Before The Americal: Task Force 6814 and Saving America’s Asian Empire, 1940-1942

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Before the Americal: Task Force 6814 and Saving America’s Asian Empire, 1940-1942

Before the Americal: Task Force 6814

Walter W. Walt, Jr. (1916-2006) served in the American Division from the moment it was created in New Caledonia in May 1942. Drafted in October 1941, and inducted into active service on 17 November, Walt was in training in Virginia as Task Force 6814 was forming in mid-January 1942. A Californian, he was assigned to the Massachusetts National Guard’s 101st Medical Regiment, Company C, which included the 254th General Hospital (Massachusetts) and the 132nd Infantry Regiment (Illinois), embossed from New York in late January 1942, reached Australia in late February, and landed at New Caledonia on 12 March 1942. The task force was joined in April by the 16th Infantry Regiment (North Dakota). With these three National Guard regiments at its core, the Americal Division was established in May 1942 on New Caledonia under the leadership of Task Force 6814 commander Alexander Patch. General Patch, and Walt’s unit, arrived on Guadalcanal in early December 1942 with the last echelon of the Americal Division to reach the still-embattled island. Walt, who was awarded the Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Medal, left Guadalcanal on 25 May 1943 for the United States. He, like General Patch, went on to serve in the European Theater. Walt was discharged from active duty on 12 August 1945.

Dawn in the Pacific

We saw Walter from our room at the Royal Hawaiian, a solitary figure on the beach at sunset. His tales were full of drama, action, and meaning. But he never talked about himself, about his personal story. Walter was always interested in the individual soldier and in the armed forces, the military, and the war. He was not interested in himself or his personal story. He was interested in the stories of others, in the stories of the soldiers who fought in the war. He was interested in the stories of the soldiers who fought in the war.

Inducing Walter Walt

Walter Walt was the son of a German father and an American mother. He was born on 12 May 1916 in Frankfurt, Germany. He was the youngest of five children. His father was a lawyer and his mother was a teacher. Walter was a quiet, reserved child who did not talk about himself very much. He was interested in the stories of others, in the stories of the soldiers who fought in the war. He was interested in the stories of the soldiers who fought in the war.

Globalizing the European Conflict

In May 1940, Germany attacked France and the French state and military collapsed. The Vichy regime, beholden to Berlin, took power on 10 July 1940. Germany, Italy, and Japan formalized their military alliance with the Anti-Comintern Pact in September 1940. The Western powers in Europe were on the defense. The French empire and diplomatic and military structures were under threat. The Treaty of Versailles. German imperial ambitions, and the French empire and diplomatic and military structures were under threat.

The last echelon of the Americal Division reached New Caledonia on 25 May 1943 for the United States. He, like General Patch, went on to serve in the European Theater. Walt was discharged from active duty on 12 August 1945.

The first letter, dated 20 January 1942, was written by the day Walter boarded the St. Elena, one of the seven ships of Task Force 6814 soon after his arrival in New Caledonia. The last letter, dated 21 June 1943 and describes Walter’s arrival back in the United States after his long voyage across the Pacific Ocean from Guadalcanal. There were no letters from New Caledonia and Guadalcanal. Could fill in this gap, wondered, from March 1942 to October 1943. Walter’s album was clearly a labor of love, and an object of great meaning and significance to him.

Our visits were too short, and Walter Walt and I never had time to spend together with his album. And he rarely talked about the war. Walter Walt was a quiet, reserved child who did not talk about himself very much. He was interested in the stories of others, in the stories of the soldiers who fought in the war.

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on their behalf in the South Pacific. The Australian government, tentatively, and the urban colonial elite leaned toward Vichy France, it was its agrarian rural elite, the British nudged New Caledonia toward their corner. While New Caledonia's mining interests. But the rarer, and strategically-important minerals nickel and chrome, were mainstays of the island's mining economy, and these were held firmly by Western economic interests. And yet the West cared in 1940–neither Britain nor the United States answered the plea for help from the Vichy governor-general of Indochina after Japan's incursion into northern Anchorage, and Japan's military cut supplies to Chiang Kai-shek. Only the Burma Road was left. No pretense could be given to Japan to launch a pre-emptive strike, military or otherwise, and take control of New Caledonia as it had the Vichy governor-general in Indochina promised Japan these riches and more in July 1941, soon after Japan's army had moved into southern Indochina. The United States reacted immediately, freezing Japanese assets in the United States, and suspending trade with Japan.

The shadow war in the South Pacific was coming into the light of day as the stages were raised. In late September 1941, Japan convened a short conference of allies, including the Free French National Committee represented by General de Gaulle. Mindful of the increasing importance of his Pacific colonies, de Gaulle offered the British access to New Caledonia's nickel and America. And New Caledonia was the largest and most strategically important of these French possessions. This was certainly the argument made by the French naval officer in Saigon who telegraphed his ideas to Vichy in February 1941: dispatch a Vichy naval expeditionary force to New Caledonia and seize the renegade colony from the grasp of the Free French. But no action was taken and the shadow war continued. The formal diplomatic and the United States military personnel had already been in New Caledonia assessing its military assets, a mission taken without the permission of the island's Free French governor. These reports were sent to Washington, D.C., where a recent Harvard Ph.D. in French history, David Pinkney, had been searching for a job. And a two-page-report on New Caledonia he wrote for the Coordinator of Information, William J. Donovan, who reported directly to President Roosevelt.

The defense of New Caledonia--and most strategists argued that it should be defended--was America's temporary responsibility. Within twenty-four hours American military ships, including the four in New York already being loaded with troops bound for the relief of British and American colonies, sailed for the Coral Sea, was about 1,600 miles from Noumea at the time. The Japanese took Rabaul, a natural harbor with an airfield in New Home Islands that must be protected. On 23 January 1942, the American consul carried credentials granted by the Vichy French military mission to the Free French. Roosevelt and de Gaulle still eyed one another with caution as Roosevelt continued with his conference. Meanwhile the New Caledonian tendency for imperialism to be a zero- sum game, de Gaulle jealously guarded all shares of Free French sovereignty that he could. Looking to the post-war future, he wanted to insulate, as did his British ally, French colonial banks and he would do so. The interests of his metropolitan France, even if only an aspirational government-in- exile in London, were paramount. Hints of de Gaulle's anti-Americanism, or even his Free French pride or pride at risk, were evident from the beginning of this conference, as the Free French were asked by de Gaulle. And now the strategic importance of the South Pacific, and New Caledonia? After conferring with Commonwealth military planners asked in the midst of the conference, defend New Caledonia.
one of the ships of the task force, had the Pacific, the men of the St. Elena, February 1942. On their way across arrived safely in Melbourne on 26 escorting of Task Force 6814, which Lexington was saved, and resumed its air battle taking place over them. The Lexington cheered their pilots in the 20 February 1942. The men of the carrier-type planes of the war on Lexington in the first battle involving bombers, eighteen in total, attacked the task force and soon two waves of But Japanese scout planes discovered USS Lexington planned a diversionary Australia at the end of February, the Pacific fell to the newly-appointed Admiral Chester Nimitz, whose Pacific fleet had been stationed in Hawaii since 1940. Admiral Nimitz dispatched two fast-carrier task forces, however, challenged Japan in the South Pacific in northern Thailand in 1973. He teaches Chinese history and “WWII: The Pacific War” at Western Washington University. He would like to thank Walter Walt’s son Christopher, Americal’s first commander, Walt Patch, who would later become the Lieutenant General. The author enlisted in the U.S. Air Force (1970-1974) and served a tour of duty in (Editor’s note: This article is part 2 of remembrances of the author while serving with 1st/20th Infantry Battalion of the 11th Light Infantry Brigade as a Radio Telephone Operator (RTO). Part 1 appeared in the Jan-Feb-Mar 2020 issue of the Americal Journal) Raid on the Bicycles The area around LZ Liz was always ripe for enemy activity. That’s because Highway 515 ran north of our hill and the enemy used that road as a resupply route to support the NVA in the mountains. We would monitor that area all night long and fire artillery to try to interdict their resupply efforts. There was hilly terrain around LZ Liz (not the triple canopy jungle we had around LZ Cork, but plenty of cover and concealment) and so the NVA and VC could move quite a bit of equipment and troops. We would also put recon out there all the time to try to interdict the enemy’s resupply efforts. We got word from MACV who told our battalion commander the enemy was using bicycles, mopeds and motorcycles from the hamlets to move supplies up and down Highway 551. So we landed next to some hamlets on the commander’s bird and he told me to confiscate all the bikes, motorcycles, etc. and bring them back up the hill. I told him I would need to get some help so I got some recon platoon friends and we loaded everything we could find in the village’s The threat of Japanese sea-and-air attacks kept Task Force 6814’s track to Melbourne well south of the area displayed on this map. Admiral Nimitz’s fast-carrier task forces, however, challenged Japan in the South Pacific in early 1942.