



Winter 2021

Before The Americal (Part Two): Task Force 6814 and Saving the British and French Empires in the Asia-Pacific, 1940–1942

Roger R. Thompson

Western Washington University, thompsr8@wwu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://cedar.wwu.edu/history_facpubs



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Thompson, Roger R., "Before The Americal (Part Two): Task Force 6814 and Saving the British and French Empires in the Asia-Pacific, 1940–1942" (2021). *History Faculty and Staff Publications*. 84.
https://cedar.wwu.edu/history_facpubs/84

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the History at Western CEDAR. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty and Staff Publications by an authorized administrator of Western CEDAR. For more information, please contact westerncedar@wwu.edu.

CARD.

January • February • March 2021



AMERICAL

JOURNAL

DEDICATED AS A LIVING MEMORIAL TO ALL VETERANS OF THE AMERICAL DIVISION



UNDER THE SOUTHERN CROSS

Before The Americal (Part Two): Task Force 6814 and Saving the British and French Empires in the Asia-Pacific, 1940-1942

Roger R. Thompson

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 embarked from New York, with Walt on the *Santa Elena*, in late January 1942, reached Australia in late February, and landed at New Caledonia on 12 March 1942. The 182nd Infantry Regiment (Massachusetts) and the 132nd Infantry Regiment (Illinois) were joined in April by the 164th Infantry Regiment (North Dakota).

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" for military and diplomatic reasons. On their way across the Pacific, the men were told about life in Australia (on the *Santa Elena* troops read *Private Pillsbury Goes to Australia*); they did not know their true mission: to occupy and defend the French colony of New Caledonia from a Japanese invasion.

In early January 1942, the War Plans Division in the United States War Department had "decided to occupy New Caledonia [with]... one triangular division, heavily reinforced with artillery, and one pursuit squadron" and to defend the island and the "natural resources [nickel and chrome] valuable to Japan." New Caledonia was also the last stop on the southern B-17 air ferry route between California and Australia.

At both Pearl Harbor and the Philippine Islands, Japan had demonstrated the lethal and destructive power of its carrier-based and ground-based planes. 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 Manila 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 China 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 President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill met in the White House for the last decision-making meeting of the secret Washington Conference, code-named ARCADIA. Some of the discussion revolved around the critical shipping trade-off for the moment: Russia or New Caledonia. Roosevelt 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, when the White House discussion moved specifically to 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 urgency of moving 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 ships 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-loaded in Australia.

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 101st Medical Regiment. These men, and others from Massachusetts National Guard units, left Cape Cod for New York Monday evening (19 January). Shortly before midnight the next day, just after boarding the Grace Lines' *Santa Elena* at the New York Port of Embarkation, Walt wrote the first line of his first trans-Pacific diary-letter: "Dear Mom: Well. Here starts adventure."

General Marshall had told President Roosevelt these troops would arrive in Australia (code-named X) by 14 February. It would take an extra ten days before Walter Walt and his shipmates, five weeks after boarding the *Santa Elena* at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, would finally glimpse Melbourne Harbor. By then, as it turned out, the

situation in the Asia-Pacific had grown very, very bleak for the United Nations. Radio Tokyo was terrorizing Australians, Japan's naval air forces had bombed 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 19 February. In Singapore, on 15 February, thousands of Allied troops had surrendered to the Japanese soldiers whose stunning sweep down the Malaya Peninsula had started as Japanese naval pilots launch their surprise attack on Pearl Harbor.

A week after the British had surrendered their naval fortress at Singapore, Roosevelt ordered General Douglas MacArthur to leave the Philippines and the shattered air-arm of American power in the Pacific, for Australia. General Marshall, returning to his office after a Sunday evening meeting with the President at the White House to confirm this decision, made sure the order was sent out immediately. America's fortress in the Philippines, as the *New York Times* had headlined in its 19 November 1941 issue, was vanquished. The Commander in Chief's "Eyes Only" radiogram was delivered in person to MacArthur at 12:30 A.M. (Washington D.C. time) on 23 February 1942. It would be a long, long day for America and the United Nations.

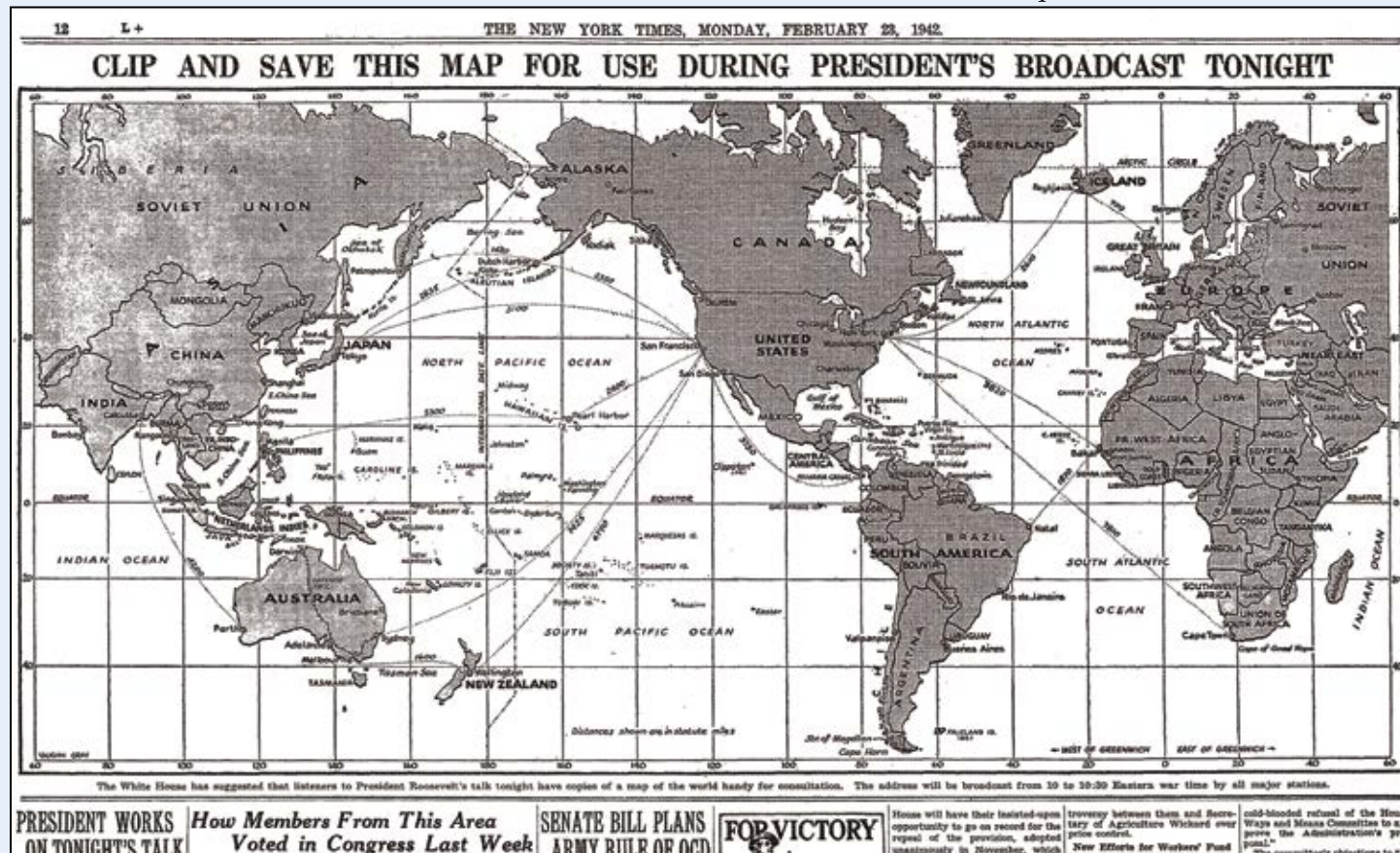
President Roosevelt Prepares America for War in the Asia-Pacific

For weeks, Roosevelt's press aides had been preparing Americans for the President's first nationwide radio address since the one he delivered shortly after Pearl Harbor. Day-by-day, as the President worked over 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 nearing Melbourne. The President's press aides had promised an important address on the progress of the war. At the President's request, millions of Americans had purchased or located world maps (newspapers were encouraged to publish maps in the days leading up to the address) so they could follow on their maps as he explained 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 Task Force 6814's fast-carrier escort *USS Lexington*, while preparing to launch a diversionary raid on Japan's positions at Rabaul in New Britain, was discovered by the Japanese. The *Lexington's* heroic naval aviators repelled a fierce attack by waves of Japanese bombers. (Two days later, U.S. Army B-17s under naval command, flying out of northeastern Australia, attacked Rabaul.)

The Japanese were well-prepared for both the *Lexington's* raid and the President's propaganda war. Roosevelt's speech would be broadcast or published around the world in many languages. He probably knew that Radio Tokyo had already been broadcasting counter-



The world map published in the New York Times on 23 February 1942 to be used that evening during President Roosevelt's radio address to the nation on the progress of the war (The New York Times Company - Used under License).

propaganda. But he did not know this: just as he was being introduced to a huge radio audience, a Japanese submarine off the coast of southern California began firing about twenty shells at an oil refinery near Goleta, just west of Santa Barbara. Japan's first attack on the U.S. mainland, not the President's address to the nation and the world, was the top banner headline—"Submarine Shells California Oil Plant"—and the lead story, in Tuesday morning's *New York Times*. The second story, also in the headlines, was the complete transcript of the President's address, with a photo of the President pointing to the middle of the Pacific on his world map. And on a second world map, published on the page with the rest of the address, the place named "New Caledonia" was as wide as the continent of Australia.

Localizing the Global Conflict: War Comes to New Caledonia

Walter Walt heard the President's broadcast live as the *Santa Elena* neared Melbourne.

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 speak. Still am trying to figure out what he said. He's good at speaking and really not giving out a whole lot of information." But for the starving, beleaguered American soldiers listening on the Bataan Peninsula jutting into Manila Bay, the meaning was clear: There would be no reinforcements for the Philippines. Little did these men know that twenty-four hours earlier, President Roosevelt had ordered their commander to leave them to their fate as he journeyed to Australia. At least they were no longer under "No surrender" orders; Small solace.

But the Australians who saw Task Force 6814 arriving at Melbourne a few days later might have assumed, given the dark news of recent days that help had finally arrived. Walter Walt's unit was sent to the mining town of Ballarat, where some of them, including Walt and his commanding officer, Dr. Dale Friend, were hosted by two eminent families in their homes on Ballarat's grand Sturt Street. While the visit was short, the connections made could last a lifetime. Walt's host, Charles Gribble, even had had enough time to entertain Walt at the Old Colonists Club and sponsor him for a month's honorary club membership. But Walt, Friend, and the rest of the 101st Medical Regiment were soon back in Melbourne, where Task Force 6814's convoy was now "combat-loaded."

This time the regiment was assigned to the largest of the seven ships in the convoy, the *Ericsson*. Before the war, this was one of the finest ships of the Swedish-American Line, christened the *Kungsholm*. Even as they boarded the *Ericsson* in Melbourne, neither Walt nor his friends were certain where they were going. In his last diary-letter (11 March 1942) Walt wrote: "We're on our way to, where, nobody knows. There are all sorts of rumors as to where we'll land this time; Looks very much like we're leaving Australia. Perhaps it will be New Caladonia [sic]. We'll have to learn French, I guess." Dr. Friend, Walt's commanding officer, had written in his journal on 8 March: "I have already



Task Force 6814 convoy arriving in Noumea Harbor, New Caledonia on 12 March 1942 (U.S. Army photo).

considered the fall of New Caledonia (where we are apparently scheduled for (a la the Rumor)." In a train of ominous .speculation, he thought New Caledonia could "become hopeless as it was at Singapore."

Occupying New Caledonia: The French Connection(s)

The *Ericsson*, which Walter Walt, perhaps mindful of the censorship rules, mimeographed on the ship's menu stock, only referred to as once being a "luxurious" Swedish-American Line ship, was "delayed a couple of days" because it "had a little engine trouble" and lagged behind the other six ships carrying Task Force 6814 that would reach Noumea Harbor on 12 March 1942.

A photograph of the formidable task force ships suggests why New Caledonians were astonished at what they saw across the harbor. The commanding U.S. Army general, Alexander Patch, had arrived by seaplane only a week before. He brought the first specific word to General Charles de Gaulle's hand-picked High Commissioner of France in the Pacific, Admiral Georges Thierry d'Argenlieu, about the military operation underway. The High Commissioner had been asking for information since January, but the United States so distrusted the ability of de Gaulle and the French National Committee's to keep this secret-secret, that the Free French in London were kept in the dark. Information about General Patch's Task Force 6814 was so protected that the Army refused to inform the High Commissioner by radiogram. D'Argenlieu found out, finally, in his first face-to-face meeting with General Patch on 5 March 1942.

A few days earlier the *New York Times* broke the story, but this was a story with almost no information: "U.S. Aids Defense of New Caledonia." But the United States, still courting Vichy French authorities in France, sought to distance itself from this no-news news story. The source of this story was Admiral d'Argenlieu, who made public from New Caledonia the agreement the State Department had just reached in Washington, D.C., with de Gaulle's

Free French National Committee.

The State Department also kept tight control of military information. De Gaulle and D'Argenlieu were not given any information about Patch and his Task Force 6814, although Patch was allowed, face-to-face, to tell D'Argenlieu about the United States forces that had arrived at the French Tahiti island of Bora Bora two weeks earlier on 18 February to garrison the island and maintain a fuel depot.

The announcement first made in New Caledonia implied, according to the *New York Times* report, that elsewhere in the Pacific America might instead recognize, as it had in Indochina, Vichy French sovereignty. The accompanying map indicated that the *New York Times* was only sure about New Caledonia being under Free French control. The Times presumed, incorrectly, that U.S. troops were already on the island; they were still in Australia. And even that was still classified.

Before boarding their Task Force 6814 ships a second time, some men had just enough time to send one last telegram to loved ones back home. Even these personal communications maintained the veil of secrecy. The telegraph company could not indicate the location of the sending office. Walter Walt's telegram (2 March 1942) to his mother was marked: "Sans origine." He cabled cryptically: "Feeling fine. Everything OK. Don't be anxious." An indication of the degree of War Department concern about the secrecy of the mission, which was rooted in the danger the men faced, was the successful War Department intervention to suppress the publication in a major Chicago newspaper of a telegram from the commanding officer of Illinois National Guard troops reporting 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 Pacific Fleet from his headquarters at Pearl Harbor, ordered the USS *Yorktown*, done escorting the second secret task force to Bora Bora, to join the *Lexington*. Both fast-carrier groups covered Task Force 6814 on its final days at sea. On 12 March 1942, the convoy (less the *Ericsson*, which arrived 14 March) pulled into Noumea Harbor as the carriers remained on station to the north to cover the hectic unloading operation for the next few days. Finally, on 16 March, the carrier task forces separated and pulled away. Nimitz ordered the *Lexington* back to Pearl Harbor; the *Yorktown* remained on patrol in the South Pacific, operating out of New Caledonia's Noumea Harbor. Thirteen weeks after Pearl Harbor, the United States Army began to establish defensive positions throughout the island, most importantly at the new Australian-built airfield just north of Noumea. The American occupation of New Caledonia, first called for in early January, had begun.

Occupying New Caledonia: The Japanese Threat

March was also a momentous month in Washington, D.C. In addition to a high-level re-organization of Army administration, the United States and Britain agreed to a

broad division of responsibilities for the global war, with the United States taking the lead in the Pacific. It was in this context, as Admiral King was preparing for staff discussions, that he sent a memo to General Marshall asking for the latest statistics about the Army's presence in the "Pacific Area." General Marshall responded the same day. This quick exchange of memos on 17 March 1942—the hundredth day of the war—took place just after the Army-Navy cooperation that had delivered Task Force 6814 safely to New Caledonia.

Marshall's statistics underscored just how small America's forces were in the face of extensive Japanese troop conquests throughout their "Southern Resource" zone. Marshall told King the following about these main Army deployments (troops/combat planes) in Australia and the South Pacific:

Australia: 31,691/14 heavy bombers operational
New Caledonia: 17,276/25 pursuit planes
Efate (New Hebrides): 450/0

With Task Force 6814 now preparing to defend New Caledonia, its capital at Noumea became the nerve center for the shrinking United Nations presence in the South Pacific, now down to New Caledonia, Australia, New Zealand, and a few other Pacific islands. (Even as Task Force 6814 was moving ashore and across New Caledonia, RCA established a direct radio-telegraph circuit between New Caledonia and the United States.)

The Dutch East Indies, British Malaya and Singapore, British Burma and soon its famous Burma Road to China—all of these colonies and their rich natural resources—were now in the hands of the Japanese. China faced a total blockade of its sea and land routes. And New Caledonia, only two-hundred-fifty miles long and thirty miles wide, was at the center of the newly-formed Australia-New Zealand Area Command (ANZAC). The coalition of United Nations military forces in Southeast Asia established on 15 January 1942, the day after the end of the First Washington Conference, had not lasted even two months. Japan appeared invincible.

It would take twenty months for New Caledonia and other advanced bases to be built up enough to launch the American counter-offensive from the South Pacific that started with the November 1943 invasion of the Gilbert Islands, the Central Pacific islands taken from Britain in December 1941, just days after the attacks on Malaya, Hawaii, and the Philippines.

With his Task Force 6814 safely disembarked and setting up positions throughout New Caledonia, General Patch could now step back and look at the strategic and tactical challenges before him. Could his troops on New Caledonia withstand a Japanese attack? Looking at the 1,600 miles between the airfields at his Noumea and Japan's Rabaul in New Britain, General Patch immediately dispatched 450 troops about 300 miles north to defend Efate and start building an airfield in the southern New Hebrides. Five weeks later, on 4 May 1942, the Japanese countered and occupied Tulagi.

This was no surprise. The Japanese had bombed this British administrative center at the southern edge of their Solomon Islands colony in early January 1942.

Of the Westerners, only a few missionaries had refused to evacuate to safer islands in the South Pacific; a small detachment of the Australian military 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 quickly built a seaplane base at Tulagi. America's Efate airfield was scheduled, as General Marshall had told Admiral King in his 17 March memo, for completion by mid-June.

By April, Japan had consolidated its holdings throughout the Asia-Pacific region. Japanese and American forces drew closer to one another—first 1,600 miles (Rabaul-Noumea), then 750 miles (Tulagi-Efate)—on small islands in the South Pacific as their powerful navies continued to parry blows across the vastness of the Pacific. The Tulagi operation was part of a major Japanese offensive ordered on 29 January 1942 to extend Japan's reach from Rabaul—taken on 23 January as Task Force 6814 was leaving New York—to the Australian-held Port Moresby, just southwest of Rabaul.

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. The Imperial General Headquarters in Tokyo now ordered its forces to take to Midway Island in the Central Pacific, having already informed its forces in the South Pacific on 28 April to delay until June the second attempt to occupy Port Moresby and that operation's second phase, taking New Caledonia, Fiji, and Samoa. Dr. Friend 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?

Occupying New Caledonia: The French Threat

Admiral Nimitz, who ordered the battered *Yorktown* back to Pearl Harbor for repairs, had been convinced that Japan's next strike would be at Midway Island, west of Hawaii, in early June. The second attempt for a Port Moresby invasion had been delayed to June as a consequence of the Doolittle raid, which had struck Tokyo on 18 April with B-25s launched in an audacious one-way raid from the *USS Hornet* in the North Pacific. Should Midway be in Japanese hands, the risk of another Tokyo raid would be much less.

Nimitz was convinced of the Japanese plans, in part because of the trust he put in estimates made by the Navy's communications intelligence operation in Hawaii. But others, including Admiral King in Washington, D.C., and General MacArthur in Australia, interpreted the same evidence to suggest the next strike would come somewhere in the South Pacific, with targets ranging from Port Moresby, to New Caledonia, to Australia. General MacArthur, in particular, had been 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.

Patch had just brought his Task Force 6814 to strength



Right to Left: Admiral Robert Ghormley, Commander of South Pacific Force; Major General Alexander Patch Commander of Task Force 6814 and Ghormley's Chief of Staff, Admiral Daniel Callaghan, coming ashore 19 May, 1942 at Noumea, New Caledonia, for inspection and consultation (U.S. Army Photo).

in mid-April with the arrival of the 164th Infantry Regiment, the North Dakota National Guard unit that had sailed on 18 March for Australia from San Francisco on the luxury liner-turned-troopship *President Coolidge*. On 18 April 1942—the day Doolittle and his airmen raided Tokyo—the North Dakotans joined the 132nd Infantry Regiment (Illinois) and the 182nd 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 were soon called upon to maintain order in the midst of what can only be called a local insurrection. In the midst of this crisis the War Department, for the first time, announced on 25 April, in a terse forty-six-word communiqué that included these words: "American troops have arrived at the island of New Caledonia." The Free French celebrated; the French government at Vichy issued a communiqué decrying the "French rebels against the fatherland [who] took over New Caledonia in September 1940... [T]his fact does not authorize the Americans to land troops there."

Three days later, in his first national radio address since his 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 Nations. These were not, in his mind, "rebels against the fatherland." Back in New Caledonia these "rebels," according to the Vichy French, the mostly rural New Caledonians who had made it possible for de Gaulle

to claim he had "rallied" New Caledonia to his cause in September 1940, now rose up to protest the removal from power of the popular Governor Sautot who had taken up their Free French cause, as he had earlier in the Anglo-French co-dominion New Hebrides, in 1940.

Eighteen months later Sautot's willingness to cooperate with General Patch, as he had cooperated with the Australians in 1940, infuriated de Gaulle's High Commissioner Admiral D'Argenlieu, who had taken up his post in November 1941. D'Argenlieu was unhappy with all aspects of the American occupation that unfolded beginning in March 1942. With de Gaulle's approval, D'Argenlieu kidnapped Sautot, 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 8 May, in one of the most momentous days in the history of Task Force 6814, an extraordinary sequence of 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 Japanese invasion.

Tokyo Delays; Noumea Plans: Task Force 6814 Takes Its Place in the Global War

Contrary 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 at New Caledonia a squadron of eight B-17s just beginning, in mid-May, its long southern air ferry flight to Australia.

In a secret "Eyes Only" radiogram of 14 May 1942, General Marshall told General MacArthur of the developing Japanese threats in the Pacific. Marshall also knew, as General Eisenhower had told him the day before, that supply chiefs were being told to make sure there were enough bombs and gasoline for New Caledonia and nearby Fiji, which would get its own provisional squadron of B-17s. Should Japan attack Port Moresby again, heavy bombers could counter-attack from Australia, New Caledonia, and Fiji. Moreover, these B-17s in the South Pacific could protect Admiral Halsey's *USS Enterprise* and *USS Hornet* now on patrol east of the New Hebrides. But days later, so sure was Admiral Nimitz that Midway, not Port Moresby, was Japan's next target, that on 16 May 1942 he recalled to Hawaii his last remaining fast-carrier task force in the South Pacific, Admiral Halsey's *Enterprise* and *Hornet*.

Even as it prepared for the Midway operation in the

Central Pacific, Tokyo ordered its South Pacific forces to be prepared to attack New Caledonia in mid-June. And Washington, D.C., too, continued to pay attention to New Caledonia. General Patch had met the twin crises of late April and early May: a threat of a Japanese invasion and Free French factionalism. His hand has been strengthened, and the fact of the American occupation of New Caledonia could now be de-classified.

Patch later had discussions in May with visiting staff officers from the War Department's Operation Plans Division (the just re-named War Plans Division). Patch had much to report and discuss, including ideas for a regular combat infantry division. But much attention, especially in the Navy Department in the first days after the Battle of the Coral Sea, was focused on Hawaii and Midway.

On 8 May, General Marshall sent a secret radiogram to General Patch telling him that he now reported to Admiral Nimitz in Hawaii (on 7 May—the day he lost the *Lexington* in the Battle of the Coral Sea—Nimitz assumed operational command of all Army units in the "Pacific Area"). On the same day Marshall wrote to Patch, he brought Admiral King up-to-speed on recent events in the South Pacific. King had just designated Admiral Robert Ghormley the first Commander of South Pacific Force. After a week of discussions at Pearl Harbor, Ghormley added Rear Admiral John McCain to his team as Commander Aircraft South Pacific Area. (McCain would soon locate his flagship in Noumea Harbor.)

Ghormley then began a tour of inspection and consultation. By 19 May 1942 he had reached New Caledonia. General Patch and his visitors walked away from a Navy launch under gorgeous skies in the South Pacific for a meeting in Noumea in which there was much to discuss. It is probable that General Patch shared with Admiral Ghormley an unprecedented idea: designating Task Force 6814 as a regular "combat infantry division." Never in the history of the United States Army had an infantry division ever been formed and trained on foreign soil, an undertaking that would take a year in the continental United States. But these were extraordinary times.

General Patch would soon bid farewell to his Navy visitors; he would see them again. Now it was time to prepare for Japan's planned June invasion of New Caledonia, which some intelligence analysts thought could come early in the month. With Admiral Halsey's *Enterprise* and *Hornet* steaming toward Pearl Harbor under Admiral Nimitz's 16 May 1942 order, General Patch's Task Force 6814 was now almost all alone in the South Pacific.

The author, Roger Thompson, 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 diary-letters, photos, and ephemera in this project.