

U. S. NAVAL AVIATION in the PACIFIC

The Office of the Chief of Naval Operations

UNITED STATES NAVY

1947

p. 25

OFFENSIVE-DEFENSIVE— GUADALCANAL TO BOUGAINVILLE

The war plans in effect at the outbreak of the war were predicated on fighting the axis powers simultaneously. Since Germany was regarded as the more dangerous, it was made the preferred objective of United States efforts. Forces in the Pacific were expected to protect Allied territory and to limit the Japanese expansion as much as possible.

With the creation of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in January 1942, a more definitive strategic concept was devised, and in April 1942 revised war plans were adopted. The Pacific was divided into two theaters of United States responsibility, the Pacific Ocean Area and the Southwest Pacific Area. Forces assigned had the general tasks of containing the Japanese in their respective areas, protecting their own communications, and supporting operations in the adjacent theater. Although the victory over Germany remained the primary objective, nevertheless, as forces became available in the Pacific the strategy was gradually to become offensive. The Allies were ultimately able to conduct major campaigns in both theaters of the global war.

On 7 December 1941, the United States Navy had seven carriers, of which only the *Lexington* and *Enterprise* were immediately operational in the Pacific. The *Saratoga* was on the West Coast; the *Wasp*, *Yorktown*, and *Ranger* were in the Atlantic; and the *Hornet* was shaking down in the Caribbean.

From Pearl Harbor to Coral Sea the *Wasp* and *Ranger* remained committed to the Atlantic. Operations of the remaining carriers conformed to the wholly defensive strategy in the Pacific. On 1 February, a series of carrier raids was launched to delay or divert the enemy's advance. The *Enterprise* and *Yorktown* participated in a combined air attack, surface bombardment, and reconnaissance of the eastern Marshalls and northern Gilberts. A task group built around the *Lexington* was approaching Rabaul on 20 February when it was detected and forced to retire after successfully repulsing a Japanese bomber attack. Four days later the *Enterprise* and accompanying screen bombed and shelled Wake

GUADALCANAL TO BOUGAINVILLE



and then went on to launch strikes against Marcus. On 10 March the *Lexington* and *Yorktown* aircraft flew over the Owen Stanley Mountains to attack shipping at the eastern New Guinea ports of Lae and Salamaua where the Japanese had landed three days earlier. The Doolittle raid of 19 April on Tokyo was launched from the *Hornet* which, since it had Army bombers on deck, was supported by the *Enterprise*. Those early raids all met with a high degree of tactical success and demonstrated that carriers were not exclusively a Japanese weapon.

With the Battles of the Coral Sea and Midway, United States and Japanese carrier strength became nearly equal. At the same time the news that the Japanese advance was creeping down the Solomons and commencing the construction of an airfield on Guadalcanal made it advisable to undertake a limited offensive in the South Pacific. In view of the danger to supply lines to Australia and with the reassurance that the United States had 12 fast and 15 escort carriers on the ways, the Joint Chiefs of Staff determined to accept the risk, and orders were issued directing operations against the Japanese in the Solomon Islands. The first test of the Japanese perimeter came a year before the enemy expected it.

On 7 August 1942, the United States Marines landed on Guadalcanal, quickly overcame minor opposition, and captured a half-constructed airfield. The operation was covered initially by a task force of three carriers. Although the Japanese were taken by surprise, their reaction was immediate and from 8 August through 15 November they attempted, by every means available, to retake the Guadalcanal airfield. United States forces remained on the defensive attempting to keep open the sea approaches and to hold and keep in operation the airstrip which had been so easily taken on 7 August. During a series of duels between weakened carrier forces,

GUADALCANAL TO BOUGAINVILLE

numerous pitched air battles between land-based aircraft and several night surface actions, the issue remained in doubt until the Battle of Guadalcanal, 12-15 November. A Japanese attempt at limited reinforcement precipitated a final night action on 30 November. The way was then clear for a land offensive which pushed back the poorly supplied Jap troops. In February 1943 some 10,000 survivors of the 30,000 troops which the Japanese had invested piecemeal in the campaign were evacuated.

United States forces began a slow advance up the Solomons chain leading toward Rabaul. As the Navy lost two carriers in the early part of the campaign, its first-line strength in the Pacific was reduced to two carriers, and this was a primary factor in explaining the slow progress of succeeding months. Guadalcanal air bases were expanded; the Russells were taken for an advanced fighter base; an amphibious campaign covered by planes from those bases took Munda and other points on New Georgia. From those airfields short amphibious advances took Vella Lavella and an island in the Treasury group on which further bases were built. A foothold at Torokina on Bougainville was obtained in November 1943. Only from here and from bases secured in similar short Southwest Pacific advances from New Guinea could land-based fighters finally reach the main Japanese base at Rabaul. Sixteen months elapsed from the date of the landing at Guadalcanal until the first South Pacific fighter planes flew over Rabaul less than 700 miles distant. Even then it was deemed desirable to take and develop further bases at Green Island and Emirau before the Rabaul area could be considered adequately covered; this consumed 3 months more.

The lessons and consequences of this long drawn-out campaign were numerous. It afforded an opportunity to perfect tactics by which the heavily armored United States fighter planes could master the brilliantly maneuverable but unarmored Japanese. It confirmed the need for close support of troops by aircraft and provided in numerous landings a school for the development of suitable techniques. It confirmed European experience as to the need for night fighters and led to their inclusion in the first air echelon sent into captured bases. It provided opportunity for perfection of fighter direction

GUADALCANAL TO BOUGAINVILLE

and other techniques. It posed the question, only partially answered by heavy-bomber strikes, of an effective means of denying the enemy the use of the airstrips remaining in his possession in the northern Solomons and Bismarcks. It emphasized the importance of adequate search and reconnaissance including the use of land-based Navy aircraft, capable of penetrating enemy-held areas without escort, and of special photographic squadrons. Last, it saw the development of the Black Cats as an effective means of dealing with Japanese night shipping activities.

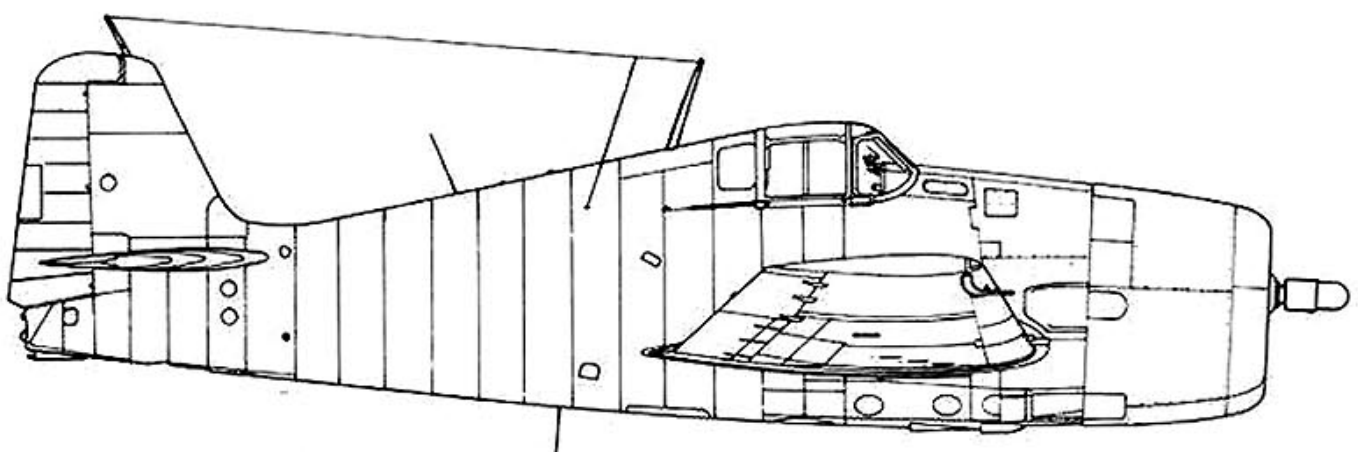
The air war was conducted principally by Marine and Navy shore-based planes of carrier types. Using largely dive and glide-bombing tactics, small planes proved most suited to this type of sea and island warfare in a theater where the supply problem was critical. Whether in terms of hits per gallon of gasoline, hits per pound of plane weight reflected in turn in time and effort of airfield construction, hits per dollar invested or flight crewmen risked, hits per hour flown, and in hits per ton dropped, the small, single-engine, low-altitude bomber with its crew of two or three and its ability to fly from short and narrow fields was the most effective weapon.

The campaign further demonstrated that the time required in the advance of a land-based air force from one newly constructed air base to another placed a serious limitation on the ability of United States forces to capitalize on the destruction of an opposing Japanese air force. By the time the new position was fully developed and prepared to support a decisive air offensive, the Japanese had reorganized and reformed their units unhindered at the next base to the rear.

Whatever the lessons from the first sustained experience with United States power, the Japanese failed to profit from them. In the face of rapid progress in radar search and fire control, night surface action once favorable to the inferior force and for which they had long trained was no better than action by day. But more important was what the Japanese lost: 2 carriers, 2 battleships, 6 cruisers, 39 destroyers, and some 3,000 aircraft and crews. The losses in heavy ships were overshadowed by the attrition suffered in destroyers and other escort types which plagued them to the end of the war. Most serious of all was the loss of experienced air per-

GUADALCANAL TO BOUGAINVILLE

sonnel, a loss which was never overcome. The Solomons campaign was a valuable laboratory to the side which could profit from experience.



Grumman F6F Hellcat

OldMagazineArticles.com