

Operation Watchtower

Soldiers Were Key in World War II's First U.S. Offensive

By Lt. Col. Greg Lane, U.S. Army Reserve retired

From August 1942 through February 1943, World War II in the Pacific centered on the tough, bloody action around Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands. The Army played a significant role in the campaign, which officially was known as Operation Watchtower.

Operation Watchtower was the first American offensive of World War II, coming ahead of both the Allied offensive in New Guinea in October 1942 and the Allied landings in North Africa the following month. It began with the amphibious assault to take Guadalcanal as well as nearby Tulagi, Gavutu and Tanambogo.

The Guadalcanal campaign was extremely important for the Army, its sister services, and for the nation's overall war effort in the Pacific Theater. It affected the remainder of World War II, with American forces continuing the offensive across the Pacific until victory over Japan was secured in 1945. The attrition of Japanese forces was pronounced, the ability to defeat the Japanese on the ground was proven, and future promising leaders were identified or validated. It helped pave the way for our ultimate victory over Japan in World War II, and gave us new innovations in warfare such as time-on-target artillery fire and ground-directed close-air support.

Graveyard of Japanese Army

For the Japanese, seeking to position themselves to either isolate or assault Australia, winning at Guadalcanal was important to blunt Allied pushback on their plans. For the Americans, Guadalcanal was vital in beginning and maintaining the offensive against the Japanese in the wake of the U.S. victory at Midway in June 1942.

One indication of the importance of this campaign was that President Franklin D. Roosevelt mentioned it six times—more than any other battle—during the wartime press conferences he delivered. Another indication is a quote from Japanese Maj. Gen. Kiyotake Kawaguchi, commander of the 35th Infantry Brigade. “Guadalcanal is no longer merely a name of an island in Japanese military history,” he said. “It is the name of the graveyard of the Japanese army.”

This operation was the first of what would become many successful American amphibious assaults during the war, with lessons learned there playing a key role in those future successes. Prior to this operation, whether amphibious assaults could succeed was an open question. The failure of the Gallipoli campaign in World War I cast a long shadow in the minds of many political and military leaders.

Operation Watchtower caught the Japanese by surprise, and initial landings at Guadalcanal on Aug. 7, 1942, were unopposed. The Japanese airfield construction unit withdrew

into the jungle away from the beaches during the preliminary U.S. naval bombardment. However, the Japanese special naval troops stationed on the nearby islands gave a spirited defense of Tulagi, Gavutu and Tanambogo. U.S. Marines secured these islands by the end of Aug. 8. But Japanese naval forces defeated U.S. naval forces around Guadalcanal in early August, beginning a seesaw contest on land, sea and air that would last until the Japanese withdrawal in February 1943.

The Japanese found themselves in a grinding attrition campaign, losing valuable troops, ships, planes and skilled aircraft crews. Their 2nd and 38th Infantry divisions both were severely mauled in the fighting and served only in garrison and defensive duties for the remainder of the war. And while U.S.



naval losses were heavy, the U.S. shipbuilding program was gearing up to become “the arsenal of democracy.” Meantime, the Japanese shipbuilding program was already at maximum capacity and would be starved of raw materials by U.S. submarines and air attacks as the war went on. Perhaps the most painful loss for the Japanese was their loss of trained, experienced aircrews. The skill level of the Japanese pilots noticeably dropped off as the fighting around Guadalcanal wore on.

The aura of the invincible Japanese soldier was quickly shattered at Guadalcanal. American soldiers and Marines gave better than they received in subsequent fighting and quickly realized that their Japanese opponents, though tough, were not unbeatable. This understanding began in the initial fighting and continued throughout the seven-month campaign.

The Marines saw it while repelling the first Japanese assault along the Ilu River on Aug. 21, 1942. The attacking Japanese Ichiki Detachment was destroyed, and the detachment’s commander committed suicide. The myth of the Japanese superman in jungle fighting was dispelled. The Army learned this firsthand later at Guadalcanal while defending the eastern side of the U.S. defensive line in the Battle for Henderson Field

Oct. 23–26, 1942. Here, the U.S. 164th Infantry Regiment held its ground and inflicted more than 1,000 Japanese casualties. For the U.S. forces, this knowledge inspired great confidence that we could and would win.

Operation Watchtower also had a positive impact on the flow of troops, ships and aircraft to the Pacific Theater. Though British and American leaders and planners had agreed to a “defeat Germany first” approach, U.S. Navy Adm. Ernest King, chief of naval operations, believed that remaining on the defensive in the Pacific would allow the Japanese a respite to greatly strengthen their defenses to repel the coming American push across the Pacific toward Japan. Gen. George C. Marshall Jr., Army chief of staff, backed King’s desire to begin pushing back the Japanese in the Pacific.

This forced the Japanese to divert units from reinforcing their effort in New Guinea and redirect them to trying to push the Marines off Guadalcanal. Additionally, it drew the attention of Roosevelt to order Army and Navy reinforcements that could be spared to help take Guadalcanal. This caused American forces in the Pacific to grow, though not as fast as in the European Theater, and ultimately paved the way



A combat artist's drawing depicts two privates operating a machine gun inside a dugout during Operation Watchtower.

All drawings from Library of Congress/Howard Brodie

for the Allied drive from Australia and the American drive through the Central Pacific.

Importance of Logistics

Operation Watchtower impacted how U.S. forces would fight throughout the remainder of World War II. Lessons learned during the Guadalcanal landings helped refine command relationships in amphibious assaults. The complexity and difficulty of supplying a major combat operation 3,500 miles from Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, was brought home to the Army and other services during Operation Watchtower. Most

commanders previously had not realized the logistical difficulties, from transport times across thousands of nautical miles to combat loading for amphibious assaults.

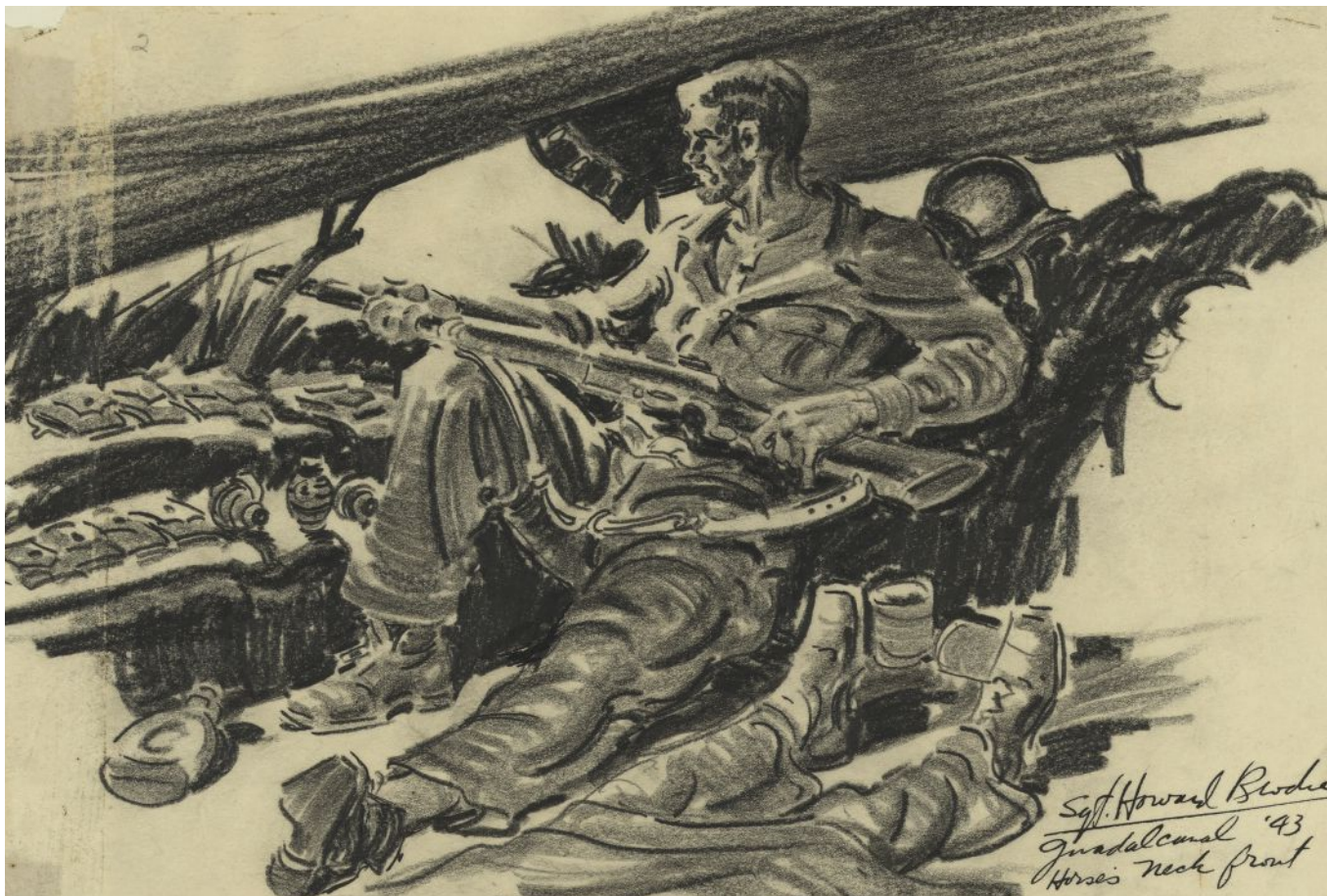
Time-on-target artillery fire made its initial appearance in the history of warfare in January 1943, with the Army's 25th Infantry Division artillery supporting the battle to take the high ground known as the Galloping Horse in the Gifu complex on Guadalcanal. American forces at Guadalcanal also used close-air support directed from the ground, a first for the Army in World War II. The 25th Infantry Division was the pioneer in this practice, using Navy dive-bombers with depth charges on fortified Japanese positions. This method was effective and led the way for further development of close-air support during the war.

The Army saw two key rising stars emerge at Guadalcanal. Then-Maj. Gen. J. Lawton Collins commanded the 25th Infantry Division. His attention to the training and preparation of the unit before it deployed from Hawaii to Guadalcanal would pay rich dividends in combat. Collins earned the Silver Star—and the nickname “Lightning Joe”—for heroism and leadership during the fighting. He later commanded VII Corps in the Northwest European battles of 1944–45, then rose to four-star rank, serving as Army chief of staff during the Korean War. He was rated as the best corps commander in Northwest Europe by Gen. Omar Bradley at the end of World War II.

Then-Maj. Gen. Alexander Patch commanded the Americal Division from its formation in New Caledonia in early 1942 through its deployment and first combat action in Guadalcanal. Patch then rose to command XIV Corps, formed in December 1942 during the latter part of Operation Watchtower and consisting of the Americal and 25th Infantry divisions, the 2nd Marine Division and the 147th Infantry Regiment. Under Patch's command of XIV Corps, Guadalcanal was finally secured in February 1943, and he earned both the Army and Navy Distinguished Service medals for his leadership. He later commanded Seventh Army through the battles of Northwest Europe in 1944–45. Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower thought highly of him, and Patch is sometimes referred to as the most underrated Army-level commander of World War II. He rose to the rank of lieutenant general before his death in late 1945, and was posthumously promoted to a fourth star in 1954.

The Americal Division, which began deploying to Guadalcanal in October





A soldier keeps watch in a Guadalcanal foxhole while his buddy rests.

1942, has the distinction of being the only American division formed outside of U.S. territory during World War II. (It was also the only division formed outside of U.S. territory during the Vietnam War.) Activated in New Caledonia in 1942, it was comprised of three activated National Guard regiments: the 132nd Infantry Regiment (Illinois), the 164th Infantry Regiment (North Dakota) and the 182nd Infantry Regiment (Massachusetts). The 164th was the first U.S. Army unit to engage in an offensive operation in World War II in the fighting near Henderson Field in late October 1942.

Medal of Honor Recipients

The 25th Infantry Division was formed in 1941 out of two regiments of the Hawaiian Division: the 27th and 35th Infantry regiments. They were joined by the 298th Infantry Regiment of the Hawaiian National Guard. Interestingly, that division, along with the 24th Infantry Division (also formed out of the Hawaiian Division), were the first Army units to see combat in World War II, when both were attacked by Japanese aircraft on Dec. 7, 1941.

The 25th Infantry Division had in its ranks all three Army Medal of Honor recipients at Guadalcanal. Then-Capt. Charles Davis was serving as battalion executive officer, 2nd Battalion, 27th Infantry Regiment in January 1943. During his battalion's assault on Hill 53, he volunteered to carry messages forward to the companies leading the assault, then remained forward and led the subsequent attack the following

morning. He helped knock out several positions with hand grenades and then, armed with only his pistol and rifle, drove the remaining Japanese defenders off the hill, inspiring other troops to continue the attack.

The other two Medal of Honor recipients, Sgt. William Fournier and Technician Fifth Grade Lewis Hall, M Company, 35th Infantry Regiment, were manning a machine gun position on Jan. 10, 1943, when they were attacked by a much larger Japanese unit. Disregarding orders to withdraw after nearby soldiers were killed or wounded, they continued to man their position and inflicted heavy casualties with machine gun fire, allowing the battalion attack they supported to succeed. Both were killed in that action.

The other services had several standouts who made names for themselves at Guadalcanal. The only Coast Guard Medal of Honor ever awarded was earned in September 1942 at Guadalcanal.

The Garand M1 rifle proved to be an excellent weapon for the Army's infantrymen at Guadalcanal. The Browning Automatic Rifle also proved its worth in the battle, providing extra firepower for the infantry squads in the close-in fighting in the thick vegetation. The 60 mm mortar also was helpful to the infantry companies, both in offensive and defensive operations. ★

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