



The Battle of Bloody Ridge: Guadalcanal, 12-14 September 1942

By Ray Starmann

Marines using a truck to traverse the wet lowlands.

Background

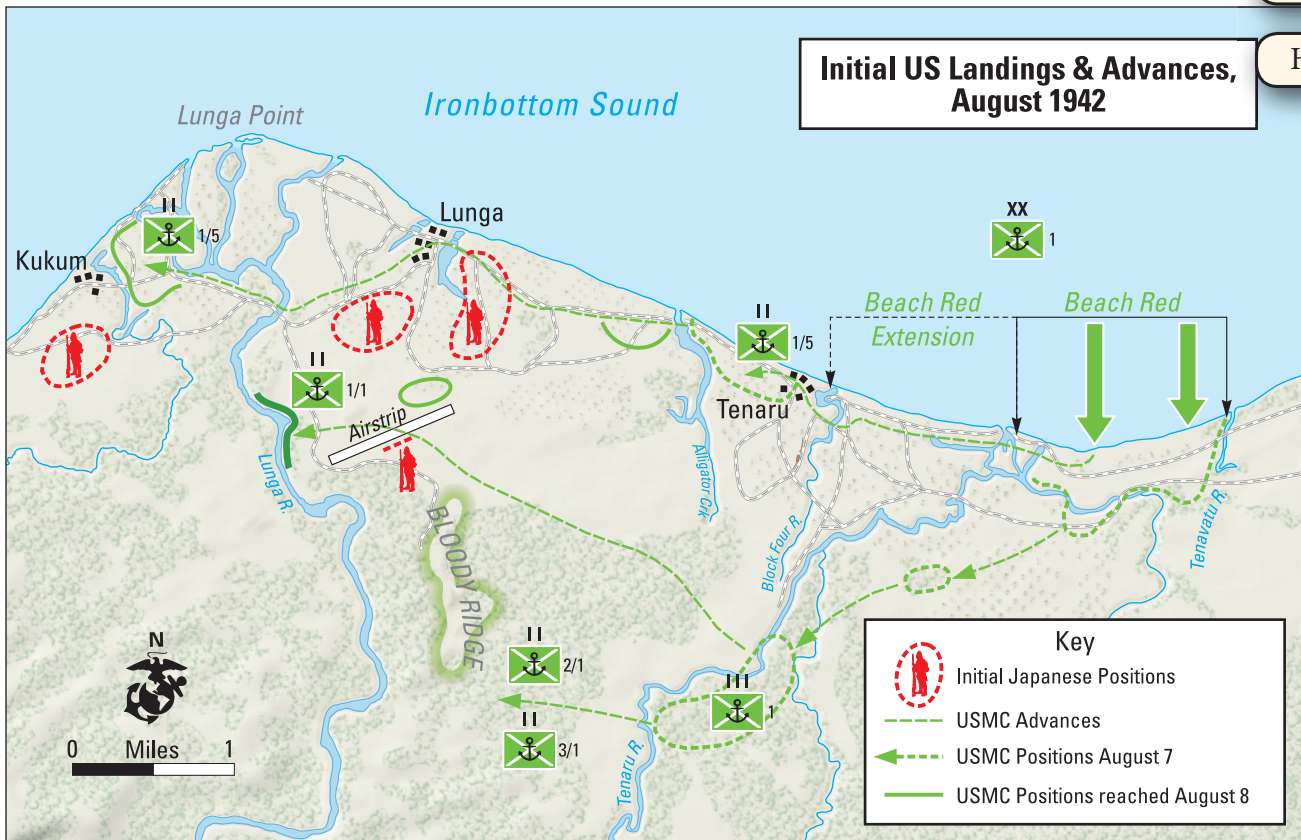
After their surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, the Japanese continued their advances in the Pacific with three goals: destroying the US naval threat, seizing land containing the strategic resources otherwise denied them, and establishing the military bases needed to set up the forward defense of that newly expanded empire. Through early 1942, then,

the Japanese captured the Philippines, Thailand, Malaya, Singapore, Burma, the East Indies, Wake Island, the Gilbert Islands, New Britain and Guam.

That spring the Japanese were checked at the Battle of the Coral Sea, a tactical stalemate but a strategic Allied victory. The Doolittle bombing raid on Tokyo (18 April) did minimal physical damage, but it shocked the Japanese people and high command. The Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) then

suffered a disastrous defeat at Midway in June. While the Japanese were reeling from the loss of four carriers there, it gave the Allies the opportunity to shift to the offense. Hence the genesis of “Operation Watchtower,” the invasion of Guadalcanal, Tulagi and adjacent islands.

Guadalcanal was chosen because the Allied high command was worried about recent Japanese actions in the Solomon Islands. By July they had



built a seaplane base on Tulagi and 900 naval troops were occupying the island. The Japanese were also constructing an airfield at Lunga Point on Guadalcanal, a base large enough to allow for the operation of over 100 aircraft. In the operational sense, if that airfield weren't captured, the Japanese would be able to threaten Allied bases in the Santa Cruz Islands and at Espiritu Santo.

In Allied hands Guadalcanal would be a strategic jump off point that could be used as a base from which to move to seize other islands to the north, including the large Japanese base at Rabaul on the island of New Britain. The capture of Guadalcanal would also enable direct US support of the New Guinea campaign, while simultaneously stopping the Japanese from being able to interdict communication routes from the US to Australia and New Zealand.

The plan for the invasion of the Solomons was formalized by Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Ernest J. King. In a directive he issued on 29 April, he began: "It is urgently necessary that an amphibious force be stationed in the South Pacific."

At that time, the priority destination for US troops and equipment



Marines newly arrived on the island. Note the prewar pith-helmet.

was Europe. Therefore, in order to get approval from the president, King stated only the Marines and the navy would participate in the operation,

leaving the army's troops to continue to be funneled to Europe. Watchtower was duly authorized at the White House, and was to be conducted

Coast Watchers on Guadalcanal

Performing their jobs from remote jungle outposts, and many times on occupied Japanese islands, the coast watchers were a vital intelligence asset during the Pacific War. Numbering no more than 400 Australian, British and European personnel and roughly 1,500 natives, the coast watchers reported on the movements of Japanese units on the ground, in the air and at sea.

The coast watcher concept originated in 1919, when the Royal Australian Navy proposed forming a civilian observer unit to provide early warning in the event of some future invasion threat against Australia. Those stations were to form a virtual tripwire around Australia's northern coast.

Initially during World War II, most of the coast watchers were missionaries, planters or natives. As hostilities spread, they were placed under the control of the Royal Australian Navy. The organization itself was led by Lt. Commander Eric Feldt, and the coast watcher officers were commissioned in the Royal Australian Navy Volunteer Reserve (RANVR).

In June 1942 the coast watchers were transferred to the administrative and operational control of the Allied Intelligence Bureau. Over 100 stations were by then observing an area of 500,000 square miles in the South Pacific, running in a 2,500 mile arc from Papua, New Guinea, to the New Hebrides, with most of the coverage in the roughly 1,000 islands of the Solomons chain.

The stations were equipped with cumbersome 300 lb. 3BZ teleradios. They had a voice range of 400 miles and a key range

of 600, and they had been chosen for that long-range capability. It had also been thought the radios would be delivered to the stations and then never moved. It hadn't been imagined they would have to be dismantled, carried and rebuilt by coast watchers and natives on the run from the Japanese.

Martin Clemens played a major role in the struggle for Guadalcanal by providing early warning intelligence concerning Japanese troop movements on the island. After graduating from Cambridge, he'd joined the Colonial Service in 1938 and was dispatched to the British Solomon Islands. He'd served for three years on the island of Malaita when he volunteered for service in the British Solomon Islands Protectorate Defence Force and was commissioned a captain in it.

In 1941 he assisted in the evacuation of European and Chinese residents from Guadalcanal. He became the district officer and coast watcher of Guadalcanal on 28 February 1942. His first station was on the eastern side of the island at Aola. Two other coast watchers on Guadalcanal were located elsewhere. Lt. D.S. McFarlan was at a rubber plantation on Berande, and Ashton "Snowy" Rhoades was at another plantation at Lavoro on the far western side of the island.

When the Japanese began their occupation, Clemens quickly organized an *ad hoc* group of former native plantation workers to assist him with further intelligence gathering and reconnaissance. It was those coast watchers and native scouts who first warned of the Japanese presence on the island and the airstrip they were constructing at Lunga Point.



The Japanese got word of Clemens and the other coast watchers on the island, and they began to comb Guadalcanal for those "spies." A dangerous game of cat and mouse ensued, forcing Clemens, Rhoades and McFarlan to establish separate headquarters in the mountains. Even though they were serving officers, they knew they would be executed upon capture.

After the *1st Marine Division* landed on Guadalcanal, Clemens and his scouts made contact with them on 15 August. Gen. Vandergrift accepted their offer to provide intelligence. Clemens was told he and the other coast watchers would be working directly for the G-2 (division intelligence section).

The Marines realized the coast watchers could play a key role in intelligence collection and sabotage on the island. From their new base east of Henderson Field, Clemens and his men not only reported on Japanese movements, they also conducted raids that further disrupted the already tenuous Japanese supply lines.

Clemens and his men discovered the location of the *28th "Ichiki" Regiment* upon their landing on the island. Sgt. Maj. Jacob Vouza, a member of the local constabulary, was captured on 19 August while leading a patrol of native scouts to further reconnoiter the disposition of that Japanese force. Vouza was brutally interrogated, bayoneted, thrown onto a nest of fire ants and left for dead by the Japanese. Critically wounded, but refusing to die, Vouza crawled through the jungle and was able to warn the Marines of the impending attack along the Tenaru River. He recovered from his wounds and, along with Clemens, continued to scout for the Marines and survive the war. He was later awarded the Silver Star and Legion of Merit.

Coast watchers located on other islands in the Solomons, such as Jack Reed on Bougainville, played a vital role in the air war over Guadalcanal. They alerted American forces to incoming Japanese air raids and naval movements down the Slot.

The Guadalcanal coast watchers scored their greatest intelligence coup when they detected the landing at Tasimboko of the lead elements of Kawaguchi's *35th Infantry Brigade*. Using the information provided by them, the *1st Raider* and *1st Parachute Battalions* conducted the successful Tasimboko raid, flushing out a security force of 200 to 300 Japanese soldiers in that village, seizing vital order of battle documents and capturing numerous supplies.

In November 1942, Clemens and his men joined *2nd Raider Battalion* on a 150-mile patrol outside the Marine perimeter. For 30 days the *Raiders* and the scouts repeatedly engaged the Japanese and destroyed their supplies. They also reconnoitered an east-west trail south of the Lunga perimeter. Meanwhile, Vouza led an insurgency of natives against the Japanese elsewhere on the island.

Clemens was promoted to major and continued his work in the Solomons. His service earned him the Military Cross in 1942 and the US Legion of Merit in 1944. He received the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in 1956. He and Vouza were instrumental in contributing to the Allied victory on Guadalcanal. As Adm. Halsey wrote: "The coast watchers saved Guadalcanal and Guadalcanal saved the Pacific." ★

in coordination with Gen. Douglas MacArthur's offensive on New Guinea.

By May the *1st Marine Division*, under the command of Maj. Gen. Alexander Vandergrift, was ordered transferred from the US to New Zealand. Espiritu Santo, in the New Hebrides chain, was chosen as the rear area headquarters for the operation. The starting date was set for 7 August, exactly eight months from the day Pearl Harbor was bombed.

The expeditionary force consisted of a total of 75 US and Australian warships and transports, and was under the command of Vice Adm. Frank Jack Fletcher from his carrier flagship *USS Saratoga*. In overall command of the amphibious force was Rear Adm. Richmond Turner, with Vandergrift in charge of the 16,000 Marines slated to hit the beaches.

The Allied landings on Guadalcanal, Tulagi and the Florida Islands began on 7 August. Japanese military intelligence had been aware of the American movements, but wrongly interpreted them as reinforcements heading to Australia and New Guinea. The landing force divided at Savo Island, with ships and transports from *Task Group Yoke* heading to Tulagi and

the Florida Islands to the northeast, while *Task Group X-Ray* moved to Guadalcanal to the southeast.

Some 3,000 Marines from the *1st Raider Battalion* and *2nd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment* landed on Tulagi itself, while the *1st Parachute Battalion* landed on two small neighboring islands, Gavutu and Tanambogo. There 886 IJN troops put up fierce resistance, but the next day the Marines overwhelmed the defenders of Tulagi and fully secured that island. Gavutu and Tanambogo were captured on 9 August. Almost all the Japanese there were killed while the Marines suffered 122 killed in action.

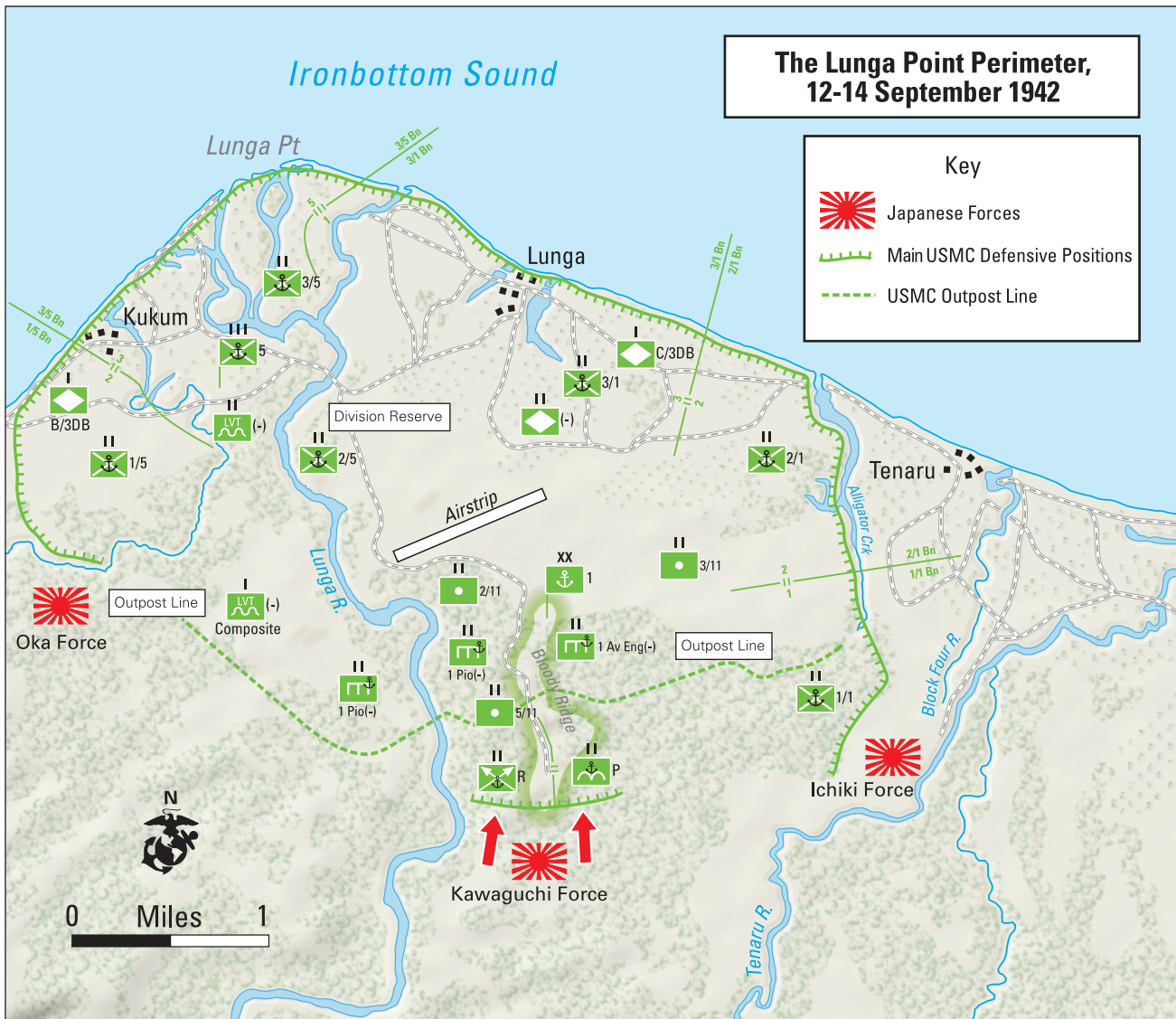
The initial landings on Guadalcanal met only minor resistance. On 7 August, at 9:10 a.m., 11,000 Marines landed between Koli and Lunga Points on Guadalcanal's northern coastline. They had advanced 1,000 yards inland by that night, and the next day they secured the airfield by late afternoon. While assaulting the airfield the Marines ran into light resistance from Japanese naval construction personnel who then fled into the interior jungle toward the Matanikau River and Point Cruz. The airfield was renamed Henderson



Edson photographed shortly after the battle.

Field (for the first USMC pilot killed at Midway), and would serve as the base for Marine pilots and planes nicknamed the "Cactus Air Force" (CAF), after the divisional codename used for the initial landing operation.

Vandergrift knew he had two immediate tasks. The first was to



Vandergrift as he appeared on the cover of Time magazine.

secure a perimeter and then, with the limited rifle strength available, be prepared to stop the expected Japanese counterattack that, he believed, would be delivered amphibiously over the beaches. (After all, the Japanese had successfully used that tactic all across the Pacific during that same year's first half. Further, when the Allied naval task force that brought the Marines to the island hurriedly pulled out on the evening of 8 August, it did so under the perceived threat of a Japanese aero-naval counteroffensive being in the offing.) The second task was simply to hold the airfield itself at all costs.

The Lunga perimeter came to be 9,600 yards wide from east to west and 3,500 yards from north to south, from the beaches into the jungle's edge. Col. Clifton Cates' 1st Marine Regiment held the territory bordered by the Tenaru River on the east, to the beaches in

the north, and to the Lunga River on the west. Col. Leroy Hunt's 5th Marine Regiment covered the area west of the Lunga to Kukum. Artillery from Col. Pedro del Valle's 11th Marine Regiment over-watched both sectors from central positions. One tank and one rifle battalion from 1st Marine Regiment were held as the division reserve.

As the Marines established their perimeter, they were aware of one certain thing: there was no immediately available follow on force. They would have to hold indefinitely against everything and anything the Japanese threw at them.

Ambush

Guadalcanal is roughly 90 miles long and 25 wide. A mountain chain runs through its center, with its highest point reaching 7,000 feet.



The view from Hill 80.

The south of the island is filled with steep ridges that descend to coral reefs, making naval landings there untenable. The island is filled with rugged ridgelines, eroded and bald at their heights. Below the ridges are dense jungles, filled with a great variety of species of birds and large insects. Tarantulas, red ants, centipedes, bush rats, crabs and iguanas comb the island. Shallow rivers and creeks filled with crocodiles meander through the land. In the mountains the rivers form dangerous rapids. Impenetrable mangrove swamps and lagoons border the long sandy coastline.

The Japanese naval construction unit and their accompanying Korean forced laborers established positions west of the Lunga perimeter on the west bank of the Matanikau River. There was also an IJN observation post at Taivu Point, 22 miles east of the Lunga perimeter. On 12 August a 25-man Marine patrol, composed mainly of G-2 (division intelligence) personnel and commanded by G-2 officer Lt. Col. Frank Goettge, conducted a reconnaissance mission between Point Cruz and the



Some Marine barbed wire running through the elephant grass at the base of Hill 123.

Matanikau. Goettge and the Marines falsely believed the Japanese wanted to surrender after a white flag was spotted. The advancing patrol was subsequently ambushed by a platoon of IJN troops and almost completely wiped out. The only survivors were three Marines who swam back to

the US perimeter. They reported the Japanese had butchered the wounded as well as several Marines who tried to surrender. The white flag had actually been the national Japanese flag (without the sunrays). Its flapping in the wind had obscured the red circle center. Among the dead was Goettge.