The New Georgia Campaign: Hard Lessons in Expeditionary Operations

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The New Georgia Campaign pitted new elements of the emerging U.S. strategies of joint and amphibious warfare against a determined and tenacious enemy in the imperial Japanese Navy and Army forces occupying the Central Solomon Islands. During the campaign, the limits of U.S. joint capabilities were tested as green National Guard Divisions were committed to intense jungle fighting under conditions that they were unprepared to cope with. The campaign quickly became a grinding battle of attrition for the Army Divisions committed to seizing the key Munda Airfield on New Georgia having to battle the terrain, the elements, the Japanese defenders and the psychological costs exacted on the soldiers committed to the battle. Through the coordinated efforts of the U.S. Army’s XIV Corps and the South Pacific Area command structure, these deficiencies were eventually mitigated and the joint capabilities of unified ground, air, and naval action brought to bear against a Japanese force that could not generate the same amount of combat potential.

The genesis for the New Georgia Campaign came in the early stages of the Unites States growing war effort in 1943. With the declarations of “Unconditional Surrender” and “Europe First” from the Allied Powers established at the Casablanca Conference of January 1943.¹ General Douglas MacArthur began working on his plan to neutralize the Japanese stronghold of Rabaul in the Bismarck Archipelago and to work his Southwest Pacific Area (SWPA) forces up the northern coast of New Guinea to deliver his promised counter-stroke against the Japanese occupied Philippines. His staff began work on the series of plans that would eventually become the Cartwheel operational concept for the neutralization of Rabaul. In the Operation Cartwheel plan he envisioned a series of offensive amphibious thrusts that would work up the Solomon Islands chain as well as Northern Coast of New Guinea.² As stated by General MacArthur’s staff:

“In the Solomons, the forces of the South Pacific Area under the immediate command of Admiral Halsey were assigned the capture of the New Georgia island group. After attaining these objectives, both parts of General MacArthur’s command, the Southwest Pacific and South Pacific, covered and supported by the newly won bases, would push on to strike simultaneous blows against New Britain to the west and Bougainville to the east.”³

These successive bounds would be made under the cover of land-based aviation, crucial for controlling the battlespace in the tight waters surrounding the Solomons and Bismarcks. Each successive operation would allow the seizure of existing Japanese airfields or the creation of new ones, allowing the Allies to continue their advance toward Rabaul. The Operation Cartwheel

³ Ibid., 113.
series of offensives would build off of the previous offensive operations begun in 1942 in the seizure of Guadalcanal by Admiral Ghormley’s South Pacific Forces (COMSOPAC) and the destruction of Japanese forces during the defense of Port Moresby in Southern New Guinea.\(^4\) Critical to the Cartwheel plan was the full cooperation of the COMSOPAC working in a supporting command relationship but still under the direct command of Admiral Chester Nimitz in his capacity as Commander, U.S. Pacific Fleet (COMPACFLT).\(^5\) In Operation “B” (or Task 2) of the approved Cartwheel plan, COMSOPAC would seize key airfields in New Georgia and Bougainville to increase the span of coverage for their fighters and to increase the offensive pressure against Japanese air, ground, and naval forces operating out of the harbors and airfields at Rabaul and satellite garrisons on Bougainville and New Britain (see figure 1).\(^6\)

![Map for Operation Cartwheel's Sequence of Offensives](image)

**Figure 1: Map for Operation Cartwheel’s Sequence of Offensives**

In October 1942, Vice Admiral William “Bull” Halsey replaced Vice Admiral Robert Ghormley as the commander of the South Pacific Area (SPA/COMSOPAC).\(^7\) With New Georgia identified as the next amphibious objective for the South Pacific Theater, planning for its seizure begun in April of 1943. Admiral Halsey was much admired as a “fighting admiral” and quickly imbued an offensive spirit into his beleaguered command. The toll of fighting a protracted battle, across competing service priorities against a well trained and equipped adversary had turned Admiral Ghormley into a reactive commander who was uncertain about his command’s ability to defeat the Japanese within a difficult operating environment where the Japanese were seen to enjoy more advantages than the Allied forces. New Georgia’s selection as the next Allied Objective forced planners to economize resources between both Southwest Pacific Area (SWPA) and South Pacific Area (SPA) theaters as well as confront their continued problems working as a secondary Allied priority to the planned operation in the vital European Theater. Trained Marine Divisions were already allocated to operations in Bougainville and Tarawa in the Central Pacific,

\(^4\) Ibid., 100.
\(^5\) Morton, 400-401.
\(^6\) Ibid, 401 (Map III).
\(^7\) Ibid., 356.
this left available two U.S. Army National Guard Divisions (37th and 43rd Infantry Divisions) who had seen only garrison duty on Guadalcanal and a third U.S. Army Division (25th Infantry Division) that was being kept as a theater reserve.8

The geography of New Georgia proved difficult for amphibious planning. The island itself was mountainous and volcanic, resembling the other islands of the Solomons chain. It combined difficult terrain with frequent streams and swampy low-lands that made over-land travel extremely difficult and greatly impacted logistics and the selection of landing sites preferably in close proximity to objectives.9 New Georgia was covered with nearly impenetrable jungle and offered stifling temperatures and almost daily rainfall from its near equatorial latitude. New Georgia was surrounded by a series of outlying islands and coral reefs that choked its channels and greatly complicated navigation for any landing craft penetrating from the Solomon Sea. The New Georgia group of islands was composed of New Georgia, the largest island and site of the Munda Airfield; Rendova Island, to the south and west of New Georgia across the Blanche Channel; Vangunu Island, the site of a key the key Wickham Anchorage and a small Japanese garrison; and Kolombangara Island, guarding the northern approaches to New Georgia and site of a well-fortified Japanese satellite garrison and secondary airfield at Villa Point (see figure 2).10 The multitude of channels and islands offered tremendous challenges to the 3rd Fleet and XIV Corps planners as they sought the right landing sites and the right sequence of landings to place the Japanese at a disadvantage. They also offered some opportunities that the previous combat landing at Guadalcanal did not.

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10 Miller, 68, Map 6.
Sites and outlying islands on and near Rendova Island offered intermediate staging bases for supplies, artillery and assault troops that could be moved using larger landing craft from Guadalcanal and the recently seized Russell Islands. From these intermediate sites, assault troops could then be moved to landing beaches on New Georgia using smaller landing craft operating in the protected waters of Blanche Channel.\(^{11}\)

With the U.S. now much more capable of successfully competing for control of the surrounding seas and air, the planning for New Georgia sought to take advantage of these factors in using the sea as maneuver space and placing widely dispersed landing sites for the multiple objectives that had been identified for the operation. These multiple landing sites allowed the Allies to mass the combat power that they believed to be decisive at the time and place of their choosing and enabled them to pursue multiple objectives without being tied to one landing site.\(^{12}\)

The actual selection of the landing sites proved problematic based on the limited intelligence available. British maps of the Solomon Islands were sketchy at best and did not show the recent improvements made by the Japanese or details of the terrain masked beneath the jungle canopy. Allied aerial reconnaissance could pin-point major troop concentrations, airfield facilities, and harbor sites but the Japanese employed extreme measures for camouflaging their construction of the Munda airfield which Allied reconnaissance could not spot until the final stages of construction.\(^{13}\)

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\(^{11}\) Miller, 73.

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 73-75.

Aiding in the Allied intelligence effort was the tremendous contribution made by Australian and New Zealander coast watchers and their native compatriots. On New Georgia, Major Donald Kennedy had remained behind after the British withdrawal from the Solomons in 1942 and had diligently reported Japanese movement up and down the “The Slot” for the past year.\textsuperscript{14} On New Georgia, his native constabularies were the first to spot the camouflaged construction of the Munda airfield and constantly harassed Japanese jungle patrols to the point where most Japanese troopers feared a “dishonorable” death at the hands of unseen natives and largely left the uncontrolled spaces of New Georgia to Major Kennedy’s native allies.\textsuperscript{15}

Major Kennedy’s firm presence on New Georgia also offered great potential for advanced reconnaissance by members of the assault forces from the 43rd and 37th Infantry Divisions and the 1st Marine Raider Regiment. Each of these units inserted elements of their divisional reconnaissance troops and staff officers who were tasked with identifying suitable landing sites and Japanese defensive dispositions and concentrations.\textsuperscript{16} Reconnaissance elements scouted their units’ objective areas and proposed landing sites in a fairly thorough manner. The location of the landing site for the main assault forces slated to attack Munda airfield proved to be the most problematic. Major General John Hester did not want his green National Guard division thrown into an opposed assault landing and therefore looked for a suitable landing site for his Division that gave him enough space to organize for an offensive operation against Munda Airfield without having to fight off Japanese defenders right from the water-line. This led 43rd Division planners to select Zanana Beach, a few miles east of Munda, as the most preferable Divisional landing site. It enjoyed the covering protection of the barrier islands Roviana and Baraulu and was linked to Munda via a partially developed native jungle track soon to be dubbed “Munda Trail.”

Landing operations were approved by Admiral Halsey to begin on 30 June 1943 and Rear Admiral R. Kelly Turner quickly began working with Major General Oscar W. Griswold’s XIV Corps to finalize the conceptual details for the invasion. As initial steps to the plan, elements of the 43rd Division slated for the initial landings were given a rehearsal run during the seizure of the Russell Islands, the stepping stone between Guadalcanal and New Georgia.\textsuperscript{17} From this base, Rendova Island would be occupied to provide a fire support and staging areas for assault troops landing on New Georgia. Complementing this main-force action would be a Marine Raider and detachment Army Infantry Landings to seize Wickham Anchorage on Vangunu Island, Southeast of New Georgia and an additional Joint Marine Raider and U.S. Army landing on the North side of New Georgia at Rice Harbor to block the over-land line of supply between Munda and Bairoko Harbor. Rear Admiral Turner organized his forces in the following manner:

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 22.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid. 22.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid, 22-24.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 11-13.
1. “Western Force (Task Group 31.1), commanded directly by Admiral Turner, would seize Rendova Island and undertake subsequent overland attacks against Munda.
2. Eastern Task Force, commanded by Rear Admiral George Fort, was to oversee the assault upon and occupation of bases at Segi Point, Wickham Anchorage, and Viru Harbor.
3. New Georgia Occupation Force (NGOF), commanded by Major General Hester and incorporating the Western Landing Force (43rd Division, plus attached units) under Hester; the Eastern Landing Force which was the tactical ground unit of Admiral Fort’s command; and the Reserve Force, which was the headquarters of the 1st Marine Raider Regiment and the 1st Marine Raider Battalion.
4. New Georgia Air Force, commanded by Brigadier General Francis Mulcahy, and consisting primarily of Mulcahy’s own 2nd Marine Aircraft Wing, which was based at Henderson Field, Guadalcanal, and Advance Base Knucklehead in the Russells.
5. Assault Flotilla, consisting entirely of the landing craft of all sizes and types to be used in the ferrying of the NGOF from Rendova to Zanana Beach.”

The development of the NGOF was the center of much debate before and during the battle. Originally conceived as a means to keep landing forces under the centralized control of the 43rd Division and its commander, Major General John Hester, it came at a great cost to the Division staff. The 43rd Division received no augmentation from its senior command echelon, the XIV Corps under Major General Oscar Griswold, and was thus responsible for the command and control of all ground forces involved in the campaign spread over as many as five major locations and landing sites and numerous smaller supporting positions across the New Georgia Island chain. This may have been a simple economy of force decision within the initial planning as the 43rd Division would be the highest echelon of command involved in the ground campaign; or a convenient construct by Admiral Turner to prevent a co-equal ground commander resident in the XIV Corps from interfering with what he saw as primarily a Naval Operation. As the battle continued after the main force landings on New Georgia and the dismal performance of the 43rd Infantry Division required closer supervision, the concept was revisited by Admiral Halsey and his staff with the recommendation made that XIV Corps take over NGOF responsibilities and allow Major General Hester to concentrate on the fight at hand for his division.

As D-Day of 30 June 1943 was set and the initial landing began to take place a few key elements began to become clear to the Commanders of the Operation. First, the Japanese 8th Area Army Headquarters in Rabaul was unable to successfully contest the air and sea space in which the operation took place. Initially, there were significant naval forces committed from Rabaul to contest the landings or threaten the transit routes from the Russells and Guadalcanal. Several

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18 Ibid., 28-29.
19 Miller, 76.
20 Ibid., 124.
night-time destroyer and cruiser surface actions largely eliminated Japanese naval control of the seas surrounding New Georgia. Second, Japanese air forces were unable to disrupt the landing forces or deliver effective counter-strikes against the growing beachheads at Segi Point, Rendova, or Rice Harbor. Several medium bomber raids were attempted in daylight and each was virtually annihilated by accurate ground anti-aircraft fire and effective fighter combat air patrols launched from Guadalcanal and Advance Base Knucklehead. Third, the Japanese had virtually no concept of what the Allied Forces intentions were regarding the airfield at Munda – the decisive point on the battlefield. With landings dispersed around the island of New Georgia, Major General Noboru Sasaki could, at this point only guess at their intentions for his airfield and garrison at Munda Point.

The Imperial Japanese Army and Navy had fractured once again over the concept for the defense of Rabaul and the North Solomon Islands. The Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) under 8th Area Army commander General Hitoshi Imamura, had wanted to sacrifice everything south of Bougainville as untenable terrain with defense requirements that proved too costly to defend in the face of growing Allied air and ground forces. After sacrificing two Divisions on Guadalcanal and experiencing tremendous logistics problems in sustaining their 17th Army forces there, the IJA wanted to consolidate its defenses tightly around Rabaul and reduce the logistics and air cover requirements as a result. The Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) wanted to continue an active defense as far south as possible and continue to operate from their airbases already established on New Georgia and Bougainville to steadily attrite Allied forces as they moved incrementally closer to striking positions near Rabaul. The Southeastern Fleet Commander Vice Admiral Jinichi Kusaka, had devoted significant effort into developing these advance air bases and defensive positions and wanted to defend Rabaul from within the depth that the Central Solomon Islands granted. The steady attrition of Japanese naval and air forces increasingly made this defense in depth strategy almost impossible to maintain for the long term and the IJN’s Combined Fleet was reluctant to sacrifice any more of its surface combatants in the close waters surrounding the Solomons and Bismarcks. Additionally, the Japanese Combined Fleet was readying itself for what it saw as the main Allied counter-stroke in the Central Pacific and was husbanding its fleet for a decisive engagement against Nimitz and his growing carrier battle groups.

Within the initial landings across the greater New Georgia area proceeding on schedule, a key decision for the conduct of the main objective of the campaign was yet to be made. Major General Hester would select his landing site for the 43rd Division effort to seize Munda airfield.

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23 Miller, 98.
24 Ibid., 35-36.
25 Ibid., 35-36.
The Japanese commander at New Georgia, Major General Sasaki was forced to contemplate his options based on the series of successful Allied landings across New Georgia. If the Americans chose to exploit their positions on the barrier islands and attack directly into the Munda airfield complex there would be little he could do to resist them and no time to call for reinforcements. If the Allies chose to isolate Munda and construct their own airfield near Segi Point, he did not have the forces to go on the offensive against a significant Allied defensive position and would have to contemplate either a withdrawal or being caught in an Allied trap as their forces by-passed him and moved further up the Solomons. Finally, if the Allies chose to assault Munda from landing sites further down the coast he would have the opportunity to create a defense in depth and perhaps effectively resist their movement through the swamps and jungles between their landing sites and the Munda complex.26 This scenario would also allow him to make the case for reinforcements from Kolombangara or even from Rabaul itself.

Major General Hester’s plan of attack played into this third Japanese option, and while selected as the best option for an untested National Guard Division, greatly facilitated Major General Sasaki’s defense of Munda. Zanana Beach was selected as the landing site for the 43rd Division and in doing so committed it to a tortuous six-week campaign of jungle and swamp fighting for which its soldiers were wholly unprepared.27 Fighting against a determined and well-disciplined Japanese defense force was a task that surmounted their current level of leadership and preparation. The actions of the 43rd Division represent the futility of throwing ill-prepared and poorly led troops into battle in difficult terrain against a determined foe that actively resisted their efforts to carve a path through the forest to get into position for a final assault against Munda.

The 43rd Division’s operations were characterized by a lack of progress, a lack of initiative at all levels, and an chronic inability to fight against the Japanese while using all the combat enablers that the Allied forces enjoyed at the time in waters and air around New Georgia. Combined arms appeared to be coordinated at the joint-level only and the 43rd Division rarely coordinated anything other than the occasional artillery or mortar barrage in their efforts to dislodge the tenaciously held bunkers and fighting positions of the Japanese surrounding Munda Point.

At night, the Japanese frequently broke through the 43rd’s porous positions terrorizing their soldiers and mounting demoralizing attacks against their flanks, rear areas and tenuous supply lines back to Zanana Beach. On separate occasions the Division’s medical aid station and forward command post were attacked at night. The medical station was overrun with 17 patients killed in their stretchers awaiting surgery or medical evacuation while the Division’s forward command post was only saved by the timely use of an artillery battalion to provide close-in final protective fires.28 The 43rd Division was in the process amassing more combat stress or “combat

26 Hammel, 81-82.
27 Miller, 106-110.
28 Frankel, 82-83.
neurosis” cases than had ever before been documented or would be for a unit throughout the entirety of World War II.\textsuperscript{29} As noted in the 37th Division’s War Diary, the jungles and beachhead of 43rd’s area of operation were filled with nervous and babbling soldiers that warned the incoming reinforcements of the dangers of Japanese night-time attacks, their trickery in the jungles and their fanatical nature in the defense.\textsuperscript{30}

To add to the 43rd Division’s problems, the time, space, and force factors that they created on the battlefield actually enabled the Japanese in establishing a robust defense in depth and adding additional forces to the battle from nearby Kolombangara. The Japanese established a strong defense in the hills and tangled terrain north and east of the airfield and were able to continue a flow of reinforcements from Kolombangara around the Marine Raider block on the Bairoko-Munda trail.\textsuperscript{31} The Japanese combined dogged defensive action with active patrolling and night-time infiltration of the American lines. Soldiers expected to attack well-fortified and mutually supporting defensive positions in the day would spend the previous night in fear for their lives and coldly waiting for a Japanese infiltrator to leap into their foxholes to slit their throats.

As the operation bogged down, Admiral Halsey dispatched XIV Corps’ Major General Griswold to investigate the situation and what he found sounded alarm bells all the way up the chain of command. His estimate of the situation was that the 43rd would never be able to capture the Munda airfield on its own. General Harmon\textsuperscript{1} recommended that the two reserve formations, the 37\textsuperscript{th} and 25\textsuperscript{th} Infantry Divisions, be released and committed to the assault on the airfield complex at Munda.\textsuperscript{32} The 43\textsuperscript{rd} had cleared its way to Laiana Beach, only a few miles distant from the Munda airfield complex and opened the beach for reinforcements to arrive.

General Griswold also recommended that the NGOF mission be given to the XIV Corps headquarters, allowing Major General Hester to dedicate himself to righting the problems experienced by the 43rd. Admiral Halsey approved all of these recommendations and gave General Harmon the latitude “to make any changes necessary” to reenergize the offensive toward Munda.\textsuperscript{33}

The 37\textsuperscript{th} Division was quickly landed at Lainana Beach and took over the northern portion of the north-south line that extended from the Blanche Channel to the north with its northern flank dangerously open the jungled hills to the north. The 37\textsuperscript{th} was probably better led and prepared for the jungle fighting after some extended training in Fiji and some careful thought by its leadership for night-time security procedures.\textsuperscript{34} As it established itself on the battle-line and began offensive operations, the cold realities of jungle warfare set in and it began

\textsuperscript{29} Miller, 121-122.
\textsuperscript{30} Frankel, 83.
\textsuperscript{31} Miller, 104-105.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 124.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 124.
\textsuperscript{34} Frankel, 84.
experiencing similar tactical problems as the 43rd. Tenuous supply-lines linked the 37th’s regiments back to supply dumps, water became excruciatingly hard to get, with soldiers rationed to a single canteen a day. The 37th Division attempted to continue the development of the “Munda Trail” to ease the logistics concerns but constantly led their columns with ill-protected bulldozer teams that would consistently lose three or more operators a day to Japanese attacks and sniper fire. As the Regiments of the 37th worked their way to the northeast of the most heavily defended hills and ridges surrounding the Munda complex, they opened a dangerous and inviting gap between their lines and the northern-most regiment of the 43rd. A gap the Japanese happily exploited and in doing so captured the 37th’s ration dump. This Japanese incursion was eventually defeated and the American lines reconsolidated to prevent further breakthroughs.

With the commitment of the 25th Infantry Division, Commanded by future Normandy Corps Commander and Chief of Staff of the Army Major General Lawton Collins, the U.S. finally had enough combat power to break the Japanese defensive network apart. The final attack on the Munda complex employed massive amounts of fire support to pulverize Japanese defensive positions and assault teams armed with newly fielded flame throwers to root out stubborn Japanese defenders (see figure 3). 

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35 Ibid., 93-94.
36 Ibid, 99-104.
37 Miller, 158-159.
38 Miller, 144 Map 9.
The Japanese forces under General Sasaki fought a delaying action on the trails leading to Bairokø harbor and eventually escaped over the Kula Gulf to join the garrison on Kolombangara. NGOF’s mission to seize Munda airfield was completed on 5 August 1943 and the clearing of the trails to leading Bairokø extended the campaign for a few more weeks. At the end of the battle, General Sasaki and 13,000 Japanese defenders were firmly established on Kolombangara just across the Kula Gulf from New Georgia. The Munda Airfield was opened to Allied warplanes on 14 August and a fighter strip was constructed on Segi Point. The U.S. Navy established anchorages at Wickham Harbor and Vinu that harbored the vast landing craft and torpedo boat flotillas supporting the 3rd Fleet’s advance up “The Slot.”

The next step of the Cartwheel campaign carried Allied forces to Vella Lavella and Bougainville, by-passing the Japanese forces at Kolombangara and avoiding further confrontations with Japanese forces over well established and well defended critical airfields. At Bougainville, U.S. Marines not only landed where the Japanese weren’t defending but also established their own airfields and forced the Japanese to attack them instead of repeating the experiences from New Georgia.
The New Georgia Campaign illuminates all the potential problems of amphibious warfare and the combat development process the United States experienced during World War II as massive numbers of troops and equipment began to flood theaters overseas. While the numerical advantages in personnel and equipment clearly swung in the direction of the Allies, their training, doctrine, and Joint operating concepts were still trying to catch up with the developments of the war at hand. The National Guard units on New Georgia proved that there were limits to what the American fighting man could endure and the U.S. Army continued its strenuous efforts to improve the leadership and training provided to combat divisions as they shipped overseas for their first combat experiences. Within the 3rd Fleet, Admiral Halsey had instilled a fighting spirit among his soldiers, sailors, airman and Marines but was still working on appropriate command and control structures and command relationships that welded the separate services into credible joint warfighting force fighting within a fleet organizational structure. These hard-won lessons were indeed heeded and further propelled both arms of the Cartwheel offensive to the point that the Japanese 8th Area Army and 8th Fleet at Rabaul were effectively neutralized and by-passed. By the end of 1944, the United States was closing in on objectives in the Marianas Islands and the Philippines thus beginning the effective isolation of Japan from its critical Southern Resource Areas.
Bibliography:


