

# Guadalcanal Campaign Notes

The Guadalcanal campaign was a significant American offensive following the dark days of Pearl Harbor. It was fought on the ground, in the water, and in the air. Most people are familiar with the bitter battles fought by the American Marines and Army on the island of Guadalcanal which made famous such names as Henderson Field, Bloody Ridge, and the Sea Horse. But at the same time these battles were being fought, significant naval battles were happening in the waters between Guadalcanal and Savo islands, in an area that would become known as "Iron Bottom Sound" by virtue of the large number of ships sunk there.

## Radar

These naval battles were fought almost exclusively at night, timed by the Japanese to avoid the superior American air power originating from Henderson Field and the American carriers. But by using darkness to avoid American planes, the Japanese would leave themselves vulnerable to another American advantage: that of radar. With the superior radar capabilities of its ships, the American naval forces were able to maneuver in advance of the Japanese arrival and with a few exceptions, were not caught by surprise. The American ships employed two types of radar, SC and the improved SG radar. As the campaign progressed, more and more of the American ships were equipped with radar and it became harder and harder for the Japanese to penetrate the American naval defenses and reach their beleaguered ground forces on the island itself. At this time in the war, a few Japanese destroyers were equipped with an early version of the Type 22 radar, which was only completely implemented later in the war and was never fully tied into their fire control. In this game, the destroyers equipped with Type 22 radar are specified, but the range associated with this early version of Type 22 radar is reduced reflecting its initial implementation.

## American Forces

The American naval forces defending Guadalcanal Island range from the huge battleships Washington and South Dakota down to the small PT-Boats which swarmed from Tulagi. Despite the narrow channels that cut between Guadalcanal, Florida, and Savo Islands, the defense of Guadalcanal was so important to the Americans that they committed these large battleships to its defense. Other than the Naval Battle of Guadalcanal, the battles were fought by task forces of cruisers and destroyers for the most part. And the small but fast PT-Boat made an effective deterrent to any nighttime entrance into Iron Bottom Sound. Speed and torpedoes were the PT-Boat's only real competitive advantage against Japanese cruisers and destroyers.

## Japanese Forces

With no ability to maintain naval forces near to the fighting on Guadalcanal, the Japanese were forced to adopt a strategy of sailing down the chain of Solomon Islands by day to reach Guadalcanal for a night battle and to return home before they were attacked by American air power. This lane to Guadalcanal became known as "The Slot" and the nature of the Japanese forays became so repetitive that they became known as the "Tokyo Express". With two notable exceptions, these attacks were conducted with a combination of cruisers and destroyers.

When the campaign had reached a peak in November, the Japanese committed two of their battleships, the Kirishima and the Hiei. However these converted battlecruisers had insufficient armor to face full sized American battleships and had no great advantage over even American cruisers. The huge Japanese battleship Yamato was never committed by the Japanese, held in reserve by Yamamoto for a decisive naval battle that never occurred. In one alternative scenario in this game, it can be explored what might have happened had the Yamato faced the Washington and South Dakota in Iron Bottom Sound.

Finally, as the campaign drew to a close, the Japanese were forced to use their destroyers as supply ships in a desperate attempt to maintain their ground forces on the Island. The battles from November to February generally consist of these Japanese destroyer groups attempting to get past American cruisers, destroyers, and swarms of PT-Boats defending the island.

## **Conclusion**

The naval battles of Guadalcanal form an interesting part of the naval history of the United States. From the defeat of Savo Island to the victory of Guadalcanal, from the battleships Washington and South Dakota, to the numerous PT-Boats, these battles are both varied and significant. Fought in the dark over glowing radar screens and with the splash of torpedoes signifying imminent danger, they are a unique collection of naval battles unlike any others before or since.

## **Bibliography**

The Struggle for Guadalcanal, August 1942 – February 1943, Samuel Eliot Morison, Castle Books, 2001.

Guadalcanal Decision at Sea, The Naval Battle of Guadalcanal, November 13-15, 1942, Eric Hammel, 1988.

Destroyers of World War II, An International Encyclopedia, M. J. Whitley, Naval Institute Press, 1988.