

The **SANTONIAN**

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Welcome to the Santonian

The extra quarterly newsletter for our Museum members.

If you caught our last issue, you'd have read about the small schooner that carried out a low-key but important role in the waters around Vanuatu. We promised more on the USS Echo, beyond its Hollywood fame, and here it is in this issue.

As well, we've got a slice of fine historical writing that pulls no punches about what it was like on Espiritu Santo in the aftermath of a naval battle.

There's an update on a remarkable restoration taking place in Australia of a B-24 Liberator.

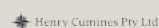
And if we began with a tiny ship, we end with another that was a bit bigger, but still one of the anonymous heroes of the war effort.

If you would like to contribute to the Santonian or provide feedback, please contact Kevin McCarthy at admin@southpacificwwiimuseum.com



Some of the beautiful work being done to restore the B-24 in Australia. Photo: B-24 Liberator Restoration Australia.

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The Real Wackiest Ship

We've previous included excerpts from the excellent history of III Island Command, written by the late Lieutenant Colonel Ritchie Garrison. He had dealings with the USS Echo – which became the subject of a movie and TV comedy in the 1960s - and devoted a chapter to the schooner that was a lifeline to many of the bravest to serve in the war.

In my discussion of the coastwatchers I mentioned they were supplied and transported by the USS Echo.

Certainly, the Echo deserves a few more words as it was a unique and valuable aid in a conflict that first included aircraft carriers.

In 1942 the US Navy purchased 2 old lumber schooners in New Zealand, for inter-island utility use.

The two vessels were of the same design and were known unofficially as the beetle fleet.

They were about 100 feet long and were complete with sails and an ancient diesel engine.

The vessels were commissioned in New Zealand and soon sailed for the New Caledonia/ New Hebrides area.

The Echo was placed under the operational command of the commanding general of III Island Group and reported to the G2 (intelligence officer).

The ship was primarily used for coastwatch supply, operating north as far as Lomlom in the Swallow Islands, about 30 nautical miles north of Ndeni, in the Santa Cruz islands - a distance of about 450 nautical miles.

It was estimated that the regular supply trips would cover about 1100 nautical miles and would take about three to four weeks.

The Echo had a complement of two officers and nine men - a complement dictated by the number of bunks that were installed in the ship.



The USS Echo (IX-95) officers and crew. Captain Riddle stands between the enlisted men and his Executive Officer (XO).

Photo: Task Force 9516 and III Island Command by Lieutenant Colonel Ritchie Garrison, USA (Ret.)

Lieutenant (JG) Riddle was the commanding officer and Lieutenant (JG) Shannon the executive officer. The engineer was a motor machinist mate, there was a boatswain's mate first class and a ship's cook first class, a combination radio operator/signalman and some seamen completed the crew.

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When Echo was first commissioned the main battery was a calibre .30 Lewis machine gun; however, a Japanese twin engine Betty bomber on long range-reconnaissance scrutinized the ship one morning near Lomlom and lost interest after seeing an old two-masted schooner flying no flag with no number on the bow and only a couple of crew members on deck.

Captain Riddle after being asked about the machine guns said: Hell, I didn't want to get I didn't want to get that Jap mad!"

When Echo came back to Efate it was decided to do something about the main battery; the ship was ordered to Havana harbor and fitted were a pair of brand new 20-millimeter antiaircraft guns, installed on the bow by a repair ship.



Pre WW2 photo of the Echo as she appeared before being rquisitioned by the US military in New Zealand. Photo: NZ Ship & Marine Society - Angus Campbell.

The crew was trained and later fired at a target sleeve towed by an aircraft – the instructors were gunners' mates from a battleship division commanded by Rear Admiral Harry Hill.

Admiral Hill was always much interested in the Echo, and he had always wanted to make a cruise on the schooner. His flag lieutenant often called on the G2 office to check on Echo's schedule but there was a war and the Admiral had to content himself with an occasional visit to the ship or by inviting

Captain Riddle to dine on the flagship for a report on the latest cruise.

Provisioning it could be a problem; when the ship was first in service it added an electrical system that only provided powerful lighting.



"Sparks" talks to a passing ship by means of the Echo's signal light. Capt. Riddle to the left and rear of "Sparks". Photo: Task Force 9516 and III Island Command by Lieutenant Colonel Ritchie Garrison, USA (Ret.).

Radio communication was provided by an Australian coastwatch radio with battery power but there was no refrigeration and fresh food was a problem.

At one period the ship carried live chickens in the hold except one chicken flew up on deck and roosted on the bowsprit.

The chickens had been donated by a planter who communicated with the rest of the world by sending his mail to and from Efate via the Echo.

I understand that the chickens improved the menu, but they were tough after learning to walk on the constantly shifting deck in the hold.

On another occasion the same planter donated a side of beef complete with hide so that the crew could have some beef.

The skipper was not sure how to handle the situation but an army sergeant from the hills of North Carolina volunteered to skin the side of beef while the ships tackle held it over the

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side, so the clean wooden deck of the Echo did not become stained. After one of Echo's many supply trips it returned to port and as the ship was backing down just before anchoring the captain noted that one of the planks in the hull was not backing down and was ahead of the bow. Luckily the plank was from the outer layer and there was no serious leak

As a result, it was sent to north to Espiritu Santo for drydocking and repair.

On arrival the Echo was an unusual sight as it tied up alongside the repair ship that was busy patching up destroyers that had been shot up.

The hull of the Echo was repaired, a minor task, and then the old wiring and generator were removed.

The ship came back to Efate with new wiring and a 110 Volt generator and wonder of all wonders, a refrigerator.

(representative of the G2), an army doctor who would check out the coastwatchers for signs of illness and an army Sergeant (supply NCO for the coastwatchers) who had gathered together all of the supplies and had supervised their loading, and an army radio technician to check over the radios and generators; also one or two volunteers who were ready to relieve any coastwatchers that might have to be replaced for medical or other reasons.

Spare weapons, radios and generators were on board if needed. Each coastwatcher station would have radioed its supply requirements - food and clothing, gasoline for generators, medical supplies, razor blades, and even writing paper and envelopes; many of the coastwatchers wrote home often even if the mail was only picked up and delivered every 60 days by the Echo.

Coastwatchers were dedicated soldiers who



Native scouts set out from a coastwatcher station on New Georgia with legendary Coastwatcher Donald Kennedy and U.S. Marines.
Photo: War History Network.

Every two months the ship would make its 1100 nautical mile round-trip supplying the various coastwatch stations; in addition to the crew the ship carried the following passengers - an army captain

had volunteered for a minimum of 60 days; however, the men found their duties fascinating and did not want to be relieved. Tropical diseases particularly malaria was a great problem in the area, and we did not always

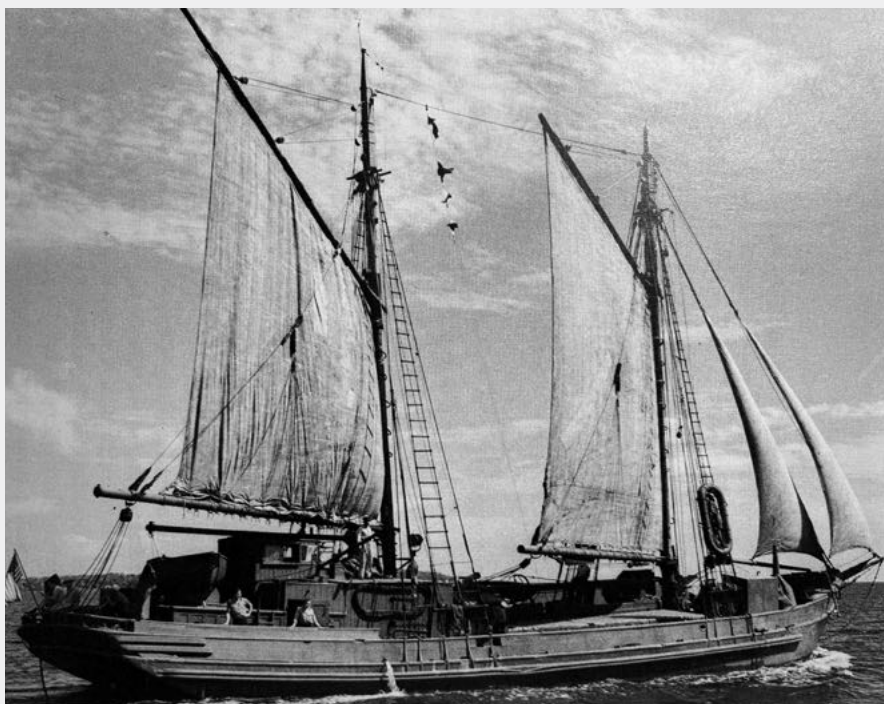
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know when a man was sick.

The doctor on the Echo had instructions to meet and talk with every coastwatcher and if they appeared to be rundown, the doctor would recommend the immediate relief of the coastwatcher and one of the spare men would take over.

For more than two years the Echo carried out its mission in an outstanding manner. A schooner flying a Commission Pennant must've looked out of a place in the fleet anchorage, but the mission was unique just as the ship was.

In the 1950s the story of the Echo was a popular TV show - The Wackiest Ship in the Army. Many of the facts of the TV show were correct but Hollywood lost much of its flavour.



The USS Echo (IX-95) underway somewhere in the Pacific. Photo: Task Force 9516 and III Island Command by Lieutenant Colonel Ritchie Garrison, USA (Ret.).



A publicity still from the original movie starring Jack Lemmon and Ricky Nelson. Not quite an accurate depiction of the original Echo, but close enough.



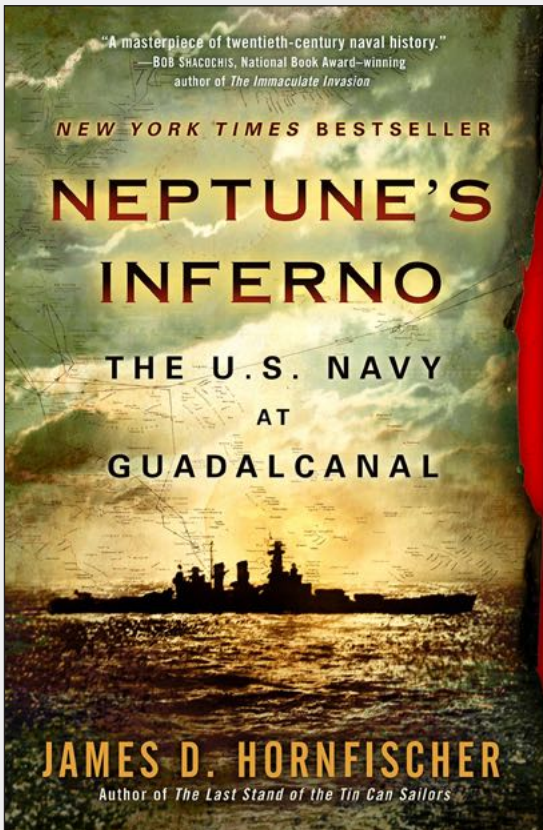
Jack Warden and Gary Collins in a publicity still for the TV version of the 'Wackiest Ship in the Army'. The series only lasted one season from 1965 - 1966.

A vivid telling of the return to Espiritu Santo

*Earlier this year, the world lost a gifted naval historian at a young age. James D. Hornfischer had written four histories of the war at sea, including the acclaimed *Last Stand of the Tin Can Sailors* which won him the Samuel Eliot Morison award - an award for literature specifically about the United States Navy. The prize is named for the late Rear Admiral Samuel Eliot Morison, a military historian.*

Hornfischer mixed history with a great narrative flair and wonderful storytelling.

His third book was *Neptune's Inferno*, about the US Navy's war for Guadalcanal, where he noted that the sacrifice and skill of the land forces had often overshadowed that of the naval forces.



As the book concerned the Solomons campaign, Espiritu Santo is often in its pages as the place from which the key battles would be fought. And with those, came the inevitable grim casualties, and often harrowing returns back to port for survivors.

In *Neptune's Inferno*, he writes of the return of ships of Task Force 67 to the anchorage after the first naval Battle of Guadalcanal, November 1942, where the US ships had stood in the way of two Japanese battleships and suffered heavily.

Here is a brief excerpt from Hornfischer's description.

The surviving ships of Task Force 67 arrived at Espiritu Santo on the afternoon of November 14.

Entering the channel, the *San Francisco* followed the *Helena* closely. A monument to the danger of haphazard navigation stood for all to see - the wreck of the luxury liner turned troop transport *President Coolidge* which several weeks earlier had blundered out of the safety of the channel into the harbor's defensive minefield.

As the *San Francisco* came into the harbour she passed port-side to port-side the other cruisers anchored in a line - the *Minneapolis*, *New Orleans*, *Pensacola*, and *Northampton*.

"It was pretty inspiring," Jack Bennett said .

The crews of the anchored ships manned the rail and offered three rousing cheers to their battle-scarred counterparts.

Hip-hip hurray three times that was something emotional,"Bennett said. "The greatest accolades you can get is from your comrades in arms in the harbour."

The *Helena* went alongside a tanker to refuel. Sailors on the oiler surveyed the shrapnel pocked light cruiser and hollered over the rail

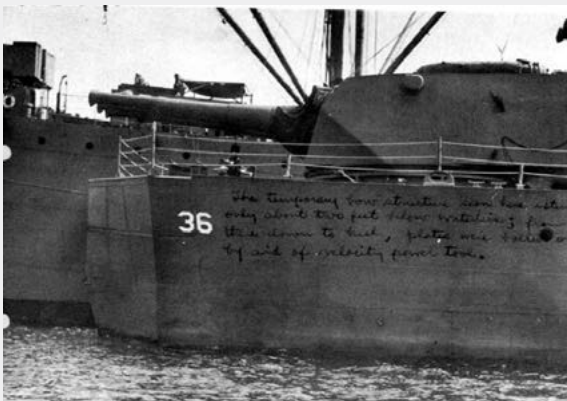
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“what happened”?

A wag replied: “Termites.”

Hornfischer then writes of the price of the battle in human terms.

“The mobile base hospital at Espiritu Santo was crowded. Ships doctors’, seeing the facilities available ashore, lamented the butchery they’d been forced to perpetrate



The temporary bow fitted to USS Minneapolis in Espiritu Santo after being torpedoed at Guadalcanal, allowed the ship to sail to the USA for major repairs.

in the battle area -a amputations - dressing soaked through and raw and open wounds.

In combat you did your best with what you had.

With his leg shot through with more than 130 shrapnel wounds the San Francisco's Cliff Spencer was taken to a wardroom full of wounded sailors and marines.

“I wasn't near anyone I knew and at that moment I'd never felt so sad and alone.”

“Next to me on the opposite tier lay a young sailor - he was crying. I tried to strike up a conversation with him and asked what ship are you off. He said the Atlanta . . . as we talked the nurse came to dress his wounds. He threw back the blankets and lifted about an 8-inch stub of his right leg that had been amputated above the knee and not been

surgically closed - just a raw cut covered with a large bandage.

“He shocked me by almost screaming the sons of bitches on the San Francisco did



James D. Hornfischer in 2016.

this - how can I ever work the farm with this bloody stump Needless to say I didn't volunteer the name of my ship. “

There were some real hard feelings between the Helena and San Francisco . . . sailors who thought the flagship had turned and run at the height of the engagement and that the Helena had to stay there and do the job or whatever.

From Neptune's Inferno – The US Navy at Guadalcanal – By James D. Hornfischer, published by Bantam, 2012.

amazon.com/Neptunes-Inferno-U-S-Navy-Guadalcanal/dp/0553385127

Phoenix rising

Museum member Ian Waters, who used to live and work in Vanuatu, is besides being a supporter of our project, a keen follower of the restoration of a Royal Australian Air Force B-24 Liberator, A72-176. You will recall one of our first Santonian articles was about a book Ian is writing about the Australian involvement in the Battle of the Coral Sea.

He's shared these words and photos about the project being undertaken just outside Melbourne, Australia, written by Dave Miller, Historian, B-24 Liberator Memorial

In 1988 a group of retired air force personnel decided to create a memorial commemorating the activities and history of RAAF B-24 Liberator Squadrons during WWII. The plan was to obtain a B24 and restore it to a "live" condition and have it installed in an accredited Museum.

The heavily corroded fuselage of B-24 A72-176 was located on a farm in Gippsland, Victoria. It was eventually purchased and relocated to Werribee Fields satellite Airfield and placed in a WWII hangar during 1995.



The B-24, fresh off the truck from Gippsland, is moved into its restoration hangar at Werribee Field. Photo: B-24 Liberator Restoration Australia.

A global search began to locate wings, centre section, undercarriage and a multitude of components and parts.

In parallel a recruitment campaign was initiated to obtain volunteers and members to support our cause.

A major milestone was reached in 2000 when a dedication ceremony was held

in the hangar with nearly 1000 veterans and families attending including a large contingent of USAAF 380th Bomb Group veterans who travelled from the United States.

During 2005 we estimated we had 95% of the parts to complete our Lib. The remaining items were "furnishings" and would not hinder the planned completion.

We then took stock of what was required to meet the dream of our founders. This resulted in the creation of a formal business plan, a five year Liberator restoration plan and a ten year planned, rolling schedule of key events that will result in the following.

1. Obtain a permanent address for our current location.
2. Obtain formal accreditation as a museum.
3. Encourage the restoration and relocation of hangar 1 on the strength of its heritage listing.

The current address allocation is awaiting two final signatures by the current owners.

Formal Museum accreditation was obtained in 2019.

The hangar restoration and relocation is currently subject to final environmental clearance prior to physical commencement.

The future restoration activities for our

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organization include the assembly and completion of a replica Airspeed "Oxford". The restoration and assembly of an Avro "Anson" and the procurement of a De Havilland "Tiger Moth".

These three aircraft flew from this airfield during WWII and were instrumental in the training of B-24 Liberator aircrew in Australia. They are part of the story of the B-24 in service with the RAAF.



The B-24's nose turret under restoration at Werribee. Photo: B-24 Liberator Restoration Australia.



The B-24 in its hangar today. A remarkable restoration effort. Photo: B-24 Liberator Restoration Australia.

We are active and proud about sharing this small part of modern history and achievement with veterans' families, local, interstate, and international visitors.

Our organization is managed and staffed entirely by volunteers.

We would be pleased to accept new members or donations through Graham Collis, Membership Secretary at: graham.collis59@gmail.com.

b24australia.org.au



Nowhere to land

This is the USS Kwajalein, pictured in July 1944, and according to the US Navy photo attribution, on its way to Espiritu Santo with this packed load of Corsair fighters and Avenger torpedo bombers.



By that time, the immediate focus of the war had moved beyond the Solomons – but the story of the Kwajalein tells quite a bit about how massive a logistic effort was needed to support the US offensive, and how the New Hebrides remained an important part.

This photo was taken on July 19, 1944, and is actually on the carrier's maiden combat voyage. She was an escort carrier, of which there were 50 in her Casablanca class. The US industrial machine was able to turn them out in such staggering numbers, they could be used for many purposes.

Some would fly on combat squadrons and be in direct support of amphibious landings. They weren't intended to fight in the big naval clashes however; they were relatively slow at 22 knots.

Some spent their time in an even more basic role – carrying forward the replacements planes and personnel to be fed into existing combat units. This was part of the genius of the US system, whereby the fast carrier groups were able to stay at sea for long periods, while their support ships kept them replenished. The Kwajalein made one ferry run to Espiritu Santo, taking two weeks.

But if you think she had a quiet war, you'd be wrong. Her replenishment duties took her in October 1944 into the path of the infamous typhoon which struck Admiral Halsey's Pacific fleet. It sank three ships and claimed nearly 800 lives, as 160mph winds and 18-metre high waves tormented the armada.

Kwajalein lost steerage and was rolling up to 40 degrees but managed to survive with light damage and a couple of planes lost overboard.

She continued to serve right through to the end of the Pacific war, including taking part in the massive repatriation of servicemen and women, dubbed Operation Magic Carpet.

USS Kwajalein was scrapped in 1961, that – ironically – occurring in Japan.

Tell us what you think!

Thank you for reading The Santonian. Your support for the Museum is most appreciated. If you any questions or suggestions for future topics, please contact Kevin McCarthy at: admin@southpacificwwiimuseum.com

“Inspiring everyday heroes.”



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