

# THE GUADALCANAL CAMPAIGN AND ITS OUTCOME IN THE PACIFIC WAR

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## ABSTRACT

In this essay, the author critically examines the significance of the Guadalcanal Campaign in relation to the overall outcome of the Pacific War. The essay delves into a thorough assessment of the campaign, weighing both its advantages and disadvantages, to justify its ultimate impact. By analysing primary sources, historical accounts and scholarly perspectives, the author investigates the strategic, operational and symbolic aspects of the Guadalcanal Campaign. He explores the major advantages of the campaign, such as the successful defence of Henderson Field, the disruption of Japanese supply lines and the turning point it provided for the Allied forces. Additionally, the author also addresses the disadvantages, including the heavy casualties suffered by both sides, the protracted nature of the campaign and the ongoing nature of the Pacific War beyond Guadalcanal. In conclusion, the author discusses the decisive nature of the Guadalcanal Campaign, providing valuable insights into its historical significance and its role in shaping the overall outcome of the Pacific War.

*Keywords: Pacific War; Guadalcanal Campaign; Respect; Decisive; Subsequent Stages*

## INTRODUCTION

The Guadalcanal Campaign refers to the battles that were fought on and around the island of Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands between the Allied Forces and the Imperial Japanese Army and Navy. This campaign took place between 7<sup>th</sup> August, 1942, to 9<sup>th</sup> February, 1943, during World War Two (WWII).<sup>1</sup> The Guadalcanal Campaign had been widely regarded by military academia as the strategically decisive victory for the Allied Forces in the Pacific theatre of WWII. This was the first major land offensive against the Japanese, which acted as the springboard to other successful Allied offensives in the Pacific War.

In this essay, the author argues that the Guadalcanal Campaign was decisive with respect to the outcome of the Pacific War due to these points: 1) the denial of Henderson airfield for the Japanese; 2) the attrition warfare employed by the Allied Forces to deplete the Japanese forces, including combatant platforms and personnel; and 3) the gained foothold to provide the decisive blows against the enemy in the subsequent stages of the War. It was this decisive victory that eventually led to the Allied Forces winning the Pacific War.

Not only was Japanese offensive capability badly affected after the Battle of Midway, their morale was also greatly affected, as Midway was the major defeat that they suffered for the first time since the start of World War II in the Far East.

## HENDERSON AIRFIELD - CENTRE OF GRAVITY FOR THE IMPERIAL JAPANESE NAVY

First and foremost, the possession of Henderson airfield by the Allied Forces was crucial for them to gain sea control over the Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs) between the United States (US) and Australia.<sup>2</sup> This vital artery was essential for the replenishment and resupply of personnel and logistics for the Allied Forces throughout the Pacific Campaign. This was the exact reason why the Japanese persisted to try to retake Henderson airfield after conceding it to the surprise attack by the United States First Marine Division on 7<sup>th</sup> August, 1942.<sup>3</sup> One would go further to state that the Henderson airfield on Guadalcanal represented Japanese's Centre of Gravity (COG) here, to interdict the

vital artery between US and Australia, and to generate the outcome of isolating Australia.<sup>4</sup> As such, it was baffling why the Japanese did not station more soldiers to defend Guadalcanal when the First Marine Division outnumbered and overwhelmed them on 7<sup>th</sup> August, 1942. Perhaps, the fact that Guadalcanal lay in the 'furthest extent of the Japanese empire in the South Pacific', was the explanation behind the Japanese conceding Guadalcanal easily at the start of the campaign, as they were stretched to a huge degree along the southern parts in their new empire.<sup>5</sup> Logically, this was also the reason why Guadalcanal was selected by Admiral Ernest King to start their Southwest Pacific thrust.<sup>6</sup>



*US Marines debark from LCP(L)s onto Guadalcanal on 7<sup>th</sup> August, 1942.*

The denial of Japanese establishing the airfield on Guadalcanal by the Allied Forces, which resulted in the inability of the Japanese to launch land-based aircrafts to disrupt the vital SLOCs between US and Australia, and continue their invasion into Australia, proved to be a crucial decision. The Allied Forces could not delay the attack on Guadalcanal any further or they risk the Japanese completing the airfield to build up her air power in Guadalcanal against the Allied Forces.<sup>7</sup> The critical SLOCs was perhaps the Allied Forces' COG in the Pacific Campaign, as Australia became the sole platform for Allied operations at that stage. This made Guadalcanal even more pivotal in Allied Forces' defence, which was rightly targeted by the Japanese, but they were just unable to gain any headway in re seizing the island nor dislocating the resupply.

## ATTRITION WARFARE - ADVANTAGE TO ALLIED FORCES

Throughout the six months of intense battle at and around Guadalcanal, both sides fought many battles, including land and naval battles. Neither was able to outsmart each other significantly and both suffered attrition on a large scale. During the Guadalcanal Campaign, Japan lost 24 major naval combatants totalling 134,889 tons, while the Allied Forces lost 24 major naval combatants totalling 126,240 tons.<sup>8</sup> Sun Tzu had stated, 'There is no instance of a nation benefitting from prolonged warfare.' However, in this case, this attrition harmed Japanese more, as the US was depleting Japanese capabilities as part of Franklin Roosevelt's strategy of attrition warfare. On the other hand, the US was able to rely on her bigger economy to replenish the loss of combatants. As such, the longer the Guadalcanal Campaign went on, the less likely the Japanese were able to regain the island of Guadalcanal and its airfield.<sup>9</sup>

**The Guadalcanal Campaign had been widely regarded by military academia as the strategically decisive victory for the Allied Forces in the Pacific theatre of World War II.**

The Imperial Japanese Navy lost a total of 901 naval aircrafts in combat against the Allied Forces between 1<sup>st</sup> August, 1942, to 1<sup>st</sup> January, 1943, during the Guadalcanal campaign. A significant note was that they lost 680 naval aircrafts in the same period due to non-combat reasons, and these numbers became greater as compared to those lost in combat, as the campaign dragged on.<sup>10</sup> The Imperial Japanese Navy was known to produce top-notch fighter pilots, and they were regarded as 'Japan's operational centre of gravity in the Pacific', as they fronted and won many of Japan's battles in the Pacific.<sup>11</sup>

Ultimately, as more Japanese pilots were shot down by the Allied Forces, the aviation training schools of Japan with their intensive pilot training programme were unable to replace their fallen elite pilots as readily as compared to the US. Quantity certainly has its quality of its own, at least for the Allied Forces in this case.

## GAINING A FOOTHOLD FOR ADVANCEMENT TOWARDS JAPAN

The Guadalcanal Campaign allowed the Allied Forces to establish their foothold for their Pacific forces, including both the Central and Southwest Pacific thrusts, to advance towards Japan. The sustained attrition of Japanese forces meant less naval tonnage and aircrafts to be on the offensive in other areas in the Pacific region, and Allied Forces were able to drive the Japanese on the defensive, who could only defend with fewer assets thereafter. The Japanese were unable to regain the initiative after the defeat in the Guadalcanal Campaign, and this was handed over to the Allied Forces, who pushed the Japanese back to Japan eventually.

The Battle of Savo Island on 9<sup>th</sup> August, 1942, almost handed the initiative back to the Japanese, but Vice Admiral Gunichi Mikawa was unable to take advantage of his asymmetric strategy of attacking at night after succeeding in executing one of the worst defeats in US naval history by destroying four Allied cruisers and damaging two destroyers and one cruiser.<sup>12</sup> Ironically, their strategy of using night to seek cover also resulted in them not eliminating the Allied Forces entirely, which proved to be a costly mistake. After a prolonged campaign that lasted six months, the Japanese finally retreated from Guadalcanal after losing 20,000 ground troops, 24 naval combatants and 901 aircrafts in combat.<sup>13</sup>

The defeat of the Japanese in the Guadalcanal Campaign and the seizure of Guadalcanal acted as a fulcrum for the subsequent naval battles fought, and with the Allied Forces winning these subsequent battles such as the Battle of the Bismarck Sea, it allowed the Allied Forces to achieve sea control in the region. This hindered the Imperial Japanese Navy from resupplying their troops with 'food and medical supplies to sustain the ground forces nor providing enough artillery and ammunition to boost fighting effectiveness.'<sup>14</sup> The long sea voyage that the Japanese troops needed to sail was also exploited by the Allied Forces. Only 2,000 out of the 12,000 men reached the shore of Guadalcanal as a result, which was highlighted by Lt General Shuichi Miyazaki.<sup>15</sup>

The Guadalcanal Campaign was also the precedent Joint operations conducted by the Air, Land and Naval forces together under one single command, which epitomised 'the true value of sea power', as pointed out by Sir Julian Corbett. This 'unity of command' adopted by the Allied Forces proved to be a success during the prolonged campaign.<sup>16</sup> Being the springboard for such 'jointness' projection of combined power by the Allied Forces, this allowed them to regroup faster and accomplish effective influence against the Japanese, who were commanded by both Imperial Japanese Navy and Imperial Japanese Army, of which there were speculations of them being at loggerheads with one another.



US Navy destroyers USS Blue and USS Patterson evacuate the crew from the burning HMAS Canberra.



## BATTLE OF MIDWAY: THE MORE DECISIVE BATTLE?

The Japanese suffered an unprecedented defeat in the Battle of Midway in June 1942, losing four aircraft carriers during the battle.<sup>17</sup> By winning the Battle of Midway, the Allied Forces managed to progress on their Pacific Campaign by reducing Japanese's offensive capability to parity. This could be said to be the turning points for both the Allied Forces and the Japanese—the former for the better, and the latter for the worse. Not only was Japanese offensive capability badly affected after the Battle of Midway, their morale was also greatly affected, as Midway was the major defeat that they suffered for the first time since the start of WWII in the Far East. Fortunately, the US was able to capitalise on this momentum and subsequently pushed Japanese forces back in the Pacific theatre.

**The sustained attrition of Japanese forces meant less naval tonnage and aircrafts to be on the offensive in other areas in the Pacific region, and Allied Forces were able to drive the Japanese on the defensive, who could only defend with fewer assets thereafter.**

However, after the Battle of Midway, the Japanese naval force was still considered on par or slightly ahead of the Allied naval fleet. The gain in the advantage by the Allied Forces tilted towards them only

after fighting the long-drawn Guadalcanal Campaign. The Allied Forces also gained territorial, sea and air advantage after winning the Guadalcanal Campaign, which gave them a more strategic advantage to strike back against the Japanese in the overall Pacific War, as compared to Midway, which was fought in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

## CENTRAL PACIFIC THRUST: THE KEY THRUST?

As compared to the Southwest Pacific thrust, the Central Pacific thrust was more effective in ending the war, when the Allied Forces dropped two atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki from the planes that took off from the Northern Mariana Islands. One may argue that the Southwest Pacific thrust was redundant, and resulted in a massive loss of resources, of which the Allied Forces could have focused on the Central Pacific thrust led by Admiral Chester Nimitz. The Allied Forces could have ended the war even earlier.

However, without winning the Guadalcanal Campaign and occupying Guadalcanal, the Allied Forces would be forced to concede Australia eventually, one of US major allies. Not only that, their Central Pacific thrust would then have to fight two Japanese fronts—the Southern front from Guadalcanal and the Western front from the Japanese-occupied islands.

Without a doubt, the Allied Forces would have to fight these uphill battles without reinforcements and supplies from Australia.



*US Navy Douglas SBD-3 'Dauntless' dive bombers from scouting squadron VS-8 from the aircraft carrier USS Hornet (CV-8) approaching the burning Japanese heavy cruiser Mikuma to make the third set of attacks on her, during the Battle of Midway, 6<sup>th</sup> June, 1942.*

By opening a new theatre in Southwest Pacific, the Allied Forces gained an advantage by: 1) limiting Japanese's advancement into Australia; 2) forcing the Japanese to continue to battle on and suffer from attrition and morale issues; and 3) deploying an indirect approach to distract the enemy from the other theatre.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Guadalcanal Campaign was decisive to a large extent with respect to the outcome of the Pacific War based on the following points: 1) the denial of Henderson airfield for the Japanese; 2) the attrition warfare employed by the Allied Forces to deplete the Japanese forces, including combatant

platforms and personnel; and 3) the gained foothold to provide the decisive blows against the enemy in the subsequent stages of the war. The positive advantages gained from the Guadalcanal Campaign far outweigh the negative aspects: 1) the Allied Forces gained a strategic advantage in territorial, sea and air aspects after winning the Guadalcanal campaign, as compared to Midway; and 2) the Southwest Pacific thrust was equal in importance, as it limited Japanese's advancement into Australia, forced the enemy to continue to battle and suffer from attrition and morale issues, and distracted the enemy from the other theatres.

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4. The Centre of Gravity (CoG) is a military concept devised by Carl Von Clausewitz. The definition of CoG is “the source of power that provides moral or physical strength, freedom of action, or will to act.” (Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2021)
5. Phillips, P. O., *How the War Was Won*. (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 379.
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7. Miller, J. J., *Guadalcanal: the First Offensive*. (Washington D.C.: Center of Military History-United States Army, 1995).
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Based on Japanese account, the airfield was completed on 5 August 1942 (Lee, 2011).

9. Phillips, P. O., *How the War Was Won*. (Cambridge University Press, 2015).
10. Ibid.
11. Lee, B. A. (2011). A Pivotal Campaign in a Peripheral Theatre: Guadalcanal and World War II in the Pacific. (*Naval Power and Expeditionary Warfare: Peripheral Campaigns and New Theatres of Naval Warfare*, 2011), 96.

Attrition warfare is a military strategy to wear down the enemy to the point of defeat due to the continuous losses in personnel and combatants such as warships and warplanes. Although this is usually applied as the last resort.

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