

Future War in the Pacific? Think Guadalcanal, Marine Corps Planners Say



F4F Wildcat fighters of the U.S. Navy and Marines lined up on Henderson Field on Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands, Jan 1943. United States National Archives

ARLINGTON, Va. – The challenge a peer competitor like China poses in a future conflict across the Indo-Pacific region bears striking similarities to the war between the United States and Japan in the same battlespace more than 75 years ago, say two top Marine Corps planners.

Japan in 1941 was a near-peer adversary of the United States, with advanced technology, expansionist policies and a bullying attitude toward neighboring countries, says Major Gen. Gregg Olson, director of the Marine Corps Staff. While the foes and times have changed “the concepts and realities of war in the vast distances that occur in the Pacific remain the same,” he added.

Like the Marines who landed on Guadalcanal in August 1942, today’s Marines will face the same sweeping distances, vulnerable supply lines, contested air, sea – and now cyber – space limitations, across a battlespace of scattered, remote islands of steaming jungle or barren volcanic rock. “That’s the framework for the next conflict,” Olson told the virtual Modern Day Marine Exposition Sept. 23.

Victory on Guadalcanal and the rest of the Pacific came “at the cost of capital ships and thousands of lives,” Olson noted. Another speaker at the conference, Major Gen. Paul Rock, director of Marine Corps Strategies and Plans, said high casualties could be likely again. “Attrition is going to be a factor in a future fight,” Rock said.

While that may prove true, the Marines are not resigned to taking the same heavy casualties they suffered in the Pacific island-hopping campaign of World War II, Gen. David Berger, the commandant of the Marine Corps, insisted a day later.

Others in and out of uniform have expressed concerns about casualty rates in an Asia-Pacific conflict given, China's anti-access/aerial denial weapons platforms. Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Charles Brown told Military Times recently that war with a peer adversary could see "combat attrition rates and risks – that are more akin to the World War II era than the uncontested environment to which we have become accustomed." Even Berger's Force Design changes to meet the expected challenges of 2030, concedes there is no avoiding attrition. "In contingency operations against peer adversaries, we will lose aircraft, ships, ground tactical vehicles, and personnel," it states, adding that force resilience – to absorb loss and continue to operate decisively – is critical.

"No, we're not resigned to high casualties, but we should not think that in a Great Power competition it's going to be clean," Berger said in livestreamed interview with Defense One on Sept. 24. Without mentioning China or Russia, Berger said neither side was "looking for a strength-on-strength fight, at all. We're not looking for a fight, period." Instead, Great Power adversaries will be using technology and other assets to target each other's weaknesses to exploit them. Although there will be casualties "if it comes to a scrap," he added.

The force in the Pacific will be distributed, Berger said, not to avoid creating an easy target for a knock-out blow – a tactical concern – but operationally, to be able to observe adversaries from every direction in every domain. That Berger said, also makes it very difficult for an adversary to focus their strengths.