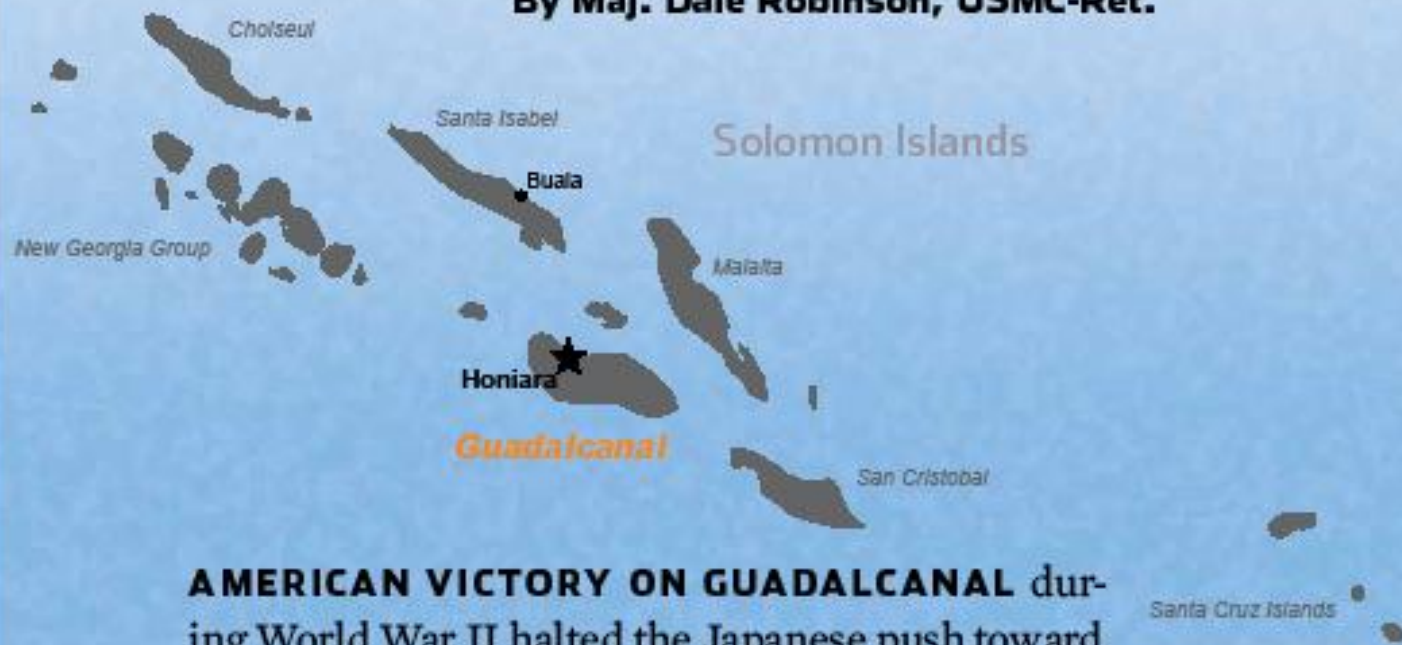


# Turning Point

By Maj. Dale Robinson, USMC-Ret.



**AMERICAN VICTORY ON GUADALCANAL** during World War II halted the Japanese push toward Australia and put Japan on the defensive for the remainder of the war in the Pacific. By all accounts, it shortened the war by at least a year. MOAA staff member Maj. Dale Robinson, USMC-Ret., recently traveled to the Solomon Islands with a group of military veterans to see firsthand the site of this decisive and historic battle that turned the tide in the Pacific.

“The [Marines’] landing ... was America’s first amphibious assault of the war.”



Red Beach today (above) looks much the same as it did during World War II. (top) The 1st Marine Division lands on Red Beach Aug. 7, 1942, achieving complete tactical surprise.

*In June 1942, American forces learned* the Japanese were building an airfield from which they planned on striking U.S. convoys to Australia. Guadalcanal had to be taken — quickly. The 1st Marine Division’s landing on Red Beach Aug. 7, following heavy naval preparatory fire, was America’s first amphibious assault of the war. The attack went almost unopposed. The Japanese, who thought the Americans were not ready to launch a Pacific campaign, were taken by surprise. By sundown Aug. 8, the Marines had taken control of the airfield and a great amount of Japanese supplies. It appeared the Japanese had fled in panic. But the enemy counterattack already was under way.

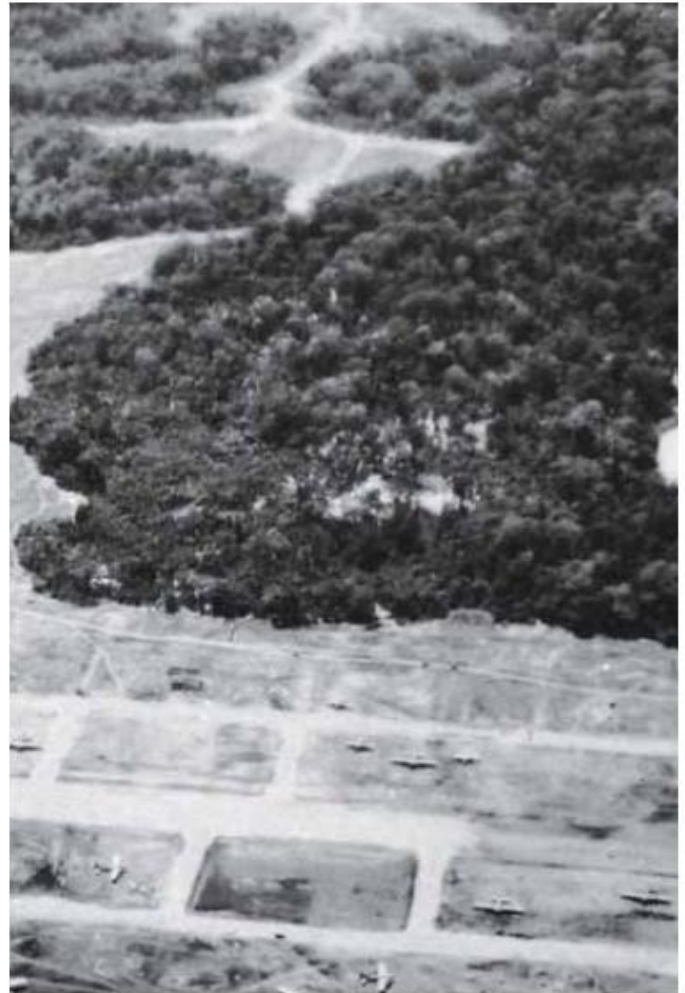
mini fact: The U.S. Navy suffered its worst defeat ever at Salvo Island Aug. 8 and 9, 1942.





“Bloody Ridge” (right) is located only 1,700 yards from Henderson Field. (above) SBD Dauntless dive-bombers taxi for takeoff from Henderson Field in 1942. The aircraft played a critical role in destroying the attempts of the “Tokyo Express” to reinforce Guadalcanal during the critical months from August to December 1942. The original airfield tower still stands today (top).

*The battle for Guadalcanal* was all about the airfield. Five days after a successful assault, the Marines named the airfield Henderson Field after the first Marine aviator killed in the Battle of Midway. They would have to defend the field for six long months. On Sept. 12 and 13, 1942, they fought on Edson’s Ridge, or “Bloody Ridge” to some. Out-numbered by about 5-to-1, 400 Marines held off a massive attack by the Japanese over a two-day period, during which they were forced to fall back toward the airfield twice. The primary targets of the attack were the planes and artillery at the airfield and the division command post nearby. Japanese reinforcements were ready to supply additional aid if the airfield was taken, but the Marines held.



**mini fact:** America suffered 7,100 deaths at Guadalcanal; the Japanese lost 30,343 people.

“I’m sure these young Marines couldn’t believe they just kept coming.”



Cpl. Mike Winters, USMC (above), stands guard on Bloody Ridge in 1942 at the site of Lt. Col. Merritt Edson’s Command Post on Hill 123 near the center of the ridge. The control tower at the airfield can be seen from this spot. This famous trail still leads directly to Henderson Field (below).

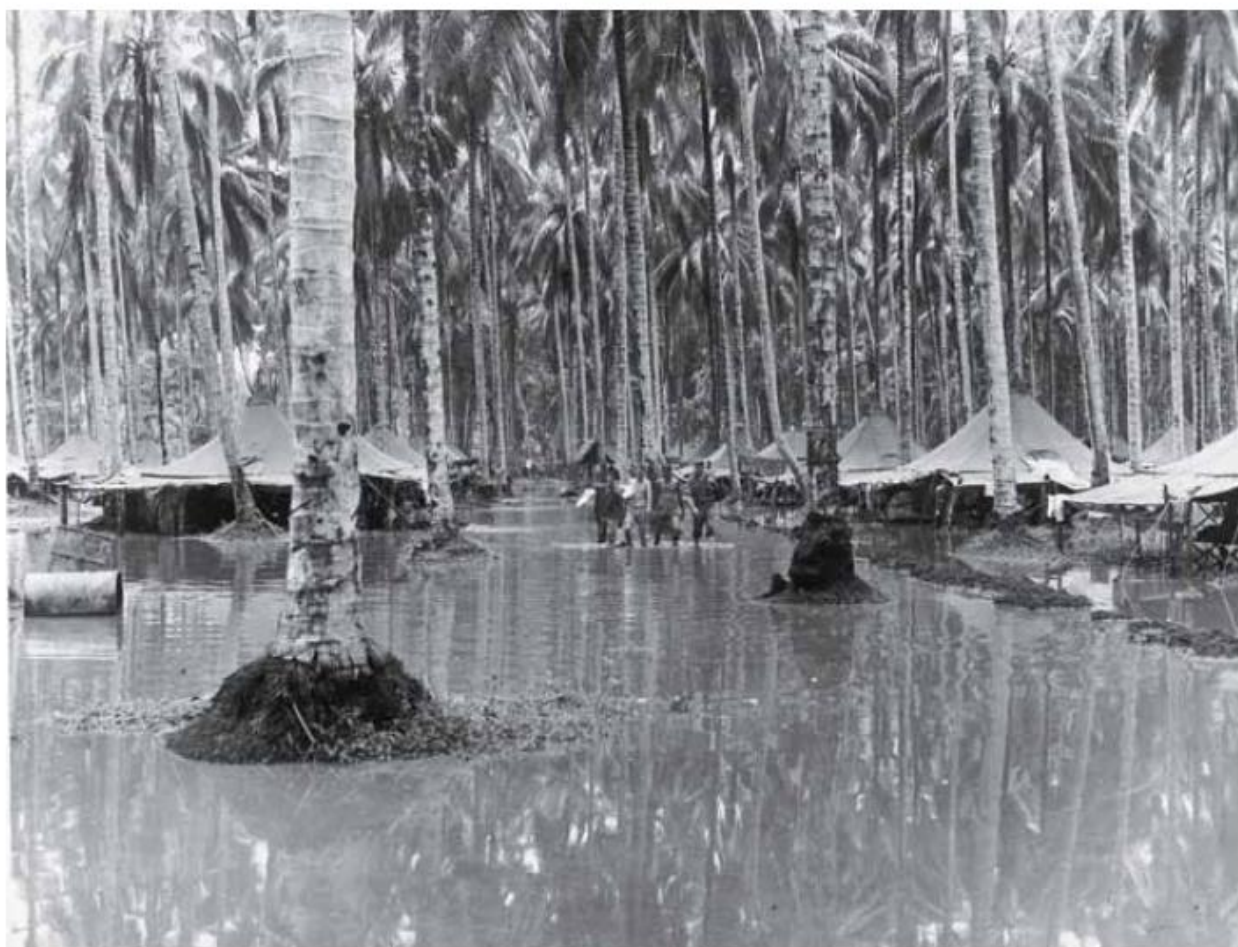


*From the top of Bloody Ridge*, I could see the old control tower on Henderson Field. Today, a portion of the original runway is used as the overrun for modern Honiara International Airport. The only reference to Henderson Field is a sign above the domestic flight terminal. As I walked over the ridge, down into the cross compartments of the hilly terrain, finding barbed wire and fighting positions everywhere, I could imagine the fear of the Japanese as they made their way up the ridge into deadly machine-gun and rifle fire. I’m sure these young Marines couldn’t believe they just kept coming in the thousands. Had the Marines lost Bloody Ridge, they would have lost Guadalcanal.



*Traveling with a military* tour group, I was grateful for the opportunity to explore Guadalcanal. My first impression was amazement at how big the island is. Located 1,200 miles from Australia and just north of the equator, it is about 30 miles wide by 90 miles long. The island has some of the world's most inhospitable terrain: plains, foothills, and mountains up to 8,000 feet, and a rain forest canopy that turns day into night, complete with deadly spiders and snakes, crocodiles, and swarms of malarious mosquitoes. Surrounded by water and drenched with monsoons in the spring and thunderstorms in the fall, Guadalcanal is hot, humid, and always wet. This, to me, is worse than the jungle in Vietnam.

A typical coconut grove today (below) looks slightly different because of modern cultivation. In 1942, heavy tropical downpours all but flood Henderson Field and a Marine Corps camp near the field (bottom).





**mini fact:** The 1st Marine Division counted 8,580 cases of malaria on Guadalcanal.

“ They defended the airfield  
and attacked Japanese ships  
bringing reinforcements.”



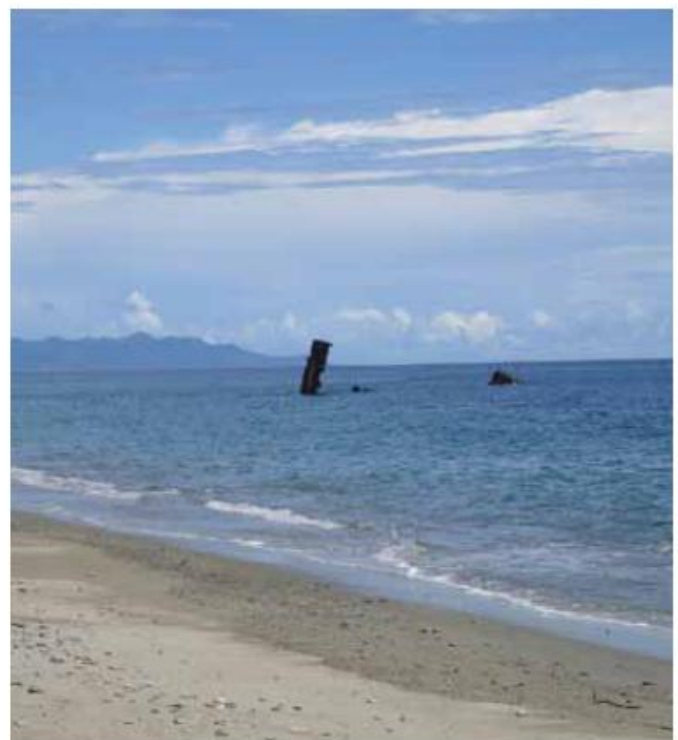
(top) Tired and dirty Marines bathe in the crocodile-infested Matanikau River, guarded by a fellow Marine manning a .30-caliber medium machine gun. (above) The bridge no longer exists and the landscape has become overgrown, but the river still resembles the way it looked in 1942.

*After its initial landing*, the 1st Marine Division was on its own until 31 aircraft from Marine Aircraft Group 23 arrived Aug. 20, 1942. Two days later, the Army's 67th Fighter Squadron arrived with P-400s, a fine ground-support aircraft the Marines quickly put to use. On Aug. 24, the Navy's aviation arm first was represented when dive-bombers from the *USS Enterprise* (CV-6) arrived. From then on, there was an irregular flow of all types of planes, collectively known as the "Cactus Air Force." They defended the airfield and attacked Japanese ships bringing reinforcements.

The Navy provided gunfire support for the Army and Marine Corps advance up Guadalcanal's coast (right). The *Kinugawa Maru* was attacked by dive-bombers from Henderson Field and the *USS Enterprise* Nov. 14, 1942. It was beached to prevent sinking (below). The ship has endured 66 years of erosion (bottom).



*While on the island, it can be easy* to focus on the extraordinary actions taken by Marines and soldiers on the ground. But from the promontory of the Guadalcanal American Memorial atop Hill 73, you look out over the resting place of 24 U.S. warships and nearly 5,000 of America's finest sailors. Most of the naval warfare happened at night. And it must have been horrific for the sailors, as well as the Marines and soldiers who watched in the dark, not knowing whether our Navy would win. With tenacity, courage, and some luck, the naval battle of Guadalcanal was decisive and put the Japanese on the defensive.





**mini fact:** Marine and Army artillery skill was a decisive factor in the American victory.

**Maj. Dale Robinson, USMC-Ret.,** traveled to Guadalcanal with Military Historical Tours of Alexandria, Va. Visit [www.miltours.com](http://www.miltours.com) to plan your own military tour.



A Japanese Type 96 155 mm howitzer stands on Guadalcanal 66 years after the battle (above). Battlefield relics still remain everywhere. Together with the Type 96, the Japanese Type 92 105 mm cannon (below), a long-range artillery piece, was known as “Pistol Pete” because of its daily shelling of Henderson Field.

*Today, few islanders think much about*

the war years on Guadalcanal, even though remnants of the battle are all around them. Their focus is on subsistence living. Very poor and not well educated, they make the best living they can by fishing, mining, or harvesting lumber. Americans, however, must always remember what Guadalcanal means to our country. Each day for six months, victory hung by a thread in the air, on land, and at sea. American courage, eagerness to avenge Pearl Harbor, and steadfast determination to win even before we were truly ready to fight brought the Japanese empire to its knees — it never took an offensive action after Guadalcanal. From Japan’s viewpoint today, at Guadalcanal they lost more than a battle; they lost the war. MO

