The SANTONIAN

SOUTH PACIFIC WWII MUSEUM

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The extra quarterly newsletter for our Museum members.

Let's play ball.

Welcome to the Santonian's last issue for 2022.

We've got an eclectic mix of articles for you this month – spanning thousands of miles, and even taking a sneak peek into the future.

There's no more overworked cliché in military history books or movies than the phrase the 'forgotten battle'.

In fact, the vast majority of battles become forgotten over time. Just the huge ones – think D-Day or Stalingrad – hang on in the public mind. Even something monumental like Kursk on World War Two's Eastern Front could be called a forgotten battle.

This Santonian's lead article is about a small battle that was briefly, globally, famous – then became forgotten, only to eventually be reincarnated as a symbol of defiance that remains too today.

The Eight Hundred is a remarkable tale told in a new book, but we've been especially intrigued by its connection to the war in the South Pacific.

Our second article concerns baseball – and its inspired by a fantastic picture taken of a team on Espiritu Santo during the war.

And our final piece is from the frontier – just how good is artificial intelligence at playing the historian?

We hope you enjoy it all. If you have any comments or ideas for future Santonians, please contact Kevin McCarthy at **mccarthy@globe.net.nz**

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The 800's Very Last Stand.

It may surprise some, but the start of the Second World War was not September 1939.

For sure - that is when Germany invaded Poland, triggering war with France and Great Britain.

Within just over two years, that European conflagration had extended to Russia, and dragged in the United States, with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour.

But there is a convincing case that what became a global war had in fact started in 1937, with the Sino-Chinese war.

To do a very quick and broad brush summary, China had for decades been prey to foreign incursions. The imperial powers like Great Britain, and Germany, had sought to carve out possessions for trade and other gain. There was no coherent Chinese nation but a series of warlord struggles.

Japan was comparatively a late comer to these depredations, but the most ruthless and dangerous once it had begun from the early 1900s to take an interest in China and Korea.

Only in the 1930s was there evidence of some coherent national government, based around the Chinese nationalist movement, led by Generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek. Centred with its capital in Nanjing, it was this Republic of China that would provide the chief resistance to the Japanese.

Of course, in the mountains to the north, the Chinese communist movement was in existence – but not yet on a decisive scale.

Chiang was as a military man, fighting to unify parts of the country, committed to a strong army. By the mid-1930s, while the mass of poor soldiers were still in evidence,

Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek in full uniform.

the Nationalist movement had also developed, with German expertise, a core of high-quality, well trained, soldiers with high motivation.

It was they who went to war with the Japanese in Shanghai, 1937. And created one of the foundation stories of modern China – the tale of the Eight Hundred.

It's the subject of a new and excellent book by military writer, analyst, and historian

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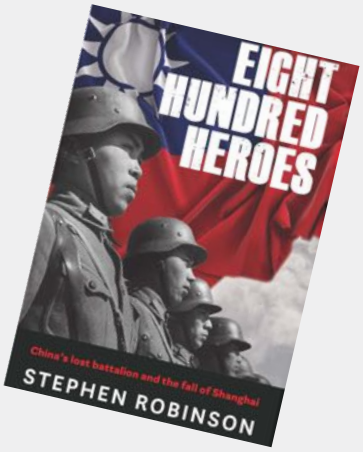
Stephen Robinson. Called Eight Hundred Heroes, you can see it here:

exislepublishing.com/product/eight-hundred-heroes/



Historian, Stephen Robinson's remarkable book about the 800.

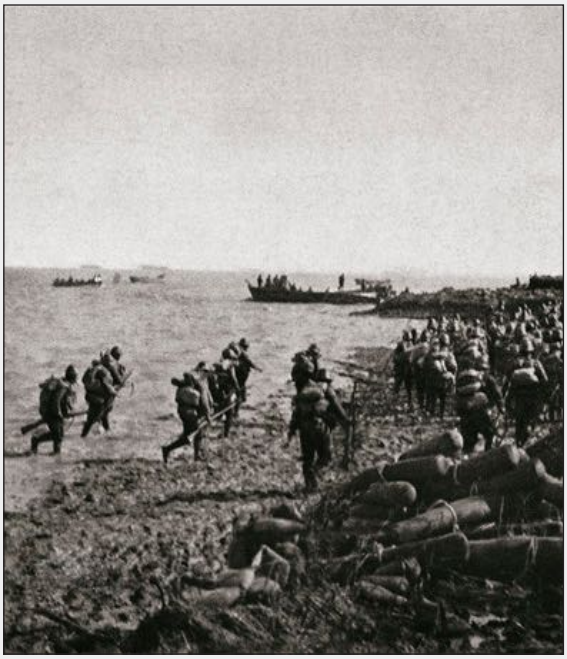
In a nutshell, what was actually a battalion of nearly 400 Chinese soldiers held a large warehouse complex against much larger Japanese assaults. Traditionally it is said they sacrificed themselves to give the rest of the nationalist army a chance to withdraw.

In fact, the stand was a very calculated one – because the battlefield sat directly opposite the international settlement – neutral ground, and garrisoned by British solders. From it, a large number of westerners, among them journalists, could witness the epic battle. And they did, and wrote about it profusely, as well as shooting movie footage. The battle, now largely unknown in the west, became famous globally, and did an immense amount to cast the Chinese resistance and the war in heroic terms. To this very day, helped by a slew of war movies, the story lives on in Chinese and Taiwanese memory.

As Robinson explains, the stand actually lasted four days, when the battalion remnants were ordered to retreat into the settlement and surrender themselves. Which is where one part of the story ends, and many others begin.

What, however, does it have to do with the South Pacific war?

Well the survivors of the battle, some 300 were kept interned in the international settlement, rather than being released back to the Nationalist side. That was four long years, ended by a worst fate – being invaded



Japanese troops landing near Shanghai, November 1937.

by the Japanese in December 1941, as the Pacific War began in earnest.

As Robinson outlines, in 1942, the Japanese transported 1504 Chinese army prisoners to Rabaul on the island of New Britain in New Guinea, who had previously been held in camps at Nanjing and Shanghai. They included approximately 50 soldiers from The "800".

The Japanese had also imprisoned Chinese civilians from New Britain and Malaya in the area.

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Rabaul of course became the equivalent of Espiritu Santo – the major naval base supporting operations in the Solomon Islands campaign. It thus became a magnet for air raids, although by 1943, the US had decided to bypass it rather than attempt a capture.

Yet in September, 1945, as Robinson recounts here, Australian soldiers moving in to accept the Japanese surrender had quite a surprise in store.

Liberated! The remarkable sight that greetd the Australian soldiers on arrival on Rabaul. Photo AWM (Australian War Memorial).

"As Australian soldiers advanced further into the jungle, they received an unexpected and warm welcome on 17th September. Chinese soldiers inside a prisoner of war camp had hoisted the Republic of China flag.

Eric Thornton, an Australian war correspondent, witnessed a group of Chinese soldiers - who had survived the maltreatment of the Japanese - with a large banner they had created with a declaration: 'the road to victory was success. Welcome victory for our friendly Australian imperial forces.'

The soldiers also wore improvised Chinese uniforms made from Japanese shirts complete with regimental insignia and cloth caps displaying the star of China." Among them were some members of The "800". Yet 377 Chinese soldiers, and 276 civilians had died at the hands of the Japanese.

During the ordeal, 653 Chinese prisoners (377 soldiers and 276 civilians) had died.

It was not lost on the Australians as to the significance of the 36 survivors they found who had fought at the Sihang Warehouse given the fame of the story before the war.

A radio was able to be set up, connecting with Chungking in China, and the men could hear news from home for the first time in years.

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Three Chinese Nationalist survivors of the Rabaul camp – wearing homemade uniforms and carrying a Nationalist banner. – Photo AWM (Australian War Memorial).

"An (Australian reporter) also interviewed Colonel Wu Yien who told him that he was shipped to Rabaul in a small freighter with 1,500 other Chinese troops. During the voyage, the men were given only one meal of rice a day and one pint of water for every eight men. Several died of thirst and many others who felt sick were thrown overboard by the Japanese. "

War crimes were identified, and trials held – in one, three soldiers and seven Japanese civilian servants were sentenced to death for murdering 24 Chinese prisoners.

Chinese soldiers also testified at the trial of General Akira Hirota, who oversaw the killing of sick Japanese prisoners.

Colonel Wu testified that Hirota wrote an order that any prisoner sick for three days would be killed, and 30 Chinese prisoners had been shot or beheaded for this reason.

Yet amid all this, it took well into 1946 before the Chinese were repatriated. In that time, they would write many letters home but often received no replies. Those that did, often received such disturbing news, they were even more anxious to be returned.

The Chinese survivors left behind in New Britain a memorial to their dead. 377 graves remained as well.

Incredibly, and despite efforts during the

Australian troops guard suspected Japanese war criminals, on New Britain, in 1945. Photo AWM (Australian War Memorial).

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intervening years – some helpful, some not – to preserve the memory, the graves were eventually swallowed up in the jungle.

Reinterred graves with new markers of some of the 377 Chinese to die on Rabaul. Photo AWM (Australian War Memorial).

China and Taiwan (where the Nationalist forces had retreated), had no interest in the site, having bigger matters to worry about.

That is however, as Robinson recounts:

"On December 2008, 60 years later, , the Taiwanese United Daily News reported that an Australian pilot had discovered the tombs - including members of the '800 heroes.' The pilot had contacted the Chinese embassy in Papua New Guinea, but officials displayed no interest."

However, a person in Beijing re-posted the media report on the internet, the story went viral on the mainland and within a fortnight, 100,000 people signed an online petition demanding the government repatriate their remains to China.

Since then, both governments have taken steps to honour the dead, and their memory.

But the victims remain unrepatriated to this day.

So that is how the 800 Heroes of China came to leave a footprint thousands of miles away in the South Pacific.

The whole story is told in great detail in Stephen Robinson's book. It's recommended as both a telling of a fantastic tale that lives on to this day, and as a great overview of just how big and globe-spanning the Second World War was.

Rabaul, March 16, 1946. A new Chinese cemetery was dedicated in a special ceremony attended by representatives of the Australian Army, Chinese Army and Chinese community. Shown are the presentation wreaths which were placed near the monument. Photo AWM (Australian War Memorial).

Another area of the newly dedicated Chinese cemetery created in 1946. Photo AWM (Australian War Memorial).

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Take Me Down to the Ballpark.

This is a wonderful shot of a baseball team at Espiritu Santo. Frustratingly we don't know much more than that. Where did the play, what unit they came from. It looks like they are Navy, and of course they have Annex emblazoned on their uniforms. But that doesn't tell us much else.

The baseball team on Santo. This team is from the Navy Annex which was located near to where the Northern Hospital is today.

There are some suppositions we can make. We know that one end of Aore Island became a giant recreation area for personnel, so it's a good bet that this is where this team played.

What it does speak to clearly is the part that baseball plays and played in the psyche of Americans. And to the ability of the US way of war to find space for that. Just as football had a role within the Empire forces.

The Santonian wanted to know some more about the wider picture, and found an excellent academic study called The American military and baseball during World War Two.

It's by Steve Bullock in the Journal of Sports History, volume 27, number one, spring 2000, at the University of Illinois.

Here are a couple of fascinating snippets.

"During the invasion of Tulagi in the Solomon Islands, Marine Sergeant Dana Babcock witnessed a fascinating scenario involving a few of his fellow battle-weary marines. Surrounded by the enemy on three sides and the Pacific on the other Sergeant Babcock stumbled upon what he first believed to be a pickup game of baseball amid the chaos. One marine had turned a dead branch from a jungle tree to take the part of a bat, and the players ran the bases hit home runs, got caught and argued with the umpire calling him every name in the book …. Upon closer inspection, however, Babcock noted something slightly peculiar; The marines were indeed playing baseball minus the ball! Apparently the marines could not locate anything resembling a baseball ; instead of finding another way to pass the time they proceeded to use a ghost ball with the umpire calling balls and strikes as the pitcher delivered his phantom pitch."

The next excerpt gives you an idea of how seriously the creation of wartime baseball facilities was taken. It concerns Major Roscoe Torchy Torrance of the United states Marine Corps. In civilian life Torrance was part owner and vice president of the Pacific Coast League Seattle Rainiers team.

"In April 1944 on an unidentified Pacific island 600 marines under Torrance's supervision established three leagues with ten teams each. Enlisting the aid of Navy Seabees armed with bulldozers and tractors, Torrance plowed under the existing jungle to construct 21 first rate diamonds which had to be hand manicured due to the absence of lawn

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mowing equipment. The opening game of the marines baseball season that year had the éclat of a World Series contest with all the different hoots and howls you would find in Ebbits Field. The following year Torrance had expanded his operation to include 40 teams."

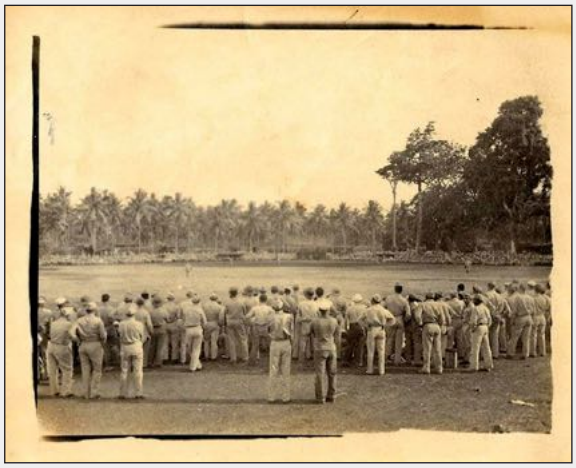
And if that wasn't enough, the US of course

Aore Island, Fleet Recreation Centre, with just about every sport catered for, including baseball. Photo US Archives.

turned to star power to support the war effort. It wouldn't be a piece of baseball, if there wasn't a reference to Joe DiMaggio.

Here's Steve Bullock on the role played by the legendary player.

"Although many Major League Baseball players certainly felt relieved that their talents and notoriety often allowed them to escape possible injury or death on the front lines some prominent players seemed uncomfortable with the apparent preferential treatment that military leaders were lavishing upon them. During his first few months in the Army Air force Joe DiMaggio participated in countless baseball related events including games practices and exhibitions in the place of other military responsibilities. DiMaggio



Baseball games pulled big crowds on Santo. This one on a field near the base Annex camp.

felt that he was extended so much special treatment that he publicly demanded combat duty from his superiors. possibly concerned with the public perception held by some that he was playing again while others were dying. DiMaggio insisted that he didn't enlist to play baseball. His superiors apparently rejected the plea and most of DiMaggio's time spent in the military involved either baseball or other athletic pursuits."

So, there you have it. The baseball diamonds on Aore are long overgrown, and Joe DiMaggio is no more. But to flip the Field of Dreams phrase, if they came, they would build it.

A baseball team poses on the wing of a Corsair at Turtle Bay fighter airfield on Santo. Colourised image by We The People.

What the Robot Said.

You may or may not have heard of ChatGPT. It is a compter-based, artificial intelligence tool for language and writing. It is quite literally taking the world by storm – especially for people who make a living out of creative arts. Although a lot of people aren't quite sure quite what it all means

We at the Santonian thought we'd test it out by asking it this question first.

Tell me about the US base in the New Hebrides during the Second World War.

The US established a base in the New Hebrides, which is now known as Vanuatu, during World War II as part of their efforts to defend against the Japanese in the Pacific. The base, known as "Luganville Base", was built on the island of Espiritu Santo, and was used as a staging area for troops and supplies. It was also used as a training base for US troops and as a site for airfield construction. The base was in operation from 1942 to 1945 and played a key role in the Allied campaign in the Pacific. After the war, the base was closed, and the facilities were eventually dismantled.

Hmmm, not bad, although it could do with some fact checking It's also short of a lot of the interesting stuff.

So with ChatGPT, you can keep asking, and feeding it cues. It is basically learning off what you provide. So here was our follow up version of the first question.

Tell me about the US base in the New Hebrides during the Second World War. Talk about the airfields, the Segond Channel, and the 500 thousand personnel who passed through it, the sinking of the SS President Coolidge, as well as Million Dollar Point.

During the Second World War, the United States established a base in the New Hebrides, now known as Vanuatu, to support the Pacific campaign against Japan. The base was located on the island of Efate and was one of the most important logistics hubs for the US military in the region.

The base included several airfields, including Bauerfield International Airport, which was used as a staging ground for bombers and fighter planes heading to the front lines. The airfields

Chatgpt Open AI, will dramatically change the way we interact with the internet and source information.

were also used to train pilots and ground crew for the US Army Air Force.

The base was strategically located at the Segond Channel, which was a key shipping route for the US military. This allowed the base to be a major supply point for the US Navy and the US Marines as they pushed towards Japan.

Over 500,000 personnel passed through the US base in the New Hebrides during the war. They were involved in a variety of roles, including logistics, air operations, and ground support.

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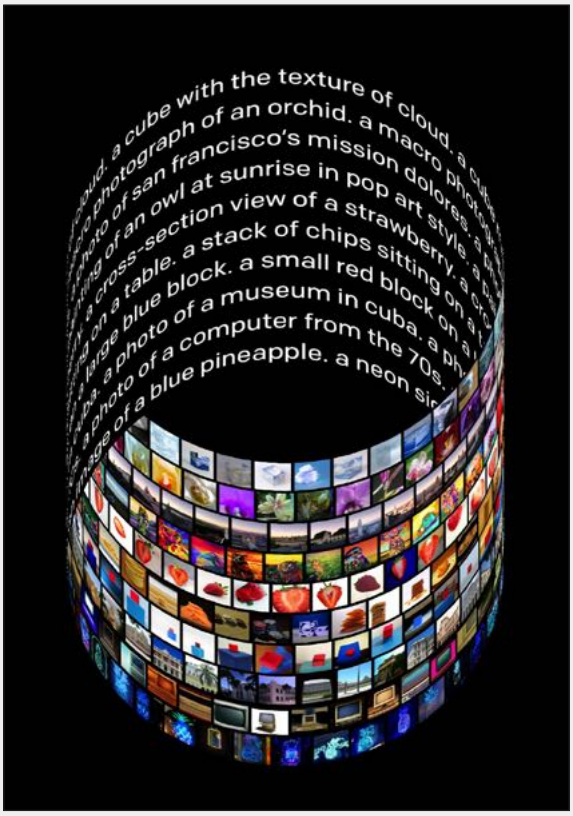
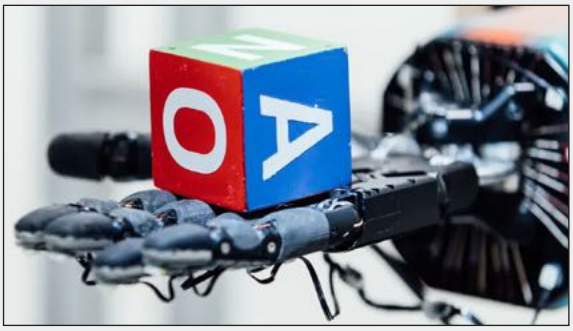
One of the most notable events that occurred at the base was the sinking of the SS President Coolidge. The ship, which was carrying supplies for the US military, struck a mine and sank in the Segond Channel. The crew and passengers were able to evacuate safely, but the ship's cargo was lost.

Another notable event was Million Dollar Point, where the US military dumped millions of dollars' worth of equipment into the sea at the end of the war. This included vehicles, trucks, and other equipment that were no longer needed. The equipment was dumped into the sea rather than returning it to the United States or handing it over to the local government.



Creating Images from text. Photo openai.com



A robotic hand learning dexterity. Photo openai.com

Overall, the US base in the New Hebrides played a crucial role in the Pacific campaign during the Second World War, providing vital logistics and air support to the US military as they pushed towards Japan.

Much better. Not nailing everything exactly and using some odd terms. If you ask it to regenerate it, it will come up with a different version.

And the time it took ChatGPT to spit out the latter reply? (having scoured the interweb for those key words we fed it).

Well, probably about 10 seconds.

We hope to keep our jobs at the Santonian, but you never know!!

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: **mccarthy@globe.net.nz**