The SANTONIAN

SOUTH PACIFIC WWII MUSEUM
VANUATU

Vol. 06 No. 03 | Luganville, Espiritu Santo, Vanuatu | October 2023

The extra quarterly newsletter for our museum members

South Seas Cruising

Welcome to the Santonian.

In this issue we follow the next stage of a slice of the life of a US cruiser, the Denver (CL-58), operating out of Espiritu Santo in 1943. The story will conclude in the next Santonian. It draws on a faithfully transcribed log of the vessel as it took part in some critical actions in the South Pacific during World War II.

We round out with how the Marines tried to learn more about the unknown island of Guadalcanal – and how they and the Japanese would bluff and counterbluff in the battles to come.

We hope you enjoy this issue of the Santonian! And if you have any ideas or contributions, please contact Kevin McCarthy at mccarthy@globe.net.nz

Dodging and drilling

The Denver goes through her paces

On the last day of August 1943, the cruiser Denver (CL-58), sits among a sizeable slice of the US Navy in the South Pacific.

In her fleet, there are similar cruisers, several battleships, and a host of destroyers. But the most valuable vessel, the carrier Saratoga, is the one target that any watching Japanese submarine would covet striking.

Should (unlikely), any Japanese plane ventures within range, the Denver is formidably equipped with anti-aircraft guns.

But the Denver is not at sea just as a shepherd. She and her compatriots in cruiser squadron 12 have their own tasks. These cruisers and their predecessors are the backbone of the fleet when it comes to engaging the Japanese

The USS Denver off Mare Island Navy Yard, California, following an overhaul, 3 May 1944. Photo Naval History and Heritage Command.

They have done so many times before – and at this stage of the Pacific War, with the new carriers yet to be fully operational, the Saratoga is pretty much it.

She's swopped in a new contingent of the Navy's newest fighters, the Hellcat, but there's no thought of hiding her away in the safety of a base like Espiritu Santo.

That's where the cruisers like the Denver are so valuable; as fast as the carriers, they are equipped with floatplanes that can help search the oceans around the taskforce.

in the constricted waters of the Solomons.

That means practising their own drills relevant to ship-to-ship fighting.

At this stage of the war, the Americans have largely been outclassed in night operations – against Japanese warships, trained to a high degree in excelling under darkness. Too often, the confusion of battle seemed compounded 10-fold for US warships, who found themselves sunk by deadly torpedo strikes, or struggling to unpick who was foe and friend. So, the Denver's ship log is a succession of fleet manoeuvres.

Continued...

Much is a constant change of zig zag and speed, reflecting the concern over submarines.

At other times, the formation is to allow frequent air launches and landing by the Saratoga. The ranges within this constantly moving swarm of vessels is not large – at one point, the Denver is formatting at 1000 yards away from the giant carrier. At 15 knots, or a potential closing speed of 30 knots, the two vessels could collide within 90 seconds or so.

The USS Saratoga in 1943/44. The photo was taken from one of the planes of Carrier Air Group 12 (CVG-12), of which many are visible on deck, SBD Dauntless dive bombers (aft), F6F Hellcat fighters (mostly forward), and TBF Avenger torpedo bombers. Photo Library of Congress.

On one log entry, it reads at 1336 the Denver has to take action to avoid the battleship Washington bearing down upon it and crossing the cruiser's bow from port to starboard. A minute later it notes the Captain has taken the Conn, and the Denver steams on various courses to regain its place in the formation. An hour later, there's a similar delicate dance, this time to avoid the cruiser Colorado.

But on another day, Cruiser Squadron 12 detaches, and specifically simulates a night approach and engagement at high speed for two hours. The cruisers are operating at 26 knots and variations in between, recreating the pace at which they might have to manoeuvre in a Solomons action.

On frequent occasions the Denver, and presumably her compatriots, are busy launching and then reclaiming spotter planes, keeping an eye on the sub threat.

But its on the run homeward to Espiritu Santo, that the Denver focuses specifically on drilling and calibrating its radar. Islands are sighted as reference points.

Denver at the Mare Island Navy Yard following her overhaul. Circles mark recent alterations to the ship, including a new radar. 1 May 1944. Photo Naval History and Heritage Command.

For radar, and how to use it effectively, will be decisive in a few months from now. The technology isn't new, but the US Navy is still struggling how to best use its electronic trump card.

And as the fleet approaches harbour, there's time for anti-aircraft drill – 40 rounds of 5-inch shells being pumped out along with smaller projectiles on one of the many gunnery ranges around Santo.

Continued...

That means that Denver will soon be needing to restock her magazines. That's why Espiritu Santo and Aore Island are now a maze of shell storage facilities.

A small part of the incredible stockpile of ammunition stored on Aore Island, Espiritu Santo. Photo US Archives.

He had commanded Denver until the end of July, when he'd been shoulder tapped to become Chief of Staff for Admiral William "Bull" Halsey.

Robert B Carney in full dress – the first commander of the Denver.

The cruiser is even more thirsty for fuel than shells. Its first priority in the Segond Channel is to come alongside the tanker Monongahela and take on 228,000 gallons. Only then does she reclaim her usual berth, kicking out an errant landing craft for good measure.

The Denver at this point had only been operational for seven months. Launched in April 1942, at the New York Shipbuilding Corp., Camden, New Jersey, she then had to undergo full fitting out and working up.

The USS Monongahela being assisted into or out of her berth, date and location unknown. Monongahela is painted camouflage scheme 32/6AO. Photo Australian War Memorial.

Her first commander was Robert B Carney, who would become one of the top US admirals of the war. Carney, as a young officer, had famously told his martinet commander that:
"Admiral, I just want to tell you I think you are a goddamn rotten son of a bitch,"
Carney survived the incident – his superior choosing instead to take him on an epic drinking binge.

Big shoes to fill, but Denver was fortunate to have another strong commander take over - Robert P. Briscoe. He was another Navy veteran and had already seen considerable action around Guadalcanal.

Perhaps just as important, he had also been one of those keenly involved with developing electronics – such as radar – for wartime naval use.

Continued...

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

The most important figure for the Denver however was not even onboard the ship. He was Task Force 39 commander, Arron S. 'Tip' Merrill.

A former professor of naval tactics, he was by January 1942, a rear admiral, taking his flag in Montpelier, a sister ship of the Denver.

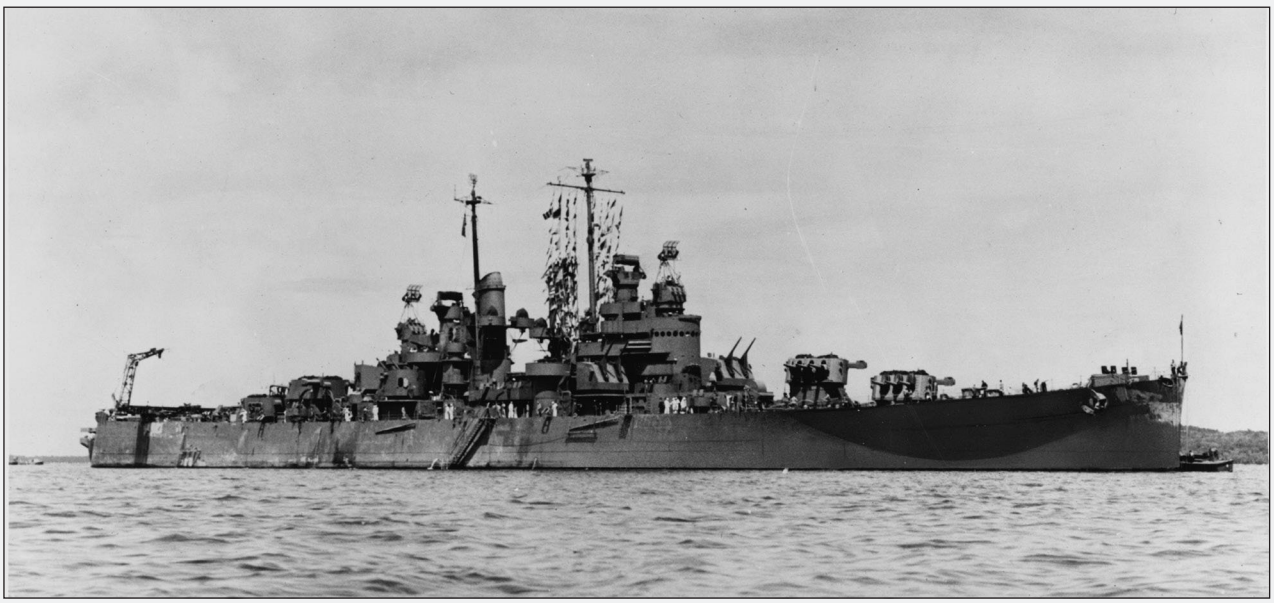
He'd already shown himself an expert in surface actions, overseeing the sinking of two Japanese destroyers solely by radar directed gunfire at night.

The Denver was part of that action.

But for it, and Task Force 39, that was small beer.

A much more important battle was looming, and one where all the training and technology would be called upon.

USS Montpelier (CL-57) following a refit and prior to becoming Tip Merrill's flag ship. Photo Naval History and Heritage Command.



USS Denver believed to be in the Segond Channel, circa 1943. Photo Naval History and Heritage Command.

Bluff and counterbluff

Anyone who's been following the war in Ukraine will know that it's often a battle of artillery - and of measure and counter measure.

Ukrainian service members fire a 2S7 Pion artillery system at Russian positions in the Donetsk region on 5 December, 2022. Photo Justin Yau / Sipa USA via AP.

In a a world of drones very little can be kept concealed for too long.

So precious artillery batteries spend a lot of time trying to keep themselves safe as much as targeting the enemy. Shoot then scoot.

It probably won't surprise anyone to learn the game of cat and mouse was just as true in World War 2.

This series of incidents are related in *New Georgia – Pattern for Victory* - a 1970s Pan/Ballantine history of the campaign in those islands.

Allied forces in 1943 were steadily working their way through the islands of New Georgia and this particular action occurred around Kolombangara which was held by the Japanese.

The US marines by this stage were in possession of 155 millimetre Long Tom artillery pieces - extremely effective. The target they wanted to shell was some 12,000 yards away over water from an adjoining island.

The targets included Vila airstrip on Kolombangara – and the sensitivity of the target meant that it was only a few minutes before Japanese gunners began retaliating and shells fell near the marine gun positions.

However, the Long Toms were well protected behind hills and no damage was suffered.

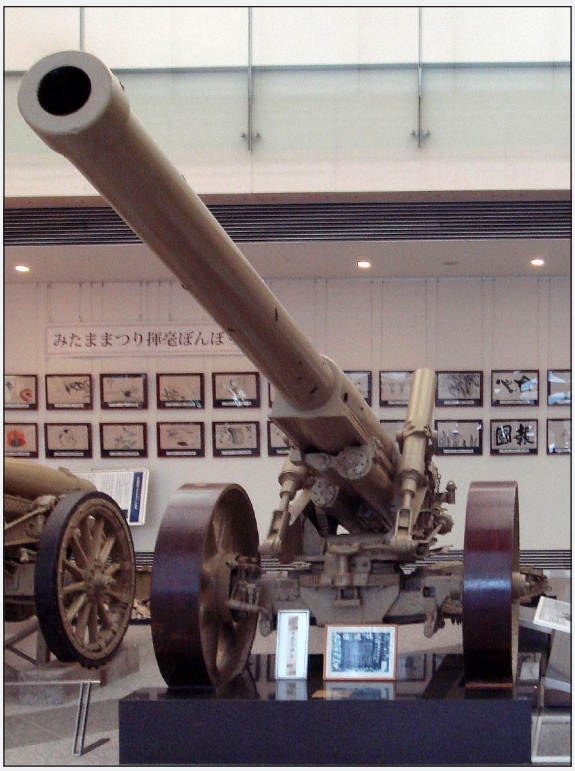
But as the book recounts, the gunnery duel continued through the following days on a basis which was more or less personal.

A 155mm Long Tom Gun M1. The gun could fire a 100 lb (45 kg) shell to a maximum range of 14 miles (23 km). A little less sophisticated than its more modern Ukranian cousin, but just as effective.

Continued...

At night a seaplane based on Vila would circle the marine gun positions and drop small bombs which did no damage – but cost them their sleep and annoyed them intensely.

These were followed by a few rounds of shellfire which further exacerbated the men.



During the day the Japanese would fire at the American position during their mealtimes – further ruffling tempers. They also had the habit of shelling boats landing near the best observation point which was a tall tree near the beach from which the fall of shot on Kolombangara could be observed.

The marines retaliated by firing at the Japanese gun flashes. The Japanese in turn tried to trick them by setting off powder flashes distant from the actual gun sites at the moment of firing.

The Nakajima A6M2-N Type 2 "Rufe" flew at night, dropping small bombs to annoy US Marines by keeping them awake.

But these ruses were soon found out when the marines realised that there was a discrepancy between the number of flashes and the number of shots falling in their area.

The marines then put up a spotter plane which was so effective that the Japanese gun positions were shelled with extreme accuracy and thereafter went out of action or were unwilling to continue the duel.

In order to retaliate for the shelling of mealtimes, the marines make careful note of the smoke from cooking fires and put down shell bursts on or very near them.

Initially the anti-aircraft fire from Kolombangara was too accurate for the

Spotter aircraft similar to these L-3 Grasshopper observation aircraft were used throughout the Pacific. These two aircraft are at the airfield that was constructed near South Santo.

Continued...

allies and resulted in the loss of nine spotter aircraft.

There after a plan was devised so that at predetermined times dive bombers would appear and attack the enemy anti-aircraft positions - which in theory would have been vacated by their crews.

Douglas SBD Dauntless dive bombers like this one were used to harrass Japanese anti-aircraft positions. Photo Public Domian.

Very soon the Japanese caught onto the American plan, and they would leave their anti-aircraft posts as soon as the marine 155MM guns began to fire then they'd return as soon as they stopped, man their guns and fire at the attacking dive bombers.

The marines then went one further; they fired as before and the enemy taking the hint would run away only to return when the marine fire stopped. But this time the dive bombers did not attack, and they remained high in the sky. The US marine gunners then fired more shells catching the Japanese in their open air emplacements.

A rough guide to war

We would like to close with an anecdote from Lieutenant-Colonel Ritchie Garrison's memoir of his time at III Island Command, Efate. It shows how literally the Guadalcanal operation was a leap in to the unknown, and how at least a little light was shed on what they might face.

As well, it sheds light on the language issues to be overcome, and the very front-line concerns of how actually to fight in the jungle.

From time to time G2 handles special projects. Probably the first special project was the task of making a map of Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands. We knew that a landing would have to be made there and we knew that there was no up-to-date map. The First Marine Division would make their landing and they needed every bit of information that was available. It was decided to use a hydrographic - that is a naval chart - as a basis and fill in the details.

Henry Josslyn provided a wealth of information to the Marines. Photo specialforcesroh.com

We were fortunate in having Henry Josslyn available. Henry had recently been the British colonial service district agent for Guadalcanal, and he was temporarily assigned to the office of the British resident commissioner for the New Hebrides at Efate. He knew every stream, every plantation, every native village, the type of trails, the chief of each native village.

Henry spent many days in our drafting room working with a draughtsman filling in the trails, the villages, the plantations et cetera. He also

The US Army Headquarters building in Port Vila, Efate, where Henry spent considerable time filling in the blanks for the Marine Corps.

wrote a travel log of a walking tour around the island to go with the map. This included just about everything that he could remember about the island.

Copies of this information went to the G2 of the First Marine Division during the planning phase of the invasion of Guadalcanal. During the landing, Henry was on the flagship of the landing force. Later he would become a coastwatcher on Vella Lavella in the Solomon Islands where he distinguished himself in rescuing survivors of the USS Helena.

The amphibious landings on Guadalcanal and Tulagi in the Solomon Islands by the US Marines - with the resulting extended ground action against the Japanese forces - was the first jungle fighting by our forces in the South Pacific. And marines and soldiers were struggling against an unknown enemy in an

Continued...

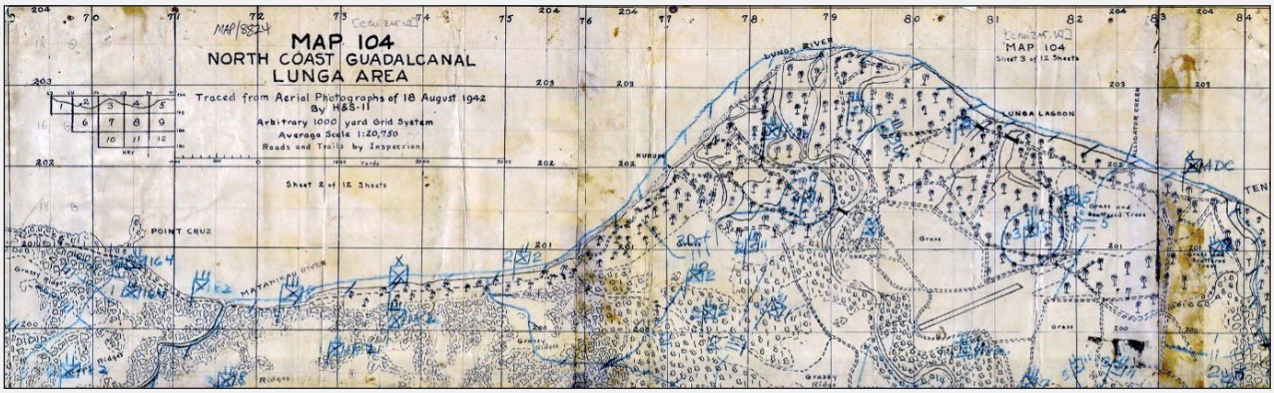
unknown environment. What tactics was the enemy using? What special problems did the Japanese jungle operations bring?

In order to attempt to find some of the answers, Captain Samuel Patten, assistant G2, spent many hours at the naval base hospital talking to the wounded marines and later soldiers. By means of informal conversations he learned about jungle tactics the ruses employed, the effects of the weapons used, and much more.

pidgin English used in that area.

With the help of colonial government officials, we put together a corrected New Hebrides and Solomon's version that was published by the United States army South Pacific area headquarters and distributed locally.

The reader might wonder why communication with the natives was important. We had thousands of natives working on construction projects and our Seabees and engineers had



One of the crudely prepared maps by the Marine Corps that laid the foundations for the invasion of Guadalcanal.

After several hours at the hospital, Captain Patten would return to the office and make notes, and from time to time a report would be sent to higher headquarters. These reports eventually arrived at the Pentagon where they became the basis for several training pamphlets on Japanese tactics.

In another area, our troops were having difficulty in communicating with the natives of the New Hebrides and the Solomon's. These natives used a pidgin English, and we were in need of a small dictionary. There was a war department publication, but it turned out to be written for the New Guinea area where there had been a German language influence that was reflected in the

to direct their activities. In addition, our coastwatchers and aviators and even sailors often wanted information from natives. Communication with local natives was therefore vital to success in the Pacific.

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**