Was the “island hopping” of the U.S. Marines in the Pacific theater an effective strategy?

**Viewpoint:** Yes, U.S. Marine strategy in the central Pacific kept the Japanese off balance and effectively isolated island defenders during the American advance toward Japan.

**Viewpoint:** No, resources given to the island-hopping campaign could have been better spent supporting the U.S. Army’s advance through the Philippines, the D-Day invasion of Normandy, and a submarine blockade of Japan.

The tactics of the U.S. Marine Corps in the island-hopping drive across the central Pacific were controversial even during World War II. Critics, including elements of the U.S. Army, argued that the Marines knew only one way to fight—direct assault, cost what it might. They pointed to the losses at Tarawa (20–23 November 1943), with a thousand dead the price of a few acres of coral; cited Iwo Jima (19 February–16 March 1945), where more than a third of the Marines committed were killed or wounded; and emphasized Peleliu (6 September–13 October 1944), where the 1st Marine Division was bled white because of the alleged bloody-mindedness of its commanders.

Marine Corps tactical doctrine reflected a prewar strategy based on a main-fleet advance across the central Pacific. That understanding meant clearing Japanese air and submarine bases from the line of advance and seizing staging points for the next phase of the offensive. Success depended first on getting ashore as quickly as possible: a landing was most vulnerable when the men were on the way to the beach. It then depended on completing the operation expeditiously, because the landing force’s naval component was significantly vulnerable to air, surface, and undersea counterattack as long as it was tied to the shoreline.

Operational requirements thus fostered a mentality that encouraged speed and shock as opposed to finesse. This mindset was reinforced by the nature of the battlefields. Atolls and islands offered no room for maneuver. Japanese defenses survived the heaviest air and naval bombardments; Japanese garrisons did not surrender. In those contexts it was arguably the better part of tactical effectiveness to take a week’s casualties in a day and finish the job. The alternative too often resembled testing the speed and sharpness of a moving buzz saw.

By the time the Marines left the “coral war,” their regimental officers and old hands in the rifle companies were conditioned to favor the direct approach, dismissing alternatives as wasting time and lives in the long run. If anything, moreover, Japanese defenses and determination increased as the Marines came closer to the home islands. By the end of the war, Marine Corps identity was strongly predicated upon what had begun as a tactical approach but became a way of war and a source of identity.
Viewpoint:
Yes, U.S. Marine strategy in the central Pacific kept the Japanese off balance and effectively isolated island defenders during the American advance toward Japan.

On one level the performance of the U.S. Marine Corps in the Pacific War was—literally—the stuff of which legends were made. From Wake Island, through Guadalcanal and Tarawa, to the epic flag-raising on Iwo Jima, the Marines built a deserved reputation as elite shock troops to match any in the world. Yet, as the war progressed, Marine achievements acquired a shadow. From second lieutenants to three-star generals, Marine officers were accused of sacrificing more men than necessary to achieve their objectives. “See the pillbox—take the pillbox” was presented as the limits of Marine tactical sophistication. Operationally, critics argued, the Marines knew only one way to fight: frontal attack, with firepower and maneuver replaced by the blood of teenage volunteers who were the backbone of the rifle companies.

The argument did not lack for illustrations. More than a thousand Marines died in three days on Tarawa (20–23 November 1943). A full division was broken on Peleliu (6 September–13 October 1944). Three more divisions were so shattered on Iwo Jima (19 February–16 March 1945) that they never fought again. More, however, than lists of dead and wounded were involved. The place and performance of the U.S. Marine Corps from Guadalcanal (7 August 1942–February 1943) to Okinawa (1 April–2 July 1945) involved questions of strategy, force structure, and ethos at national levels far above the interservice rivalry that allegedly led one senior army general to dismiss Marines as “a bunch of beach runners,” while his Marine counterparts consistently seemed to affirm the Army’s fighting power with their tongues more or less visible in their cheeks.

The place of the Marines in the Pacific was above all a consequence of the decision to mount a two-pronged drive against Japan, one based on Pearl Harbor and the other in Australia. Purists have criticized the decision on strategic grounds. In policy terms, however, it was an updated application of Carl von Clausewitz’s dictum on the appropriate relationship between military operations and national decision making. Not U.S. planning, but Japan’s offshore, then completing the operation rapidly enough to restore the fleet’s freedom of operation against air and naval counterattack. For the Marines, the best defense was a good offense. Their own losses were projected as likely to be lower if their tactics were aggressive. More to the point, however, a naval defeat could easily leave the landing force hopelessly isolated. That fear came sufficiently close to being reality on Guad-
Marine doctrine and culture were sustained by the nature of their opposition in the first stages of the central Pacific campaign. They were attacking small islands and atolls, whose garrisons often fought to the last man. There were few opportunities for tactical sophistication. Command devolved downward, from divisions to regiments and companies, with senior officers more engaged with driving and reinforcing their subordinates than in planning the next stages of operations that had no future stages, but merely ended once the island was overrun.

The Marine paradigm began to shift with the invasion of the Mariana Islands in the summer of 1944. On one hand, the Navy was by then in a position to stay; on the other, the islands to be conquered were larger. Saipan and Guam were division- and corps-level battles. Marine inexperience with that scale of war manifested itself most spectacularly in the behavior of General Holland M. “Howlin’ Mad” Smith, who capped his frustration by relieving an army subordinate for slow progress. Some of Smith’s Marine subordinates, however, openly argued that the Tarawa model was not relevant to the new conditions. By 1945 the Marines adjusted accordingly. Marine contributions to Iwo Jima and Okinawa were administratively and operationally sophisticated. Marine tactics were no whit inferior to the Army’s in their synergy of firepower, maneuver, and fighting spirit. Marine casualties were high—but the Japanese had something to do with that.

Ironically, the Marines’ very success in meeting the changing terms of the Pacific War left them vulnerable to two other criticisms. One was that they had emerged as America’s version of the Waffen SS (Combat SS)—not in the sense of being racist militarists, as implied in such works as Craig M. Cameron’s American Samurai: Myth,
From 20 to 23 November 1943, U.S. Marines fought a brutal battle against Japanese troops on Tarawa atoll in the Gilbert Islands. Richard W. Johnston, a journalist with the Associated Press, filed a report of the battle, excerpted below.

The Japanese soldiers are not surrendering, but are beginning to commit hara-kiri. There is every indication, however, they will fight to the end from strong positions and that many more American boys will die before the last Japanese are driven from Tarawa.

No victory in American military history was ever attained at a higher price. . . .

The sweet, sickening smell of death literally permeates the blasted, shell-torn beaches, scarred blockhouses and riddled plateau topped by splintered, topless coconut trees on this tiny island—only two and one half miles long and 800 yards wide. . . .

Dead Japanese are everywhere, in blockhouses, in the surf and scattered among tattered palm fronds which they have used incessantly as cover for sniping.

The assault was made against three designated beaches by three battalion landing teams going shoreward through a lagoon on the north coast of the fortified air base island of the Tarawa atoll.

These battalions and others supporting the three landing teams went shoreward in Higgins boats and other landing craft under cover of naval and air attacks, but they encountered ferocious fire from Japanese shore batteries and emplacements, of which few were affected by the bombing and shelling.

A shelving reef hung up most of the Higgins boats and wave after wave of infantry had to struggle 500 yards through water neck deep under a murderous Japanese barrage. At low tide many of their bodies dot the reef. . . .

In the initial landings at 8:30 A.M., November 21, one of the three landing teams was so powerfully opposed that only two companies were able to land. They held a beachhead seventy yards wide for more than twenty-four hours.

I landed at the center beach under Major Henry Pierson Crowe, 44, and like the Marines, I had to walk 500 yards shoreward under a machine-gun crossfire.

Because of the low altitude of the island, which is under ten feet above sea level at all points, it was impossible to secure any point against enemy fire. Throughout the last sixty hours, and probably through the next sixty, Japanese snipers have been taking, and will take, a heavy toll.

From the outset the Japanese fought with amazing fury and even now with occasional surrenders and hara-kiris there is no indication of mass surrenders or evacuation. Instead the indication is the Japanese will fight to the death, which means they will make a vicious defense of an area more than a mile long and subject only to frontal assault and naval and aerial bombardment. . . .


Imagination, and the Conduct of Battle in the First Marine Division, 1941-1951 (1994), but rather in the sense of being a second army that in this case drained not equipment but personnel from its larger counterpart. For half the war the Marines had been an all-volunteer force. Even after the Corps began accepting draftees, its reputation as the best of the best continued to attract teenagers who wanted to fight. Given initial projections of a 250-division army, that claim to fame had not mattered too much. Given the ninety-division force structure finally accepted, however, the six Marine divisions arguably represented an inappropriate concentration of fighting power. Related to that was what might be called a distinctive Marine mind-set uncomfortably at home with face-to-face killing. After 1945 the Marine Corps confronted both arguments: the first by standing on its record, the second by citing the nature of war. Their success, while outside the direct scope of this essay, reflects achievements during World War II that on any fighting front were matched by few and exceeded by none.

-DENNIS SHOWALTER, COLORADO COLLEGE
Viewpoint:
No, resources given to the island-hopping campaign could have been better spent supporting the U.S. Army’s advance through the Philippines, the D-Day invasion of Normandy, and a submarine blockade of Japan.

In 1941 the Marine Corps was a branch of the U.S. military system waiting for a mission. Its older, original purpose, to provide boarding crews and shipboard security for naval officers was obsolete even by the time of the American Civil War (1861–1865). After World War I (1914–1918), there was serious debate about the complete abolition of the Marine Corps, until a small group of Marine personnel developed the doctrine of direct amphibious assault against fortified positions. Thus a mission was created for a service branch threatened with extinction. It led, however, to a costly strategy that took the Corps from Tarawa (20–23 November 1943) to Iwo Jima (19 February–18 March 1945) during World War II.

New Marine doctrine, with its emphasis on specially designed ships such as the LCT (Landing Craft, Tank) and LST (Landing Ship, Tank), the concept of “combat loading,” (stowing a ship so that supplies immediately needed, such as ammunition, were quickly available instead of giving priority to weight distribution), and the development of a logistical system for rapid off-loading and deployment of men and matériel had a profound impact on the outcome of World War II. The evolution of this doctrine made Operation Overlord (6 June 1944) possible.

Yet, between the Army and Marines, there was a key difference in operational and tactical concepts. Marine doctrine taught that the moment an amphibious operation was launched, the supporting fleet was at its most vulnerable, locked into a static position until the objective was taken and a base secured for the docking of ships. In addition, air superiority had to be achieved by the rapid construction of air bases, thereby freeing carriers from their support role, with the additional benefit of providing a secondary means for the inputting of supplies and personnel.

Therefore, regardless of losses, the assault must press forward with all possible speed, hence the reliance on direct frontal attacks. Army doctrine placed a greater emphasis on securing a beachhead; the buildup of fire support and land-based air support; and then a safer, but slower advance dependent on superior firepower. In short, Marine doctrine directly traded lives for the speedy taking of the objective; the Army was willing to take more time to achieve the same objective, believing that the support fleet could, if need be, take care of itself without serious loss.

This belief shows the traditional fault line between services. The Marines being, at least on paper, a subsidiary branch of the Navy would, of course, have a doctrine that placed supreme emphasis on the protection of naval assets, even if it meant higher ground-based casualties. The Army, in contrast, held as a primary concern its own personnel and objectives, therefore the Navy was supposed to be in the support role. These doctrinal differences would result in several serious clashes between commanders and staff in combined Army-Marine-Navy operations, such as at Saipan (15 June–9 July 1944) and Okinawa (1 April–2 July 1945). Beyond the dispute regarding tactical and operational techniques there was a far broader debate: was the best road to Tokyo from the south—coming up through New Guinea, to the Philippines, then Okinawa and finally to the main islands of Japan—or across the central Pacific?

The merits and drawbacks of each plan are well known. It was, as well, a debate of personalities, pitting General Douglas MacArthur against Holland M. “Howlin’ Mad” Smith of the Marines and Admiral Chester W. Nimitz of the Navy. President Franklin D. Roosevelt solved the debate in typical American fashion, through a compromise: both approaches were used. MacArthur would have control of the southern route, with the Navy in a subsidiary role, while the Navy and Marines controlled the central route, with the Army in a supplemental role. The question this compromise left unanswered though is simple: was there a better way?

Many argue that the compromise strategy kept the Japanese off balance, forcing them to spread resources across two broad fronts of operations and leaving them guessing as to the true axis of the advance. Consider the following scenario, however: the green light for a Marine Corps operation across the central Pacific is not given, and all emphasis is placed, instead, on MacArthur’s campaign from the south, with a scaled-back Marine Corps placed in a support role. The strategies of the two service branches would have been drastically altered.

The large scale, specialized logistical support needed for Marine operations would have been diverted elsewhere if the historic central Pacific campaign had not gone forward. It can-
not be emphasized enough just how complex was the logistical and industrial demands of this campaign. Landing craft requirements alone, both for Europe and the Pacific, were so intense that they received the highest production priority, higher even than for aircraft or submarines. Intense bureaucratic battles raged in the Pentagon between the Army, with its emphasis on Europe and MacArthur’s objective, and the Navy as to where these craft were to be sent. The Navy won: the much sought-after LVTs (Landing Vehicle, Tracked) became the sole possession of the Marines, much to the detriment of Army troops who had to storm the beaches of Normandy aboard the “tincan” LCIs (Landing Craft, Infantry). Had the Army instead received the resources given to the Marines, it would have sped up the assault on Festung Europa (Fortress Europe) and most definitely added greater punch to the campaign through the Solomons, New Guinea, and then on into the Philippines.

This change would have had a significant impact on the timetable of the European invasion. One of the primary reasons for the postponement of the D-Day invasion from April or May, to June, was to allow an additional two months of specialized production in landing craft. Without that production the first-day assault forces would have been cut by more than 20 percent. The original Overlord plan of launching a near simultaneous assault on the coast of southern France had to be scrapped as well, with that landing not occurring until August. It should be noted that in the same month as the assault on Normandy another amphibious campaign in the Pacific started against Saipan (15 June–9 July 1944), Guam (21 July–10 August 1944), and Tinian (24 July–1 August 1944).

It is interesting to speculate what might have happened if even half the assets involved in those landings had been committed to Europe instead. One could conceive of a scenario that might have put the Allies into Paris by early July and to the Rhine before winter, perhaps even initiating a final collapse of Germany before the Russian spring offensive of 1945. The postwar implications are profound. In the South Pacific, even with but half of the additional resources freed from the central Pacific it is possible to consider that MacArthur might have been six months, perhaps even nine, ahead of the historical schedule.

As to the supposed diversion of Japanese resources by the two-front operation, they would have been locked into defending the central Pacific anyhow. The Japanese grand strategy of seizing an outer perimeter, digging in, and holding until America was exhausted from losses was already in place long before the U.S. strategic response was set in motion. The Japanese troops were there, and there they would stay. Minor diversionary operations would have kept them locked in place. Japanese placement of thousands of troops on hundreds of islands across the Pacific in 1942–1943 is a forgotten aspect of the war. The majority of them never fired a shot. More Japanese soldiers died of disease and malnourishment, trapped in forgotten and bypassed garrisons, than were killed by all the Marine assaults of World War II. Regardless of whether the Marines were storming Tarawa or Iwo Jima, the Japanese garrisons in the central Pacific would have been there nevertheless—rotting, cut off, and forgotten while American troops sliced into Japan three thousand miles behind them.

Another factor in this equation, often forgotten by the proponents of the direct Marine assaults, is the submarine war. Plagued by doctrinal problems and faulty torpedoes (U.S. torpedoes were equipped with a detonator that almost inevitably failed to explode and had a disturbing tendency to circle back on the firing submarine), the undersea service had a minimal impact during the first two years of the Pacific War. By the middle of 1944, however, the problem with the torpedoes had finally been solved, despite military inefficiency and bureaucratic bungling of the worst kind. Operational doctrine was changed as well, freeing submarines from wasteful picket and defensive duties. The Navy had a wealth of experience from combating German U-boats in the Atlantic but failed miserably when it came to applying that knowledge offensively in the Pacific. When doctrinal changes were at last implemented, including the use of wolf packs, the impact on Japan was stunning.

One should remember that by the end of the first year of the war in Europe the Germans, with less than a hundred U-boats, had all but paralyzed England. In the months after America’s entry into the war, less than two dozen U-boats created havoc along the eastern seaboard. When the reorganized and properly armed U.S. submarine fleet was finally cut loose in 1944, Japan began to starve. The submariners’ efforts have often been ignored when compared to the far more “glamorous” and photogenic Marines. Until it was far too late, the Japanese failed to develop an effective convoy system. Their antisubmarine technology was woefully inadequate when compared to the Allied “wizard war” during the Battle of the Atlantic.

Japan, even more than Britain, was totally dependent on import of nearly everything,
from coal and iron ore, to food, aluminum, rubber, and even the cloth for uniforms. Unlike Britain, however, Japan did not have a powerful oceangoing ally who could ship supplies to it no matter what the cost.

Advocates of the submarine school argue that if but a fraction of the matériel committed to supporting the Marine assaults had been diverted instead to the manufacture of subs and effective torpedoes, Japan as a military entity would have been paralyzed by the end of 1944. The starvation of Britain in 1940–1941 had been a near-run thing; with Japan it would have been a foregone conclusion by the end of 1944. Combining this improved submarine effort with a unified front advancing from the south, and thus cutting off crucial imports of oil, rubber, and food supplies, the war in the Pacific might have ended even before the fighting in Europe. This conclusion would have had profound implications for the postwar world, blocking the entry of Russia into Korea and Manchuria. That denial of Russian participation in the final campaign of World War II the Orient might have changed all the tragedies that followed for American foreign policy in East Asia, and may have, as well, avoided the use of atomic weapons.

—WILLIAM R. FORSTCHEN, MONTREAT COLLEGE

References

Alexander, Storm Landings: Epic Amphibious Battles in the Central Pacific (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1997);
Craig M. Cameron, American Samurai: Myth, Imagination, and the Conduct of Battle in the First Marine Division, 1941–1951 (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994);