

New volume is one of the best on World War II in the Pacific

by Mike Minnicino

Guadalcanal: The Definitive Account of the Landmark Battle

by Richard B. Frank

Random House, New York, 1990,
816 pages, hardbound \$34.95

Richard Frank opens his book with a suggestive quote from Marine Corps historian George McMillan, "There are two Guadalcanals: the battle and the legend." The legend always loomed large. During the war, Marines who survived the island were considered an elite, even within the elite Corps. The mystique was still in force in the 1950s for baby-boomers like myself (and Mr. Frank). My father's Army Air Corps squadron was deployed to the island for the second half of the campaign; we had photographs of him there, smiling in front of his tent, his weight down to 100 pounds, his body wracked by a textbook-full of tropical disease. As a child, I dutifully watched endless reshowings of the film version of Richard Tregaskis's *Guadalcanal Diary*. I was shocked that my father refused to watch war movies.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the legend lost its luster, as if the historians needed the revision for its own sake. Several books celebrated the U.S. victory at Midway and the American codebreaking effort which helped win it, and soon it became the standard line that Midway was the "turning point" in the Pacific war. Frank's excellent and exquisitely researched book sets matters right. Relying heavily on Japanese archives, Frank demonstrates that, if Midway was the turning point, then someone neglected to inform Japan's Imperial General Headquarters. Midway hurt the Imperial Navy badly, and disordered IGHQ timetables, but it left Japan with enough seaborne power to counter an Allied offensive.

For this reason, Japanese grand strategy remained essentially the same after Midway: Build up Rabaul as the forward headquarters of the defensive perimeter; invest or at least neutralize the Solomons and New Guinea (which were within B-17 range of Rabaul); then, holding the American fleet at bay, sweep the Allies out of New Caledonia, Samoa, and the Fijis. With the Hawaiian Islands thus an indefensible "bulge," and supply lines to Australia disrupted, this would

be an optimum moment for Japan to jettison its Axis ally Germany, and negotiate a separate peace for the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. It is illustrative that, after Midway, Imperial Navy Commander Isoroku Yamamoto still felt he had a free hand; but, after the decision to withdraw from Guadalcanal, he wrote a friend, "I do not know what to do next."

The importance of small units

Guadalcanal is called a "battle," and it certainly started as one, but, beyond the wildest projections of planners on both sides, it became a six-month campaign involving seven major naval confrontations, over 20 land battles, and sometimes twice-daily aerial duels. Fighting involved battleships and carriers, down to humble PT-boats; nominally, the issue was a 2,500-square-mile, jungle-infested island in the middle of the Solomons chain, but much of the action was confined to separate fighting, often hand to hand, for a few square miles surrounding a hastily constructed airfield. Because of the attenuated nature of the conflict, the forces involved in any particular battle were relatively tiny by the standards of the European theater; therefore, this was a campaign where the positioning of a single heavy-weapons platoon, the decision of a destroyer skipper, or the action of a single flight of fighters could tip the balance.

Mr. Frank is very sensitive to small-unit tactics and command (the author himself commanded a rifle platoon in Vietnam), and often slips deftly out of his narrative to make an appreciation of a decision somewhat low on the chain of command. He also seems quite just in his appraisal of the highest commanders: He is openly outraged at the decision to award the Navy Cross to Rear Adm. Carleton Wright for the Battle of Tassafaronga, in which a superior American force was mauled under Wright's command; he is also just in what charity he shows to Adm. Robert Ghormley, the overall Guadalcanal commander who was sacked in mid-campaign. Ghormley, Frank shows, was fighting the battle he was ordered to fight, with resources begrudged him by Washington—much of which thought Guadalcanal to be a side-show.

Ghormley's problem—admittedly, a devastating one—was his inability to change fast enough. Better than any previous book on the Pacific war, Frank's volume shows that

the lessons learned on Guadalcanal fundamentally changed strategy and tactics on both sides. The Americans started this first offensive of the theater with extreme reluctance, and only at the singlehanded insistence of Adm. Ernest King, the Commander-in-Chief of the U.S. Fleet, who correctly assessed that a penetration of Japan's defensive perimeter, even with inadequate forces, had to be accomplished in 1942, in order to spoil further enemy offensive preparations. As the campaign evolved, it provided a crucial opportunity to test men and (often poor) matériel; it forced the U.S. to develop heretofore-unknown levels of cooperation between land, sea, and air forces; and, perhaps most importantly, it confronted the U.S. with the mind-boggling logistical problems of fighting a war thousands of miles away in an undeveloped part of the world. Frank emphasizes that it was only when the American commanders consciously threw out what they had been taught at the War Colleges, that they started to succeed.

Changes in Japanese thinking were more profound. Despite Midway, the Japanese at the beginning of the campaign were still uniformly afflicted with *senshobyu*, ("victory disease"), causing the chain of command to underestimate American capabilities, both moral and physical. Ideologically blinded by the belief that Japanese "will" was irresistible, commanders repeatedly committed inadequate resources to accomplish a mission; this meant "banzai" charges where whole units were wiped out, and the mass starvation of troops who had been given only a few days' rations in the expectation of quick victory. The rest of the two-and-one-half year island war would be characterized by a general Japanese conservatism, and emphasis upon bombardment-proof defensive positions which were to cause American invaders much more bloody effort to reduce.

How the Japanese viewed Guadalcanal

U.S. commanders at the time did not see, nor have U.S. historians understood until recently, how highly the Japanese prized Guadalcanal, especially as it related to New Guinea. The Solomons and New Guinea represented a mutually supporting flank vital to the defense of Rabaul, and IGHQ conceptualized them as a unified "Southeast Area," under single command. By contrast, Guadalcanal was, for the United States, a Navy show, while New Guinea was under Douglas MacArthur's completely separate command. Cooperation between the two American operational areas started poorly, and never achieved much brilliance; if the U.S. had more clearly perceived that pressure in one area would have effected capabilities in the other, then success might have been more easily secured. In fact, if there is any quibble to be had with Mr. Frank's book, it is that he merely notes, but does not discuss, the relationship of the Guadalcanal campaign to New Guinea operations. However, the omission is understandable: Frank is aiming for completeness, and the addition of a discussion of New Guinea would have made things unmanageable.

By the time IGHQ officially recognized (in a memorandum of Nov. 21, 1942) that the Guadalcanal confrontation was strategic and demanded total effort, it was already too late. The Marines and soldiers in the Solomons had given MacArthur the time he needed to concentrate his forces for an attack on Buna in New Guinea; at the same time, the Japanese, through their piecemeal reinforcements, had allowed the Americans at Guadalcanal to chew up some of their best forces, including a good chunk of the 17th Army, and 13 of the Imperial Navy's highly trained and deadly destroyer force. The pride of Japanese offensive capability, the Navy Air Arm, though hurt at Midway, was decapitated through various Guadalcanal confrontations; it would never regain offensive status, and could rarely muster an adequate defense.

When the Japanese made the decision to withdraw from Guadalcanal and redefine their defensive perimeter at the end of 1942, it was much more than a humiliation. From that point, the initiative of the Pacific war was in American hands, never to be ungrasped. Japan had failed to secure its flank before American industrial potential, Yamamoto's great fear, kicked into full mobilization. As Frank usefully points out, the Japanese cabinet was forced to divert shipping resources to the Solomons, even though they knew it meant a severe drop in their country's import-dominated industrial economy. This, plus the loss of ships and aircraft in the Solomons, meant that Japan could never catch up; it would, in effect, be forced to simply wait until it was rolled over by the output of Henry Kaiser's shipyards and General Motors' tank factories. Before Midway, Japan had 12 carriers of all types to the Americans' 11, and 108 destroyers to America's 180—thus, if you deduct American deployments in the Atlantic, Japan outnumbered America in the Pacific. By the end of the war, Japan still had 11 carriers, but America had 99; Japanese destroyers, despite replacements, had dwindled to 18, while the U.S. had amassed 379.

Another outcome of the Guadalcanal campaign was a horrible one. American forces had never before experienced the Japanese concept of *gyokysai* ("a gem shattered"): the belief that suicide in service to the Emperor was superior to surrender. In an early attack, the Marines literally massacred an 800-man force which attacked their position in an unsupported, frontal bayonet charge. Marine commander Gen. Alexander Vandergrift, in a report to superiors, related what happened next, as his men waded in among the piles of Japanese bodies: "General, I have never heard or read of this kind of fighting. These people refuse to surrender. The wounded wait until men come up to examine them . . . and blow themselves and the other fellows to pieces with a hand grenade." To avoid further casualties, Vandergrift's men were forced to pump rounds into the bodies, both dead and alive. Almost three years later, this tragic incident, and several others like it, would be produced as evidence in the judgment to use the atomic bomb on Japan.