



A WOMAN *on a Mission*

Eleanor Roosevelt's Remarkable Journey to the South Pacific

Story by Donna Esposito. Photography courtesy of the South Pacific WWII Museum.

There was nothing unusual about a B-24 Liberator landing on Espiritu Santo in September of 1943. By then four airfields buzzed with constant activity, along with a seaplane base, port, dry dock, and hospitals supporting the Allied war effort. During World War II, thousands of American troops were stationed on Santo, as well as on Efate. Many more passed through the islands for rest and recreation or as hospital patients suffering from battle wounds or diseases like malaria. But on September 14, 1943, the American bomber arriving from Efate delivered a very special shipment: the first lady of the United States, Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt.

Mrs. Roosevelt's stop in Vanuatu, then known as the New Hebrides, was the latest in a 38-day, 26,000-mile tour of the South Pacific. At the request of her husband, US president Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the first lady embarked on the trip to see the work of women in Australia and New Zealand, gather information for the Red Cross, and to personally pass along a greeting from the Commander in Chief to as many men as possible. She departed San Francisco by plane on August 17, 1943, flying first to Hawaii. She eventually visited multiple cities in New Zealand and Australia, as well as seventeen different islands including Bora Bora, Samoa, New Caledonia, and even Guadalcanal.

The first lady was traveling as a representative of the American Red Cross and wore their official blue uniform exclusively during the tour, partly, it was said, to save room in her luggage. A prolific writer, Mrs. Roosevelt wrote a syndicated newspaper column, 'My Day', from 1935 until her death in 1962. Although she continued to write her daily column while on the trip, publication was delayed until she had arrived safely in New Zealand. In the meantime, her column consisted of musings on home front issues like wartime housing and fire

prevention, giving the illusion she was safely at home in Hyde Park, New York. On August 28th, Americans learned their first lady was, in fact, in the heart of the South Pacific. To quell anticipated complaints about needless travel, the column header explained she had paid her own way and all proceeds from 'My Day' would be donated to the Red Cross and the American Friends Service Committee.

Throughout the tour, Mrs. Roosevelt met with government and military officials, made speeches and radio broadcasts to crowds of thousands, and even became the first woman to eat in the Australian Parliament House dining room. But visiting troops in hospitals, rest camps, and Red Cross clubs was the top priority for the first lady, allowing her to talk directly with the boys, understand their experiences, and learn about their concerns for the future. Chief among concerns was what life would be like after the war. She reported that, "The ones who hadn't finished their college wanted to know if they would have a chance to go on with their education; the ones who had acquired skills in the service were hopeful they could find a way to use them after the war. They all wanted to know whether they would have jobs. They took a tremendous interest in the kind of world we are going to have after the peace."

After a stop in Noumea, New Caledonia, the first lady traveled first to Efate and then Espiritu Santo, accompanied by Miss Coletta Ryan, American Red Cross Supervisor of the South Pacific Area. At Admiral William F. "Bull" Halsey's request, they visited naval hospitals on Efate but had to promise not to divulge the name of the island; the Japanese were not aware the Americans occupied it. Of Efate, she wrote, "I am deeply impressed with the work that has been done on that island to prevent malaria and make it a healthful place." On Espiritu Santo, the pair was escorted by Admiral Aubrey

Fitch and Major General Maxwell Murray. They visited hospitals, where Mrs. Roosevelt pinned Purple Hearts on the wounded, a base barbershop, and vast villages of Quonset huts. At the fleet recreation center on nearby Aore Island, Mrs. Roosevelt addressed large crowds of sailors, watched men play basketball, and took in the evening movie at an outdoor theatre.

In her 'My Day' column, Mrs. Roosevelt commented that, "In Espiritu Santo, where we stopped for half a night and day, we admired the recreation area, where there were almost as many attractions as in Coney Island, but, in spite of the great crowd of men, it was less crowded."

Mrs. Roosevelt's itinerary was not completely set prior to the trip. She most wanted to see Guadalcanal and New Guinea, closest to the front lines. President Roosevelt left that to the discretion of the military commanders in the area. General Douglas MacArthur declined to allow her to visit New Guinea, saying her visit would be "more of a bother than a pleasure." Initially Admiral Halsey also rejected the first lady's request to visit Guadalcanal due to safety concerns: the island was still a target for Japanese bombers. However, after seeing her effect on the troops at other bases, he acquiesced. Mrs. Roosevelt and Miss Ryan flew from Espiritu Santo to Guadalcanal, taking the troops there by surprise. As it turned out, the concern for the first lady's safety was warranted; Guadalcanal was bombed the evening before she arrived and the night after she left. Everywhere she traveled, Mrs. Roosevelt made a point of telling the men they were not forgotten by the people back home. In her column, she mentioned specific men she had met by name so their families would have news of them. She even filled four notebooks with the names of servicemen's mothers and girlfriends to contact when she returned home. The effect of her maternal care



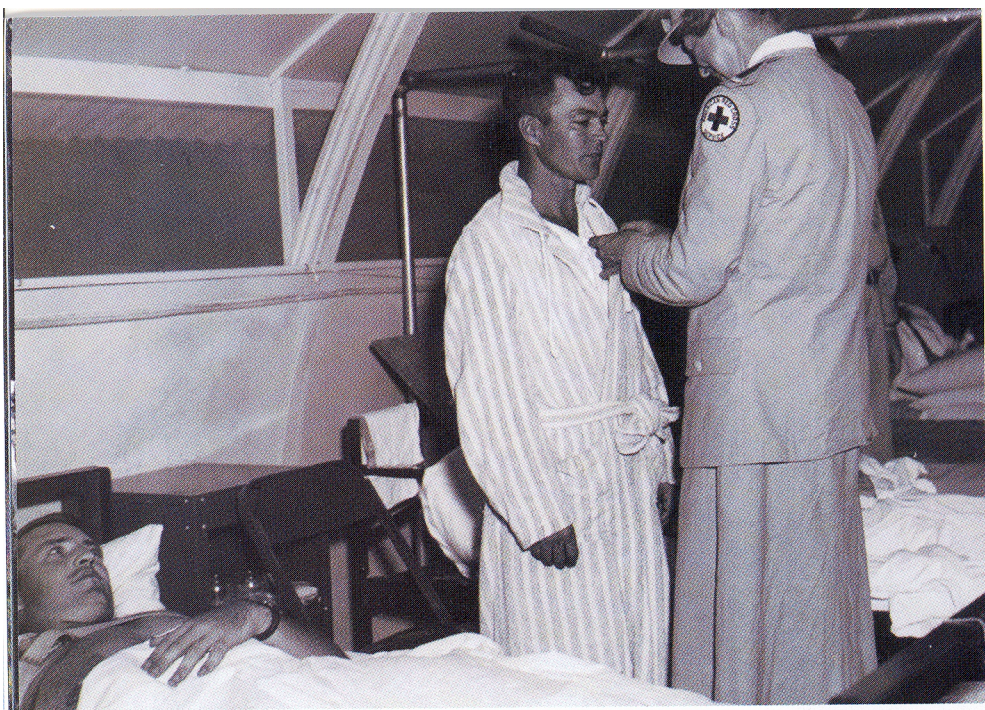
and concern for the boys she met was profound.

Admiral Halsey later relayed his admiration for Mrs. Roosevelt, saying that in just twelve hours, “she inspected two Navy hospitals, took a boat to an officer’s rest home and had lunch there, returned and inspected an Army hospital, reviewed the 2nd Marine Raider Battalion (her son Jimmy had been its executive officer), made a speech at a service club, attended a reception, and was guest of honour at a dinner given by General Harmon. ... When I say that she inspected those hospitals, I don’t mean that she shook hands with the chief medical officer, glanced into a sun room and left. I mean that she went into every ward, stopped at every bed, and spoke to every patient: What was his name? How did he feel? Was there anything he needed? Could she take a message home for him? I marveled at her hardihood, both physical and mental, she walked for miles, and she saw patients who were grievously and gruesomely wounded. But I marveled most at their expressions as she leaned over them. It was a sight I will never forget.”

Mrs. Roosevelt’s South Pacific tour had both immediate and long-lasting effects. Personally, the 59-year-old first lady was deeply affected by the trip. She had lost 37 pounds during the five-week journey. After hearing her speak, a newspaper columnist commented that she had returned “subdued and deeply thoughtful.” The first lady brought back with her memories of the thousands of wounded men she met. Upon her return, she stressed that the country “must prepare now to place these men in useful jobs after the war (...) The problem that concerns



me most is how these returning men will re-enter their social lives.” She urged the



American public to develop an attitude of not noticing a physical disability. She also took special note of New Zealand's and Australia's plans for the government to pay for veterans to finish their education and offer low interest rate loans to start a business, buy a farm, or build a home. "No man should ask what our plans are for the demobilization period. The Australians and the New Zealanders have told their men. We should shortly do the same," she advised the American public and her husband, the president. In addition to the primary effect of lifting the morale of the troops, Eleanor Roosevelt's observations on the needs and concerns of the fighting men helped to shape policy that became the G. I. Bill for returning veterans.

Admiral Halsey concluded that on her journey, "she alone had accomplished more good than any other person, or any group of civilians, who had passed through my area." Nearly seventy-five years later, one reporter's assessment of Mrs. Roosevelt's South Pacific tour as "the most remarkable journey any president's wife has ever made" still holds true.

Donna Esposito is the Director of the Library/Archives at the Empire State Aerosciences Museum in Glenville, New York, USA (www.esam.org). She is a member of the South Pacific WWII Museum, supporting this new development on Espiritu Santo, Vanuatu. To find out more about the South Pacific World War II Museum, visit southpacificwwiimuseum.com.



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