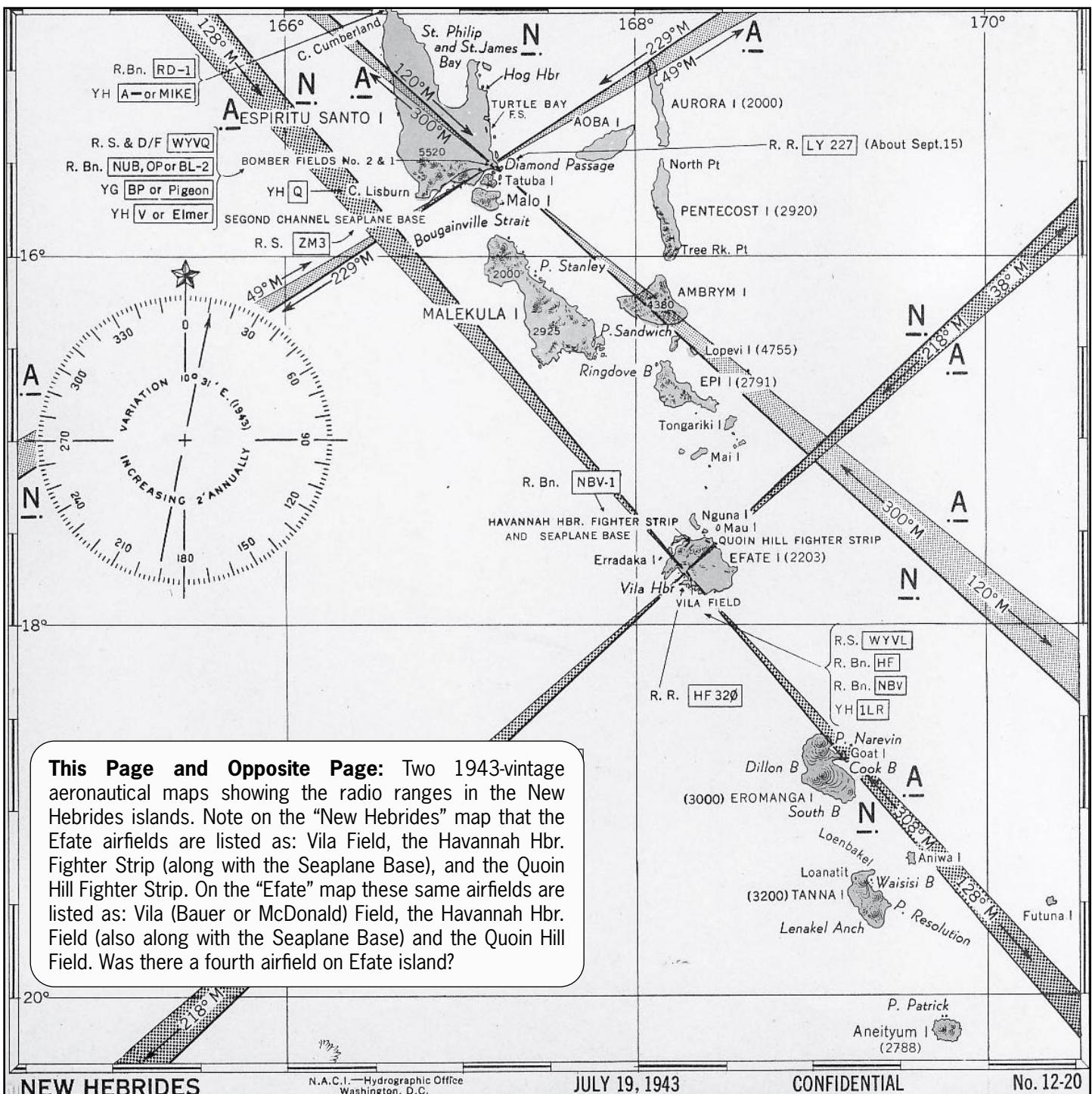


A Little Mystery: The World War Two Airfields of Efate Island



by David G. Powers

Unless otherwise noted, all maps and images are courtesy of the South Pacific World War II Museum, in the Republic of Vanuatu.
<https://southpacificwwiiimuseum.com>

During World War Two the U.S. Navy built dozens upon dozens of airfields throughout the Pacific theatre, some laid out on barren atolls only a few feet above sea level, others hacked out of nearly impenetrable jungle. While most of these airfields had an official designation, sometimes as nondescript as a simple number, or a code name, many

of them were also named in honor of fallen servicemen, oftentimes aviators who were lost in battle.

Several months ago, while doing some non-related research, I ran across an article in the May 1950 issue of "Naval Aviation News" magazine titled "Field Names Honor Heroes." Interested, I took the bait and chased this tangent. The article presented a brief synopsis of the somewhat obscure process by which, back then, an airfield would acquire its name. The article does mention, however, that during the war, with so many airfields being built in quick succession, many acquired names that may have not been official, names that may have never really been approved or disapproved. The trouble is, if the airfield was never officially named, when the physical

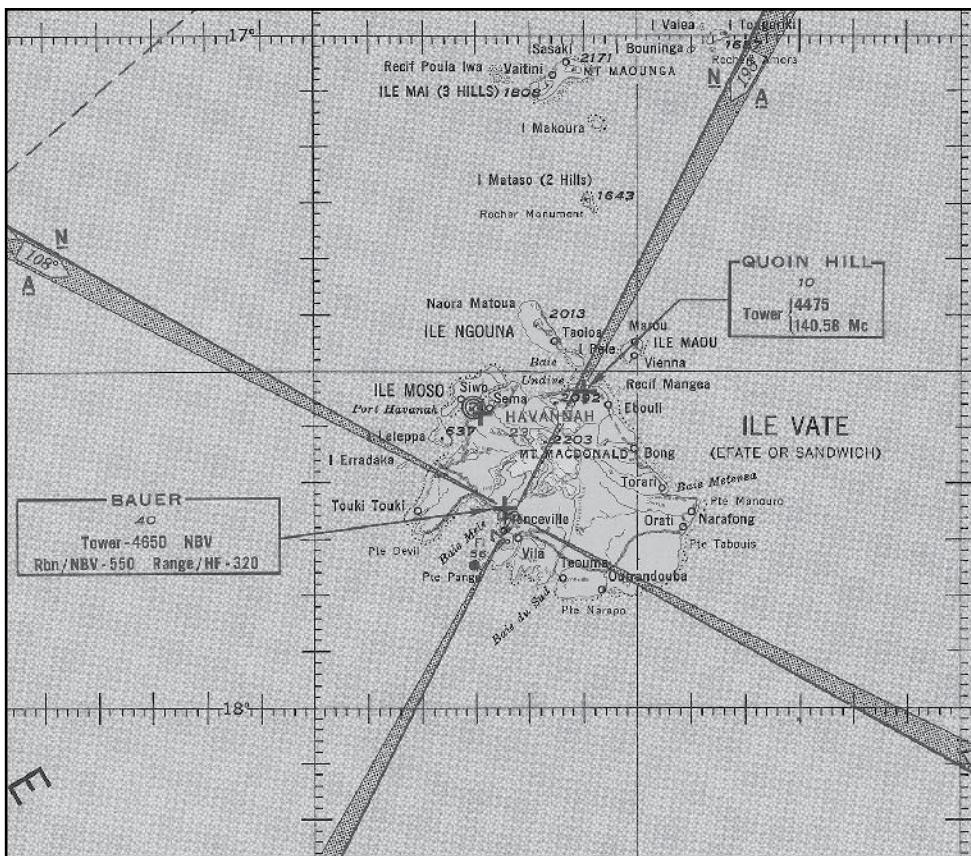
airfield was abandoned and faded back into the jungle, the name often faded away also. The article concludes with a list of a few of the airfields scattered around the Pacific islands, the author noting that he could find no definitive list of other airfields. It is perhaps because of the official/unofficial method of naming airfields, plus the lack of any definitive list of these names, that presents a bit of a quandary concerning one island in the Pacific.

Efate island - Île Efate in French - is located near the mid-point of the New Hebrides island chain, now called the Republic of Vanuatu since gaining independence on 30 July 1980. In its colonial days the New Hebrides were claimed by both the British and the French, and since 1906 was governed under what was called the "Anglo-French Condominium" system, where joint rule was administrated by both countries. During the war, the Americans moved in and made Efate an important staging point to further the war in the Pacific, although Efate was not quite so well known as another, bigger island up the New Hebrides chain, namely Espiritu Santo. Efate saw the construction of two ship harbors, a seaplane base and three, or perhaps, four airfields. It's these land-based airfields, and their names, that presents the aforementioned quandary.

According to the 1950 "Naval Aviation News" article there were three named airfields on Efate: Bauer Field, Taylor Field, and Haring Field. The article does note that Bauer Field was located at Vila, in the New Hebrides. Vila, it should be clarified, is the largest town on Efate. The same article lists a Finucane Field, located on Guadalcanal, in the Solomon Islands. To confirm these names and locations, I then turned to one of the best references concerning the history of U. S. Naval Aviation, the book "United States Naval Aviation 1910-2010," written by Mark L. Evans and Roy A. Grossnick, and published by the Naval History and Heritage Command. And, it was here the mystery started.

Appendix 11 of this massive volume lists naval air stations and fields named for Naval and Marine Corps aviators. So, Bauer Field was there, still listed as being "on Vila, New Hebrides," as are Taylor and Haring Fields. Finucane Field, however, is now recorded as being on Efate, as well. A total of four airfields? Again, this is one of those history rabbit holes that, although not the most important of earth shattering mysteries, I wanted to solve. So, I started to do some casual digging.

In an article titled "The Project was ROSES," which appeared in the May/June 1967 issue of "The Naval Civil



A U.S. Army Air Forces navigational chart - with a revision date of January 1945 - still shows only three airfields - denoted by the crosses - with only Bauer Field actually named. Note that the cartographer on this chart used the French versions of the geographical features. Also note in the distant past Efate was called Sandwich Island, a titled bestowed by Captain James Cook, when he transited the islands in 1774.

Engineer," it was noted that on 20 March 1942, the Joint Chiefs of Staff issued orders to both the U.S. Army and the U.S. Navy to: "Establish an Army and Navy advance operating base at Efate, New Hebrides." ROSES - the secret code word for Efate Island - was to be one of a number of island bases built to support - to provide a "springboard" - for the upcoming operations in the Solomons. The Army, while providing a engineering company, was to provide for the overall defense of Efate, while the bulk of the construction was tasked to the Seabees - Naval Construction Battalions, newly formed under the auspices of the Navy Bureau of Yards and Docks. The Seabees had only been officially established on 5 January 1942, by the Bureau of Navigation, and the moniker "CB" had been approved only a few months later on 5 March. In addition to a large complex of harbor facilities, the plan called for one main airfield, supported by two outlying "dispersal" airfields, plus one seaplane operating base. Other ancillary base facilities were also called for, including a 600-bed hospital - made out of Quonset huts, of course.

Prior to the arrival of the Americans, there had been a very small contingent of Australians based in and around



the town of Vila. There was a small seaplane base in Vila Harbor, but the harbor was deemed much too small to operate the big U.S. seaplanes that would soon be arriving in large numbers. The nearby Meli Bay, while much larger, was open to the elements, and the water was often too rough for seaplane operations. There were then no land-based airfields, a situation that would soon change, while the harbor at Havannah was eyed as the new seaplane base. The Seabees had their work cut out for them. For example, before they arrived there was not even a road between Vila and Havannah.

Period maps of Efate after the arrival, and eventual departure, of the Seabees show only three land-based airfields: one outside the town of Vila, one on the shores of Havannah Harbor, and one on the north side of the island in the area of Quoin Hill. If there were four airfields, where was the fourth? Plus, what was each field named? I looked at each airfield individually.

Bauer Field

On 18 March 1942, a couple of advanced units arrived on Efate, primarily to ensure the island was secure, in preparation for a large fleet of transport ships - carrying the CBs - which would depart San Francisco on 12 April. These advanced units consisted of about 500 soldiers, including engineers, from the U.S. Army's Americal Division, out of Noumea, and the Marine Corps' 4th Defense Battalion, 45th Marines. Along with these Marines were a number of ground element

Looking to the southeast, Bauer Airfield is seen in the lower left, while the village of Vila is seen in the center, on the shores of the small Vila Harbor. Meli Bay is seen to the right. Photo was taken by of photo-reconnaissance aircraft launched from the USS Chenango (CVE-28), in mid-1943.

Photo: U.S. Navy

Marines assigned to Marine Fighter Squadron TWO-ONE-TWO (VMF-212), then based at New Caledonia.

Certainly the most well documented of the Efate airfields is Bauer Field, occasionally referred to as McDonald Field, perhaps after the nearby Mount McDonald, itself named after an early Scottish missionary assigned to the island. When the Seabees landed on Efate on 4 May 1942, they found that the Army engineers, Marine ground-pounders, and the Marines of VMF-212, in conjunction with some hired natives, and a British civil engineer, had already scratched out a 2,000 by 200-foot runway about three miles northwest of the town of Vila, on what was known as the Blandmere coconut plantation. The Seabees quickly took over and expanded the runway to 6,500 by 350 feet, big enough for heavy U.S. Army Air Forces bombers. A combination of ground coral and Marston Mat pierced steel planking (PSP) was used to surface the runway. On 27 May the first fighter - an F4F Wildcat, possibly from VMF-212 - landed on what would eventually be called Bauer Field.

Bauer Field is named after Lieutenant Colonel Harold W. Bauer USMC, who in March 1942, had assumed the command of VMF-212, soon to be stationed on Efate. By September

1942, VMF-212 had begun to deploy forward to Henderson Field - itself named for Major Lofton R. Henderson, who was lost in action at the Battle of Midway - on Guadalcanal. It was while operating out of Henderson that Bauer scored his ten - or perhaps eleven, depending on the reference - aerial victories against the Japanese. Later, he was tasked to take charge as the overall commander of the fighter command on Guadalcanal. The last two of his shoot downs occurred on 14 November, during an engagement that saw his Grumman F4F Wildcat suffering damage to the point that Bauer was forced to bail out. Initially, fellow Marine Corps Aviators fixed the location of Bauer, swimming in the water - or alternately reported as floating in a life raft that had been dropped to him. In any case, later rescue units failed to locate him, and he was never found. Lieutenant Colonel Harold Bauer was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor.

That the airfield at Vila was named for Lieutenant Colonel Bauer is fairly well confirmed, although it was also variously referred to at Vila Airfield, the Main Bomber Field and the aforementioned McDonald Field. On an aeronautical chart dated 27 July 1943 (see Page 40), produced by the U.S. Navy Hydrographic Office, the airfield just outside the town of Vila is clearly called Bauer Field. Indeed, even after the war the airfield retained its heritage, as a civilian airport known today as Port-Vila Bauerfield (sic) International Airport.

Many references state that Bauer Field was "on" Vila, however, I believe it would be more accurate to state that Bauer Field was "at" Vila. This could be a source of confusion. Additionally, and rather oddly, some later references do not list Bauer Field on Efate at all. By the way, the USS Bauer (DE-1025) - a Dealey-class destroyer escort in commission from 1957 to 1973 - was also named in honor of Lieutenant Colonel Bauer.

Taylor Field

As mentioned, Meli Bay was deemed too rough for regular seaplane operations, whereas further investigation determined that Havannah Harbor, sited on the northwest side of Efate, would be more suitable. When the Seabees landed they were tasked not only with building the seaplane facilities - seaplane ramps and onshore hardstands - but also with building a land-based airfield at the same location. One of the ideas was to have a land airfield for use by carrier-based aircraft while their carriers were in port at Havannah Harbor.

In early August 1942, the escort carrier USS Long Island (CVE-1) was en route to "Cactus," the code name for Guadalcanal, and aboard was Marine Fighter Squadron TWO-TWO-THREE (VMF-223) - Captain, soon to be Major John L. Smith commanding - which was part of Marine Air Group TWENTY-THREE (MAG-23). The carrier made a stop at Efate Island, where a bit of expeditious personnel swapping occurred. Since VMF-223 was soon to be in battle, it was decided to trade some more experienced aviators from Ma-

yor Bauer's VMF-212 for some less seasoned aviators from VMF-223. In this trade as Second Lieutenant Lawrence C. Taylor. Late in the day on 20 August, some 200 miles southeast of Guadalcanal, the squadron launched from aboard Long Island, and soon recovered at the recently named Henderson Field.

Originally named the "Rainbow" Squadron, a name that would be changed to the "Bulldogs," VMF-223 soon had their Grumman F4F Wildcats in the heat of battle, flying their first missions at dawn the very next day. A few days later, on 24 August, the now christened "Cactus Air Force" launched to meet a large force of Japanese aircraft - estimated at fifteen bombers and ten fighters - that came from aboard the Japanese carrier Ryujo. VMF-223, along with its MAG-23 sister squadron Marine Scout Bombing Squadron TWO-THREE-TWO (VMSB-232), flying the Douglas SBD-3 Dauntless, and a handful of U.S. Army Bell P-400 fighters, rose to meet the Japanese. In the ensuing melee, Second Lieutenant Taylor was shot down, crashing into the sea. While the Japanese lost ten of their bombers and six of their fighters, the Marines lost three aviators.

Information about the naming of Taylor Field, Efate, is relatively scarce. No map that I have found yet actually denotes a "Taylor Field" on the island. There is, however, a newspaper article in the 2 November 1943 issue of the Oakland Tribune noting that: "Second Lieutenant Lawrence C. Taylor USMC," had been posthumously awarded the Silver Star, "for heroism on combat over the Solomons," in August 1942. The article goes on to note: "In commemoration of his heroic action after he hastily repaired a faulty engine [on his Wildcat] to join his comrades in his first combat mission, an American flying field on Havannah Harbor, Efate, New Hebrides, has been named in his honor." The Silver Star citations states: "He gallantly gave up his life for his country."

So, both Bauer and Taylor fields are pretty well confirmed. Bauer Field is located just outside of the town of Vila, and Taylor Field is located at Havannah Harbor. That leaves only one field remaining, what was often referred to as a "fighter strip" near Quoin Hill, and noted on some maps simply as Quoin Hill Field. Was this field named Haring Field or Finucane Fields, or perhaps neither at all.

Haring Field and Finucane Field

Second Lieutenant Richard D Haring was a young Marine Corps Aviator assigned to VMF-212. On 13 September 1942, Haring was part of a ferry flight bringing eighteen much needed Wildcats in from ROSES (Efate) and BUTTON (Espiritu Santo) to CACTUS (Guadalcanal). Shortly after the ferry flight's arrival to Henderson Field, while the new birds were still being serviced, the alarm was sounded - Japanese aircraft were inbound. Second Lieutenant Haring reportedly jumped into the nearest Wildcat and took off. While climbing out to meet the enemy Haring's bird was seen to enter a dive from which it did not recover. Frantic radio calls from

Second Lieutenant Jack Conger, Haring's VMF-212 section leader, went unanswered, and Haring's Wildcat was observed impacting the ground on Guadalcanal. The cause of what happened has never been determined, but a failed oxygen system may have been the problem. Second Lieutenant Richard D Haring was posthumously awarded the Distinguished Fly Cross.

In the 2 February 1943, issue of the Battle Creek Enquirer (Michigan) there is a short article that reads: "The marines have named a New Hebrides airfield for Lieut. Richard D Haring, Muskegon aviator who was killed protecting the landing of United States forces on Guadalcanal in the Solomon islands. Lieut.-Gen. (sic) Thomas Holcomb, commanding officer of the marines, informed Haring's parents of the move honoring their son." Although this article does mention the New Hebrides, it does not specifically mention Efate island. Perhaps Haring Field was situated on a different island in the New Hebrides, and not on Efate like so many references claim.

Another Marine Corps Aviator assigned to VMF-212 was Second Lieutenant Arthur E. Finucane, the facts around who's demise are a bit obscure. It seems that in late May 1942, at least a portion of his squadron was based at New Caledonia, conducting training flights in preparation for its move to Guadalcanal, via Efate. On 31 May, while training against a derelict target ship, Finucane failed to pull out of diving attack, and crashed into the sea. He was the first aviator from VMF-212 to lose his life. Regarding the naming of an airfield after Finucane, an article in the 16 February 1943 issue of The Spokesman-Review (Spokane, Washington), was titled "Finucane Field Tribute To Pilot." The article records the comments of Lieutenant General Holcomb: "It is a distinct pleasure to inform you that the secretary of the navy has just approved the naming of a flying field on Efate, New Hebrides on honor of the memory of your son."

Again, the location and provenance of Bauer Field and Taylor Field both seem to be relatively certain. Not so certain was Haring Field and Finucane Field. Were they even on Efate island? Were there three or four airfields on Efate? There was one theory that was forwarded to me positing that the Havannah Harbor seaplane base was named of one of the Marine aviators, while the Quoin Hill fighter strip was



Another aerial photo - this one taken by Carrier Aircraft Service Unit TWELVE (CASU-12) - alternately known as a Combat Aircraft Service Unit - in December 1943. It shows the land-based airfield at Havannah Harbor, Efate, which was adjacent to the Seaplane Base. It is reasonably certain that this airfield was later named Taylor Field.

Photo: U.S. Navy

name after the other. Another theory figures that these airfields were abandoned so soon after the end of the war, that perhaps there was never a chance for some of the names show up on the period maps, nor be recorded in the official records. The war was over and the airfields were gone.

Throughout my research I had the opportunity to correspond with a wide variety of historians, curators and archivists, including folks at the U.S. Navy History and Heritage Command, the archives of the National Naval Aviation Museum, the U.S. Marine Corps History Division, the National Museum of the Marine Corps, and the Flying Leatherneck Aviation Museum. I spoke with the Government of the Republic of Vanuatu, and the South Pacific World War II Museum. Everybody was quite helpful, but most agreed it was a bit of a mystery. I perused dozens of books, articles and unit histories, some of which only added to the mystery.

I have a feeling that the solution to this mystery can be easily cleared up with a single document or map, it's just that I haven't found it yet. And, again, the answer to these questions may not be groundbreaking history, but it is still interesting history, all the same.

Any thoughts or ideas? I look forward to hearing from you. Drop me a line at: contact@logbookmag.com 