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Roger R. Thompson
Western Washington University, thompsr8@wwu.edu

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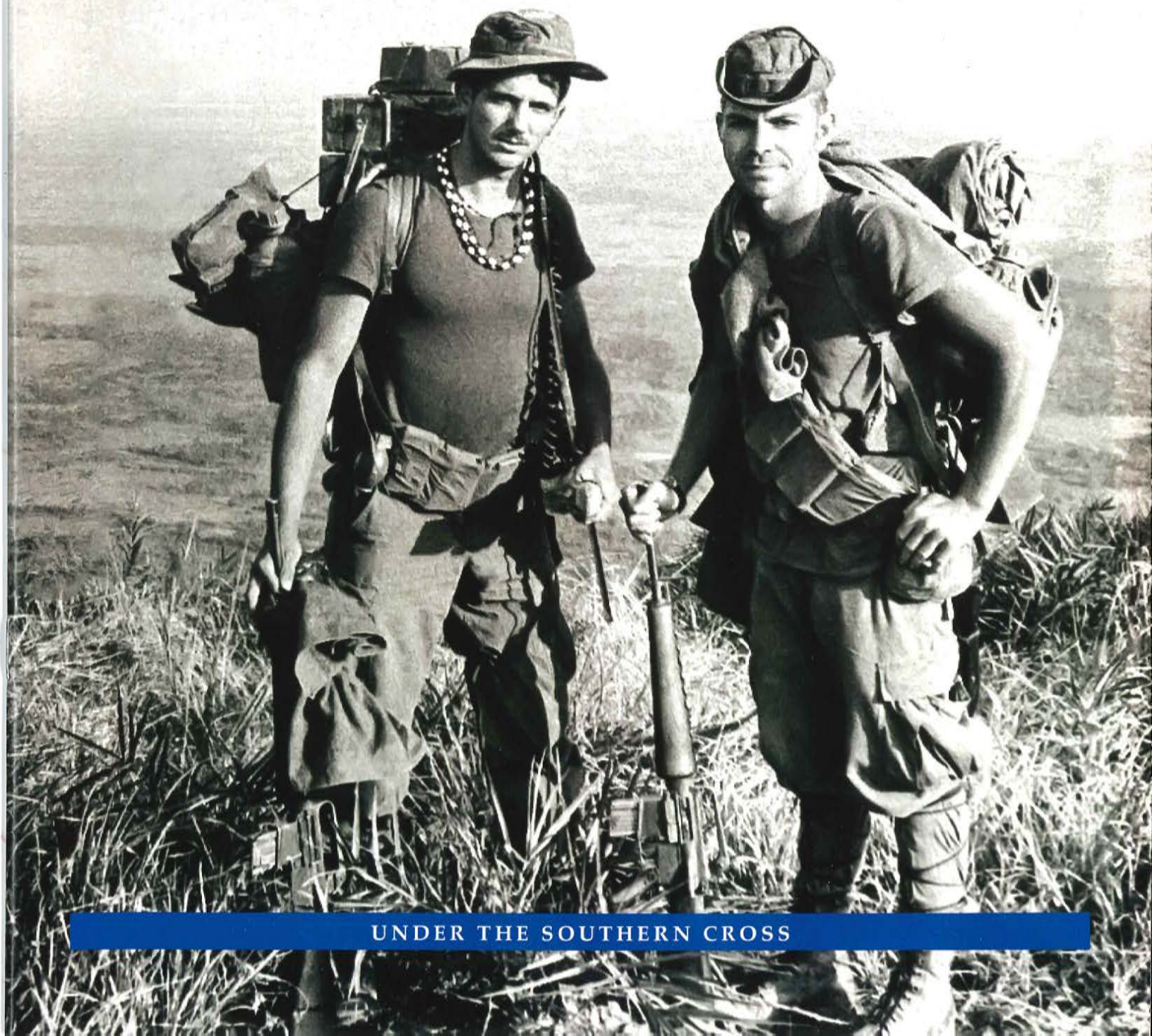


UNDER THE SOUTHERN CROSS

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

Roger R. Thompson, PhD

(Contributing Editor's Note: Before the Americal in Vietnam was the historic formation of the Americal on New Caledonia after it arrived as Task Force 6814. But what were the conditions that shaped the Task Force to come to that part of the world which sealed the legacy of the Americal as a jungle-fighting infantry division? This article gives you the unique background to what was to become "The Americal Story.")

Introducing Walter Walt

Walter W. Walt, Jr. (1916-2006) served in the Americal 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 I. Task Force 6814, which included the 182nd Infantry Regiment (Massachusetts) and the 132nd Infantry Regiment (Illinois), embarked 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 164th Infantry Regiment (North Dakota). With these three National Guard infantry 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 empty beach at Waikiki, watching another dawn in the Pacific. My wife Melissa's first instinct was to rush down to her 83-year-old father and make sure he would be OK, but she left him to his thoughts and solitude. We were on holiday with Walter, and his wife Dorothy, who had invited us to join them as they celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary in 1999.

We did all the usual tourist activities, including a trip to the USS Arizona memorial at Pearl Harbor. All was going smoothly as we pulled into the parking lot, when quietly and firmly, Walter and Dorothy said: "We'll wait for you here. You two go on. We'll be fine." We gently protested, but to no avail. Nothing more was said, then or later. Why wouldn't they join us? I've been trying to answer that question ever since. I still have questions for Walter and Dorothy, but like so many of their generation, time has silenced their voices. As I write this in April 2020 in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, I cannot even visit my father, my first World War II vet. But we still talk, and I continue to ask questions.

"The Pacific War" is one of the courses I teach at Western Washington University. Every time I teach this course I think about Walter, who served in the South Pacific in 1942-43, and I think about Dorothy, whose first husband was killed in action in the Pacific. I also think about the sixteen million Americans who wore a uniform during World War II, and I think about a civilian population mobilized for "total war." I think about the estimated seventy million persons, military and civilian, who perished in the war; at least a third of these deaths were in Asia, where millions starved to death. The scale of World War II is almost too much to imagine. And so when I teach the Pacific War, I also try to make it personal for my students. We start with their family histories; I sometimes share a few of Walter's stories. Shortly before he died in 2006, Walter brought out for the last time--although we did not know that--his World War II album. Full of photographs and other items, 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 and I never had enough time to spend together with his album. And he rarely talked about the war. He still suffered from malaria; he had nightmares. But for the most part his memories were kept private. Walter was not unusual; America's World War II veterans often put the war behind them and focused their energies on families and careers as the post-war boom began in the 1950s.

When I began dating Walter's daughter in 1975, his war was only three decades distant. The fall of Saigon had just brought to a tragic end America's role in Vietnam. I was a freshman at Stanford University and I rarely mentioned my four years in the Air Force; I never talked about what I did in northern Thailand during the Vietnam War. But I did share this with Walter; I thought it might be a way for us to connect. Perhaps it did, but it is also possible Walter might not have understood why anyone would enlist. He was drafted when he was twenty-five, and went on active duty just before Pearl Harbor, one of the million or so men drafted in the first fifteen months of America's first peacetime draft; And then, Pearl Harbor. We served America in Asia in two very different wars, Walter and I, but it was a bond.

About forty-five years after we met, and over a decade after Walter's death, the time had come to go to the storage locker where Melissa and I had placed the boxes we packed up after Walter's death in 2006. I had remembered a large envelope with an inscription in Walter's hand that I thought was war-related. Last summer I located it--the envelope read "Contents: Letters sent home from service in army, Ribbons etc., Discharge copy"--brought it home, and opened it up for the first time. There was a small envelope with medals and patches, including a patch with a striking design: a cluster of four white stars in a cross design on a dark-blue background. And then the treasures Walter had never mentioned to his son Christopher or his daughter Melissa: Two letter-diaries written to his mother before and after his service in New Caledonia and Guadalcanal.

The first letter, dated 20 January 1942, was written the day Walter boarded the St. Elena, one of the seven ships of Task Force 6814 soon to leave the Brooklyn Navy Yard. The last letter is dated 21 June 1943 and describes Walter's arrival back in the United States after his long voyage across the Pacific from Guadalcanal to San Francisco.

But there were no letters from New Caledonia and Guadalcanal. Could I fill in this gap, I wondered, from March 1942 to May 1943? I had the album photos and ephemera from his time on the two islands, but little else. In ways that have astounded me in recent months, I found I could indeed fill in these gaps. And when I completed this extraordinary journey, I discovered that Walter and I shared the experience of two young Americans in Asia that links his service in New Caledonia with my tour in Thailand. We were connected by the French, their empire, and the United States that first came together in fateful ways in 1940. The consequences of that fraught relationship continued until 1975, transforming in turn my generation. One early consequence is the Americal Division, the only infantry division formed and trained overseas on foreign soil and the United States Army's only "named" division. The Americal Division, book-ended by Task Force 6814 in World War II and Task Force Oregon in the Vietnam War, has an extraordinary history that resonates in profoundly important ways in the histories of the United States, Asia, and the world. Let us turn to these histories.

Globalizing the European Conflict

In May 1940, Germany attacked France and the French state and military soon sued for peace. The Vichy regime, beholden to Berlin, took power on 10 July1940. Germany, Italy, and Japan formalized their military alliance with the signing of the Tripartite Pact in September 1940. The European crises was now a global crisis as the Japanese and Italian empires established common cause with Germany, whose empire had vanished two decades earlier under the terms of the Treaty of Versailles. German imperial ambitions had now returned to dominate the world stage two decades after the Great War; once again a world war loomed.

Although the French state had surrendered to German might, the French empire and diplomatic and military forces abroad had not. Diplomats, admirals, and generals, including one Charles de Gaulle, had to decide whether or not the newly-established Vichy government was the legitimate representative and defender of French sovereignty. Most obeyed orders from Vichy, but de Gaulle was one of the "Free French" contenders who did not. He would become, eventually, the symbol of Free French resistance to Hitler's Germany. And while there was not much de Gaulle could do in France itself, he had all of the French empire to appeal to in the dark days of 1940. French colonial officials and military leaders throughout their empire tended to hew to the lines established by the Vichy administration in France--French Indochina is a good example--but de Gaulle's blandishments resonated with some of the French empire's imperial subjects.

Britain and the United States, with their own empires to protect around the world, turned to the people and democratic principles of self-government as they sought to prise pieces of the French empire from Vichy influence. If the people, in free elections, decided to align their colony with the Free French, then both countries were willing to recognize the people's voice as the crucial legitimating factor in these high-stakes struggles for sovereignty in a fracturing world. In the South Pacific, this obscure but pivotal process would involve Britain, the United States, Japan, Vichy France, and the Free French in dramatic and fateful ways in 1940 and 1941. Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941 is just one part of this very complicated story.

A Shadow Diplomatic War in Asia

The shadow diplomatic war of 1940-41, when none of these protagonists was at war with one another, anticipated the global war to come. In China, where Western empires had acquiesced in Japan's expansion of its Asian empire in 1931 when it took Manchuria, the West continued to recognize and work with the Japanese government and military that had occupied much of northern and coastal China after its undeclared war with China began in July 1937. Japan tolerated the continuing Western presence in China, most notably in Shanghai, even as its anti-imperialist and anti-Western rhetoric became shrill. As would General Petain in Vichy France, China's Wang Jingwei took power in Nanjing (30 March 1940), near Shanghai, and collaborated with Japanese authorities as he headed the Reorganized National Government of China. Unlike General de Gaulle, however, "Free China's" leader Chiang Kai-shek commanded significant, but beleaguered military forces from his wartime capital deep in China's interior at the Yangzi River treaty port of Chongqing (Chungking) in Sichuan province. Elsewhere in Asia, Japanese and Western imperialists also eyed one another warily. Even in French Indochina, nominally under Vichy control in 1940, French colonial authorities accommodated Japanese demands with reluctance since imperial competitions were always ones with clear winners and losers. Except for "semi-colonial" China, where all imperialist powers had once agreed to cooperate, sovereignty in Asian colonies was held by the nation-states located in the West or Japan.

Sovereignty and legitimacy, then, were key elements in the shadow war of 1940-41. The rules of war and diplomacy still guided policy-makers. French diplomats sent to Washington, D.C., by their Vichy government were accredited and received in the halls of power. Americans travelling to French colonies obtained visas from the Vichy government; the United States government dealt with General de Gaulle with great discretion. But there was one part of the French empire where significant exceptions were made for reasons of grave geo-political importance: the South Pacific. After 1919, and the Treaty of Versailles, Japan had been granted League of Nations mandates for Germany's island colonies and areas north of the equator; Western imperialists shared the German spoils of war south of the equator.

From these starting positions in China and the Pacific, Japan extended its influence to the northern part of French Indochina in 1940 (a year earlier it had taken control of Hainan, a Chinese island near China's southeastern coast,

and quickly established air assets that could strike at all of French Indochina). From Indochina, all of Britain's southeast Asian possessions (Malaya, Singapore, and Burma) were at risk. And to the south lay the Dutch East Indies, Australia, and New Zealand. None of these imperial possessions could survive without protection from either Great Britain or the United States. And the United States' air and sea lines-of-communication with Australia and New Zealand cut through the South Pacific. The South Pacific mattered.

A Shadow Diplomatic War in the South Pacific

President Roosevelt, who would eventually have a secret Map Room in the White House to help him visualize this vast geo-political panorama, was also convinced that the South Pacific mattered, especially New Caledonia. Located about one thousand miles off Australia's northeastern coast, and astride the sea and air lines-of-communication between the United States and Australia, New Caledonia became a destination point on the Pan American Airways Pacific Clipper Service new southern route via Hawaii to New Zealand in 1940; the northern route from San Francisco Bay, with intermediate stops in Hawaii, Midway Island, Wake Island, and Guam en-route to Manila in the Philippines (all U.S. possessions), had been pioneered in 1935.

The Japanese had also been paying attention to New Caledonia. A Japanese consul was dispatched to New Caledonia in 1940 and soon took residence in a fine house with a splendid view of Noumea Harbor. About 1,500 Japanese citizens lived on the island, mostly as farmers and merchants in both urban and rural areas; New Caledonian iron ore was being shipped to Japan by Japanese 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 tread carefully in Asia 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 Indochina in July 1940, a move that cut supply lines to Chiang Kai-shek's military. Only the Burma Road was left. No pretext could be given to Japan to launch a pre-emptive strike, military or otherwise, and take control of New Caledonia as it had in French Indochina; no Western power could have reversed such a dire development in 1940-41.

Pan Am's sea planes landed in New Caledonia's Noumea Harbor, the most developed shipping port in all of the South Pacific, another reason this was an important point on America's line-of-communication with Australia. And so the shadow war played out in New Caledonia. In the same month, September 1940, that the Axis powers inked the Tripartite Pact in Berlin, British colonial authorities made the first move in New Caledonia. Hoping to help repeat de Gaulle's success in neighboring Tahiti, where a plebiscite had gone in favor of the Free French, the British nudged New Caledonia toward their corner. While New Caledonia's urban colonial elite leaned toward Vichy France, it was its agrarian rural elite, some of whom were descendants of the radical political prisoners sent from Paris to Noumea after the failure of the Paris Commune in 1871, who supported in word and deed de Gaulle's Free French call.

In September 1940, these mostly rural New Caledonians rose up and forced a capitulation of both Vichy French colonial and naval authorities. These men had sought and received de Gaulle's support in August. British authorities in London and the South Pacific had yet to come to a firm position. But the arrival of a Vichy French gunboat from Tahiti on 25 August 1940 forced their hand in August; meanwhile in London a new agreement between Prime Minister Churchill and de Gaulle was signed on 27 August. The British still had to convince Australia to act on their behalf in the South Pacific. The Australian government, tentatively, and finally definitively, approved the operation on 9 September 1940. Orchestrated in part by British authorities, and approved and executed by Australia, the plot began in the nearby colony of New Hebrides to the north of New Caledonia. (British authorities had protected the French colonial authorities who supported the Free French cause in the New Hebrides, an Anglo-French "co-dominion" shared-power colony.) An Australian gunboat escorted the French Resident Commissioner from the New Hebrides to Noumea, where he was greeted by the New Caledonians who had "rallied" to de Gaulle's Free French call. The Vichy French gunboat from Tahiti eventually sailed away, and the one that had been dispatched from Indochina was recalled. General de Gaulle added New Caledonia to his meager Free French portfolio.

A Shadow Diplomatic War in New Caledonia

By the end of 1940, these three small pieces of the French empire in the Pacific were aligned with Britain 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. A diplomatic consul from the United States joined the Australian representative who had arrived in Noumea in August 1940 (An Australian military party arrived in early 1941 to assess New Caledonia's defense needs and its potential for air fields.)

The American consul carried credentials granted by the Vichy French embassy in Washington, D.C. Roosevelt and de Gaulle still eyed one another with caution as Roosevelt continued with his "Vichy Gamble." Ever mindful of the tendency for imperialism to be a zero-sum game, de Gaulle jealously guarded all shards of Free French sovereignty that he could. Looking to the post-war future, he wanted to insure, as did his Vichy foes, the long-term survival of the entire French empire. The interests of his metropolitan France, even if only an aspirational government-in-exile in London, were paramount. Hints of de Gaulle's anti-American propensities, whenever he thought French sovereignty or pride was at risk, were evident from the beginning of this often-contentious relationship between the Free French and the Americans around the globe.

And even New Caledonians, especially those in the monied urban elite, were suspicious of this developing relationship with both America and Australia. Despite New Caledonia's proximity to the coast of northeastern Australia, it was part of the French empire. Its trade was largely within the French imperial trading bloc, except for the Australian coal needed to power its mining industries. Its flour and butter came from France; some of its contracted labor from northern Indochina. Without new trade agreements with the British Commonwealth, especially Australia and New Zealand, and the United States, the New Caledonian economy would collapse. These re-orientations were made. Australia began to sell food to New Caledonia; Australia agreed to buy its nickel production, previously sold to Germany via France. But Japan would challenge this new status quo. It too needed New Caledonia's nickel production, especially after Japan lost access to the world's primary source of nickel, Canada, in 1940. Vichy authorities 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 stakes were raised. In late September 1941, Britain 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, its harbor, and its airfield-in-progress. American 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. Their reports were sent back to Washington, D.C., where a recent Harvard Ph.D. in French history, David Pinkney, had been searching for information in the Library of Congress for a two-hundred-page report on New Caledonia he wrote for the Coordinator of Information, William J. Donovan, who reported directly to President Roosevelt.

Empires in Collision in the South Pacific

The shadow war ended on 7 December 1941. Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor was coordinated with a much broader attack on American, British, and Dutch imperial possessions in Asia. In the first page of President Roosevelt's first draft of his famous "Date of Infamy" speech to Congress, written hours after the attacks at Pearl Harbor, he placed this action in the context of Japan "simultaneously" bombing "Hawaii and the Philippines." The President later mentioned Malaya, penciled in Guam, and summarized: "Japan has . . . undertaken a surprise offensive extending throughout the Pacific area." Japan needed to control the United States' Philippine Islands in order to protect the line-of-communication with its so-called "Southern Resource" zone. Resource-poor Japan needed much from British Malaya and the Dutch East Indies. (Even the resource-rich United States relied on rubber and tin from these colonies.)

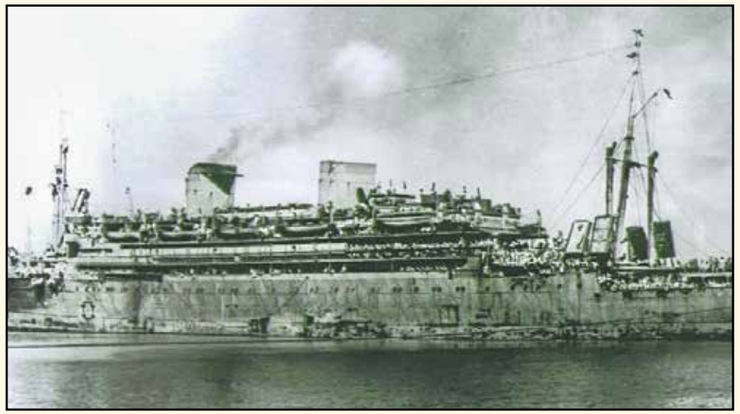
And now the strategic importance of the South Pacific for Japan came into focus for all too see. It was the flank to Japan's line-of-communication from southeast Asia to the Home Islands that must be protected. On 23 January 1942, Japan took Rabaul, a natural harbor with an airfield in New Britain that would eventually have six airfields and be home to over 100,000 Japanese. Rabaul, at the northern edge of the Coral Sea, was about 1,600 miles from Noumea at the southern edge of the Coral Sea, where the Australians had been helping the New Caledonians fortify their defenses and build an airfield since early 1941.

In a very deadly game, less akin to the dynamic game of chess than the apparently static positional Asian game of Go, moves and counter-moves were played very quickly; the shadow war of 1940-41 had prepared the board. British Hong Kong had fallen on Christmas Day; America's tiny Wake Island soon followed as President Roosevelt, Prime Minister Churchill, and their military staffs debated the strategy and tactics of global war at a closed-door conference in Washington, D.C., in late 1941 and early 1942. All agreed Hitler should be the priority. But America was also especially concerned about the fate of the American, British, and Dutch empires in Asia. Just after the first formal meeting of the United States and British Chiefs of Staff at the first Washington Conference of the war on 24 December, de Gaulle's Free French representative in Washington, D.C., reported a communication to the United States government offering the "technical use of Free French airfields at New Caledonia." Could the British Commonwealth, the American planners asked in the midst of the conference, defend New Caledonia? After conferring with Commonwealth authorities in Australia and New Zealand, the British answer came quickly. Neither Australian nor New Zealand could send re-enforcements to the Free French outpost in the South Pacific, secured in September 1940 through the machinations of Britain and a hesitant Australia, until the middle of 1942.

And so the defense of New Caledonia--and most strategists argued that it should be defended--would be America's temporary responsibility. Within twenty-four hours the U.S. Army's shipping experts came up with the ships, including the four in New York already being loaded with troops bound for the relief of British and American troops in Iceland and North Ireland. The next day, 12 January 1942, Roosevelt and Churchill met at the White House for the final decision-making meeting of the First Washington Conference. The two men, as advised by their military staffs, agreed to the immediate shipping shift from Europe to the Pacific. The relief troops left their four ships, and three more ships were made ready in haste. Ten days after the White House meeting, and only six weeks after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor (and the same day the Japanese took Rabaul), about twenty thousand Americans were squeezed into seven ships about to pull out of the Brooklyn Navy Yard to an unknown destination; (The operation was highly classified; most of these men would not find out their true destination until a few days before they reached New Caledonia on 12 March 1942.)

The race was on. Designated Task Force 6814, these seven American ships rendezvoused with another secret task force (headed for Bora Bora in the south-central

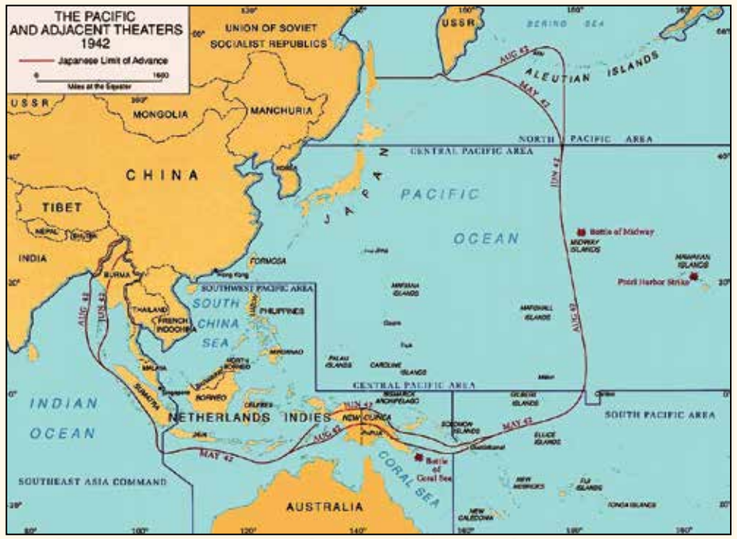
Walter Walt peering out of the St. Elena sick-bay porthole; Like General Patch, who would later become the Americal's first commander, Walt caught pneumonia, for him soon after Task Force 6814 left New York. Shortly after the St. Elena had passed through the Panama Canal and reached the Pacific, Walt had recovered.



The Grace Lines' St. Elena, a luxury liner with a South American route, was hastily re-fitted as a troop ship. Corporal Walter Walt, with the St. Elena still docked in the Brooklyn Navy Yard on 20 January 1942, wrote to his mother just before midnight: "Well. Here starts adventure"

Pacific) off the coast of South Carolina. Together, these two convoys of ships that had been quickly loaded with U.S. Army forces, weapons, and equipment headed for the Panama Canal. The responsibility for escorting both task forces as they zig-zagged across 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 to the South Pacific. As Task Force 6814 neared Australia at the end of February, the USS Lexington planned a diversionary attack on Japanese forces at Rabaul. But Japanese scout planes discovered the task force and soon two waves of bombers, eighteen in total, attacked the Lexington in the first battle involving carrier-type planes of the war on 20 February 1942. The men of the Lexington cheered their pilots in the air battle taking place over them. The Lexington was saved, and resumed its escorting of Task Force 6814, which arrived safely in Melbourne on 26 February 1942. On their way across the Pacific, the men of the St. Elena, one of the ships of the task force, had been given the short pamphlet Private Pillsbury Goes to Australia. What now? Australia? For most of the men their stay in Australia would be very short indeed. Task Force 6814 was under orders to embark once again as soon as possible. Most men still did not where, or why.

The author enlisted in the U.S. Air Force (1970-1974) and served a tour of duty 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, and his daughter Melissa, for permission to use their father's World War II letter-diaries, photos, and ephemera in this project.



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.

My Destiny With The Americal

Richard Sytsma
(As told to Les Hines and Dave Taylor)

(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

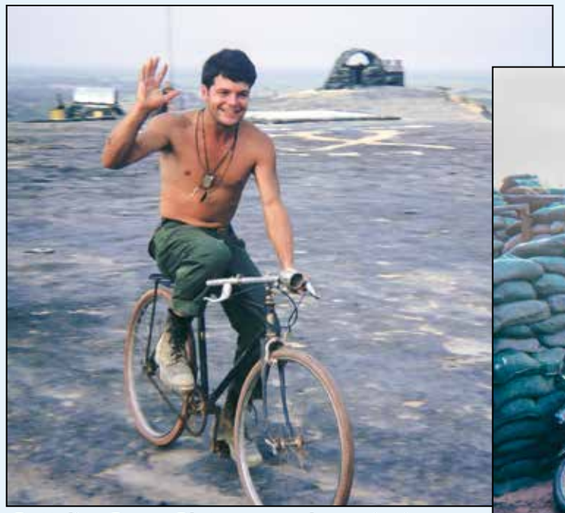
The area around LZ Liz was always ripe for enemy activity. That's because Highway 515 ran north of our hill and the enemy used that road as a resupply route to support the NVA in the mountains. We would monitor that area all night long and fire artillery to try to interdict their resupply efforts. There 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 ville's onto the commanders bird and it made numerous trips hauling that stuff up to LZ Liz. I guess we hauled about 80-100 bikes, etc. up to our LZ.

The next day the village chief of those hamlets was at the gate, claiming we took their livelihood away. The battalion commander was not having any of it. We took them all of them over to the artillery side of LZ Liz and blew them up.

Rembering LZ's

LZ Dragon was another place we were on from time to time. It seems that everyone made it up to that LZ. We had to cross a large and wet rice paddy east of the coast to get to it. Of course we would get sniper fire as we crossed because of our slow movement, which hastened us along. Once we got up to the beach-type terrain we would find a lot of spider-holes and other



Battalion Recon Platoon member enjoying one of the confiscated bikes on LZ Liz.

Dick Sytsma enjoying one of the finer motorcycles confiscated.