

The SANTONIAN



Vol. 06 No. 01

Luganville, Espiritu Santo, Vanuatu

August 2023

The extra quarterly newsletter for our Museum members.

Batten down the hatches

Welcome to the latest issue of the Santonian. This issue we're starting a series we've dubbed the Ships of Santo.

Strictly that's already opened with last year's retelling of the remarkable Free French ship, the *Chandeleur*. Or possibly it opened with our retelling of the story of the Wackiest Ship in the Navy. Regardless, this time we are not talking about converted merchantmen or ketches, but a purpose-built modern and deadly warship.

The *Chandeleur* story was sparked by rare footage we tracked down to being shot at Espiritu Santo of the American fleet, circa September 1943, on exercise.

We were able to pin down the location partly through a great resource, the detailed log of the *Denver*, a light cruiser which spent much of its time based out of the island and its naval base. That log had a day-to-day list of ships (when the cruiser was in port) in the Second Channel. It gives a great snapshot of the diversity of vessels there and is a treasure trove of information.

What this and successive Santonians will cover is a slice of the life of the *USS Denver* in the middle months of 1943, when the US Navy has fought the Japanese to a standstill around Guadalcanal and is now turning to how to support the steady taking of islands further along the Solomon Islands and towards Bougainville, New Georgia, and Rabaul.

It is still not a time when US material wealth is not decisively in play, and the Japanese remain particularly dangerous. In short, ships like the *USS Denver*, still not long off the slipways, and their relatively new crews, are still learning their art.


Our other articles include an entertaining cameo from the well-known podcast *We Have Ways of Making You Talk*, concerning life on Bougainville, and one of the least known naval battles of the Solomons campaign – featuring guerillas and a ketch disguised as a floating island.

Enjoy!

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The Ships of Santo

USS Denver – Part One

It's Monday August the 30th 1943.

In Espiritu Santo, New Hebrides, in the Segond channel it's just after midnight and the USS Denver – identification number CL-58 - sits darkened as do the other US Navy ships in the fleet present in the harbour.

Among them is the Lansdowne, a Gleaves class destroyer that will just two years later, serve as the transport for Japanese emissaries to the battleship Missouri in Tokyo Bay for the official surrender ceremonies. And then sail into a retirement of sort in the Turkish Navy four years later.



August 1943 looking across the Segond Channel at the myriad of ship types and classes anchored in Espiritu Santo. Pic US Archives.

The battleships Maryland and Colorado are there – and sister ships to the Denver, fellow Cleveland class cruisers – Columbia, and the cruiser division flagship, Montpelier.

The Jeep carrier Breton is nearby – the slow, slab like escort carriers, built en masse to provide aircraft ferries, and close air support for landings.

All around are more than half a dozen destroyers, ships like the ubiquitous Fletcher class vessel, the Claxton.

Elsewhere sit the myriad support vessels and merchant vessels supplying the giant naval and airbase that Buttons has become.

To the casual observer that night, it might appear that nothing much is happening but in those early hours before dawn, the Denver is slowly making preparations for what will be an extensive series of fleet exercises.

This is the life of a light cruiser in the New Hebrides in 1943.

Continued...

As dawn around 06:00 begins to colour the sky, ships are already starting to stand out of harbour. First are the destroyers – the Patterson, Selfridge, Ralph Talbot, McCalla and Buchanan are all underway. They're the



USS Maryland after surviving the Pearl harbour attack.

watchdogs of the task force that is putting to sea, searching in particular for the threat of Japanese submarines.

Soon they'll be joined by the Breton, and the big battlewagons Maryland and Colorado. Maryland is a survivor of the attack on Pearl Harbor, a famous photo showing her largely unscathed while other ships burn. Like the ungainly Breton, the two dreadnoughts can only make 20 knots at most, but each carry eight 16-inch guns to keep any unlikely Japanese surface vessel well deterred and a growing array of anti-aircraft guns. Both will spend the war battering Japanese island strongpoints with shellfire, but the Maryland will in 1944 take part in the last battleship action of World War two, the battle of the Surigao Strait.

On board the Denver, it's not yet time to leave harbour but the work has begun.

Pressure is building in the boilers and there's the daily inspection of magazines and smokeless powder samples being carried out while steering is checked.

As other ships continue to put out, the Denver completes her main engine tests.

At 1023, the crew muster – no absentees are reported, and then finally at 1029 having made all preparations for getting underway



USS Denver glides into port in Efate. Pic Wikipedia.

Denver too passes down the Second Channel, Aore Island to starboard, the wreck site of the SS President Coolidge to port.

The Denver, like her sister ships, would win few prizes for aesthetics. They however will prove to be one of best designs of the war, albeit one that is seriously overweight by the end with new weaponry. The Cleveland light cruiser class will be the most numerous produced during the Second World War.

At the time we're looking at the Denver it's only a little over 18 months since the attack on Pearl Harbour in December 1941 and just

Continued...

over a year further on from when the keel of the Denver had been laid down in the Camden Yards in New York.

So, while she was one of 29 vessels (from a planned class of 36) the Denver wasn't a product of American rearming caused by the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Instead, she was part of the general modernisation of US fleet that had been planned through the 1930s as arms limitation

They're fast, reasonably well armoured, and with excellent range – an important factor in the long stretches of the Pacific, it not being uncommon for the cruisers to act as floating gas stations for their escorting destroyer screens on some voyages.

But notably there are no torpedo tubes on American cruisers. It's a telling difference from the Japanese, whose cruisers and destroyers carry the deadly Long Lance weapons that have already caused havoc



USS Denver in a South Pacific harbor, circa 1943. Note signal flags drying on her foremast halyards. Pic U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command.

treaties frayed and broke down, and America struggled to climb out of the Great Depression.

The Cleveland class are largely a continuation of the earlier Brooklyn class, but dropping one triple 6 inch gun turret, in favour of more 5-inch dual purpose guns that could also fire at aircraft.

amongst US squadrons during the fighting around Guadalcanal.

Denver is symbolic of the revolution in naval warfare that's taken place in less than 50 years.

In 1906, the Royal Navy launched HMS Dreadnought, the ship which gave its name to the very concept of a super warship. With

Continued...



USS Cleveland underway at sea in late 1942. Pic U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command.

10, 12-inch guns, she revolutionised design and made other battleships obsolete. Within the decade she was herself obsolete.

Yet 35 years later, the Cleveland class – while never intended to fight in the battleline against dreadnoughts – disposes of four times more horsepower, is nearly a hundred feet longer, and carries 1200 crew, 500 more than the battleship.

The Dreadnought had no anti-aircraft guns

– why would she need any? The Cleveland class disposes of 12 5-inch dual purpose guns, and 40 other lighter anti-aircraft cannons.

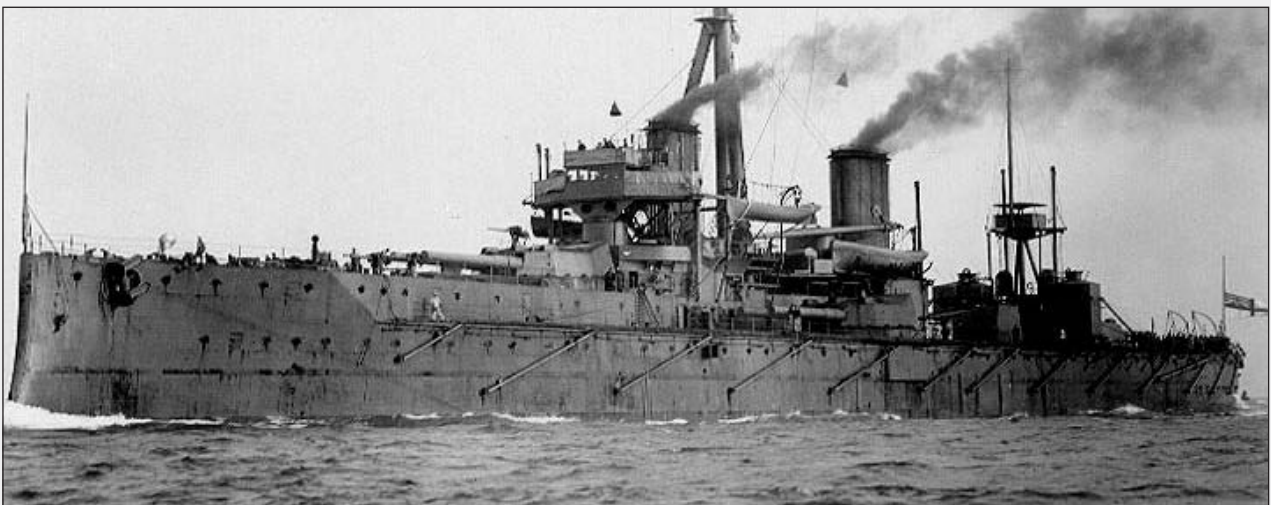
Most tellingly, the Cleveland class can travel over 8,000 nautical miles without refuelling, while the Dreadnought could manage 6,000, while tied to a network of colliers and coaling stations.

And the aircraft that don't even feature in the thinking of the

Dreadnought. Well, four of them are onboard the Denver.

If in some time warp, the two ships had met, there would be little doubt about the winner – a ship with radar fire control, and as we'll see later, a capacity to pump out shells like a hosepipe.

But now Denver is joining up with Task Force 38. The Japanese are not the allies of World War One, but the enemy, and a formidable foe.



The British ship, HMS Dreadnought at sea in 1906. Pic U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command.

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Their mission will be to exercise what is called operational plan #2-43.



Aaron S. Merrill and Captain W.D. Brown during operations in the Solomon Islands, December 23, 1943.

That plan is for fleet tactical exercises. Task Force 39, the Denver's force, is centred on cruiser division 12, and the force commander is Rear Admiral A.S. Tip Merrill, who will become one of the noted surface battle tacticians of the US Navy.

Waiting for them are two other task forces, 37 and 38. They include the mighty carrier the USS Saratoga – a very precious commodity at this stage of the Pacific War.

Now finally clear of the islands around Espiritu Santo, the Denver makes 15 knots, steering various courses and making changes of speed.

But it is not plain sailing. Only a few minutes in, there's a loss of steering control for the navigation bridge. It only lasts a minute, but the fault soon repeats. The ship has been plagued by earlier such instances.

Investigations fail to find the cause, and the mission proceeds.

By midday, however, steering control has been shifted to another part of the cruiser. It's another 90 minutes before the cause of the problem – a faulty transfer switch – is identified.



USS Denver off the Mare Island Navy Yard, California, following an overhaul, 3 May 1944. Pic U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command.

Continued...

The issue is fixed, and then Denver begins a series of constant zigzagging exercises – speeds rising up to 20 knots.

It'll be the evening of Saturday September the 4th before the Denver is back in Espiritu Santo harbour and mooring in Pekoa Channel at buoy No 2 as is usual.

In the interim she has been rigorously exercising against air attack, performing gunnery drills and zig zagging constantly – and even having to dodge the big and ponderous battlewagons when they got too close. Little wonder the steering issues are so critical to fix.

Ahead, in just a few months, is a famous naval battle in the waters of the Solomon

Islands. Task Force 39 and the Denver will go head to head with a formidable Japanese navy that has so far largely had the edge in fighting at night.

In the days before then, the repeated drills and exercises were thus much more than wargames. Matters were going to be become deadly serious.

We'll have more on the Denver in future Santonians – including her role in the pivotal battle of Empress Augusta Bay. This story is sourced from a number of places, but the key information is from the USS Denver log, at the Haze Gray and Underway website – a vast repository of information about the US Navy.



USS Denver underway, circa December 1942. Pic from the Bureau of Ships Collection in the U.S. National Archives.

Bougainville, baseball and banzai

There's a very entertaining podcast for lovers of World War II, called *We Have Ways of Making You Talk*. It's hosted by noted historian James Holland, and British comedian Al Murray. They confess to being obsessed with the Second World War of course; they also confess to being somewhat Europe centric and Brit centred, which is understandable. But in the last few months, they've been broadening their menu with episodes on the

an airbase, but nothing more. The remaining Japanese defenders were left to wither on the vine, although only after considerable fighting and an ongoing threat. Eventually in 1944 the garrison was shipped off to fight in the recapture of the Philippines, while Australian forces took over what was seen as acting as prison guards.

Here's John McManus' edited comments



Bougainville was well known for its horrendous conditions, particularly the incredible rainfall which turned it into a muddy bog.

war in the Pacific, including Bougainville. They frequently enlist US historian John McManus, who has written a trilogy on the US army in the Pacific, from war's start to end.

The episode on Bougainville is worth catching in particular, for echoes of how the US was able to build very large virtual cities, just a few miles from where the fighting was. On Bougainville, they perfected the technique of taking the land they needed for

from the episode, with many echoes of what was already existing on Espiritu Santo and Efate.

So, for those several months, Bougainville is this bustling place where you might have been stationed and had no more danger than if you've been in a post in the states I guess on some levels.

Here's the other thing- so the movies - anything you see is Movietone news right so you're seeing footage from the war.

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One night they were watching a movie and there was footage from earlier in the war and it showed the sinking of USS Lexington and then all of a sudden this voice from out in the trees begins to shout Banzai.

yeah that's it until 1945.

What's interesting is that they have ceremonies in which there's like a handover with the Australians to commemorate a very beautifully tended cemetery



Baseball on Bougainville, July 1944. This photo of a game involving the XOVI Corps Headquarters team, the 145th's Barracudas. The 37th Division was one of two principle units of the XIV Corps during the Bougainville campaign. Pic Chevrons and Diamonds Collection.

Well, it was a Japanese soldier who had holed up and was watching the movie and couldn't restrain himself - so they went out and they policed this guy up you know and made him a POW.

Then there were baseball leagues going on and the soldiers of the 37th division noticed that there was a bedraggled looking Japanese soldier who was out there about a mile away say and he would just sort of hunker down in a tree and watch the games and he would cheer for their team you know when they scored a run. So, they didn't have the heart to go out and get the guy - he was just there like oh this guy's a baseball fan and he's not hurting anybody.

So that's how you are spending a lot of your time as a soldier. It was boring as hell otherwise and it's a horrible place to be so

of those who had lost their lives in the 1943 and 1944.

But in 1944 you would have lived some level of an American lifestyle - this city in the jungle just cleared away around these two airfields and there's no attempt to kind to get the rest



The beautifully maintained military cemetery on Bougainville.

Continued...

of the island because what's the point - which is smart, and I think could have been taken into account on other islands in the Pacific.

There are some 100,000 measurement tonnes of material coming in every week - ice plants, there are ice cream dispensers, there are 66 chapels built, hundreds of services that are going on.'

There are you know well into double figures in baseball fields, volleyball courts, tennis courts, a boxing ring.

There are 40 different PX's you can visit throughout this perimeter where you can buy soda, watches, pens, lighters, cigarettes, dictionaries, alarm clocks, chocolates, even moccasins.

Its movie theatres become such a big deal that not only are you going to have second run movies that you're watching but first run movies themselves come and do premieres.

Going My Way, It Happened Tomorrow and Marriage is a Private Affair, and Devotion - all four of those films actually premiered on Bougainville.



Troops of 58/59 Infantry Battalion, loaded into jeeps and trailers moving along the muddy Buin Road east of the Ogorata River.



Baseball was incredibly popular throughout the South Pacific. This game of Bougainville is dated 4 July 1944.

You've got Mother's Day that comes up in May and a lot of soldiers were buying money orders to send flowers to their mothers back home or sending Easter cards.

You know the dog faces on the line who are manning the perimeter - well that's a different world then - but you would rotate back and isn't that wild.

The Battle of Morovo Lagoon

Donald Kennedy was one of five district officers and administrators, left in place as the Japanese hopped down the Solomon Islands in 1942, taking possession of various key points, but at no stage having the resources to occupy everywhere. There thus remained the basis of what became the famous Coastwatcher network able to observe and report on Japanese movements. Of course, should the Japanese suspect such a presence, the coastwatchers were in potentially deadly peril.

Kennedy decided to base himself at Segi Passage, at the southeast end of New Georgia island. Much of the Japanese movement was by barge, and with the aid of his carefully cultivated villager network he was able to start reporting those movements, and also to judiciously wipe out some of the vessels with the aid of local villagers with a distinct aptitude for guerilla fighting. The key was to allow no survivors from such attacks who might raise the alarm. The Japanese however could not fail to notice they were mysteriously losing vessels and men.



Donald Kennedy (left) serves tea to U.S. Marine Captain Clay Boyd in 1943.

This account is taken from a Pan/Ballantine history of World War II volume entitled *New Georgia – Pattern for Victory*. It was published in 1971 and written by D C Horton. He was district officer at Guadalcanal when the Japanese invaded and became himself a distinguished member of the Coastwatcher network. The extract below is slightly edited.

Perhaps it was the fierce little amphibious fight known as the Battle of Marovo Lagoon which finally convinced the Japanese that they must clear up the mysterious situation at Segi Point.



Members of Donald Kennedy's coastwatching group ('Kennedy's Army') in training at Segi Point, New Georgia, June 1943.

Kennedy's scouts had reported a Japanese patrol of a dozen men moving up the lagoon in a big whale boat hopping methodically from island to island and getting nearer and nearer to the forbidden area near Segi - the area in which Kennedy found it necessary to destroy any enemy patrol without trace in order to preserve the secret nature of his headquarters.

Kennedy decided it was time to act and taking 12 men with him in his ten-tonne ketch the *Dundavata*, camouflaged to look like a small island he set off up the lagoon.

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The ketch was armed with a mixture of weapons acquired from aircraft and in other ways and the main armament was a browning heavy machine gun while his men were armed with rifles submachine guns and grenades.

Kennedy intended to anchor near Batuna station and then make a surprise night attack from canoes.

But as he neared the station he saw the Japanese patrol on an island in his path and 15 miles nearer than the point at which he'd hoped to intercept them.

The enemy saw him at the same time and in order to cut them off from the mainland Kennedy anchored the Dundavata behind an island, which would enable him to cover any of their possible escape routes.

One of the scouts swarmed up a palm tree on the island and with the help of binoculars kept a close watch on the Japanese.

Presently the scout called down that the Japanese had set up machine guns on the beach as though to resist attack. As dusk fell another scout took a small canoe and making a wide detour, landed on the Japanese held island and then crept close to the Japanese position.

He returned to Kennedy with detailed information about the strength of the enemy patrol and Kennedy decided it that it would be worth his while to land his force that night and take the enemy from the rear.

Just then his treetop scout reported that the Japanese were preparing to leave and so Kennedy embarked his men on the Dundavata and edged out of the lagoon.

He could see the shape of the Japanese whale boat a mile away to the South a dark blur in the moonlight and turned the ship towards

it. At first the enemy rowed frantically in the other direction but when they saw that they could not escape they turned about and made straight for the Dundavata.

Kennedy opened fire at 500 yards and got in 3 1/2 drums with the Browning before it jammed. The Japanese had opened fire on the ketch at the same time – and a lucky bullet hit Kennedy in the thigh, but he kept on firing.

The enemy fire fell away, and Kennedy gave the order full speed ahead – ram the enemy. The Dundavata raced along at a majestic 7 knots and as she crashed into the whaleboat the guerillas threw a shower of grenades into the Japanese.



Japanese soldiers resting on New Georgia Island.

But there was no real need, for the whaleboat capsized under the impact of the Dundavata and when she turned about for another run they could see many corpses floating on the surface.

But there was no time to lose. The bodies were brought ashore stripped searched and buried and the whale boat having been divested of all gear and food was sunk in the lagoon, while the guerillas dived for equipment which had been lost overboard by the Japanese following the ramming.

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It was not long after the epic battle that Kennedy found the Japanese stepping up their patrols even more. With Segi under real threat but set to be a crucial point in the planned US invasion of New Georgia, he alerted the US commanders.

The response was swift, and in June 1943, US Marine Raiders and army troops landed by destroyer, securing the area. Soon the Seabees followed, and an airstrip was built, and the war moved on.



US Navy Seabees construct the runway at Segi Point, New Georgia.



Kennedy on a balcony somewhere in the South Pacific.
Pic University of Hawaii at Mānoa Library.

Editor's note – By many accounts, Donald Kennedy would have been a tough man to like, with a reputation for harsh disciplining including flogging and a tendency to like the bottle. There's no doubting his effectiveness however.

Tell us what you think

Thank you for reading The Santonian. Your support for the Museum is most appreciated. If you have any questions or suggestions for future topics, please contact Kevin McCarthy at: mccarthy@globe.net.nz

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