



The Fight for Edson's Ridge

By Maj Allan C. Bevilacqua, USMC (Ret)

"When we got back to Lunga and they sent us out toward the ridge, I was firmly convinced we were in the path of the next Japanese attack."

LtCol Merritt A. Edson
Commanding Officer, 1st Raider
Battalion

In May 1942, Major General Alexander A. Vandegrift's 1st Marine Division loaded out from ports in the United States, bound for New Zealand. There, it was planned that the Division would spend six months in intensive training prior to undertaking offensive operations against the Japanese in the Southwest Pacific. It was not to be.

When plans collide head-on with reality, it is usually reality that finishes on top. MajGen Vandegrift's Marines' reality took the form of an alarming intelligence report that the Japanese had begun construction of an airfield on the island of Guadalcanal, the southernmost major island in the Solomon Islands chain. The general knew that if that airfield became



Left: Officers from Colonel Merritt A. Edson's (seated at desk) 1st Marine Raider Battalion confer before another attack during the Guadalcanal campaign.

Below: Marines work on front-line defenses around part of the airfield on Guadalcanal. (USN photo)



unable to mount any resistance. Before the sun dropped below the horizon, Marine engineers had already begun work on completing the airfield the Japanese had laid out. Even as bulldozers and graders labored into the night, the Marines had given the airfield a name—Henderson Field. The airfield was called in honor of Marine aviator Major Lofton Henderson who had been killed in action at Midway Island, where the Japanese had been dealt a stunning defeat earlier that year.

The Japanese struck back immediately. The result was somewhat less than a success. Two Japanese thrusts—one an air attack to neutralize the airfield, the other a ground attack to reclaim it—were resoundingly routed. Of the 36 Mitsubishi G4M twin-engine medium bombers that took part in the air attack, a scant three returned to their base at Rabaul on the island of New Britain, the northernmost of the Solomon's Chain. Of the 900 Japanese who threw themselves at the lines of Colonel Clifton B. Cates' 1st Marine Regiment on the banks of a sluggish tidal estuary, Ilu Creek, 787, their commander Colonel Kiyonao Ichiki among them, died there.

Despite two resounding setbacks in as many attempts, the Japanese were not considering pulling the plug on the Guadalcanal operation. In the Japanese view, Guadalcanal was essential to the overall Japanese posture in the Southwest

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Pacific and they were upping the ante. After the shocking Japanese victory at Savo Island on the night of Aug. 8 that sent four Allied cruisers—three American and one Australian—to the bottom of the ocean, the Japanese were in total control of the waters around Guadalcanal and they were taking full advantage of the situation.

From his headquarters at Rabaul, Lieutenant General Harukichi Hyakutake, supreme Japanese commander for the Southwest Pacific, was cramming the 4th Mixed Brigade on fast transports—destroyers—their decks filled with troops, and sending them south as quickly as shipping became available. Headed for Guadalcanal from the immense Truk Atoll, hundreds of sea miles to the north, were the combat experienced veterans of Major General Kiyotake Kawaguchi's 35th Infantry Brigade. The two forces would meet on Guadalcanal. Their mission: to reclaim the airfield and deprive the Americans of vital air support.

operational, Japanese bombers from Guadalcanal would be able to wreak havoc on the crucial shipping lanes from America's West Coast to New Zealand and Australia, the very places from which America's counterattack forces were to be assembled. For the 1stMarDiv, there would be no extended period of training; instead there would be combat.

On L-Day, Aug. 7, 1942, the Marines of 1stMarDiv came ashore on Guadalcanal unopposed. By nightfall, all objectives on Guadalcanal were exclusively held by Marines. Caught short with nothing more than a relative handful of construction troops on the island, the Japanese were



Above: This photo, taken on Sept. 6, 1942, of members of the Kawaguchi Brigade Headquarters with mustachioed MajGen Kawaguchi in center, was probably taken in the Philippines or on Palau shortly before the unit shipped out to Guadalcanal.

COURTESY OF DOD

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That site was a complicated ridge within gunshot range of Henderson Field. About 1,000 yards in length, the ridge was oriented southeast-northwest, with several spurs running from both the front and back of the ridge. Combined with the confusing network of lesser ridges and ravines in its front, the ridge was a difficult place to approach. It also made the ridge a difficult place to defend.

Gen Vandegrift was playing from a short hand. One of his infantry regiments, Colonel James W. Webb's 7th Marines, was still hundreds of miles away, tied down in the defense of New Caledonia. What Gen Vandegrift had available to defend the ridge was Lieutenant Colonel Merritt A. Edson's 1st Raider Battalion, a force too slim to maintain a continuous line of 1,000 yards.

Edson already was a bit of a Marine Corps legend for his action in Nicaragua in 1926 during which he earned the Navy Cross. Over a period of a month, in the heart of Nicaragua's rainy season, Edson had pre-empted every move of the rebel leader Augusto Sandino before Sandino could make them, almost without having to fire a shot. That operation also brought Edson the nickname of "Red Mike" for the bristly red beard that grew when the constant rainfall made something as simple as shaving impossible. Edson's style of leadership by example made him the obvious choice for a mission filled with danger.

Faced with the conditions that existed, Edson settled for doing what the situation permitted with the assets he had. Already suspecting that the ridge would be the objective of the main Japanese attack, Edson established his battalion in a series of strongpoints along what he felt would be the logical Japanese avenue of assault.

The assets Edson had on hand to man these strongpoints were not much. His own battalion had been reduced to only three companies. The battalion's fourth company, Company D, had been cannibalized to provide replacements for casualties in Companies A, B and C. Beyond this, Edson could count on only the three understrength companies of Major Robert A. Williams' 1st Parachute Battalion and Co C, 1st Pioneer Battalion which were attached to his command. This force was pretty well dwarfed by the 3,500 men Kiyotake Kawaguchi could throw at it.



Japanese troops from the Aoba Regiment march along the shore of Guadalcanal shortly after landing in the first week of September 1942. Savo Island can be seen faintly in the background.

COURTESY OF DOD

Both commanders, Gen Vandegrift and Gen Kawaguchi, were fully aware of the importance of Guadalcanal's airfield. The side that held the airfield would control the skies above Guadalcanal, which would be essential to the battle on the ground. Already, a slim handful of Marine Corps air assets were operating from Henderson Field. Brigadier General Roy S. Geiger and less than a dozen of his 1st Marine Aircraft Wing staff had already set up shop at Henderson Field, with more to follow.

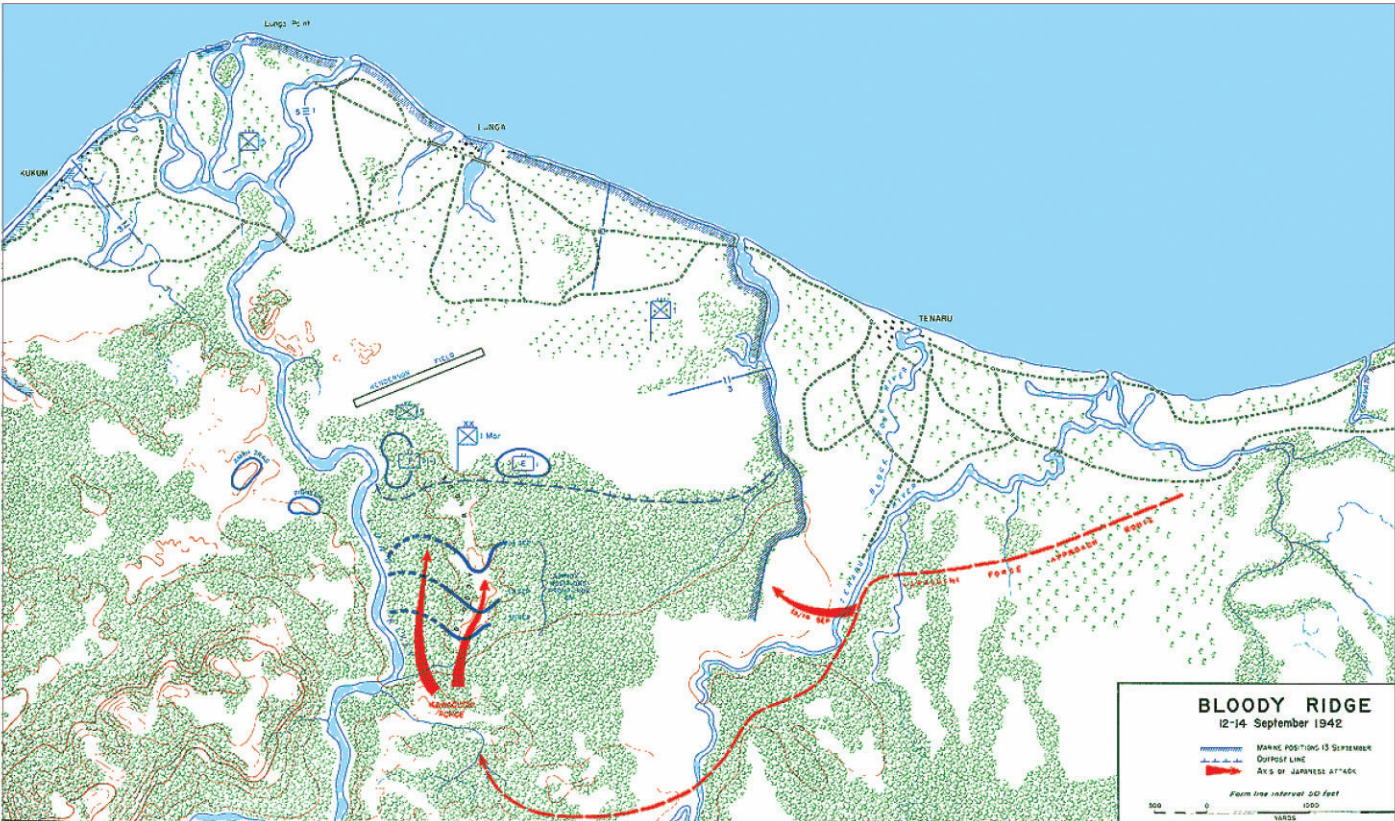
From the Japanese perspective, that condition could not be allowed to continue. As seen from Gen Vandegrift's command

post, the condition must not only continue but grow if the campaign on Guadalcanal were to succeed. The stage was set for Henderson Field to be the key terrain of the Guadalcanal operation.

The advance elements of the Kawaguchi Brigade arrived on Guadalcanal during the night of Sept. 8. Almost immediately, engineer units assigned to the brigade began cutting an approach road through the dense tangle of jungle that blanketed everything east of Henderson Field. Japanese reconnaissance units already were at work probing Marine defenses and the site of the main Japanese attack had been determined.



Above: This is a copy of a photo that was found among the personal items of a Japanese soldier who was captured by Marines on Guadalcanal. (Photo courtesy of National Archives)



Edson anticipated that the Japanese would not attack the ridge frontally; rather, they would attack along the long axis of the ridge from the southeast. While the ridge itself was for the greater part covered by kunai grass, the terrain to the east—the direction from which the Japanese would come—was cloaked in thick, matted jungle. The Japanese would be able to launch their attack from almost stone-throwing distance of Edson's sketchy line.

Edson's defense plan was both aided and complicated by the terrain. While the Raiders' strongpoint defense was anchored on the left by the bulging nose of the ridge itself, the right rested firmly on the unfordable Lunga River. Almost dead center between these points was a lagoon, which also was unfordable. While this was an asset, in one respect it was a danger as well.

Edson's Co C that defended the gap between the lagoon and the river, the very spot that one of Kawaguchi's battalion was slated to attack, was almost isolated. Co B, which held the ground between the lagoon and the ridge, would be able to support by fire but only to a limited extent. For all purposes, Co C would be fighting its own war.

On Sept. 12, Kiyotake Kawaguchi

launched his attack. As it was planned, this was to be no hell for leather, devil take the hindmost, mad charge in the manner of Kiyonao Ichiki's doomed effort. As planned, the Japanese assault was to be a joint air, sea and ground effort that employed air and naval gunfire bombardment followed by an infantry

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attack. Before that effort could get underway, the hellish terrain of Guadalcanal threw it all into confusion.

If Red Mike Edson had problems defending an over long stretch of terrain, Kiyotake Kawaguchi wasn't long in encountering his own difficulties. A long approach march through dense jungle that all but strangled movement threw the Japanese commander's timetable completely off the tracks. Barely a third of Kawaguchi's troops had reached their start line at the time the assault was to begin.

Although Kawaguchi's engineers had attempted to clear several routes for an approach march, the dense jungle made for slow going. There still were more than 10 miles of nearly impenetrable jungle growth and deep ravines to be overcome before the Japanese infantrymen arrived at their starting points. The Japanese assault units were almost exhausted by their battle with the jungle before they even went into the attack. The result was that Kawaguchi's force was compelled to attack piecemeal as individual units arrived in position.

While the Japanese attack may have been uncoordinated, it lacked nothing in courage. But courage alone cannot overcome confusion. Rather than a clenched fist, the Japanese attack was more along the lines of a jab by the spread fingers of a hand. Worse, the fingers did not all arrive at the same time, as the bulk of Kawaguchi's troops were still fighting the strangling jungle at the designated time for the attack to begin.

Right on schedule at 9 p.m., a flight of Japanese bombers swooped low over the ridge and dropped several sticks of bombs along the length of the bridge. Due to the dispersed nature of the Raiders' defense plan, most of these disturbed nothing but foliage. No sooner had the Japanese

This craft was used by the Japanese to land reinforcements on Guadalcanal Island. The ramps were designed to land light mechanized equipment and artillery. (USN photo)



bombers departed than a lone floatplane dropped a string of green flares along the spine of the ridge, the signal for a light cruiser and a trio of destroyers to begin raking the ridge from end to end with almost point blank fire from six-inch and three-inch guns. Once again, most of the projectiles impacted where there were no Marines.

The Japanese naval gunfire lasted no longer than 20 minutes. Hot on the heels of this, a series of green flares arose from the jungle at the foot of the ridge. This was the signal for the Japanese infantry attack, but two-thirds of those infantry elements were still slogging through the jungle attempting to reach their starting positions. From that point, everything descended into confusion.

What Kiyotake Kawaguchi had envisioned as one coordinated attack became a series of individual attacks as units went into the battle in bits and pieces. Nevertheless, while the Japanese were exhausted by their struggle with the jungle, they advanced by sheer determination, throwing themselves at the Marine positions regardless of fatigue and casualties.

The first of these piecemeal attacks, as Edson had determined, threw itself at the nose of the ridge. There, a comparatively minor coral elevation dubbed Hill 80, constituted the core of where Edson's Co B and Co B, 1st Parachute Battalion, had established themselves. At first, the Japanese attack was pressed forward by only a single company, but as more Japanese finally arrived after what must have seemed an eternity of floundering through the jungle, the Raiders and Paramarines found themselves locked in combat with the entire 2nd Battalion of Kawaguchi's 124th Infantry Regiment.

Inevitably, the sheer weight of Japanese numbers began to tell. The Raiders and Paramarines holding the nose of the ridge were forced back to a tight semi-circle around Hill 80 before finally establishing a perimeter of sorts there. It got worse.

On Edson's right, where the Raiders of Co C held the ground between the lagoon and the Lunga River, Japanese troops in sufficient numbers finally were in position to initiate a concentrated move against Co C. The company's third platoon, holding the ground adjacent to the lagoon, took the main impact and was soon cut off and surrounded. Other Japanese attacks, taking advantage of the dense jungle in that area that lessened the Raiders' advantage in firepower, were able to dislodge Co C's strongpoints closer to the river.

Greatly aided by the fires of 3rd Bn, 11th Marines' 75 mm pack howitzers, all three of Co C's platoons were able to successfully withdraw in good order and establish a new line close to the west of the



Above: This photo, dated Oct. 28, 1942, shows several of the U.S. officers who were leading the fight against the Japanese on tiny Tulagi Island in the Solomons. Seated on the steps of the staff house are, left to right, front row: LtCol O.K. Pressley, LtCol M.A. Edson, LtCol H.E. Rosecrans, and LtCol R.E. Hill. Second row: LT E.B. McLarney, MC, USN; BGen W.H. Rupertus; Col R.C. Kilmartin; and Maj William Enright. Third row: Capts Ralph Powell, Daryle Seeley and Thomas Philpott.



A Marine looks at fighting positions on Edson's Ridge—possibly Hill 123, looking north—in September 1942.

ridge.

Had the Japanese been able to follow up on their success and advance along the line of the Lunga, the Raiders' situation could have become perilous. Three things intervened to prevent this. First, Gen Vandegrift released Lieutenant Colonel Harold E. Rosecrans' 2nd Bn, 5th Marines from the Division's reserve to counter any

Japanese move along the line of the Lunga. Second, light was beginning to make its presence known on the eastern horizon. Daylight would erase the Japanese advantage of moving under the cover of darkness. Third, the Japanese infantrymen who had spent the entire night battling the jungle and Edson's Marines were all but out on their feet. As tense as the night had been, the Raiders had emerged in

A Grumman F4F Wildcat fighter sits at Henderson Field, Feb. 2, 1943. Markings under the cockpit indicate this plane was credited with shooting down 19 Japanese aircraft while being flown by several different Marine Corps pilots.



USN

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relatively good condition.

The day that followed was a day when both sides needed a break. The Japanese were able to enjoy a break of sorts. Shaded by the jungle overhead, they were at least shielded from the direct rays of a scorching sun that burned ever hotter as the day wore on. Edson's Marines weren't as fortunate. In the midst of nothing but kunai grass, which provided precious little shade, the Raiders and Paramarines sat, waited and baked. The bit of warm water in their canteens provided what little comfort that could be had.

The sun's slow descent to the west found Edson at his command post, firmly convinced that the next Japanese attack would be launched as soon as light failed. In true Edson style, he had established himself and his battalion staff on another coral outcropping identified as Hill 120, less than 200 yards behind his forward companies. There, he informed the handful of officers and NCOs grouped about him that he intended to stay, alive or dead.



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View of final line positions on Edson's Ridge, Guadalcanal, that were barely held during the battle on Sept. 13, 1942, as viewed from Bailey's intermediate position just southward.

As night fell on Sept. 13, the Japanese came on again, at the very site Edson had felt would be the point of the main Japanese attack—the nose of the ridge. This time, the Japanese attack was far better coordinated and organized than the previous day's effort. With a full day to reassemble, the Japanese threw the defenders of Hill 80 a clenched fist that struck with force.

Supported by the fires of mortars and heavy machine guns, the Japanese

infantry hit the Marine lines with the impact of a pile driver. Fires by the Raiders and Paramarines cut the Japanese down in swaths, but the Japanese were there in strength and they kept pressing forward. Inevitably, the sheer weight of numbers began to make itself felt. Slowly, grudgingly, the Raiders and Paramarines were forced backward. By 10 p.m., the Japanese were in a position to attack in strength all across the Marine front from the Lunga to the ridge. The next Japanese



COURTESY OF NATIONAL ARCHIVES

ADM Chester W. Nimitz, Commander in Chief Pacific, presents awards to Marine Raiders at Guadalcanal in January 1943.

surge would determine whether Marines or Japanese would control the ridge and access to Henderson Field.

That surge was not long in coming as a massive Japanese attack hit all along the Marine line. On the right, the Raiders and Pioneers holding the gap between the lagoon and the Lunga were able to beat back the attackers and hold their positions. At the ridge itself, it was a different story. There, the Japanese had forced the Raiders and Paramarines back until their defensive line straddled the ridge barely 50 yards in front of Edson's line.

Edson himself hadn't taken a single backward step. While others around him sought what cover was available, Edson stood totally erect amid the missiles flying through the air all around him.

Utterly fearless, Edson continued to direct the defense. At one time, when the artillery forward observer informed him that friendly fire would fall below the "danger close" criteria, Edson instructed him to "bring it in." There was no other choice and Edson didn't hesitate. As the 75 mm rounds of the 11th Marines impacted among the Japanese regrouping for another assault barely 80 yards in front, Edson did not do so much as duck

as shell fragments flew through the air.

By that time the Raiders and Paramarines had been forced back to a horse-shoe-shaped line little more than a dozen yards from Edson's command post. Then the word went down the line: this was the final stand. "Nobody moves, just die in your holes."

Somehow, by midnight, the Marines' situation had stabilized. Co C, which had enjoyed a very brief "rest" in reserve after the previous day's fighting, was brought forward to bolster the defense. That seemed to take some of the offensive spirit out of Kawaguchi's troops. They had come within sight of their objective only to find relatively "fresh" Americans barring their way. They still were attacking, but some of the strength had gone out of them. "From then on," Edson would later say, "I knew we had them licked."

Sporadic fighting would continue until dawn. By noon, Kiyotake Kawaguchi knew that it was a lost cause. His command had suffered about 750 dead and 500 wounded. The rest of his men were utterly exhausted, as much by their struggle with the jungle as by their battle against Edson's Marines who refused to give up. Sadly, Marine losses were equally heart-

breaking, and those who were left were out on their feet.

The attack on Edson's Ridge—it had a name now—would be the last Japanese offensive on Guadalcanal. The fight for Guadalcanal would continue for another four months, but from that point on, the Japanese would be on the defensive. Henderson Field would remain in American hands that would eventually control the sky above Guadalcanal, sweeping it clean of Japanese.

For his indomitable and courageous leadership on Sept. 12 and 13, 1942, Red Mike Edson would receive America's highest award for military valor, the Medal of Honor. Major General Merritt A. Edson made his final roll call on Aug. 13, 1955, and was interred in Virginia's Arlington National Cemetery.

Author's bio: Maj Allan C. Bevilacqua, a Leatherneck contributing editor, is a former enlisted Marine who served in the Korean and Vietnam wars as well as on an exchange tour with the French Foreign Legion. Later in his career, he was an instructor at Amphibious Warfare School and Command and Staff College, Quantico, Va. 🍷

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