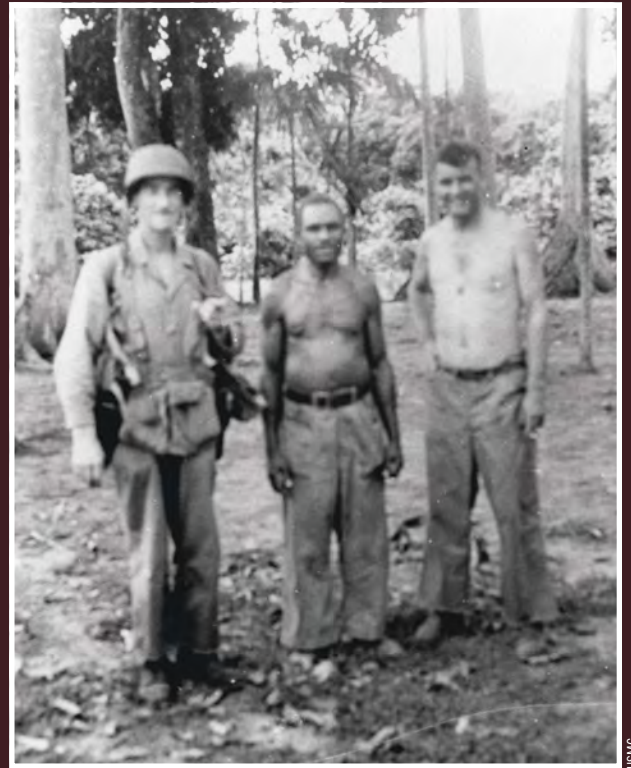




USMC



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Above left: SgtMaj Jacob Vouza, British Solomon Islands Constabulary, as he first appeared to U.S. Marines at Guadalcanal in August 1942.

Above right: LtCol Evans Carlson, left, met with the “hero of Guadalcanal,” SgtMaj Vouza, and coastwatcher Martin Clemens.

Coastwatcher Jacob Charles Vouza

“Better I Die 100 Times Than Marine Friends Die”

By Maj Allan C. Bevilacqua, USMC (Ret)

“He was an awful mess. I could hardly bear to look at him. After he chewed free of his bonds, he set off to contact the Marines, but after a bit, he became so weak that he had to crawl on all fours. He must have crawled nearly three miles. To this day, I am still in awe of his courage and physical endurance.”

—Martin Clemens, coastwatcher, Guadalcanal 1942-43

In front of the police station on Mendana Avenue in Honiara, capital of the Solomon Islands, there is a life-size bronze statue. The statue is that of a Solomon Islands fighting man of a bygone era. With feet firmly planted, the figure stands erect with head held high. A kiltlike garment, such as that worn by Solomon Islanders of long ago, is its sole article of clothing. In its right hand the statue firmly holds a short sword remarkably like one a Roman soldier would have carried. A look back in time, the image is an odd contrast amid the shiny new cars passing by and the silver passenger airplane on its

final approach to Honiara International Airport. On the monument’s base a single word is inscribed: VOUZA.

Who was Vouza? What set him apart from everyone else?

He was born in Papagu Village in Koli District, West Guadalcanal Province, on the island of Guadalcanal in what was then the British Solomon Islands Protectorate (BSIP). At that time no convenient documents such as birth certificates were kept neatly on file at the county courthouse, so his date of birth only may be approximated as about 1900. His parents, evangelical Christians, named him Jacob Charles Vouza, although as he grew into manhood, he preferred to be known simply as Vouza.

He was educated at the South Seas Evangelical Mission School where he was noted for his intelligence and direct reasoning ability. An apt student, he was a very active youth, who even at a young age showed signs of an uncommon physical constitution. As a boy, he spent much of his time outside of the classroom, roaming the jungle that blanketed the area and developing remarkable skills at woodcraft and tracking. While all young

men of his day were very much at home in the outdoors, his skills were above and beyond the ordinary.

In 1916, when he was about 17 years old, he was accepted into the BSIP Armed Constabulary and began a 25-year career as a police officer. Some men are born to be doctors; others find their calling in life as carpenters, mathematicians or whitewater-rafting guides. Vouza and law enforcement were a perfect match; the man was a natural-born police officer. In the summer of 1941, after a career of accomplishments that set a new standard for police work, Sergeant Major Vouza retired. As events would prove, it was only a beginning.

Less than a year after Vouza’s retirement, war came to the Solomon Islands.

After its stunning attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on Dec. 7, 1941, that left America’s Pacific fleet in smoking ruins, Japan thrust deeply into Southeast Asia and the South Pacific. By spring 1942, major Japanese bases had been established at strategically important Truk and Rabaul. In June 1942 Japanese troops arrived in the Central Solomons and began

surveying an airfield site on Guadalcanal close to the town of Honiara. Short weeks later, initial construction commenced.

It was then that Vouza and Martin Clemens entered the picture. Scottish-born Martin Clemens, the Colonial District Commissioner for Guadalcanal, and Vouza were friends of long standing. They had worked closely together when Vouza had been in command of the police detachment on the island of Malaita. Vouza and Clemens joined the ranks of the coast-watchers, the Combined Field Intelligence Service of the Royal Australian Navy. Risking summary execution if they were caught, they worked clandestinely in Japanese-controlled areas, gathering information of intelligence value. They were the first to report the Japanese airfield construction activity.

The news of a Japanese airfield on Guadalcanal blew American and Australian plans completely out of the water. Japanese bombers from Guadalcanal would be perfectly positioned to inflict pulverizing blows upon the direct convoy route from the American mainland to Australia. An operational Japanese airfield on Guadalcanal would change the entire war in the South Pacific.

By whatever means necessary, the Japanese could not be allowed to complete their work on Guadalcanal.

The only available means of thwarting the Japanese airfield planning was far from ready. Newly arrived in New Zealand, Major General Alexander A. Vandegrift's First Marine Division had expected to have six months of training before undertaking active offensive operations. Combat ready or not, there was one thing the 1stMarDiv could do that no other American or Allied force anywhere in the world could undertake. Thanks to extensive training exercises in North Carolina and the Caribbean, the 1stMarDiv could conduct an amphibious assault.

On Aug. 7, 1942, with one of his infantry regiments, the 7th Marines, tied to the defense of New Caledonia, Gen Vandegrift sent his Marines ashore on Guadalcanal. It was a shoestring operation born of dire necessity. Fortunately, the Japanese activity on Guadalcanal was no less an improvisation. The majority of the relatively small Japanese forces on the island were construction personnel, with but a handful of combat units. The Japanese were completely unprepared. The first American amphibious action of the war was unopposed. By nightfall on L-day, the airfield was firmly in American hands.

The day when Marines came ashore on Guadalcanal was also the day Vouza first met Americans. A U.S. Navy pilot from

the aircraft carrier USS *Wasp* (CV-7) was forced to ditch at sea after the engine of his Grumman F4F Wildcat failed. Brought to shore by Vouza, he was guided to Marine lines. Then and there Vouza volunteered to be a scout for the Marines.

The Japanese would be quick to respond to the loss of the airfield. It was a given that the Japanese would send major combat units from the Rabaul garrison. Vouza's intimate knowledge of the area and his skills in moving about in it would be priceless to the 1stMarDiv D-2 (intelli-

Heaving himself onto the stream bank, he was confronted by Japanese with leveled rifles and fixed bayonets.

gence) section. He went to work promptly, guiding Marine units out into the jungle surrounding the airfield and the village of Honiara. It was a fortunate move.

Within days, major Japanese reinforcements were being introduced under the cover of darkness each night. Japanese bombing raids from Rabaul were a daily occurrence. While Marine engineers and U.S. Navy Seabees (construction battalions) worked around the clock to complete the airfield the Japanese had started, Vouza was in the jungle day and night, locating and identifying Japanese activity.

It was during one such mission on Aug. 20 that Vouza was captured by the Japanese. While crossing a particularly treacherous tidal stream, he lost his footing, was knocked down and swept along by the strong current. He was seen by the members of a Japanese patrol who were waiting for him when he fought his way free from the fast-moving water.

Heaving himself onto the stream bank, he was confronted by Japanese with leveled rifles and fixed bayonets.

The Japanese were members of a recently arrived unit, the 28th Infantry Regiment, 7th Infantry Division. Commanded by Colonel Kiyonao Ichiki and commonly listed as the Ichiki Detachment, the unit had been slated to be the landing force for the Japanese assault on Midway in May. Following the decisive Japanese defeat at Midway, the Ichiki Detachment had been diverted to Guadalcanal. The unit's mission was to overwhelm the Marine positions protecting the airfield.

Begun by the Japanese and vital to the Marines, the airfield had been completed and named Henderson Field in honor of Marine aviator Major Lofton R. Henderson, who had been killed at Midway. (One day in the far-off future Henderson Field would be a modern facility, Honiara International Airport, hosting airline service to the Solomons.) It was critically important to Marines on Guadalcanal. The first Marine aviation units on the island had arrived even as Vouza became a prisoner of the Japanese. If Guadalcanal were to be held, Henderson Field had to be held.

Vouza was taken before an English-speaking Japanese officer. Confronted by a barrage of questions, Vouza stood mutely, trying to convince his inquisitor that he did not speak or understand English, that he was nothing more than an unremarkable Solomon Islands native.

The ruse was unsuccessful. Upon searching him, the Japanese found a small, folded American flag hidden in his clothing.

He was taken to a tree where he was tied with vines. The questioning was accompanied by a merciless beating. Vouza refused to utter a sound. Shouting questions



Control of Guadalcanal's airfield, later named Henderson Field, was crucial to both American and Japanese plans in the Pacific.



Solomon Islands residents were instrumental in helping Marines win the Guadalcanal campaign, serving as scouts, guides and intelligence gatherers. Native policemen assisted coastwatcher Martin Clemens as part of the Solomon Islands Defense Forces.

and demanding answers, the officer thrust his sword into Vouza's face, shoulders and chest. Vouza denied his captors the satisfaction of hearing him emit a sound of pain. The officer stepped aside to allow soldiers to use their bayonets. Each of 10 bayonet thrusts was accompanied by a demand for his knowledge of Marine defenses. In spite of excruciating pain, Vouza refused to utter a word.

Through it all, the English-speaking officer taunted Vouza, boasting of the "crushing defeat we will inflict on your friends tonight." Vouza remained silent as the officer snarled obscenities and barked demands for answers to his questions, accompanying the bayonet slashes with vivid descriptions of how and where the Japanese would "overwhelm the defenders of the airfield." The officer had no intention of leaving Vouza alive. If he knew what the Japanese planned, he would not live to tell of it. At last, convinced that Vouza was dead, the Japanese walked off casually, joking and laughing. It was a mistake that would cost all of them their lives.

Vouza wasn't dead. Knowing one thing—that he must somehow warn the Marines of where the impending attack would fall and the numbers of Japanese that would make the attack—he freed himself from the bonds that pinioned him to the tree. How? He chewed through the vines hold-

ing him there. In indescribable agony and drenched in his own blood, he chewed his way free. With strength born of determination and an iron sense of duty, Vouza set out to give a warning. Later he would say, "Better I die 100 times than Marine friends die."

With blood flowing from wounds that would have put most men in a hospital

Each of 10 bayonet thrusts was accompanied by a demand for his knowledge of Marine defenses. In spite of excruciating pain, Vouza refused to utter a word.

bed, sometimes walking and sometimes crawling on his hands and knees, he fought to remain conscious and keep moving. He later would relate that at times he felt as though he was outside of his physical form, watching himself staggering and stumbling his way through terrain that would have taxed the stamina of a strong, healthy man. At other times instinct alone carried him. Shortly before dusk, covered with his own blood and bleeding from his mouth where a sword thrust had cut his tongue, he lurched and crawled into the

defensive positions of Lieutenant Colonel Edwin A. Pollock's 2d Battalion, 1st Marines. In response to the challenge of the first Marine he met, Vouza replied, "Do not kill me. Japanese already have."

With Martin Clemens at his side, Vouza refused medical treatment until he related all he had learned from the conversations of his captors. Pausing from time to time to clear his mouth of blood from his lacerated tongue, he reported everything he had overheard. The Japanese would attack shortly after midnight with a force he estimated at 700 to 800 men. The attack would come at low tide from the opposite bank of the tidal river that fronted the Marine positions. He had overheard nothing that would indicate that the Japanese carried crew-served weapons other than machine guns and light mortars. Exhausted and drifting out of consciousness, Vouza was rushed to the 1st Medical Bn, where Commander Warwick T. Brown, MC, USN and a team of surgeons strove to save his life.

Shortly after midnight, precisely when and where Vouza said the Japanese would attack, Kiyonao Ichiki threw waves of assailants against the Marine positions. It was the first organized attack of what eventually would be numerous such attacks that would attempt to overrun the airfield. While it went into the records as the Battle of the Tenaru, some maps showed the river as the Ilu, while still others gave the name Tenaru to a small nearby town. In some local usage the river was called Alligator Creek.

Tenaru, Ilu or Alligator Creek may have been confusing. There was no confusion about the Japanese attack that night. During the Pacific War, the Japanese would stage other such *banzai* attacks, seeking to overcome defenders by sheer weight of numbers. The attack of the Ichiki Detachment that night was the first Marines would experience, and it was something beyond sheer violence. The Battle of the Tenaru was horror and savagery writ large.

Despite Marine fire that tore into them, the Japanese stormed forward over the dead bodies of their comrades, surging into the Marine line, making the fight a face-to-face, hand-to-hand affair.

Second Lieutenant Robert McLanahan, wounded in both arms, both legs and his hip, loaded Browning Automatic Rifle (BAR) magazines for able-bodied Marines of his platoon. When the entire crew of a 37 mm antitank/antipersonnel gun was killed or wounded, nearby Marines who never before had manned the weapon, took over and continued firing canister rounds into the ranks of charging Japanese. When Corporal Dean Wilson's BAR

jammed, he drew a machete and hacked three attackers to bloody tatters.

From their post near the mouth of the Tenaru, Cpl LeRoy Diamond's three-man squad employed their Browning Model 1917A1 water-cooled .30-caliber "heavy 30" machine gun with devastating effect. The Japanese kept coming. Cpl Diamond was wounded in both shoulders, unable to use either hand. Private First Class Johnny Rivers, gunner, was killed. Private Albert A. "Al" Schmid, assistant gunner, kept the gun in action, laying streams of fire into the Japanese.

Blinded by a Japanese grenade, Schmid kept firing, with Cpl Diamond calling out estimated corrections to deflection and elevation: "Right three, up one." "Left two." "Left three, up two."

Unable to see and working by touch, Al Schmid used the gun's search-and-traverse hand wheels to follow Diamond's directions, firing in short bursts to keep the gun from overheating after the water jacket was pierced by grenade fragments. Al Schmid, Johnny Rivers and LeRoy Diamond each would receive the Navy Cross for that night on the Tenaru. The Marines of 2/1 were hard pressed throughout the night. The Ichiki Detachment was wiped out.

For his courageous action in warning the Marines of the impending attack despite life-threatening wounds, Vouza would receive the Silver Star, the highest award a division commander could make without reference to a higher headquarters. Gen Vandegrift himself would affix the medal to Vouza's hospital gown as he lay fighting for his life. Vouza also would receive the George Medal, a decoration personally authorized by King George VI for "acts of great bravery" by persons other than members of the armed forces, from Great Britain.

Closing Vouza's multiple wounds would require almost 100 sutures. He received 16 pints of blood. In an incredible two weeks, Vouza was back on his feet and out of the hospital. Less than two weeks after that, he became chief scout for the 1stMarDiv, once again leading patrols and reconnoitering Japanese troop strengths and locations.

During November and December, Vouza and a contingent of scouts, he personally had selected, accompanied Lieutenant Colonel Evans F. Carlson's 2d Raider Bn on what would be called "The Long Patrol." The patrol was an epic of endurance. Through it all, a man who had

SgtMaj Jacob C. Vouza, resplendent in uniform, in later years met with Martin Clemens once again. Both men's names are often linked to the Marines of Guadalcanal during WW II.



Though fierce and fearless, Vouza was also described by those who knew him as soft-spoken and a gentleman. In later years, he was named an Honorary Marine with the grade of sergeant major.

been at death's door was an inspirational example of stamina. For 30 days Carlson's Raiders operated behind Japanese lines, creating havoc and spreading destruction. Thanks to Vouza and his scouts, Carlson's Raiders never at any time were surprised by the Japanese. Every bit of information taken back to the main body proved to be 100 percent correct. For his role in providing information and security during The Long Patrol, Vouza received the Legion of Merit.



Accolades continued to come his way during the after-war years. He was inducted as a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) and became head man (mayor) of his village. His home village was renamed California in his honor. By special order of the Commandant of the Marine Corps, Vouza was named an Honorary Marine with the grade of sergeant major. He was promoted to the police force rank of inspector. He was appointed district head man and served as president of the Native Council and as a member of the Solomon Islands Advisory Council. By unanimous vote of the membership, he was made a life member of the 1st Marine Division Association. In 1953, Vouza represented the Solomon Islands at the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. In later years he was knighted by the queen.

Throughout the years Vouza often voiced a desire to see America. In 1968 he was invited by the 1st Marine Division Association as guest of honor at the association's annual reunion, held that year in Philadelphia, Pa. He was taken on tours of Los Angeles, Calif., Philadelphia and Washington, D.C., where he met Secretary of State Dean Rusk. Australian-born June Heim, whose husband Gordon Heim was one of the association's founding members, met him that year. More than 40 years later, June Heim would recall with vivid clarity Vouza's dignified bearing and gentlemanly manner.



MC2 JOSHUA VALCARCEL USN

It was Aug. 7, 2009, the anniversary of the Marine landing on Guadalcanal when Marine BGen Rex C. McMillan delivered a speech at the Sir Jacob Vouza monument on what is now Honiara, Solomon Islands. The ceremony, some 25 years after SgtMaj Vouza's death, honored the American and Allied men who lost their lives during the Guadalcanal campaign.

As the years slipped away, the trail before Vouza grew shorter and the shadows drew closer. In his last message to the 1st Marine Division Association he wrote, "Tell them I love them all. I am old man now, but I never forget them. Never."

The Honourable Sergeant Major Sir Jacob Vouza slipped away quietly in his sleep on March 5, 1984. He was a citizen of the Solomon Islands by birth, a Knight of the Realm by Decree of the Queen, and an American by the blood he carried within him and by his affection for a land he saw only once in his lifetime.

When Sir Jacob Vouza was carried to his final resting place, he was clad in the dress uniform of an Inspector of Police and one thing more. That one thing more was his prized possession, a gift of the 1st Marine Division Association: a Marine Corps battle jacket of WW II design bearing the eagle, globe and anchor em-

blem of the United States Marine Corps and the rank insignia of a sergeant major of Marines.

The independent Solomon Islands are a constitutional monarchy within the British Commonwealth of Nations today.

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In those far-off islands, there are two bits of the Marine Corps. Vouza's home in California Village is a Solomon Islands national heritage site, maintained as it was during his lifetime. On a nightstand beside his bed, his many medals and decorations are permanently displayed in a glass case.

Standing beside the case are the flags of the United States of America and the United States Marine Corps.

In front of the police station on Mendana Avenue in Honiara, capital of the Solomon Islands, there is a life-size bronze statue. The statue is that of a Solomon Islands fighting man of a bygone era. His name was Vouza. He was a sergeant major of Marines.

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 in Algeria. Later in his career, he was an instructor at Amphibious Warfare School and Command and Staff College, Quantico, Va.

