

1st Marine Division Guadalcanal and Iwo Jima

Jack Adams Hacker enlisted and fought in this unit during World War II.

The primary mission of the 1st Marine Division is to execute amphibious assault operations and other such operations as may be directed.

The division was activated aboard the battleship Texas on February 1, 1941. It is the oldest and most decorated division-sized unit in the United States Marine Corps. Since its formation, the 1st Marine Division has been involved in many of the most famous campaigns in Marine Corps history. They fought on Guadalcanal, Peleliu and Okinawa in WWII. Korea saw Division units execute the landing at Inchon, and the famed withdrawal from the Chosin Reservoir. In Vietnam, Division units saw heavy fighting during the Tet Offensive. In the Gulf War, they made up the task forces assigned to breach Iraqi minefields and enter Kuwait. Since the cessation of hostilities in the Gulf, the Division has been involved in numerous contingency and humanitarian operations, including peacekeeping actions in Somalia.

Guadalcanal was the first major American offensive of World War II. Launched on August 7, 1942, this operation won the division its first of three World War II Presidential Unit Citations (PUCs). Others won were for the battles of Peleliu and Okinawa.

On 15 September 1950, the 1st Marine Division, under the command of Major General Oliver P. Smith, led the first major U.N. force strike in North Korean-occupied territory, with a surprise amphibious assault at Inchon. In five days of textbook-style campaigning, the division closed on the approaches of Seoul, the South Korean capital. In house-to-house fighting, the Marines wrested the city from its communist captors by Sept. 27. On Oct. 7, 1950, with North Korean forces in full retreat, the Inchon-Seoul campaign was formally declared closed.

On 27 November 1950, elements of the Chinese Communist People's Liberation Army struck Marine positions in force. In a carefully planned counterstroke, eight Chinese divisions charged down from surrounding mountains with the sole mission of destroying the 1st Marine Division. Over the next four weeks, the Chinese and Marine Corps forces engaged in some of the fiercest fighting of the Korean War. In an epic movement, the 1st Marine Division completed a successful fighting withdrawal through 78 miles of mountain road in northeast Korea. The fighting withdrawal ended in mid-December with the amphibious evacuation of the Marines from the port of Hungnam, Korea. Although suffering more than 4,000 battle casualties and uncounted incidents of frostbite, Marine Corps air and ground units killed nearly 25,000 Chinese communist troops.

GUADALCANAL



Shortly after defeating the Japanese at the battle of Midway, the United States decided to push into the strategically important area of the southwest Pacific. Now that Hawaii was deemed secure from immediate attack it was time to take the fight to the Japanese. Both American C.O.'s in the Pacific, General Douglas MacArthur (SW Pacific) and Admiral Chester Nimitz (Pacific Ocean) were offensive minded, aggressive leaders, and welcomed the directive that came from the Joint Chiefs on July 2, 1942. This directive called for parallel attacks on Rabaul Island, New Guinea, and the Solomon Islands Chain. Plans were started for attacking in these areas immediately.

Just as fast the plans had to be looked at from a different angle, when air recon showed that the Japanese were moving troops from Tulagi to Guadalcanal and building an airfield on the latter. These islands were next to each other in the lower Solomon Chain. The Americans had been warned earlier by Australian Coast watchers that the Japanese were starting to occupy Guadalcanal, an island 90 miles by 25 miles and covered mostly by rain forests, mountains, and swamps. A Japanese airfield here would jeopardize all U.S. forces in the area. Guadalcanal had to be taken and taken right away. Normally the island would fall under the command of MacArthur, but for now the boundary between the two commands was moved, giving command of the operation to Nimitz.

Preparation and training started at a feverish pace. Nimitz assigned three carrier groups (Saratoga, Wasp, and Enterprise) under the command of Admiral Fletcher to support the operation. Fletcher was in over-all command of the operation. Admiral Turner was in command of the landing force. This force consisted of the 1st Marine division and a regiment of the 2nd Marine Division.(19,000 men) General Vandergrift commanded these troops. Lastly the operation was backed up by a joint force (TF44) of American and Australian cruisers and destroyers.

At 0900 hours on 8/7/42 (8 months to the day after the sneak attack on Pearl harbor) 11,000 Marines landed on Guadalcanal after a lengthy naval and air bombardment. The landing was not contested by the Japanese and the airfield was secured that first day. Tulagi was also hit by a force of 1,000 Marines and it was a different story. The Japanese resisted fiercely and in two days fighting the Marines killed just about all of them.



U.S. Marines land on the beaches of Guadalcanal

On the 2nd day things became more difficult for the Marines on Guadalcanal. Fletcher withdrew the Carrier groups for fear of air attacks from Rabaul. Turner did the same with the transports. The Marines were now on their own in enemy territory. To make matters worse for them, Turner's transports held much needed supplies and equipment. In addition to the supplies there were also 1,000 Marines still on the transports that would be sorely needed in the coming hours. The only naval force in the area were the patrolling ships of TF44. Vandergrift put the Marines in a five mile long defensive perimeter and started to finish building the airfield with the equipment he had, plus that which the Japanese left.

The Japanese Commander in the area, Admiral Mikawa, sent a naval force from Rabaul down between the islands of the Solomon Chain (known as "The Slot") on the night of the 8th and hit TF 44 by surprise. In two quick battles off Savo Island the allied force lost the *Canberra*, *Quincy*, *Astoria*, *Vincennes*, and the *Chicago* with a great loss of life. On the night of the 20th of August the Japanese that had been landed earlier hit the Marine line at the Tenaru River in a fanatical "Banzai" attack. The young Marines held their ground and slaughtered the attackers. When the sun came up the ground before the Marine line was littered with over 800 dead Japanese. These young Americans who had been civilians a short time ago had stood up to a professional, experienced army and beat them.

Their hardships and heroism was just starting though.

August 20th was also the day the first Marine fighter planes landed on the now usable airfield. They quickly dubbed themselves "the Cactus Air Force." The field itself was

named Henderson Field in honor of Major Lofton R. Henderson killed in the Battle of Midway.

The Japanese kept underestimating the strength of the Americans on Guadalcanal and kept putting their troops ashore piecemeal. They also kept up the pressure on the U.S. Navy which returned to the area. In ensuing sea battles the *Enterprise* was crippled by bombs. The Japanese lost a seaplane carrier (the *Chitose*) and over 70 planes. A Jap troop ship was also sunk, and the USS *Saratoga* was put out of action for 3 months by torpedoes. The *Wasp* and the battle ship *North Carolina* were also sunk. The loss of life inflicted upon the sailors engaged was extremely high.

The battle for the island continued with the Americans landing troops and supplies during daylight hours and the Japanese doing the same after dark. This procedure the Japanese used with ships (mostly destroyers) shuttling troops in at night became known to the Marines as "the Tokyo Express." The night of the 21st of August was the scene of another "Banzai" attack against Henderson Field. 1,000 Japanese ran screaming into the Marine positions and 800 were killed before morning.

The "Tokyo Express" dropped off another 6,000 troops and on the 13th of September 3,500 of them hit the south perimeter of the airfield. This area was defended by the 1st Marine Raider Battalion under the command of Lt. Col. Merritt (Red Mike) Edson. They were dug in on a ridge and bore the brunt of wave after wave of "banzai" attacks. Edson was all over the field of battle, exhorting his men, and fighting right in the line with them. At one point the Japanese breached his line and he ordered a pullback and then called in artillery strikes on their previous positions catching the attackers in the open. This area became known as "Bloody Ridge."

Dawn broke over the bodies of 1,000 Japanese lying in and around the Marine positions. The balance had fled back into the jungle. After the battle, Vandergrift sent large patrols into the jungle after the retreating enemy. There was almost a serious setback when a battalion of Marines were hit by a large body of Japanese and were pushed back to the beach. It looked like they'd be overrun until a destroyer responded and bombarded the attacking Japanese while the Marines were evacuated by landing crafts. It was during this operation that Coastguardsman Douglas Munro put himself in harms way while evacuating the Marines and received the Medal of Honor posthumously. He was the only member of the Coast Guard to receive this honor.

The tide began to turn against the Japanese when the "Cactus Air Force" started to operate. Now the Japanese no longer had control of the air and soon the skies would be clear of them altogether. Marine Captain John Smith became the first ace of the squadron and also won a Medal of Honor.

On the 18th of September the 7th Marines landed (4,200 strong) and Vandergrift became even more aggressive. Firefights were a daily occurrence now. The Japanese were still determined to kick the Americans off the island and were landing about a thousand men a night and the Marines kept on shooting them. The Japanese finally landed a full division

on Guadalcanal under the command of General Masao Maruyama. Maruyama planned to hit the Americans in full force and put an end to them once and for all. He had his division split into 2 attacking forces. While one hit the Marines from the west the other would hit from the south. This latter force would hit the Marines on Bloody Ridge again. This battle would feature two of the Marine Corps legendary figures, Gunnery Sgt John Basilone and Lt. Col. Lewis "Chesty" Puller. The young Marines serving with them would soon become war hardened veterans.

The all out attack that the marines expected hit them on the night of October 24th. The brunt of the assault came against the south perimeter, Bloody Ridge again, in wave after wave of "Banzai" attacks. This position was held by Puller's 1st Battalion, 7th Marines. At almost 10 PM the Japanese came screaming out of the jungle and into heavy machine gun fire. Gy Sgt. John Basilone, set up in the middle of the line, fired a constant stream of bullets from one gun and kept the other guns supplied with ammo. He moved about the positions directing fire and had to run to the rear on several occasions to bring up more ammo. Several times he had to have his men crawl out in front of their position and drag the bodies of the dead Japanese away. They would pile up so high as to block the field of fire. The attacks continued all night(7 in all) as did the rain, and when it ended there were 1,300 hundred Japanese lying dead in front of the marines, a large percentage of them killed by Basilone's machine gunners.

Basilone received the Medal of Honor for his actions. Sadly to say, he was killed at the battle of Iwo Jima in 1945. He could have stayed out of the action. He was offered a commission and could have stayed Stateside on a bond tour but refused and went back to his fellow Marines.

By November the 182nd U.S. Army Infantry Regiment was landed to bolster the Marines. The "Tokyo Express" was still landing troops each night and the outcome was still to be decided. The war on the sea was just as savage as that on the land. In fact more Americans would be killed in sea battles in this campaign than would be on the land. Shortly after midnight on November 13th a fierce surface battle erupted north of Guadalcanal. It was one of the largest sea battls of the war. The U.S. Navy took another beating, losing the *Juneau*, *Atlanta*, and 4 destroyers. The *San Francisco* was badly damaged.

With the loss of the Juneau, 5 brothers who served together aboard her were killed (the Sullivan brothers).



USS *Juneau* (CL-52), June 1942

The Japanese also suffered losses. The battleship *Hei* was sunk. They also lost some 12,000 men from their 38th Division that were drowned when the U.S. sunk their troop transports on the 14th of November. Navy Lt. Cmdrs. Bruce McCandless and Herbert Schonland received the Medal of Honor for their actions in this sea battle. Another member of the "Cactus Air Force" Lt. Col Harold Bauer, who had received the medal for actions taken on October 16th was missing in this action and later declared KIA. Another Medal of Honor winner was Marine Captain Joe Foss, who, between October and January shot down 26 Japanese planes. He became Governor of South Dakota after the war.

The Tokyo Express finally petered out and came to a halt on November 30th. The 1st Marine Division was officially relieved and the Army took over on December 9th 1942. These men, relatively new to military service, and led mostly by officers that, except for the higher grades, were also new to the military, had fought face to face with a battle hardened, experienced enemy, and had beaten them.

The battle now was continued by the XIV Corps which consisted of the 2nd Marine Division and the Army 25th and Americal Divisions under the command of Army General Patch. The fighting was still vicious, but while American strength on and around the island was building, the Japanese strength was on the wane. Attrition was wearing them down. Due to the American buildup of ships and planes the Japanese could only supply the island with men and supplies by submarines. On January 3rd 1943, Japanese headquarters conceded defeat and ordered the evacuation of their remaining troops from Guadalcanal and on the 7th the last of the defeated Japanese left the island via destroyers. They left 25,000 dead on the island and between 600 and 900 pilots in the sea. I don't have any figures on the number of sailors killed. 1,600 Americans were killed on the island and many more killed at sea. The rest of the Solomon Islands chain would take almost another year of fighting before being entirely in American hands.

This victory, coming after the battles of the Coral Sea and Midway, showed the world that the United States was definitely recovered from the devastating damages done at Pearl Harbor and was on the way back.

During the Guadalcanal Campaign, the following Americans were awarded the Medal of Honor:

- **BAILEY, KENNETH D** (Posthumous) USMC 1st Marine Raider BN
- **BASILONE, JOHN** USMC 7th Marines, 1st Marine Division
- **BAUER, HAROLD WILLIAM** (Posthumous) USMC VMF-212
- **CASAMENTO, ANTHONY** USMC 5th Marines, 1st Marine Division
- **DAVIS, CHARLES W.** US Army 25th Infantry Division
- **EDSON, MERRITT AUSTIN** USMC 1st Marine Raider BN
- **FOSS, JOSEPH JACOB** USMC VMF-121
- **FOURNIER, WILLIAM G.** (Posthumous) US Army 35th Infantry, 25th Infantry Division
- **HALL, LEWIS** (Posthumous) US Army 35th Infantry, 25th Infantry Division
- **MUNRO, DOUGLAS ALBERT** (Posthumous) US Coast Guard
- **SCOTT, NORMAN** (Posthumous) US Navy
- **VANDEGRIFT, ALEXANDER ARCHER** USMC Commanding General, 1st Marine Division

IWO JIMA

By October of 1944, the American military in the Pacific decided to invade the small Japanese held island of Iwo Jima. Being only 600 miles from the Japanese home islands, it would put the now mighty American war machine on the very doorstep of Japan. It would also be used as an emergency landing field for damaged bombers returning from missions over Japan. Crews were being lost when damaged planes had to ditch in the Pacific. As it turned out the Marines would pay a very bloody price to save these airmen. Japan had fortified this island decades previously but in 1944 decided to fortify it further. Under the command of General Kuribayashi some 22,000 troops were dug in deeply and prepared to defend the island to the last man. Both ends of the island were defended in such a way as to have fields of fire in every direction. The morale of the Japanese defenders was high, and they were prepared to "give their lives for the Emperor." The Marines would accommodate them.

The date of February 19th, 1945 was established for the invasion, which would be under the command of Marine General Holland M. "Howlin' Mad" Smith. There would be some 80,000 Marines available for the operation. Bombing of the island started in December, '44 and Smith requested intense bombardment for the 10 days prior to the attack. He was promised 4 and actually given three days. Supplies were short due to the invasion of the Philippines that was also due to take place.



Sixth Fleet during invasion of Iwo Jima. Mt. Suribachi in background. 02/19/1945

The requested bombardment started on the 16th but due to bad weather much of the air attacks were cancelled and many specific targets were left untouched. The second day was somewhat better but still most of the defenses were left intact. On the 3rd day the fleet blasted the island the entire day. On the next day it would be up to the Marines to finish the job.

After a 2 hour air and naval barrage, the Marines started landing at 9AM on the 19th of February, 1945. They first came ashore on the southeast part of the island below the 556 foot high Mount Suribachi. Resistance was light and there soon were 6,000 men on the beach. By 10AM the inland movement started and the Japanese struck back mightily. Casualties began to pile up almost immediately as the advancing Marines and the newly arriving landing crafts were raked by machine gun and artillery fire. Further landings were halted temporarily while the dead and wounded were cleared from the beach. The Marines already on shore continued to press forward despite the heavy casualty rate.



Out of the gaping mouths of Coast Guard and Navy Landing Craft, rose the great flow of invasion supplies to the blackened sands of Iwo Jima, a few hours after the Marines had wrested their foothold on the vital island.

The landings resumed and by the end of the day there were some 30,000 Marines on the island. They were ready now to attack Suribachi and the airfield in the north. By the end of the day the Marines were ordered to dig in where they were. Further advancing was called off even though all the pre-planned objectives hadn't been reached. The expected banzai attack never came but the Japanese did shell the dug in Americans through the night. The U.S. fleet responded with their own bombardments. 566 Marines had already been killed and almost 2,000 had been wounded.

The next day the climb up Suribachi started. The Japanese were dug in in hundreds of spots along the slope and these had to be killed as the Marines went up. The top was an observation post from which the Japanese were directing fire on the Americans throughout the island. The Marines fought hand-to-hand and face-to-face with the defenders all day and into the next day. There were at least 2,000 Japanese dug in on the mount. The 3rd day was even worse than the other two days if that was possible. It was on this day that a platoon of Marines became the most decorated platoon in all Marine history. 3rd platoon of E company, 2nd Battalion, 28th Marine Regiment, 5th Marine Div. received the following decorations from that battle; 1 Medal of Honor (posthumously to PFC Don Ruhl), 2 Navy Crosses, 1 Silver Star, 7 Bronze Stars, and 17 Purple Hearts.

The battle raged the next day but the Marines had finally neared the summit while killing at least 1,000 Japanese defenders on the way up. (By the end of this day Marine casualties would reach 4,500 on this 8 square mile island.) On the next day the summit was taken and it was here that the Marines raised the American flag not only raising the morale of all Marines on that island but eventually all Americans everywhere.

On the 24th of February the battle raged just as hard as the Marines advanced northward. The enemy would come out of underground positions that were untouched by the aerial and naval bombardments and had to be killed by rifle and machine gun. The casualties on both sides were horrendous. The fighting continued on through the end of the month and on March 4th the first U.S. bomber (a B29) made an emergency landing after bombing the Japanese main islands.

The island was pronounced secured on the 14th of March, though the Marines would suffer 6,000 more casualties cleaning up this "secured" island. The last Japanese attack came on the 26th of March when 1,000 Japanese charged the American line. The Marines suffered more KIA's but killed the Jap attackers almost to a man.

When the shooting finally stopped there were only 250 Japanese prisoners out of the original 22,000 defenders. The rest were killed. General Kuribayashi committed suicide (hari kari). The Marines lost 7,000 killed and 19,000 wounded. The Navy suffered also. Five ships were sunk by Kamikazi planes, as was the carrier HMS *Bismarck* with 500 of its crew.

Twenty-seven Marines received the Medal of Honor for actions they took in this battle. It's said that 2,000 B29's made emergency landings on Iwo coming from Japan, thus saving some 2,500 airmen.



From the crest of Mount Suribachi, the Stars and Stripes wave in triumph over Iwo Jima after U.S. Marines had fought their way inch by inch up its steep lava-encrusted slopes.