

# A Guadalcanal Chronology

## 7 August 1942 - 6 March 1943



**Let us go forward to certain victory in the traditional night attack of the Imperial Navy.**

**May each one of us calmly do his utmost.**

Vice Admiral Gunichi Mikawa, Battle of Savo Island, August 9, 1942



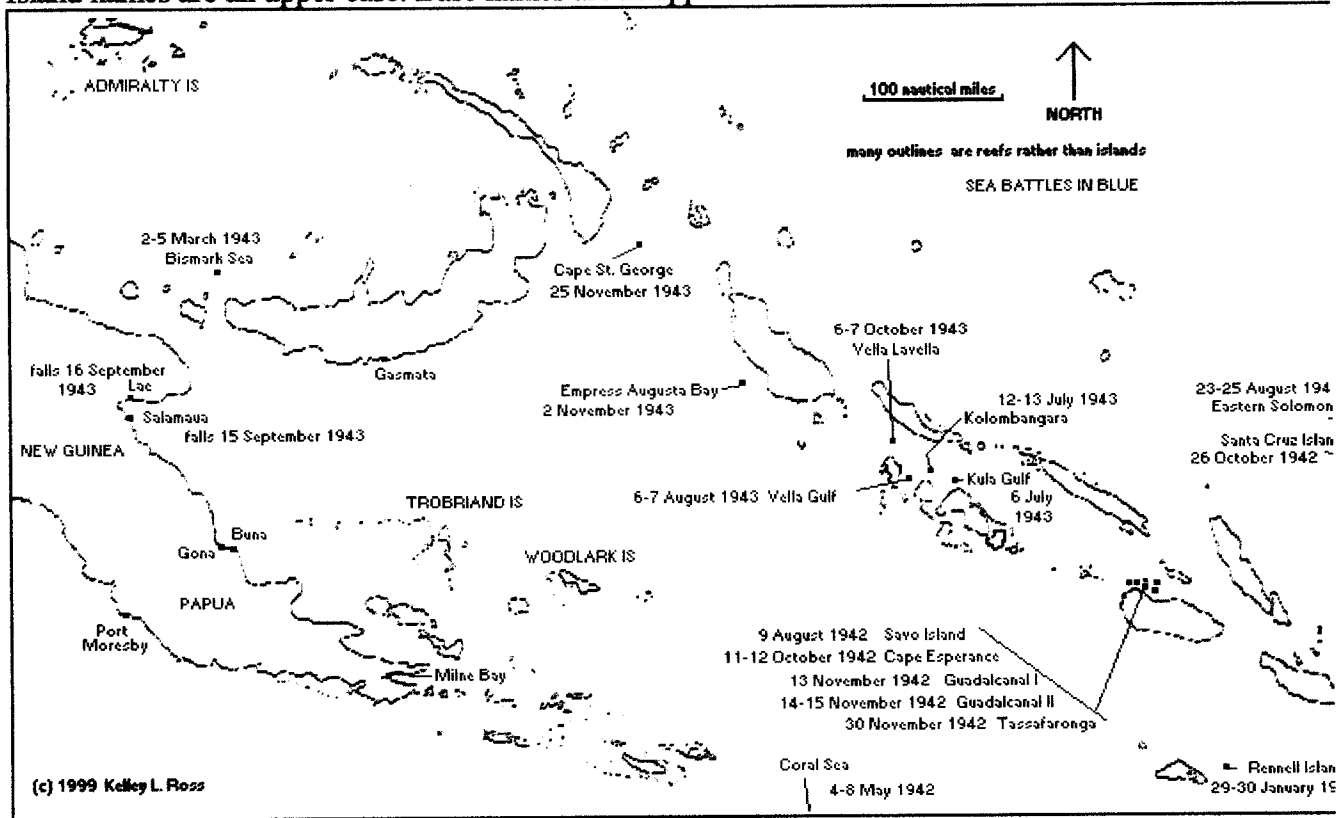
Rear Admiral's Flag

This sketch of the events of the Guadalcanal Campaign is based on several sources, listed [elsewhere](#). The original basis of the table, however, was the **Simulations Publications, Inc. (SPI)** wargame "Bloody Ridge, Turning Point on Guadalcanal, September 1942" (in "Island War, Four Pacific Battles," Simulations Publications, Inc., 1975). The 70's were the golden age of board wargaming, and Simulations Publications was the leader. Unfortunately, although computers promised to pick up in innovation and realism where the board games left off, I'm not sure that it all has turned out to be quite the same thing. Meanwhile, Simulations Publications is long gone.

The major land battles of the Guadalcanal campaign are in **bold red**; the major sea battles in **bold blue**. Entries on lines between dates are for night actions. Events in the fighting elsewhere in the Solomons (e.g. Munda) and on New Guinea (e.g. Port Moresby, Milne Bay, Buna, & Lae) are also indicated, with the New Guinea items all in green. New Guinea was the scene of an ambitious contemporary Japanese offensive and then Allied counteroffensive. The great historical interest of the Guadalcanal campaign (and, to a lesser extent, that of the subsequent actions on the rest of the Solomons) is due to two factors: (1) the combination of air, land, and sea operations, and (2) the relative equality of the forces. Thus, although many think of Guadalcanal in terms of the land battles, there were more naval battles fought off the island in six months than the British Royal Navy fought in all of World War I. The name given to the strait between Guadalcanal and Savo Island, "Iron Bottom Sound," was no less than descriptive of the carpeting of ships that the bottom received. A serious student of naval history cannot avoid the naval battles in the Solomons. The intensity of the battles at sea and on land was due in great part to the rough equality of the forces involved. The industrial strength of the United States had not yet flooded the Pacific with new construction. Because of previous losses, sometimes the U.S. Navy only had one operational carrier (the *Enterprise*) in the area. The Japanese Navy had been similarly reduced by losses, but there also would never in the future be much in the way of new construction to replace the losses. The new ships and planes upon which the Japanese later placed all their hopes were mostly destroyed in the Battle of the Philippine Sea (19-20 June 1944). The Japanese Navy was then destroyed as an organized force at the Battle (actually battles, five of them) for Leyte Gulf (23-26 October 1944).

On this map, locations relevant to the Solomons campaign are in **red**, the Papua-New Guinea campaign in green, and naval battles, including subsequent battles in the area, in blue. The five battles

in the waters off Guadalcanal, which include the two nights of the Naval Battle of Guadalcanal, are listed in sequence to the left of the island. The two carrier battles were fought off the map to the right. Island names are all upper case. Base names are in upper and lower case.

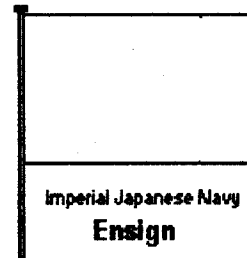


The land fighting on Guadalcanal has been immortalized in James Jones' *The Thin Red Line*, made as a movie in 1964 and recently remade by Terrence Malick in 1998. The fighting in *The Thin Red Line*, however, comes from fairly late in the campaign, after the battles of Bloody Ridge and Henderson Field. All the early fighting was right on the perimeter of Henderson Field, with the Japanese trying to break in during night attacks. Starting on 17 December 1942, however, Allied forces moved out to drive the Japanese off the island. The charge up grass covered slopes to capture hilltop Japanese positions, as on Mt. Austen (which fell December 24th), is the kind of action shown in Malick's movie. The Japanese retreated before such losses and soon determined to evacuate the island, which they did in the first days of February 1943. During that whole late period, the Japanese were so weakened by disease, starvation, and lack of ammunition, that they were incapable of offensive action. Some of Malick's aggressive Japanese thus look rather too well fed and equipped for authenticity. A similar problem may occur with the many prisoners Malick shows being taken. This may be true, but my understanding is that the Japanese usually fought to the death and that few prisoners were actually taken. On Guadalcanal, there was even an open line for Japanese retreat, a feature missing from many later Pacific island battles where few, if any, Japanese were captured alive.

In the following table, beginning September 11, the right hand column indicates the moves, two days each, in the wargame. With the moves, the arrival of Japanese reinforcements is also indicated. The arrival of Japanese forces is estimated for dates prior to September 11, and for reinforcements after the end of the game on November 2. The notation is in battalions and regiments, e.g. "2/28" indicates the second battalion of the Japanese 28th infantry regiment -- the first Japanese force to respond to the arrival of the Americans, and the one involved in the suicidal attack on August 21st. The wargame thus covers both the Battle of Bloody Ridge in September, and the Battle for Henderson Field in

October. A major land battle might have occurred, but did not, in November, since most of the Japanese forces that were to be landed to participate in the offensive were destroyed at sea. Although Japanese forces nevertheless outnumbered the Americans at that point, disease, starvation, and lack of other supplies rendered too many Japanese units ineffective for an attack. Only Japanese forces are shown because the Japanese strategic problem was the main interest when I originally drew up the table.

The Japanese had trouble appreciating the seriousness of the American threat and at first only designated a regiment to retake the island. The foolish commander of the regiment was so overconfident that he went ahead and attacked the perimeter of the airfield with only a battalion. The ease with which this was wiped out, and the subsequent failure of the Japanese attack at the Battle of Bloody Ridge, led the Japanese to commit division sized forces and to put give the area its own command, as the 17th Army. This piecemeal approach meant that Japanese power suffered constant attrition as larger and larger commitments needed to be protected.



The Battles of the Eastern Solomons and of the Santa Cruz Islands are the two great carrier battles of the period. These are not as famous as the Coral Sea or Midway but are two out of the five great carrier battles (with the very one-sided Battle of the Philippine Sea in 1944) of the War. Santa Cruz was the very last carrier battle of the War between roughly equal sides, and it is where the carrier *Hornet*, which helped launch the Doolittle Raid against Tokyo (18 April 1942), was sunk. Since the Battle of the Coral Sea had also been fought in the area of the Solomons (the first naval battle in history in which opposing ships didn't even see each other), a study of carrier tactics necessarily means a study of the War in this area.

7 August 1942	American Landings on Guadalcanal, 10,000 American, 2,200 Japanese troops
8 August	airfield (Henderson Field) occupied Battle of Savo Island, <i>Canberra</i> , <i>Astoria</i> , <i>Quincy</i> , & <i>Vincennes</i> sunk
9 August	
10 August	<b>Kako</b> torpedoed & sunk off New Ireland
11 August	
12 August	
13 August	
14 August	(7th Division)
15 August	28th Inf Regt, detached 7th Engr Regt, detached
16 August	
17 August	
18 August	General Horii arrives at Buna
19 August	
20 August	10,000 American, 3,600 Japanese troops

2/28