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William H. Bartsch, *Victory Fever on Guadalcanal: Japan's First Land Defeat of World War II*.

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On the night of 20–21 August 1942, some nine hundred men of the storied “Ichiki Detachment” of the Twenty-Eighth Infantry Regiment of the Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) attacked hastily prepared defensive positions of the First and Second Battalions of the First US Marine Division commanded by Maj. Gen. Alexander Vandegrift at the Ilu River on Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands. By 1700 hours on 21 August, the assault was over and Col. Kiyonao Ichiki and over seven hundred of his men lay dead after the first catastrophic rout of IJA forces in the Pacific War. Although the scale of the engagement was small, its psychological effect on the Japanese command was profound. Both sides now raced to reinforce their troops on Guadalcanal, as the struggle for the island—especially the airstrip at Henderson Field—intensified. Former UN development economist, independent consultant, and World War II historian William Bartsch¹ offers in his latest book a meticulously researched and detailed reconstruction of the “Battle of the Tenaru” (misnamed due to the poor maps available to both sides) based on the personal accounts of American and Japanese participants. Fourteen years in the making, the book seeks to clarify the tactical circumstances the two sides faced and to capture the human perspective on this nightmarish confrontation.

The great strength of the book is its attention to the tactical decisions made by the men on the spot who were leading the forces later rushed in by both sides to contest for control of Guadalcanal. To construct a balanced account of the Battle of the Tenaru, Bartsch did extensive spadework in identifying, locating, and contacting participants or their surviving families; this was much easier on the American side, since the Ichiki Detachment was all but wiped out. Thus, Bartsch cautions the reader that Japanese participants’ personal memories had to be “primarily gleaned from statements made to Susumu Sugawara for his 1979 privately published book *Ichiki Shitai zenmetsu* (Annihilation of the Ichiki Detachment), translated for me by Edward Rasmussen” (xv). In light of this limitation, Bartsch’s efforts to reconstruct events—in some instances minute-by-minute—are heroic.

The book contains ten chapters. The first four concern the abbreviated training of the Marine recruits at New River, North Carolina; the preparation and transport of the American and Japanese units to Guadalcanal; and the landing of both forces—the Marines on 7 August at Red Beach to the east of Lunga Point, the Japanese on 18 August at Taivu Point twenty-two miles to the east. The following six chapters analyze the events of the succeeding hours and days—from the Marines’ tortured advance upon and seizure of Henderson Field to the first encounter of opposing reconnaissance parties and the showdown of 20–21 August. The book features forty illustrations, including many photographs of key personnel, seven maps, extensive endnotes, a three-page glossary, a bibliography of published and unpublished sources, an index of military units, and a general index. *Victory Fever* will stand as the authority of record on the Battle of the Tenaru for the foreseeable future.

The book is a comprehensive indictment of the tactical incompetence of Colonel Ichiki and of the culture of the army that produced him. As more than one historian has noted, Ichiki was more a fanatic than a soldier. A former instructor at the IJA infantry school, he was fond of night attacks and bayonet assaults. As a company commander, he had triggered the attack on the Marco Polo Bridge that opened Japan’s war with

1. His previous books include *Doomed at the Start: American Pursuit Pilots in the Philippines, 1941–1942* (College Station: Texas A&M Pr, 1992); *December 8, 1941: MacArthur’s Pearl Harbor* (id., 2003)—winner of the Arthur Goodzeit Book Award; *Every Day a Nightmare: American Pursuit Pilots in the Defense of Java, 1941–1942* (id., 2010); and, with Abraham Felber and Franklin S. Felber, *The Old Breed of Marine: A World War II Diary* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2003).

China in 1937.² At Guadalcanal, Ichiki was the personification of the “old breed” of the IJA. When on 19 August a Japanese reconnaissance party was pinned down by a US Marine patrol and devastated by converging fire, Ichiki first realized that the American force on the island was likely bigger and better than he had anticipated (92–115). He nonetheless resolved to take Henderson Field with only nine hundred men of the first echelon of the two thousand at his disposal. He had faith that initiative and aggression could substitute for greater strength in manpower and vital equipment. The first echelon had been transported to Guadalcanal in six destroyers, a fatal mistake.

The fact that each destroyer was capable of carrying only 150 troops was the constraining factor in determining the size of the first echelon. Ordering destroyers as the means of transport automatically eliminated the three units of Ichiki’s detachment equipped with 75 mm howitzers or 37 mm antitank guns [the Regimental Gun Company (152 officers and men), the Rapid Fire Company (140 officers and men), and the 8th Independent Antitank Company (136 officers and men)] since the destroyers had neither the means to transport nor to offload such weapons. Only the Battalion Gun Platoon (48 officers and men) could be taken, as its two 70 mm guns could be disassembled. (77; bracketed inclusion Bartsch’s)

Ichiki’s overconfidence was not shared by the Marines on Guadalcanal, facing a foe whose fighting reputation had become mythic in the first months of the Pacific War. But the Marine defensive positions, though hastily prepared, were extensive enough in terms of both sheer firepower and the distribution of fields of fire that even a much larger force than Ichiki chose to deploy might not have fared much better. The positions had been chosen and prepared on the assumption that the Marines would be hard pressed to process was happening once the fighting began. The position of Cpl. Leroy Diamond’s Number 11 machine-gun squad, for example,

was well protected in the pit, around which a three-foot-deep trench had been dug with enough room for three men and the ammunition boxes. There were sandbags on each side and in front of the gun, with coconut logs on top, covered with additional sandbags. With Diamond, gunner Jack Rivers, and assistant gunner [Pvt. Al] Schmid in the pit, the other men of the squad were in individual foxholes dug in around the gun about ten feet apart, responsible for providing rifle protection for the gun crew against any attack by the Japanese across the river. The tripod of the gun rested at ground level on a shelf of dirt. A shamrock was painted on the gun for Schmid and the word *Chief* for Rivers. On each side of the gun, pointing out an opening below the log roof, final protective stakes were stuck into the ground to serve as guides to the distance the gun could traverse left and right when its locking device was released, should no one of the gun crew be able to see to fire the gun. (122)

Yet even after the first probing assault by Gorō Ohasi’s Second Platoon revealed the stoutness of the American defenses, Ichiki resisted Capt. Tetsurō Sawada’s suggestion that the main attack be delayed until an artillery barrage could first suppress the American firepower and enable the Japanese infantry to close en masse for hand-to-hand combat. Knowing his 75 mm guns had been left behind with his second echelon, Ichiki would not be deterred; “integrating such additional weapons had become part of the IJA’s doctrine since 1937, yet Ichiki held to the IJA’s earlier absolute faith in close fighting alone as the key to victory” (142–43, 227). Worse still, he did not so much as reconnoiter upstream on “Alligator Creek” where the Marine defenses were less dense. Firm in the delusion that he commanded an irresistible force, he shattered it against the strongest Marine defenses near the mouth of the creek. Only after a second attempt by lightly armed platoon-strength infantry failed, did Ichiki agree to bring up heavy machine guns and his two 70 mm guns to support a full-strength effort.

Although the Marines immediately felt the new vigor of the Japanese assault, only the confusion of close-in night fighting made them wonder whether they might be overrun. By dawn, it was evident that Ichiki’s soldiers had been comprehensively cut up by every caliber of Marine weapon. Concentrated in a

2. See Richard B. Frank, *Guadalcanal* (NY: Random House, 1990) 145–46, and Meiron and Susie Harries, *Soldiers of the Sun: The Rise and Fall of the Imperial Japanese Army* (NY: Random House, 1991) 401.

small rectangular area just off shore extending for a mile to the east of the mouth of Alligator Creek, they awaited annihilation.

On the morning of the twenty-first, Companies A, B, C, and D of the First Battalion, supported by a platoon of M2A4 light tanks, moved east across the dry bed of the upper Ilu River, then swung north to envelop the Japanese between the beach and the Marine defenses on the lower Ilu. Very few Japanese chose to surrender—some even faked death in order pull the pin of a grenade to kill Marines stooped over them. The counter-assault rapidly became a slaughter. Tanks rolled over the remaining Japanese machine-gun positions, while Marines pumped rounds into fallen Japanese soldiers. The water off shore became “discolored from the blood of fallen Japanese littering the mouth of the Tenaru and the adjacent beach” (212). General Vandegrift and his staff were baffled by, though rather grateful for, the tactical rigidity that had led Ichiki, now dead by suicide, to so wantonly squander the lives of his seasoned troops.

Bartsch’s epilogue identifies five critical errors of judgment by Ichiki that doomed his detachment: 1) he attacked before he could be reinforced by his second echelon; 2) he relied on lightly-armed infantry to spearhead his attack; 3) he attacked the Marines’ defensive strong point; 4) he never seriously considered an assault upstream at a weaker point; and 5) he did not commit his machine guns and 70 mm guns at the outset (224–27).

For their part, Vandegrift’s troops, “a force of predominantly very young men—teenagers for the most part—whose training had been shortened at Parris Island and aborted in New Zealand and who had never faced combat before proved a match for the highly trained and indoctrinated Japanese soldier in fighting capability and acts of bravery often involving hand-to-hand combat, in which the Japanese regarded themselves as the masters” (228). The skills and experience of the Japanese infantrymen at the engagement were mostly negated by the orders of their criminally negligent commander and the firepower advantage of their opponents:

The vastly superior firepower of the Marine defenders, provided by their 37 mm antitank guns, 81 mm mortars, 75 mm pack howitzers, and .30- and .50-caliber machine guns overwhelmed the Japanese attackers. Indeed, recalling the events of forty-five years earlier, Colonel [Edwin A.] Pollack maintained that “our [81 mm] mortars did more damage to the Japanese than [the weapons of] any other unit,” due the mortar men’s ability to “fire close in.” (228)

The Battle of the Tenaru, Bartsch asserts, set the terms of fighting for the remainder of the Pacific War. The Marines now knew that, however implacable their foe, his astounding willingness to accept high casualties might be the key to his ultimate defeat.

Bartsch might have done more to situate the battle in its broader strategic context by noting that, after the night-time naval Battle of Savo Island on 9 August (63–66), Vandegrift’s Marines quite rightly felt abandoned by the US Navy and that the Japanese navy did not exploit its victory by attacking American supply or pounding Marine positions ashore. Both navies temporarily withdrew, leaving their respective armies alone on the island to fight it out in a microcosm of the Pacific War. After their disastrous rout on the Ilu, the Japanese again launched night-time frontal assaults against Marine positions on Edson’s Ridge in September 1942. At this point, Japan’s navy was conducting night attacks with great effect, while its army relied on the cover of darkness and raw courage against automatic weapons, mortar, and artillery—to little avail. Japanese commanders’ repeated underestimation of American strength and morale and overestimation of their own men’s native virtues, show that Ichiki’s attitude was deeply rooted in the Imperial Japanese Army. Seen from this perspective, the struggle over Guadalcanal foreshadowed much yet to come on the atolls of the Western Pacific.³

William Bartsch has made a valuable contribution to our understanding of the Guadalcanal campaign, especially of the psychological condition and the tactical reasoning of the American and Japanese soldiers involved directly in the fighting. Scholars of the Pacific War generally, or of the US Marine Corps or the Imperial Japanese Army specifically, will profit from reading *Victory Fever on Guadalcanal*.

3. Frank (note 2 above) 604–9.