Guadalcanal

First step on the long road to Tokyo

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During the first six months of the Pacific War, the Japanese moved rapidly to ensconce themselves across the South and Southwest Pacific, with bases and outposts stretching from the Palaus, Carolines, and Bismarcks to the Marshalls, Gilberts and the Solomons. Moving ever closer to Australia, the forces of Imperial Japan pushed back the American, Dutch, and Commonwealth forces hastily thrown against them. For the first half of 1942, it seemed nothing could stop the Rising Sun.

Following the naval battles of the Coral Sea and Midway in the spring of 1942, however, the strategic balance in the Pacific shifted towards parity between the United States Navy and the Imperial Japanese Navy. Thus emboldened, Washington looked towards an operation that would shift the American war effort against Japan from a defensive to an offensive posture, in tune with the upcoming efforts against Germany and Italy in North Africa. The logical place for such an attack was the island of Guadalcanal, the lynchpin of the Solomons chain and, since July, home to a small Japanese garrison. From there, Allied forces could march up the chain of islands running straight to Japan itself, while blocking any thrust from that direction towards Australia.

Operation WATCHTOWER landed the 1st Marine Division on Guadalcanal on the morning of 7 August 1942. For the next three months the Marines struggled against the Japanese defenders and the island's miserable climate, carving out a small bridgehead three miles deep by six miles wide and taking the island's main airfield. From the beginning, Japanese resistance was fierce, not only on land but by sea and in the air as well. Forced to stage naval forces from their base at Rabaul in the Bismarcks northwest of the Solomons, the Japanese took to running ships down the chain of islands known as "the Slot" so as to reach the waters around Guadalcanal at night, thus avoiding American naval and land-based air power. The goals of the Japanese ships were both tactical and strategic. They escorted reinforcements and supply transports, and hoped to intercept and destroy American naval vessels supporting the Marines on the island. The result was a series of dramatic night-time sea battles that saw the first sustained naval combat between USN and IJN surface vessels during the war.

Savo Island 9 Aug 42

The first naval response by Japan to the American invasion of Guadalcanal came in the form of a sortie by Vice Admiral Gunichi Mikawa's Eighth Fleet at Rabaul, about six hundred miles from the fighting on Guadalcanal. Mikawa sailed towards the waters between Guadalcanal and Tulagi, an area that would become known as Ironbottom Sound. His goal was the concentration of Allied naval power

assisting the invading Marines. During the night of August 8-10th, he found what he was looking for.

The Japanese force of seven cruisers and two destroyers—all that could be rounded up at short notice from Rabaul—faced a much larger Allied force of nine cruisers and eight destroyers, but the difference was not nearly as great as it seemed. For one thing, the Allied ships were divided into multiple groups to cover the various paths into the waters around Guadalcanal from the Slot, the passage leading to the north and ultimately to Rabaul. Mikawa's force slammed into a portion of the Allied flotilla south of Savo Island after eluding the Allied picket destroyers, and savaged HMAS Canberra and USS Chicago, sinking the former and severely damaging the latter. For some reason neither of the Allied cruisers nor the two destroyers with them notified the other defending ships, so that when Mikawa's force rounded the southern tip of Savo Island and encountered the northern group of defenders, the results were more of the same. The American cruisers Vincennes, Quincy, and Astoria were sunk, leaving the Allied fleet largely helpless.

Negligence, inattention, and plain ineptitude had handed the US Navy one of its worse defeats in its history, but fate at last intervened to spare the Americans a strategic debacle. Mikawa, worried about American carrier aircraft if he stayed too late in the area, failed to send his ships in to attack the transports near Lunga Point; he was unaware the US CVs were no longer in the vicinity. Content to have inflicted a grievous and demoralizing blow, the Japanese admiral turned his ships north and withdrew to Rabaul. It was the first, but by no means the last, major confrontation in the waters around Guadalcanal, and while it had been a substantial defeat for the Americans, it was not a decisive victory for Japan—the battle for the Solomons would go on.

Cape Esperance 11 Oct 42

The Japanese would continue to pressure the American forces fighting for Guadalcanal. One such attempt came in mid-October, when Rear Admiral Aritomo Goto led a squadron of cruisers and destroyers into Ironbottom Sound to shell American positions. Guarding the Sound that night was Rear Admiral Norman Scott with his own cruiser and destroyer force, built around his flagship, the heavy cruiser San Francisco, which unfortunately lacked the most modern and capable US radar suite. Still, Scott's two light cruisers, Helena and Boise, were outfitted with over a dozen 6" guns apiece, and had more modern electronics.

Shortly before midnight on the 11th, the light cruisers detected Goto's force coming down the Slot. Not sure of the information he was getting from his flagship's radar, Scott kept his ships in line formation and closed the range with the attackers. Though taken by surprise, the Japanese gave a good account of themselves; losing one of their three heavy cruisers and a destroyer, and having another cruiser seriously damaged, the IJN force nevertheless managed to cripple Boise, and sink or damage another two US destroyers. With almost a two to one advantage in ships, Scott had failed to win a decisive victory. Goto died in the battle, but not the Japanese determination to challenge the USN for control of

the Solomons; it would take many more nighttime clashes before Japan would concede defeat.

Cruiser night action 13 Nov 42

As was to be the case throughout the Pacific war, air power set the limits on the use of sea power. Henderson Field on Guadalcanal offered the Americans an incalculable advantage in controlling the Solomons, as it allowed them to base combat aircraft at the point of the greatest need. The Japanese came to realize that if they were to hold Guadalcanal, much less evict the Americans from the island, they would have to neutralize Henderson.

Vice Admiral Abe's job in mid-November was to do precisely that, while also reinforcing the hard-pressed Japanese garrison. In the early morning hours of 13 November 1942, Abe led his force into Ironbottom Sound. He had two battleships with him this time, for the express purpose of pounding the American airfield into oblivion; Hiei and Kirishima were, along with the supply ships they accompanied, the main reason for the entire sortie. Escorted by at least nine destroyers and the light cruiser Nagara, the battlewagons represented the heaviest concentration of naval power the Japanese had yet committed to the battle for the Solomons.

Facing Abe was Rear Admiral Daniel Callaghan, with his flag in the heavy cruiser San Francisco, and who was thus burdened with substandard radar intelligence. The Americans were once again in line ahead formation when they encountered Abe's force just before 2 AM. At amazingly close range—perhaps as close as 1000 yards—the two forces slugged it out in the darkness. Callaghan's cruisers gave a good account of themselves, but at a terrible cost. Both the heavy cruisers, San Francisco and Portland, took serious damage, and the light cruiser Atlanta sank; Helena and Juneau also took major hits. Five US destroyers went to the bottom as well, and Juneau succumbed to a Japanese submarine the next day (along with all five of the Sullivan brothers).

For his part, Abe failed in his mission to bombard Henderson Field, and he was unable to land his supplies as well. Though the IJN lost five destroyers sunk or damaged during the fighting, the biggest loss was Hiei, which after being pounded mercilessly during the night battle fell victim to the Americans as she made the way back to Rabaul the next day. Still, though they had turned back the Japanese again, the Americans had also shown they had a lot to learn about night fighting. Too many more "victories" like this one and the US Navy would run out of ships.

Guadalcanal 14 Nov 42

Shortly before midnight on 14 November 1942 the Japanese made what would turn out to be their last major naval attempt to turn the tide at Guadalcanal. After a successful bombardment of Henderson Field earlier that day [*The Naval Battle of Guadalcanal (Alt) – 0030*] Vice Admiral Kondo led a powerful force built around Kirishima and the heavy cruisers Atago and Takao past Savo Island into Ironbottom Sound. The Americans, now under Rear Admiral Willis Lee, were running low on ships, having lost most of the cruisers the USN had in the region

to sinking or serious damage. Facing Kondo, though, were two fast battleships newly arrived near Guadalcanal. Washington and South Dakota sported nine 16" guns apiece in their main batteries, and were more than a match for the Japanese heavies coming their way. The American weakness was, predictably, in cruisers; there were none, only a quartet of destroyers and a handful of PT boats to screen the battleships.

In the ensuing battle [*The Naval Battle of Guadalcanal – 2300*], radar once more played a vital role, giving Lee the knowledge he needed to engage the Japanese force effectively. Though South Dakota, through a series of mechanical difficulties, wound up doing little more than absorbing a prodigious quantity of Japanese shells during the battle, Washington had better luck. Closing to what amounted to point-blank range for its 16" rifles, the big ship pounded Kirishima into a smoldering hulk and followed that up by sinking a Japanese destroyer as well. Though all four of Lee's destroyers were either sunk or crippled, he came away from the battle with a decisive victory. Kondo's survivors limped home up the Slot, and with them went any chance that the Japanese could reinforce their troops on Guadalcanal, or stop the American advance.

One intriguing "what if" remains, however. The Japanese could have committed the world's most powerful warship, Yamato, to the battle. *The Naval Battle of Guadalcanal (Alt) – 2300* examines what might have happened had that occurred. Certainly, the Japanese ship's 18" guns, employed effectively, could have caused Admiral Lee a great deal of grief. Given the fate of Kondo's other BBs, though, perhaps the IJN command was wise not to send their prize vessel into the deadly waters of Ironbottom Sound.

Tassafaronga 30 Nov 42

The Naval Battle of Guadalcanal didn't end the fighting around Savo Island, however. It just caused the Japanese to shift tactics. Having seen the futility of sending heavy forces down the Slot, in the face of superior American radar at night and aviation during the day, the IJN turned to the one part of its force the Americans couldn't easily match: the destroyers. Nimble, generally well skippered, and armed with the deadly Long Lance torpedoes, the Japanese tin cans were admirably suited for operations in the Solomons. Fast and small enough to get in and out during the hours of darkness, and hard to hit from the air, the destroyers could be loaded with supplies at the cost of decreased combat effectiveness.

On the night of 30 November 1942, that's exactly what the Japanese did, sending a force of eight destroyers into the Sound [*The Battle Off Tassafaronga – 2300*]. Most of the Japanese ships were burdened with supplies for the soldiers still fighting on Guadalcanal, but Rear Admiral Tanaka's force was still deadly, as the waiting Americans discovered. Though outgunning the Japanese substantially, the American force of four heavy cruisers, a light cruiser, and four destroyers was caught by surprise when alert Japanese lookouts spotted the line of defenders in the dark. At the cost of one destroyer sunk, the Japanese used their torpedoes to sink the heavy cruiser Northampton and damage three others.

The supplies, too, made it ashore. It was a painful reminder of how deadly the IJN still was, and how much the USN still had to learn.

PT Action 11 Jan 43

As 1942 drew to a close, the Japanese limited themselves to destroyer runs into the Sound, supplying their forces on Guadalcanal as best they could. The Americans, for their part, increasingly relied on PT boats to halt or at least harass these resupply missions. Small, fast, lightly constructed wooded vessels, the PTs were little more than speedboats with guns and torpedoes. Powered by souped-up gasoline-fueled engines, the boats were deathtraps when facing serious opposition, so their tactics relied on speed and hit and run attacks, where their torpedoes could do some damage.

On the night of 11 January 1943, four Japanese destroyers began their run into the Sound [*PT Action – 0030*]. It led to an action that was fairly typical of the sort of combat the PT boats often got into. In this case, six American PTs engaged the Japanese ships in a swirling nighttime melee. The results were inconclusive; two PT boats sank, while one Japanese destroyer may have been damaged. It was a typical night in the life of a PT boat crew in the Solomons—dangerous, and seemingly futile. But the constant threat of the small boats took its toll on the Japanese, too. They could never be sure whether, out there in the gloom, a force of aggressive Americans lay in wait for the Tokyo Express.

Operation KE 1 Feb 43

On the first day of February 1943 there occurred what may have been the most intense PT boat battle of the war, when a group of American PT boats and minelayers intercepted a large force of Japanese destroyers once again moving down the Slot to support the troops on Guadalcanal .[*Operation KE – 2300*]. The battle began in the afternoon, with intense air activity that continued into the night, and quickly degenerated into close-range knife fights between the attacking PT boats and the Japanese destroyers. As was usual in these contests, what the participants saw and what could be verified later often differed. The Americans fired something less than 20 torpedoes and sunk one Japanese ship, while losing three PTs. For the men involved, though, it seemed a lot more dramatic. Many of the PTs that survived did so only through heroic efforts and quick thinking on the part of the young commanders and crews.

Operation KE marked the last true PT boat battle around Guadalcanal. The Japanese forces on the island were running out of time, and the IJN was running out of ways to keep them fighting. Japanese resistance on Guadalcanal ended in late February 1943, though struggle for the Pacific, and the Solomons, went on.

Battle of Kolombangara 13 July 43

Guadalcanal was only the beginning of the long struggle for the Solomons. The Americans continued their island-hopping strategy, while the Japanese continued

to rely on night time convoys, the fabled “Tokyo Express,” to reinforce their garrisons and harass American invasion forces. Naturally, the USN took steps to intercept these nightly forays, and was growing increasingly competent in its use of radar. Unfortunately, the Americans were also growing somewhat complacent, relying on their technology to give them an edge while forgetting that technology cuts both ways.

On the night of 12-13 July 1943, the USN found out the truth of that axiom when Admiral Ainsworth’s cruiser and destroyer force ran into the Tokyo Express off of Kolombangara [*The Battle of Kolombangara – 0110*, *The Battle of Kolombangara – 0200*]. The Japanese force of Rear Admiral Izaki was formidable, consisting of nine destroyers or destroyer transports and the light cruiser Jintsu. The American flotilla was even more imposing, being built around three light cruisers and no less than ten destroyers—two full Destroyer Squadrons, DesRons 12 and 21.

Early on 13 July, the American force received word of the oncoming Japanese. By 0100 or so the Americans had radar and visual contact with the oncoming Japanese, and the stage was set for what should have been a devastating American radar-directed attack. Unfortunately for—and unknown to—the Americans, the Japanese had finally figured out a way to if not counter then at least to exploit the American advantage in radar. Izaki’s ships fielded primitive radar detectors, which could detect the emissions of the American SC and SG sets at ranges greater than the sets themselves could detect the Japanese ships. Consequently, the Japanese became aware of the American ships hours before the Americans detected the IJN ships. While Ainsworth was preparing to engage, Izaki’s force was launching Long Lances at the American ships.

Though HMNZS Leander, one of Ainsworth’s cruisers, took a torpedo and sustained heavy damage from the initial onslaught of Long Lances, the American force escaped serious injury initially. Unfortunately, Ainsworth misinterpreted events, and in the confusion of the battle thought he was doing far better than he actually was. While the American force pounded Jintsu into oblivion, no other Japanese ship was seriously harmed, For their part, the Japanese made good use of their radar detectors, and over the course of the next hour or so managed to seriously damage Honolulu and St. Louis as well as the destroyer Gwin, which had to be scuttled later that morning. Moreover, the IJN managed to accomplish its primary mission of landing supplies for the Japanese forces fighting on Vela.

Kolombangara was a humiliating defeat for the US Navy. Ainsworth had relied on radar to an extent he grew complacent, and his inability to keep track of where his ships were and where the enemy was in the admittedly confusing night battle resulted in some poor decisions and ineffective use of his ships. Radar would ultimately prove to be a hugely effective tool, but it would go for naught unless the Navy’s tactical commanders could use it correctly, and figure out ways to best the Japanese in close actions.

Cape St. George 26 November 43

For months the campaign for the Solomons wore on, but the end was drawing near as 1943 waned. With the Americans on Bougainville and setting their sites on Buka, the Japanese were scrambling to hold on to some small part of the island chain. On the night of 26 November 1943 a small force of destroyers dropped off supplies at Buka, the last stop before New Ireland, New Britain, and the main Japanese base at Rabaul. After dropping off their cargoes, the IJN ships turned to make their escape. Waiting for them was a small force of American destroyers.[*The Battle off Cape St. George – 0150*]

Unlike in earlier battles, though, this time the Americans had their ducks in a row. Whether it was because the small force of a half-dozen destroyers wasn't commanded by a barnacle-laden Admiral, or for other reasons, the USN managed to acquit itself admirably in this action, the last surface battle of the Solomon's campaign and the last major naval skirmish before the struggle for Saipan began in the new year. Spotting the Japanese on radar, and managing this time to take advantage of their knowledge, the American tin cans used their torpedoes to good effect. Two IJN ships went down in the opening torpedo attack, and another fell to gunfire as the Americans closed in for the kill. So effective and aggressive was the USN attack that the Japanese were unable to mount an effective response; no US ships were damaged seriously in the engagement.

Cape St. George marked a turning point in the naval war with Japan. After the Solomons campaign, there would never again be a situation where the two sides were relatively evenly matched and situated so that repeated surface engagements were common. From now on the war would be largely one of carrier task forces against land-based air power, with the occasional one-sided surface fight to keep the battleship admirals on their toes. But naval warfare was changing, and the days of the gun-armed ship were drawing to a close. Only the geography and peculiar character of the Solomons fighting had allowed surface engagements of such quantity and quality as had occurred from mid-1942 through the end of 1943. It was the high point of the cruiser and destroyer in traditional naval combat, and its like would never again be seen on the high seas.