

(Part I) 75 years ago today, a convoy of U. S. ships was steaming toward an obscure Pacific Island where two great nations would meet in a decisive battle that determined the course of the Pacific war. Both sides suffered heat, hunger, malaria, fungal infections and dysentery, living in conditions unfit for humans and inflicting upon each other savagery unimagined by humans. Neither expected to meet on this battlefield and both thought themselves invincible.

The Japanese soldier was called an ISSEN GORIN, 1 Yen, 5 Rin – postage of his draft notice. Conditioned to brutality by constant beatings during training, he expected to die in battle. He could fight in the most extreme climates and impassible terrain – demonstrated by his “impossible” overland conquest of the British fortress of Singapore.

Proven by its 1904 defeat of the Russian Navy and the American Pacific fleet in 1941, the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN,) possessed the most advanced warships afloat and excelled at seamanship and gunnery as well as modern tactics of amphibious and carrier warfare. By recruiting men with exceptional night vision for lookouts and developing specialized illumination techniques, they trained for night surface battles, something thought impossible by most of the world’s navies.

American experts thought the Japanese incapable of producing modern airplanes. The Japanese, with their “Nell” and “Betty” bombers with 2000 mile ranges and plenty of payload, encouraged our hubris. The bombers, protected by the “Zero” fighter which could outmaneuver any American aircraft to date, were the point of their sword, reducing landing areas to ashes before invasion.

By mid 1942, using the effective tactic of preparatory air strikes, amphibious landings and close IJN support, the ISSEN GOREN raised the Rising Sun over most of the south Pacific and as Admiral Yamamoto contended, were on their way to “dictating the terms of the American surrender on the steps of the White House.” The next phase of their eastward strategy was a 3 pronged attack to build an “impregnable wall of island fortresses” isolating Australia, while continuing their westward expansion via China toward India for a link-up with their German and Italian AXIS partners.

The U. S. victory at Midway in June, 1942 halted the northern and central Japanese advances at the Aleutians and Midway Island. The U. S. Navy and Naval Aviators also learned valuable lessons in how to counter Japanese numerical and technical advantages. Though committed to the “Europe First” overall strategy, the top brass of the U. S. Navy knew that Japan was too powerful so simply “contain” without ground action somewhere. Events would soon determine where.

Japan covered up its defeat at Midway and continued the southern attack capturing New Britain, with it’s port of Rabaul, a key advanced base for the IJN. From Rabaul, the next step was the Solomon Islands, a British protectorate, to be followed by a thrust through the New Hebrides. The Solomon Islands were steamy jungles, sparsely populated by indigenous populations and a small group of white planters and missionaries. The British loosely governed the Solomon chain through District Officers, an “entry-level” position in the British Foreign Service, mostly held by former or reserve military men. Most whites evacuated when the Japanese threatened but these heroic civil servants remained behind, forming the Coast Watchers Service who secretly reported Japanese military movements throughout the

Solomon Islands campaign as well as arranging rescue of survivors like LTJG John F. Kennedy and his crew.

As Japanese aircraft began raids on the Eastern Solomons, one coast watcher, Martin Clemens, took to the jungle to spy on the Japanese who were about to occupy his island. When Japanese troops arrived in June, 1942, they set to work excavating a coastal area. Clemens recognized an airfield taking shape and reported it via his hidden radio. The report soon reached U. S. Naval Headquarters and made Admiral King's hair stand up.

Admiral Ernest J. King, boss of the U. S. Navy, knew that finishing that forward airfield would render unstoppable the Japanese southern advance. King convinced the other Chiefs of Staff to detach sufficient resources from the impending invasion of North Africa and gave the Navy only a month to plan and execute our first complex amphibious operation of WWII to deny the Empire of Japan this crucial airbase.

To take on the ISSEN GOREN, King employed the United States Marine Corps. The Navy considered it's Marines a useless adjunct but fortunately USMC officers weren't interested in the Navy's opinion. They committed to developing the world's finest amphibious infantry, ignoring orthodox doctrine which deemed amphibious warfare untenable in the light of the British WWI disaster at Gallipoli. Leatherneck non-commissioned officers were the Old-Breed, whose only home was the Corps. Men who saw action in China and Haiti and joyfully brawled with everybody, everywhere when not in combat. The privates were angry young men who were incensed by Pearl Harbor and joined up soon after with only the desire to be the best. They were in their late teens and athletic. Harlon Block along with the rest of the Weslaco Texas High School football team joined up together. Later killed in action, Block would be eternally remembered as the Marine anchoring the base of the flagpole in the photo atop Mt. Suribachi on Iwo Jima and the Marine Corps Memorial in Washington.

And so a convoy of too few U. S. warships, escorting hot, overcrowded troopships carrying elements of the First Marine Division was 75 years ago this night, approaching a little beach on Martin Clemens' island, near the yet-unfinished airfield. 20 miles offshore they could already smell the fetid odor of rotting vegetation from their destination where their arrival was not expected and fortunately undetected. Tomorrow would begin a series of air, sea and land battles over six months that would hand the Japanese their first defeat in decades and never again, would the term "obscure" be used to describe... Guadalcanal.

(Part II) The one thing the United States Marine Corps understood better than any service was how to cultivate a fighting spirit in it's recruits via Esprit de Corps. The USMC made you feel elite because they were picky about whom they accepted. They rejected a young Texan named Audie L. Murphy who later joined the Army and became the most decorated soldier of WWII. Marines were kept in the same unit throughout the war so they always fought with men they knew and trusted. Robert Leckie of Rutherford, NJ served with "How-Two-One" (Marine lingo for "H" company, second battalion, first Marine regiment) through the battles of Guadalcanal, Cape Gloucester, and Peleliu. Leckie, who at age

16 began his writing career covering sports for the Bergen Record, was a bit more cerebral than the average recruit, but no less tough. He enlisted the day after Pearl Harbor but was rejected because he wasn't circumcised. Though he never understood why this was necessary, Bob Leckie had himself circumcised, tried again and got in.

Another member of H-2-1 was Al Schmid, a tough welder from Philadelphia who enjoyed outdoor sports. Smitty, Lucky (Schmid and Leckie) and the First Marines landed unopposed on Guadalcanal on 7 August, 1942. The medics expected 60% casualties but the only Marine treated that day cut his hand trying to open a coconut. The Japanese garrison retreated the jungle where they got off urgent messages informing their command of the landing. (The Marines who landed on Tulagi, 20 miles north were actually the "first to fight" because that island was defended and some bitter battles ensued.)

From the start, the supply situation on "The Canal" was awful. The Marines were too busy fortifying a perimeter around their landing beach to haul supplies to protected dumps. Navy coxswains just dumped supplies on the beach. This did little to further endear the Navy to the Marines who on the voyage over, endured spoiled food and sweltering conditions in troopships. Rain and humidity rapidly ruined anything in cardboard boxes and daily Japanese bombing raids also took their toll. Marines were issued World War I Springfield bolt-action rifles and water cooled machine guns. Recruits got to choose which weapon they wanted to specialize in on the theory that the choice would make them willing experts. Thus, even these antiquated weapons in the hands of a Marine were expertly employed and meticulously maintained.

The enmity between the Navy and the Marine Corps was indicative of the inter-service rivalry that plagued the Military in the isolationist era prior to WWII. Each service competed for scarce inter-war funding. WWII brought the innovation of "unified command" led by the Joint Chiefs of Staff who settled all inter-service squabbles. Bob Leckie would write 20 years later that the survival of the Marine forces on Guadalcanal was entirely due to the costly naval and air battles that interdicted Japanese resupply and troop convoys and systematically deprived Japan of irreplaceable ships, sailors, aircraft and experienced pilots. On "The Canal" the Marines made up songs about the Navy – they weren't hymns of praise.

The supply situation went from bad to worse quickly. Within hours of the landings, the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) dispatched a sizable naval force to Guadalcanal. Taking full advantage of their preparation in night surface actions - necessary because by day, they were vulnerable to attack from U.S. carrier aircraft - they attacked our fleet on the second night. Japanese warships were upon us before our lookouts and rudimentary radar detected them. Four cruisers and a number of smaller ships were sunk in the "Battle of Savo Island" and Admiral Richmond K. Turner, in command of the mauled fleet, withdrew, taking with him the transports full of unloaded supplies. He had little choice, he had to save the remainder of his fleet. The body of water north of Guadalcanal saw the loss of so many ships in the ensuing months that it would become known as "Iron Bottom Sound."

The Marines woke up that morning abandoned by the Navy, short of food, ammunition – nearly everything except for the one intangible that Bob Leckie would later identify as the weapon that overcame all numerical and technical advantages – valor.

Japanese personnel on Guadalcanal in early August were mostly engineers and laborers. Japan had to gather up fighting units from various Pacific bases and get them to Guadalcanal for a counteroffensive. In the meantime, by day Japanese bombers hit the airfield and supply dumps and by night IJN ships shelled Marine positions. The most hated Japanese aircraft was "Washing Machine Charlie," a single cruiser-launched seaplane that each night would drop one or two small bombs and then loudly circle over the USMC perimeter for hours just to keep the Marines awake.

The worst enemy to face the Marines was Guadalcanal itself. After 10 days of intense tropical heat and humidity, rain, mud, mosquitoes and vermin, every Marine had contracted malaria, dysentery, leg sores or heat rash. Malaria rated sick bay until the fever broke but they just lived with dysentery - a solid bowel movement on Guadalcanal was a source of rejoicing. All of this caused an average weight loss of 25 pounds, worsened by dwindling food rations. Leathernecks subsisted on captured Japanese canned goods and rice. The rice was infested with worms but a captured cache of Sake helped.

So the men of how-two-one spent their time picking worms from their rice, running to the bushes every hour and refortifying their positions around Henderson field, as the airfield came to be known. None of this however, lessened the Marines' resolve. Sick, sleep deprived, and hungry, they watched and listened for enemy movement. They knew a counterattack was coming and they were ready. On 19 August, the Japanese would learn just who they picked a fight with.

(Part III) 75 years ago, westerners were, according to Japanese battle studies, a cowardly and effeminate people, adverse to fighting in rain, mist or at night. To the Westerner, night especially was an improper time for war. So believed Col Kiyono Itchiki, commanding officer of a 2,000 man force tasked to destroy the American invaders of Guadalcanal. Faulty Japanese intelligence put our number around 2,000 and our mission a raid to destroy the airfield and quickly withdraw. Itchiki didn't bother waiting for further reinforcements, his force was more than enough to oust the American weaklings because the Japanese soldier possessed a quasi-religious fighting spirit that could not possibly be defeated in combat.

On 12 August, Lt. Col. Frank Goettge, division intelligence officer, received reports from captured laborers that a Japanese unit wanted to surrender and led an amphibious patrol to verify the story. The "Goettge Patrol" was ambushed as they landed and only 3 survived. The Marines had yet to learn that Japanese never surrendered and the massacre, in Yamamoto's words, "filled the giant with a terrible resolve." Marines watched the convoy carrying Col Itchiki and his force move east of their perimeter but had no idea how many would land, or where. That information came from the Coast Watchers. Martin Clemens, now in from the jungle, was in charge of a guerrilla force of Native Policemen. Sgt Maj. Vouza, at Clemens' side through the covert pre-landing reconnaissance, had been captured by the Japanese and tortured unmercifully. Left for dead, he somehow found the strength to return to American lines. From his hospital bed, he reported that a Japanese regiment had landed east of the Tenaru River and was preparing to attack westward toward Henderson Field. For his gallantry, Vouza was later knighted with the Order of The British Empire.

General Alexander Archer Vandegrift, Commanding Officer of the First Marine Division, moved reinforcements to positions along the west bank of Tenaru River. (The battle was originally called the “Battle of the Tenaru” but maps at the time were incorrect and today the battle is known as the “Battle of Alligator Creek,” where it was actually fought.) Gunners Bob “Lucky” Leckie, Lew “Chuckler” Juergens, Bill “Hoosier” Smith and Bud “Runner” Conley set up their .30 Cal. water cooled machine gun on the left flank of the Marine line, near the mouth of the river. Fellow gunners, Al Schmid, Lee Diamond and the well-liked Johnny Rivers, called “the Indian” from his boxing days, covered the center of the line. They began hearing sounds of movement across the river, and soon the “entire Japanese Army” was headed for them.

The Japanese used only one tactic on Guadalcanal, the mass, fixed-bayonet, “Banzai Charge,” essentially an antiquated WW I tactic. Col. Itchiki’s troops waited for night, when Americans don’t fight, and hit Marine positions with a frontal attack. Alligator Creek erupted in gunfire, shouts of “Banzai,” mortar and artillery fire and streaking tracer rounds in every direction. Lucky and Chuckler, removed the tracers from their ammo belts because they were worried the enemy would use them to pinpoint their position – they were right. Further right on the line, “The Indian” kept his gun firing continuously, cutting down wave after wave but the enemy tracked his tracers to his hole. Rivers was shot in the head and instantly killed. Soon after, Lee Diamond was wounded in the arm and Al Schmid took over the gun, felling enemy troops by the dozens as they charged. Then a half-dead Japanese crept up on his position and shoved a grenade in Schmid’s face, blinding him.

Lucky, Chuckler, Runner and Hoosier used a tactic of short traversing bursts and frequent movement to confuse the enemy as they protected the Marine’s flank. All across the line, Marines kept up withering fire and held. Hundreds of bodies lie before them and the attack petered out. Later, the Marines encircled the remnants of the Itchiki force and destroyed them. After losing some 800 men in the charge, Col. Itchiki burned his colors and committed suicide. The dead continued to fight – here and there, a wounded Japanese would shoot or lob a grenade at Marines looking to aid wounded or find souvenirs. This prompted necessary but brutal measures to ensure that enemy dead were in fact, dead – and would haunt the veterans throughout their lives.

The pattern of the battle of Alligator Creek was followed in every major ground offensive on Guadalcanal, with the same result – lopsided losses for the Japanese. The Japanese held to their tactics not because they were inflexible but because the very idea of defeat was not possible in their minds. If the tactic did not work the first time, it would work later because their spirit was invincible. Until their relief in December, 1942, the Marines repelled 4 major frontal attacks, each involving a larger force, and each costing the Japanese 10 casualties to every American. U. S. Naval and air victories brought landings of food and supplies along with reinforcements from the 7th Marines and the Army’s Americal Division. My next blog will describe the naval and air actions that concluded the Battle of Guadalcanal.

Al Schmid (a fellow ham radio operator) eventually recovered some of his eyesight and along with Lee Diamond was awarded the Navy Cross. Schmid was the subject of a 1945 movie, “Pride of the Marines” one of the first to deal with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Leckie, Conley, Jurgens and Smith later fought together at Cape Gloucester and Peleliu where all were seriously wounded but survived. After the war, Bob Leckie wrote for the Associated Press and was the author of some 40 books, including two I used in the preparation of these blogs: *Helmet For My Pillow*, his 1957 combat memoir and in 1964, the scholarly and superb, *Challenge For The Pacific, Guadalcanal*. Bob Leckie died of Alzheimer's Disease in 2001, he loved the Corps all his life and his last coherent thoughts were of "The Canal," warning his wife about Japanese troops attacking their home in New Jersey.

Leckie also never forgot "The Indian," and although Schimd and Diamond were decorated and lauded as heroes, Leckie considered Johnny Rivers the true hero of Guadalcanal. In *Helmet For My Pillow*, Leckie wrote of Rivers and the 5,000 others killed on Guadalcanal, "...There are no glorious living but only glorious dead. Heroes turn traitor, warriors age and grow soft – but a victim is changeless, sacrifice is eternal."

(Part IV) In his 1964 history of the Guadalcanal campaign, Bob Leckie concluded that the Combined Air Forces and the U. S. Navy made the victory possible. As Leckie left "the Canal," he gladly accepted the Navy's help again as he grabbed the outstretched hand of a sailor who helped him board his transport. Exhausted from hunger and malaria, dysentery and jungle rot, mud and rain and everything Japan could throw at them, 18-year-old Marines who landed on Guadalcanal in peak condition, were barely able to stand on deck to watch the island fade into the distance.

On this December morning, the only people on Guadalcanal in worse shape than the First Marine Division (and the Army's Americal Division who fought alongside them) were the Japanese. In the months following the landings and the defeat in the Battle of Savo Island, the U. S. Navy began to assert itself again. Prevailing in 3 more major surface and carrier actions, the Navy reduced Japanese resupply to a trickle. Japanese soldiers, weakened by starvation and disease, were no longer physically able to fight and some 200 died each day.

Dispatches by such eminent war correspondents as Richard Tregaskis began filling stateside papers with heroic accounts of Marines making America's first successful stand against the Japanese, raising public morale after our early defeats and prompted demands for more support for the Solomons campaign. Although committed to the "Europe First" policy, Roosevelt and the Combined Chiefs of Staff realized the wisdom of making more ships and aircraft available to the Pacific Fleet and did so, much to the dismay of Churchill and the British.

Slowly, Japanese naval advantages in night fighting and their deadly "Long Lance" torpedo, were overcome by appointing aggressive commanders like Adm William F. Halsey. New carriers were arriving in theater, along with new technologies including radar-guided fire-control systems. This innovation achieved hits with the first salvo, inflicting severe damage while Japanese gunners were still bracketing their targets. The element of surprise was eliminated by Coast Watcher's who allowed no enemy ships to pass the northern Solomons unreported and air patrols that detected enemy ship movements further out to sea. While Japanese and U. S. ship losses were about even in the Solomon

Islands sea battles, the Japanese could not readily replace lost ships and trained crews, thus strategically each U.S. naval victory tightened control of the vital supply routes to Guadalcanal for American supply vessels and progressively blocked Japanese resupply.

Immediately after the Battle of Alligator Creek, the first combat aircraft arrived on Henderson field, the vanguard of the Cactus Air Force. Advanced warning of enemy aircraft overflying Bouganville was provided by the coast watchers so that ground forces had plenty of time take to shelters while interceptor aircraft were scrambled. In the ensuing months, Marine, Navy and Army air forces took a high toll of irreplaceable Japanese bombers, escort fighters and pilots while providing close air support for ground actions. They also kept Japanese ships far away by day fearing aerial attack.

Aircraft however need a runway to operate and Henderson Field was under daily attack from Japanese artillery, bombers and naval shelling. The unsung heroes of Guadalcanal included the Navy “Seabees,” experienced construction workers who had developed runway repair into a science. “Marston Matting” (steel mats that covered the dirt runway) and gravel were pre-positioned along the runway so that after a bombing or shelling, craters were rapidly filled in and matting was replaced, opening the runway within minutes. The Seabees fixed what was broken and built what was needed – all across the Pacific.

On 9 December 1942, Gen. Vandegrift relinquished command of U. S. Guadalcanal forces to Army Gen. Alexander Patch, marking the end of the Marines’ battle on “the Canal.” By this time, the 30,000 man Japanese force on the island were emaciated, disease-ridden and barely able to stand, let alone fight. The Japanese High Command never gave up on a massive counter attack and gathered 50,000 more to be landed. Gradually, the realization came, that if 30,000 could not be sustained, how could 80,000 men be fed and supplied? On 31 December 1942, the Japanese finally admitted to themselves that Guadalcanal was lost. During their bloody campaign, the Marines never ceded an inch of ground but never expanded the perimeter they established after the initial landing. Never again in WWII would U. S. Marines simply hold a position. When the Army finally went on the offensive in early February, 1943, they found no enemy soldiers to oppose them. The Japanese Navy was able, in two nights, to secretly evacuate all Japanese personnel that could walk – those that couldn’t were encouraged to commit suicide. The Japanese Dunkirk as it came to be known, marked their first defeat in the ground war and the first of an unbroken chain of American victories.

I remember the 75th anniversary of the major American battles of Pacific Theater not to glorify the carnage, nor to vilify the Japanese for causing their own destruction, but to honor “the Indian” and his fallen brethren and the families displaying gold stars in their windows. Mostly, I honor my father and his generation who protected our country from the unthinkable possibility of Fascist domination. Born in the Great Depression, sent to war out of high school, they returned to rebuild the free world and try for a better world. Right or wrong, Willy and Joe and Rosie the Riveter achieved more than any generation may ever achieve. They were our mothers and fathers, and truly, the mothers and fathers of our nation.

Every time I enjoy the superbly-crafted Japanese radios in my ham shack and drive my Japanese car that’s run perfectly for a decade, I wonder: Why couldn’t the greatness that Japan is today have been achieved without the loss of millions of military and civilian lives in the Pacific? This slaughter

occurred even before the ultimate horror of the two mushrooms that ushered in the age of fear that my generation grew up with and continues to enslave the world. I refuse to yield my fervent hope that amongst the great grandchildren of the veterans of all nations who returned from Guadalcanal and the other venues of the Pacific war, there will be found the wisdom to excise the cancer of self-destruction that has infected humankind since Eden. Sown with the genes of this powerful WWII generation, I hope a coming generation will find in itself the power not to triumph in war, but triumph over it. That will be true victory.

Originally appearing as 4 Facebook posts in August, 2017

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