Proposal

for a Thesis in the Field of History

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Master of Liberal Arts Degree

Harvard University
Extension School
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I.

Tentative Title

I propose to title the thesis “The Naval Battles for the Solomon Islands: The Significant Lessons Learned by the United States Navy and Applied Throughout the Campaign.”

II.

Research Problem

Many notable authors, such as Samuel Eliot Morison, Ronald H. Spector, and Edwin P. Hoyt, have written accounts of the naval battles of the Solomon Islands, often providing blow-by-blow chronologies of the actions. Each author describes the battles in detail and discusses the ships and planes lost in action. These accounts briefly mention American errors in strategy, tactics, weapon design, and deployment, but almost all accounts fail to detail what was learned from these errors, what training improvements were achieved, how plane and ship construction was altered, and when the results of these lessons were put into action.

Historian and author Samuel Eliot Morison is unquestionably the foremost expert on the naval history of World War II. In his work *History of United States Naval*

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Morison provides in Volume 5 a chronological account of the naval battles that supported the Guadalcanal campaign. He expends great energy and exacting effort to ensure accuracy of detail. Each engagement describes ship and plane movements in graphic detail. Names of various officers and sailors, along with their accomplishments or failures, are well documented. Yet, he too makes relatively few comments regarding the lessons learned from the battles or their impact on future battles of the campaign.

Using Morison’s chronology as a basis, the thesis will take his work a step further. It will address the significant lessons the United States Navy learned and applied throughout the battles of the Solomon Islands. I will investigate the following questions: How did the campaign affect the combat loading of ships and the landing of supplies? How was the use of radar improved throughout the campaign? What improvements were made in naval firefighting and damage control? How did the United States develop better tactical use of destroyers and cruisers? What improvements were made in the development and deployment of torpedoes? How did these battles affect ship and airplane construction programs?

My hypothesis is that as a result of inexperience, poor training, faulty weapons, and inadequate planning, the United States Navy learned many valuable but costly lessons. Throughout the campaign the Navy gradually made improvements and

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modifications based on learning from these mistakes. Naval command and individual officers developed better training, communication, organization, and operational planning based on these battles. In the United States, the experience of veterans was instrumental in designing better ships and planes. Success was aided by the United States possessing both the desire and the means to make these rapid advancements, while the Japanese often lacked both. By the conclusion of the naval battles of the Solomon Islands, the United States Navy had made dramatic improvements in various areas of naval warfare and set the stage for future successes in the Pacific.

To test this hypothesis, I will use Morison’s seminal work *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II*, specifically volume 5, *The Struggle for Guadalcanal*. I will follow his chronological approach to battles of the Solomon Islands, with specific focus on the significant lessons the United States Navy learned and applied throughout the battles. I will compare and contrast primary and secondary sources through the use of Naval Action Reports and military documents relating to various battles. I will also consult civilian sources that address these specific topics in order to provide further technical and statistical details.
III.

Definition of Terms

“The Naval Battles of the Solomon Islands”: the significant battles between the Allies and the Japanese in support of the ground offensive of Guadalcanal. These battles are:

- The Invasion of Guadalcanal  
  August 7-8, 1942
- The Battle of Savo Island  
  August 9, 1942
- The Battle of the Eastern Solomons  
  August 24, 1942
- The Battle of Cape Esperance  
  October 11-12, 1942
- The Battle of the Santa Cruz Islands  
  October 26-27, 1942
- The Naval Battle of Guadalcanal  
  November 12-15, 1942
- The Battle of Tassafaronga  
  November 30, 1942
- The Battle of Rennell Island  
  January 29-30, 1943

IV.

Background

At the onset of World War II, Samuel Eliot Morison was a Professor of American History at Harvard University. He believed that too often history was written from an outside perspective, and that the history of the war should be written first-hand while the events and memories were still fresh in the minds of participants. Following the Japanese attack on the United States naval base at Pearl Harbor, Morison suggested this idea to
President Roosevelt. With presidential approval, Morison was made a Lieutenant Commander in the United States Navy and ordered to active duty. He began to work on what would become the *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II*, his fourteen-volume masterpiece.

After Pearl Harbor, America was torn between two areas of operational focus. Roosevelt had agreed to put Germany first and take a defensive position in the Pacific. In the spring of 1942, the Japanese drive in the Pacific had basically halted. America’s main goal was to hold the U.S./Hawaii/Midway line as a solid defense. But after the invasion of the Philippines and the Battle of Midway, both the United States and Japan turned their focus on the Southern Pacific.

In March 1942, Roosevelt met with the Joint Chiefs to discuss plans for the Pacific. Admiral King and General MacArthur agreed that a two-prong attack in the southern Pacific was necessary to break through the Bismarck Archipelago and retake the Philippines. The Army and Australian forces would move up through New Guinea, while the Navy and Marines would handle the Solomons.

The Japanese planned to build island airfields to replace carriers lost at Midway. They built a seaplane base on Tulagi, across from Guadalcanal. If left unchecked the Japanese would control the entire region and threaten Papua, New Guinea, Australia, Samoa, and even New Caledonia. On June 13, 1942, the Japanese Naval General Staff decided to build an airfield on Guadalcanal, only nine days after the heavy losses suffered

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at Midway. The six-month land battle of Guadalcanal became the first major ground offensive in the Pacific. The Navy’s role in support of the ground operation led to the engagements that collectively became known as the Naval Battles of the Solomon Islands. Which each major battle came losses and lessons for navy, as well as, specific questions that I propose to answer through my thesis research.

The Invasion of Guadalcanal

During the initial landing at Guadalcanal, the most serious error was the failure to properly combat-load the ships. The haphazard loading meant the toilet paper was loaded on top of ammunition, medical supplies were mixed with rations, and fuel was dumped at points marked for water. The mistakes were compounded by poor training and organization of the beach parties responsible for actual unloading. The supplies on the beach were piled poorly, and the entire unloading process was confused and congested. Many boats circled in the water waiting to find a spot to land. By the end of the first day, only 25 percent of the cargo had been unloaded. This chaos and poor planning cost the Marines dearly in the days to come.

But it was the overall organization, leadership, and training of the men on the beach that was seriously lacking. Just over a month later, on September 18, with the landing of the 7th Marine Regiment at Lunga Roads, Morison stated it was conducted in the “most orderly fashion of any debarkation to date. Tanks, vehicles, weapons, bullets, food, fuel, and assorted supplies along with nearly 4000 men were landed in twelve
hours.”

How did the Marines improve the combat-loading of the ships? What plans were put in place to better organize the landing zones on the beach? How did the training improve to prevent a repeat of earlier mistakes?

The Battle of Savo Island

It is easy to see why Morison called this “one of the worst defeats ever inflicted on the United States Navy in a fair fight.” Successful damage control and firefighting can often mean the difference between saving or losing hundreds of lives—even the ship itself. Following the horrible defeat of Savo Island, many improvements were made that dramatically improved damage control. Morison writes: “all inflammable furniture and bedding were ordered ashore, and every ship in the Navy was ordered to scrape down her interior to bare steel; day and night for the rest of 1942, sounds of chipping hammers were never still.” Did the battle of Savo Island actually precipitate the removal of wooden furniture, linoleum, and flammable bedding? Was this action taken on all American warships? What materials were found as replacements? How did this result in improving the success of damage control?

Morison also mentions an improvement in firefighting equipment. He says, “improved firefighting equipment such as a fog nozzle, which poured a cooling

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6 Morison, Two-Ocean War, 167.

7 Morison, Two-Ocean War, 177.
quenching mist on the flames, far more effective than solid streams of water.”

Where and when was this nozzle created? Did it specifically come into service as a result of the battle of Savo Island? Did it become standard equipment on all American warships? Was the training significantly altered with the new firefighting tool? How did it affect damage control success in future battles? Commenting on the Battle of Tassafaronga, Morison believed the battle brought about major improvements in the junior officers’ and sailors’ ability to fight fires. Morison states, “Minneapolis, New Orleans and Pensacola would have been lost had they received similar damage four months earlier.”

The Battle of the Eastern Solomons

Regarding the battle of the Eastern Solomons, Morison wrote: “The Pacific Fleet profited much from the study of this engagement by tacticians and technicians. Immense carrier-pilot training programs and fleet-carrier building programs were already under way, and any practice or information was sure to count in the end.” What specific lessons were taken back to the United States and incorporated into future training? How did the training improve? What new features or improvements were made to carrier construction as a result of this battle? Did these improvements prove successful in future battles?

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8 Morison, History, 5: 64.


The Battle of Cape Esperance

The night battle of Cape Esperance provided an excellent lesson in the use of radar. The old versions of the eccentric-type radar were common on American ships, but the Japanese had radar receivers capable of detecting these transmissions. Morison points out that a newer “radar was just putting in its appearance in the Fleet. It became a scourge of the enemy, but Helena and Boise were the only ships in Scott’s force so equipped, and few commanders as yet realized it potentialities.”11 How did the two types of radar differ? How were the officers and sailors being trained to use the new radar? Did its use in the battle of Cape Esperance affect its further implementation into the fleet?

A second lesson coming out of the battle arose out the tragic amount of destruction that resulted from friendly fire due to poor ship identification during battle.12 The ships used search lights and recognition lights to identify each other, but these lights could also be seen by the enemy. Why did the commanders fail to make better use of the new radar for ship identification? How did the outcome of the battle help commanders and gunners to recognize friendly ships in the future? How did these losses alter training and operational planning? Morison mentions that “later commanders learned that proper use of radar could eliminate the search lights and recognition lights which attracted


enemy gunfire as a candle attracts moths.”

How did commanders employ the new radar technology? Was it successful in future battles?

A major tactical mistake of this battle was the belief that a long, single-column formation of ships was appropriate. It actually kept American destroyers from using their torpedoes effectively, and placed the destroyers in the way of cruisers when gunfire was required. It would take another defeat before commanders would begin to learn effective destroyer-cruiser formations. How did this battle specifically affect the operational planning for future battles? What were the results of continued single-column formations? When did the Navy begin to consider alternatives, and how successful were they?

The Battle of the Santa Cruz Islands

One fault of the Japanese was their failure to return veteran pilots to Japan for supplemental training purposes. Instead, veteran Japanese pilots remained in action until they were killed, which resulted in a constant stream of inexperienced replacements. The American Navy used its battle veterans to aid ongoing pilot training in the U.S.

In the Battle of Santa Cruz, Morison mentions briefly that “the main reason the enemy seemed less efficient in the air was an improvement in American fighting

\[13\] Morison, History, 5: 170.

\[14\] Morison, History, 5: 170.
technique, both in the air and on deck.\textsuperscript{15} Morison does not elaborate on the new techniques. What specific lessons were the veterans teaching new pilots? How quickly was updated information reaching pilot training programs? How did the veteran pilots’ experiences bring about improvements in the new aircraft that was being built?

The second major failure in the Battle of the Santa Cruz Islands centered on U.S. inability to properly conduct torpedo attacks. Again, Morison mentions the problem but does not adequately address its solution. America lacked a top-quality torpedo and the training to effectively use it. When did the Navy make improvements to its faulty torpedoes? Why was the U.S. so slow to learn the tactics of proper torpedo attacks? How did the outcome of this battle aid the future use of torpedoes?

The Naval Battle of Guadalcanal

During this battle, the single-column formation was used again since it appeared to be successful at Cape Esperance. However, according to Morrison:

\begin{quote}
A long column helped one to navigate restricted waters and facilitated communications between ships. Unfortunately, the three cruisers and two destroyers that mounted the latest search radar were not placed in lead positions; anti-aircraft cruiser \textit{Atlanta} with inferior radar steamed ahead of flagship \textit{San Francisco} and the rear destroyers were in no position to join the van in a torpedo attack.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{15} Morison, \textit{History}, 5: 223.

Operational planning appeared to grossly overlook the specific capabilities of the ships. If torpedoes are used before gunfire, shouldn’t destroyers always precede cruisers? During the Battle of Cape Esperance only two American ships were fitted with the new SG radar. At Guadalcanal, five American ships had the new radar, yet they were again under-used. When the battle began, San Francisco ordered “Odd ships commence firing to starboard, even ships to port.” According to Morrison, “This order added to the confusion, in ships which could not see or bear on targets on their designated sides but could see targets on the opposite sides, and it took no account of variations in gun caliber between ships.”

The Battle of Tassafaronga

Morison describes this operational plan, noting:

taking heed of errors in previous battles, it divided the force into one destroyer group and two cruiser groups, each including at least one ship fitted with SG surface search radar. In night action the destroyers stationed on the engaged bow of the cruiser column would use their radar advantage to deliver a surprise torpedo attack, then clear out to prevent fouling their own cruisers, which would try not to close within 12,000 yards of the enemy and would hold their gunfire until the destroyer’s torpedoes were at or near their targets. Use of search lights was forbidden and recognition lights were to be used only to check fire by friendly ships.


It finally seemed that the previous lessons were beginning to make their way into operational planning.

The battle, however, was a disastrous defeat. The most notable reason was that the destroyers waited too long to launch a torpedo attack, and then fired from excessive ranges. In addition, Morison states, “American commanders of cruiser-destroyer task forces had the bad practice of tying their destroyers to a cruiser column instead of sending them off on an independent torpedo shoot before the gunfire was opened.” This was a pitiful loss for the U.S., which suffered three damaged cruisers and one sunk. The Japanese only lost one destroyer, *Takanami*.

In January 1943, the Japanese appeared to be reinforcing the island. In fact, they planned a massive evacuation, and they brought in carriers, battleships, destroyers, and transports to help. American intelligence spotted these ships, and Admiral Halsey ordered four transports to Guadalcanal as bait. One of the war’s worst intelligence failures occurred at that time, and the Japanese managed to evacuate 11,000 men right under the noses of the U.S. forces. The Pacific Fleet lost twenty-four ships, including two carriers. Excluding transports, each side lost exactly the same number of combat ships, but the United States could replace its losses Japan could not.

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V.

Research Methods

My research methods will consist of comparing and contrasting primary and secondary sources. I will use *The Struggle for Guadalcanal* (Vol. 5) by Morison as the foundation of my research. I will draw upon Naval Action Reports and military documents relating to the various battles. I will use civilian sources that specifically address topics such as combat-loading of ships, landing beach logistics, use of radar, naval firefighting and damage control, destroyer-cruiser formations, pilot training, carrier construction, and torpedo use and design.

VI.

Research Limitations

The main limitation of this thesis is the specific Battles of the Solomon Islands. I will use Morison’s chronological approach followed in *The Struggle for Guadalcanal* as the basis of my research. I will restrict the research to the naval combat lessons that were learned during these battles. I will also restrict my findings to specific improvements or modifications that resulted from these lessons, highlighting those that were implemented during the same campaign.

I now reside in San Diego, California. As a result, contact with my thesis director will be slightly limited. I am confident that with e-mail and scheduled telephone calls we can maintain efficient and effective communication. I will arrange my schedule to
coordinate telephone conferences. However, if it is necessary, I will not hesitate to fly to Boston.

VII.

Tentative Schedule

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<tr>
<td>Initial submission of proposal</td>
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<tr>
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<td>August 15, 2000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Submission of proposal for final revisions</td>
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<td>April 1, 2001</td>
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VIII.

Working Bibliography

I. Works Cited


II. Works Consulted


III. Works to Be Consulted


