was borne by fewer than 200 Marines, the group of troops that held the line at the mouth of the river. Somehow they managed to keep an estimated 1,000 enemy troops from advancing.

It wasn't until late that afternoon that reinforcements, including tanks, outflanked the enemy and finished the mopping up. A total of 871 Japanese



In the early part of World War II, the Japanese needed an airfield in the Southwest Pacific. Their choice was Guadalcanal. Fighting Marines wrecked those plans.

bodies were counted. We lost 28 men. One Japanese prisoner was taken.

This then, this savage "Battle of the Tenaru River" as it is called, was the curtain raiser. In effect, the enemy had given the Marines 14 days of rest. Now the struggle was to begin in earnest, for the Japanese were clearly determined to retake the island they had seemed to hand over so willingly.

Within 72 hours after the Tenaru River battle, a huge Japanese fleet was sighted heading for Guadalcanal. The South Pacific force, under the command of Vice Admiral Robert L. Ghormley, mustered what ships it had in an attempt to drive them off. The resulting action was a wild, confused, scrambling battle, during which the aircraft carrier *Enterprise* was bombed out of action. But American forces sank the Japanese carrier *Ryujo* and downed 96 of the enemy planes.

Most important, however, the Marine position ashore was saved. But one observer put his finger exactly on the situation when he characterized the beachhead as being like the heroine in an old-fashioned melodrama: She required saving anew in every act.

The next night, August 25, while the Marines were still out of breath and picking up the pieces—a tactical situation apparently well known to the Japanese—the enemy sneaked in with seven destroyers and landed a sizable force of men on Cape Esperance at the western tip of the island. Then, in order to get double duty out of their mission, the destroyers steamed past our shore positions, shelling them as they went by.

This was the first of a series of enemy landings that came to be called the "Tokyo Express," the lightning delivery of troops and supplies by Japanese cruisers and destroyers operating from impregnable bases farther north. The overall pattern was almost always the same: Land the troops so they could encircle us, then shell our coastal positions.

For the Marines, these bombardments were particularly brutal, since the ships were out of range of shore guns and there could be no retaliation. And psychologically, each invasion meant that additional enemy troops had been landed with whom the Marines eventually would have to do battle.

Unquestionably, the psychological part was the hardest of all to take. Not just the shellings of the Tokyo Express, but the whole fabric of things. The Marines were aware that the real fight was yet to come, and that they probably would have to face it without ground reinforcements. It was not a happy situation.

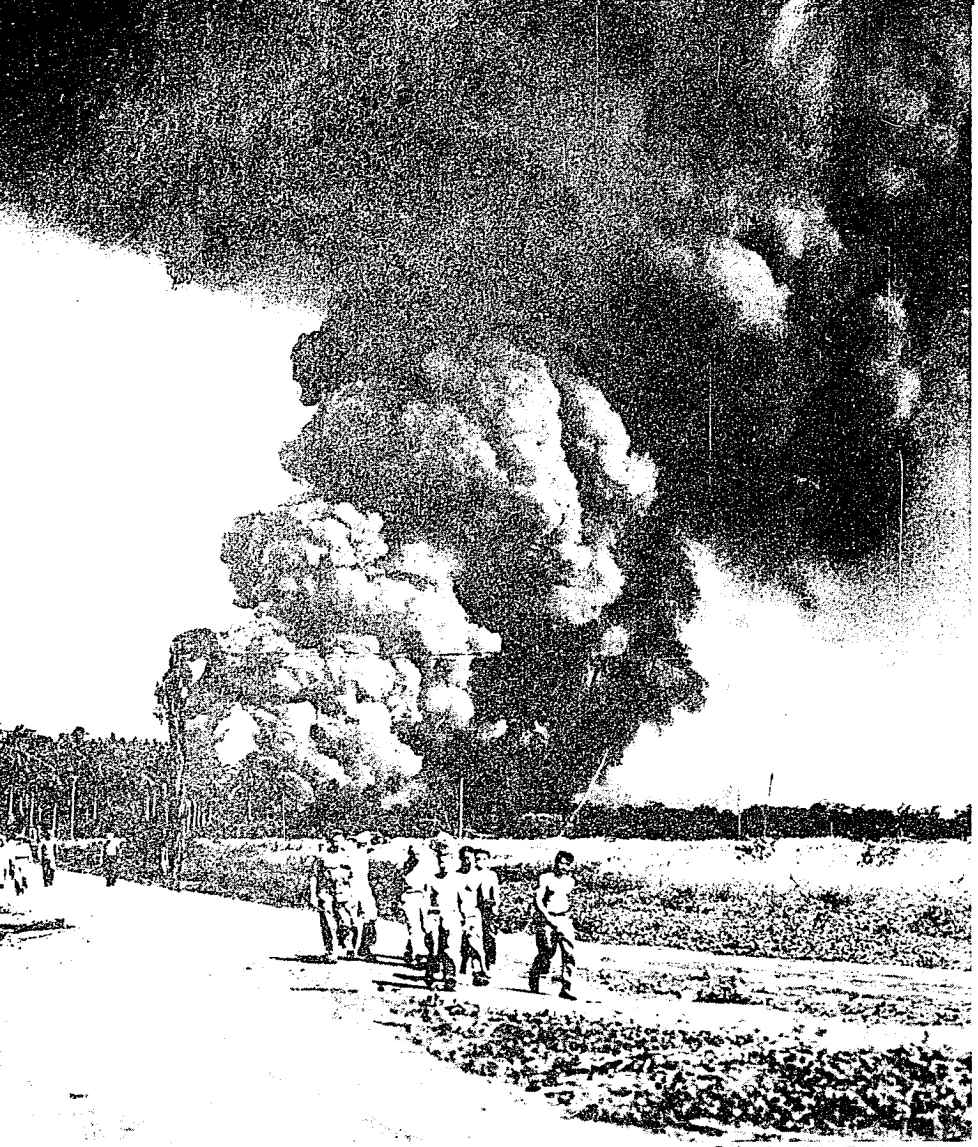
The enemy did everything in its power to heighten the tension. Every night there was a visit from "Oscar," a lone Japanese submarine that surfaced offshore and lobbed shells inland at random. Also there was "Louie the Louse," a plane that flew over regularly at night and first dropped a flare and then a single, sleep-shattering bomb. The Japanese rigged loudspeakers in trees and played records like "Home, Sweet Home." They listened carefully for anything they might hear from the American lines. Perhaps the most unnerving experience of all was to hear one's own name blast forth in the middle of the night—"You! You're next!"

And all this, of course, occurred in an atmosphere which in itself could wear a man down without any help from the enemy: Steaming, breathless humidity by day and as often as not wet, raw, penetrating cold by night.

After a time, some of the Marines became convinced that the Japanese intention was "not so much to kill us as to drive us crazy."

Even more pressing, however, was the practical matter of supplies. August was coming to an end, and in the three weeks since the invasion, not one C-ration or a single round of ammunition had come ashore. The Marines had reluctantly taken to eating captured Japanese food and even smoking the enemy's cigarettes. Shortages were mounting that only an American convoy could remedy. And that, the men thought, was about the least likely thing to arrive at Guadalcanal.

Those closing days of August and into early September were a period of spotty, indecisive actions. In the air, the balance was on our side. But despite our superior flying ability, the Tokyo Express ran on, and man by man, the enemy force was building. By the first week in September, one month after the initial landings, the Japanese had brought in 6,000 fresh troops to add to their original 7,500-man garrison. The Marines were without reinforcements



Submitted by Paul Sarokin

In November 1944, Guadalcanal shook as the Hell's Point ammo dump blew up. The Sixth Marine Division was staging there for the invasion of Okinawa.

and now were outnumbered by more than three to one. Something was indeed in the wind.

By September 12, the enemy had surrounded our seven-by-three-mile beachhead. That night the flicker of enemy flares was seen among the ridges along the entire length of the front to the south.

The attack, when it started, was from all three sides at once—east, west and south. The enemy came quietly at first, infiltrating the American lines, possibly in an attempt to assess our strength. But no real damage was done.

The next night was different, particularly along the ridges. The Japanese stormed forward by the thousands in the most determined attack thus far. They fired Roman candles, burned flares and shouted in a frenzied *banzai* charge. Estimates put their strength between 4,000 and 6,000 men, as against less than half that many Marines. In fact, the major impact of the attack—about 2,000 Japanese—was borne by the 300 or so members of Colonel Merritt A. Edson's special Raider force, which had come in from nearby Tulagi Island. Fortunately, the Marine artillery got the range at the crucial moment and helped break the back of the attack. Just how close the enemy approached may be judged by the fact that a Marine sergeant was bayoneted to death directly in front of the operations tent of Major General A. A. Vandegrift, commander of the invasion forces.

The ferocity of the struggle was even more apparent after it was all over. The ridges now were quiet, but fires smoldered in the grass, and there were burned patches here and there where grenades had exploded.

The top of one knoll had been scorched bald, and it was still smoking. It was up this hill that wave after wave of Japanese had tried to storm the heights. On their side of the hill lay perhaps 200 mutilated bodies, torn by grenades and artillery fire. On our sideof the hill were the Marine dead, along with dozens of Japanese. The corpses, lying motionless, were frequently in grotesque positions, still gripping one another as they had died in hand-to-hand combat.

They called it the "Battle of Lunga Ridge," and it left the Marines half exhausted from the simple impact of it. There had been mutterings in the past, but now the demands became insistent: "Where is the Navy?" the Marines asked, meaning, of course, "Where is the convoy?...Where are the supplies?... Where are the reinforcements?"

But the convoy was finally on its way. The Navy knew how desperately it was needed. And though a force of Japanese battleships and cruisers was en route from the north and the whole area was crawling with enemy submarines and patrolled by Japanese planes...this convoy *had* to get through. And so the Navy assigned to it the precious aircraft carrier *Wasp*.

But then—at 2:44 p.m. on September 15—only hours after the Marines had turned the tide at Lunga Ridge, the *Wasp* was hit by three torpedoes that set off thousands of lesser explosions from her own gasoline and ammunition. She was set afire so thoroughly that by nightfall she had been abandoned, and her ribs and frames could be seen outlined against the hull plates that glowed red above the waterline from the fiery heat they contained.

The loss of the carrier delayed the convoy three days, but on September 18, fully 42 days after the original invasion, 4,000 men of the Second Marine Division Regimental Combat Team swarmed ashore to join their weary comrades. They were dressed in fresh green dungarees, and, temporarily at least, they were a tough-talking bunch. Said one First Division veteran: "Cheez, these guys want to tell *us* about the war."

The arrival of the American reinforcements and the much-needed supplies seemed to spur the Japansese to new heights of determination. They began to build up their strength in a desperate effort to retake the island. The Tokyo Express was no longer a few destroyers

SgtMaj Jacob Vouza was visited by SgtMaj Leland Chapman (R) on Guadalcanal in 1943. Vouza, a Solomon Islands native, was badly wounded by the Japanese but he still managed to provide invaluable combat information to the Marines.

and some cruisers, but whole bristling squadrons of warships. In fact, as the weeks passed, enemy naval activity around Cape Esperance became so intense that the area earned the name "Sleepless Lagoon."

By mid-October, the Japanese had managed to put another 10,000 fresh troops ashore, bringing their total to about 22,000 men. And still they came. But sometimes we were lucky and caught them. On October 12, for instance, we repaid them for the loss of four of our own cruisers back in August. In the Battle of Cape Esperance, we sank three Japanese cruisers and four destroyers.

Yet the enemy's resilience approached the point of unbelievability. They were back just 72 hours later, on October 15, with more men. This time they brought a battleship along for protection. The shelling that night was particularly bad, but it was nothing compared with that of a week later.

The Japanese arrived with a full task force. They landed their troops and supplies, then steamed past our positions. The battleships opened up with such a merciless shelling that even some veterans ashore were heard to pray, "My God, my God, will they never stop?"

This time it was the Americans who were being "softened up." For four days the Japanese had been increasing the pressure against our lines. Now the shelling was the signal for the big push to retake the airfield.

In other battles, in other wars, men have fought for a town, a province, a mountain ridge. On Guadalcanal, men fought to control the space occupied by the bomb-shattered stump of a single palm tree that stood between the enemy and the airfield. There is perhaps no better index of the savageness of the struggle than the fact that on the night of October 15, the Japanese had captured one corner of the airfield—just one corner. With the coming of morning, every American who could fire a weapon, including cooks and bakers, drove back the enemy in a desperate counterattack that left both sides utterly spent.

Logically, perhaps, it was time that Japan wrote off Guadalcanal as a loss. But no. The Tokyo Express was back in operation 10 days later to deliver 1,500 additional troops. Nor were we exactly idle, either. The remainder of the Second Marine Division had landed, plus two Army regimental combat teams of the Americal Division, along with a scattering of other specialized Army units. Our total strength was brought to about 25,000 men.

If ever they were going to retake Guadalcanal, the Japanese knew that now was the time for an all-out effort. The wherewithal for that effort headed south on November 13—the biggest force ever: 13 destroyers, six light cruisers, two heavy cruisers, two battleships, plus who knows how many submarines. Behind them was a fleet of huge transports bearing more than 12,500 men in all.

The American ships met the task force head-on—in a furious and often point-blank engagement called, appropriately, the "Battle of Guadalcanal," for essentially that is what it was.

When it was over, we had lost two cruisers and five destroyers. But, for the enemy, the price was two battleships, one cruiser, three destroyers and two submarines. What really mattered, however, was that the seas had been swept clean of warships and our planes could go in almost unopposed and sink 11 transports and cargo ships. Of the 12,500 Japanese reinforcements, fewer than 4,000 made the shore, and they were mainly without supplies and ammunition.

To say that Guadalcanal was won that night is an over-simplification, but a permissible one. The Japanese Navy never again seriously menaced the area around Guadalcanal. And three months later, in February 1943, the enemy finally evacuated the remnants of its forces. Their commander later reported: "I had thirty thousand of the finest men. Ten thousand were killed. Ten thousand starved to death. Ten thousand were evacuated, too sick to fight."

This was an understatement. Closer to 24,000 Japanese died on Guadalcanal. We lost 1,600.

Guadalcanal, of course, is still there, and so is the airfield (named Henderson Field after a heroic Marine flier of the Battle of Midway), which still is in operation. Everything is quiet now. The soap manufacturers are back on the island, growing palms for coconut oil. In fact, except for some rusting equipment and a few shell craters, almost no scars remain to testify to the violence that took place there.

In the seas offshore there are no scars whatever. All that remains is a memory—and a name...Iron Bottom Bay, so-called for the ships sunk there during the struggle for Guadalcanal. Counting the major warships alone, there are 47 (2 aircraft carriers, 2 battleships, 12 cruisers, 25 destroyers, and 6 submarines) for a grand total of more than 390,000 tons.

Is all this sufficient to explain why Guadalcanal holds its special place of honor?

Not necessarily. Tales of almost equal horror and heroism may be found among any of a dozen different Pacific battlegrounds. Neither does Guadalcanal occupy its little niche in immortality because it was the first U.S. ground offensive of World War II.

It is significant, of course, that the "Battle of Guadalcanal" was one of the turning points in the war against Japan.

But the thing that is really special about the place is a matter of spirit. It is not that we invaded—but that we stayed. We stuck it out. That is why it is memorable to this day. With the odds against us, and in full view of an anxious and apprehensive world, we hung on through an all-but-hopeless situation.

The "Battle of Guadalcanal" was no sudden, shining bolt of bravery. It was much more than that. On Guadalcanal we proved the quiet truth of the old proverb, "Heroism is endurance for one moment more."