

From Opportunity to Strategic Necessity: The Japanese in the South Pacific, 1942-43

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For over two years, from January 1942 through the spring of 1944, the Japanese fought an intense ground, naval, and air campaign against the Americans and Australians in the South Pacific, on, around, or over eastern New Guinea, New Ireland, New Britain, and the Solomon Islands. The losses the Japanese suffered there affected their ability to fight effectively in the latter half of 1944 and in 1945. The South Pacific campaign therefore played an important role in determining the outcome of the Pacific War. However, the Japanese had not expected to fight such an extended campaign in the South Pacific when planning the opening operations of the Pacific War.¹ Broadly speaking, the South Pacific campaign was essentially an Allied counteroffensive against a Japanese thrust into the area. A review of the process and chain of events by which the Japanese extended their reach into the South Pacific will therefore help to better understand the conduct of war by the Japanese in the Pacific War. For the purposes of this conference, the Japanese South Pacific campaign is a good example of a campaign that expanded beyond expectations in intensity and length, to a degree that the entire outcome of the war was affected.

This paper will therefore explore the various factors behind the South Pacific strategy of the Japanese. The focus will be on the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) in 1942, since the IJN took the initiative for expanding the war into the South Pacific.

After the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05, the IJN's primary hypothetical enemy was the United States Navy. As is well known, the key concept of the Japanese Navy's war plans was the so-called "Reduce, then Ambush" Operational Concept. These plans envisioned the following scenario in case of a war with the United States. First, the Japanese would invade and occupy the Philippine Islands. Then, the Japanese battle fleet would meet the American Battle Fleet as it advanced westwards to relieve or retake the Philippines. A decisive fleet battle would be fought, and the IJN would win.² From the early 1930s, in order to make up for the relative numerical inferiority of the Japanese battle fleet, which was a result of the Washington and London Naval Treaties, submarines and aircraft would be used to reduce the American battle fleet before the Decisive Fleet Battle. The IJN expected the decisive fleet battle to take place to the east of the Mariana Islands in the early versions of their plans. This area gradually

¹ Interestingly, the Allies also did not expect to fight such an extended campaign in the South Pacific until the war actually began. Allan R. Millett, *Semper Fidelis: The History of the United States Marine Corps* (Free Press, 1991), pp. 319-43.

² Boeicho Boei-Kenshusho Senshishitsu (War History Office, National Institute for Defense, Ministry of Defense) (hereafter referred to as War History Office) ed., *Senshi Soshō Dai-hon-ei Kaigunbu Rengo-Kantai (1) Kaisen made* (Senshi Soshō, Navy Section, Imperial General Headquarters, and Combined Fleet (1) To the Opening of the War) (Asagumo Shinbunsha, 1975), pp. 175-76.

shifted eastwards to the Marshall Islands by the late 1930s.³

The IJN thus became a navy whose major focus was the fighting of a decisive fleet battle against the U.S. Navy in the Central Pacific. This meant that the IJN did not have a concrete strategy regarding the South Pacific until the eve of the Pacific War. Since the Central Pacific, and not the South Pacific, was the expected area of battle, the IJN did not seriously study the South Pacific as an area where operations might take place.

The IJN had, along with civilian authorities, collected intelligence information regarding the South Pacific from before the Pacific War, but this consisted mostly of hydrographic and weather information, and was not information collected for the purpose of planning an actual operation in the area. It was not until the middle of 1940 that the IJN began developing concrete plans for actual operations in the South Pacific.⁴

In July 1940, the Japanese government decided on an expansion into Southeast Asia even at the risk of war, and a war against the Americans became an actual possibility. Sometime in the second half of 1940, the Naval General Staff studied the possibility of including Rabaul, on New Britain, in the list of objectives to be taken at the start of such a war. This marked the first concrete step by the Navy to move into the South Pacific. The Naval General Staff felt that Rabaul had to be secured in order to secure the safety of Truk Island. The IJN developed Truk in the second half of the 1930s, and turned it into its primary advance base in the Central Pacific. In case of war, Truk would be within range of bombers which might be based at Rabaul. Therefore, Rabaul had to be taken in order to remove the aerial threat to Truk. Furthermore, the IJN was concerned about the possibility of the Americans and British mounting an offensive from Rabaul and aimed at Truk and the western Caroline Islands, and further north to the Marianas. Alternatively, an offensive aimed at the Solomon Islands and advancing along the northern coast of New Guinea could also be mounted from Rabaul.⁵ In addition to these defensive concerns, the IJN envisaged Rabaul as being the southern anchor of a defensive perimeter encompassing the Mariana and Caroline Islands.⁶ Rabaul was therefore included in the objectives listed in the operational orders of November 6, 1941. These operations were called the First Stage Operations, and were commenced on December 8 (Japan time).

Rabaul was included as an objective in the First Stage Operations relatively late in the planning process. As late as August 1941, the Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) still had not agreed to the Rabaul operation, in which the IJN was proposing to use the Army's South Seas

³ War History Office, *Senshi Soshō Minami Taiheiyō Rikugun Sakusen (1) Port Moresby Ga-to Shōki Sakusen* (Senshi Soshō, Army Operations in the South Pacific (1) Port Moresby and Early Operations on Guadalcanal) (Asagumo Shinbunsha, 1968), p. 6. For a detailed overview in English of the IJN's "Reduce, then Ambush" operational concept, see David C. Evans and Mark R. Peattie, *Kaigun: Strategy, Tactics, and Technology in the Imperial Japanese Navy 1887-1941* (Naval Institute Press, 1997), pp. 201-05.

⁴ As noted above, the U.S. Navy also was relatively uninterested in the South Pacific as an area of naval operations, and also focused on the Central Pacific until the actual outbreak of war. For an analysis of the U.S. Navy's plans and concepts during the 1920s and 1930s for a war with Japan, see Edward S. Miller, *War Plan Orange: The U.S. Strategy to Defeat Japan, 1897-1945* (United States Naval Institute, 1991).

⁵ *Minami Taiheiyō Rikugun Sakusen (1)*, pp. 6-7.

⁶ War History Office, *Senshi Soshō Daihon-ei Kaigunbu Rengo Kantai (2) Showa 17-nen 6-gatsu made* (Senshi Soshō, Imperial General Headquarters, Navy Section, and Combined Fleet (2) Until June 1942) (Asagumo Shinbunsha, 1975), p. 134. *Minami Taiheiyō Rikugun Sakusen*, pp. 6-7.

Detachment, along with the IJN's Naval Landing Forces. It was not until sometime in October that the Army finally agreed to the operation, less than two months before the start of the war.⁷

At this time, the IJN had no concrete plans for invading areas further to the south or southeast of Rabaul in the South Pacific. After the Pacific War had begun, however, the Japanese did advance beyond Rabaul. At the start of the war or shortly thereafter, the Naval General Staff considered the possibility of an aerial war of attrition in the South Pacific, and planned for the establishment of a perimeter stretching from Tulagi to Port Moresby. Such a perimeter would force the American and Australian air forces to pull back to bases on the Australian mainland, New Caledonia, and the New Hebrides. Fighters based on those islands would not have the range to reach the Tulagi – Port Moresby perimeter, which would help to ensure the safety of Rabaul and other Japanese bases in the area. However, at that stage in the war, the IJN still viewed the South Pacific as a secondary theater. Any offensive to expand the Japanese perimeter to the line Tulagi – Port Moresby would have to wait until the so-called Second Stage Operations, and were therefore not planned in concrete detail at that time. Likewise, the Combined Fleet also placed greater priority in the opening stages of the war on operations in areas other than the South Pacific. This relative lack of priority accorded to the South Pacific, along with a shortage of forces which might be deployed in the South Pacific and a relative lack of geographical and other information about the South Pacific, led the Combined Fleet to view any operations beyond Rabaul as an issue for the future.⁸

Rabaul was duly captured on January 23, 1942.⁹ Planning for assaults on Lae and Salamaua, on the northeastern coast of New Guinea, began at around that time, and both were captured on March 8. In addition, studies and planning for an assault on Port Moresby also began sometime in January. The IJN determined that these areas had to be occupied to protect Rabaul from an aerial threat from the south, i.e. bombers based at Port Moresby. There was thus a clear and immediate strategic necessity for an advance into New Guinea. In addition, opportunism was a factor: the rapidity and relative ease with which the Japanese achieved their objectives in the First Stage Operations led them to believe that further offensives would be equally as successful at little cost. On the other hand, the offensive into New Guinea was not planned as part of a larger overall strategy for the area. Fourth Fleet headquarters, rather than the Naval General Staff or Combined Fleet, took the initiative in the arguments for an offensive aimed at Lae, Salamaua, and Port Moresby. This indicates that the Fourth Fleet's immediate security concerns, i.e. the protection of Rabaul, was the main factor which drove the early stages of the planning of an advance beyond Rabaul, and that the advance into New Guinea was not part of an overall strategy developed by the Naval General Staff or the Combined Fleet for the area.¹⁰

Both the Naval General Staff and Combined Fleet, however, quickly grasped the strategic necessity of capturing Port Moresby and other critical areas in New Guinea. Both commands

⁷ *Minami Taiheiyo Rikugun Sakusen*, pp. 7-8.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 135-36.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 173. John B. Lundstrom, *The First South Pacific Campaign: Pacific Fleet Strategy December 1941-June 1942* (Naval Institute Press, 1976), pp. 23-27.

therefore agreed with the Fourth Fleet's proposals and, in the second half of January 1942, decided to carry out operations to assault and occupy Lae, Salamaua, and Port Moresby.

The Naval General Staff issued its orders for the New Guinea and Solomons operations on January 29, 1942, as IGHQ Navy Section Directive No. 47. The Army General Staff followed four days later with its IGHQ Army Section Order No. 596. The Lae and Salamaua operations were thus carried out in on March 8, to be followed by the Port Moresby operation.¹¹

It is important to note that neither of these operations were conceived within the framework of a broader strategy for the entire South Pacific. According to the *Senshi Shōsho*, the official Japanese war history, both were “new operations, which had not been planned at the start of the war,” and involved “an expansion of the areas to be assaulted and occupied which were not part of the plans of the IGHQ at the start of the war.”¹² Furthermore, both operations plans “were adopted prior to the reaching of any conclusion regarding the overall direction of the war and direction of operations” for the next stage of the war.¹³

Parallel to and somewhat separately from the thrust from Rabaul into Eastern New Guinea, the Navy also began considering advances to Australia and as far as Fiji and Samoa. This was part of the broader issue faced by the Japanese of what to do after the First Stage Operations. This debate took place at two levels: the operational level, among the Army and Navy General Staffs and Combined Fleet staff, and at the national policy level, involving principally the Army and Navy General Staffs and ministries. The operational level debate began within the Navy as early as mid-December, and developed into discussions between the Army and Navy General Staffs in January and February 1942.

In January and February 1942, extended debates had taken place within the Imperial General Headquarters about what operations should follow the conclusion of the First Stage Operations, which were the operations carried out under the Operations Guidance Policy of November 6, 1941. That policy called for the quick overrunning and occupation of the so-called Southern Resources Area, after which Japan would establish a sustainable “long-term, undefeatable” condition. Britain would be defeated, with the help of the Germans, and the Japanese hoped that these two developments would make the Americans lose their will to fight Japan further. The Japanese realized that they could not directly force an American surrender by, for example, executing operations against the American mainland, so felt they had no choice but to create a situation which would make the Americans lose heart.

The Japanese Army and Navy General Staffs agreed that these should be Japan's strategic objectives. However, the two general staffs differed on how they should be achieved, i.e. the two services could not agree on what constituted the sustainable undefeatable condition, or where the defensive perimeter should be drawn. The IJA took a relatively conservative stance, and called for the consolidation of occupied areas and a return, at least by the IJA, to focusing on the war in China and preparing for a war against the Soviet Union¹⁴. Colonel Takushiro Hattori, who was chief of the all-powerful Operations Section of the General Staff, wrote after

¹¹ *Minami Taiheiyo Rikugun Sakusen (1)*, pp. 173-75.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 54-55.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

¹⁴ *Daihon-ei Kaigunbu Rengo Kantai (2)*, pp. 245, 247-49.

the war that the IJA's position was that the Japanese, "since we had assaulted and occupied the planned area, we should constantly adopt a steadfast attitude commensurate with our national strength, in particular our military strength, and plan for a strategy of 'holding in place,' and destroy the enemy as he counterattacks, thereby accomplish our objective of 'holding out.' This method has the defect of not enabling the quick end of the war. However, since Japan cannot count on positive measures to defeat the enemy, such as by invading the American mainland, this cannot be helped. This was the basic policy of the direction of the war and operations as was decided at the start of the war, and should not be changed lightly."¹⁵

This was not only a reflection of the IJA's traditional institutional interest, which focused on the Asian mainland, but also because they genuinely felt that the main strategic danger to Japan after the end of the First Stage Operations would come from Chiang Kai-shek, if he were allowed to continue the China War, and the threat from the Soviet Union.

Meanwhile, the Naval General Staff also embraced the November 6 strategy of establishing a strong, sustainable defensive perimeter and waiting for the Americans to lose their will to continue the war. However, it differed with the Army General Staff regarding the area to be included in the perimeter, or where the perimeter should be drawn. The Naval General Staff was well aware of the disparity between Japan and America's industrial strength, and clearly realized that Japan could not win a long war. Hence, a short war was the only option left. However, when a war with the Americans became a reality by mid-1941, the Naval General Staff also realized that the Japanese had no way of forcing the Americans into an early decisive battle which would suit Japanese needs. They therefore somewhat reluctantly agreed to the November 6 strategy of establishing a strong, sustainable defensive perimeter and waiting for the Americans to lose heart. However, the Naval General Staff felt that broad areas of the Pacific Ocean needed to be controlled in order to establish the "sustainable undefeatable condition." The Naval General Staff felt that Japan needed to expand its defensive perimeter because of the nature of naval operations, which involve large-scale fleet movements and deployments. The Naval General Staff therefore felt that drawing the defensive perimeter from the Japanese home islands through the Marshalls, then through Rabaul and westwards along the Malay Barrier, as the IJA favored, would be too constrictive. The Naval General Staff felt that the defensive perimeter needed to be pushed outwards, through further, localized offensive operations, even if Japan shifted to the strategic defensive.¹⁶

The Naval General Staff therefore proposed, among others, the invasion of Australia and operations to cut the line of communications between the United States and Australia, by occupying New Caledonia, Fiji, and Samoa. The purpose was not only to expand the perimeter in the South Pacific, but also to prevent Australia from becoming a base from which a major counteroffensive could be launched into the newly acquired Southern Resources Area, or northwards into the Mandated Islands. There was also the chance that Australia might be knocked out of the war, which would be a setback to the British.

¹⁵ Takushiro Hattori, *Daitoa Senso Zenshi* (Complete History of the Great East Asia War) (Hara Shobo, 1965), pp. 297-98.

¹⁶ *Daihon-ei Kaigunbu Rengo Kantai* (2), pp. 245-49.

The Navy's efforts to decide upon a strategy for the Second Stage Operations was complicated by the strategic preferences of Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto and the staff of his Combined Fleet. Yamamoto very strongly felt that a short war was the only hope that Japan had of winning, given the disparity in industrial capability between Japan and the United States. For that reason, Yamamoto did not believe in the November 6, 1941 strategy of establishing a sustainable "long-term, undefeatable" condition, because he believed that such a strategy would simply drag Japan into a long war which it could not win. Yamamoto felt the best way to achieve victory in a short war was to quickly win a series of decisive battles that would make the American people lose their will to continue fighting. In mid-December 1941, he therefore advocated an invasion of the Hawaiian Islands. The Combined Fleet staff, however, concluded that naval air forces could not be built up in time for a quick invasion of Hawaii, and proposed an invasion of Ceylon while the naval air forces were being strengthened. After that was secured, the Combined Fleet would then turn to Hawaii.¹⁷

When the Naval General Staff rejected both the proposed invasions Ceylon and Hawaii, Yamamoto and the Combined Fleet staff had to decide upon a new operations proposal. This was the genesis of Operation MI, the assault on Midway Island. The purpose of the operation, i.e. to force the American to commit their aircraft carriers to its defense and thus to force the Americans to fight the "decisive battle," is well known. It is important to note, however, that the Midway operation was not definitely intended to be a first step towards any invasion of Hawaii, at least when MI was conceived. It was proposed as a replacement for the Ceylon and Hawaii invasion operations when both were rejected by the Naval General Staff.

The Army and Navy General Staffs held numerous discussions in January and February regarding their operations plans for the Second Stage Operations. The IJA strongly opposed any invasion of Australia, because it would require 10 to 12 divisions. A further deployment of such a force would seriously weaken the IJA's strength in Manchuria and China. The IJA agreed with the IJN, however, on the strategic need to deny Australia to the Allies. When the Naval General Staff assured its IJA counterpart that Operation FS, as the plan to assault and occupy the New Hebrides, Fiji, and Samoa was named, would only require 9 or 10 infantry battalions, the IJA acquiesced.¹⁸

Meanwhile, the Army General Staff was becoming increasingly concerned that the Naval General Staff was trying to realize a de facto revision of strategy on the national policy level, which had been adopted on November 15, 1941.¹⁹ That document was titled the "Draft Plan for Terminating the War Against the British, Americans, Dutch, and Chiang," which called for the establishment of a sustainable impregnable condition, in other words, a strategic defensive in the Pacific Ocean after the conclusion of the First Stage Operations. At the request of Prime Minister Hideki Tojo, the Army and Navy general staffs and ministries therefore began discussions in February to determine what Japan's national policy should be after the First Stage Operations.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 246-47.

¹⁸ Hattori, pp. 314-15. *Minami Taiheiyo Rikugun Sakusen (1)*, pp. 123-26.

¹⁹ *Daihon-ei Kaigunbu Rengo Kantai (2)*, p. 250.

The result of these strategic deliberations regarding the next stage of operations was the “Outline for the Guidance of Future Operations,” which was adopted on March 7, 1942. The key clause read, “The expansion of current military successes will be continued, and positive measures will be taken when the opportunity presents itself while a long-term, undefeatable condition is established.” Because of this double-talking clause, the IJA felt its preference of consolidating the Southern Resources Area and adopting the strategic defensive had been authorized. The Navy, meanwhile could believe its preference for continuing local offensive operations had been approved.²⁰ As a result, Japan’s strategic focus split into three directions: the ongoing war in China; Operation FS, the assault on New Caledonia, Fiji, and Samoa; and Midway.

The Naval General Staff now proceeded with preparations for Operation FS, as well as Operation MO, the seaborne assault on Port Moresby. Interestingly, Yamamoto and the Combined Fleet, which had earlier doubted the efficacy of Operation FS and proposed that Japan merely destroyed the military facilities on both rather than fully occupy them, shortly turned in favor of FS. In return, Yamamoto received Naval General Staff approval for his Midway operation proposal, which the Naval General Staff had been opposed to.²¹

The objective for Samoa had been downgraded to the “destruction of (its) facilities” rather than a full occupation, but there was still little discussion on specific scenarios which might happen after New Caledonia and Fiji were occupied. The Japanese certainly did not expect the battles for the islands themselves to take more than several days, or a few weeks at most.²² There is also no record left of what problems, if any, they expected in supplying the garrisons on the two islands. Fiji is approximately 3200 kilometers (2000 miles) from Rabaul, and just over 4000 kilometers (2400 miles) from Truk. When one considers the difficulty the Japanese had in supplying Guadalcanal, which is just 1000 kilometers (625 miles) from Rabaul, it is hard to imagine that the Japanese could have adequately supplied Fiji once it became part of a combat zone.²³

Meanwhile, as mentioned earlier, Lae and Salamaua had been captured as planned in March, and Tulagi on May 3. The seaborne assault on Port Moresby, Operation MO, was halted, however, as a result of the Battle of the Coral Sea on May 6-7. One month later, the Midway operation ended in a major defeat and eliminated any possibility of further offensives in the Midway - Hawaii area.

As a result of the defeat at Midway, the IJN postponed Operation FS. After further studying the feasibility of the operation, both the Naval General Staff and Combined Fleet concluded that the state of naval air power after the Midway battle would be a major obstacle to the success of Operation FS. The Midway operation marked the first time that the IJN attempted to rely solely upon carrier based air forces to seize control of the air in an offensive operation. The outcome proved, in their eyes, that carrier air forces could not adequately subjugate the enemy’s land based air forces. The IJN therefore wanted to return to relying

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 285-93. Hattori, p. 295.

²¹ *Daihon-ei Kaigunbu Rengo Kantai (2)*, pp. 341-45.

²² *Daihon-ei Kaigunbu Rengo Kantai (3)*, p. 18.

²³ Ibid., pp. 19-20.

upon land based air forces to seize control of the air over their ground objectives, especially since that had proven to be the successful formula during the Japanese advances into the Netherlands East Indies during the First Stage Operations. However, the cumulative losses suffered by the land-based naval air forces since the start of the war, coupled with the inability of the aircraft industry to increase production to meet the IJN's increasing need for aircraft, meant that land based naval air forces were too weak to support a thrust towards Fiji and Samoa in the summer of 1942. Furthermore, there was little prospect that aircraft production could be increased rapidly. According to an officer in the Naval General Staff, aircraft "were in short supply, even under current conditions, and replacement (aircraft) are vital. Unless aircraft production reaches the necessary numbers, I do not have confidence in further operations."²⁴

On July 3, the Naval General Staff informed the Army General Staff that "Operation F (sic) cannot be carried out, mainly because of the aircraft problem." Three days later, the Naval General Staff officially cancelled FS. On the other hand, it also informed the Army General Staff of its intention to continue the effort to capture Port Moresby, this time via an overland approach.²⁵

The capture of Port Moresby thus became one of the main objectives for the IJN in the South Pacific following its defeat at Midway. The other was to strengthen its network of air bases in the area. In early May, when Operation MO was attempted, the Navy operated airfields at Rabaul, where it had two airfields, Lae, Sarmi (Gasmata), and Kavieng. Of these, however, only the airfields at Rabaul and Lae were capable of supporting major air operations. Operation MO revealed, among other things, that the air bases in the area were insufficient to permit the Japanese to adequately carry out reconnaissance and attack missions, a deficiency which was noted again during the planning for Operation FS. Even after FS was cancelled, the IJN continued to strongly feel the need for an improvement in its air base network in the South Pacific, in terms of both more and better airfields. The cancellation of Operations MI and FS freed up a number of construction battalions, which the IJN decided to use to improve its South Pacific airbase network. This effort was designated Operation SN, and its objective was to improve the airfields at Rabaul, Lae, and Kavieng, and the seaplane base at Buka, and to construct an airfield on Guadalcanal.²⁶

As is well known, the Combined Fleet intended to complete the Guadalcanal airfield by early August, but the Americans landed there on August 7, capturing the airfield. The subsequent Guadalcanal campaign, which lasted until early February 1943, was the final major event which fully expanded Japan's South Pacific campaign beyond anything that was expected at the start of the war. The IJA and IJN's initial response at the operational guidance level to the American assault on Guadalcanal was to recapture Guadalcanal, in particular Lunga Airfield, while simultaneously continuing the advance on Port Moresby, which had begun on July 21 with the landing of Japanese forces at Buna. However, as a result of the failure of the Ichiki Detachment's effort to recapture Lunga Airfield, followed by the difficulties encountered in the

²⁴ Diary of Sadamu Sanagi, reprinted in *Daihon-ei Kaigunbu Rengo Kantai* (3), p. 19.

²⁵ *Daihon-ei Kaigunbu Rengo Kantai* (3), p. 19.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 101-02.

Japanese efforts to reinforce the Ichiki Detachment in late August, the Japanese reconsidered their operational priorities in the South Pacific. At the end of August, the Japanese gave top priority to the Guadalcanal operation, halting the advance on Port Moresby until Lunga Airfield was retaken.

As the operational and strategic situation in the South Pacific quickly deteriorated, the IJN began to urgently ask for assistance from the IJA. The Army had been reluctant to commit major forces to the South Pacific, as can be seen in their opposition to the proposal to invade the Australian mainland. The reality of the situation on Guadalcanal, however, finally left the IJA with little choice but to commit more forces to the South Pacific. The decision to make these redeployments were made in a number of stages. Ground forces which were to be committed to Operation FS or MO, such as the Kawaguchi Detachment, were sent to Guadalcanal instead. In addition, forces which had taken part in the First Stage Operations (Southern Operation) and were scheduled to return to Japan, such as the 2nd and 38th Divisions, were also committed to the Guadalcanal operation. By November, the Army decided to commit its air forces to the South Pacific for the first time, redeploying the 6th Air Division and other units from the Asian mainland to Rabaul. It also established a new Area Army command (the 8th Area Army) and activated an additional Army command (18th Army) in the region. By the end of 1942, the IJA had thus established high level command organizations and committed major ground and air forces to the South Pacific, a region which until then had been considered the IJN's area of responsibility.

The IJN, too, reoriented its strategic focus in response to the Guadalcanal operation. After Midway, Yamamoto and the Combined Fleet had been planning further operations in the Indian Ocean. Those plans were cancelled, and the Combined Fleet was fully committed to the South Pacific for the first time in the war. The IJN had two major missions in the Guadalcanal operation, at least through mid-November. First, it had to support the Army by transporting and escorting reinforcements of men and supplies to Guadalcanal, and by providing naval air and, at times, surface gunfire support of Army operations on Guadalcanal.

Second, the Combined Fleet believed the contest for Guadalcanal could be used to draw the American carriers into battle, in which they would be destroyed.²⁷ However, it is unclear whether the Combined Fleet was anticipating an opportunity to merely reduce or possibly destroy the American carrier forces, or if it was hoping for a decisive battle with greater strategic implications, in other words, a war-ending decisive battle such as was projected in prewar planning to take place in the Central Pacific. The orders for the combat elements of the Combined Fleet in the Battle of the Eastern Solomons (August 1942) stated the objective was to "engage and destroy the enemy carrier fleet."²⁸ In the Battle of the Santa Cruz Islands

²⁷ War History Office, *Senshi Soshō Nantō-Hōmei Kaigun Sakusen (2) Ga-to Tesshū made* (Senshi Soshō, Southeastern Area Navy Operations (2) Until the withdrawal from Guadalcanal) (Asagumo Shinbunsha, 1975), p. 3.

²⁸ Support Force Operation Order No. 1, dated August 20, reprinted in *Daihon-ei Rengo Kantai (3)*, pp. 164-65.

(October 1942), the objective was given as “to engage and destroy the enemy fleet.”²⁹

Ryunosuke Kusaka, chief of staff of the 3rd Fleet (the Japanese carrier fleet) in both the Eastern Solomons and Santa Cruz battles, wrote in his postwar memoirs that the objective in both battles was to engage and destroy the enemy carrier forces, but again, was unclear about whether he meant a decisive victory which would end the war.³⁰ In comparison, Matome Ugaki, the Combined Fleet’s Chief of Staff, wrote in his diary on August 26 that “the securing of Guadalcanal has to come first, in the current situation, and it is necessary to put the destruction of the enemy fleet in second place.”³¹ This implies that the Combined Fleet was not thinking in terms of using the Guadalcanal operation to fight the decisive battle, but again, the evidence is inconclusive.

The Japanese thus expanded their perimeter in the South Pacific from January 1942, without a clear idea of the scale of forces that might ultimately be needed to defend the area, nor of how long or intense a struggle for control of the area might be. Initially, at least, the problem was not the lack of a strategic objective. The objective was the establishment of a “sustainable undefeatable” condition. The Japanese, however, could not define what constituted such a condition, and so in the South Pacific, the IJN proceeded to push the defensive perimeter outwards. After March 1942, Japan arguably lacked a clear strategy, and the IJN was able to continue its efforts to expand in the South Pacific, until the defeat at Midway and, more directly, the American landing on Guadalcanal put an end to any further Japanese advance. However, from then on, the Japanese had to commit ever larger forces, especially on the ground and air, on a scale which had not been foreseen in early 1942.

²⁹ Combined Fleet Operation Order No. 354 (dated October 25), reprinted in *ibid.*, p. 313. See also *Nanto-Homen Kaigun Sakusen (2)*, pp. 273-74, 282.

³⁰ Ryunosuke Kusaka, *Rengo Kantai Sanbo-cho no Kaiso* (Recollections of the Chief of Staff, Combined Fleet) (Kowado, 1979), pp. 162, 171.

³¹ Matome Ugaki, *Sensoroku* (Record of the War) (Hara Shobo, 1968), p. 176.