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

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Indroducing Walter Walt
Walter W. Walt, Jr. (1916-2006) served in the United States War Department from the end of World War II until his death. He was a member of the American Society of Transportation and Logistics and a recipient of the Distinguished Service Medal. Walt was also a professor at the United States Military Academy and a member of the American Society of Civil Engineers.

Disaster in the Asia-Pacific
The American public knew very little about the dramatic story of Task Force 6814. The task force mission, code-named POPPY, was classified “Secret” by the United States War Department. The American public knew very little about the dramatic story of Task Force 6814. The task force mission, code-named POPPY, was classified “Secret” by the United States War Department.

At both Pearl Harbor and the Philippine Islands, Japan had demonstrated the lethal and destructive power of its carrier-based and land-based forces. The B-17s, the new long-range heavy bombers the Japanese had destroyed on the ground at Clark Field in the Philippines shortly after the Pearl Harbor attack, had reached Manilla via the northern air ferry route from Hawaii, with stops at America’s Midway, Wake, and Guam islands. With the Japanese now controlling Wake and Guam, the southern route pioneered by the Pan American Airways Clipper Service in 1940 was the only way to ferry B-17s across the Pacific.

The third reason for New Caledonia’s importance: any attempt to defeat Japan in southeast Asia would require an advanced base in Australia, the endpoint in a very long line of communication from Hawaii to South Pacific islands like New Caledonia, lying about 1,000 miles east of Australia. If the Japanese occupied New Caledonia first, the consequences would be disastrous in the global war being waged against Germany, Italy, and Japan by the new “United Nations” led by America, Britain, the Soviet Union, and twenty-two other countries that had signed a Joint Declaration at the White House on New Year’s Day, 1942.

And so, on 12 January 1942, President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill met in the White House for the last decision-making meeting of the secret Washington Conference, code-named CRADIA. Some of the discussion revolved around the critical shipping trade-off: should the United States supply New Caledonia, and Prime Minister Churchill approved the Army’s plan to send a division to New Caledonia, even though both leaders wanted to focus on Europe and Hitler first.

These were momentous decisions made after much preparatory discussion by the military staffs of the United States and Britain. The United States Army’s Chief of Staff General George Marshall, who was with the White House when the raw news came through from New Caledonia, informed President Roosevelt, with support from Admiral King, the Chief of Naval Operations, that the occupation of New Caledonia was very important. Marshall underscored the urgent need to move troops from New York to New Caledonia: “to delay added to dangers of the voyage.”

After extensive discussion about global shipping to both the Western and Eastern hemispheres, President Roosevelt, in the closing minutes of the White House meeting, said simply: “We approve General Marshall’s plan.”

Task Force 6814 must get whatever shipping was available, now, and leave for the South Pacific, immediately. General Eisenhower, whom Marshall had called to Washington in mid-December to head the Pacific Section of the War Plans Division, knew the situation was so urgent that the ship could not be “combat-loaded” before sailing—that would have to wait until Task Force 6814 arrived in Australia in mid-February.

For the troops leaving New York, there was room and time for personal equipment only; their military equipment and supplies would be shipped from the West Coast and combat units would disembark at Port Hormy.

This was the most complicated convoy yet planned by the Army, but it was accomplished with astonishing speed. Two days after the Monday afternoon White House decision, Walter Walt cabled his mother from Virginia (Camp Lee): “Leaving here Friday [16 January] for New York.” But first Walt travelled all the way to Camp Edwards on Cape Cod where he joined Company I of the 10th Medical Regiment. The forty men, and others from Massachusetts National Guard units, left Cape Cod for New York on Monday evening (19 January). Shortly before midnight the next day, just as boarding the Grace Lines’ Santa Elena at the New York Port of Embarkation, Walt wrote the first line of his first trans-Pacific diary: “Dear Mom. Well. Here goes adventure.”

General Marshall had told President Roosevelt these troops were en route to New Caledonia (code-named X) by 14 February. It would take an extra ten days before Walt Walt and his shipmates, five weeks after boarding the Santa Elena, would land in New Caledonia. Walt would see the Breakwater, the entrance to the capital and gulf of Port Hormy. By then, as it turned out, the situation in the Asia-Pacific had grown very, very bleak for the United Nations.

Radio Tokyo was transmitting intelligence as if the Japanese had crushed Port Darwin, the last stop on the southern B-17 air ferry route to the Philippines, on Australia’s northwestern coast, to devastating effect on 15 February. In Singapore, on 15 February, thousands of Allied troops had surrendered to the Japanese soldiers whose advance down the Malaya Peninsula had started as the Japanese naval pilots launch their surprise attack on Pearl Harbor.

President Roosevelt Prepares America for War in the Asia-Pacific
For weeks, Roosevelt’s press aides had been preparing Americans for the President’s first nationwide radio address. The only topic was the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor.

Day-by-day, as the President worked over the drafts, the news from the Asia-Pacific became more and more grim.

Most of America tuned in at 10:00 P.M. Eastern War Time on 23 February 1942 as Task Force 6814 was secretly approaching New Caledonia. The President’s press aides had promised an important address on the progress of the war. At the President’s request, millions of Americans who had purchased or located world maps (newspapers were encouraged to publish maps in the days leading up to the address) so they could follow the war’s progress, were impressed by the geo-political complexities and necessities of this new global war.

He started with China, now almost completely isolated from the United Nations, and by the end of his address he had covered the world. In his concluding words, President Roosevelt assured Americans that their men were already fighting the Japanese in the Pacific. But he did not share what he knew: a few days earlier, President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill met in the White House for the last decision-making meeting of the secret Washington Conference, code-named CRADIA. Some of the discussion revolved around the critical shipping trade-off: should the United States supply New Caledonia, and Prime Minister Churchill approved the Army’s plan to send a division to New Caledonia, even though both leaders wanted to focus on Europe and Hitler first.

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The Japanese were well-prepared for both the Battle of Midway and the President’s propaganda war. Roosevelt’s speech would be broadcast or published without a delay, and the President’s words would find their way to the world in the days following the President’s address. And so, as the President had predicted, that Radio Tokyo had already been broadcasting counter-
commanding officer, had written in his journal on 8 March: "I have already
in Melbourne, neither Walt nor his friends were certain where they
the convoy, the convoy was now "combat-loaded." To entertain Walt at the Old Colonists Club and sponsor him for a month's
time could "become hopeless as it was at Singapore."

Localizing the Global Conflict: War Comes to New Caledonia
Walt heard the President's broadcast live as the Santa Elena
He could not quite figure out the implications for him and the men of the
101st Medical Regiment. Walt wrote: "Just finished listening to the President

Free French National Committee: The State Department also kept tight control of
volunteer groups, functioning as an arm of the Anti-Axis War movement.
announced that his 2,500 men were in Australia.

Six of the seven-ship convoy left Melbourne on 6 March 1942 and continued on to New Caledonia. Admiral Chester Nimitz, commanding America's

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General Charles de Gaulle's hand-
brought the first specific word to

Army general, Alexander Patch, had arrived by

before Walt and his men could last a lifetime. Walt's host, Charles Gribble, even had enough time to
enjoy his first face-to-face meeting with


Walt wrote: "We're on our
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occupying New Caledonia: The Japanese Threat
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Of the Westerners, only a few missionaries had refused to evacuate to safer islands in the South Pacific; a small detachment of Marines had stayed, and one had pulled out on 1 May. As the Americans solidified their positions on Efate, 750 miles to the southeast in the New Hebrides, the Japanese sent a report from Makin Island that they would attack at Tulagi. America’s Efate airfield was scheduled, as General Marshall had told Admiral King in his 17 March memo, for completion by 20 March.

By April, Japan had consolidated its holdings throughout the Asia-Pacific region. Japanese and American battleships continued to parry blows across the vastness of the Pacific. The Tulagi operation was part of a major Japanese offensive on 29 January 1942 to extend Japan’s presence from Saipan to 21 March as Task Force 6814 was leaving New York— to the Australian-held Port Moresby, just some 2,000 miles away.

The May invasion of Port Moresby was blocked by the same two fast-carrier task forces that had protected Task Force 6814 in March. The Lexington, the carrier that had also protected Task Force 6814 in February as it approached Melbourne, was lost in this battle, the Battle of the Coral Sea, on 7 May. The second attempt for Port Moresby had been delayed to June as a consequence of the Doolittle raid, which had struck Tokyo on 8 April with B-25s launched in an audacious one-way raid from the USS Hornet in the North Pacific. On 18 April 1942—the day Doolittle and his airmen raided Tokyo—the North Dakotans joined the 132d Infantry Regiment (Illinois) and the 182d Infantry Regiment (Massachusetts). Patch, finally, had the “heavily reinforced triangular infantry division” the War Plans Division had specified for New Caledonia in early January during the first Washington Conference.

Task Force 6814 reached full strength not a minute too soon. Not only did Patch need troops for defense of the island, he also needed them for maintaining local order. The newly-arrived 164th was assigned to defend the section in and around Noumea. One can only imagine their bewilderment when these men from North Dakota arrived in March, having already informed its forces in the South Pacific that the second delay until June the second attempt to occupy Port Moresby and that operation’s second phase, taking New Caledonia, Fiji, and Samoa. Dr. Freund had worried about the “fall” of New Caledonia in March. Had he enough time to prepare and train his men if the attack finally came in the months to come?

Occupyng New Caledonia: The French Threat

Patch’s Task Force 6814 was now almost all alone in the South Pacific. As Patch’s Task Force had retreated back to Pearl Harbor for repairs, it was found that Japan’s next strike would be at Midway Island, west of Hawaii, in early June. The second attempt for Port Moresby had been delayed to June as a consequence of the Doolittle raid, which had struck Tokyo on 8 April with B-25s launched in an audacious one-way raid from the USS Hornet in the North Pacific. On 18 April 1942—the day Doolittle and his airmen raided Tokyo—the North Dakotans joined the 132d Infantry Regiment (Illinois) and the 182d Infantry Regiment (Massachusetts). Patch, finally, had the “heavily reinforced triangular infantry division” the War Plans Division had specified for New Caledonia in early January during the first Washington Conference.

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Nimitz was convinced of the Japanese plans, in part because of the trust he put in estimates made by the Navy’s chief of intelligence in Washington. But others, including Admiral King in Washington, D.C., and General MacArthur in Australia, interpreted the same Japanese signals to mean that a large invasion force could come somewhere in the South Pacific, with targets ranging from Port Moresby, to New Caledonia, to Australia. General Adachi’s July 1942 scenario was focused on this scenario since April (MacArthur had arrived in Melbourne, where he established his command headquarters, on 21 March 1942.) He had warned General Patch twice in late April to be prepared for a Japanese invasion.

Pat had just brought his Task Force 6814 to strength to claim he had “rallied” New Caledonia to his cause in September 1940, now rose up to protest the removal of power. The French Governor Sauvot who had taken over their Free French cause, as he had earlier in the Anglo-French co-domain New Hebrides, in 1940. Sauvot’s willingness to cooperate with General Patch, as he had cooperated with the Australians in 1940, infuriated Gauze’s High Commissioner, who had taken up his post in November 1941. D’Argenlieu was unhappy with all of the American occupation that had happened. By early March, 1942— Gauze’s approval, D’Argenlieu kidnapped Sauvot, arrested the pro-American local council, and sent them all away from New Caledonia in exile. As civil unrest simmered toward a full boil, Patch wrote four urgent radiograms in three days (6-8 May) about the political situation in New Caledonia.

On 5 May, in one of the most momentous days in the history of Task Force 6814 and communications and decisions connected Noumea with Hawaii, Washington, D.C., Hyde Park, and London. The White House, the War Department, the Navy Department, the State Department, and American military and diplomatic representatives in London collaborated to support General Patch and bring to heel General de Gaulle, the French National Committee, and Admiral d’Argenlieu in New Caledonia. Patch soon had permission from Washington, D.C., to declare martial law, if necessary. De Gaulle and d’Argenlieu backed down, and Patch could return to his preparations for a possible invasion.

Tokyo Delays: New Caledonia

Conary to MacArthur’s April warnings, the Japanese target in early May was not New Caledonia. Instead, as we have seen, it was Port Moresby. Thwarted once, it was likely Japan would try again. But when? The gravity of the situation was underscored by the decision to halt New Caledonia an island of New Caledonia. The Free French celebrated, the French government at Vichy issued a communiqué declaring the “French rebels against the fatherland [who] took over New Caledonia” on 6 May. The Free French government at Vichy issued a communiqué declaring the “French rebels against the fatherland [who] took over New Caledonia” on 6 May.

Three days later, in his first national radio address since 23 February 1942 “Map Chat,” President Roosevelt began to signal a policy shift that, eventually, opened doors for de Gaulle and his struggle for Free French sovereignty in New Caledonia and around the world. Responding to a recent tilt toward Germany by the Vichy French, in his radio address Roosevelt suggested that most French men and women supported the cause of the United States. These were not, in his mind, “rebels against the fatherland” but “rebels,” according to the Vichy French, the mostly rural New Caledonians who had made it possible for de Gaulle