

Midnight in the Pacific

reviewed by Col Eric L. Chase, USMCR(Ret)

Fierce combat violence over endless days and months, tropical diseases, shortages of supplies and personnel, anxieties of men at war, and suspense drive Joseph Wheelan's superb *Midnight in the Pacific*, an intense historical portrayal of the August 1942–February 1943 battle for Guadalcanal. The Marine Corps' first amphibious operation of the Pacific War followed months of serial Japanese triumphs after Pearl Harbor in places like Wake Island, Guam, the Philippines, Singapore, and elsewhere. The Empire touted its military power and capabilities as invincible, shouting that its ultimate victory was inevitable, but the juggernaut had just suffered a crushing blow at the sea and air battle near Midway Atoll (4 to 7 June 1942). There, American forces, which lost one carrier, sent four Japanese carriers and a heavy cruiser to the bottom of the ocean. Thousands of sailors, along with hundreds of Japan's most seasoned pilots, were lost.

Soon after Midway, Guadalcanal emerged unexpectedly as the initial major test of opposing land forces in the Pacific. Its importance in the American scheme to take the fight to the enemy became paramount. Wheelan notes *New York Times* reporter Hanson Baldwin's stark assessment on 27 September 1942: "The United States had 'nailed the colors to the mast.' ... [The battle] 'is a sprawling intermittent sea, air and land action on which the stakes are high—perhaps eventual victory itself.'"

Wheelan delivers the story in meticulously researched, chilling, riveting, and often gruesome detail. Historical retrospectives too often

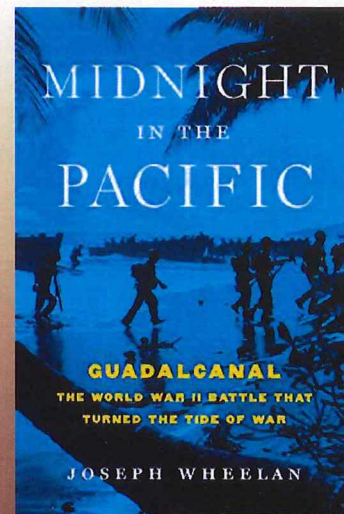
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make eventual outcomes seem inevitable, especially in war. The reality of the moment, however, usually lacks the neatness of certainty that hindsight allows. Such was the case on Guadalcanal, where entrenched combatants on both sides and political leaders at home shared day-to-day trepidation.

Now, 75 years after the campaign, *Midnight in the Pacific* brings to life the qualities of those who endured one of the critical struggles of World War II. Having written of war in previous major historical works, including four on the Civil War in addition to others on early American conflicts, Wheelan brings his considerable talent to an early Pacific battle in the epic conflagration of the 20th century. His detail and perspective make this book the resource of choice for Guadalcanal.

Graphic, horrific combat scenes race at a breathtaking pace. As the battle raged, it became a public symbol of America's resolve. "President Franklin D. Roosevelt and his advisors anxiously monitored the all-out fight on Guadalcanal," and they cautiously avoided expressions of over-confidence. Through the end of 1942, concerns about the enemy's plans abounded:

Indeed, the Army and Navy agreed that victory on Guadalcanal was crucial to winning the Pacific War, and the intensi-



MIDNIGHT IN THE PACIFIC: Guadalcanal, The World War II Battle That Turned the Tide of War. By Joseph Wheelan. Cambridge, MA: De Capo Press, 2017. ISBN 978-0306824593, 356 pp.

fied Japanese air and naval attacks plainly pointed to something big about to happen. Intelligence reports from Nimitz's command repeatedly warned of a major Japanese offensive.

In capturing the events, people, context, and contemporaneous meaning of this first island battle of the war, *Midnight in the Pacific* will not only captivate those with a serious interest in the Pacific War, but it will also intrigue and inform a much broader audience.

Until the final weeks of the battle, Japanese probes, air attacks, artillery, and naval gunfire ruled the flow of the battlefield most nights. Meanwhile, Marine grunts and the so-called "Cactus Air Force"—American warplanes and pilots whose fortitude and ingenuity saved Marine units from being overwhelmed—controlled the hours of daylight. For at least five of the battle's six months, the outcome remained in doubt, as reflected by the Marines on the ground and the angst of decision makers and the public at home. Americans contemplated

the likelihood of a new Japanese onslaught as late as February 1942, even as the enemy stealthily withdrew its surviving forces. Although some critics have charged that American commanders unnecessarily permitted remaining Japanese units to escape to fight another day, the reality was that the Japanese successfully sustained the ruse that they were preparing for a reinvigorated offensive.

Guadalcanal was a slog of constant vigilance, danger, and fighting, much of which was hand-to-hand. Wheelan wields a journalist's talent in crafting stirring vignettes into the overall story, enabling the reader to both grasp the big picture and witness in close proximity the action, fear, and miscues of combatants on both sides.

The omnipresent stench of death permeated the jungle landscape and hilly terrain, and young men shrunk and aged by the week. Throughout, the author deftly weaves Japanese perspectives into the struggle, and he shows their conversion from contempt for perceived American military weakness to a grudging respect for Marines as warfighters. All the while, Japanese propagandists in Tokyo fed the public nothing but rave reviews of the Empire's progress and certain victory.

Heroic Marine exploits and exceptional feats of leadership punctuate the saga of *Midnight in the Pacific*, with actions at "Alligator Creek," "Edson's Ridge," and elsewhere described in fascinating and horrifying detail. Among many others, battalion commanders like LtCols Lewis B. "Chesty" Puller, CO 1/7; Merritt "Red Mike" Edson, CO, 1st Raider Battalion; and Evans Carlson, CO, 2d Raider Battalion became legendary for their personal bravery, ingenuity, and battlefield success on the island and elsewhere, both before and after Guadalcanal. In their storied Marine careers starting early in the 20th century, these three officers earned a combined total of ten Navy Crosses (Puller eventually wore five) and one Medal of Honor (Edson). Epitomizing the Corps' warfighting ethos, Puller, Edson, and Carlson all

went on to be general officers. Sgt John Basilone received his Medal of Honor for extraordinary prowess as a machine-gun section leader who personally destroyed seemingly unstoppable waves of attackers. Subsequently, Basilone became the only World War II enlisted Marine to be awarded a Medal of Honor and a posthumous Navy Cross, the latter for his heroic action on Iwo Jima in 1945.

Wheelan's focus on Marine leadership and individual feats of courage is instructive. Heroic leadership and individual mettle were likely the keys to the American triumph on Guadalcanal. When Army and National Guard units arrived in the latter days of the campaign, their performance, compared with Marines, was bleak. In addition to the central casting on Guadalcanal, Wheelan's storyline provides a full perspective of related air and sea operations and engagements, as well as occasional hostilities on nearby islands. Part of the story is about the Japanese troops who never made it to Guadalcanal because American airpower and warships destroyed so many enemy troop ships and other vessels. As he switches venues, Wheelan sometimes unnecessarily repeats facts, but this is a small blemish within a well-told and compelling history.

Initial U.S. naval campaign planning had called for ignoring and perhaps bypassing Guadalcanal, one of the half dozen larger islands of the Solomons—a vast archipelago in the southwestern Pacific. The "electrifying news" in July 1942, however, of ongoing Japanese construction on an airstrip that would "jeopardize the vulnerable oceanic lifelines" between Australia and the United States changed everything in an instant. In a sense, Guadalcanal morphed by happenstance into a must-win, all-out fight over which side would control future air operations in and near the Solomons.

The previously inconsequential Guadalcanal suddenly became an immediate strategic threat to allied war planners as well as a potential venue for American airpower. Urgency ruled

the day. ADMs Ernest King, Chief of Naval Operations, and Chester Nimitz, Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Pacific Fleet, ordered an amphibious assault on Guadalcanal to commence on 1 August. The unexpected need for an urgent mission, to be planned and begin in only a few weeks, "came as a shock" to MajGen Alexander A. Vandegrift, CG, 1stMarDiv, as his division prepared in New Zealand for an anticipated 1943 entry into the war.

After the actual landing, delayed to 7 August, Marines and the Japanese fought daily, grisly close-in battles of attrition, savagery, and atrocity and endured contests against inhospitable elements: disease, privation, dense jungle, and an unforgiving climate of heat, high humidity, and regular tropical downpours. In this first major engagement with U.S. Marines, the Japanese brimmed with confidence stemming from one-sided conquests in China during the previous decade and early successes prior to Midway in 1941–42.

Japanese military leaders at all levels believed themselves racially superior and militarily invincible. They boasted of a predicted quick capitulation by the new enemy; any contrary result was unthinkable. Perversely, they perplexed the dug-in Marine defenders and frequently ordered their soldiers to run en masse into withering fire in sacrificial "Bonzai" charges that helped reset the Marines' odds against the much larger Japanese forces that were depleted by such ill-advised tactics. Until much later in the Pacific War, the Japanese repeatedly resorted in island warfare to this self-destructive, sacrificial warfighting scheme.

Early fatal confrontations soon resulted in a tacit "no-quarter" practice. Marines learned to expect perfidy from wounded Japanese on the battlefield, whereas Japanese soldiers routinely tortured and murdered their Marine captives. *Midnight in the Pacific* recounts incidents of screaming, dying, captured victims of Japanese torture, orchestrated in close proximity to intimidate Marines

listening with helpless outrage from their nearby defensive perimeters. Legal protections for prisoners and the wounded, codified in the 1929 Geneva Conventions, were meaningless. Guadalcanal's opposing combatants forsook any concept of chivalry or adherence to treaty. They eliminated the option of mercy on and off the battlefield, which set the stage for the (mostly) no-prisoner ferocity of the string of island battles to follow. Wheelan writes:

The Marines now learned to give no quarter. Among the piles of bullet-shredded Japanese corpses lived wounded soldiers still capable of killing and wounding. When they cried for help and corpsmen attempted to give aid, they detonated a grenade or shot the caregiver before being killed. Sometimes they waited for a Marine to pass by—and then stabbed him.

For their part, Japanese leaders preached to their men ugly myths about Marines:

The bodies and packs [recovered from Japanese corpses] yielded boilerplate Japanese atrocity propaganda about the Marines. "The Americans on this island are not ordinary troops, but Marines, a special force recruited from jails and insane asylums for blood lust. There is no honorable death [for their] prisoners, their arms are cut off, they are staked on the airfield, and run over with steamrollers."

For Marines on Guadalcanal, Gen Alexander T. Vandegrift emerged as their ideal commander. As Wheelan writes:

Under these perilous circumstances the Marines could not have asked for a better leader than 55-year-old ... Vandegrift, a calm, mild-mannered Virginian who had spent more than thirty years in the Marine Corps.

Appropriately, he focused on early seizure of the still-unfinished airstrip (Henderson Field), completing it and continually refurbishing it after Japanese bombings and artillery strikes. For months, Japanese efforts to retake Henderson Field were nearly constant threats, and Vandegrift sparked his Marines to hold and prevail again and again. He was one of many on Guadalcanal to be awarded a Medal of Honor. Later, he served as

Commandant and became the Corps' first four-star general.

Marine morale ebbed and flowed on Guadalcanal, but there was more ebbing than flowing. The Japanese had dealt the allied fleet near Guadalcanal a crushing blow at Savo Island on 9 August, sinking three U.S. cruisers and one Australian cruiser. As a result, allied naval forces withdrew, and Marines ashore had to fend for themselves for months, protecting themselves and Henderson Field with inadequate naval gunfire support, sparse resupply, and few

air and sea Battle of Midway and Guadalcanal that secured a high probability of eventual defeat for the Empire of Japan. Moreover, Guadalcanal was only a defining beginning of the amphibious combat operations that ended with Okinawa two years later. The formidable Japanese military conceded nothing and fought aggressively in every succeeding island battle.

The victory at Guadalcanal did set the stage for all the islands to follow. The Marine Corps and other Services conducting the island hopping

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reinforcements or replacements. Seventy-five years later, the Navy's departure still remains controversial, and Wheelan presents the harsh facts, including the resentment of the Marines who endured indescribable hardships.

Food was at a premium. Marines survived on enemy rice and rations taken from myriad Japanese corpses. Most men on the line for only a few months lost 40 or 50 pounds or more, becoming weak, skeletal, and disease-ridden as they fought a relentless foe day after day. Nevertheless, the warrior ethos persevered, and the motley Cactus Air Force managed to continue the day-to-day fight in the air and in bombing runs, while men on the ground constantly filled in the craters inflicted by the Japanese on Henderson Field. At times, the only resupply and reinforcement arrived by air.

Although in both text and subtitle, Wheelan characterizes the denouement of the Guadalcanal campaign as the Pacific War's turning point, it was more accurately the accumulated impact of both the

campaign from Guadalcanal to Okinawa prevailed in every instance. But the battles were costly in men and treasure. An enemy that almost never surrendered continued to be at least as challenging and agonizing as it was in the first major confrontation on Guadalcanal. *Midnight in the Pacific* offers a worthy telling of an epic struggle that, had it turned out differently, might have altered or delayed the course of conflict in the Pacific. Indeed, when the end finally arrived, a still-reluctant Japan capitulated only after atomic bombs destroyed Nagasaki and Hiroshima. Guadalcanal was a Marine victory for the ages, but it was also a harbinger of the courage and sacrifice yet to come.

