

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 371

“Operation Shoestring”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

There is no gainsaying that the Solomons are a hard-bitten bunch of islands...It is true that fever and dysentery are perpetually on the walk-about, that loathsome skin diseases abound, that the air is saturated with a poison that bites into every pore, cut, or abrasion and plants malignant ulcers, and that many strong men who escape dying there return as wrecks to their own countries.

Jack London, “The Terrible Solomons.”

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 371. Operation Shoestring.

Last time we were looking at the Pacific theater, we left off with a reluctant US Army General Douglas MacArthur and an equally reluctant US Navy Admiral Robert Ghormley preparing to invade Tulagi and Florida in the Solomon Islands, when they received the news that the Japanese were building an airfield on the much larger island of Guadalcanal, and the seizure of that island became another of their assigned objectives.

Despite its status as a last-minute addition to the mission, codenamed Operation Watchtower, Guadalcanal would soon become the most important objective and the center of the battle for control over the southern Solomon Islands.

In Washington, the Joint Chiefs of Staff felt it urgent to proceed with Operation Watchtower as soon as possible, to capitalize on the momentum the Allies had gained following the US victory in the Battle of Midway. The commanders on the scene, Ghormley and MacArthur, though, were concerned that the forces available to them would be insufficient.

Their concerns were brushed aside. Roosevelt had pledged to Churchill that the US would pursue a “Germany first” strategy and Roosevelt had rashly promised Stalin that the Western Allies

would be on the ground in continental Europe before the end of 1942. Those obligations precluded sending any additional forces to take part in Watchtower.

Guadalcanal, which the Solomon Islanders call Isatabu, is the largest island in the Solomons. Actually Bougainville is bigger, but administratively the Solomon Islands were British territories, while Bougainville was controlled by Germany as part of German New Guinea until after the First World War, when the League of Nations gave Australia a mandate over the now-former German territory.

Guadalcanal is the 111th largest island on the planet. At 5,300 square kilometers, or 2,100 square miles, it is just slightly smaller than Prince Edward Island in Canada, which is a whole Canadian province, and slightly larger than Trinidad, which is almost a whole country. It lies about 10° south of the equator. From a distance, its tropical forests carpet the island in an entrancing emerald green. Up close, it is a land of crocodiles, army ants, scorpions, torrential rains, and leeches.

In 1568, a Spanish expedition in search of King Solomon's mines encountered these islands. They didn't find any gold mines, but named them the Solomon Islands anyway. One of the officers named Guadalcanal after his home town in Andalucía, back in Spain.

In May 1942, the United States 1st and 2nd Marine Divisions, a force of 17,000, was deployed to New Zealand. Originally, the plan was to send the Marines to garrison Fiji, Samoa, and New Caledonia against the expected Japanese invasions. Now, in the aftermath of the Battle of Midway, they would instead participate in Operation Watchtower.

Because supplies were limited, and this operation had to compete with the European theater for resources, the Marines went into the Guadalcanal campaign with a bare sixty-day supply of food and a ten-day supply of ammunition, far less than was typical for an operation like this. The Marines were armed with Model 1903 Springfield rifles, the same weapons their grandfathers used during the Philippine War four decades ago. The Marines made light of their poverty of supplies and equipment, referring to the coming invasion as "Operation Shoestring."

The invasion would be escorted by a US Navy task force that included the carriers USS *Saratoga*, *Enterprise*, and *Hornet*, under the command of Admiral Jack Fletcher. Fletcher, the only commander involved in this operation who had previously faced the Japanese in battle, openly expressed skepticism over the prospects of Operation Watchtower. When the Marine commander told him it would take five days to land the Marines and their supplies onto Guadalcanal, Fletcher refused to support the landings for more than 48 hours, because of the risk of attack from Japanese land-based bombers. He was in command of three-quarters of the American carrier force in the Pacific, and he was not about to lose a single one of them.

The invasion force traveled to the Solomons on the night of August 6. Hazy weather helped conceal them from Japanese reconnaissance flights. At dawn on August 7, the invasions began.

Three thousand marines assaulted Tulagi, where some 900 Japanese naval infantry were stationed. The Japanese resisted fiercely and almost all of them were killed.

The situation was quite different on Guadalcanal. The landings were to be on the north shore of the island. Here the terrain was relatively flat, which is why the Japanese chose it for their airstrip, which lay just three miles, or five kilometers, inland from the site of the invasion. There were no signs of the Japanese on the beach. American ships bombarded the landing site for thirty minutes, but there was no response and no sign of the enemy.

Eleven thousand Marines landed on the beach and began probing into the jungle beyond. Still no sign of the Japanese.

In fact, there were hardly any Japanese soldiers on Guadalcanal. There were nearly 3,000 civilians there, building the airfield, which was almost complete when the Americans attacked. Of these 3,000, about 2,200 were Koreans conscripted to do heavy labor for the Japanese military. When the Americans began shelling the island, these airfield workers fled into the jungle.

You would have expected the Japanese would do more to defend their positions on Tulagi and Guadalcanal, but even after Midway, the Japanese Navy was still underestimating the Americans. At Rabaul, Japanese commanders had received news of the American invasion by radio before the first Marine set foot on shore, but even then they assumed this was a hit-and-run raid. That the Americans had come to Guadalcanal to stay did not enter their minds.

They ordered air strikes on the Americans, which was a challenge for the pilots. Guadalcanal was a thousand kilometers, or 600 miles, distant from Rabaul, which put it at the limit of their range. Two Japanese air strikes bombed ships supporting the invasion, forcing them to scatter. These air attacks sank one transport and damaged one destroyer, but succeeded only in delaying the landings for a few hours. If they had attacked the Marines and their equipment on the beach, they could have done much more damage.

Also at Rabaul was the commander of the 17th Army, General Hyakutake Harukichi. He was focused on the plan to land his soldiers at Lae and march them across New Guinea to take Port Moresby. He dismissed the American attack on Guadalcanal as a diversion. The naval commander, Admiral Mikawa Gunichi, disagreed. He commanded the Eighth Fleet, the naval force stationed at Rabaul, and protecting the Solomon Islands from Allied attack was part of his assignment.

Since the Army wouldn't cooperate, Mikawa struck out on his own with the Eighth Fleet, which consisted of seven cruisers and one destroyer, to oppose the landing on Guadalcanal. Before he left, his superior Admiral Nagano warned him, "The Japanese Navy is different from the American Navy. If you lose one ship, it will take years to replace." Mikawa took this advice to heart.

The Eighth Fleet lingered at Bougainville until late afternoon, so that it could attack the Americans by night. If you look at the Solomon Islands on a map, you will see that most of them are arrayed in two parallel lines running northwest to southeast. Mikawa sent his fleet toward Guadalcanal through this channel, which the Americans would nickname "The Slot."

By dusk on August 7, those 11,000 Marines had landed on Guadalcanal without suffering a single casualty. The following afternoon, a Saturday, the Marines advanced inland against minimal opposition and took control of the abandoned Japanese airfield. The fleeing workers had made no effort to damage the runway or destroy any of their equipment or supplies. They had left their meals half-eaten on the mess hall tables.

The Marines captured hundreds of rifles, machine guns, and ammunition, trucks and cement mixers, stores of gasoline and oil, and stockpiles of rice, beer, and sake. The airfield was equipped with electric generators and radar; it even had an ice-making machine. One of the Marines hung a sign on the machine. It read: TOJO ICE PLANT: UNDER NEW MANAGEMENT.

A second day of air strikes from Rabaul convinced Admiral Fletcher to withdraw his task force and its precious aircraft carriers on Saturday evening, just 36 hours after the landings had begun. Admiral Richmond Turner, commander of the task force escorting the transports, decided that if the carriers were leaving, his force would have to leave as well, even though most of the supplies and equipment meant for the Marines on Guadalcanal had not yet been unloaded. He chose to remain overnight, waiting while as many supplies were unloaded as possible, intending to withdraw at dawn on Sunday the 9th.

Unfortunately for Admiral Turner and the sailors under his command, the Japanese Navy excel at night combat, and the Eighth Fleet was almost upon them. Mikawa's ships approached at midnight, slipping past two patrolling US destroyers, which apparently never saw them. Blame it on exhaustion after 48 hours on alert.

Japanese seaplanes flew over the Allied ships and dropped parachute flares behind them, illuminating them in silhouette for Japanese gunners. The Americans were caught entirely by surprise. In two hours of combat, Japanese ships glided easily into and through American formations. The first shells set fires on several ships, lighting them up for the Japanese.

Mikawa sank four heavy cruisers, USS *Astoria*, *Quincy*, and *Vincennes*, and HMAS *Canberra*. Over a thousand Australian and American sailors were killed. The Japanese ships suffered only minor damage, but then Mikawa ordered his ships to withdraw. Remembering the words of Admiral Nagano, he made the conscious choice not to attack the American transports, even though their escorts had been damaged or driven off. If he took the time to do that, daylight would arrive before his ships were out of range of the American carriers he assumed were lurking somewhere nearby, waiting for dawn to strike.

Had he stayed and attacked the transports, it would have cost the already undersupplied Marines valuable stores, but it might have cost Japanese ships and Japanese lives. Besides, enemy troops on the island were the Army's problem, not his.

History will know this engagement as the Battle of Savo Island, Savo Island being a small island nearby, and it was the biggest American defeat since Pearl Harbor. A naval board of inquiry censured Howard Bode, the captain of USS *Chicago*, which was itself heavily damaged in the battle, for failure to give other ships timely warning. When Captain Bode learned of his censure, he killed himself.

Allied sailors began to refer to the stretch of sea between Guadalcanal, Savo, and Florida Islands as "Ironbottom Sound," for the large numbers of ships and planes that went down in these waters.

As far as the admiralty in Japan were concerned, the decisive defeat of the Allied navies at Savo Island was more significant than the fact that US Marines had captured Guadalcanal. Nevertheless, the Marine presence on Guadalcanal put the Japanese Navy in the uncomfortable position of having to ask the Japanese Army for help. The Army asked how many Americans were on the island. The Navy estimated 2,000, a fraction of the actual number. Together, the Army and Navy assembled a force of 6,000 to oppose them, which they judged ample for the purpose. Most of the soldiers in this force came from the 17th Army.

The Marines on Guadalcanal moved their supplies inland and formed a defensive perimeter around the airfield and the beach. They had only five days' worth of food, plus what they had captured from the Japanese. They set to work completing the airfield, which they named Henderson Field, after Major Lofton Henderson, the Marine aviator who had been stationed on Midway and died attacking the Japanese fleet at the Battle of Midway.

[music: Serbanescu, "Pacific 1941."]

On August 15, the day before Japanese soldiers were to ship out for Guadalcanal, their commander, Kawaguchi Kiyotake, ordered that they be given three months' pay in advance. He instructed them to send most of it home to their families, but to retain enough to celebrate their last night before they went off to combat.

They rode transport ships to Rabaul, then switched to destroyers for the last leg of the trip. Destroyers were much faster than transports, and could make the round trip to and from Guadalcanal in one night, safe from detection by American aircraft. The disadvantage of this mode of transportation was that each destroyer could carry only a few soldiers at a time.

The first Japanese detachment, numbering a little over 900, came ashore on Guadalcanal just before midnight on August 18. Their orders were to wait until additional units arrived, but their commander was confident that Americans would be no match for his troops. The Japanese Army

training manual had this to say about fighting Westerners: “Westerners, being very haughty, effeminate, and cowardly, intensely dislike fighting in the rain or mist or in the dark. They cannot conceive night to be a proper time for battle—though it is excellent for dancing. In these weaknesses lie our great opportunity.”

So they didn’t wait. They began advancing on the Americans at once.

The Marines were aware that Japanese troops had landed on Guadalcanal, but that was all they knew. They sent scouts to investigate. One of the scouts was a 50-year-old native of Guadalcanal named Vouza who acted as a coastwatcher for the Australians. Vouza had already proved his worth when he located a US Navy aviator who had parachuted onto Guadalcanal after his plane was shot down, and guided the American safely back to the Marines.

On August 20, Vouza discovered this Japanese force that was working its way through the jungle hunting for Americans. Unfortunately for him, he was found and captured by the Japanese. When they strip-searched him, they found a small American flag tucked inside his loincloth. It had been a gift. When interrogated, he refused to talk, so the Japanese tied him to a tree and struck him in the face several times with their rifle butts while they continued to question him. He still refused to cooperate, so the Japanese bayoneted him several times in the stomach, shoulders, and throat and left him there to die.

Incredibly, after the Japanese left, Vouza was able to chew through the ropes and escape. He made his way through miles of jungle to reach the American lines before the Japanese did, and warned them there were “maybe five hundred” Japanese soldiers approaching before he fainted. He would be hospitalized for 12 days, but he did recover.

The Japanese assumed their arrival on the island had gone undetected. At 1:30 AM, they began an attack on the American position. The Americans were ready for them, raking the charging Japanese with machine gun fire. At dawn, another Marine unit circled behind the Japanese and surrounded them. When the Japanese refused to surrender, the Marines brought in their light tanks. Aircraft from Henderson Field strafed Japanese positions.

By dusk, the fighting was over, at least the Marines thought so until they began examining the bodies of the Japanese dead and discovered that some of them were only playing dead until an American got near; then they would begin shooting or throw a grenade. The Marines quickly learned to bayonet every Japanese corpse, just to be safe. Eight hundred Japanese were killed in this action, at the cost of the lives of some 40 US Marines.

The Allied side learned of Japanese ferocity and their willingness to fight on as long as it was possible to kill even one more enemy. The Japanese learned that fighting Westerners was not so easy as the training manual made out.

The Allies gradually managed to station a mixed collection of US Army, Navy, and Marine aircraft, along with some planes from the Royal New Zealand Air Force, on Henderson Field. This motley collection of planes came to be called the “Cactus Air Force,” *Cactus* being the codename for Guadalcanal. The Japanese could no longer assume air superiority over the Solomons.

These developments at last persuaded the Japanese Army and Navy that the Allied landing on Guadalcanal represented a serious threat. Further Japanese transports already delivering Japanese soldiers to the region were ordered to rendezvous with a naval escort force assembled by Admiral Yamamoto that included *Shokaku* and *Zuikaku*, Japan’s two surviving fleet carriers, plus the light carrier *Ryujo*, three battleships, sixteen cruisers, thirty destroyers, and three submarines, commanded by Admiral Nagumo.

Their goal was to land an additional 1,500 soldiers on Guadalcanal, but besides that, Yamamoto was still working his plan to ambush some American carriers. At the appropriate time, he hoped to send the light carrier and a small destroyer escort ahead of the main force to tempt the Americans into attacking it and exposing themselves to the two Japanese fleet carriers.

The Americans detected this approaching force and Admiral Ghormley decided to meet them head on, sending out Jack Fletcher with a task force led by the carriers *Saratoga* and *Enterprise*.

In the small hours of August 24, with the two fleets both approaching the Solomons, the Japanese sent their diversionary force ahead of the main fleet. At midday, *Ryujo* launched its 21 aircraft to attack Henderson Field. Japanese bombers based at Rabaul were attacking Henderson Field every day, and the aircraft from *Ryujo* were supposed to coordinate with them, but today bad weather had forced the other planes back to Rabaul, leaving the carrier planes on their own. The attack did no damage to the airfield, but the Americans shot down six Japanese planes.

Fletcher sent an attack force from *Saratoga* after *Ryujo*, which was heavily damaged and sank that night. But *Ryujo* had succeeded in diverting the Americans from the real threat.

At the same time Japanese planes were bombing Henderson Field, a Japanese scout plane spotted the American carriers. Within minutes, *Shokaku* and *Zuikaku* launched the first wave of their attack. At 4:00 in the afternoon, the approaching planes were detected by American radar. The US carriers launched fighters to intercept them, but the interception was badly coordinated and the fighters were not able to find the Japanese before their dive bombers reached their target: *Enterprise*.

American anti-aircraft fire took its toll, but three of the dive bombers landed hits on *Enterprise*. The first bomb penetrated the deck and exploded inside the hull, killing 35 sailors. The second started a fire, and the third blew a hole in the flight deck.

Enterprise's damage control teams were able to repair much of the damage, and Admiral Fletcher ordered his task force to withdraw south. The Japanese had lost 75 planes and 61 aircrew to the Americans' 20 planes and 7 air crew. Japanese losses represented most of their carrier strike forces, so Admiral Nagumo also ordered his carrier task force to withdraw to the north.

The Japanese believed, incorrectly, that they had seriously damaged both US carriers, so the troop transports and their escorts continued toward Guadalcanal. The following morning, they were attacked by the Cactus Air Force, and then by four US B-17 bombers based in the New Hebrides. The Japanese convoy was forced to turn back. They landed their troops on Shortland Island, at the opposite end of the Solomons.

This encounter, known as the Battle of the Eastern Solomons, amounted to a marginal US victory. *Enterprise* was damaged and had to return to Pearl Harbor for repairs, but the Americans sank a Japanese light carrier and cost Japan more of its irreplaceable elite pilots. Japan was losing experienced pilots much faster than it could train new ones.

The lesson the Japanese took from their naval encounters around Guadalcanal was that American carriers and the Cactus Air Force made it dangerous for ships to operate in those waters in daylight. Instead of sending slow transport ships, the Japanese Navy would begin shuttling soldiers and supplies to Guadalcanal on submarines, which could sneak up on the island, or on fast destroyers, which could quickly dart to Guadalcanal along the Slot and away again in a single night, and thus never be seen in daylight by Allied reconnaissance planes.

Japanese sailors called this "Rat Transportation," because they were scuttling about in the dark like rats. The Marines and Allied military personnel on Guadalcanal called it "The Cactus Express." In the United States, newspapers dubbed it "The Tokyo Express."

This may sound like a clever improvisation on the part of the Japanese. It was, but it was also expensive and inefficient. Fast destroyers burn a lot more fuel than slow transports, and Japan was short on fuel. Destroyers can't carry very many soldiers, and lack the equipment necessary to load and unload soldiers and cargo efficiently. Often the Japanese simply put supplies into watertight drums and tossed them overboard close enough to the beach that soldiers on shore could swim out and collect them. Some critical equipment, such as vehicles and artillery guns, could not be delivered at all by this method.

Additionally, every destroyer running the Tokyo Express was a destroyer not available for escorting Japanese merchant ships. You may have noticed in our episodes on the war in the Pacific so far that Japanese naval doctrine called for the use of submarines in combination with surface ships as part of a naval task force. Japanese submarines were used to scout the position of the American fleet in the run-up to the Battle of Midway, for example. The Americans, on the other hand, were borrowing a page from German naval doctrine and sending their submarines to hunt merchant shipping to and from Japan, which meant those ships needed destroyer escorts.

The Allies had also become leery of sending bigger than a destroyer to Guadalcanal and were also using modified destroyers to bring soldiers and supplies to the island.

The Americans were also sending aircraft to Guadalcanal as fast as possible. Japanese planes from Rabaul attacked Henderson Field daily, weather permitting, and in the aerial combat that followed, both sides were losing planes, but the Allied side had the advantage here, in ways reminiscent of the Battle of Britain two years ago. When Allied pilots bailed out of their planes, they were rescued and returned to duty. Japanese pilots who bailed out either drowned or became POWs. It was a four-hour flight from Rabaul to Guadalcanal and another four hours back, limiting the time and fuel available to the Japanese to spend on fighting the Allies, and those Australian-led coastwatchers in the Solomon Islands usually gave Henderson Field advance warning of any incoming Japanese planes, allowing time to get fighters into the air before they arrived.

Despite their difficulties, by early September the Japanese had landed about 5,000 soldiers on Guadalcanal, including their commander, General Kawaguchi Kiyotake, and the newspaper reporter Nishino Gen, whom we met before.

On September 7, Kawaguchi began an operation to attack Henderson Field. He split his troops into three separate forces that would move through the jungle and into positions from which they could attack the Americans from three directions. The eastern attack would begin first, as it was a diversion. When the Americans turned their attention east, the attacks from the south and west would begin. He left 250 soldiers behind to guard their supply dump, at the coastal village of Tasimboko.

As the Japanese moved into position around Henderson Field, they came across the miserable, starving survivors of the construction crew that had been building the airfield when the Americans arrived. They thanked their rescuers profusely.

Solomon Islanders kept the Americans apprised of the Japanese moves. On the morning of September 8, as most of Kawaguchi's force was making its way through the jungle to their assigned positions, US Marines, supported by air and naval bombardment, landed at Tasimboko. The Japanese guards were surprised and fled into the jungle, leaving the Marines in possession of the large stockpile of food, ammunition, and supplies that the Japanese had painstakingly delivered to Guadalcanal in small batches over the last several weeks. The Marines took what they could and destroyed the rest. Among their booty were Japanese documents that showed just how many enemy soldiers were operating on Guadalcanal, and a couple of General Kawaguchi's dress uniforms.

Japanese naval vessels had been shelling the American positions around Henderson Field every night. The US Navy had told the Marines it would not be able to help. After nightfall on September 12, Japanese light artillery joined in that night's bombardment. The Japanese infantry

began their attack on the American position, but it in the jungle darkness became confused and disorganized. When daylight came, they had to retreat back to the jungle.

They tried again the following night. The Americans had taken up positions on a ridge, with Henderson Field was just a short distance behind them. The Japanese repeatedly charged the ridge in the face of intense enemy fire. One Marine battalion of less than a thousand held off a fierce attack by a Japanese brigade of more than 3,000.

The Japanese attacks failed. By dawn, the dazed and exhausted Japanese were withdrawing, taking with them as many of their wounded as they could. They lost about 800 killed to the Americans' 59. Again, wounded Japanese lying on the ground would call for help, then attempt to kill any American who responded. Isolated survivors, unable to retreat, made suicide attacks. The commander of the 1st Marine Division, General Alexander Vandergrift, was reading a dispatch at his command post that morning when he heard a cry of "Banzai!" and looked up to see three Japanese soldiers charging at him. Marines shot them dead before they reached him.

The Americans won the battle, and this was as close as the Japanese would come to taking back Henderson Field, but at the time, it hardly felt like victory. The Marines were isolated on the island and exhausted; many were sick with dysentery, malaria, and fungal infections. Of course, the same could be said of the Japanese.

The surviving Japanese retreated to their original position on the coast to consider their next move. This was the first time a Japanese Army force of this size had been defeated since the war began. Much to their surprise, the Americans had proved far more tenacious than they had expected. It seemed they loved their country, too. Critically short on supplies, Japanese soldiers began referring to Guadalcanal as Hunger Island. The words sound similar in Japanese.

An Allied naval convoy delivered 4,000 more Marines to Guadalcanal on September 18. Unfortunately for the Americans, this convoy's escorts were attacked by Japanese submarines, which damaged the battleship USS *North Carolina* and the aircraft carrier USS *Wasp* was sunk. *Enterprise* and *Saratoga* were at Pearl Harbor for repairs, meaning that *Hornet* was now the only American carrier available for operations in the Southwest Pacific.

At Rabaul, Japanese commanders believed that Guadalcanal was the most important engagement in the entire war at the moment, and that it had to take precedence over anything else, including the ground offensive toward Port Moresby on New Guinea, which I already told you about. In the next three weeks, the Tokyo Express would deliver thousands more soldiers to the island, with the goal of beginning another, larger attack on Henderson Field in October.

Army commanders had had enough of sending supplies and soldiers piecemeal, to be destroyed piecemeal by the Americans. The Army wanted to send another division to Guadalcanal, and not by Rat Transportation. They wanted real transport ships capable of carrying heavy weapons. The

naval commanders at Rabaul told them the Navy lacked the means to escort such a tempting target safely.

It was only when the Army threatened to send their transports unescorted, if that was what it took, that the decision was kicked upstairs to Admiral Yamamoto, aboard his flagship *Yamato* at Truk. When he heard about the Army's demands, he acknowledged that the Navy bore some responsibility for the difficulties facing the Japanese Army on Guadalcanal. He agreed the Navy would escort the convoy and assist in the effort to retake Guadalcanal.

Further action on Guadalcanal is coming, but we'll have to stop here for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Andrew and Padraig for their kind donations, and thank you to Daniel for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Andrew and Padraig and Daniel help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, you are most welcome; just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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And I hope you'll join me next week, here on the *History of the Twentieth Century*, as we explore the most ghastly topic in the entire history of the twentieth century. The Road to the Holocaust, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. I mentioned a Marine battalion that had held off a much larger Japanese attack force during the assault on Henderson Field. This unit, the 1st Marine Raider Battalion, was supposed to have been a reserve force, behind the front line and resting when it found itself under attack that night.

The unit's commander, Colonel Merritt Edson, distinguished himself that night, moving energetically up and down the line, giving his Marines instruction, advice, and encouragement, while repeatedly exposing himself to enemy fire.

Appreciative Marines began referring to the ridge line where this fighting took place as "Edson's Ridge," and the engagement "The Battle of Edson's Ridge." For his actions in that combat, Colonel Edson was awarded the Medal of Honor.

[music: Closing War Theme]