

PRAISE FOR JEFFERY R. COX

"Rising Sun, Falling Skies *commemorates not a defense but a defiance:  
a forgotten epic of character and honor.*"

DENNIS SHOWALTER

JEFFREY R. COX



MORNING  
STAR,  
MIDNIGHT  
SUN



THE  
EARLY GUADALCANAL-SOLOMONS  
CAMPAIGN OF WORLD WAR II  
AUGUST–OCTOBER 1942

OSPREY



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PUBLISHING





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# PROLOGUE: VISITORS

As light started taking over the eastern sky on the morning of August 7, 1942, the officers and men of the Imperial Japanese Navy's 13th Construction Unit began to rouse themselves. Their commander, Captain Monzen Kanae, knew it was going to be a hot day, as days here on the island the Japanese called Gadarukanaru always were.<sup>1</sup> And a busy day. He was expecting visitors.

A month earlier, Captain Monzen's 13th Construction Unit, joined by the 11th Construction Unit under Lieutenant Commander Okamura Tokunaga, had been sent down to this island in the southernmost corner of the Empire of Japan – or, more accurately, the “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.” That was what the Japanese called their empire, though this island was neither in Asia nor blessed with prosperity.

Captain Monzen was in a land as alien to him as Tokyo Bay was to Commodore Matthew Perry when Perry barged in, literally, in 1853 and started the dominos falling, the first of which was the so-called “Meiji Restoration” and with it the creation of the Japanese Empire. The foundation of the Meiji Restoration was Japan's desire to establish itself as a great power so that nothing like the humiliation of the Commodore Perry visit could ever happen again.

And in establishing itself as a great power, Japan put itself on a collision course with other great powers. It was most fortunate for Japan that its first European rival for control of Asia was the most inept of the great powers – Tsarist Russia. The Combined Fleet of the Imperial Japanese Navy destroyed the Russian Far East Fleet off Port Arthur. The tsar sent his Baltic Fleet halfway around the world to relieve Port Arthur. The Japanese destroyed that fleet, too, at the decisive Battle of Tsushima in 1905. It became part of the Japanese national psyche, the “decisive battle” that stopped the European imperialists.

After World War I, Tsarist Russia was replaced as a rival by Great Britain and the United States, who became the focus of Japanese military preparations. As relations between Japan and the West deteriorated, Japan moved to modernize its navy and figure out how it would fight the next war at sea. The Imperial Japanese Navy refused to abandon



its long-held idea of the “decisive battle” like it had enjoyed at Tsushima in 1905 during the Russo-Japanese War. However, the Washington Naval Treaty, a noble attempt by the victorious Allies to prevent another arms race through the limitation of naval construction, ostensibly forced Japan into a set disadvantage against its likely rivals. As a result, Japanese naval strategists looked for creative ways to gain a decisive edge. And achieved several breakthroughs.

Seeing that, at least in the days before radar, darkness could hide their inferior numbers, the Combined Fleet, the main ocean-going combat component of the Imperial Japanese Navy, trained relentlessly in night combat.<sup>2</sup> They perfected high-quality optics for night spotting and developed illumination rounds, flares, and floatlights that were more reliable and burned more brightly than their American counterparts. The Imperial Japanese Navy’s Naval Air Force, known as the “Sea Eagles,” became the world leader in naval aviation, both in its pursuit of carrier aviation and in its development of seaplanes and seaplane tactics.

It was during this period that the Imperial Japanese Navy developed what was arguably the crown jewel and definitely the most dangerous weapon of its surface fleet – the Type 93 torpedo. By far the finest torpedo of its time, the Type 93 was 24 inches in diameter and, at 29 feet 6 inches, unusually long. It carried an explosive charge of 1080lb, the largest of its kind. But what made the Type 93 so special was its range. At its high-speed setting of 48 knots, it had a range of 20,000m – more than 10 miles. At its slowest speed of 36 knots, it could go an incredible 40,000m – more than 20 miles. By comparison, the US Navy’s Mark 15 torpedo, used by destroyers, had a maximum range of just 5,500m at its high-speed setting of 45 knots and a range of 13,700m at 26 knots – a speed so slow that it could be outrun by Japanese warships. On top of that, the Mark 15 was powered by steam, which left a trail of bubbles that was easily spotted, and seemed overly prone to duds. In contrast, the Type 93 was powered by oxygen, which left no bubbles and little visible wake. The Japanese went to great lengths to conceal the Type 93; its devastating power would be a rude shock to the US and Royal navies in the Pacific. Much later, the torpedo’s extreme effectiveness and unusual length earned from noted historian Samuel Eliot Morison the title by which the Type 93 would become famous – “Long Lance.”

The Washington Naval Treaty of 1922 was arguably Japan’s last attempt at outwardly restraining its expansionist ambitions in the name of “peace.” As the Treaty was concluded, Emperor Taisho, whose lack of interest in politics had helped Japan agree to the Washington Treaty, was forced from power by health issues. His son Crown Prince Hirohito steadily gained more power until December 25, 1925, when Taisho died and the Crown Prince became Emperor of Japan. The new era of Showa (“enlightened peace”) was proclaimed. Hirohito would use this period of enlightened peace to start two wars.<sup>3</sup>

Despite her naval ingenuity, her first aggressive act was in fact on land with the invasion of China, starting in earnest in 1937. It was never called a war, at least not in Japanese parlance. It was always called an “incident” – one that was supposed to last a month. Yet it was in this “incident” that the behavior of the Imperial Japanese Army

exhibited some of the most barbaric conduct of the 20th century, including the literal “Rape of Nanking”. Some 20,000 women were raped, most repeatedly, many in front of husbands, fathers, or children who were murdered when they attempted to intervene.<sup>4</sup> In Nanking alone some 260,000 civilians were killed, more than a third of the city was left in ruins, and everything of value was shipped to Japan.<sup>5</sup>

Ultimately, Japan conquered everything worth conquering in China – its ports, its industrial areas, the majority of its arable land, most of its navigable rivers. Yet it meant nothing. In 1940, the Sea Eagles received a new toy: the Mitsubishi A6M Type 00 (*Reisen*) Carrier Fighter, Model 11, which would become famous as the “Zero.”<sup>6</sup> It literally chased what little air power China had from the skies. It still meant nothing. The Chinese would not surrender, could not be made to surrender.

As a result, the “China Incident” kept consuming more and more resources – \$5 million a day, a staggering sum for that time – while the continuing Japanese atrocities were alienating the very countries on whom Japan depended for import of those resources, such as the United States.<sup>7</sup> Only 10 percent of the oil Japan used was produced in the home islands. Another 10 percent came from the Netherlands East Indies. The remainder, 80 percent, came from the United States. And that flow of oil was in danger of being cut off if relations between Japan and the West continued to deteriorate.

And continue to deteriorate they did, as World War II in Europe began. In June 1940, a month after President Roosevelt had moved the Pacific Fleet from San Diego to Pearl Harbor, the US Congress authorized the Two-Ocean Navy Act, providing for a massive expansion of the US Navy. In a few years, the US Navy would achieve quantitative superiority to the Imperial Japanese Navy in the Pacific, and any chance of the Japanese assembling the East Asian hegemony that was now the clear goal of Emperor Hirohito would be gone unless immediate action was taken.<sup>8</sup> Tokyo did its calculations. Based on the Two-Ocean Navy Act and Japan’s own continued naval expansion, Japan’s naval strength relative to the US would peak in late 1941.<sup>9</sup>

Meanwhile, the army’s continued brutality increased international sympathy for the Chinese, who received a trickle of military support. The Japanese seized northern Indochina to cut the last remaining routes for that support to get to China. The US, Britain, and the Dutch government-in-exile rationalized that Japan was simply trying to cut the Chinese supply line through Indochina and did not suspect that a full-scale invasion of their Far East interests was in the offing. However, in July 1941, the Japanese moved into southern Indochina, seizing a major air complex in and around Saigon.

The strategic ramifications of this action were obvious. The Japanese now effectively surrounded the Philippines, with Saigon to the west, Japanese-held Formosa to the north, and the Japanese-held Marshall Islands to the east. Saigon was in range of British Malaya and all-important Singapore, as well as northwest Borneo, which could serve as a gateway into the East Indies. Their intention was clear. The response from Washington was outrage – and, on August 1, 1941, Japanese assets were frozen and a total trade embargo on Japan imposed. The British and the Dutch quickly followed suit.

Japan and the United States were now at an impasse. Washington would not lift the trade embargo until Japan had withdrawn from both Indochina and China. Japan would not withdraw as to do so would mean a loss of “face” – that vague but important Asian concept that remains imperfectly understood in the West – and Japan’s inevitable reduction to a second-rate power.

So the long-held Japanese ambition to seize the resources of Malaya and the oil-rich Netherlands East Indies was now a national imperative. Becoming self-sufficient through the seizure of Southeast Asia was now more than philosophical; it was essential for national survival. Imperial General Headquarters, the rather informal organization roughly equivalent to the American Joint Chiefs of Staff that grew in wartime to coordinate (in theory) the activities of the Imperial Army’s and Navy’s general staffs on behalf of the respective services, needed options.

The Naval General Staff had been planning an operation to seize Malaya, Borneo, and the Netherlands East Indies for a long time. However, Admiral Yamamoto Isoroku, head of the Combined Fleet, knew what going to war with the US would mean – a likely catastrophic defeat for Japan. As Yamamoto famously said, “In the first six to twelve months of war with the United States and Great Britain I will run wild and win victory upon victory. But then, if the war continues after that, I have no expectation of success.”<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, he fine-tuned those plans for war.

While the Japanese would have the advantage in the short term, they knew they could not match America’s industrial and military might in the long term. What they were hoping for was a continuing manifestation of the American political weakness and isolationism that had kept it out of the war so far. Admiral Yamamoto’s projection of six months was key. The Japanese hoped they could build up their East Asian empire during that timeframe – adding the Philippines, Malaya, the East Indies, Siam (already an ally), and Burma, and building up a defensive web of islands including Guam and the Marianas, the Carolines, the Marshalls, the Gilberts, Wake, and New Britain. By the time the United States was mobilized, Japan hoped its new defensive network would make the American public question whether retaking far-away East Asia was worth the cost in lives and in materiel, opening the door to a political settlement that could allow Japan to keep its territorial gains. Of course, that strategy relied on doing nothing to so outrage the American people that they would refuse to listen to any settlement short of Japan’s unconditional surrender.

And so the plans that Admiral Yamamoto and the Japanese had developed were put into motion. The ships under Vice Admiral Nagumo Chuichi were assembled. Six aircraft carriers, officially called the 1st Air Fleet, whose names would become infamous – *Akagi*, *Kaga*, *Hiryu*, *Soryu*, *Shokaku*, *Zuikaku*. The *Hiei* and *Kirishima*, two fast battleships that had been converted from battlecruisers. The *Tone* and *Chikuma*, two bizarre-looking heavy cruiser/seaplane carrier hybrids. And finally the 1st Destroyer Flotilla of eight destroyers – *Urakaze*, *Isokaze*, *Tanikaze*, *Hamakaze*, *Kagero*, *Shiranuhi*, *Arare*, and *Kasumi* – led by the light cruiser *Abukuma*. Referred to as the “Japanese Carrier Striking Force”

in US Navy circles, it was and is more commonly known by the informal name of *Kido Butai* – “Striking Force.”

They headed to Pearl Harbor and a date with history on December 7, 1941.

But even before *Kido Butai* struck Pearl Harbor – an act that indeed so outraged the American people that they refused to listen to any settlement short of Japan’s unconditional surrender – the Japanese began what US military theorists would later call “the Centrifugal Offensive,” the conquest of Malaya and the Netherlands East Indies being the prime objectives, but also including the Philippines; Guam and the Marianas; and an outer defense web with the Carolines, the Marshalls, the Gilberts, Wake, and New Britain. The Japanese conquered almost all of them. And they did so even more quickly and at a much cheaper cost in men and materiel than their plans had predicted.

Japan’s drive to seize the Philippines, Malaya, and the Netherlands East Indies was later called the Java Sea Campaign. The key combat engagements included destroying most of the US Far East Air Force on the ground at Clark Field in the Philippines, effectively ceding control of the air to the Japanese for the entire campaign. There was the sinking of the Royal Navy battleship *Prince of Wales* and battlecruiser *Repulse* off Malaya by the Japanese Naval Air Force, destroying the most powerful Allied surface ships in the first days of the war. And then there was the Battle of the Java Sea, in which a motley, multinational collection of Allied warships slapped together at the last minute was decisively defeated by the Imperial Japanese Navy.<sup>11</sup>

The key component to Japan’s victories during this time was air superiority, whether by land-based air or *Kido Butai*, which topped off this first round of conquests with a rampage through the Indian Ocean, viciously lashing at British bases and ships almost unopposed. Admiral Yamamoto had indeed run wild.

But those early victories had come with a heavy, albeit intangible, price. Almost inevitably the Japanese suffered from a bout of what they called “Victory Disease” – the Naval General Staff and the Combined Fleet thought they simply could not lose. Richard Frank defined the symptoms of Victory Disease as “overextension and dispersion of forces.”<sup>12</sup> This was true on a strategic level, but it also manifested itself in arrogance, overconfidence, and sloppiness all the way down to unit level.

The arrogance, overconfidence, and sloppiness showed up regularly at the end of the Java Sea Campaign. Just before the Battle of the Java Sea itself, which involved Japanese surface forces escorting a very large convoy of army troops, the commanding Japanese admiral was so contemptuous of Allied opposition that he lagged some 200 miles behind his charges, barely reaching them before the Allies did. Just after the battle, Japanese transports started landing troops in northwest Java, again so contemptuous of Allied opposition that they positioned their forces to block escape rather than protect the invasion transports. The Allied cruisers USS *Houston* and HMAS *Perth*, who were indeed trying to escape, got in between the helpless transports and their alleged guards, resulting in a melee in which the Japanese sank both cruisers, but in the process sank four of their own transports, including the flagship of the invasion convoy. The next day, a lone, aged,

and damaged American destroyer, the USS *Edsall*, stumbled into the vaunted *Kido Butai* south of Java. The carriers' heavy surface escorts, battleships *Hiei* and *Kirishima*, and the heavy cruisers/seaplane carriers *Tone* and *Chikuma* took the destroyer under fire. However, their shooting was inaccurate, and an enraged Admiral Nagumo resorted to an airstrike to sink the aggravating destroyer.

But the Japanese did not see the warning signs, and the Victory Disease got worse. On January 29, 1942, the Naval General Staff approved an offensive outward from Rabaul to capture Lae, Salamaua, and Port Moresby on New Guinea and Tulagi in the lower Solomon Islands of the South Pacific. The idea was to eliminate positions from which the Allies could attack Rabaul, which with its famous harbor had become the primary Japanese base in the South Pacific.

The idea for eliminating threats to Rabaul came from Vice Admiral Inoue Shigeyoshi, whose 4th Fleet would be handed the job. Highly intelligent and outspoken, Inoue knew his assignment to command the 4th Fleet – the smallest in the Combined Fleet with only 18 ships and covering something of a backwater – was a punishment for opposing the war and doubting the Imperial Japanese Navy's ability to stand up to the US Navy. But Inoue made the most of it. It was his forces that had originally captured Rabaul on January 23, 1942.

The invasion of New Guinea started out all right. Admiral Inoue's invasion force moved to Lae and Salamaua, capturing both on March 8. Two days later, the anchored invasion force was subject to a surprise attack by more than 100 US Navy carrier aircraft from the aircraft carriers *Lexington* and *Yorktown*. Three transports were sunk; a fourth was damaged. Seven other ships were damaged, including light cruiser *Yubari* and destroyers *Asanagi* and *Yunagi*.

The loss of the transports was critical, hampering future operations such as the capture of Port Moresby, which had to be postponed. Even more critical was the effect on the Japanese. Admiral Inoue did not like the idea of American aircraft carriers roaming around the South Pacific. He requested his own carriers to aid him in taking Port Moresby.

In the meantime, the Naval General Staff had been considering what to do about Australia. On February 7, the Navy Ministry's Captain Ishikawa Shingo admitted, "There will be no security ... unless we make Australia the main target in stage two of our basic war plan and annihilate it as a basis for the American counteroffensive."<sup>13</sup> They thought about actually invading Australia, especially after *Kido Butai's* successful raid on the Australian Northern Territory town and Allied staging area of Darwin in February. But the Army derailed that idea; there were simply not enough troops or transport and supply capacity.

The next best thing was to isolate Australia from the United States, cutting communication, sea and air lanes, and possibly forcing it from the war. The Japanese settled on an operation to seize Fiji, Samoa, and New Caledonia in June or early July. They called this operation "FS" for Fiji and Samoa; New Caledonia apparently did not warrant its own letter.

Admiral Yamamoto opposed FS, however, because he believed that occupying Fiji and Samoa would leave Japan dangerously overextended. He had a better idea – occupy

Midway and then Hawaii. How that was not overextending Japan was never explained. But Yamamoto believed occupying Midway would compel the US Pacific Fleet to come out for that “decisive battle” Japanese theorists had long wanted. Following a major debate in the corridors of power in Tokyo, Yamamoto got his way. *FS* would be delayed until after the Midway operation, and orders were sent out setting *FS* for July. The Army didn’t like it, but after 16 US Army Air Force B-25 Mitchell medium bombers under Lieutenant Colonel James Doolittle successfully bombed Tokyo, an attack obviously launched from American carriers, they could not deny the need to neutralize the Pacific Fleet. Yamamoto wrote to a friend saying operations until this point had “been kind of a children’s hour and will soon be over, now comes the adults’ hour ...”<sup>14</sup>

In the meantime, two carriers of *Kido Butai*, the *Shokaku* and *Zuikaku*, along with the light carrier *Shoho*, were assigned to help Admiral Inoue take Port Moresby and Tulagi. Tulagi was captured on May 3. In an action that would later be known as the Battle of the Coral Sea, the US carriers *Lexington* and *Yorktown* showed up and attacked Tulagi, sinking a few auxiliaries and the destroyer *Kikuzuki*. Before the *Shokaku* and *Zuikaku* under Rear Admiral Hara Chuichi could take action, the Americans sank the *Shoho* in spectacular fashion on May 7, prompting the convoy the carrier was protecting to turn back to Rabaul to avoid sharing the *Shoho*’s fate. It was the first carrier-versus-carrier engagement. The next day the Japanese and Americans traded airstrikes. The Japanese hit the *Yorktown* with a bomb and damaged the *Lexington*, which later had to be scuttled. In exchange, the Japanese suffered heavy damage to the *Shokaku* and the loss of 77 aircraft. The *Shokaku* was compelled to return to Japan, while the air crew combat losses on the *Zuikaku* compelled her to train a new air group before conducting future operations. Now neither carrier would be available for the main, more crucial operation at Midway.

Midway: that most brilliant of Admiral Yamamoto’s plans. He could have simply taken his massive fleet and advanced on Midway itself. Instead he divided his massive armada up into bite-sized pieces, one of which was two-thirds of *Kido Butai*. Its four operational carriers would attack and neutralize Midway Atoll, paving the way for the invasion force to seize its two islands. The seizure would compel the Pacific Fleet to come out and fight that “decisive battle.” And yet there was a flaw. The consummate supporter and theorist of air power, Yamamoto appears to have wanted his carriers to attack and weaken the Pacific Fleet in order for his battleships, which were following in another bite-sized piece about 200 miles behind *Kido Butai*, to arrive and finish off the enemy.

Admiral Yamamoto was so sure of himself, the Japanese were so sure of themselves, so stricken with Victory Disease, that they never developed contingency plans. They lacked the flexibility to adapt to a changing battle situation. Yamamoto thought he had developed the perfect battle plan, yet it was just a theory untested by battle.

Crucially, there was no contingency for the possibility that Midway would put up more of a fight than planned, or the possibility the US Pacific Fleet would be waiting for

the Japanese at Midway. Both came to pass. And arrogance, overconfidence, and sloppiness finally caught up with the Imperial Japanese Navy.

Continual attacks from the US air squadrons recently based on Midway kept Admiral Nagumo and *Kido Butai* off balance. Nagumo, never the most creative commander, was torn between attacking Midway and attacking the American carriers, until Douglas SBD Dauntless dive bombers from the *Enterprise* and *Yorktown* struck the *Akagi*, *Kaga*, and *Soryu*, whose hangar decks were packed with fully armed and fueled aircraft. The resulting explosions and fire devastated all three carriers and forced their abandonment and scuttling. A counterattack by the *Hiryu* disabled the *Yorktown*, but then Dauntless bombers from the *Enterprise*, *Hornet*, and *Yorktown* caught her with fully armed and fueled aircraft on her hangar deck, and *Hiryu*, too, became such an inferno that she had to be scuttled. A few days later the Japanese submarine *I-168* managed to finish off the *Yorktown* and the escorting destroyer *Hammann*, while, in a bizarre incident, the Japanese cruisers *Mikuma* and *Mogami* collided, slowing both down enough for Dauntlesses from the *Enterprise* and *Hornet* to sink the *Mikuma* and severely damage the *Mogami*.

While Midway might be seen as a cure, if an extremely expensive one, to Victory Disease, it was not – at least not totally. While the Naval General Staff and the Combined Fleet considered the defeat at Midway disastrous and embarrassing, they did not view it as crippling. They still had a numerical advantage over the US Pacific Fleet in every major category of warships, an advantage in aircraft, and some new carriers in the pipeline. There was no panic, no beating of breasts. They would fight on.

Which brought the *FS* operation into the spotlight. After Coral Sea and Midway it was obvious this timetable was blown, and the operation was delayed two months. Enter the Japanese Naval Air Force's 11th Air Fleet of land-based aircraft. Its commander, Admiral Tsukahara Nizhizo, submitted an analysis in late June that argued there were not enough Zero fighters for the operation. Moreover, Allied forces in New Guinea were pointed into the Japanese flank for this operation and had to be neutralized.<sup>15</sup> Admiral Yamamoto's Chief of Staff, Rear Admiral Ugaki Matome, went to Tokyo to press Tsukahara's case with Imperial General Headquarters. Ultimately, *FS* was canceled.

Except, they still had that little matter of trying to bolster their defenses against the expected American counter strike. The solution was to fortify the very same islands that would be needed to pursue the isolation and neutralization of Australia, whenever that took place.

It was in this context that Tulagi, a target during the Coral Sea battle and an expected jumping off point for *FS*, provided the next move in this particular game. The Navy's Yokohama Air Group, consisting of seaplanes used to conduct reconnaissance off the eastern Solomons, was stationed at tiny Tanambogo Island just off Tulagi. The men of the Yokohama, when they got bored or hungry, would sail south across Sealark Channel to a much larger island, Gadarukanaru. There they would hunt wild cows. The hunters often included Captain Miyazaki Shigetoshi, commander of the Yokohama, who noticed a plain near Lunga Point on the island's north coast that might make a good airfield. In late

June, Miyazaki led Lieutenant Commander Okamura and Admiral Yamada Sadayoshi of the 25th Air Flotilla based in Rabaul in a survey of that plain.<sup>16</sup> They liked what they saw.

And so the 11th Construction Unit under Lieutenant Commander Okamura, originally charged with building bases on Midway, were ordered to Gadarukanaru to build this new airfield. So, too, Captain Monzen's 13th Construction Unit was sent to Lunga to help build this latest extension of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. A total of some 2,500 men. Men from the 3rd Kure Special Naval Landing Force were also sent as guards, designated the 81st and 84th Guard Units. The Special Naval Landing Force, often called "Japanese Marines," though they could more accurately be described as "naval infantry," were tough, well-trained, well-equipped, and already infamous for their brutality.

It had taken more than a month. They had worked from opposite ends of the airfield, on the east bank of the Lunga, using pickaxes and shovels. They had met in the middle. Almost. There was still a 197-foot depression there that remained to be filled in and leveled.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, on August 7 the Japanese considered the airfield "complete."

Not that there wasn't still work to be done. Already 2,624 by 197 feet, the airfield was suitable for the 27 fighters slated to arrive within a week, but more work was needed for the 27 bombers coming at around the same time. With more work still it could have 45 fighters and 60 bombers by mid-September.

Those aircraft would account for only part of the defenses of the new Lunga airfield. The Japanese had placed two 75mm mountain guns, one triple-mount 25mm, two 13mm anti-aircraft guns, and even two radar sets.<sup>18</sup> But they had no one who knew how to operate the two 75s.<sup>19</sup> In fact, on-site expertise in handling all the heavy weapons was lacking. For the most part, the weapons were not positioned properly and, in some cases, not even assembled.<sup>20</sup> This didn't seem like a big issue to Captain Monzen, however. Construction was on schedule and was complete. Well, almost: there was still that big hole. Nevertheless, much of the 81st Guard Unit was withdrawn.

But there were some troubling signs. The Gadarukanaru airfield started attracting bombing attacks by US Army Air Force B-17s. The Yokohama Air Group reported to Rabaul that raids had suddenly increased and were now daily occurrences. Seven B-17s made an attack on July 31, ten on August 1, 11 on August 2, two on August 3, nine on August 4, and five on August 5.<sup>21</sup> There were reports that US submarines were moving into the area.<sup>22</sup> Things were not helped when a storm front moved through the area on August 5 and 6, preventing Japanese reconnaissance planes operating from both Tulagi and Rabaul from searching to the south and east of the Solomons.

Then there were the native laborers. The 13th Construction Unit was west of the Lunga River around the village of Kukum, along with the base headquarters and the 247 members of the 84th Guard Unit, the 1st Company of the 3rd Kure Special Naval Landing Force.<sup>23</sup> The 11th was east of the river, as was the airfield itself. The laborers were mostly from Korea and Okinawa, but also numerous Melanesian natives – some working voluntarily, others not so much. Except the previous morning the native workers were



nowhere to be found. They had vanished during the night, a development that was reported to Rabaul.

Meanwhile, in late July, Lieutenant Commander Ito Haruki of Japanese radio intelligence, known as the Owada Communications Group, had detected two new Allied unit call signs in the southwest Pacific. Both were on the commander-in-chief circuit series, and both communicated directly with Pearl Harbor. On August 1, radio direction-finding equipment located one of the call signs in Nouméa, French New Caledonia, and the other near Melbourne, Australia. Ito guessed Nouméa was for a new South Pacific command and Melbourne for an Australian or British force. Deducing the Allies were about to start a new offensive in the Solomons or New Guinea, he sent word to Truk, where Admiral Yamamoto was on the battleship *Yamato*, and to Rabaul as well. His messages were ignored and not passed on to Gadarukanaru or Tulagi.<sup>24</sup>

At least not directly. On the morning of August 1, the 4th Fleet radioed, "According to information received the enemy's condition is as follows: enemy is gathering power along the east coast of Australia ... You should keep close watch." On the evening of August 6, the 84th Guard Unit received a bizarre message from the 8th Base Force in Rabaul, stating that the remnants of the 81st Guard Unit, most of which had already been withdrawn from the area and were headed back to Rabaul, should be withdrawn as soon as possible, although, because "conditions" were increasing the "probability of danger," the withdrawal should be postponed.<sup>25</sup>

Even so, there was a slowly developing sense of urgency at Lunga. Lieutenant Commander Okamura of the 11th Construction Unit had been urging for weeks the deployment of aircraft to Gadarukanaru despite its lack of a finished runway.<sup>26</sup> On August 5, the 84th Guard Force joined him in that request. But the request was rejected, as it was believed that the US Navy could not mount a counteroffensive until 1943.

Nevertheless, aircraft would be here soon. Three officers of the Yokohama Air Group had visited the airfield on August 5 to inspect the progress. Satisfied that the work was on schedule, they told Captain Monzen that elements of the 25th Air Flotilla would stage into the Lunga field on August 8.<sup>27</sup> That was the reason for the visitors on this day. Two staff officers of the unit were coming from Rabaul to inspect the airfield and figure out where to put the aircraft. Maybe they wouldn't notice the big hole.

The completion of the airfield had been a cause for celebration for the Japanese. They had been drinking *sake* and singing in celebration until midnight.<sup>28</sup> Now, the men of the 11th got to sleep it off while the men of the 13th, nursing hangovers no doubt, had to cross the Lunga to make the airfield truly operational.<sup>29</sup> Before heading out, the men of the 13th, such as Captain Monzen, performed their morning religious rituals and settled down to breakfast and crushing headaches ...

There was an explosion. A big one. It came from the kitchen building at Lunga or, more accurately, what had been the kitchen building, which was now just a pile of rubble.

What happened? Another bombing raid? There was no time to consider the question. In quick succession came more blasts. And aircraft making strafing runs on the Lunga base.

The Americans were here. Well, he had been expecting visitors.

There was panic among the Japanese and the Korean labor force. After carefully considering the question of whether they wanted to die for their Japanese masters, the Koreans decided “Not my emperor” and fled. The crack Special Naval Landing Force troops, with a well-earned reputation for never surrendering, turned their tails and fled. Captain Monzen reported his men “had gotten out of hand.”<sup>30</sup> Some fortunate ones fled to a coconut grove, from which Monzen would try to figure out a way to defend Gadarukanaru – the island known in the West as “Guadalcanal.”

The time was 6:14 am. It was, as Petty Officer 2nd Class Kaneda Sankichi of the 3rd Kure Special Naval Landing Force called it, “the beginning of Hell.”<sup>31</sup>



## CHAPTER 1

# FIGHTING THE PROBLEM

At 5:19 am, more than two hours after battle stations had sounded, a new command post came to life on the transport USS *McCawley*. The “Wacky Mac,” as the *McCawley* was known, was the flagship of Rear Admiral Richmond Kelly Turner, commanding the ships of an amphibious invasion force, the first such force for the US in World War II. Indeed, the first amphibious invasion since 1898.

The US Navy would not have done this – because too many senior officers believed it simply could not be done – but for the iron will of the commander-in-chief of the US Fleet, Admiral Ernest J. King. After Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt believed he needed new people in place to deal with the new reality of war, people who were fighters, not politicians. King was certainly no politician. The man described by official US Navy historian Samuel Eliot Morison as “a hard man with little sense of humor” had made few friends ascending the ranks, but had done enough to be noticed by the right people.<sup>1</sup>

Pearl Harbor had convinced President Roosevelt to replace Husband Kimmel with Chester Nimitz as commander-in-chief of the Pacific Fleet, whose acronym CINCPAC was usually verbalized as “sink pack.” Admiral Thomas C. Hart was already commander-in-chief of the Asiatic Fleet (CINCAF, verbalized as “sink aff”) and, indeed, most of what had been the Asiatic Fleet was now sunk.<sup>2</sup> King himself had been commander-in-chief of the Atlantic Fleet (CINCLANT, verbalized as “sink lant”) before he was named commander-in-chief of the US Fleet (CINCUS, verbalized as “sink us”). King quickly decided he would rather not have all the officers and sailors fighting the war at sea under his naval command saying “sink us.” The new acronym for the same title would be COMINCH.

The 63-year-old admiral would become a somewhat controversial figure. A trained aviator, King was brilliant, determined – and arrogant. Historian William Tuohy would

say King “believed he could do any job in the US Navy better than anyone else,” and would run the Navy “with an iron fist and no velvet glove.”<sup>3</sup>

The eminent Guadalcanal historian Richard B. Frank describes him this way:

Besides intelligence and dedication, one other pillar supported King’s professional reputation: his toughness. He regarded exceptional performance of duty as the norm and evinced insensitivity or even callousness to his subordinates, upon whom he also frequently exercised his ferocious temper. But if King proved harsh with subordinates, he was no toady to superiors. Those who fell short of King’s standards found he could be hostile, tactless, arrogant, and sometimes disrespectful or even insubordinate.<sup>4</sup>

According to Morison, Admiral King knew he was “respected rather than liked by the Navy.” He was hated by such a distinguished cast of characters as Secretary of War Henry Stimson; British Prime Minister Winston Churchill; Chief of the Imperial General Staff Field Marshal Sir Alan Brooke; and Royal Navy Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham.<sup>5</sup> None came close to the opinion of General Dwight Eisenhower. The man who could make friends with pretty much everyone once said, “One thing that might help win this is to get someone to shoot King. He’s the antithesis of cooperation, a deliberately rude person, which means he’s a mental bully.” Why? Because King wanted to press the Pacific War against the Japanese, not drain it to support the fight against Germany.

Nevertheless, Admiral King was appointed to the renamed COMINCH on December 30, 1941. Why? Although he may have been dark and humorless, King had a can-do philosophy. He approached the Pacific War with the idea of “Make the best of what you have”:

There must be no tendency to excuse incomplete readiness for war on the premise of future acquisition of trained personnel or modernized material ... personnel shall be trained and rendered competent ... existing material shall be maintained and utilized at its maximum effectiveness at all times.<sup>6</sup>

With the thin reed of resources available in the Pacific at this time, it was an essential philosophy.

The man with whom Admiral King would be working in the Pacific would be Admiral Nimitz, the new commander-in-chief of the Pacific Fleet. Nimitz was almost King’s alter ego. Every bit as brilliant as King, Nimitz was in some ways a contradiction, a soft-spoken Texan almost without ego. “[Q]uiet, thorough, and thoughtful – a natural diplomat,” was how Tuohy would later describe him.<sup>7</sup> Nimitz was loyal to his subordinates and was good at avoiding the poisonous personal relations that seemed to follow King. Morison described him as having:

... the prudence to wait through a lean period; to do nothing rash for the sake of doing something. He had the capacity to both organize a fleet and a vast war theater, the tact to

deal with sister services and Allied commands, the leadership to weld his own subordinates into a great fighting team, the courage to take necessary risks, and the wisdom to select, from a variety of intelligence and opinions, the correct strategy to defeat Japan.<sup>8</sup>

That was with the benefit of hindsight. Things looked different in those last days of 1941 and early days of 1942. The demands of the war and the politics involved exhausted even Nimitz. He wrote to his wife, "I'll be lucky to last six months."<sup>9</sup>

Together, King and Nimitz would have to wrestle with the big philosophical issue dominating these hard early days of the Pacific War: identify the fine line between "mak[ing] the best of what you have" and "[doing something] rash for the sake of doing something." Indeed, early on Admiral King did not trust Nimitz and tried to steamroll him. But soft-spoken did not mean weak and Nimitz stood up to him. King backed down and the two ultimately worked well together, especially at finding that line.

As Japan swept across Southeast Asia and the Pacific, President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill were having their first secret conference, codenamed "Arcadia." It was at Arcadia that the "Europe First" policy was firmly established by the US and Britain. Nevertheless, the Pacific was not to be neglected, and the Allies were not to remain passive in defense of this theater. It was at Arcadia where the ill-fated organization known as ABDACOM (American-British-Dutch-Australian Command) was formed to pool Allied resources in the defense of Malaya and the Netherlands East Indies in what has been called the Java Sea Campaign.

It was from Arcadia that, on December 31, 1941, Admiral King issued his first substantive orders to Admiral Nimitz. The Pacific Fleet was, first, to hold the line at Hawaii-Midway and protect the lines of communication with the West Coast. Second, and "only in small degree less important," the fleet was to protect the lines of communication with Australia.<sup>10</sup>

Even though the agreement out of Arcadia was very clearly "Europe First" for resources and efforts, Admiral King got in a few helpful lines about the war against Japan. The carefully worded and intentionally vague declaration said efforts in the Pacific would involve "maintaining only such positions in the [Pacific] theatre as will safeguard vital interests and deny to Japan access to raw materials vital to her continuous war effort while we are concentrating on the defeat of Germany." "Vital interests" was conspicuously left undefined, though the term was used a second time as a title for a tiny section:

The Safeguarding of Vital Interests in the Eastern Theatre

18. The security of Australia, New Zealand, and India must be maintained and Chinese resistance supported. Secondly, points of vantage from which an offensive against Japan can eventually be developed must be secured.<sup>11</sup>

This authorization to seize "points of vantage from which an offensive against Japan can eventually be developed" was added at Admiral King's insistence.<sup>12</sup>

The declaration also identified “main sea routes which must be secured,” including “the Pacific routes from United States and the Panama Canal to Alaska, Hawaii, Australia and the Far East.” Securing those routes required holding and capturing “essential sea bases,” which included Hawaii and Samoa. There were also “main air routes which must be secured,” which included “the U.S. to Australia via Hawaii, Christmas Island, Canton, Palmyra, Samoa, Fiji, [and] New Caledonia.” This required securing “essential air bases,” including Hawaii, Christmas Island, Palmyra, Canton, Samoa, Fiji, New Caledonia, and Townsville.<sup>13</sup>

Allied action in the Pacific seemed to be severely limited by this document. But Admiral King had a lawyer’s eye. For instance, Australia was some 7,000 miles from San Francisco. As Vice Admiral George Dyer pointed out in discussing King’s seemingly limited options:

A straight line on a mercator chart from San Francisco in California to Townsville [...] passes just south of the island of Hawaii and just south of Guadalcanal Island in the Solomons. In Admiral King’s belief, the Japanese should not be permitted to impinge on this line, if the line of communications from Hawaii to Australia through Samoa, Fiji, and the New Hebrides was to be secure.<sup>14</sup>

Did that mean in order to “secure” the air and sea lane to Australia, under the Arcadia declaration, Guadalcanal “must be secured”? The New Hebrides? One could make the argument that it did. That is how all these locations would come up again and again as King looked for ways to wedge his allowances under the Arcadia declaration ever wider to position US forces in the Pacific for not just defense but offensive operations as well.

Under pre-existing defense plans, Admiral King was able to send small garrisons to Palmyra, almost 1,000 miles south of Pearl Harbor, and to American Samoa, another 1,300 miles toward New Zealand. South of Palmyra on the route to Samoa were Canton and Christmas islands, which the Army under Arcadia garrisoned with 1,500 and 2,000 troops respectively.

Things started to get strained when the issue of French New Caledonia came up. New Caledonia was Free French, with strategically important nickel and chrome deposits. With France under Nazi occupation and a Vichy government, it was almost defenseless. Australia had agreed to garrison it, but was stretched too thin to do so beyond a company of commandos. Aside from these 300 Australians, there was a local force of native troops of dubious effectiveness. New Caledonia could not withstand a major Japanese effort.

With New Caledonia specifically listed on the Arcadia declaration, Admiral King forced the Army to scrape up something to defend it. They gathered loose units totaling some 17,000 troops, including the Army Air Force’s 67th Pursuit Squadron, and threw them in a secret, heavily guarded convoy from New York to Nouméa, where they arrived in March. The Army also scraped together a 4,000-man garrison for Bora Bora, where King established a fueling base.

While trying to secure these supply lines, King prodded Nimitz to carry on a sort of naval guerilla warfare against exposed Japanese positions. On February 12, he told Nimitz, “a strong and comprehensive offensive [is] to be launched soon against exposed enemy naval forces and the positions he is now establishing in the Bismarcks and Solomons.” Three days later came a reminder: “Current operations of the Pacific Fleet, because of existing threat, should be directed toward preventing further advance of enemy land airplane base development in the direction of Suva and Nouméa...” Then, on February 26 came yet another reminder: “[O]ur current tasks are not merely protective, but also offensive where practicable...”<sup>15</sup> In other words, make the best of what he had.

It was this nudging that resulted in an attempted raid by the carrier *Lexington* on Rabaul on February 20 that was aborted when Japanese flying boats from the Yokohama Air Group spotted the carrier, spooking it enough to withdraw, but not before having to fight off an attack by twin-engine “Mitsubishi G4M Type 1 Land Attack Planes” – the Allies called this aircraft the “Betty” – of the 4th Air Group. Fighter pilot Lieutenant Edward H. “Butch” O’Hare was credited with shooting down five bombers in six minutes. This made him the US Navy’s first Flying Ace and earned him the Medal of Honor and his name on an airport in Chicago. Admiral King’s pestering also brought the successful attack on the Japanese invasion force off Lae and Salamaua on March 10.

The leadership of the US Army, in the form of General George C. Marshall and Army Air Force General Henry H. “Hap” Arnold, was committed to the Europe First policy. Taking much of their cue from General Eisenhower, Marshall and Arnold were determined to quash any offensive actions in the Pacific and not send any reinforcements there:

To set a limit to future movements of Army forces into the Pacific and find a basis for increasing the rate at which Army forces would be moved across the Atlantic became, during February and March, the chief concern of General Marshall and his advisors on the War Department staff, and the focus of their discussion of future plans with the Army Air Forces and the Navy.<sup>16</sup>

Nevertheless, the continuing Japanese advance that imperiled Australia obliged President Roosevelt to send Army troops there, which meant a supply line for those troops had to be maintained and protected. And an American public still enraged over Pearl Harbor and filled with “unbridled fear, hatred, and distrust” toward Japan meant that a passive posture in the Pacific was politically unacceptable to Roosevelt.<sup>17</sup>

In Admiral King’s estimation, that advance meant the Japanese would soon conquer positions to threaten the lanes through Samoa, Fiji, and New Caledonia with air attacks. On February 18, King suggested Tongatabu in the Tonga Islands would be the ideal location for “the principal operating naval base in the South Pacific,” while aircraft there would provide mutual support for those on Fiji and Samoa. King also suggested taking Efate, in the New Hebrides, which would “deny a stepping stone to the Japanese if they

moved South [sic] from Rabaul” and provide a strong point “from which a step-by-step general advance could be made through the New Hebrides, Solomons and Bismarcks.”<sup>18</sup>

General Marshall did not like that. Six days later he wrote back: “It is my desire to do anything reasonable which will make offensive action by the Fleet practicable.”

But:

- a. What is the general scheme or concept of operations that the occupation of these additional islands is designed to advance? Are the measures taken purely for protection of a line of communications - or is a step-by-step general advance contemplated?
- b. What islands will be involved?
- c. What Army troops, particularly Air, will your proposal eventually involve? [...]
- d. Your proposal contemplates the employment of Army forces as occupational troops. Has the question of the availability of the Marines been fully explored? [...]

Marshall went on to state that American operations in the South Pacific must “for several reasons be limited to the strategic defensive” so far as air and ground forces were concerned. He concluded:

I, therefore, feel that if a change in basic strategy, as already approved by the Combined Chiefs of Staff, is involved, the entire situation must be reconsidered before we become involved more seriously in the build-up of Army ground and air garrisons in the Pacific islands.<sup>19</sup>

It was a flat refusal to provide any help, behind a thin passive-aggressive veil. But Admiral King was deft. He answered each of Marshall’s questions with his “frankly more offensively minded concepts of our future Pacific endeavor.”<sup>20</sup>

At a March 2 meeting of the newly formed Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral King handed out a memorandum detailing his proposal. King summarized his proposal with nine words: “Hold Hawaii; Support Australasia; Drive northwestward from New Hebrides.”<sup>21</sup> “The general scheme or concept of operations is not only to protect the lines of communication with Australia,” he wrote, “but in so doing to set up ‘strong points’ from which a step-by-step general advance can be made through the New Hebrides, Solomons, and Bismarck Archipelago.”<sup>22</sup> For this proposal, King said he needed two, maybe three, Army divisions and maybe eight groups of aircraft.

By this time, Singapore had fallen only a few weeks earlier; defeat in the Battle of the Java Sea had spelled the end of the Allies in the Netherlands East Indies. President Roosevelt needed something, anything, on which to hang some hope. Admiral King’s proposal did just that. King was the man with a plan, which was more than anyone else had at that time. Roosevelt gave his tacit approval.<sup>23</sup>

However, by now the Joint Chiefs could not even agree if keeping the lines of communication open to Australia was necessary, as had been contemplated in the Arcadia declaration. On February 28, 1942, General Eisenhower told General Marshall:



The United States interest in maintaining contact with Australia and in preventing further Japanese expansion to the Southeastward is apparent ... but ... they are not immediately vital to the successful outcome of the war. The problem is one of determining what we can spare for the effort in that region, without seriously impairing performance of our mandatory tasks.<sup>24</sup>

As a result, Roosevelt now prohibited further reinforcements for the Pacific. The Army had convinced him to give everything to Europe and nothing to the Pacific.<sup>25</sup> Touring the Pacific, General Arnold later said, “it was impossible not to get the impression that the Navy was determined to carry on the campaign in that theater, and determined to do it with as little help from the Army as possible.”<sup>26</sup>

The Army’s refusal to provide additional units to the Pacific or to agree to offensive action softened when General Douglas MacArthur was rescued from the fall of the Philippines in March 1942. When the Japanese first attacked the Philippines on December 8, 1941, MacArthur, already a national hero, “demonstrated his unique leadership style: when he was good, he was very, very good[;] when he was bad, he was horrid.”<sup>27</sup> After long predicting the Japanese could not attack until spring of 1942, MacArthur had refused to consider evidence that a Japanese attack was, in fact, imminent. Then, after being informed of the Pearl Harbor attack, MacArthur disappeared for the next several hours, the first hours of the war, apparently shell-shocked that his predictions were actually wrong. Most of his aircraft were destroyed on the ground at the Clark Field base complex, due largely to MacArthur’s willful violation of orders. The result was an inability to contest Japanese control of the air over the Philippines, and, later, the Netherlands East Indies. MacArthur refused to position supplies on the Bataan Peninsula for a protracted campaign because the idea of withdrawing there was “defeatist,” so that when he ultimately did withdraw there, his troops had neither the ammunition nor the food for prolonged resistance. After the situation in the Philippines went south, Roosevelt ordered MacArthur to go south, too, all the way to Australia, leaving the troops he had so poorly served behind.

But MacArthur was still a national hero, with a formidable public relations machine that covered up much of his horrid performance – and made him a domestic political threat to Roosevelt. Keeping him on the sidelines was out of the question. Now the Army was interested in reinforcing the Pacific – for an offensive led by Douglas MacArthur. Like a protagonist in his own movie, MacArthur needed something interesting to do.

Which brought up the question of whether the Pacific needed to be like Europe under General Eisenhower and have one theater commander. Douglas MacArthur was the obvious choice. To the Army, at any rate. To the Navy, MacArthur was the one who had constantly berated the Asiatic Fleet and its commander Admiral Hart as not being worthy of the name; allowed the Japanese to completely destroy their base at Cavite; then, to top it off, blamed the fleet for the collapsing situation in the Philippines. Finding MacArthur’s performance more “horrid” than “very, very good” and rightly believing MacArthur knew

nothing about sea power, Admiral King, with the full backing of the Navy leadership, vowed that MacArthur would never have operational command of the Pacific Fleet.<sup>28</sup> The Army believed MacArthur bore no responsibility for the disaster in the Philippines – that public relations machine at work – and would not agree to command by a Navy admiral.

To break the impasse, on March 9, the Joint Chiefs created two command areas of the Pacific theater. One, a “Southwest Pacific Command,” encompassed the Philippines, the Netherlands East Indies, Australia, the Solomon Islands, and adjoining ocean areas. Most of these were not currently under Allied control. It would be up to its commander, General MacArthur, to retake them. As part of the command, MacArthur even got his own little navy to abuse just as he had Admiral Hart and the Asiatic Fleet. And he did. At his new headquarters in Melbourne, MacArthur told a reporter, “[T]he best navy in the world is the Japanese navy. A first-class navy. Then comes the British navy. The US Navy is a fourth-class navy, not even as good as the Italian navy.”<sup>29</sup>

Nimitz got the rest as part of a “Pacific Ocean Area,” and, like General MacArthur, he reported to his respective service chief on the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who would be conducting this Pacific War by committee. Nimitz’s Pacific Ocean Area was further divided into three regions: North, Central, and South, with boundaries at 40 degrees north latitude and the equator. Admiral Nimitz could directly command the first two, but the new South Pacific Command for the area south of the equator would have to be handed off to a subordinate, with Vice Admiral Robert L. Ghormley, who had just finished his term as special naval observer in London, eventually selected.<sup>30</sup>

On April 18, while Lieutenant Colonel Doolittle conducted an operation initiated by Admiral King in leading 16 B-25 Mitchell medium bombers from the deck of the aircraft carrier *Hornet* in a bombing attack on Japan that left little damage but humiliated the Japanese military establishment, King issued orders to Admiral Ghormley that, as Ghormley later recalled them, read like a summons to jury duty:

You have been selected to command the South Pacific Force and South Pacific area. You will have a large area under your command and a most difficult task. I do not have the tools to give you to carry out the task as it should be. You will establish your headquarters in Auckland, New Zealand, with an advanced base at Tongatabu. In time, possibly this fall, we hope to start an offensive in the South Pacific. You will then probably find it necessary to shift the advanced base as the situation demands and move your own headquarters to meet special situations. I would like for you to leave Washington in one week if possible.<sup>31</sup>

Admiral Ghormley, 59, had served in destroyers and battleships followed by multiple staff assignments, culminating in a stint as chief of the War Plans Division in 1938–39 in which he earned a reputation as “a brilliant strategist.”<sup>32</sup> Considered by King to be “a very able man,” Ghormley was highly respected for his intelligence and well-liked by his subordinates. Even so, many shared the opinion of Marine Lieutenant Colonel Samuel Griffith, who later wrote, “It is not entirely clear what prompted King to this

appointment.”<sup>33</sup> While one cannot rise to flag rank without some sense of politics, and, indeed, there has been some suggestion that Roosevelt, a fan of Ghormley’s, may have interceded on his behalf, Ghormley seems to have been shy and introverted, especially among peers.<sup>34</sup> An outgoing personality is not needed to be an outstanding commander or a capable administrator, but Ghormley’s previous positions never required the proactivity he would need now.

They had required diplomacy, however, and so would this new assignment. And Admiral Ghormley did have considerable diplomatic skills. He arrived in Nouméa, New Caledonia, on May 17 to find Admiral George Thierry d’Argenlieu, who had taken the island for the Free French, unhappy that he and his commander-in-chief, George de Gaulle, had not been consulted on Pacific strategy. But Ghormley managed to smooth things over and then flew to New Zealand.

Of his first impressions of the area, Ghormley wrote:

The vast distances, the shortage of aircraft, the ease with which the Japanese could slip between defended points, the large size of many islands, the high mountains on most of them, the primitive state of the natives, the total lack of harbor or base facilities, the lack of cable facilities, the lack of ships.<sup>35</sup>

Grim first impressions did not count for much in Admiral King’s planning. On April 16, King’s assistant chief of staff for planning, Rear Admiral Richmond Kelly Turner, presented a four-phase “Pacific Ocean Campaign Plan.” Phase One was the buildup of forces and bases in the South Pacific to secure the area and position for an offensive against the Japanese. Phase Two was an offensive up through the Solomons and New Guinea to seize the Bismarck and Admiralty Islands. Phase Three would extend that offensive to the central Pacific, such as the Marshall and especially the Caroline Islands. Phase Four would involve a drive into the Philippines or the Netherlands East Indies, “whichever offers the more promising and enduring results.” This document would become the basic plan for the US Navy in the Pacific.<sup>36</sup>

To make this plan work, earlier Admiral Turner had also recommended the establishment of an amphibious assault force in the South Pacific. King agreed and ordered Admiral Nimitz to create it. When Nimitz arrived back in Hawaii after his April 23–24 conference with Admiral King in San Francisco, he was carrying the specific directive to Admiral Ghormley to “prepare to launch a major amphibious offensive against positions held by the Japanese.” The Pacific Fleet staff conducted studies that examined the Santa Cruz and lower Solomon Islands. King made Turner commander of this new amphibious force. Turner, very uncharacteristically, admitted that he knew little of the subject. King responded, “Kelly, you will learn.”<sup>37</sup> It was a new war, with new weapons, new tactics, and new ways of thinking. How this all interacted, no one knew. They would have to learn on the fly, something that American officers would later call “makee learnee.”<sup>38</sup>

Like King and Nimitz, Admiral Turner, who went by “Kelly,” would leave his sizable and controversial imprint on the Pacific War. Thin, 57 years old, he looked like a college professor, with the intellect, the vision, and the patronizing manner to match. A trained aviator, Turner would be described by eminent naval aviation historian John Lundstrom as “a tough, bright, even brilliant officer, ‘Terrible Turner’ was also arrogant, abrasive, irascible, and domineering, grasping for power where he had no business. Only strong-willed commanders kept him in check.”<sup>39</sup> Nimitz remarked that Turner was like King in that he was “brilliant, caustic, arrogant, and tactless – just the man for the job.”<sup>40</sup>

Then-Lieutenant Colonel Merrill B. Twining, operations officer of the 1st Marine Division, later worked extensively with Turner and remembered him as having “a colossal ego that sometimes led to decisions that ignored the dictates of ordinary common sense.” Twining meant it with all due respect, as he did the following description of Turner:

A loud, strident, arrogant person who enjoyed settling all matters by simply raising his voice and roaring like a bull captain in the old navy. His peers understood this and accepted it with amused resignation because they valued him for what he was: a good and determined leader with a fine mind – when he chose to use it.<sup>41</sup>

While Admiral Turner got to work building the “South Pacific Amphibious Force” from scratch, Marine Major General Alexander Archer Vandegrift was busy training the 1st Marine Division in New Zealand. In March, Vandegrift had been ordered to prepare a regiment to be sent to Samoa. Suspecting the regiment would see combat, Vandegrift cannibalized the rest of the 1st Marine Division to pack the 7th Marine Regiment with as many of the most experienced officers and noncommissioned officers as possible, and the 7th was shipped off.<sup>42</sup> The general’s suspicions would have been correct if Midway had resulted in defeat, but it didn’t.

On April 15, General Vandegrift was ordered to move the 1st Marine Division – without the 7th Marine Regiment – to New Zealand to form the new Landing Force of the South Pacific Amphibious Force, which was expected to be seeing combat soon. So, right after he assembled his most combat-ready men to send to a place where they would see no combat, the general was now to get the rest of his division – the 1st, 5th, and 11th Marine regiments, all green – ready for combat. Vandegrift got to work trying to very quickly mold these green recruits into a fighting force.

The Japanese were pushing ahead with their next offensive, the capture of Tulagi in the Solomons and Port Moresby, the only remaining position of value in Allied hands in New Guinea. Always keeping his eye out for opportunities to attack, Nimitz believed the Tulagi position was exposed and proposed raiding it using the 1st Marine Raider Battalion. This started another tug of war between General MacArthur, who, though he would shortly field slightly more than three divisions, admitted he did not have the forces to take Tulagi, and Admiral King, who thought Tulagi was too small and wanted something more.<sup>43</sup>

And there things sat while carrier battles took place in the Coral Sea, in which the Japanese invasion force directed at Port Moresby was turned back, and near Midway, in which four Japanese carriers were sunk. Despite the losses of the carriers *Lexington* and *Yorktown*, destroyers *Sims* and *Hammann*, and oiler *Neosho*, the positive effects of both actions, especially Midway, on sagging American morale cannot be overstated. But the American victory at Midway would not have been possible without “Magic.”

“Magic” was a subset of what is more commonly and famously known as “Ultra,” the term adopted by the Allies to reference signals intelligence (in military acronym SIGINT) obtained by breaking encrypted enemy radio and wireless telegraph communications. While *Ultra* covered all such intelligence, the US adopted the term *Magic* for its decrypts specifically from Japanese sources. In the case of Coral Sea and Midway, a breakthrough had come in the Japanese naval high-level command and control communications code the Allies called “JN-25.”<sup>44</sup> The Allied breakthrough had been the result of painstaking intelligence work. With the Japanese unaware of the breach, *Magic* and signals intelligence would be the gift that kept on giving.

As it was, Midway was its own gift, of which some could not wait to take advantage. The *Yorktown* was perhaps still on her way to the bottom of the Pacific when on June 8 General MacArthur told Washington he could overrun New Britain and New Ireland in a few weeks, “that important area, forcing the enemy back 700 miles to his base at Truk,” thus obtaining “manifold strategic advantages both defensive and offensive.”<sup>45</sup> All he would need to do this were only the three infantry divisions he already had – which earlier had not been enough to seize Tulagi – plus “one division trained and completely equipped for amphibious operations and a task force including two carriers.”

That sounded fine to General Marshall, who believed this potential operation needed to be run as quickly as possible. He was in the process of requesting the necessary forces from Admiral King when King preempted MacArthur’s proposal with one of his own. The Navy was already preparing operations against the objectives MacArthur mentioned, operations that would be more gradual. Capture of intermediate air bases was necessary to help neutralize the air power based at Rabaul. Such a campaign would be “primarily of a naval and amphibious character supported and followed by forces operating from Australia.”<sup>46</sup> In short, the Navy would do it, with MacArthur’s help.

Admiral King was continuing to lay the groundwork for offensive operations in the Solomons. On June 11, King asked Admiral Ghormley when he could go on the attack. Ghormley replied that he planned to occupy the New Hebrides, Santa Cruz, and Ellice islands, which were unoccupied, “as soon as the prospect of reinforcement is favorable.” This did not answer the question. It was a sign of things to come.

But General MacArthur did try to answer the questions posed to him. Or at least obfuscate them. In a June 24 message, MacArthur addressed the criticism of his plan by claiming his original proposal was only an outline. Quite obviously, he said, a “gradual” approach with seizure of intermediate bases in the Solomons and New Guinea would be required to capture Rabaul. What MacArthur meant by “gradual” he did not say, but

plans at his headquarters indicated his version of gradual was 14–18 days. He would not need any more time. He spent the rest of the message explaining why only he, Douglas MacArthur, should be in command of this offensive.<sup>47</sup>

Correctly figuring MacArthur was “blackmailing the US Navy into greater reinforcements in the South Pacific,” Admiral King was having none of it. He tried to explain to MacArthur that Tulagi had to be taken before Rabaul or else the air power based there posed too great a risk to his ships.<sup>48</sup> That same day King ordered Nimitz to prepare a plan to capture “Tulagi and adjacent islands.” The next day, King told General Marshall they needed to strike now before this “golden opportunity” arising out of Midway passed. The admiral recommended a single unified command to perform the seizure of the Santa Cruz Islands as the start of an offensive to begin around August 1 that would culminate in the capture of New Guinea and Rabaul.

The day after that came General Marshall’s response. He continued to push for General MacArthur’s command, mainly on the grounds that the operation lay “almost entirely in the Southwest Pacific area” and that it was “designed to add to the security of that area,” though he did acknowledge that the boundaries were not necessarily controlling. He went on to make the case, such as it was, for General MacArthur to lead this offensive through the Solomon Islands and New Guinea to Rabaul and New Britain.<sup>49</sup>

By now well aware that he was in a political pissing contest, Admiral King responded in writing the same day. “[General Marshall’s] basic trouble,” he later said, “was that like all Army officers he knew nothing about sea power and very little about air power.”<sup>50</sup> So, King later explained, he had “to ‘educate’ the Army people.” King told Marshall that he had agreed to have an Army general in command of the European theater – “unity of command” – because it would be fought primarily by the Army. The Pacific was being fought primarily by the Navy and Marine Corps; hence it made more sense to have a Navy admiral in charge. The offensive “must be conducted under the direction of CINCPAC and cannot be conducted in any other way.” He finally said he was going to start an offensive “even if no support of Army forces in the Southwest Pacific is available.” King gave Admiral Nimitz orders to this effect on June 27.<sup>51</sup>

General Marshall was furious. Without approval from President Roosevelt or the Joint Chiefs, Admiral King had ordered preparation for a major offensive into General MacArthur’s Southwest Pacific Area. He also seemed to be defying Roosevelt’s order not to reinforce the Pacific; once Admiral Nimitz started his attack, reinforcements would be forthcoming. But King could point to Roosevelt’s approval of his March 2 memorandum for limited actions in the Solomons. And he had only ordered Nimitz to prepare for an offensive.

MacArthur was beyond furious. He had not even seen Admiral King’s letter to Marshall; he had just picked up King’s orders to Admiral Nimitz and Nimitz’s response in which he listed some units under MacArthur’s command for the attack. In “one of his more remarkable tantrums of the war,” in the words of the historian Richard B. Frank, MacArthur on June 28 radioed General Marshall:

It is quite evident in reviewing the whole situation that the Navy contemplates assuming general command control of all operations in the Pacific theater, the role of the Army being subsidiary and consisting largely of placing its forces at the disposal and under the command of Navy or Marine officers ... I shall take no steps or action with reference to any components of my Command except under your direct orders.<sup>52</sup>

Evidently MacArthur thought it was patently ridiculous that an invasion of Pacific islands across thousands of miles of ocean be commanded by someone from the Navy. Especially when it could be commanded by Douglas MacArthur.

But it was about more than that, the general alleged. It was all part of a master plan for “the complete absorption of the national defense function by the Navy.” A plan he had “accidentally” uncovered when he was Chief of Staff of the Army.

... By using Army troops to garrison the islands of the Pacific under Navy command, the Navy retains Marine forces always available, giving them inherently an army of their own and serving as the real bases of their plans by virtue of having the most readily available units for offensive action.<sup>53</sup>

General Marshall, of course, backed his Army colleague. But even he admitted that General MacArthur was “supersensitive about everything” and “thought everybody had ulterior motives about everything.” MacArthur’s “hypersensitivity” was something of a joke in defense circles. His “paranoia, lust for personal publicity, political ambition, structured and comfortable lifestyle, and hypochondria were well-known in the army... His emotional balance was precarious. These personal foibles [...] made George Patton look normal.”<sup>54</sup>

It was left to General Marshall, after he had sufficiently calmed down himself, to initiate a way out of the impasse. During the last two days of June, Marshall and Admiral King hammered out the “Joint Directive for Offensive Operations in the Southwest Pacific Area Agreed on by the United States Chiefs of Staff” that consisted of three phases. Phase One, already given its own code name of “Watchtower,” would involve the seizure of Tulagi and the Santa Cruz Islands. This task would be completed by the Pacific Fleet. MacArthur’s Southwest Pacific Command boundary would be moved up the Solomons, so this phase would lie entirely within the South Pacific Command. MacArthur himself would interdict “enemy air and naval activities westward of operating area,” meaning Rabaul and New Guinea.<sup>55</sup> Phase Two would be the capture of Lae, Salamaua, the rest of the northeast coast of New Guinea, and the central Solomons. Phase Three would involve the reduction and capture of Rabaul. Phases Two and Three would be under the command of General MacArthur. This three-part plan was given the cheerful name of “Pestilence.”

Admiral King and General Marshall – curiously not General Arnold – formally adopted *Pestilence* on July 2. Phase One – *Watchtower*, involving the capture of the Santa Cruz Islands, Tulagi, and adjacent positions – was scheduled to begin August 1.

King scheduled a meeting with Admiral Nimitz for July 3 in San Francisco to brief him on these developments. In the interim, Nimitz had been working on *Watchtower* as he understood it. On June 27, he expanded the planned attack on Tulagi to include the capture of an unspecified airfield site, if not a finished airfield.<sup>56</sup>

On July 2, Admiral Turner briefed Nimitz on how *Watchtower* was developing. In what he called a “Limited Amphibious Offensive in South and Southwest Pacific,” Turner planned to capture various islands to create a web of mutually supporting airfields. His first target would be Ndeni in the Santa Cruz Islands, some 250 miles north of Espiritu Santo in the New Hebrides, where Admiral Nimitz had already authorized development of a base, and 350 miles southeast of Tulagi. Turner thought Ndeni would make a great air base to guard the eastern flank of the Solomons, largely because he had never been there and knew nothing about it.<sup>57</sup> But as Admiral King had said earlier, he would learn.

Next would be the Tulagi and Florida islands. The problem was that there was no place on either island to build an airfield. So Admiral Turner suggested a coastal plain on Guadalcanal, 18 miles to the south, where an airfield could be built. Neither he nor Admiral Nimitz had any idea as yet that more than a few parties were suddenly interested in Guadalcanal.

Among those parties was, like *Magic*, a uniquely useful form of Allied intelligence gathering in the South Pacific: an organization called “Ferdinand.” Named after the children’s story *Ferdinand the Bull*, whose title character preferred smelling flowers to fighting, *Ferdinand* was the brainchild of Australian naval reservist Lieutenant Commander Eric A. Feldt, a veteran of the British Grand Fleet in World War I. Feldt had been local affairs administrator on New Guinea, where he became familiar with the talented, temperamental, and fiercely independent Melanesian natives. When Feldt was recalled to service, he came up with the idea of enrolling plantation managers, government administrators, missionaries, and anyone who wanted to serve, but not to fight, not to be noticed, not to cause any trouble for the Japanese, except to watch and warn of Japanese movements, actions, and other developments. By December 1939, *Ferdinand* had 800 members, located everywhere in New Guinea, the Bismarcks, and the Solomons, including chief observers trained to communicate by radio.<sup>58</sup> They would become known as “coastwatchers.”

Upon the arrival of the Japanese, the coastwatchers became dependent on the goodwill of the local Melanesians. Whether due to the respect and humanity with which the Australian local colonial officials had treated them, the general brutality with which the Japanese treated everybody including them, or both, the vast majority of Melanesians remained loyal to the Allied cause. They became essential to the Allies by gathering information, carrying equipment and supplies, providing cover, and infiltrating Japanese construction details.

As the Japanese advanced and began consolidating their hold on the Solomons, the coastwatchers, directed from Townsville, Australia, became eyes and ears – but not hands – for the Allies. Six in particular became critical to the South Pacific war effort. In a



hilltop hideout in Pora Pora, northern Bougainville, near the Buka Passage, where the local Melanesians had, unlike the others, switched sides to the Japanese, was Lieutenant W. J. “Jack” Read. At the other end of Bougainville, overlooking the Shortland Islands, was Paul Mason, a short, bespectacled radio hobbyist and former plantation manager with 25 years’ experience in the islands. At a plantation on Segi Point on New Georgia was Donald Kennedy, a middle-aged former district officer who, according to Feldt, projected “a natural aura of command.”<sup>59</sup>

Guadalcanal had three coastwatching posts. On Gold Ridge, 15 miles from the coast, was naval reservist Donald MacFarlan, working with Kenneth D. Hay, a sizable plantation manager with sizable intelligence. On western Guadalcanal was F. Ashton “Snowy” Rhoades, working with an older former Norwegian trader, Leif Schroeder. Filling the role of chief coastwatcher on Guadalcanal was former district officer Martin Clemens, positioned east of Lunga at Aola Bay.<sup>60</sup>

It was Martin Clemens who first noticed Japanese activity in the Lunga area. By radio and by native runner, he, MacFarlan, Hay, and Rhoades compared notes to determine what the Japanese were doing. When the convoy carrying the 11th and 13th Construction Units arrived, they deduced the Japanese were building an airfield. Construction on the base progressed under the watchful and thoroughly enraged eyes of Martin Clemens.

As a result of the work of Clemens and friends, *Ferdinand* reported work at the Lunga site on July 1. *Ferdinand* was joined the next day by *Magic*, who concluded the Japanese had landed construction troops on Guadalcanal.<sup>61</sup> Admiral Nimitz had wanted to seize an airfield site. Now he had one. King and Nimitz agreed to replace Ndeni in Phase One with Guadalcanal for the time being. But that airfield construction was an hourglass, and as it got closer to completion, the sand was running out.

In the midst of all this politicking, Admiral Ghormley was dealing with a South Pacific Command that was little more than a paper and a cabin on the command ship *Argonne* – given the happy nickname “Agony Maru” – in Auckland. On June 25, he had been ordered to arrange the capture of “Tulagi and adjacent positions.”<sup>62</sup> Ghormley was “flabbergasted.” His “immediate mental estimate of the situation was that [they] were far from ready to start any offensive.”<sup>63</sup> And they weren’t. At the moment all Ghormley had was a tiny staff that was largely scavenged from the Asiatic Fleet, with Rear Admiral Daniel J. Callaghan, former skipper of the cruiser *San Francisco* and formerly President Roosevelt’s naval aide, as its chief.<sup>64</sup> Ghormley had little information, no major units under his command, and no bases anywhere close to the target.

Nimitz was trying to help with that by directing the seizure of Espiritu Santo, 125 miles north of Efate in the New Hebrides, where an airfield was to be constructed. But, in a pattern that would reveal itself more and more over the coming months, Ghormley actually complicated his own reinforcement when he refused to shift troops from rear bases to Espiritu Santo, without which Nimitz would not authorize the airfield. Ultimately, just to get moving, on July 3 Nimitz ordered construction of the air strip, on the next day specifying that it be made ready for B-17s by July 28.<sup>65</sup>

The arrival of the new orders from Admiral King for the seizure of Guadalcanal and Tulagi, before the issuance of the Joint Chiefs' directive, had done nothing to improve Admiral Ghormley's sinking mood. General Vandegrift had come from his own headquarters in Wellington to pay his new superior an official call in Auckland on June 26 when he was summoned to meet the admiral. Vandegrift had met Ghormley in Washington and was surprised at his "harassed, almost brusque manner" now.

They had barely shaken hands when Admiral Ghormley declared, "Vandegrift, I have some very disconcerting news."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Admiral."

"You will be more sorry when you read this," Ghormley said as he handed the Marine general a piece of paper. Vandegrift pulled a chair up to the admiral's desk to read it.

It was a set of top secret orders. General Vandegrift's 1st Marine Division was to seize Guadalcanal and Tulagi as part of an amphibious operation. Vandegrift had to read it again to be sure of the shocking words they contained. The most shocking was the date: August 1.

General Vandegrift folded the orders and silently pushed them across the desk to Admiral Ghormley. Then the general leaned back in his chair. He had to think.

The admiral tapped the orders with his index finger for a moment, then looked at Vandegrift. "Well?"

General Vandegrift went over his issues. He had been given command of the 1st Marine Division, but it came with the disclaimer "Some assembly required." The 7th Marine Regiment was garrisoning Samoa. The divisional command and the 5th Marine Regiment were in Wellington, New Zealand; the 1st and the 11th Marine regiments, the latter less two of its battalions, were en route.<sup>66</sup>

To compound matters, they had to break in new equipment and their supply situation had to be determined. Most importantly, they needed information on Guadalcanal; Vandegrift didn't even know where Guadalcanal was. The general concluded, "I don't see how we can land anywhere by August first."

"I don't see how we can land at all, and I am going to take it up with MacArthur," Ghormley responded. "Meanwhile, we'll have to go ahead as best we can."<sup>67</sup>

And with that inspiring declaration, the meeting was concluded. A rather subtle but important distinction had been exposed. General Vandegrift thought *Watchtower* could not be started by August 1; Admiral Ghormley thought it could not be started at all. Admiral King, with his belief in making the best of what you have, was conscious of the difference.

General Vandegrift had to redouble his work. He tried to arrange to assemble his division as quickly as possible, at sea if necessary. His staff informed him that to replace the 7th Marine Regiment, which was staying in Samoa for the time being, they were getting the 2nd Marine Regiment from the 2nd Marine Division; the catch was that the 2nd was sailing in from San Diego. They were getting the 1st Raider Battalion back from the 7th Marine Regiment, but it was still in Samoa. They were also getting the 3rd Defense Battalion, sailing in from Hawaii.

But the general had to assemble more than just his division. Admiral Turner would be commander of the amphibious force, but he would not arrive until mid-July, so Vandegrift had to draw up the plan for the landing and the amphibious force himself. He had to assemble his supplies for the cargo ships and transports. “Combat loading,” it was called. Upon landing, the most essential supplies, such as ammunition, food, water, fuel, and medical supplies, would be positioned to be unloaded first. Less essential supplies, such as accordions, shoe polish, and hats, would be at the back of the supply queue. With the dock workers at Wellington trying to heist the government for more money, the 5th Marine Regiment had to take up the loading arrangements itself – in the midst of heavy rains that lasted for some three weeks.<sup>68</sup>

With the two most important elements in any combat operation being communications and information, General Vandegrift gave Lieutenant Colonel Frank B. Goettge, 1st Marine Division’s intelligence officer and former football star at Ohio State, the task of redressing the distressing lack of the latter. Goettge and his section interviewed former Solomons residents, civil servants, and merchant ships’ officers in New Zealand. On July 1 Goettge even flew to Melbourne, where he spent a week scouring General MacArthur’s headquarters for everything he could get on Guadalcanal. He found out about the *Ferdinand* organization and was able to establish contact. Goettge then spent a few days in Sydney, continuing to dredge up and interview former residents of the Solomons. Soon, Guadalcanal got its code name, a name that would become famous: “Cactus.” Other locations got code names as well. Tulagi was “Ringbolt,” Espiritu Santo “Button,” New Zealand “Spooner,” and Efate “Roses.”<sup>69</sup>

The orders for *Pestilence* included a directive that Admiral Ghormley meet with General MacArthur to coordinate planning. The South Pacific commander went to Melbourne on July 8, but he wasn’t happy about it. He informed MacArthur’s command: “On account of early commencement of [Phase] One and the great detail of planning necessary, [I] will be accompanied by minimum officers and my stay must be as short as possible.” For his part, MacArthur was still brooding over not being given the entire command over the first offensive in the Pacific. Like most meetings involving Ghormley, this was not going to be a happy meeting.

The two announced their lack of confidence in the planning, preparation, and execution of *Watchtower*, now only three weeks away:

The two commanders are of the opinion, arrived at independently, and confirmed after discussion, that the initiation of the operation at this time without a reasonable assurance of adequate air coverage would be attended with the gravest risk... surprise is now improbable... successful accomplishment is open to the gravest doubts. It is recommended that this operation be deferred.<sup>70</sup>

The issue, as they saw it, was airpower; more precisely, lack of the same. The landing force would need carrier support from 36 to 96 hours, “where they will be outside the range of

any supporting air and exposed to continual hostile surface and submarine attacks.” General MacArthur did not have the air power to sufficiently suppress that of Rabaul. “The carriers will be themselves exposed to attack by land-based air while unprotected by our land-based aviation.” Consequently, it was “extremely doubtful that they will be able to furnish fighter escort to the transport area, especially should hostile naval forces approach.” Surprise was “improbable” due to “the depth of the existing hostile reconnaissance.”<sup>71</sup>

Moreover, with their nearby bases the Japanese were better positioned to rush reinforcements to the Solomons that could destroy the invasion and covering forces. “The initiation of this operation at this time without a reasonable assurance of adequate air coverage during each phase would be attendant with the gravest risk.”<sup>72</sup> General MacArthur and Admiral Ghormley recommended *Watchtower* be “deferred” pending the further development of force to enable all three phases [of *Pestilence*] to take place, “in one continuous movement.”<sup>73</sup> Which sounded suspiciously like MacArthur’s proposals from early June.

Admiral King saw exactly what was happening: Douglas MacArthur was sulking over not being given complete command over *Pestilence*. Likely speaking for the naval leadership, King told General Marshall, “Three weeks ago, MacArthur stated that if he could be furnished amphibious forces and two carriers, he could push right through to Rabaul. He now feels that he not only cannot undertake this operation but not even the Tulagi operation.”<sup>74</sup>

With the Japanese already on Guadalcanal, the sand in that hourglass was running out. *Watchtower* now needed speed, not delay. Admiral King contemptuously responded to their statement with a one-word order: “Execute.”<sup>75</sup>

Perhaps appropriately, the MacArthur-Ghormley memo of hopeless optimism crossed one in which Admiral Nimitz told Ghormley, “I have full confidence in your ability to carry this operation to a successful conclusion.”<sup>76</sup> More appropriately, the missive got the attention of General Marshall, who tried to bolster the operation by sending the 11th Bombardment Group to the South Pacific. The first of its B-17s arrived at the newly completed airfield at Espiritu Santo on July 30. The completion of the airfield in such a short time, especially given how the “Sea Bees” (men of the construction battalions) were fighting heat and malaria, was, said the commander of land-based air Rear Admiral John S. “Slew” McCain, “a truly remarkable achievement.”<sup>77</sup>

On the opposite end of the remarkable spectrum was the situation in Wellington. The 1st Marine Division and its supplies were still straggling in. Organizing the supplies in the driving rain was still a headache, with a lack of dock space in Wellington being the major culprit, becoming a drag on the operation. To try to speed things along, General Vandegrift ordered that “all units ... reduce their equipment and supplies to those items that are actually required to live and fight,” helping earn Operation *Watchtower* the nickname “Operation Shoestring.”<sup>78</sup> The supply difficulties caused Vandegrift to ask for a slight delay in *Watchtower*. On July 16, the date was officially reset for August 7, but

the Japanese were so close to completing the airfield that the date could not be pushed back further.

That same day, Vice Admiral Ghormley published and distributed a 174-page operational plan for *Watchtower*. Given the catchy title of “Op-Plan 1-42,” it was not a particularly complicated plan from an organizational standpoint. Under his South Pacific Command were two task forces. One, Task Force 63 under Rear Admiral McCain, consisted of all the land- and water-based aircraft. Everything else he placed in what he called Task Force 61, “The Expeditionary Force.”<sup>79</sup>

The Expeditionary Force was under the command of the newly promoted Vice Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher, the most experienced carrier admiral in the Navy, veteran and victor of both the Coral Sea, where he had lost one aircraft carrier, and Midway, where he had lost another aircraft carrier. And who was currently sailing from Pearl Harbor under radio silence. Identified under his direct command were six task forces. Three of them were carrier groups, each consisting of one aircraft carrier plus an escorting screen. Task Force 11, under Fletcher’s direct command, was centered on his flagship carrier *Saratoga*, escorted by heavy cruisers *Minneapolis* and *New Orleans*, and destroyers *Phelps*, *Farragut*, *Worden*, *MacDonough*, and *Dale*.

Task Force 16 was commanded by Rear Admiral Thomas C. Kinkaid on the carrier *Enterprise*, with the new battleship *North Carolina*, heavy cruiser *Portland*, light cruiser *Atlanta*, and destroyers *Balch*, *Maury*, *Gwin*, *Benham*, and *Grayson*. The *Atlanta* was a new class of light cruiser, featuring 16 rapid-fire 5-inch guns in eight dual mounts. The weapons layout would be good in air defense, and she was classified as an antiaircraft cruiser.

Task Force 18 was under Rear Admiral Leigh Noyes, the only trained aviator of the three carrier admirals. His flag was on the aircraft carrier *Wasp*, which was the only one of the three carriers whose air group was trained in night operations. She was screened by heavy cruisers *San Francisco* and *Salt Lake City*, and destroyers *Lang*, *Sterrett*, *Aaron Ward*, *Stack*, *Laffey*, and *Farenholt*. Providing fuel to the carrier task forces were five oilers: *Platte*, *Cimarron*, *Kaskaskia*, *Sabine*, and *Kanawha*.

As a general rule, each of the American fleet carriers had an air group that consisted of four squadrons. Each squadron was assigned a particular role – fighting, bombing, scouting, or torpedo. Originally, the squadrons were designated according to their role and the hull number of their carrier. So, for instance, the hull number of the carrier *Enterprise* was 6. The fighter squadron on the *Enterprise* was officially designated “VF-6” but was informally known as “Fighting 6.” Normally, carrier fighter squadrons like Fighting 6 would have 27 Grumman F4F Wildcats, the US Navy’s primary fighter. The rather stubby-looking Wildcat would be the primary opponent for the famous Japanese Zero. It had a slightly lower top speed and inferior rates of climb, acceleration, and maneuverability compared to the Zero. But, unlike their Japanese counterparts, pilot protection was a major priority for American combat aircraft procurement, and the Wildcat was no exception. The Wildcat was rugged, with an armored cockpit and

self-sealing fuel tanks combining to provide excellent protection for the pilots. The F4F was considered obsolete, but when flown with even moderate skill it could more than hold its own against the Zero.

The typical torpedo squadron, to use the *Enterprise's* original squadron as an example, had the official designation of "VT-6" and was called "Torpedo 6." Normally, it would have 18 of the Grumman TBF Avenger. The Avenger was a brand-new torpedo plane, rushed into service because its predecessor the Douglas TBD Devastator was not only obsolete but had become a deathtrap. At Midway every single one of the Devastators from the carrier *Horne's* Torpedo 8 had been shot down by Zeros and anti-aircraft fire. The Avenger was fast for a torpedo plane, with long range and even an enclosed bomb bay. Like its fellow Grumman Wildcat, the Avenger was a very rugged plane with good protection for the pilot. The TBF was easily recognizable by its .50cal dorsal tail gun. It also carried a ventral .30cal tail gun and a .30cal "peashooter" for the pilot.<sup>80</sup> Its enclosed bomb bay could carry two 1,000lb bombs, four 500lb bombs, or one torpedo. The big drawback here was that the torpedo was the Mark 13, which, like the American Mark 14 and Mark 15 torpedoes, seemed to be less than effective.

To continue with the *Enterprise* as an example, each carrier had two squadrons of dive bombers, each with 18 Douglas SBD Dauntlesses. One squadron was dedicated to dive bombing, carrying the official designation of "VB-6" or "Bombing 6." The Dauntless was also used to conduct long-range reconnaissance, which was an additional focus for, originally, "VS-6" or "Scouting 6." The Dauntless did not look like much and its aerial ratings were not all that impressive, either. But the Dauntless was the hero of Midway and beloved by its pilots.

As the war went on, the numerical designations for carrier squadrons would get mixed up as carriers were lost or sidelined for repair, or carrier squadrons were rotated. For instance, the *Enterprise's* scout bombing squadron was now actually "VS-5" – "Scouting 5" – moved over from the sunken *Yorktown*, as was the *Enterprise's* torpedo squadron, "VT-3" – "Torpedo 3."<sup>81</sup>

Admiral Turner's force, called Task Force 62, was subdivided nine ways. The group of transports headed for Lunga was officially called Task Group 62.1 but codenamed "Transport Group X-Ray." It was commanded by Captain Lawrence F. Reifsnider with transports *Fuller*, *American Legion*, *McCawley*, *Barnett*, *George F. Elliott*, *Hunter Liggett*, *Alchiba*, *Crescent City*, *President Hayes*, and *President Adams*; and cargo ships *Albena*, *Betelgeuse*, *Bellatrix*, *Libra*, and *Fomalhaut*. This transport group was further divided into two groups of three transports and one cargo ship each; one group of two transports and two cargo ships; and one group of two transports and one cargo ship.

The distinction between "transports" and "cargo ships" might seem academic, and indeed in most reports they are both lumped together as "transports."<sup>82</sup> But, in fact, there was considerable difference. Each transport was assigned to carry one combat team, three "units of fire" – roughly the amount of ammunition consumed in a day of heavy combat – 30 days' rations, and quartermaster, ordnance, engineer, chemical, signal, and medical

supplies. Each cargo ship was to carry supporting troops, heavy equipment, seven more units of fire, 30 days' rations and other supplies, and clothing stocks were assigned to each cargo ship.<sup>83</sup> Indeed, some very important people would demonstrate they were quite conscious of the difference.

Providing artillery support to the landing at Lunga was Task Group 62.3, with heavy cruisers *Quincy*, *Vincennes*, and *Astoria*, each cruiser with two spotter planes, and destroyers *Hull*, *Dewey*, *Ellet*, and *Wilson*, commanded by the *Vincennes*' skipper Captain Frederick L. Riefkohl.

The landing at Tulagi centered on, officially, Task Group 62.2, coded "Transport Group Yoke" under Captain George B. Ashe. Not surprisingly given its target, it was much smaller than its Guadalcanal counterpart, consisting of transports *Neville*, *Zeilin*, *Heywood*, and *President Jackson*, and four old destroyers converted into fast – by transport standards – transports: *Colboun*, *Little*, *McKean*, and *Gregory*.

The Tulagi landing would get fire support from the official Task Group 62.4 under Rear Admiral Norman Scott, flying his flag in the light cruiser *San Juan*, a designated anti-aircraft cruiser like her sister *Atlanta*. In addition to the *San Juan*, the fire support would come from the destroyers *Monssen* and *Buchanan*.

Task Group 62.5 was a group of minesweepers, creatively dubbed the "Minesweeper Group," under Commander William H. Hartt, Jr. Its job was to sweep for mines around both Tulagi, Guadalcanal, and Savo Sound in general with minesweepers *Hopkins*, *Trever*, *Zane*, *Southard*, and *Hovey*.

Given the task of providing protection from surface forces was "MacArthur's Navy," the Allied ships supporting General MacArthur's Southwest Pacific Command. They were normally designated Task Force 44, but for *Watchtower* they were called Task Group 62.6, the "Screening Group." It consisted of Royal Australian Navy heavy cruisers *Australia* and *Canberra*; US Navy heavy cruiser *Chicago*, Australian light cruiser *Hobart*, and American destroyers *Selfridge*, *Patterson*, *Ralph Talbot*, *Mugford*, *Jarvis*, *Blue*, *Helm*, *Henley*, and *Bagley*. This squadron was commanded by Rear Admiral Victor Alexander Charles Crutchley, a British admiral on loan to the Royal Australian Navy, which was such a new organization that it lacked experienced flag officers of its own.

Generally, Americans did not and do not like serving under foreign officers, especially after what they considered the subpar performance of the Dutch Admiral Karel Doorman during the Java Sea Campaign. Victor Crutchley seems to have been an exception. He was a distinguished Royal Navy veteran known for his physical courage, having fought in the Battle of Jutland, been awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for one attempt to block the German U-boat fleets in harbor, been awarded the Victoria Cross (Britain's highest award for bravery) for gallantry and seamanship during another, and on top of all that the French *Croix de Guerre* – all during World War I.<sup>84</sup> He commanded the battleship *Warspite* to an impressive victory against the German *Kriegsmarine* off Narvik early in World War II. "His intelligence, careful demeanor and meticulous approach to planning and operations deeply impressed his American colleagues."<sup>85</sup>

Because almost everything needs a numeric designation, the carrier planes supporting the landing were officially called Task Group 62.7, the “Air Support Group.” This would be the air support provided by the carriers *Saratoga*, *Enterprise*, and *Wasp* in the form of fighter cover and bombing attacks. Fighter director officers were placed on the flagship *McCawley* and the transport *Neville* to direct air support for Guadalcanal and Tulagi respectively. Another fighter director officer would be placed on the cruiser *Chicago* to direct the intercept of the expected Japanese air attacks on transports.<sup>86</sup> The direct air support for General Vandegrift’s Marines was called Task Group 62.8, with floatplanes from the *Astoria* and *Quincy* spotting for the Guadalcanal landing, while those from the *Vincennes* would support the landing on Tulagi under Brigadier General William H. Rupertus. The Marines set to land on Santa Cruz were not given a numeric designation for some reason, though they appeared in Admiral Turner’s table of organization.

The transport *McCawley* would serve as Admiral Turner’s flagship, a far more grandiose term than this ship actually deserved. Like many transports, the *McCawley* was a hurried “conversion” from a cruise liner, in this case the *Santa Barbara*, who for some 12 years had carried passengers, most recently for Grace Lines. Whether she carried them in luxury is open to question. Even by Navy standards she was cramped, with staff officers crammed together three in a room, and the more junior ship and communication officers stacked up in bunk rooms.<sup>87</sup>

Moreover, by the time the US Navy got the *McCawley*, she was “a dirty ship.”<sup>88</sup> Not that this was unusual for the transports on this mission, as many of the Marines noticed. The *American Legion* was so “filthy” that the men on board were said to resemble “wild gypsies,” many choosing to sleep out on deck – so many that individual squads would protect areas on deck they had settled.<sup>89</sup>

It was even worse on the transport *John Ericsson*, transporting Marines from San Francisco to Wellington, New Zealand.<sup>90</sup> Navy officers had to step in to prevent the *John Ericsson* from loading rancid butter and rotten eggs – but not the spoiled beef and chicken and fouled cooking grease that later sickened most of the men on board. Marine Corporal Grady Gallant called the food “genuine slop” and declared “none of it was fit to eat.” Marine Robert Leckie said there was not an ounce of fresh food on the ship.<sup>91</sup> Even the Marine history, though not mentioning the *John Ericsson* by name, admitted, “The standard of health [for Marines arriving in New Zealand] remained fairly high, except for troops on board one transport of the second echelon. Among those marines rotten food on the voyage to New Zealand had caused a loss of weight varying from sixteen to twenty pounds per man, as well as a diarrhea epidemic.”<sup>92</sup> Leckie would say the *John Ericsson* was “little better than an African slaver” that “stank like a floating head.” The only ones left healthy were the ones who had refused to eat the horrid food, subsisting only on peanuts and Pepsi Cola.<sup>93</sup>

The 13,000-ton *McCawley* was rated for 17 knots, which by transport standards is practically light speed. But she also had “an intermittently flaming stack, visible for miles around as we charged along for all the world like a horse-drawn steam fire engine.”<sup>94</sup>



The fire-breathing smoke stack, which was dangerous inasmuch as it could act as a beacon at night for interested and not necessarily friendly parties, had been troublesome for the last 18 months, but no one had gotten around to fixing it yet.

This was largely because the *McCawley* had a completely dysfunctional command staff. Her skipper was Captain Charles P. McFeaters, whom Lieutenant Commander Twining of the 1st Marine Division described as “a superannuated hypochondriac” who “was in no physical condition to command a ship.”<sup>95</sup> The deficiencies of a skipper can be addressed by a good executive officer, but the *McCawley*'s was Lieutenant Commander George K. G. Reilly, “a Marine-hating mustang, a sadist determined to haze Marines,” who worked to abuse them 24 hours a day. A bit more gentle than Twining, Admiral Turner's biographer said of them, “These two officers struggled constantly to meet the demanding requirements of a stern taskmaster and an eager beaver staff, but never quite made the grade.”<sup>96</sup>

The problems did not end there. The two most critical elements in any military operation are information and communications. And in communications the *McCawley* was sorely deficient, lacking even a voice radio. A radio suite was brought in, including 16 field radios, but the range of the radio was not much more than 5 miles and still could not regularly monitor the frequency used by Admiral Fletcher.<sup>97</sup> It was a common problem on the *McCawley*. Of Admiral Turner's staff, only the meteorologist filed a “satisfactory” report on the particular flagship facilities needed for his efficient functioning.<sup>98</sup>

In the judgment of Lieutenant Colonel Twining, the *McCawley* was a “Hell Ship” that was “definitely not battle worthy.”<sup>99</sup> Twining's opinion was prevalent among the Marines. General Vandegrift was so disgusted by conditions on board the *McCawley* that he requested “a vessel better suited in communications and accommodations,” but had been denied.<sup>100</sup> Only the exigent circumstances can explain why the *McCawley* was chosen as the flagship for the first US offensive of the Pacific War and the first US amphibious invasion since 1898.

Admiral McCain deployed his Task Force 63 for primarily reconnaissance and antisubmarine patrols. He had at his command the Army Air Force's 11th Bombardment Group, consisting of the 26th, 42nd, 98th, and 431st Bombardment Squadrons, newly formed in July as a sort of mobile fire-fighting force under the direct command of the Joint Chiefs. The brand-new airstrip at Espiritu Santo had five Boeing B-17 Flying Fortresses of the 98th, five of the 26th were at Efate, ten of the 42nd were split between two airfields on New Caledonia, and the 12 of the 431st were used as a kind of reserve and based at Nandi in the Fijis.<sup>101</sup>

Also on hand were 28 Consolidated PBY-5 Catalina flying boats. Of these Catalinas, 12 were based on shore – six at Nandi in the Fijis, four at Efate, and two in New Caledonia. The remainder were on seaplane tenders to be positioned for the flying boats to conduct air searches. The seaplane tenders *Curtiss* and *McFarland* were moved up to Segond Channel, just off Espiritu Santo, from where the *Curtiss* would deploy her ten PBY Catalina flying boats to search south and southeast of the Solomons. The *McFarland*

would continue on to the Santa Cruz Islands so its six PBVs could search north and northeast of Guadalcanal. The seaplane tender *Mackinac* would be positioned in the Maramasike Estuary on the east coast of Malaita to serve as a base for nine Catalinas, whose primary job was to search to the northeast.<sup>102</sup>

Task Force 63 could also call on 79 Bell P-39 Airacobras of the Army Air Force's 67th, 68th, and 70th Fighter Squadrons, and 22 Martin B-26 Marauders of the Army Air Force's 69th and 70th Bombardment Squadrons. The B-26 was the closest American equivalent to the Japanese Naval Air Force's Mitsubishi G3M Type 96 Land Attack Plane – the Allies would call it the “Nell” – and G4M “Betty” bombers, inasmuch as it could carry torpedoes. There were also 50 Grumman F4F Wildcats of Marine Fighting 111 and 212, and Observation 251, 12 Hudsons of the Royal New Zealand Air Force, 25 Navy Vought OS2U Kingfisher floatplanes, and 17 Curtiss SBC Helldivers of Marine Observation 151.<sup>103</sup> Given the area Task Force 63 had to cover and the bases it had to protect, this was a woefully inadequate force in both numbers and types of aircraft. It was just the best that could be done. Even so, the most forward base, the new airfield at Espiritu Santo, had exactly three fighters in addition to its five B-17s, one of which crashed at sea on August 6 and had to be replaced from Efate, and three floatplanes.<sup>104</sup>

With the Bismarcks and the northwestern part of the Solomons still under General MacArthur's jurisdiction, his cooperation was required for *Watchtower* to succeed. MacArthur was indeed a good soldier and amenable to working with Admiral McCain to coordinate search efforts within the Southwest Pacific Command area. The most important aspects of the agreement included the arrangement, from five days before the invasion to four days afterwards, of four daily reconnaissance flights from Port Moresby covering an area including Madang, Kavieng, Ontong Java, Santa Ysabel, and the central Solomons. Naval targets discovered in this area within a 550-mile range of Port Moresby would be attacked in separate airstrikes. On the day of the invasion and for four days thereafter MacArthur's air force was to suppress Japanese air operations in and around Rabaul and Kavieng.<sup>105</sup>

In the meantime, 1st Marine Division intelligence officer Colonel Goettge was still trying to dredge up anything he could on Guadalcanal and Tulagi. And not having much success. The Marines had no maps of the area and their charts were inaccurate, so they decided to make a map from aerial photographs. Demonstrating a commendable degree of foresight, Admiral Ghormley, who had been instrumental in setting up a US Navy aerial photography unit, was able to take one with him when he was sent to the South Pacific.<sup>106</sup> Ghormley had an aerial photograph collage made of the Lunga area, but the weather during the mission had been cloudy so there were blank spaces in the picture. General MacArthur's intelligence people promised aerial photography of the objectives. They put together a good set of photographs of the Lunga area, then sent it to the wrong address; General Vandegrift never received it.

Lieutenant Colonel Twining was familiar with the criteria for a good landing beach, so he volunteered to personally perform an aerial photographic reconnaissance of the

beaches. He went to Auckland to talk to Admiral Ghormley, who told him he needed to take a plane from Nouméa. So the Marine went to Nouméa, where Admiral McCain told him his aircraft could not scout the Solomons due to a lack of range. The Army Air Force's could, McCain said, but wouldn't, as the local Army Air Force commander would not allow it. But McCain had a friend commanding the Army Air Force in Port Moresby who would arrange it. Twining would have to go there. As the Marine headed out, he was stopped in his tracks. "What do you know about aerial reconnaissance anyway?" the admiral was asking. Before Twining could reply, McCain said, "Well, you got to go anyway. Even if they burn you up. Good luck."<sup>107</sup>

With that last bit of encouragement, Lieutenant Colonel Twining and his crew made their way to Port Moresby, where Admiral McCain's friend had indeed arranged for a specially modified B-17 to take him over Guadalcanal and Tulagi to scout the area. Their Fortress took off on the morning of July 17 headed for Guadalcanal, their only map a reprint of a prewar *National Geographic* with a map showing the Solomon Islands, which was just as good because the navigator was too engrossed in a comic book to pay much attention to it.

They arrived in the Guadalcanal area around 2:00 pm. The Fortress headed toward Tulagi first, due to reports of enemy aircraft. Flying low to take photographs, they found Tulagi ringed with coral. Landings could only be accomplished with light craft. They also found floatplanes – the "Nakajima A6M2-N Navy Type 2 Interceptor/Fighter-Bomber," which did not exactly roll off the tongue, so, as they did with all other Japanese aircraft, the Allies identified it with a common given name: "Rufe." The Rufe was literally a Japanese Zero with floats. And the Rufes were taking off.

Twining's Flying Fortress made a quick run over Lunga on Guadalcanal. The beaches looked good; there was indeed a runway there, or, more accurately, most of one, with a big gap in the center that would not be there much longer. Before the Fortress could make another pass, the float Zeros were onto it, holing the Boeing with 20mm gunfire and forcing it into evasive maneuvers before it escaped into a cloud. The B-17 managed to get away, but the exchange had caused it to use most of its fuel and it still had to get back to Port Moresby. On top of that, they were lost. They managed to grope their way in the dark toward Papua, where bursts of antiaircraft fire and searchlights in Port Moresby led them back to base. On fumes. But Lieutenant Colonel Twining got what he needed.

On July 21, Admiral Fletcher ordered all units to rendezvous southeast of the Fiji Islands at 2:00 pm on July 26. The 12 transports and cargo ships of the amphibious force, carrying the 1st and 5th Regiments of the 1st Marine Division, and their 14 escorts under Admiral Turner, sailed from Wellington on July 22. The 2nd Marine Regiment, coming from San Diego, was being escorted by the *Wasp* task force. The 1st Marine Raider Battalion was to be carried by the destroyer transports *Colboun*, *Little*, *McKean*, and *Gregory* that were currently with the *Saratoga* task force. All in all, 72 of the 76 US Navy ships arrived on time. Once assembled, they all headed for the Fijis to perform a dress rehearsal of the landing.

With the rendezvous completed, on July 26, Admiral Fletcher called the various commanders involved in *Watchtower* to his flagship *Saratoga* for a conference. It was to be a large conference – Admiral Turner’s flagship *McCawley* alone sent 17 officers – and one that would become infamous and somewhat bizarre.

The bizarre nature of the conference stemmed from the absence of the man who should have been its dominant participant, Vice Admiral Ghormley. This was the first major operation in his new area of command, and he was not going to attend the final meeting to iron out details and disputes? Ghormley would later explain, “I was desirous of attending this conference, but found it impossible to give the time necessary for travel with possible attendant delays.”<sup>108</sup> Though his headquarters was in the process of moving from Auckland to Nouméa, Ghormley never gave an adequate explanation for his absence. In fact, though he had ordered the conference held, he had never planned to attend and apparently only sent his chief of staff, Admiral Callaghan, along with his communications officer, at the insistence of Admiral Fletcher.<sup>109</sup> The absence of the admiral from the conference had a definite effect.

The destroyer *Hull* arrived at the *Saratoga* carrying the aforementioned Admiral Callaghan, the head of land-based air Admiral McCain, and members of their attendant staff. En route, the destroyer had also picked up Admiral Turner and General Vandegrift and their staffs.<sup>110</sup> When they arrived, they all got into a cutter, but the carrier rolled, and McCain ended up “waist deep in the ocean.” Protocol required the senior officer to board first, in this case McCain. He stepped on the ladder, known as a Jacob’s ladder, to climb aboard the flagship. As he was climbing, someone opened a garbage chute along the side and inadvertently dumped a torrent of sour milk on the admiral. McCain was, in the words of Vandegrift, “one mad little admiral.”<sup>111</sup> *Watchtower* was off to a great start.

While the junior staff officers attended subsidiary conferences of intelligence, communications, and other topics, the senior officers held a private meeting in the wardroom that lasted nearly four hours. It would become a conference to remember, and nearly all of its participants would remember it differently.

With Ghormley absent and having delegated tactical command to Admiral Fletcher, the carrier commander effectively dominated the meeting and the conversation. Years later, General Vandegrift would write that Fletcher, whom he had never met before, was “a distinguished-looking man but seemed nervous and tired,” graciously allowing that the recent combat at Coral Sea and Midway could do that. The Marine general first detected something amiss when he sensed Fletcher “lack[ed] knowledge of or interest in the forthcoming operation.” Vandegrift soon found out why, when Fletcher “quickly let us know he did not think it would succeed.”<sup>112</sup>

It wasn’t exactly Henry V’s St Crispin’s Day speech.

Admiral Fletcher seemed to direct particular ire toward Admiral Turner. According to Turner’s chief of staff, Captain Thomas G. Peyton, “the conference was one long bitter argument between Vice Admiral Fletcher and [Turner]. Fletcher questioned the whole upcoming operation. Since he kept implying that it was largely Turner’s brainchild, and

mentioning that those who planned it had no real fighting experience, he seemed to be doubting the competence of its parent.”<sup>113</sup>

“Fletcher’s main point of view was the operation was too hurriedly and therefore not thoroughly planned, the Task Force not trained together; and the logistic support inadequate.”

Admiral Turner kept responding with, “[T]he decision has been made. It’s up to us to make it a success.”

“To [Admiral Fletcher’s] arbitrary objections, expressed forcefully,” wrote General Vandegrift, “we replied as best we could but obviously failed to make much impression.”<sup>114</sup>

Admiral Fletcher himself remembered saying, “Now Kelly, you are making plans to take that island from the Japs and the Japs may turn on you and wallop the hell out of you. What are you going to do then?” Admiral Turner answered, “I am just going to stay there and take my licking.”<sup>115</sup>

At one point, Admiral Fletcher interrupted Admiral Turner to ask how long it would take to land the troops on Guadalcanal. Turner answered five days.<sup>116</sup>

The veteran carrier admiral then announced, “Gentlemen, in view of the risks of exposure to land-based air, I cannot keep the carriers in the area for more than 48 hours after the [initial] landing.”<sup>117</sup>

One can imagine that the immediate reaction in the wardroom to Admiral Fletcher’s dissonant declaration was a moment of stunned silence. Admiral Callaghan was apparently shocked. Admiral Turner was outraged. General Vandegrift felt betrayed. “My Dutch blood was beginning to boil,” he later wrote, “but I forced myself to remain calm while explaining to Fletcher that the days ‘of landing a small force and leaving’ were over.”

This operation was supposed to take and hold Guadalcanal and Tulagi. To accomplish this I commanded a heavily reinforced division which I was to land on enemy-held territory, which meant a fight. I could hardly expect to land this massive force without air cover – even the five days mentioned by Turner involved tremendous risk.<sup>118</sup>

Admiral Turner “heatedly backed” Vandegrift. Admiral Fletcher “curtly announced” he would stay until the third day, then dismissed everyone.

The difference of opinion on Admiral Fletcher’s withdrawal of the carriers did not end there. Afterwards, Admiral Turner reportedly confronted Fletcher, snarling, “You son of a bitch. If you do that you are yellow.”<sup>119</sup>

It was vintage Admiral Turner, though whether he actually did it is uncertain.<sup>120</sup> Admiral Callaghan reported back to Ghormley with the notation, “Task Force must withdraw to South from objective area (i.e. general advanced position) within two days after D day!”<sup>121</sup> It would seem that Callaghan did not agree with this early withdrawal of the carriers. Not that he did anything about it. As representative of Fletcher’s superior Admiral Ghormley at the conference, Callaghan did nothing to overrule Fletcher or hold the withdrawal decision in abeyance until Ghormley as senior officer could settle the

dispute. For that matter, during this “acrimonious conference, Callaghan reportedly “sat in silence” and “never said a word.”<sup>122</sup>

Admiral Turner did not even bother appealing the decision, as to do so would be going outside the chain of command. When, two decades later, he was asked why not, he explained, “Whom to, and who was I to do so? Fletcher was my old boss, and at that moment the most battle experienced commander in our Navy. It was his judgement, and it was my job to live with it.”<sup>123</sup>

The conference on the *Saratoga* would be remembered differently by different people for different reasons. Captain Peyton was not surprised by Admiral Fletcher’s position nearly as much as he was by how the admirals spoke to each other. “I was amazed and disturbed by the way these two admirals talked to each other,” he recalled. “I had never heard anything like it.” One witness went so far as to describe the conference on the *Saratoga* as “stormy.”

Admiral Kinkaid disagreed, calling the mood of the conference “animated rather than stormy,” adding, “Turner asked for a lot of things, much of which he didn’t get, because they were not in the realm of the possible.”

Vice Admiral Fletcher later described the conference, as was his wont, in more gracious terms, saying, “[T]here was no bitterness in the discussion. Plenty of opinions vigorously expressed as to what or could be done.”

Nevertheless, Captain Peyton seems to have been accurate when he later said of the conference, “In my opinion too much of the conference was devoted to ‘fighting the problem,’ as we used to say at the [Naval] War College, and too little time to trying to solve the problem.”<sup>124</sup>

Admiral Turner’s jaundiced comment notwithstanding, fairness to Admiral Fletcher, at that time the US Navy’s most battle-experienced carrier flag officer – although significantly not an aviator – requires some digression to discuss what seems to have been his logic in providing such a tight and hard limit to the presence of his three carriers in covering the initial landing on Guadalcanal.

Indeed, there was a certain military logic to it. The landing needed air support. The closest Allied base was Espiritu Santo, 580 miles away from Savo Sound. The major Japanese base at Rabaul was 540 miles away. The Japanese-held airfields at Buka (392 miles) and Kieta, Bougainville (340 miles) were even closer. Thus the Japanese bases were closer than the Allied bases. Worse, the range of the Grumman F4F Wildcat was too short to fly from Espiritu Santo to Guadalcanal and provide air cover. But the range of the Japanese Zero and the simply incredible range of the G4M Betty meant that Guadalcanal was within range of Rabaul, let alone Buka and Kieta.<sup>125</sup> So, while providing air support for the invasion, Fletcher’s carriers would be in range of Japanese land-based air power. That’s even before the question of the location of the Japanese carriers was addressed.

Admiral Fletcher may have had his decision on the timing of the carriers’ withdrawal come down to a question of cargo ships. On July 25, Admiral Turner gave Fletcher word that if the landings proceeded well, he envisioned sending back all of the transports and “about all of the

Pacific Fleet combatant ships” by the evening of August 8, basically a day-and-a-half after landing. What would remain were the five cargo ships – the *Albena*, *Betelgeuse*, *Bellatrix*, *Libra*, and *Fomalhaut*. “The greatest difficulty,” Turner said, “would be with the five cargo vessels.” He couldn’t predict when the cargo ships would be unloaded, estimating three to six days. “We will need air protection for the entire period,” Turner concluded.

The carrier admiral might have been taken aback by that one. Fletcher had to have wondered, “Seriously? You want me to risk three aircraft carriers – three fourths of the remaining US Navy carriers in the Pacific – for *cargo ships*?” Did it matter that the entire Allied offensive in the Pacific depended on those cargo ships, more specifically the supplies they carried for the Marines ashore?

In order to provide air cover, the carriers had to be within about 60 miles of Tulagi, and toward the south. Those requirements put the flattops in a very tight box in which they could move. The Japanese would find them eventually. Before the Battle of Midway, Admiral Nimitz had issued the following directive to Admiral Fletcher:

You will be governed by the principle of calculated risk, which you shall interpret to mean the avoidance of exposure of your force to attack by superior force without good prospect of inflicting, as a result of such exposure, greater damage to the enemy. This applies to a landing phase as well during a preliminary air attack.

This order was general in nature but still in effect. The key phrase was “calculated risk.” Admiral Fletcher likely had the question of whether exposure of his force to attack by the superior Japanese forces at Rabaul and elsewhere to protect *cargo ships* came with good prospect of inflicting greater damage on the enemy. His performance at the conference shows that his answer to that question was quite obviously “no.” But was that the right question? Was Fletcher interpreting his orders properly? Would providing the air cover for the cargo ships, arguably, inflict greater damage on the enemy by allowing creation of an air base in enemy territory?

Even General Vandegrift’s operations officer Lieutenant Colonel Twining of the 1st Marine Division agreed that Admiral Fletcher had a point. “[...] Fletcher’s view on a strategic level [...] in a way [...] was correct.” Then there is the inevitable, “But his somewhat brutal conduct of the *Saratoga* conference was totally incorrect from every point of view.”<sup>126</sup>

This is where Captain Peyton’s statement that “too much of the conference was devoted to ‘fighting the problem,’ [...] and too little time to trying to solve the problem” must be considered. It says something that Fletcher reportedly opened the meeting by saying he thought *Watchtower* would fail because it was too hurriedly and therefore not thoroughly planned, the Task Force not trained together; and the logistic support inadequate. That was all true. It was also irrelevant. As Turner would respond, “[T]he decision has been made. It’s up to us to make it a success.” Maybe Fletcher was just venting. But it’s hard to see what he hoped to accomplish by starting the conference not so much critiquing the plan as completely dismissing it.