The six-month Guadalcanal campaign was the longest and most complicated operation U.S. Marines faced in the Pacific War. In July 1942, when it was discovered that the Japanese were building a bomber base on the island, the 1st Marine Division was the only Allied force available to respond to the threat. Although the airfield was seized without a fight after the Marines landed on August 7, 1942, a Japanese naval attack the following night drove off the supporting U.S. Navy forces before the transports finished unloading supplies.

Sixteen thousand Marines were on their own, without naval or air support. They had a limited food supply and munitions sufficient for just four days of heavy fighting; the Japanese, however, were able to land fresh troops and supplies from Rabaul, their main regional base, six hundred miles to the
northwest. The Marines were repeatedly on the verge of being overrun, and it was not until mid-November that the Americans turned the tide. After being relieved by U.S. Army forces in December, many Marines were too weak to climb the cargo nets to reach the decks of the troop transports that would take them to Australia.

The Guadalcanal campaign began with the weapons and tactics of 1918 combat in France and ended with the tactics that would sweep aside the Japanese defenders of formidable island bases all across the Pacific. Guadalcanal served as a test bed for the leaders, weapons, and techniques that brought the United States to total victory in the Pacific in World War II. This volume of remarkable photographs (many never before published), coupled with Hammel’s expert analysis, is a tribute to the men who sacrificed so much in winning this vital steppingstone on the path to victory over Japan.
Marines On Guadalcanal
Books by Eric Hammel

76 Hours: The Invasion of Tarawa (with John E. Lane)
Chosin: Heroic Ordeal of the Korean War
The Root: The Marines in Beirut
Ace!: A Marine Night-Fighter Pilot in World War II (with R. Bruce Porter)
Duel for the Golan (with Jerry Asher)
Guadalcanal: Starvation Island
Guadalcanal: The Carrier Battles
Guadalcanal: Decision at Sea
Munda Trail: The New Georgia Campaign
The Jolly Rogers (with Tom Blackburn)
Khe Sanh: Siege in the Clouds
First Across the Rhine (with David E. Pergrin)
Lima-6: A Marine Company Commander in Vietnam (with Richard D. Camp)
A mbush V alley
Fire in the Streets
A ces A gainst Japan
A ces A gainst Japan II
A ces A gainst Germany
Air War Europa: Chronology
Carrier Clash
A ces at W ar
Air War Pacific: Chronology
A ces in Combat
Bloody Tarawa
Marines at War
Carrier Strike
Pacific Warriors: The U.S. Marines in World War II
Iwo Jima: Portrait of a Battle
Marines in Hue City: Portrait of an Urban Battle
The U.S. Marines in World War II: Guadalcanal
The U.S. Marines in World War II: New Georgia, Bougainville, and Cape Gloucester
The U.S. Marines in World War II: Tarawa and the Marshalls
The Forge
Coral and Blood
The Road to Big Week
Islands of Hell
Always Faithful
The Steel Wedge
Marines On Okinawa
Marines In the Marshalls
Marines On Peleliu
This book is respectfully dedicated to the gallant American soldiers, sailors, and Marines who stood their ground and achieved the stunning victory at Guadalcanal.
Contents

Author’s Note ix
Glossary & Guide to Abbreviations xi
Maps xiii
Chapter 1: Before 1
Chapter 2: August 1942 19
Chapter 2: September 1942 125
Chapter 3: October 1942 223
Chapter 4: November 1942—February 1943 301
Bibliography 366
Glossary and Guide to Abbreviations

A6M  Imperial Navy Mitsubishi “Zero” fighter
Amtrac  Amphibian tractor
Avenger  U.S. Navy/Marine Grumman TBF carrier torpedo/light bomber
B-17  U.S. Army Air Forces Boeing Flying Fortress four-engine heavy bomber
Betty  Imperial Navy Mitsubishi G4M twin-engine land attack bomber
D3A  Imperial Navy Aichi Val dive-bomber
Dauntless  U.S. Navy/Marine Douglas SBD dive-bomber
F4F  U.S. Navy/Marine Grumman Wildcat fighter
Flying Fortress  U.S. Army Air Forces Boeing B-17 four-engine heavy bomber
G4M  Imperial Navy Mitsubishi Betty twin-engine land attack bomber
LCM  Landing Craft, Mechanized
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LCVP</td>
<td>Landing craft, vehicle, personnel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LVT</td>
<td>Landing vehicle, tracked; amphibian tractor; amtrac</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M1903</td>
<td>U.S.-built Springfield .30-caliber bolt-action rifle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M3</td>
<td>U.S. light tank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAG</td>
<td>Marine Air Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P-39</td>
<td>U.S. Army Air Forces Bell Airacobra fighter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P-400</td>
<td>U.S. Army Air Forces Bell Airacobra export variant fighter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PBY</td>
<td>U.S. Navy Consolidated Catalina twin-engine patrol bomber</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R4D</td>
<td>U.S. Navy/Marine Douglas Dakota twin-engine transport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SBD</td>
<td>U.S. Navy/Marine Douglas Dauntless dive-bomber</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TBF</td>
<td>U.S. Navy/Marine Grumman Avenger carrier torpedo/light bomber</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Val</td>
<td>Imperial Navy Aichi D3A carrier dive-bomber</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VF</td>
<td>U.S. Navy fighting squadron</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VMF</td>
<td>U.S. Marine fighting squadron</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VMSB</td>
<td>U.S. Marine scout-bombing squadron</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VS</td>
<td>U.S. Navy scouting squadron</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wildcat</td>
<td>U.S. Navy/Marine F4F Wildcat fighter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zero</td>
<td>Imperial Navy Mitsubishi A6M fighter</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 1

Before

Ready or Not

Major General Alexander Archer Vandegrift received word on June 26, 1942, that his 1st Marine Division had been selected to invade a Japanese-held island called Tulagi, in the Eastern (or Lower) Solomon Islands. There was no other Allied command to undertake the sudden and urgent mission, and Vandegrift’s command was barely up to the task. On the day the news was given, the 1st Marine Division was spread all the way across the breadth of the Pacific, and the Marine Corps felt that it still required a minimum of six months of intense combat training to be considered battle-ready. Nevertheless, Vandegrift was told by his superiors that the Tulagi invasion was of utmost urgency and would take place in little more than four weeks.
At the moment General Vandegrift received the stunning news, only his division headquarters and the reinforced 5th Marine Regiment (5th Marines) were on hand in Wellington, New Zealand, to begin preparing for the upcoming invasion. The reinforced 1st Marines was still at sea, on the way from California, and was not due to arrive in Wellington for two weeks. Also, a brigade built around the division’s 7th Marines was committed to the defense of Samoa, and it would not be available for the invasion at all. With days, Vandegrift’s thoroughly surprised superiors in Washington had arranged for the temporary transfer of the 2d Marine Division’s 2d Marines to Vandegrift’s command, but the reinforced regiment would not be able to ship out from San Diego in time to join the 1st Marine Division in New Zealand; it would meet up at sea, on the way to Tulagi. Also slated to join Vandegrift’s division at sea were the independent 1st Marine Raider Battalion, which was training in Samoa; the independent 1st Marine Parachute Battalion, which had only 377 officers and men on its rolls; and the independent 3d Marine Defense Battalion, which was to take charge of antiaircraft and coastal defense at Tulagi and surrounding islands after they had been secured.

There wasn’t much information available about Tulagi, nor even the reasons it had suddenly become the focus of an urgent invasion by a half-trained Marine division. As far as the new South Pacific Area headquarters could advise 1st Marine Division staffers, the key objective was Tulagi Harbor, which was potentially one of the best fleet anchorages in the world. The Japanese had seized the place in early May and appeared to be turning Tulagi into a jumping-off point for a projected invasion of the New Hebrides Islands; Fiji; the Tongan Islands; and, ultimately, Samoa. The hurry-up nature of the impending counterinvasion was timed to stop the Japanese advance before it started.

On July 5, 1942, high-ranking U.S. Navy officers—including Admiral Ernest King, the commander in chief of the U.S. Fleet; Admiral Chester Nimitz, the Pacific Fleet commander in chief; and Rear Admiral Richmond Kelly Turner, the South Pacific transport chief—were meeting in San Francisco to map out a comprehensive Pacific War strategy. At the close of their planning session, the admirals learned that Japanese engineers and laborers had been seen on Guadalcanal, a large island 20 miles south of Tulagi, and that they appeared to be building an airfield just inland from a feature known as Lunga Point. The 1st Marine Division’s list of objectives was immediately
Captain Martin Clemens was a twenty-five-year-old civil administrator when he was commissioned in the British Army and directed to remain behind on Guadalcanal as the Japanese forced their way into the area in May 1942. Local policemen under his command infiltrated work crews hired by the Japanese, and they reported the construction of a new airfield near Lunga Point to Clemens, who forwarded the news to higher headquarters in Australia. The jarring news proceeded to a gathering of U.S. Navy Pacific commanders in San Francisco, who turned it into an urgent order to capture the Tulagi anchorage and the airfield by whatever means lay at hand before the airfield began operating aircraft. This led to the unexpected assignment of the 1st Marine Division to the task. (Official USMC Photo)
broadened to include the seizure of the airfield site, even though no one knew exactly where that was.

As the 1st Marine Division intelligence officer rummaged around Australian government archives to develop a workable map of the objective, and as the Marines already assembled in Wellington struggled to prepare all their equipment and supplies for combat loading, the admirals offered a one-week respite. Given the realities of time and distance, there was no way the invasion of Tulagi and Guadalcanal could take place before August 7.

The main body of the 1st Marine Division arrived in Wellington, New Zealand, in two parts. The Marines were prepared to offload, build their own encampments, and settle down to at least six months of intense precombat training. (Official USMC Photo)
Somehow—by sheer force of willpower—the Marines in Wellington managed to reload the bulk of their supplies, equipment, and weapons in time to sail on July 22. Unfortunately, a huge amount of foodstuffs and other perishables were destroyed by New Zealand’s heavy winter rains, and tons of equipment had to be left behind for lack of space.

The ships carrying Marines to New Zealand were not loaded for combat operations, and some even had to sail on to other assignments. In a cold, persistent winter rain, all of the division’s weapons, equipment, and supplies had to be offloaded, sorted, prioritized to unload as needed for combat, and then loaded for a trip to war. Here, framed by a light tank in the foreground and a line of transports on the left, the division’s new amphibian tractors (amtracs) are waiting in a dank, rainy overcast to be doled out to the several ships that will lift them to Guadalcanal. (Official USMC Photo)
Artillerymen of the 4th Battalion, 11th Marines (4/11), rush to palletize and lash down shells for their 155mm field guns. (Official USMC Photo)
Marines of the 1st Division hike up the gangway of a transport that will carry them to battle. Note that the fully equipped Marines on their way aboard are dressed in their green winter service uniforms. (Official USMC Photo)
U.S. Navy transports bearing the main body of the 1st Marine Division prepare to sail from Wellington. (Official U.S. Navy Photo)
The entire invasion armada, including transports from the West Coast and three aircraft carriers, assembled at Koro Island, in the Fijis, on July 26. Last-minute changes were issued as many of the ground troops took part in an embarrassing, amateurish landing exercise that cast doubt upon the entire enterprise. But the die had been cast at the highest levels of national authority, and the invasion plan went forward despite dimming hopes.

A rushed, ill-planned, and completely unrealistic landing exercise at Koro, Fiji, from July 28 to July 31 was a terrible omen for the upcoming storm landings at Guadalcanal, Tulagi, and nearby islands. Nearly everything associated with the practice operation highlighted a universal lack of definitive combat training, even a lack of a clear understanding of amphibious doctrine by many naval officers. Two of the division’s major attachments—the 2d Marines and the 1st Raider Battalion—joined the main body at Koro, giving division commander Vandegrift no time to lay out the full plan, or really get to know the newly arrived commanders and troop leaders. (Official USMC Photo)
Rear Admiral Richmond Kelly Turner (left), the South Pacific amphibious force commander, discusses the plan for the invasion of Guadalcanal and Tulagi with Major General Alexander A. Vandegrift, the 1st Marine Division commanding general, aboard Turner's flagship. The brilliant but overbearing Turner and the affable, gentlemanly Vandegrift were a poor match of personalities, but they eventually formed a bond that remained unbreakable throughout the ordeal of the Guadalcanal Campaign. (Official U.S. Navy Photo)
Three main objectives had been identified. The smallish island of Tulagi was still a prime target because of the fleet anchorage it dominated, and the Japanese airfield behind Guadalcanal’s Lunga Point was of major interest because of the regional threat it represented. Also of major interest was the former Royal Australian Air Force seaplane base at Tanambogo, a tiny coral islet near Tulagi. It appeared that the Imperial Japanese Navy had improved Tanambogo’s facilities, and that Japanese floatplane fighters and other amphibian aircraft were stationed there.

The main landings at Guadalcanal would be undertaken by two battalions and headquarters of the 5th Marines backed by the reinforced 1st Marines. The 1st Raider Battalion, with the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines (2/5), in reserve, was to secure Tulagi. And the 377-man 1st Parachute Battalion was charged with seizing Tanambogo and the neighboring islet of Gavutu. The reinforced 2d Marines, which was only temporarily attached to the 1st Marine Division, was charged with patrolling Florida Island (just north of Tulagi, Gavutu, and Tanambogo) and with providing a force reserve. Pending its release from the reserve roll, the 2d Marines was to sail in days to occupy Ndeni, a potential air-base site in the Santa Cruz Islands. Surface screening and gunfire support would be provided by a formidable array of cruisers and destroyers, and air support would be provided by several hundred fighters, dive bombers, and torpedo bombers operating from the aircraft carriers Saratoga, Enterprise, and Wasp, which represented three-fourths of the U.S. Navy’s effective carrier strength.

As the largest invasion fleet the United States of America had ever assembled to that time weighed anchor for the last lap to the Eastern Solomon Islands, the national leaders, the nation’s highest-ranking military officers, the Pacific high command, the division staff, and all but the most thickheaded Marines knew that the ultimate gamble of the Pacific War lay ahead. It was insane to send a division of amateurs against the victorious Japanese, insane to enter an area about which so little was known, and insane to do so while understanding in advance that no reinforcements were available and that there was no means by which to resupply the Marines, nor even any assurance that adequate air support could be provided for as long as it would take Marine engineers to get the Lunga airfield into operation. All these pitfalls, and many more, were known and discussed in advance. But there was no recourse. If the Japanese got their Lunga airbase into operation, the last ring of island bastions guarding the America-Australia line of supply would be
threatened and might well fall. The invasion had to go when it had to go, and no later; the Japanese were only weeks away from completing their Lunga airfield.

The journey from Koro to the Eastern Solomons was entirely uneventful. It gave the troops time to study the invasion plan, prepare themselves and their gear, and even relax. (Official USMC Photo)
Major Noah Wood, the executive officer of 5/11, the 1st Marine Division’s sole 105mm howitzer battalion, discusses plans with the battalion fire direction staff while aboard ship on the way to Guadalcanal. A six-month training syllabus had to be crammed into a few weeks of sea travel. Without their weapons, which were stowed in the holds, it was all theoretical. (Official USMC Photo)
Marines kill time aboard ship with a game of bingo in the troop messing compartment. (Official USMC Photo)
Marine paratroopers inspect their new Reising submachine guns prior to their—and the Reising's—combat debut. (Official USMC Photo)
Killing time included weapons maintenance, cards, endless group discussions, and staring out to sea. (Official USMC Photo)
This is a belting party. Machine gunners are loading loose rounds into linked belts from which they will be fired. The invasion fleet is rapidly closing on the Eastern Solomons; the landings are only a day or two away.
(Official USMC Photo)
Dear Reader,

If you enjoyed this book from Pacifica Military History, please visit our website at http://www.PacificaMilitary.com where many other books of similar high quality are offered in printed or electronic versions. The site also offers a free book-length sampler with excerpts from most of our active titles.

*Your patronage is deeply appreciated.*

Pacifica Military History