The SANTONIAN

SOUTH PACIFIC WWII MUSEUM
VANUATU

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The extra quarterly newsletter for our museum members

Battle hardened

Welcome back to the Santonian for 2024, and the third and final part of the Ships of Santo series focussed on the cruiser USS Denver.

Espiritu Santo was effectively the home port at this time for the Cleveland class ship, which in turn was part of what would become a famous task force in the US Navy.

Here we look at what those ships and crews had been building to all along – the Battle of Empress Augusta Bay – and why, amidst all the surface battles being fought in the South Pacific, this is thought to be so significant. That's not the assessment of historians, writing long afterwards, but that of the people doing the fighting, who turned to Hollywood techniques to spread the word.

As well we have a recent exciting discovery about another wartime vessel that was based at Palikulo – and the contrast couldn't be greater.

We round out this issue with some further memories of Ni-Vanuatu people about the time when many ships and people came to the islands and changed it forever.

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

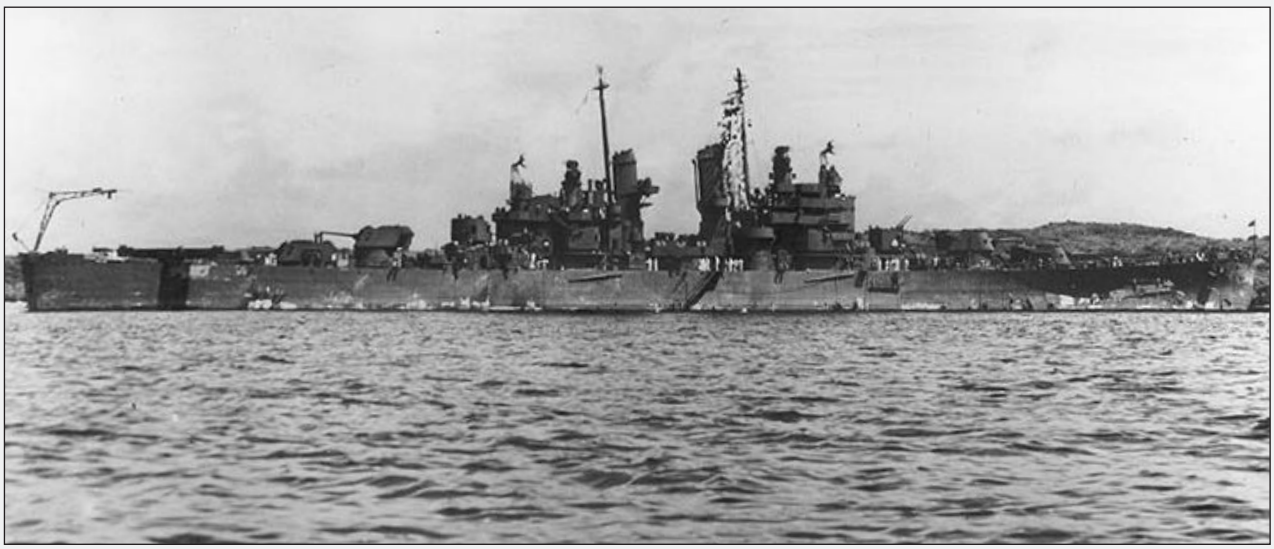
Blue water school

Early in 1944 the US defence department and the Navy issued roughly a 45 minute long film about a naval battle that had occurred late in the previous year in the Solomon Islands.

While it's narrated in what we now consider a gung-ho style in parts, the less than snappily titled United States Navy Action Report Film gives a real insight into just how important this one battle was considered.

presence at the battle of Empress Augusta Bay on November 1st and 2nd 1943.

Tip Merrill does not quite look the part of the frontline commander - nor indeed much resemble a picture of him on deck heading into the battle. Instead, he peers through glasses, slumps in his chair, reads laboriously but precisely in his Mississippi drawl, and has the air of an avuncular college professor.



USS Denver in a South Pacific harbour, circa 1943 - presemably Santo. Pic - US Naval Historical Centre.

It's clear that considerable resource was put into the production with state-of-the-art graphics and sound effects, intercut with footage. But this wasn't intended to be run in cinemas for the general population to drive War Bond sales. This instead was meant to be a primer for current U.S. Navy commanders about the very recent lessons learned.

Indeed, the last 10 minutes or so is a postscript by one of the commanders at the battle - the now legendary A.S. 'Tip' Merrill. Rear Admiral Merrill was commander of Task Force 39, the heart of the American Navy

A frame of Tip Merrill from the US Navy Action report Film. Looking more academic than a military leader. Pic - US Navy.

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Those first impressions would be a mistake.

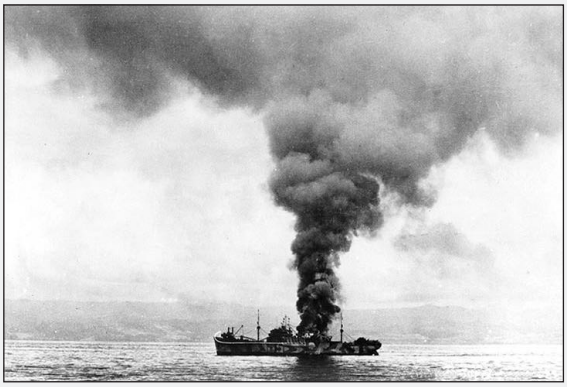
We've seen in previous issues how the USS Denver and sister ships – all cruisers of the Cleveland class – had spent days staging out of Espiritu Santo into exercise areas further from the islands. There they would practise manoeuvring combat formations, live firing exercises against surface and air targets, and all the other plethora of working together as a naval squadron. These drills of course were part of a clear intent of improving the navy's performance against the Japanese.

USS Denver in a South Pacific harbour, again most likely Espiritu Santo.Circa 1943. Pic - US Naval Historical Centre.

While by late 1943, the tide of the war has begun to shift irrevocably towards the Americans - with many new vessels now entering service - it was by no means clear that, when it came to the so-called black shoe Navy, the USN could claim any ascendancy or even equality in the traditional role of ship to ship combat.

Albeit the Solomon islands campaign was proceeding well after the US and allied forces had finally forced the Japanese to retreat from Guadalcanal. They had now turned to fashioning and holding a series of defences intended to stop the Americans advancing further through Bougainville and towards the key base of Rabaul.

But while American air power was beginning to overwhelm the Japanese during day, the enemy still retained a capacity to deal damage both from the air and most significantly at sea, if the circumstances were right.



The US Navy troop transport USS George F. Elliott (AP-13) burning between Guadalcanal and Tulagi, after she was hit by a crashing Japanese aircraft during an air attack on 8 August 1942.
Pic - US Navy/laststandonzombieisland.com.

By the circumstances being right, that was the scenario in which Japanese warships, fast moving, would descend upon slow moving Allied transports off landing beaches. That was what had played out several times off Guadalcanal and while the US had managed to scrap out what it could claim as several victories, the edge still gallingly lay with the expertise of the Japanese.

When things had gone wrong they had gone spectacularly wrong. US forces, despite the advantage bestowed on them by radar. would find themselves being blasted and sank out of the darkness by salvoes of long range torpedoes. In the indescribable confusion of a night battle the Japanese, who had long practised such operations, seemed able to offset their growing material disadvantages by using superior tactics and ship handling.

Never had this been more evident than in the Battle of Savo Island at the very start of

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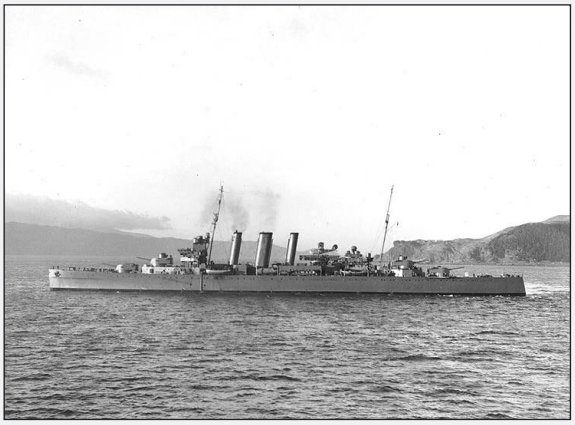
the Guadalcanal campaign.

By necessity, the naval force screening the landing was made-up of a variety of US and allied ships. There were different types of US cruisers alongside an Australian heavy cruiser. The command structure wasn't well set up, with fatal consequences. Air reconnaissance wasn't adequate. In short against a single unified foe, the battle that was going to occur was already tilted towards the Japanese side.



Australian heavy cruiser HMAS Canberra leaves Wellington, New Zealand, on 22 July 1942 en route to participate in the invasion of Guadalcanal and Tulagi. Pic - US Archives.

In the months afterwards. despite the growing American technological improvements, U.S. Navy performance at sea was still dogged more by what was going wrong then by what was going right.

Commander-In-Chief of the US Pacific Fleet, Admiral Chester W. Nimitz. He led the US naval victory over Japan in World War II through brilliant naval strategy and leadership.

This of course was not unrecognised by those in charge. As this 2017 Naval History Magazine essay observes:

The Navy's tactics off Guadalcanal had two clear limitations. First, commanders lacked the time to adequately prepare their subordinates for combat . . . .Without clear doctrines to guide them, these formations lost cohesion and fought as individual ships.

The second weakness involved information processing. Even though radar and other sources could have provided a clear picture of the night battles around them, none of the Navy's commanding officers was able to understand what was really happening in combat. The problem was not a lack of information; the problem was the inability to integrate and process it.

Admiral Chester Nimitz and his staff recognized the problem and in November 1942. ordered all ships to establish a combat information center (CIC). The CIC would receive, assimilate, and evaluate information. (Citation 1)

And the war of course had a cruel method of winnowing out those who were not performing and giving a chance ideally to those who might – men like Tip Merrill, and one of his subordinate commanders, Arleigh Burke, who would become even more famous for his exploits in charge of destroyers.

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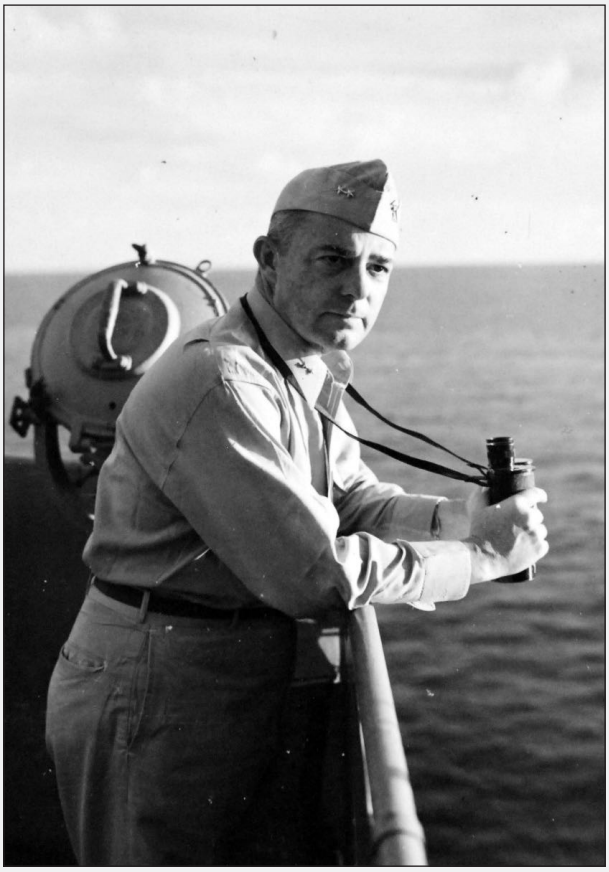
Merrill and TF39

Aaron S Merrill had graduated from the US Naval Academy 31 years earlier – serving during the last months of World War One. And by 1940 he was a captain commanding a destroyer division in the Pacific.



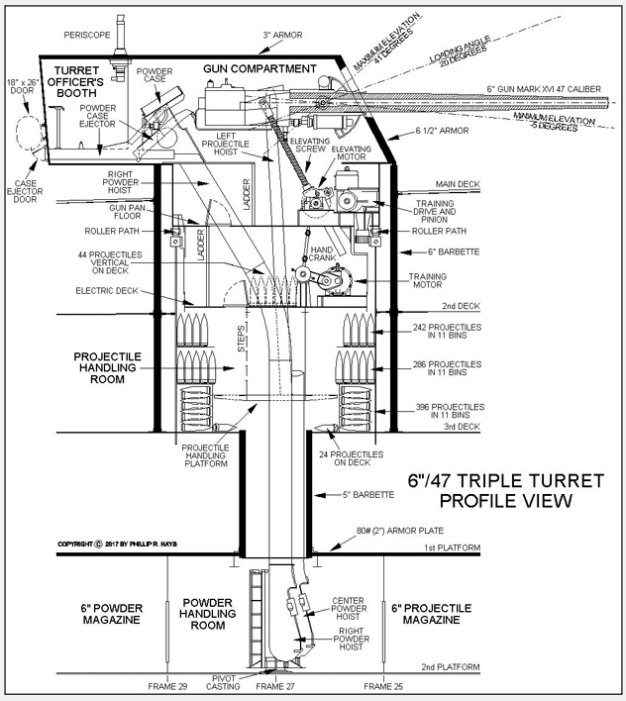
Rear Adm. Aaron S. Merrill, Commander TF 39, on board Montpelier (CL-57), December 1943. Pic - US Archives.

When war came he was indeed a professor – of Naval Science and Tactics at Tulane University in Louisiana.

By April 1942 he was captaining the USS Indiana, just commissioned as one of the newest battleships in the Navy. But promoted to rear admiral in January 1943, he began the association with the cruisers and destroyers most suited to fighting in the narrow waters of the Solomon Islands chain.

This is an excerpt from a 2004 essay on Task Force 39:

The four light cruisers that Merrill took into battle were unlike anything the United States Navy employed before the Second World War. The ships were large, exceeding 10,000 tonnes – essentially on the same hull as the wartime generation of heavy cruisers. The difference was less armour and a very different main battery. Each one of the cruisers mounted a 12 gun battery of 6-inch/47 calibre guns. The design was not fully understood or appreciated by many and dismissed as a waste of a big hull with a small gun by others of the prewar Navy.



A plan view of one of the 6-inch triple turrets on board the Light Cruiser USS Cleveland - The gun occupied five deck levels of the ship.

Extensive testing however offered great hope for these platforms and their unusual gun system.

The Navy first tested the gun operationally in 1939. Without any radar gun crews aboard, USS Savannah easily maintained a rate of fire of 10 rounds per gun per minute. This unparalleled speed for the main battery of a cruiser allowed these ships to simply smother their targets....

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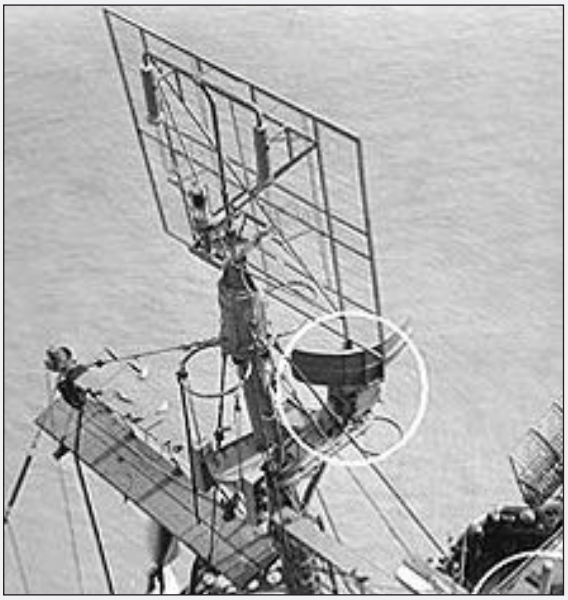
This volume of fire – 150 rounds or more per minute – equated to a single ship throwing over six tonnes of ordnance to a target in less than 60 seconds.

Colloquially one commander observed it was like a stream of 6-inch shells coming from a hosepipe.

Rear Admiral Merrill was well acquainted with those capabilities – indeed, in March 1943 he'd employed the rapid fire technique against two unsuspecting Japanese destroyers at night, tracked on radar and then sunk in just minutes.

The essay continues:

The effectiveness of the cruiser gun system would have been greatly reduced without the second and arguably be the most important technological improvement within the American fleet - that is radar.



A 6-SG surface search radar (circled) on a US Navy ship.

Radar had been employed in all previous engagements - but the key difference at Empress Augusta Bay was the presence of effective search and fire control radar on each ship in Task Force 39 and the expertise with, and belief in the systems to make them worthwhile…. On that moonless, overcast night, as Admiral Merrill closed to engage the enemy, all his commanders saw what he saw, and he saw what all his commanders saw. The Japanese commanders saw very little.

Heading towards the battle

Task Force 39 had continued exercises around Espiritu Santo in October 1943 when on the 24th, it was ordered north to support the Bougainville landings. Through training and individual combat experience in the last six months, the force, including USS Denver, could be confident – but would that be enough?

Amphibious landings at Cape Torokina just north of Empress Augusta Bay, would open the campaign for the upper Solomons. Two divisions would go ashore – covered by Task Force 39. It consisted of the four cruisers, Montpelier (the flag, with Merrill onboard), Cleveland, Columbia, and Denver - supported by Destroyer Division (DesDiv) 45 and Destroyer Division (DesDiv) 46.

USS Cleveland somewhere in the South Pacific. Pic - US Navy.

The landing was accomplished as planned on November the 1st with over 14,000 men and 6,200 tons of materiel put ashore in eight hours.

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At Rabaul however lay the Japanese Cruiser Division Five, under Vice Admiral Ōmori Sentarō. With two heavy eight inch gun cruisers, two light cruisers (smaller than their American equivalents) and six destroyers, he intended to sink the US transports.

Japanese Vice Admiral Ōmori Sentarō.
Pic - Wikipedia.

Although Ōmori expected to meet only transports, Merrill's TF 39 was already steaming north to intercept the Japanese.

Having been informed of the Japanese approach by reconnaissance aircraft, Merrill selected a meeting point well west of Empress Augusta Bay and maneuvered accordingly.

He deployed his force on a north–south line, the leading destroyer three miles ahead of the Montpelier.

The cruisers were spaced 1,000 yards apart, and there was a 3,000-yard interval between the rear cruiser and the flagship of DesDiv 46.

Although this was the formation typically employed for a night action, it differed in one essential respect from the tight column used in other night engagements during the preceding year.

As was later noted, the destroyers were not tied to the cruisers, they were free to act independent of the cruiser line. That meant they could be used offensively instead of defensively and had been sent to fire their torpedoes before any guns were fired.

TF 39 approached the rendezvous at 20 knots, so that the wakes of the ships would not attract reconnaissance aircraft.

Although many circumstances replicated those at Savo Island, there was one major difference. Merrill had exact knowledge of Ōmori's movements.

The flagship Montpelier in action at Empress Augusta Bay.
Pic - US Navy.

He proposed to push the enemy westward to gain manoeuvre space and, in order to protect his cruisers, to fight at ranges close to the maximum effective range of the Japanese torpedoes, which were up to 20-thousand yards.

He planned to detach the two destroyer divisions for an initial torpedo attack and to hold his cruisers' gunfire until the destroyers' torpedoes struck home.

Some of Ōmori's ships mounted radar, but the operators of the equipment were poorly trained. So Ōmori relied on visual spotting.

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However, the U.S. radar sets would prove far more capable than the Japanese spotters with binoculars. Nearing 2.30 in the morning (0230) the Command Information Centres on the US cruisers began to detect ships at nearly 40-thousand yards range. Merrill started to move his fleet to lie across the Japanese course.

Of course, nothing ever goes to plan – the US destroyers fired torpedoes without success – and a Japanese plane dropped flares, revealing the American fleet to the Japanese – who immediately began to fire off their own torpedoes.

But Merrill kept his nerve and ordered his radar-controlled gunnery crews on the four cruisers to open fire. Soon one Japanese cruiser was burning, and two destroyers had collided trying to dodge the salvos.

View forward from the US light cruiser Columbia towards the US light cruiser Cleveland as both ships fire at Japanese warships during the Battle of Empress Augusta Bay. Pic - US Navy.

The Japanese began firing in return, but with less accuracy. However, their star shells lit up the US line, forcing Merrill to sheer away and deploy smokescreens to keep a distance.

The gunfire from the U.S. ships was now proving very accurate and forced the Japanese heavy cruisers and their accompanying destroyers to manoeuvre frantically, resulting in further collisions between Japanese ships.

In turn Merrill manoeuvred his ships to keep the Japanese gunnery off target. While the US ships were hitting they did not appear to be having a great effect – and the Japanese in quick succession hit the USS Denver with three eight inch shells.

In the meantime, the US destroyers were at times fighting themselves as much as the enemy, including two colliding.

By just before 5am, the action was largely over. The Japanese had lost one cruiser and one destroyer, and four others heavily damaged. Although the Americans suffered damage to seven ships, none were sunk and there were relatively light casualties, especially given the amount of ordnance fired. Most importantly, the Japanese had come nowhere near the beachhead.

A Japanese aircraft crashes (upper centre) into the ocean near the cruiser Columbia during air attacks on Allied ships off Bougainville, a few hours after the battle. Pic - Wikipedia.

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Onboard the Denver

During the battle, the USS Denver had become clearly illuminated by Japanese star shells. That made her an easy target, especially as at one point she was leading the cruiser column.

The enemy cruisers concentrated on her with shots straddling the cruiser repeatedly. One shot clipped her number one stack, and a shell then smashed into Denver's forward section at 0322 and flooded a compartment immediately. Another shell struck at nearly the same time as the cruiser veered deftly on evasive courses—trying hard to make a 90˚ turn out of the way, but only making it to 45˚ when the last shot struck her forecastle.

It was her lucky day, for none of the shells detonated.

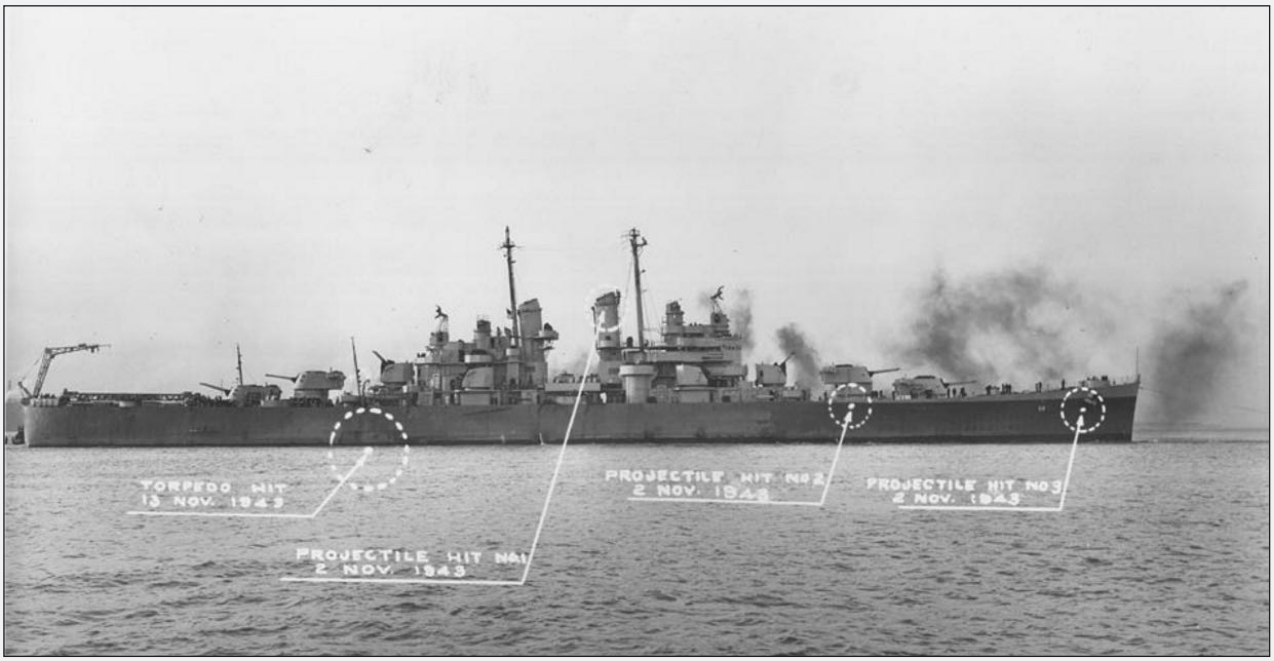
However, that was not to be the end of it – for in the aftermath of the battle, Japanese aircraft launched large airstrikes at the US force. Those repeated AA drills paid off, with dive bombers being driven off. Task Force 39 then in the coming days continued to operate in support of the landings.

But later, on November the 13th, striking in the early morning darkness, three Japanese Betty torpedo bombers managed to sink a torpedo into the Denver.

20 men died, others were injured, and the cruiser came to a halt.

By dawn, damage control had allowed her to start moving at just over 4 knots, but able to still work her AA battery if needed. Eventually a tug secured a line and Denver proceeded to Port Purvis, off Guadalcanal.

Denver was then ordered to report to a dry dock on Espíritu Santo for temporary repairs before returning to the U.S. West Coast and more extensive repairs at Mare Island Naval Shipyard in California.



Starboard side of the Denver showing the locations of three 8-inch shell impacts (which did not explode) that were received on 1 & 2 November 1943 and one aerial torpedo hit which occurred on 13 November 1943. Photo taken on 2 Jan 1944 off Mare Island. Pic - US Navy.

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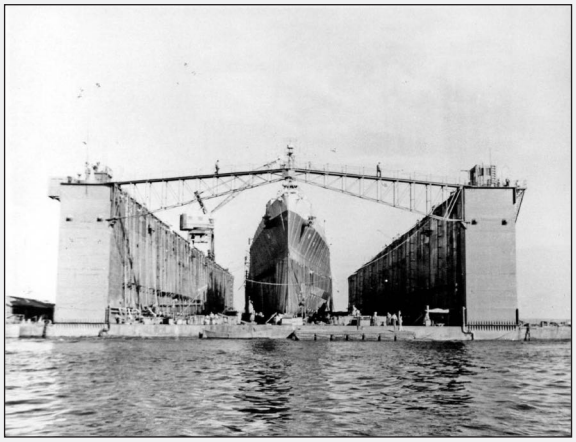
A slow three day voyage then took place so that by November the 24th, Denver was again slipping into a familiar berth in the Segond Channel – and then not long afterwards, into Floating Dry Dock 21.



Not the Denver, but her sister ship the Columbia in the same floating dry dock in Espiritu Santo. Pic - US Archives.

After extensive repairs, Denver sailed for the US and a lengthy refit – not completed until early 1944.

The cruiser then returned to be part of some of the climactic battles of the Pacific war, including the Battle of Surigao Strait, in the Philippines in late 1944.

This was the last surface action between battleships in history – and indeed thanks to lessons learnt in how to apply the US technological edge at Empress Augusta Bay and afterwards, the action was more a one-sided massacre than a battle.

It took place just under a year after Empress Augusta and that timeframe shows one of the genius aspects of the US way of war. In that time, the US Navy was able to produce an instructional film to spread the word on what worked and didn't work.

The on-the-nose summary delivered in less than 10 minutes by Tip Merrill was a masterclass in sharing knowledge across a vast potential audience. Guns were power, radar was power, training was power – but knowledge, too, was power.

USS Denver off Mare Island Navy Yard, California following the completion of her repairs. Pic - US Navy.

Rear Admiral Aaron S. Merrill, USN receives the Navy Cross from Vice Admiral Aubrey W. Fitch, in ceremonies held on the after deck of USS Montpelier (CL-57), 11 December 1943. Pic - US Archives.

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References

(1)
Guadalcanal Proved Experimentation Works
By Trent Hone, December 2017
Naval History Magazine
Volume 31, Number 6

(2)
Night Fighters Without Equal – Task Force 39 at Empress Augusta Bay
By David C Fuquea, Colonel USMC
2004 paper to US Naval War College

Descriptions of the battle are drawn from the Naval History and Heritage Command page for the USS Denver:
https://www.history.navy.mil/research/histories/ship-histories/danfs/d/denver-cl-58-ii.html

You can view the wartime Empress Augusta Bay documentary on You Tube here:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dCraM6p3MWE

And there's an excellent analysis In the Unauthorised History of the Pacific War podcast here:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=orGgm91ebCc

USS Denver
Awards, Citations and Campaign Ribbons

Precedence of awards is from top to bottom, left to right
Top Row - Navy Combat Action Ribbon - Navy Unit Commendation
Second Row - American Campaign Medal - Asiatic Pacific Campaign Medal (11) - World War II Victory Medal
Third Row - Navy WWII Occupation Medal w/JAPAN Clasp - Philippine Presidential Unit Citation - Philippine Liberation Medal (2)
Source: Navsource.org

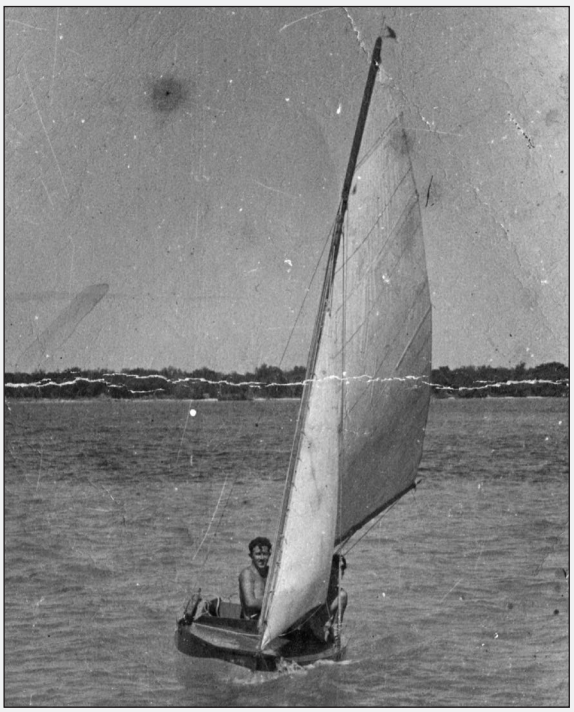
The skimmer of Palikulo Bay

It's always amazing how much history continues to be unearthed – as people uncover old documents and pictures from within their family.

This is one of those stories.

It concerns a home made boat made by a New Zealander serving on Espiritu Santo with the Royal New Zealand Air Force in 1943.

Leading Aircraftman Robert Highet was stationed at Palikulo Bay. Sailing was in his blood – so naturally he used his recreation time to design and build what he called his skimmer.



A fantastic photo of Robert in his skimmer in Palikulo Bay.

Robert's time at Palikulo Bay came to an end in November 1943 when his servicing unit was transferred to Guadalcanal.

The skimmer boat remained and what happened to it is unknown.

The story doesn't end there, however. Robert's uncle Harry Highet, who also served in the Pacific constructing airfields, was the designer of the famous P-Class, which anyone who has learned to sail in New Zealand will be familiar with.

P-Class yachts racing in New Zealand. Pic - Tauranga Yacht & Power Boat Club.

And if you've ever seen the dramatic new monohulls that now are used to race for the America's Cup – you'll see that, just a little, there's the ghost of the Palikulo Bay skimmer.

Emirates Team New Zealand America's Cup boat - a high performance fully foiling monohull racing yacht. Pic - Emirates Team New Zealand.

Please read the full story at the RNZAF's Air Force Museum website – including how the boat was made:

https://airforcemuseum.co.nz/blog/new-to-the-collection/

Memories from Lelepa Island

Lelepa island stands at the principal entrance to Havannah Harbour north Efate, the main anchorage for the American fleet in the central area of the country.

Island residents therefore had a good view of ship movements to and from this base.

The USS Enterprise and a supply ship (most likely the Chenango), anchored in Havannah Harbour in Efate. Pic - US Archives.

The following are reminiscences by formerly Lelepa resident in a December 1993 interview recorded in Ni-Vanuatu memories of World War II, collated by Margaret and Bruce Moon.

Mrs Tungulumanu:

I was little at the time when we heard about the war. I remember all the warships out there lined up to come into Havannah harbour. We were rather afraid of so many big ships at one time. Women and girls were afraid of the soldiers and couldn't go across to the mainland to do their washing, collect freshwater and local foods. They would only go across if there was a man, perhaps an old man, to go with them. If they spotted a soldier somewhere they would run for their lives - even to jump in a canoe and paddle back to the island.

I remember being scared if the men were away working on the mainland. If we heard the dogs backing in daylight we knew there were soldiers about so the women would lock the doors and tell the children to be very quiet.

Outside the approach to the harbour in Efate as seen from the USS Chenango's spotter aircraft. Pic - US Archives.

One good thing was that the women washed clothes for soldiers and got paid for it. Also, if they found coins in the soldiers' pockets and brought them back, the soldiers would say that they could have them.

While there were many warships in the harbour there would be only one guard ship outside between Hat island and Lelepa island. It would warn the people that they were not allowed any fires at night, no torches or even cigarettes. All the mothers would try to cook their meals before sunset.

Liberty party from USS Chenango at the recreation centre on Havannah Harbour. Pic - US Archives.

The patrol ship was always present day and night. Some of the crew would work at night and sleep in the day. They were afraid of submarines coming into the harbour, so they put nets across from Lelepa to Moso and from Lelepa to Efate. The nets had to be opened when American submarines went in and out. Some of the ships there were the Colorado, Washington, and Alabama...

It must have been quite a sight.

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**

"Inspiring everyday heroes."

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