



Cape Gloucester is located at the northwest corner of New Britain and is part of the Bismarck Archipelago. (Click on the map for a much-better view.) It is near the Solomon Islands (which include Guadalcanal, depicted at the lower right corner of this map).

To get a sense of the Pacific's vast expanse, we can view a map of the continental U.S. superimposed on a map of the Pacific southwest (where many World War II battles were fought). The map (Plate 12, at page 41 of the *Reports of General MacArthur, Volume I*) reveals that even distances between islands were often significant.



Why did anyone care about these hot, malaria-infested places? General MacArthur believed capturing Cape Gloucester, and other island locations with good harbors, was indispensable for his plan to recapture Japanese-occupied sections of the Philippines:

Although the reduction of Rabaul was an important goal, MacArthur was also interested in obtaining bases to support his drive toward the Philippines. All the military services, and especially the Allied navies, required logistical bases to resupply their forces, repair their equipment, treat their wounded, and support their fighting elements. The Admiralty Islands, within the Bismarck Archipelago, contained an excellent harbor that could fulfill those needs. (See Bismarck Archipelago, by Leo Hirrel, at [pages 4-5](#); from the Center of Military History.)

What were conditions like at Cape Gloucester?

Like much of the southern Pacific, the Bismarck Archipelago consisted of volcanic islands with steep mountains, dense jungles, and malaria-breeding swamps. Temperatures were hot, softened only by torrential rains and often dense cloud cover. Governed by Australia before the war, the population consisted almost exclusively of native islanders. A few coconut plantations and missionary settlements reflected inroads of western civilization, but for the most part the islands remained primitive. (Hirrel, [pages 5-6](#).)

Why was the Bismarck Archipelago, including Cape Gloucester, important to Japan?

The Japanese Eighth Army headquarters directed operations in the archipelago. From Rabaul, it controlled all Japanese Army forces in the Solomons, New Guinea, and the Bismarcks. By late 1943, following the series of defeats which had begun in Papua and Guadalcanal and continued through the battles for North-East New Guinea and the Solomons, the Japanese adopted a posture of strategic defense. Constant reinforcements brought the strength of the Rabaul garrison, the southeast anchor of their defensive perimeter, to over 90,000 men by February 1944, and additional units defended the outlying islands. (Hirrel, [page 6](#).)

MacArthur ordered the taking of Cape Gloucester as part of [Operation Dexterity](#). He thought the Japanese defenses would be light:

General MacArthur decided formally to open the campaign, Operation DEXTERITY, with December assaults on the western tip of New Britain. Possession of this area would provide the Allies with Cape Gloucester and the small harbor of Arawe, facilitating control of the Vitiaz and Dampier Straits. Local beaches were suitable for amphibious landings, and Japanese defenses were expected to be light. (Hirrel, [page 7](#).)

MacArthur and the Allies misjudged the Japanese defenses. They were not light:

The assault began on 15 December 1943 and almost immediately encountered severe difficulties. Japanese machine gunners spotted the rubber boats and sank almost all of them. The soldiers of A Troop were forced to abandon their equipment and swim for their lives. Sixteen were killed and seventeen wounded in this abortive attack before naval gunfire could silence the Japanese machine guns.

Meanwhile, the main attack, employing conventional landing craft less susceptible to damage from machine gun fire, also ran into problems as successive landing waves became separated and confused. Nevertheless, superior Allied firepower forced the numerically inferior Japanese to retreat. By midafternoon the Americans controlled the peninsula. (Hirrel, [pages 7-8](#).)

It was not the end of the battle for Cape Gloucester, however. The Japanese continued to fight:

Although they lost the opening battle, the Japanese did not concede Arawe to the Americans without further struggle. Beginning on the afternoon of the invasion, 15 December, and continuing for the next several days, they launched furious air attacks, especially targeting ships that had supported the assault. In addition, two nearby Japanese infantry battalions advanced on Arawe and dug in just beyond the American perimeter. (Hirrel, [page 8](#).)

A stalemate ensued, requiring combat leaders to send in American Marines:

The tactical situation rapidly degenerated into a stalemate as the Americans and Japanese probed each other's lines. American strength and the natural defensive terrain along the base of the Arawe peninsula rendered the U.S. lodgment relatively secure for the moment, but American commanders could not feel comfortable with an entrenched enemy just outside their perimeter.

To break the stalemate without incurring excessive casualties, Krueger [Lt. Gen. Walter Krueger] landed a Marine Corps tank company and additional infantry to reinforce the 112th Cavalry. (Hirrel, [page 9](#).)

The 1st Marines - veterans of the Battle for Guadalcanal, including Robert Leckie (featured in the HBO series "The Pacific") - were assigned the job. Facing a very difficult task, especially because the hard-fighting Japanese wanted to "[control the night and the jungle](#)," the 1st Marines landed at Cape Gloucester the day after Christmas, 1943.



Arriving, according to the U.S. National Archives, the "Marines hit three feet of rough water as they leave their LST [landing crafts] to take the beach at Cape Gloucester, New Britain." (The photo - 127-G-68998 - was taken by Sgt. Robert M. Howard, on December 26, 1943.)

Beyond dealing with night-long battles, the Marines had to cope with Cape Gloucester's terrible winter weather. Day after day of monsoon rains flooded the kitchens (causing the men to eat watery soup) and flooded the rearward tents (for those fortunate-enough to sleep in tents instead of outdoor hammocks covered with mosquito netting).



Bernard Nalty tells us that Cape Gloucester was a "Green Inferno" where:

Wet uniforms never really dried, and the men suffered continually from fungus infections, the so-called jungle rot, which readily developed into open sores. Mosquito-borne malaria threatened the health of the Marines, who also had to contend with other insects—"little black ants, little red ants, big red ants," on an island where "even the caterpillars bite."

The Japanese may have suffered even more because of shortages of medicine and difficulty in distributing what was available, but this was scant consolation to Marines beset by discomfort and disease. By the end of January 1944, disease or non-battle injuries forced the evacuation of more than a thousand Marines; more than one in ten had already returned to duty on New Britain. (Nalty at Section 6, "The Capture of the Cape Gloucester Airfields.")



A Marine commander likened the Marines' predicament at Cape Gloucester to a famous Civil-War battle:

The island's swamps and jungles would have been ordeal enough without the wind, rain, and disease. At times, the embattled Marines could see no more than a few feet ahead of them. Movement verged on the impossible, especially where the rains had flooded the land or turned the volcanic soil into slippery mud.

No wonder that the Assistant Division Commander, Brigadier General Lemuel C. Shepherd, Jr., compared the New Britain campaign to "Grant's fight though the Wilderness in the Civil War." (Nalty at Section 6, "The Capture of the Cape Gloucester Airfields.")

See, also:

Cape Gloucester - Wounded Marines - Video

Cape Gloucester - Ill and Exhausted Marines - Video

Battle of Cape Gloucester - Marines Land and Fight

Cape Gloucester - Japanese Positions, 1943 Battle

Cape Gloucester - Marine Machine Gunners

Image and Brief Bio: Robert Leckie

Credits:

Map and quotations from "Bismarck Archipelago - The U.S. Army Campaign of World War II," online courtesy the U.S. Army Center of Military History.

Externally linked maps - from Reports of General MacArthur, Volume I - in order of appearance, above:

1. Plate 12 - "The United States Superimposed on the Southwest Pacific Area" - at page 41;
2. Plate 1 - "The Japanese Conquests which Isolated General MacArthur's Forces in the Philippines" - at page 1; and
3. Plate 2 - "The Japanese Invasion of the Philippines and the Forces Employed" - at page 5.

Images from "Cape Gloucester: The Green Inferno," featured above:

"The monsoon rains flood a field kitchen at Cape Gloucester, justifying complaints about watery soup." Department of Defense (USMC) photo 72821; and

"Flooding caused by the monsoon deluge makes life miserable even in the comparative comfort of the rear areas." Department of Defense (USMC) photo 72463.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/Battle-of-Cape-Gloucester-Purpose-of-the-Fighting1>

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Media Stream



WWII - Beach Landing at Cape Gloucester

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Cape Gloucester - Soggy Tents

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