

How to Fight and Win the Single Naval Battle

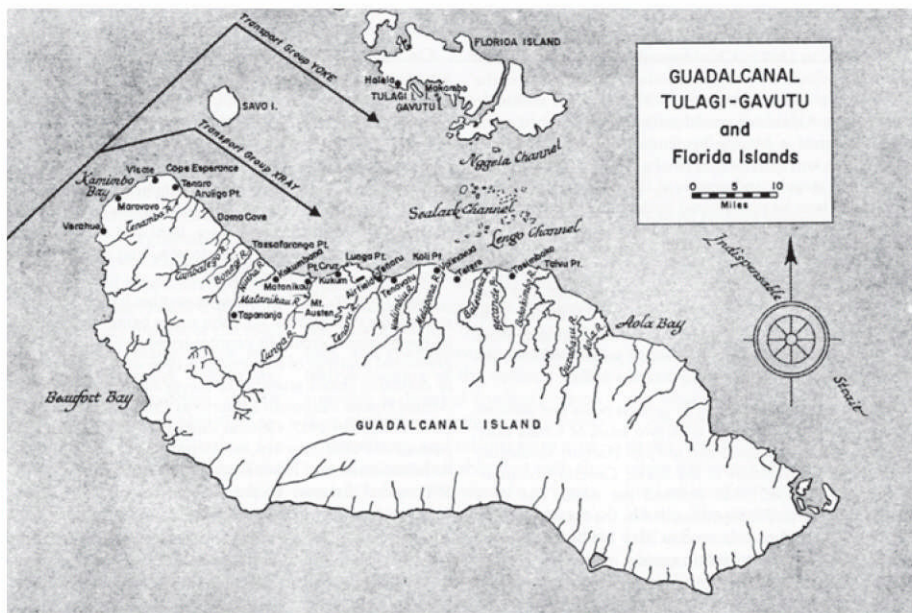
Operation WATCHTOWER's relevance today

by Staffs, Marine Corps University

The 2016 unclassified edition of the *Marine Corps Operating Concept* states,

We must be a *Lethal Force* with a 21st century approach to combined arms that integrates information warfare and seeks to destroy and defeat our enemies across five domains—air, land, sea, space, and cyberspace.¹

This vision of a “single battle” approach to meet the challenges of an emerging security environment, while complex, is not new. The Navy-Marine Corps Team faced a similar challenge in the summer and fall of 1942. The strategic victory at the Battle of Midway provided the United States an opportunity to halt Japanese expansion throughout the Pacific and embark upon an offensive campaign that would change the course of the war. The first step would be an amphibious assault on Guadalcanal that would test the soundness of the doctrine created during the interwar period. It would also set the stage for important changes in Marine Corps and Navy command relationships, more effective integration and employment of new technology (such as radar), and the development of a joint operating concept that would be employed for the remainder of the war in the Pacific. The purpose of this case study is to provide a historical example of the Navy-Marine Corps Team working with their Army brethren in the ground and air forces to adapt to a demanding operating environment in which America's military was challenged across all domains and emerged victorious.



Guadalcanal is in the Solomon Islands. (Photo from Henry I. Shaw, Jr., *First Offensive: The Marine Campaign for Guadalcanal*. Washington, DC: Marine Corps Historical Center, 1992.)

Known as Operation WATCHTOWER, this protracted, multi-domain campaign offers many lessons to commanders as practitioners interested in the risks and opportunities of expeditionary advanced base operations at the far end of a long and fragile logistics chain. As America's first counter-offensive against the unbroken chain of decisive Japanese land victories, WATCHTOWER tested the combined/joint forces' ability to conduct and sustain amphibious operations; to seize, secure, protect, and control littoral terrain including islands, straits, and extensive shorelines; and to ultimately deny the use of this terrain to

a determined enemy's air-ground-naval force.

Although it took less than 48 hours to gain a foothold on Guadalcanal, it would take nearly six months of hard fighting and the lives of many thousands of Marines, soldiers, airmen, and Sailors as well as the loss of numerous ships and aircraft before the campaign was successfully concluded. As an early attempt at sea control and power projection by an integrated naval expeditionary force, WATCHTOWER offers a sobering and compelling case study on the importance (and difficulty) of executing the single naval battle concept.



Open areas, jungle growth—a varied area of operations. (Photo from Henry I. Shaw, Jr., *First Offensive: The Marine Campaign for Guadalcanal*. Washington, DC: Marine Corps Historical Center, 1992.)

The single naval battle concept is not about seeking a decisive “single battle” to achieve victory at sea or on land but rather the integration of all elements of sea control and naval power projection into a cohesive “whole” that shares a common, unifying purpose and that runs from top to bottom through all formations.

The significance of the Guadalcanal Campaign extends well beyond its impact on the war in the Pacific and our amphibious doctrine. Guadalcanal was about more than Guadalcanal. Although replete with stories of individual heroism, superb tactical leadership, technological experimentation, and contributions of all elements of the MAGTF, this case study explores the

operational interrelationship between sea control, power projection, and achieving a single naval battle through cross-domain operations. When applied to both current and future challenges, new lessons emerge from the Guadalcanal Campaign that reinforce the enduring utility of history as a laboratory for learning.

Note

1. Headquarters Marine Corps, *Marine Corps Operating Concept: How an Expeditionary Force Operates in the 21st Century*, (Washington, DC: September 2016).

>Editor’s Note: The three-part case study will be available in May at <http://www.usmcu.edu/lli/marine-leader-development/discussion-topics>.



RADM Richmond K. Turner and MajGen Alexander A. Vandegrift review Operation WATCHTOWER’s landing plan. (Photo from Henry I. Shaw, Jr., *First Offensive: The Marine Campaign for Guadalcanal*. Washington, DC: Marine Corps Historical Center, 1992.)

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