

The Other Cactus Air Force

Historynet

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“**Why** the hell do we want to take some little place nobody’s ever heard of?” complained a young U.S. Marine preparing for an August 7, 1942, amphibious assault on Guadalcanal, one of six islands in the Solomon chain in the South Pacific. The island’s geographic obscurity had led the leatherneck to dismiss its strategic value. But the six-month campaign that followed reversed the course of the Pacific War.

The outcome was anything but assured. Immediately following the attack on Pearl Harbor, Japanese forces overwhelmed the Philippines, Thailand, Malaya, Singapore, the Dutch East Indies, Wake Island, New Britain, the Gilbert Islands and Guam. Still reeling from the onslaught, America managed to halt the Japanese advance at the Battle of Midway in June 1942. Even so, the Japanese made a diversionary feint north, attacking Dutch Harbor, Alaska, and seizing Attu and Kiska in the Aleutians before pushing deep into the South Pacific, flooding the Solomon Islands with tens of thousands of troops.

On July 5, Allied coastwatchers reported that Japanese forces were building an airfield on Guadalcanal, threatening the Allies’ lifeline to Australia. Concerned, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) directed Pacific Fleet commander Admiral Chester Nimitz to intervene. The landing was hurriedly planned and carried out with such meager resources that troops dubbed it Operation Shoestring. Worse, the operation was poorly led. Vice Admiral Robert Ghormley, whom Nimitz appointed commander, South Pacific, spent most of his time holed up in his headquarters on another island and failed to set foot on Guadalcanal. To prevent a debacle, Nimitz, citing the admiral’s uninspiring and indecisive leadership, would replace Ghormley with the more focused and aggressive Vice Adm. William F. Halsey on October 18.

What stopped the Japanese? Much of the credit belongs to the indomitable fighting spirit of the American servicemen. Heroes such as Lt. Col. Lewis B. Puller and Major Joseph J. Foss fought valiantly. “Chesty” Puller, commander of the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, earned his third Navy Cross in a three-hour firefight against a Japanese regiment that October. Marine ace of aces Joe Foss of fighter squadron VMF-121, one of six aviators to earn the Medal of Honor during the Guadalcanal campaign, shot down 26 Japanese airplanes.

However, individual acts of bravery do not explain why the brutal conflict gradually yielded a decisive U.S. victory. The answer lies in the record of all the services. Army Air Forces bombers struck enemy strongpoints, such as Rabaul, and ships bound for Guadalcanal. Navy cruisers and battleships further choked Japanese reinforcement and resupply. Finally, Marine and Army ground troops, supported by aerial firepower from Marine, Navy and AAF planes, turned the tide of the battle. These joint efforts, which succeeded by only the narrowest of margins, turned Guadalcanal into “the graveyard of the Japanese army,” according to a

Japanese general on the island. Another Japanese flag officer observed, "Japan's doom was sealed with the closing of the struggle for Guadalcanal."

While all the services were indispensable to victory, the Army Air Forces' contributions are the least known. The requirements of global war forced it to prioritize other theaters. Moreover, the Navy-dominated command structure of the South Pacific confined the AAF to a supporting role. Nevertheless, operating within those constraints, it wore out its men and machines in the combined effort to seize and hold the island.

At the outset of the war, President Franklin Roosevelt directed the JCS to focus on Germany while conducting a holding action against Japan. His "Europe First" strategy resulted in understrength AAF units in the Pacific operating outdated equipment.

Case in point, 67th Fighter Squadron pilots on Guadalcanal flew the Bell P-400, an underpowered export version of the P-39 Airacobra that was ill-suited for high-altitude combat. Upset with the airplane's limitations after the first dogfights, 1st Marine Division commander Maj. Gen. Alexander Vandegrift told Ghormley, "P-400s will not be employed further except in extreme emergency; they are entirely unsuited."



Originally meant for Britain, P-400 Airacobras from 67th Fighter Squadron, 347th Fighter Group, arrived at Henderson Field, Guadalcanal, on August 22, 1942.

Army Air Forces chief General Henry "Hap" Arnold, however, rejected Vandegrift's call for more and better aircraft. Arnold thought seizing and holding the Solomons was necessary but was unwilling to take resources away from the AAF's primary effort, the destruction of German industry. He told Vandegrift to get by with the forces he had and to expect a trickle of reinforcements.

Arnold complained about the command arrangement in the South Pacific, expressing disdain over having to cede operational control of AAF units to Ghormley, a ship captain. General George Marshall, Army chief of staff, brokered a compromise with Halsey. Major General Millard Harmon was appointed commanding general of U.S. Army forces in the South Pacific. He arrived in theater on July 29, one week prior to the start of the Guadalcanal offensive.

Arnold told Harmon he was responsible for protecting AAF interests. That meant restricting operations in the South Pacific to those necessary to support the strategic defensive. As such, Harmon could expect to receive "second-string" players and equipment.

That second-string team, however, would rise to the occasion. In September 1942, pilots flying P-400s, an aircraft Vandegrift initially categorized as unsuitable, repeatedly strafed a Japanese force that came within 1,000 yards of overrunning the airfield. An elated Vandegrift greeted the pilots on landing, saying: "You'll never read it in the papers but that P-400 mission of yours at Bloody Ridge saved Guadalcanal." Shortly thereafter, in a letter to his wife, the general wrote: "[Our pilots] have been doing a superb job and licking hell out of the Japs. When you see these boys go up and know what they are doing, it makes you proud to have them with you."

B-17s were the first to spring into action against the Japanese on Guadalcanal. The 11th Bombardment Group hacked a primitive airstrip from the jungle on Espiritu Santo, 640 miles southeast of Guadalcanal, as a temporary staging field. The JCS plan called for seizing the runway on Guadalcanal and lengthening it to accommodate bombers. But frequent enemy attacks prevented anything other than sporadic bomber operations from the island. Seabees battled to keep the runway open using prefabricated Marsden matting and pre-positioned dump trucks carrying loads measured to fit the size of the expected craters, but they rarely succeeded in making the runway viable for large aircraft. Fighters, on the other hand, were better able to taxi around craters and take off in shorter distances.

Vandegrift's forces landed on Guadalcanal after a week of preparatory bombing. They quickly secured the airfield, although a lack of planning meant supplies piled up on the beach in disarray. Fortunately for the fledgling landing force, the Japanese were slow to counterattack. They believed the purpose of the invasion was to destroy the airfield and then withdraw. When the Japanese realized the Americans were there to stay, they rushed reinforcements through "the Slot," the seaway between the New Georgia Islands on the west and Santa Isabel and Choiseul to the east.

Japanese and American reconnaissance aircraft fought for the high ground above the Slot, trying to determine each other's order of battle. On September 6, a B-17 exchanged shots at 200 yards with a massive Japanese flying boat. Battered, the B-17 limped home. The next day, an enemy round penetrated the oil tank of another B-17's no. 1 engine, causing a fire. The crewmen shut down the engine and bravely elected to continue their mission, spending 30

minutes strafing enemy barges. On September 9, another B-17 was not so lucky. It did not survive its aerial encounter, bursting into flames and crashing on Rendova Island.

Despite the loss, Ghormley preferred B-17s over Navy PB4Ys for surveillance. With its considerable firepower, the Flying Fortress was better able to cling to enemy convoys and survive. For instance, Captain J.E. Joham orbited above a convoy for 30 minutes while dodging Japanese planes and flak. Fighters shot away the B-17's tail surfaces, but the Flying Fort downed three of them in the process. Badly damaged, the bomber was able to limp 600 miles back to Espiritu. Before departing, Joham accurately reported the enemy convoy's location to the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing on Guadalcanal, which readied its torpedo and dive bombers for an attack.

At first, Ghormley prohibited B-17s from carrying bombs, to give them more range and endurance for surveillance. He partially relented after AAF crews begged for bombs to hit ships moving down the Slot, allowing some planes to carry half a payload of 500-pounders. B-17 crews quickly discovered that hitting targets in combat was far more difficult than in practice runs during training. Only a few had had the opportunity to practice against the Navy's target ship *Utah* when the group passed through Hawaii en route to Espiritu. Now they faced destroyers and cruisers that could, in the words of bombardiers, "turn on a dime," causing bombs to land 100 to 200 feet off target.

Initial results were predictably poor: Less than 2 percent of bombs hit their intended targets. Crews suggested their low success rate was due to fatigue from grinding 12-hour sorties. They also cited a lack of ordnance mass. AAF tactics called for a nine-plane attack, which was impossible to assemble given the squadron's size and maintenance woes. "We felt that we were doing pretty well if we got six airplanes together," remarked one pilot. Even so, on August 25 a flight of B-17s scored a lucky hit that sank the destroyer *Mutsuki*.



A Boeing B-17E (nicknamed Eager Beavers), from the 11th Bomb Group, taxis at Henderson Field, on the way to another mission.

Unlike Maj. Gen. George Kenney, who embraced skip-bombing in the Southwest Pacific, Harmon refused to deviate from high-altitude tactics because he didn't want to lose crews to what he called the "sacrificial nature" of skip-bombing. Low-altitude attacks also required more fuel, without which his bombers couldn't complete their long return trip to Espiritu. One Navy officer derided the AAF's high-altitude attacks as "sniping." Despite meager box scores, however, bomber attacks played an important role in limiting Japanese naval action. Even if they didn't achieve direct hits, the bombers caused enemy convoys to disperse, making them more vulnerable to subsequent torpedo and dive-bomber attacks. Additionally, they passed intelligence on Japanese fleet movements to Navy ships, improving the effectiveness of the American blockade.

To avoid being slowly strangled by a tightening noose of American air and naval forces, the Japanese planned a major ground offensive for October 1942. They assembled two divisions—nearly 17,500 troops—and planned to send them south aboard the "Tokyo Express" through the Slot.

A key part of their plan was taking out the airfield on Guadalcanal, which the Americans had christened Henderson Field in honor of Major Lofton Henderson, who died leading a dive-bomber attack at the Battle of Midway. Preventing American airpower from flying from Henderson would mean a safer journey through the Slot for Japanese transport ships, allowing them to mass troops and supplies to overrun the Americans.

The Japanese added 85 fighters and bombers to Rabaul's strength, and on October 12 launched multiple waves of planes to pound Henderson. The second wave caught American fighters on the ground, destroying or inflicting damage on scores of them.

The next night, the sound of a small enemy aircraft overhead awoke troops on Guadalcanal. The scout dropped three flares—red at the west end of the airstrip, green at the east and white in the center. Shortly thereafter, a massive bombardment force consisting of two battleships, a light cruiser and eight destroyers, which had slipped up to Guadalcanal under cover of darkness, opened up on the airfield at a distance of 16,000 meters—point-blank range in terms of naval fire. An 80-minute salvo followed. The Japanese walked fragmentation shells, specifically designed to destroy land targets, across the airfield in a perfect pattern. "All over the field, aircraft went up in clouds of smoke and flame," wrote an AAF historian. "In hundreds of foxholes and improved bomb shelters, men clung to the ground, cursing, praying, and in some cases, going out of their minds." The bombardment heavily damaged both runways, burned most of the aviation fuel stockpile, destroyed 48 of the 90 aircraft on the field and killed 41 men.

The shelling temporarily stopped at 3 a.m., resuming at daybreak along with attacks by waves and waves of bombers. Japanese artillery, nicknamed "Pistol Pete" by the Americans, also intermittently rained down on the airfield. Seabees worked for hours to repair the runway.

By midafternoon, they succeeded in patching it up enough for four fighters carrying 300-pound bombs and three P-400s loaded with 100-pounders to take off. They found the Japanese task force off Santa Isabel Island, but heavy anti-aircraft fire and violent maneuvers rebuffed their attack.

The lack of fuel limited the American counterattack. Two hours later, however, someone remembered a pair of abandoned B-17s, victims of a previous Japanese artillery attack. Airmen siphoned their tanks to get enough gas for another four P-400s to get airborne. Meanwhile, Japanese artillerymen resumed shelling the airfield. Pilots, with parachutes strapped on, waited in nearby foxholes. Between explosions, they made a dash for their planes but did not reach their cockpits before the next volley caught them in the open. Luckily, Pistol Pete missed and the pilots sped their P-400s crazily down the runway, dodging craters while explosions literally opened new holes behind their aircraft. The "Klunkers" staggered and wobbled as they lifted off, barely clearing the trees.

The situation was desperate. A Marine colonel visiting the 67th Fighter Squadron headquarters warned: "We don't know whether we'll be able to hold the field or not. There's a Japanese task force of destroyers, cruisers and troops transports headed our way. We have enough gasoline left for one mission against them. Load your airplanes with bombs and go out with the dive bombers and hit them. After the gas is gone we'll have to let the ground troops take over. Then your officers and men will attach yourselves to some infantry outfit. Good luck and good-bye."

At midnight on October 14, Japanese transports anchored 10 miles from Henderson Field, pouring more than 10,000 troops and supplies ashore.

Gas was on the way, if the Americans on Guadalcanal could hold out. Starting on the morning of the 15th, Harmon arranged for a stream of Douglas C-47s to serve as a lifeline. Each transport ferried 12 drums of aviation fuel, enough to keep a dozen fighters airborne for an hour. In addition, personnel scoured the beachhead for any stray caches of fuel that might have been overlooked. By the end of the day, the Americans had accumulated 400 drums, replenishing their fuel stocks.

During the lull in flying due to the lack of gas, crew chiefs worked diligently to patch up battered planes. In one four-ship, three aircraft had damaged machine guns while the fourth was unable to carry bombs. Pilots joked about their worn-out machines: "Well, [we thought] they would scare the hell of out the Japs anyway—keep them running. Maybe some of them would break their necks diving into holes."

Pilots belted their own ammunition, while armament crews, lacking munitions carts, endured the backbreaking work of carrying and hoisting 500-pound bombs onto bomb racks. They did this on empty stomachs, forced to subsist on hardtack and cold hash for more meals than the men would care to remember.

The Americans braced for a major assault, which occurred on October 23-25. Fortunately, Harmon had convinced Ghormley that Guadalcanal needed to be reinforced with

more ground troops if the Allies were to defend the island against the expected Japanese offensive. The timely arrival of 2,837 men from the Army's 164th Regimental Combat Team on October 13 bolstered the beleaguered Marines.

When the attack came, the Americans buckled but did not break. Shrieking Japanese threw themselves against the Marine and Army defensive lines around Henderson Field. Enemy squads reached the crest of the ridge overlooking the airstrip before falling back due to withering fire. After the attack, 600 enemy dead lay in front of Army positions, and even more in front of Chesty Puller's Marines. Five Zeros and seven enemy bombers circled over Henderson, apparently waiting for their landing signal after receiving word that the Japanese had overrun the airfield. Instead, eight F4F-4 Wildcats left the muddy field and shot them all down.

Still, the Japanese did not give up. On November 12, they sent a convoy of 11 transports, escorted by an equal number of destroyers, carrying an estimated 18,000 to 35,000 fresh troops, enough to swamp Guadalcanal's defenders. On the 14th, TBF Avengers scored two torpedo hits on the Japanese battleship *Hiei*, which had been left dead in the water from naval hits the night before. B-17s also relayed the location of the convoy to dive and torpedo bomber pilots, who proceeded to inflict more damage. AAF airmen teamed with their Marine brothers to engage in the wild melee. *Hiei* was finally abandoned and sank that evening, the first Japanese battleship to be lost in action. The cooperative effort led Foss to remark, "You fellows can play ball on our team any day." By November 15, only four troopships that ran the American air and naval gantlet had reached Guadalcanal; the others were sunk or gutted by fire.

Seeking to exploit the tactical victory, the Americans launched a ground offensive supported by additional airpower. The precarious situation on Guadalcanal convinced the JCS to maintain 72 heavy bombers, 57 medium bombers and 150 fighters in the South Pacific. It also gave birth to the Thirteenth Air Force. Harmon wrote Arnold that the existing command structure made it "impossible for me as Commander of all Army forces to exercise directly the command responsibility of air units that is required and necessary to insure their preparedness, proper distribution, and accomplishment of operations to the extent of which I am responsible." Arnold agreed, establishing the new command in January 1943.



1943 brought reinforcements in the form of new P-38F fighters and other equipment.

A regular flow of reinforcements, including more capable planes such as newer models of the P-39 and new Lockheed P-38F Lightnings, began arriving shortly after the birth of the Thirteenth Air Force. This was a welcome relief for tired crews flying worn-out equipment. Veterans were stretched to the breaking point after months of combat. Indeed, a flight surgeon warned that one-third of the enlisted men and more than half the flying officers required immediate relief "if they are to be salvaged for further useful service."

As the American offensive gained momentum, AAF fighters hammered enemy positions, prepping the battlefield for a final ground offensive to push the Japanese off the island. Fighters raced up and down the beaches and jungles of Guadalcanal, bombing, strafing and harassing the Japanese. Vandegrift used AAF airpower to destroy enemy positions that blocked the path of his Marines. Meanwhile, bombers destroyed enemy supply depots and prevented scattered resistance from gathering critical mass.

The American offensive quickly outdistanced ground supply lines. Not willing to give the enemy any respite, Harmon directed his B-17 crews to find novel ways to resupply troops from the air. They wrapped 15,000 pounds of ammunition and supplies in canvas and burlap, fastened improvised parachutes and dropped them out windows and bomb bays of their aircraft.

Organized enemy resistance came to an end on the afternoon of February 9. The Japanese abandoned all those who could not reach beaches to be taken aboard the Tokyo Express. While the ground forces temporarily relaxed, the Army Air Forces did not. Its crews immediately set their sights on Japanese strongholds in the northern Solomons.

Colonel Lawrence Spinetta commands the U.S. Air Force's RQ-4 Global Hawk UAV fleet. For further reading, he recommends: The Army Air Forces in World War II, Volume Four: The Pacific, Guadalcanal to Saipan: August 1942 to July 1944, edited by Wesley Craven and James Cate.