



SOUTH PACIFIC WWII
MUSEUM

The SANTONIAN

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Welcome to 2019's final issue of The Santonian, the extra newsletter exclusive to our valued members.

Our apologies for a disrupted publishing schedule this year, but we are now back on track.

If you'd like to contribute to future Santonians, please drop the editor, Kevin McCarthy, an email at admin@southpacificwwiimuseum.com

And if you have other queries or questions for the project as a whole, our main office email is info@southpacificwwiimuseum.com

This month's Santonian concludes the late Ritchie Garrison's telling of the first work to develop Espiritu Santo as a massive base.

Garrison was involved, as a young officer in first reconnoitring the island.

In this issue, he recounts the hair-raising first flight of a B17 bomber into Turtle Bay airfield, scratched out of the jungle by July 29th 1942 at the order of the high command. It was crucial to support the upcoming Guadalcanal landings.

Our second article is by our great museum supporter, Donna Esposito, who travelled to Peleliu for the 75th anniversary of the fierce battle there.

The 1st Marine division, famous for Guadalacanal, was given the task of taking the island. It was meant to be a swift operation but turned into what is considered the Marines' bloodiest battle of the entire Pacific war.

And finally, if you've been tracking the string of amazing underwater discoveries off the Solomons during 2019, you may have missed another discovery thousands of miles away—from another war. Find out how the seeds of the conflict in the South Pacific were planted 105 years ago.

You're the navigator!



A B17—workhorse of the South Pacific War

By Lt. Col Ritchie Garrison, US Army

Early on the afternoon of 29 July, I was placed on temporary duty with the small headquarters that General Rose had established at Espiritu Santo (Buttons) and told to go out to Bauer Field and report to Col. LaVerne G. Saunders, the Commanding Officer of the 17th Bomb Group. He would arrange for my flight to Espiritu.

General Saunders introduced me to a young first lieutenant, the aircraft commander, and I soon found myself in the huge aircraft. I was told to ride with the navigator and the bombardier in the nose compartment. The aircraft had just arrived in the area that day and the navigator had not been properly briefed. He knew the name of the island that we were headed to – but he had no idea where it was located.



He was delighted to have me aboard because I was an old hand and had even been to Espiritu.

I was able to point out Efate and Espiritu on the very inadequate hydro chart that he had. I was even able to show him exactly where the new Buttons field was located. Anyway, the navigator soon had a pencil line on the chart indicating the proposed route.

The weather was cloudy with a ceiling of about 2000 feet. We took off and slowly circled until we were on course. I had a headset on and could hear the intercom conversation between the various members of the crew.

I could also see the bombardier's altimeter as I was occupying his seat. I heard the pilot say that he would cruise at 1500 feet and I noted that there was considerable haze.

At that point, I swung around in my seat and asked the navigator if he was planning to follow the pencil line on the chart. He sensed that I had a reason for asking the question, and asked if there was any reason why he should not. I told him that the island of Malekula - over which we were scheduled to fly - had many peaks that were far higher than the 1500 feet that we would be flying. We both realized that the haze was limiting our visibility. The navigator then asked for my recommendation.

I suggested that we continue on our present heading until we could visually identify the southern coast of Malekula, then turn easterly off the shoreline to the south-easterly tip of the island, and then head north keeping the eastern shore to our left. The navigator immediately called the pilot on the intercom and repeated what I had said.

The pilot then called the radio operator and told him to activate the radar, locate the southern shore of the nearest large island, and report the distance from the shore.

By the time that the radar had warmed up, we were about 10 miles south of the island of Malekula. I then heard the pilot call the navigator and tell him to send the "passenger" up to the flight deck. I crawled up through the hatch and found that I was standing just back of the pilot and the co-pilot. The pilot said, "You are now the navigator. What course do you want me to fly?"



Turtle Bay, pictured probably around 1943, was much more rudimentary on the day Ritchie Garrison flew in.

Here I was, identifying the important landmarks - which I had only seen a couple of times before - from the deck of a "junk".

We saw the south coast of Malekula about the time that I arrived on the flight deck. We turned to the east until we arrived at the SE point and then turned left to a heading of about north. I now had to guess what heading we should take when the northern point of Malekula was on our left wing.

I decided to make a slight correction to the left and continue on into the haze that prevented long range vision. We soon picked up the southern tip of Espiritu and then the eastern end of Segond Channel. I told the pilots that we had to find the USS Curtiss (Seaplane Tender) at anchor to verify our position - and about a minute later - it came into sight - much to the pilot's and my surprise. At that time we were flying at about 900 feet of altitude.

I then directed a considerable (about 120 degree) turn to the right and soon told the co-pilot (on the right side of the cockpit) to watch for the airfield that should soon appear below on the right . . . and about a minute later the field was in sight. I then informed the pilot that my task was complete and all he had to do was to get the aircraft on the ground.

This sounded like an easy task, but it was late in the afternoon and the light was failing. We flew easterly across the north end of the runway, turned south, then west along Segond Channel for a "base leg" and then on "final" descending for a landing.

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There was only one course of action. Full power was applied on all four engines, the wheels were retracted and we made a "go around" - for another approach.

By the time that big bomber was ready for another approach, the light was really failing and our approach was influenced by some lights on the ground which we thought might be jeep lights at the end of the runway.

As we descended to about 300 feet, the pilot turned on the landing lights - and we found that we were over a coconut grove - so the four engines went back to climb power and we tried again.

It was so dark this time that we discussed going back to Efate, but I reminded the pilot that Efate had no field lighting. So we continued on for another approach and guided ourselves by the shore of Second Channel which could easily be seen. With our landing lights on, we "felt" our way in, found the field and made a fine landing on the still unfinished bomber field.

From these humble beginnings, Espiritu Santo (Buttons) became one of the great bases of the Pacific War. The Navy eventually spent \$36,369,925.00 at Espiritu - only Guam, Leyte-Samar, Manus, Okinawa and Saipan cost more.

Peleliu: A Forgotten Battle Remembered

By Donna Esposito

September 15, 2019 marked the 75th anniversary of the start of the Battle of Peleliu, an island in the Palau group, the westernmost chain of the Caroline Islands north of New Guinea and east of the Philippines. The Japanese-held island was the site of an airfield deemed important in the advance to liberate the Philippines, and its capture was planned in the controversial and prophetically named Operation Stalemate II.

Despite objections from Admiral William F. Halsey, who thought the invasion was unnecessary, the First Marine Division landed on September 15, 1944, while the 81st Infantry Division of the US Army landed on the small island of Angaur just to the south.

The Peleliu operation was expected to last three to four days, a campaign so brief that many war correspondents did not bother to disembark from their ships.



White Beach 1 - site of the First Marine Regiment landings on 15 September 1944. Looking south from "The Point" toward "The Promontory."

Caves are filled with Japanese relics like canteens & sake bottles.

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However, the Marines experienced stiff resistance from the well-entrenched Japanese troops and days turned to weeks. The island was not secured until November 27, 1944 at a steep price: more than 2,000 Americans were killed and another 8,000 wounded. Almost all of the 11,000 Japanese defenders were killed. Meanwhile, General MacArthur's return to the Philippines proceeded in October, before Peleliu was secured, reinforcing the idea that the battle had been unwarranted.

In the intervening years, Peleliu continued to be a forgotten battle, perhaps because so many of its participants did not want to recall the brutal fighting there. The 2010 miniseries *The Pacific* brought the battle to the attention of a wider audience, but it still does not have the recognition given to Guadalcanal, Iwo Jima, or Okinawa. So perhaps it is not surprising that only a handful of Americans and just one Japanese person were there on September 15th to mark the occasion. I was fortunate to be one of those Americans.

Our small group, led by retired professor Anderson Giles for Valor Tours, consisted of history buffs, as well as filmmakers Tim Gray and Bill Francis of the World War II Foundation, there to capture footage for an upcoming documentary on the First Marine Division. A few others had travelled there independently: the nephew of a Marine killed in action, the son of a US Navy LVT driver who transported Marines ashore and survived the war, and a Japanese woman whose great uncle is still missing in action on the island.



Wreckage of an American tank of the 710th Tank Battalion. After saving two Navy airmen, the tank hit a landmine, killing 4 of the crew and one Marine.



A Japanese fuel storage bunker that held up the advance of the Marines across the airfield now houses the Peleliu World War II Memorial Museum.



Helmets in the jungle – and at right, wreckage from an Avenger TBM. 2 crewmen remain MIA.

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Knowing that someone had tragically met his end on practically every inch of that island made for a particularly solemn occasion. Despite the beautiful beaches and lush foliage, it was impossible not to recall the images of bodies strewn across the white sand and the terrain of bare coral rock dotted with caves and pillboxes that were exposed after naval and aerial bombardment destroyed the jungle. Nature may have reclaimed the island, where just a few hundred welcoming Palauans live today, but there are relics of the war everywhere. Ruins of Japanese buildings, bunkers, and pillboxes abound, as do caves filled with sake bottles, rice bowls, and other small and personal reminders of their defenders. Larger artifacts like tanks and aircraft are readily seen in the jungle. And more ominously, dangerous unexploded ordnance is still found regularly, despite years of painstaking effort to remove it from the island.

Our group paid our respects to the fallen on the morning of the 15th at the site of a wrecked American tank where several Americans were killed. Later, we visited the landing beaches, and I was honored to say some words at White Beach 1, where the First Marine Regiment had come ashore 75 years ago to the day. In particular, I remembered two 18-year-old Marines, Pfc. Haig Sarafian of Philadelphia, PA and Pvt. Charles Wartell of Chicago, IL. The young men were not supposed to land on that beach, but remain safely back on Guadalcanal as anti-aircraft gunners. However, they had stowed away on a troop transport, wanting to fight. They joined a rifle company and served with distinction. Pfc. Sarafian was subsequently killed on September 19th, earning a Silver Star for his bravery. His body not recovered, he is still listed as missing in action. Pvt. Wartell was wounded but survived to fight again on Okinawa. Although he survived the war, he died in 1947 at the young age of 22, another voice to tell the story of Peleliu silenced.

There are, of course, monuments on Peleliu paying tribute to both the Americans and Japanese. Active duty US Army and Marine personnel serving with the Civic Action Team Palau came to care for the monuments and raise the American flag in honor of all who served. The official anniversary ceremony was subsequently held on September 28th with more dignitaries and military personnel attending. Peleliu's



Relics at the site of the former US cemetery. All burials were relocated to the US cemetery in Manila or back to the US according to families' wishes.

75th anniversary did not attract the attention given to Guadalcanal's 75th in 2017 or the upcoming 75th anniversary of Iwo Jima; much like the original battle, it did not even make the news back home. But those who have traveled there will never forget the solemn beauty of the island and the tragic events that occurred there in 1944.

Story and pictures, copyright Donna Esposito.

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Echoes from the past

Readers of our newsletter may have recently seen that Museum supporter Kevin McCarthy is now living in the Falkland Islands.

The Falklands like Vanuatu bears evidence of conflict, including the 1982 war with Argentina.

But it is one from 105 years ago that has been in the news – with the finding of a German warship sunk, some 100 miles off the coast of the Falklands.

The Battle of the Falklands, on December 8, 1914, saw the Royal Navy avenge an earlier defeat at the Battle of Coronel, off Chile's west coast. The adversary in both battles was the German Imperial Navy's East Asia Squadron, under Admiral Graf Von Spee.

The squadron had begun the war at Tsingatao, China, a colonial outpost of the German empire. As Germany had come late to colonisation, its outposts were scattered and isolated throughout the Pacific. They included the Solomon Islands, Samoa and the Caroline Islands.

Japan entered the First World War on the Allied side, and its navy joined the Royal Navy in trying to track down the German squadron, as it was a significant threat to shipping and troopships.

Von Spee began what was an odyssey across the Pacific, hoping to sail home. At Coronel, he encountered and destroyed a British squadron of outgunned warships.

But when he attempted to raid the major British base at the Falklands, and replenish with coal, he found the humiliated Royal Navy had sent two modern and much more powerful battlecruisers to take revenge.

Now in December 2019, Von Spee's flagship, SMS Scharnhorst, has been found nearly 2000 metres below the sea. It was discovered by a team led by Falkland Island marine archaeologist Mensun Bound.

The historical links from the battle back to the South Pacific war are not insignificant. Japan and the Allies, with no rival warships left to oppose them, soon seized the former German possessions.

Those bases became key to Japan's early sweep through the Pacific in 1941, while some such as the Solomon Islands became targets. And the fighting in the Solomons, of course, is why Vanuatu became home to a vast Allied presence in World War II.

They say the end of every war sows the seed of the next. Perhaps they are right.



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