

# Naval Construction Maintenance Unit 573

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*Historical  
Information*



*“Construimus, Batuimus”  
“We Build, We Fight”*



NOTE - Peary  
ABD - Gulfport  
Ready Date - 7 Jan'44  
Left ABD - 7 Feb'44  
Location - Russell Is.

LOG

- 11-27-43 - CNO orders transfer of CBMU 573 to ABD Gulfport about 30 Nov. (CNO conf disp 341309 to Camp Peary dtd 24 Nov'43)
- 2-19-44 - CBMU 573 left ABD 7 Feb'44. (WRK)
- 5-13-44 - 1 Apr'44 report of CBMU 573 - operating in Russells. A number of excess shipfitters will be trfd to Espiritu to work on 100 Ton Crane.
- 6-3-44 - 1 May'44 report of CBMU 573 - operating at Russells.
- 7-11-44 - 1 Jun'44 report of CBMU 573 - operating at Russells.
- 8-1-44 - 1 Jul'44 report of CBMU 573 - operating at Russells.
- 9-2-44 - 1 Aug'44 report of CBMU 573 - operating at Russells, conjunction with CBMU 572.
- 10-9-44 - 1 Sep'44 report of CBMU 573 - operating at Russells in conj. with CBMU 572.
- 11-17-44 - 1 Oct'44 report of CBMU 573 - operating at Russells.
- 12-8-44 - 1 Nov'44 report of CBMU 573 - located at Russells.
- 1-11-45 - 1 Dec'44 report of CBMU 573 - located at Russells.
- 2-7-45 - 1 Jan'45 report of CBMU 573 - located at Russells.
- 3-17-45 - 1 Feb'45 report of CBMU 573 - located at Russells.
- 4-9-45 - 1 Mar'45 report of CBMU 573 - located at Russells.
- 5-4-45 - 1 Apr'45 report of CBMU 573 - located at Russells.
- 5-18-45 - 1 May'45 report of CBMU 573 - operating at Russells in conjunction with CBMU 572.

Location - Russells Esp. Santo      CBMU 573

- 6-3-45 - CBMU 573 included in list of activities at Russells earmarked and ready later but no destinations assigned. (ComsoPac sec disp 290535 May'45 to Comservpac)
- 6-29-45 - 1 Jun'45 report of CBMU 573 - operating in Russells in conjunction with CBMU 572.
- 7-8-45 - 1 Jul'45 report of CBMU 573 - located at Russells.
- 7-14-45 - Your 270343 refers (replacing CBMU 572 and CBD 1056). Concur provided following: An equivalent plan is approved. Assured retention in SoPac area and augmentation of CBMU 573 with stevedoring personnel from CB (Sp)s now in the area to a max strength of 450. This plan to furnish experienced nucleus crew at each port to supervise cargo loading by general service personnel. (ComsoPac sec disp 210000 July to Comservpac)
- 7-20-45 - 1 Aug'45 report of CBMU 573 - located at Russells.
- 7-24-45 - Russells is directed to detach CBMU 573 & proceed to Esp. Santo. "One Admin. Staff, Santo report to CNB, Esp. Santo for duty. (Comservtranscom sec admtr sec 060045 dtd 5 Sept'45 to CNO & others).
- 10-17-45 - CBMU 573 detached from Russell Is. and will proceed to Espiritu Santo & report to CNB, Espiritu Santo. (CNB, Russell Is. conf ltr ser 0362 dtd 11 Sept'45 to OinC, CBMU 573).
- 10-26-45 - 1 Oct'45 report of CBMU 573 - located at Espiritu Santo, N.H. CBMU 573 left the Russell Islands on 11 Sept'45 & arrived Espiritu Santo, N.H. on 14 Sept'45.
- 11-30-45 - 1 Nov'45 report of CBMU 573 - located at Espiritu Santo, N.H.
- 12-13-45 - 1 Dec'45 report of CBMU 573 - located at Espiritu Santo, N.H.
- 1-18-46 - Comservpac recs AdminOff of ComSoPac to inactivate CBMU 573. (Comservpac disp 060045 Jan'46 to AdminOff of ComSoPac).

Location - Espiritu Santo, N.H.

CBMU 573

- 1-30-45 - CBMU 573 inactivated on 5 Jan'46. (Comsopac 080646 Jan'46 disp to Comservpac).  
1-30-45 - 1 Jan'46 report of CBMU 573 - located at Espiritu Santo, N.H.  
1-30-45 - Disposition of pers. of CBMU 573 upon inactivation was:-- 60 men to Rec Sta. west Coast for leave & further assignment; 51 men to CBD 1056 (Sp), Sec. 1 for duty; 50 men to CBD 1056 (Sp), Sec. 2 for duty. (Comdr., SoPac Area & SoPac Force ltr ser 15-61 dtd 11 Jan'46 to Comservpac).

INACTIVATED

<u>DATE</u>	<u>ON BOARD</u>		<u>AUTHORITY</u>
	<u>OFFICERS</u>	<u>MEN</u>	
1 Jul'44	5	260	MoR
1 Aug'44	5	260	MoR
1 Sep'44	5	260	MoR
1 Oct'44	5	259	(Sopac report - 1 Nov'44).
1 Nov'44	5	257	MoR
1 Dec'44	5	255	MoR
1 Jan'45	5	255	MoR
1 Feb'45	5	256	MoR
1 Mar'45	5	254	MoR
1 Apr'45	5	251	MoR
1 May'45	4	252	MoR
1 Jun'45	4	249	BNP625 & R
1 Jul'45	4	239	Roster & BNP625
1 Aug'45	4	226	BNP625 & R
1 Sept'45	5	208	BNP625 & R
1 Oct'45	7	180	BNP625 & R
1 Nov'45	7	213	BNP625 & R
1 Dec'45	5	181	BNP625 & R
1 Jan'46	5	168	BNP625 & R

Date	Organization	Location	Reference	Notes
6/13/44	-	Russell Is.	c. B report 1 June Russells sec act dispatch 0 18143 Sept.	Left U.S. Feb. 1944
7/11	-	" Howl		
9/16/45	-	ComDAO Base		tele to Moral
		Russells sec 162311		
		Sept.		
7/16/45	Econ	to San Jo sec adt	added	
		disp. 140346 Sept.		

## FOREWORD

THE following account of the activities of two Seabee maintenance units, from organization through their first year of overseas duty, attempts, in its modest way, to record as objectively as possible not only some of the facts involved but also in part the temper of the men behind the facts and the flavor of the life confronting them. It is perhaps impossible to cover adequately even a fraction of the field represented by a group of this sort, but if there results an approximation of the general feeling, that will be sufficient. Some may be able to recognize themselves in the ensuing pages; others will not. Be that as it may, facts of the material things we had to deal with are believed to be substantially correct.

Not everything, very likely not even the things some might consider most vital, is depicted in the following text, drawings and photographs. It is a human failing to overlook things which, being too close, take distinct shape only as time and distance sharpen the image. But it is the expectation that enough material has been presented—enough of the small details as well as the broader patterns—so that it will recall to you unmentioned facts that may be more pertinent to your own life in the naval service. If you don't want to remember any of it, you can obtain, for a nominal sum, an ashcan into which this volume will fit conveniently—and no questions asked.

On the other hand, if you not only wish to remember some things but also to add a touch of the spectacular for the benefit of a couple of Charlies who weren't

there, you can use the material to develop a lie that will at least be consistent with some of the facts. You will still have plenty of latitude. The only thing you should guard against is passing the book around to show your friends where you appear in the photographs. A stray glance at another picture or a cartoon may spoil your whole story and you might have to make a deal with your friends to keep their traps shut.

Throughout the textual matter, you will notice the absence of proper names. There are only four that have a direct connection with the outfits: Gunner, the dog; Blackie, the dog; Brenda, the dog; and Doc, the parrot. Omissions were deliberate, following a policy of generalization. But somewhere in the photographic section each man will find a facsimile of his mug.

This account makes no pretense of being literary. It was put together too fast to be anything except a hasty reproduction of sections of life on a South Pacific island during wartime. And it had to be done fast, not only because our island stay was increasingly uncertain, but also because it was necessary to get the material into the many hands that must thumb and approve it before the printer takes over. As it was, you had almost forgotten about the book by the time you received your copy, hadn't you?

It should be noted that during preparation of the book no official pressure was exerted to subordinate one thing or to elevate another, to omit some things or to substitute others, or in any way to distort the scene as it appeared to the recorded. But the demands of censorship at this time being inexorable, it may follow that certain deletions will be insisted upon.\*

\*They were. Deletions included several passages and references in the text, and a few photographs and maps.

Costs of publishing enough copies to furnish each man in the units with one will be defrayed entirely by the Recreation Fund. For extra copies you must make with the moolah.

All of us together produced this volume. Now, damya, read it!

R. E. S.

Banika  
Russell Islands  
British Solomon Islands

11 March 1945



## INTRODUCTION

THIS story begins in all corners of the country, in the homes of the men who left them and in the minds of the men who came away. They came like the sands of an hourglass, flowing toward the center. They sifted through the cursal passage that was the training ground, and on the other side they spread out to assigned places over the globe. Some of them clung together and this is the story of some who did.

From the beginning there were difficult adjustments to make and hardships to be borne in preparation for the task at hand. So there were complaints and some bitterness—but for all that, resignation to whatever lay ahead.

This is not to say that inconveniences and disruptions were endured always with the best of grace. However, from the unsettling undercurrents of war and its background, men fashion an expedient perspective—an outlook that finds a measure of security in the inevitable and develops a sustaining humor from the commonplaces of necessity. Thus, while they bear no resemblance to talent scouts for comic opera, they eventually become capable of locating, at the drop of a coconut, something to chuckle about, even though it is morose or ironic. And if there is nothing to chuckle over, bitching fills the gap—becomes, in fact, a fine art of maintaining emotional stability. It is an expression of the unholy satisfaction to be derived from the assumption that nothing has been done right, nothing is being done right and the chances are that nothing will ever be done right.

We have done plenty of chuckling and plenty of bitching; and although we may not be able to say we enjoyed ourselves in the service, sometimes at least we were probably able to kid ourselves into thinking that parts of it weren't too bad.

In our attitudes we were no different than any other branch of the military which has been pushed around from here to there, and so we are at liberty to use the old military formula of complaining like all git-out about the beating we took. To do this, let's take a look at our period of service as it looked to us while it was happening. But if we see anything too, too wonderful about it, let's stop smoking those things altogether.

And now having duly expounded the expectable and stated our defense, we take a gander backward . . . .



## CHAPTER ONE

*In which a large group of diverse persons, being brought together for the first time and processed at a naval training ground, become sorely tried and are only too happy when they can leave the sunbitch.*

THE good residents of the State of Virginia could do nothing about it. A national combine known as the Bureau of Yards and Docks of the Navy Department had taken over fourteen square miles of Virginia's finest red mud fields and said: "Let there be a United States Naval Construction Training Center, Williamsburg, Va.!" And there was one. But part of it was in Magruder, Va. Well, those things *will* happen.

And private contractors descended and built all manner of ramshackle barracks, and roadways and divers establishments. And they caused messhalls and drill sheds to be erected. And water systems and plumbing lines created they them. And when they had finished, behold, the Bureau gazed upon their work and called it good!

One thousand and seventy-six men disagreed with this conclusion. The why and wherefore may become apparent in the narrative of the 1076.

Once upon a time (October 20 1943), a sad-sacked aggregation of self-styled "confused bastards" lined up on a cold sand-bare drill ground of Camp Peary's A-1 Area. They were members of the new 18th Super Battalion. The name had all the sound and earmarks

of a "crack first-line" outfit, something extra powerful, dire and ominous for the enemy, like a secret weapon. But all it meant was "superfluous;" in short, something that could be dragged in if and when it were needed. And soon, not being needed in its then constituted form, the gallant 18th was drawn and quartered. Two of its components formed the organization that one day would settle, with much wailing and gnashing of teeth, on the little island of Banika, a water-bound wart on the body Pacific, albeit one of the larger of the 50-odd Russell Islands.

But all this was in the future and the typical Seabee is not psychic. For the moment the unhappy band was fated to stand on Peary's drill field, to await the calling of their names, to shoulder their two ungainly seabags and to haul their aching fundaments after an officer who would guide them to their new barracks.

Most of the 18th's personnel was fresh from boot camp where in four long weeks the fear of God, the Officers and the CPO's had been so instilled in them that they trembled at the thought of a bunk out of alignment with the cracks in the floor and blankets folded the wrong way so that the stencils were upside down.

Throughout boot, there had been fourth day "duty days." Bug-eyed men had been initiated into the mysteries of "short arm." On kitchen police they had known the torment of peeling onions, had felt lye water swirl ankle deep on messhall floors. They had kept the midnight vigil at guard posts, challenging both shadow and substance. They had practically policed the area down to bed rock. There had been boardwalk repair and mop pushing and hand shovel operation and all kinds of slimy details in all parts of camp. There had

been lectures and more lectures and the inevitable reading of the "Articles for the Government of the United States Navy." If the weather stank too bad for outdoor operations, a lecture on interior guard was always on tap. Sometimes there were lectures in the barracks on field stripping of pieces. There were agonizing mornings and afternoons of drilling; and for the "awkward squad" or those whose towels didn't happen to be Rins white at a crucial inspection, a little night "instruction."

"Right shoulder . . . Ha-a-a! Left shoulder . . . Hams! . . . Faw-wood . . . hotch! . . . By the right flank . . . hup! By the left flank . . . hoop! . . . He-eep, hup, trip four and your left . . . your left . . . To the rear hutch to the rear hutch . . ."

It went on until your brogans wore your feet to raw meat and you walked as though you momentarily expected an indecent gesture.

There were drill instructors, who with studied critical gaze, sauntered onto the field a minute late probably because they had lain awake half the night mulling over a new gag to use on the boots. Some of these fugitives from a day's work struggled very hard to be comedians. They had a few standard sadisms such as ordering a quaking delinquent, who may quite innocently have confused east with west, to stand at attention, helmet in teeth. Or they had, for instance, a quip calculated to panic the audience:

"All right, all right, Mae! Suck in that Budweiser tumor!"

Not all instructors had Broadway in their blood; but some would have given their Bluejackets Manual with right arm attached to be known as a "card."



*"All right, Mac! Suck in that Budweiser tumor!"*

On dry days, or if the dew were less than a half inch deep, you might be herded into the woods for extended order, a form of attack by infiltration which could be effective if your butt didn't have an Eiffel Tower complex. The way it happened in boot, you crawled on the ground following your squad leader and chief who blithely led you into ambush. And when you saw a guy with a handkerchief tied to his arm, you jumped the sumbitch and told him he was dead but he wouldn't believe you.

With one thing or another—bayonet drill, grenade heaving and machete drill with a wooden facsimile of the McCoy—boot training ran its course. The "Fighting Seabee" who had successfully fought his way

through was given parting injunctions and warnings; then his assignment. For most, the assignment was to the 18th Super and thus the 1076 stood, on October 20, at the A-1 drill field, slightly confused and bewildered.

Advanced training began with a stimulated bang. Up the hill to drill shed you went to hear a loudspeaker blare: "Simulate load and lock;" then "Fire at will," and the dry firing clicks filled the echoing shed like the chatter of New Year's eve noisemaker.

Later there were cozy seminars in the woods where an instructor explained the history, mystery, measurements and operation of the M1—the little carbine everyone allowed he'd like to have for hunting after the war. When the instructor was sure you knew which end of the weapon should be pointed at the target, you were ready for the sloppy trek to the rifle range, where you flung yourself into the mud, squinted through the rain and pinged away at the 100 and 200-yard targets. You also kept score for the man on the relay just ahead of you, if you happened to be looking at his target at the time. If you qualified at 135 or better, you got a slip saying so in your Service Record (the one they gotta show you, it says so right in da book). If you got a 175 or better, you were a sharpshooter and could wear the appropriate bulls-eye on your blue dress jumper sleeve. As a whole for the 1076 men of the battalion, the percentage of qualification was high in the 90's and established a new record for the range. The record, unfortunately, was broken soon after by another outfit.

Things began to happen faster now. After several days of military, enrollment for special schools began. From then on the personnel was in more or less sharp division, one group being assigned full time to schools

and the other occupied with daily drills, lectures, extended order and maneuvers. While technical instruction was paramount for the school men, some attempt was made to supply them with military training. A case in point was the plumbers' ten-mile "abortive putsch," for which they were dragged out of the sack about midnight.

Climaxing the military instruction was a series of mimic warfare operations, staged over wide areas in the wooded sections surrounding the camp. Strategies and tactics were worked out beforehand on maps. Officers, chiefs and squad leaders were in charge of detachments. If anything went wrong, the woods came alive with theoretical corpses who congregated in a clearing to enjoy a post-mortem discussion by a Monday morning quarterback. These were enjoyed principally because you could sit down.

Memorable enough for the record is the bloody day the Blue Dungarees attempted to storm defensive positions across a swamp held by the Green Coveralls.

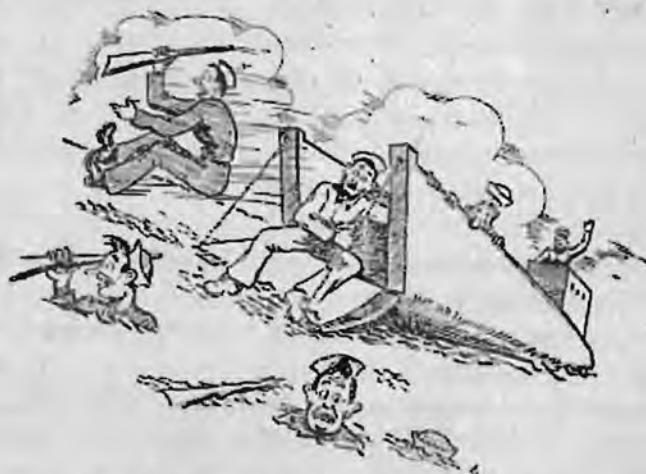


Laughing at danger (who laughed right back at them), these hardy Blue Dungarees crept from the heights of the knoll to the pit of the swamp, forthwith plunged into the muddy hollow and sank knee to waist deep. Thus immobilized, many had to be freed by brute force, but soon or late enough of the attackers had made the treacherous crossing to deploy for hand-to-hand combat. Whereupon, the enemy, with a trace of disgust, said that all them sumbitches had been picked off like sitting ducks. It had been a massacre. There was much washing of clothes that night.

So it went—hikes, schools, drill, boiler watch, guard—and later the obstacle course, which turned out to be a three-ring circus, complete with an aerial act and the usual assortment of clowns. If for any reason you were excused from playing "follow the leader," you had permission to sit in the bleachers, hold coats and watches and yell words of discouragement to all the miseries who had to go over that obscene thing. There are probably some who still think the only reason the rope bridge didn't break was that their insurance was paid up.

Life never settled down for any length of time. If it wasn't one thing, it was two. There came a day in chilly November when we were called upon to plunge into a literally blood-chilling escapade—the historic amphibious operation across the James River. For some, the storming of the woods on the west bank from assault barges was a slick operation, the attackers stepping from barge to dry land with an ease that would have made Sir Walter Raleigh feel useless. But at least one barge got hung up on a sand bar and couldn't get off. Whether the helmsman's bifocals were in the repair

shop or whether it was an official "act of God," nobody ever took the trouble to explain. At any rate, the bow ramp was lowered and the men were ordered to make like a fish—only keep that dummy rifle dry! Since the water was only shoulder to chin deep and the barge was little over 100 or 150 yards from shore and the mud-holes were not too near together, nobody drowned; but the briny was icy, the legs became numb, the teeth chattered and the shore looked far away. With the weight out, the barge was maneuvered off the bar while dunked personnel shivered through the woods, took it for granted they had chased the enemy and hastily returned to the landing spot. The barge still stood out from shore. The only way to board it again was to wade out.



*The helmsman's bifocals were in the repair shop.*

On the slow, spray-filled trip back to port, a rattle-voiced choir churned out familiar ditties to bolster be-

draggled spirits; but it was not until the hike in wet clothes from the dock to the barracks, interspersed with double time, had begun, that normal blood circulation returned. Despite exposure, the only casualties were sartorial; but immediately thereafter, scheduled periodic assaults on the west bank of the James River were halted for the year, apparently by the camp medical staff. Too cold.

Scuttlebutt has a peculiar habit of sometimes being not entirely wrong. Already there were rumors that the 18th Super was to feel the axe, that out of it would come some kind of distinctly specialized units, which at a signal would go off to war on their own. Whatever the accuracy of the reports, the 18th Super was now making plans for what would be, to all intents and purposes, its last public social appearance as a battalion. Or perhaps, since it was dying, the event could more properly be called a wake. In any case, the Pre-embarkation Smoker was shaping up. It was a little early (by about three months) for pre-embarkation shenanigans, but shortly after the approaching ten-day leave, the new units would become realities.

Rehearsals of bandsmen, hill-billy groups, comedians and singers (all stag) took precedence over "R-r-eep, two, three, four and your left!" until at last the Ziegfelds were satisfied they had a super-colossal extravaganza. On the appointed night, the doors were thrown open to 1000 patrons who sat one way to view the spectacle, then twisted the other way to see the boxing matches at the rear of the hall. During intermissions, candy, cigars, cigarettes, cokes and peanuts were distributed, but unfortunately the laws of supply

and demand were on vacation and some of the audience were lucky to gaff a goober.

This alpha and omega of the 18th's social season marked the decline and fall of advanced training. Uppermost in the minds and emotions now was the ten-day leave. The great majority of the men had been away from home for two months; those who had sweated it out in Replacement Battalion or withstood a siege in Ship's Company, had been away three months or more. But regardless, it seemed like years, so quickly and firmly had camp routine insinuated itself into the new fabric of living. Now that the prospect of home was near, it was a little unbelievable. Naturally there was rejoicing, yet it was sobering to realize that since this was to be an embarkation leave, it may be the last chance to see family and friends for a long time to come.

Officially, leave papers had been dated November 18 to 28, but the Powers had dug down deep in their hearts and brought forth a 12-hour grace period, so that actually we could start shaking off the dust of Peary at 5 p.m. on November 17.

The night before, bunks had been stripped of mattresses so that seabags could be packed and ready for early storage. Men slept, if at all, on bare springs or a single blanket. The device of awakening the brethren by a call to urination, which was then starting to achieve its place as an institution in camp life, was frequently employed during the night by its most able exponent, Elmer. (You-know-Elmer-he's-a-riot!)

About 4 a.m. (0400 hours), some exuberant insomniaes concluded that it was time to rise and shine and from that moment on until 5 p.m., we seemed always to

be on the verge of leaving. "They" said that right after we dropped off our blankets to be washed, we'd be going, but we didn't. "They" said to stick around the barracks and make sure we had on our dress blues because we were liable to get orders anytime, but we didn't. "They" said hurry up and get chow, because we would probably "leave out" right afterward. We didn't.

The sun was already low in the afternoon sky before we shuffled through the Personnel Office, ID cards in hand, clutched our leave papers, formed into files and hiked up the hill to the main drag, and down the main drag to the station where a long train waited and wheezed.



"By the right flank . . . ."

Behind were left the leave-hoarders from the West, the ones who expected to go to the Pacific Coast and therefore elected to take their leaves from there, so not to lose any precious time traveling. The fact that all the companies, reconstituted as units, went to Gulfport, Miss., and not the West Coast, was no ill wind for the Westerners, however. Many were granted additional travel allowances exceeding those given Easterners.

(If any blank space appears on this page, it is now and hereby dedicated to personal activities and projects which may have characterized the ensuing ten days of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. What you did you will never forget, unless it happens that you couldn't remember in the first place.)

Upon returning, we found that the A-1 Area had become a thing of the past. The mates who had stayed behind had moved all our belongings to new barracks in Area B-6, adjacent to but barred from Area B-5 (psychiatric and medical area, sometime known as the "nuthouse"). Here the business of more drill went on, if only to fill the time until entrainment for our new station. In the brief space of ten days, our muscles had softened and our marching coordination and rhythm had suffered equally, so that we'd make a bunch of raw boots look like the Rockettes. But we had to be kept occupied, "they" said.

Then one night the chiefs gave us our new address: Camp *Hollyday*, Gulfport, Mississippi. There was general rejoicing.

"Thank God we're getting out of this obscene place," the tenor of comment ran. "I don't *never* want to see the sumbitch no more!"

The day the 18th Super died had a holiday air. Places had been designated on the drill field for stacking of seabags according to assigned train coaches for the trip south. Early in the morning the stacks began to grow. Knots of men in dress blues and pea coats, lugging ditty bags, appeared at their stations, talking and congratulating themselves on leaving the "concentration camp."

A little after mid-day, the group due to ride the

second of the two-section Gulfport-bound train was yelled into formation by chiefs and officers. At the proper time and at the proper signal the procession moved off the drill field in route step.

Presumably, each of the Gulfport train sections had a schedule, but who knows for sure? They clungged out when the engineers took a notion and managed to convey it to the locomotives.

Two hours or so later, in the half-deserted B-6 Area, after a period of pleasant restlessness, the mobilization procedure was repeated and the first section men troup-ed from the grounds.

Before the depot they halted to await the pleasure of the Iron Horse. For a long time they waited, coat collars turned up against the chilling wind, and passed the time hooting truck-borne detachments of Ship's Company men or truckloads of Negro boots.

At last a ripple of chatter ran down the file of waiting men and the column moved. At the station, as the loading began, the Ship's Company band broke into a loud martial air. When everything was in order, the train groaned to a start. Before the indifferent gaze of scattered station watchers, the former 18th Super Battalion reincarnated as Construction Battalion Maintenance Units, moved on to a new era in its history. The date was December 7 1943.



## CHAPTER TWO

*In which blisters and "Maggie's Drawers" and prophets and doctors play prominent parts in a sad farewell.*

Of all the secret weapons of the war, by far the most terrifying was the so-called railway "troop carrier." Built in the style of a bedroom dresser, with concealed soot-intake ducts and alternating hot and cold dust-blowers, they made riding the rods seem like life on a Santa Fe "Chief."

Both sections of the Gulfport train carried several of these tributes to man's perversity. When the windows were shut, the stale air hung heavy with smoke and BO. When the windows were open, draughts dug channels through the compartments and soot sifted onto clothes and skin. When it became too chilly, someone flipped a switch and soon it was too hot. The other coaches were of more conventional types, though. The soul of the railroad industry was not all black.

Mealtime on a troop train is a harrowing experience, like that of an army retreating through roads chocked with refugees. Narrow aisles are jammed by a line snaking through three or four cars. Through this line, bucking the tide, squirm those who have eaten and want to get back to their seats. Eating in itself isn't a bad operation; the chow is good, comes on round, gleaming white plates, officer-style, and is placed—not thrown—before you by a civilian attendant. It is just a matter of shoveling it in, tipping the waiter and forgetting the bill (which your grandchildren will pay). Puffing and



*Your grandchildren will pay the bill.*

sweating when it's all over, you have to admit that the hardest part is getting to a table. For that you need patience or strategy or both.

Twice we got off our train to eat, once for an evening meal in a Savannah, Ga., naval station, and the following morning at Columbus, Ga., in the nearest thing to a tea shoppe the Navy has ever thrown our way. This was route of the first section which left second and arrived last. The second section, which left first, followed a slightly different route, but beat the first section into Gulfport, arriving about 9:30 p.m. December 10. The first section, which left second, covered the ground in three nights and two days, arriving about 4 a.m. December 11. If this sounds like a slide-rule symphony, just remember there are three ways of doing everything: The right way, the wrong way and—think hard, Jasper! We want to get 100 on our examination, don't we?\*

\*The Navy way—and we don't give a damn about our marks.

At night it gets just as dark in Mississippi as it does in Virginia, and so we said howdyado to Gulfport without seeing anything more than a mist and a truck convoy waiting near the rail line to take us to new barracks.

The barracks were yellowish, two-story frame structures with shower rooms at the front on both floors, the familiar double bunks, large wooden lockers for each man and fan-type gas-heating units. We threw our gear on hastily assigned bunks, then made for the chow hall, in line as usual, wearing rolled up shirtsleeves and feeling very comfortable, even though it was early on a December morning.

By the time we had had a breathing spell, the sun had risen bright and warm and we were mustered outside the barracks for our first look at the new country. Camp *Hollyday* followed the usual pattern of military reservations, functional buildings in a regular layout on a setting of flat, bare and barren land. The camp, an *Advance Base* Depot, was divided into two distinct sections, the Navy Armed Guard, an organization of men trained to man guns on merchant ships, and the *Advance Base* Depot Receiving Barracks, the area to which we belonged.

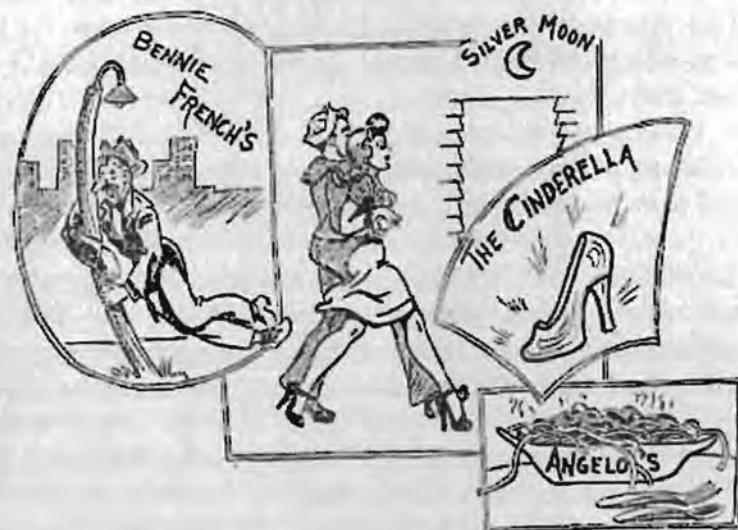
Most of the musterees had a chance to view more of the flatness and bareness when they were taken out on a leash for a de-stiffening walk. The remainder had already been subtracted for KP or other details. It was beginning again.

It required only a brief time for the organizations to become reoriented and shaken down into the groove they would follow for the next two months. But even before settlement was complete, the matter of ten-day

leaves for the West Coasters had to be handled. The majority of Southerners, having assumed that they lived as near to the East as to the West, had already been home.

With matters of organization fairly well along, we began to swing more fully into a routine of military field instruction and pre-embarkation preparations; for even at this time interest had turned to the question of "shipping out." Solemn-faced purveyors of scuttlebutt would quote "a guy that knows" and cite dates. Fingers traced courses all over the map. Some of the best scuttlebutt came "direct from the head;" if it came from the "first stool," the chances are it was pretty straight stuff. In the days of 9:30 "lights out," when the head was the only lighted room, there were many post-taps "cracker-barrel" discussions. It was surprising how many men felt impelled to personal body functions, and once arrived found it convenient to talk, write letters or play hopscotch. Usually the fire-watchman was around, too. It was his duty to be everywhere.

The exodus on the first round of liberty sections was practically unanimous. There was a strong desire to test Gulfport, Biloxi and later New Orleans, as "good" or "stinking" liberty towns. First reactions appeared to be that Gulfport was a pretty good place and Biloxi its equal. But later there was a feeling that there ain't nothing to do nowhere, and New Orleans became the place you were lucky to get to. Gulfport's night life—the Silver Moon, the Cinderella, Bennie French's, Angelo's, et al—began to lose its charm. Enough remained, however, to lure some of the boys out through the famous Gate Two-and-a-Half ("T'row you over the



*The lure was worth a small fee.*

fence for ten cents") on nights when they should have been mending their socks.

Daily routine at Hollyday was only slightly different in form from that at Peary. One of the most striking differences was the playing at Colors every morning by one or more of the Armed Guard bands—well-drilled snappy outfits that concluded the Colors ceremony with marches through company streets, blaring zestful martial airs.

Issue of the 03-A3 rifle (what's your number?) launched a crescendo of scuttlebutt. It was evident our stateside tour was drawing to a close. The fact that we hadn't been given carbines, considered to be the weapon of the Pacific, indicated to a minority that we might be

headed for Europe; but this scant argument was loudly howled down. There were other ideas of what might happen, too. These were based on stories that such-and-such an outfit had "left out" with full battle equipment and training, had cruised up and down the East Coast for a couple of months and finally wound up at Camp Endicott, Davisville, Rhode Island. But with the issue of items for tropical living and lectures on malaria control and prevention, it was quite generally agreed that we were headed for the Pacific. A few of the more gimlet-eyed eagles even asserted that they knew for a fact just where we were going. To them we doff the proverbial chapeau.

The immediate burning question of the month, however, was whether we would go to Cat Island, the allegedly fever-wracked, insular dunghill just off the Mississippi coast, said to be a place where men got a taste of Island X. According to surreptitious reports, officers of our units were darting from here to there like the late Dexter Fellows making advance arrangements for the Big Show. They were going to yell us out of the sack some midnight; we'd find out! But we never went and "Cat fever" died.

Gas drill in the chlorine chamber, lectures, schools and field tactics came along in the repetitious course of training. But the most noteworthy event of our Gulfport sojourn (barring liberties) was the glorious episode of the Rifle Range march, a gruelling climax of all the "conditioning hikes" that had become something to go to Sick Bay about.

Thirty-two (count 'em), 32, miles from Camp Hollyday in the wooded country of Mississippi lies the Rifle Range, as purposely a primitive establishment as

you wish you hadn't seen. It's a bit "rugged," especially if you go there in January, as we did, when the freezing air doesn't stop at the barracks doors.

There were two ways of getting to the Range: The political method, by truck, hauling supplies and equipment; or the proletarian method, hauling your rifle and dragging your buttocks. The officers took turns leading the way, starting out at a leisurely pace through the camp gate, past the dilapidated Negro shacks and finally through the center of an outlying section of town. Spirits were high and a feeling of martyrdom rode the ranks, but out on the highway and into more open country, exuberance subsided when the pacemaker stepped up the marching rate to a point where leg muscles began to talk back and incipient blisters appeared. The double file became progressively more disrupted, spaces widened between men, some dropped to near-last positions for the momentary rest it afforded. What a relief to hear the whistle and to fling yourself on the roadside for five or ten minutes every hour! It was always worth a groan or two to get going again. The highway stretched interminably, although nearly everyone struggled through that part of it. Not until we turned from the concrete into the uphill, unpaved back roads, did the lengthening march really take its toll. Blister-ridden, fagged men lurched out of line to sit down and await one of the trucks that would be along to pick up stragglers. Here and there up ahead were reclining remnants of other units that had preceded us.

Most killing of all were the last five miles when the body had become a mass of aches. The sun was lowering and we knew we must be almost there, but the road didn't end. Truck riders jounced by and we yelled:

"How far?" One said, "Half a mile." Another said, "Only two miles." Some pointed casually: "Just up ahead!"



*Bushed as a rat on a treadmill.*

At last over a rise appeared the entrance to the Range, a high angular gateway of narrow rustic limbs. Cheering wanly, we straggled through to the far end of the camp where Peary-type barracks ranged side by side. It was 6 p.m. (1800 hours), and we felt as if we'd been walking for 1800 hours. We had started at 7 a.m. We had marched 32 miles. We were as bushed as rats on a treadmill. Half of the men "hit the sack" at once, stirring only an hour or so later to take chow in the messhall across the company street.

There was a messhall eloquent of its name! Water was heated in big G.I. cans over outdoor open fires and some of the cooking was done there also. Frequently washing of dishes, trays, cutlery and the messhall itself had to be done in lukewarm or cold water. The whole works served only too well to illustrate some of the difficulties to be met on an Island X.

Since there were only a couple of generators, electricity was at a premium. But the messhall, though scanty of operational facilities, was at least wired for light and power. None of the barracks was lighted except by air-gasoline lanterns in various stages of inefficiency. Since there were but two to a barracks, only the ends of the buildings glowed, the rest of the room looking like the home of bats and vampires. It was an eyestrain, sometimes, even in the lighted zones, to tell a jack from a deuce, and writing a letter made you

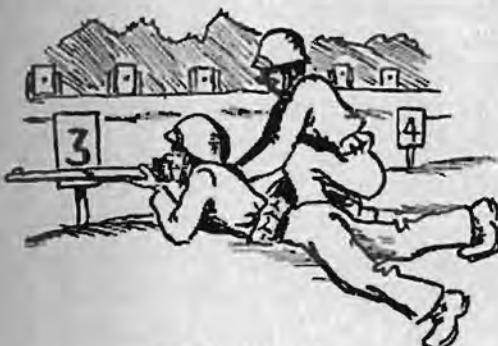


think of Abe Lincoln. There were wood-burning stoves at each end that did their best to heat the draughty places but with 40 men making trips during the night to the eight-holer out in back, the doors were continually swinging. There was a "shower" in back too, but it dispensed only cold water. Iceboxes for Eskimos!

We stayed at the range for more than a week, during which time we witnessed the solution to the engineering problem of the age: How to salvage a "cat" that has

been mired almost out of sight in the transplanting of an eight-holer? The answer: First, assemble about 100 semi-official consultative assistants who work in shifts. They discuss methods, apply hand power and try automotive power. Then they go get somebody who knows how to salvage mired "cats," and behold, it's done! The "cat" has been saved from a fate worse than death!

Naturally, the primary purpose of coming to the Range was to shoot. To those whose only pre-Seabee



*He fired that shot.*

experience with firearms had been a few turns with the Flit gun, the prospect of firing 100 or 120 rounds of .30 calibre was a disconcerting adventure.

On alternate days we went in groups to the range a few hundred yards from the camp site. On intervening days we stood in the long, wide pit behind the target embankment to hoist, patch and mark targets being fired upon by another group. The number of rounds per man fired daily by a given group increased in successive sessions, starting with 20 to 40 and in the final period 80 to 120.

The conventional offhand, standing to sitting and kneeling positions were not too rough on the neophyte—at least as far as comfort was concerned. Making a decent score in those positions was a different story. But the prone position on solidly frozen ground with the body numbed by cold felt like a trip through a ham-burg grinder. Padding of shoulders and elbows with gloves or watch caps didn't help much and many a left elbow was scraped raw by the recoil and many a shoulder or collarbone was black and blue from wear. Men built brushwood fires all along behind the firing line to warm themselves between relays. Qualification scores were not officially recorded here, but unit percentages were somewhat below the records chalked up at Peary with the carbine.

Contributing to this statistical drop was "Maggie's Drawers" which more than frequently blazed out in slow, double waves across the faces of targets unmarred by rifle fire.

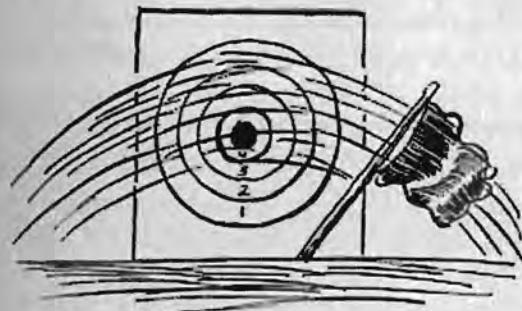
"Maggie's Drawers" was the name given to the red flag which swept the target to indicate a complete miss. Whatever the reason—astigmatism, indolence, firing on the wrong target or failure to get off all your shots in the required time—the man in the pit seemed to take ghoulish glee in advertising the fact that you couldn't hit the broad side of a barn. You had two lines of defense: Either that you'd made a bulls-eye on the target next door, or that you'd put a bullet squarely through a previous hole. As a last resort you could claim that the sumbitch in the pit was crazy.

The sessions began with curt, firm instructions over an amplifying system by the rangemaster.

"Ready on the right! . . . Ready on the left! . . . Ready on the firing line! . . ."

And woe to him who fired at Will before he was supposed to! Somewhere in the world today walks a man whose ears perhaps ring with the question: "WHO FIRED THAT SHOT?" It is one of the Range's mysteries. But we know, don't we?

One day of the time spent at the Range was allotted for the much-heralded Combat Range—a broad tract of land well away from the firing grounds, where instruction was given in the rudiments of infantry attack under simulated battle conditions. Some live ammunition was used and land charges of explosives were detonated close to squads in the field. But it was all safely controlled. Compared to the more stark realism of combat ranges in other branches of the armed services, ours was like a carnival where air whistles up your pants-leg and trapdoors swing out to slap you on the behind. The course could be covered within an hour and for many the hardest part was the 300-yard zigzag run uphill across the field that began the "attack." Top point of the exercises was rapid fire at metal target



*Her drawers kept the average down.*

figures from theoretical points of vantage. Policing the ground for cartridge cases followed.

Our goodbye to the Rifle Range was a mental thumbing of the nose and we began a two-day trek back to the Hollyday Barracks, spending the intervening night in a prepared bivouac area at the halfway point. Quarters there were well worn, high-peaked tents with an average of eight cots to each, no lights and a small, wood-burning unmanageable stove and flue in the center. To keep the stove burning and, while burning, to keep it from overheating, someone had to be awake all night. We were glad to get started on the last 16 miles back to camp, even though it threatened to rain for most of the march and finally, just before we entered the familiar section of Gulfport, it poured like all git-out. Drenched, dripping and aching but with a satisfied, good-natured glumness, we ambled up the home stretch. Typical was the overheard comment made by one mate to another:

"What glory, Price!"

The biggest part of training schedules now behind us, scuttlebutt on "shipping out" buzzed around camp and Gulfport itself, infecting all whom it bit with the "straight dope." Letters home hinted darkly at expected surprise moves in the dead of night. Many Seabee wives came from far corners of the country to be with their husbands for the last few weeks or days of stateside tenure. You had to be a crossbreed of Sherlock Holmes and Henry Kaiser to find a room for the little woman, but it was done. And the little woman, once comfortably set up, made it a point to gather a lot more scuttlebutt than camp-bound "insiders" could hope to root out.

With the coming of the distaff side, came also a growing list of requests for more, better and longer special liberties. Telegrams and letters, flourished in the face of the Personnel Officer, often blossomed into 21 or 48, or even 72-hour liberties. Items of business hanging fire in Gulfport or surrounding areas were exploited for what they were worth, even if good for only five or six hours. The increasing number of empty bunks in the barracks at night equalled the number of sad or red-eyed sleepy men who reported for 0700 muster.

Final issue of field equipment—shelter halves, bush mosquito nets, cot mosquito nets, knives, bayonets, canteens, messkits, gas masks, tent poles, stakes, sunglasses, etc.—brought the matter to a head. Even skeptics who had half-figured on indefinite stateside duty were convinced. From then on, it was merely a matter of when the ship would get in and be loaded. Merely? It was the hottest controversy since the Webster-Hayne debates!

The prophets who had been at the docks, or who had known someone who spoke to one of the civilians who worked at the docks, filled the ears to overflowing with misinformation. There were some, though they would not believe themselves, who could tell a convincing story about the keel-laying of our ship. Among the many to give ominous testimony, there may have been some who actually knew the score. But if so, their small voices were lost in the welter and the end result was that we didn't know from nothing.

Finally the word was official and definite. We were "leaving out" very soon. The order went out to tell all wives to go home—an order that was neither strictly

adhered to nor rigidly enforced. Passenger lists were being drawn up with next-of-kin listings, headed by the code word for our unknown destination.

The afternoon of the day before departure was set aside for a physical examination, a rubber-stamp once-over given presumably to determine fitness for overseas duty. Apparently, diagnosis of a man's constitution depends for validity on *who* asks the questions. If you should meet a friend and he should ask you "How

are you today?" and you should answer, "Very well, thank you"—why that is no diagnosis at all. But if you should go to a doctor's office and the doctor should say, "How do you feel?" and you should answer, "Very well, thank you"—now *that* is a diagnosis. Our examinations came closest to the classic exaggeration attributed to draft



"How do you feel?"

board procedure: If you're warm, can see light and hear thunder, you're in.

Trucked to the Camp Hollyday Station Force Dispensary, we lined up for a "short arm;" the doctor thrust a small wooden paddle in our mouths, asking simultaneously: "Is there anything wrong with you that you know of?" Assuming that you gargled "No," as was customary, the doctor said either "H-m-m-m" or "O.K.," depending upon his mood; and you were officially considered a fit specimen.

Late the following afternoon, dressed in green coveralls, wearing full helmet, with about 60 pounds of

full pack strapped to our backs, field equipment hanging from all sides, and carrying rifles, we waddled out in front of the barracks. Mustering by alphabetical order required some time, so those from the P's to the Z's allowed themselves to collapse in a lump, not seeking hoisting assistance until their time drew near.

At last we were ready. Ranged in double file, we started the winding course through camp. Well-wishers called out. Off-hand goodbyes echoed back and forth. At the gate, where knots of civilians had gathered, a band met us to head our procession on the three-mile hike to the dock. Town watchers stood on verandahs or along the line of march, their expressions ranging from excitement, through awe, to dead-pans. Clusters of children trailed excitedly along the column until outdistanced. In the fast-growing darkness, we hit the gulfside boulevard, turned left toward the dock area. Automobiles eased past us on the light-spattered thoroughfare. From the column came periodic calls, tinged with mock and premature irony:

"Look! A white woman!"

For us it was a significant date—the first day of a year and more that we would be separated in a deeply personal sense from the things we loved. In a way the day's events seemed like unrealities. It was February 7, 1944.



## CHAPTER THREE

*Wherein flying fish and Mae Wests, and sunsets and submarines fail to delight famished mariners.*

THE ship lay moored to her dock berth, half hidden by darkness and concealed by shadowy warehouses from which the last of her cargo was being loaded. Spots of shaded electric light illuminated a section here, a section there. All about was the muffled rumble of pre-sailing activity.

Behind us, as we straggled out on the pier, lay the lights of Gulfport, before us lay the black of the Gulf, beside us loomed the warehouses and ship. We came to a halt, milled aimlessly around, finally flopped anywhere that was convenient. Guards patrolled nearby. There would be nearly a couple of hours' wait before we were taken aboard, although then we expected the order every few minutes. We moved a little every half hour, and once inside the wharf shed, could see the gangway leading to deck and a file of men going aboard.

Two checkers stood at the gangway's foot, one on each side, clicking tally-meters as a man clomped up the ramp. His last name was called and he responded with what was left.

"Zilch," said the checker.

"Joe Ambrose," said Zilch and passed upward.

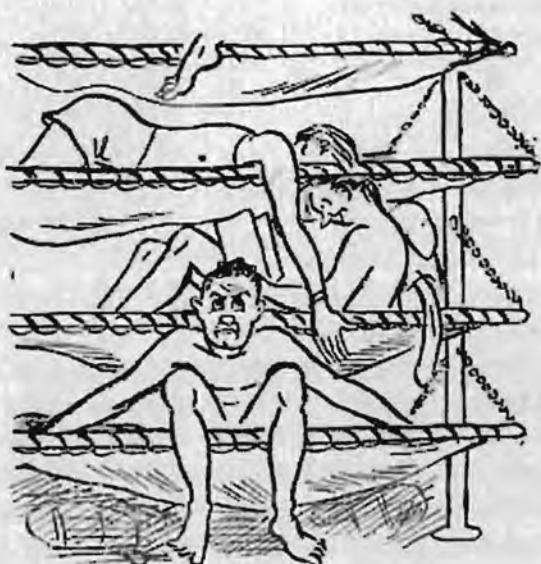
On deck he saw gray, grotesque shapes of ship's gear, loading equipment and superstructure. He fol-

lowed the man before him like a sheep, entered the hatch, scrambled awkwardly down the steel companion-way.

With the others he was led by a Marine sergeant to a lower deck. When they stopped it was in a large, oppressively compact compartment, one of the three forward that composed the enlisted men's quarters. Each of the three decks had the same arrangement. The compartment was packed with tiers of bunks four deep—metal frames strung with canvas, looking like meat racks or morgue slabs. Every conceivable space where a man could be laid endwise was used. Once in the racks, especially in a lower one, you were trapped until the herds of men finished tramping through the scanty aisles. You had slightly over two feet leeway before your head hit the drooping form of your upstairs neighbor's butt. Looking out, you could see only masses of legs blocking the aisles.

As background to the noises of getting settled sounded the steady day-and-night whir of the electric air blowers. Now and then the loudspeaker (one to a compartment) buzzed, relaying scratchy orders from above.

For the first night you perhaps slept in your clothes. You were heated from the hike and chilled by the wait on the pier; it was nearing midnight and you were dog-tired. Besides, you were issued only one khaki blanket and it was growing cooler all the time. You might have to chase down the Marine sergeant to get the blanket, too. There was one in your pack, of course, but the damn thing took you a couple of hours to roll when you had plenty of area. Here and now you wouldn't bother with it.



*Your neighbor's butt intruded.*

The ship left the pier early on the morning of February 8 while hundreds of men snored belowdeck.

When the first morning's breakfast was over, Gulfport was a haze on the horizon and we looked out across the green Gulf to see the small escort ships convoying us, we learned from crewmen, to New Orleans. It would be just a short run.

The aforesaid meal was not as easy to get as it sounds. There had been no time yet to organize chow schedules. The idea was to get in line and stay there, carrying your rattling, tarnishing messkit (that had to be reamed out with steel wool every day or so). The lines at first were organized (the word is used loosely) entirely belowdeck; later the jam became so intolerable

they had to be started on deck. Anyway, the first chow line was not the worst. Not until the men saw that getting to chow was a survival of the hungriest, fittest and most persistent, and also discovered that shipboard eating schedules called for but two meals a day, did the real crush begin—a stampede of swearing, sweating, complaining hundreds, pushing, being pushed and pinned against bulkheads. That sort of thing went on for several meals. Afterward chow passes were issued and regular eating times assigned for each of the Units and Casual Draft.

The messhall, situated about three-quarters aft, had apparently been converted from a storage hold, the hatch cover, two decks up, being its ceiling or overhead. When the heat below became too terrific, this hatch was uncovered, but the heat remained terrific nevertheless. The chow lines, starting at the "bottleneck"—a series of narrow labyrinthine passageways that led to the galley—wound through all three compartments as far forward as the brig, which was about as far as you could go. To get to the messhall, you had to pass through the crew's quarters, by the engine room where the heat rose in solid banks, then down the companionway to the galley. There was plenty of time to study landmarks along the route. Moving was slow and uncomfortable. Sometimes it took hours.

You stood at high counters in the messhall to eat, the sweat running down your face, arms and body and often dripping into the steaming messkit before you. When the voyage was further along and the wearing of the Mae West life jacket was compulsory, these were tied around your waist. Afterwards, as if you hadn't sweated enough already, you dumped your garbage into

*Always the Mae West.**Bitter Bellies*

the swill can and bent over boiling water to wash your mess gear. After that you fled in all possible dripping haste to your compartment, flung your utensils on the bunk and ran for the cooling breezes of the deck, dragging your inseparable Mae West.

Aft of the galley were the chiefs' mess and the officers' wardroom, where meals were served to a considerably fewer number of men three times daily.

The third meal came to those few enlisted men who stood guard at various points of the ship, or to those who by some "smoke-filled room" politics had inveigled themselves into stewards' jobs.

The food was not of the choicest, but it would sustain life if swallowed along with a few other aversions. Chief cause of complaint was the scarcity. It was common fact that some of the men had dug into the trash pile to recover raw potatoes or onions. Sometimes the cooks would hand out bread or other items as long as a surplus lasted, but it was not everyone who shared in this.

When complaints mounted so high as to echo aft, the officers-in-charge of the Banika-bound units made inquiries among the men concerning causes of dissatisfaction. Nothing could be done about the two-meal schedule, but shortly after, fresh fruits, such as oranges and apples appeared on our menus and the helpings increased somewhat. But eating was still a matter of stuff

*Shipboard*

all you can while you can and grab what you can when you can.

It was near mid-morning of the first day aboard ship when our vessel turned from the Gulf into the Mississippi for the day-long upriver run to New Orleans and Algiers where the degaussing system (apparatus affixed to the ship's hull to neutralize the effect of magnetic mines) was to be inspected. The checkup completed by the following morning, the ship sailed downriver again, past New Orleans' waterfront teeming with landing ships, dingy unpainted freighters, transports, old-type stern-wheel riverboats reminiscent of Show Boat days, battered hulks, ships of many nations, an aircraft carrier flying the French tricolor—and against this panorama, the background of the old city.

Next morning we were still in the Mississippi, one among a flock of ships of varying sizes, some sloppy and inert, others snappy and ready to sail. We detached ourselves from the crowd, and threaded slowly out through the Delta lands, past the Cagin country, out through the narrow channels where a well-ordered Coast Guard station sparkled like a garden in a swamp. Finally toward late afternoon, we slipped into the open Gulf where the water is bluer.

Far ahead we saw two ships about our own size, possibly a little larger. Planes circled periodically. The mainland grew more distant. Evening closed in and the gun watch took their stations. Ship's rails were lined with water-lookers, lethargically watching foam break from the vessel's prow and drift backward in patterns of white and blue agate. The canvas-covered hatches were studded with garrulous groups getting the feel of the ship. Then the deck loudspeaker ordered:

"All troops below!" and we made ready for the nightly blackout.

Shipboard life resolved itself into a regular form: After morning chow we hunted cool, shady spots until it was time for the deck crew to hose down everything in sight with sea water. Then we hunted dry, cool spots, slept, read, talked or wrote letters until mid-afternoon when it was time to think about going through left tackle for a meal. In the evening we lolled at the side or perched on the hatches until it was time to go below.

Apprehensions always rose at night, despite assurances of the skipper that proper warnings would be issued if danger threatened and that there were 45 per cent more Mae Wests aboard than were required for the number of personnel. Instructions to follow, should the "abandon ship" order be necessary, had already been given. Yet with the setting up of the "sunset watch"—the period of danger from submarines when ships are most readily silhouetted against sun or clouds—came the annoying habit of closing the hatches and pounding the bolts into place. The sound of metal on metal never failed to draw comment.

"Yeah, hear that? Now just whatinell we'd do a torpedo hits? Crissake! The doors'd be so bent you never get out!"

Somebody else would break in: "Listen that crazy sumbitch. A tin fish hits this place, nobody in the god-dam compartment is gotta worry about it!"

"Shoot a quarter!"

Usually morbid talk soon gave way to gaming; or to homespun music and singing; or to reading "whodunits" the Red Cross had distributed as we came aboard; or to writing letters that would be censored on board



... across the Gulf of Mexico. (Lafitte extreme left)

and mailed at the first port of call; or washing clothes, using sea water in a helmet stuck in a head stool; or showering in salt water and rinsing with forbidden fresh water; or chess or checkers. Sometimes, the loud-speaker would interrupt with messages to ship's crewmen or with detail assignments for troops. (KP came infrequently, the Casual Draft taking the beating for the first week or more, a fact which gave the units comfort and pleasure. They got their turns later, however.) Or perhaps the call over the speaker would be in the well-known Scandinavian voice:

"Stand-by men, report to the bridge *immediattle!*"

In later stages of the trip messages would direct resetting of timepieces as we moved westward. And, if so, "lights out" would be delayed. A few guide lights still burned after "lights out," but since there were no ports below deck, they held no danger. Beneath the lights, located above companionways, card games continued far into the night. On the meat racks men tossed or sprawled at coolest angles, for the weather was becoming perceptibly warmer and the roaring air blowers failed to reach all corners of the hold.

During the night petty officers, assigned as guards, stood deck watch. From them came many a weird tale of things that happened on the ocean in the dead of night. Somewhere along the line fact and fancy merged. Several days out from New Orleans, the morning brought a tale of submarine chasing. But another version of the same episode asserted that the ship's fuel pumps had gone haywire ("sounded like all the machinery being chewed up and then went dead") and that the good ship had been wallowing and pitching in mountainous troughs for an hour until repairs were made.

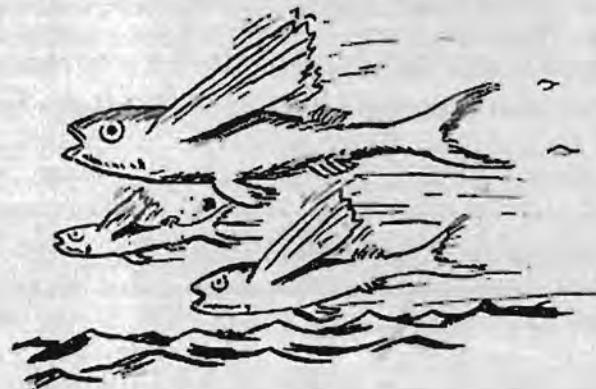
Not only that, but at the time the machinery became constipated, the story goes, we were in the famed Yucatan Straits, the narrow strip of water separating Yucatan from the western tip of Cuba and marking the southern passage from the Gulf of Mexico to the Caribbean Sea. This area has shared, along with others, the name "Torpedo Junction," since it is the logical place for enemy undersea craft to ambush Gulf shipping bound for Panama or South America. According to speculative reports published sometime previous to this, the area fell under the domain of one Graf von Luckner, World War I commander of the German sailship-rigged raider and suspected of being in charge of Nazi undersea operations in the Gulf during World War II.

Be that as it may, after chow of the morning in question, everything seemed the same. There was no doubt that we were in the Caribbean, which not long ago had been profitable hunting grounds for the enemy; but outwardly at least in the clear blue of the day, it might have been a Cook's tour (with alterations).

To those who were not below with an ailment known as seasickness or those not at the leeward rail expecting, the blueness of the Caribbean, the sweep and rhythm of the water, the swishing foam and churning wake, and the striking phenomenon of a perfect-circle horizon were things of wonder and a not unpleasant experience.

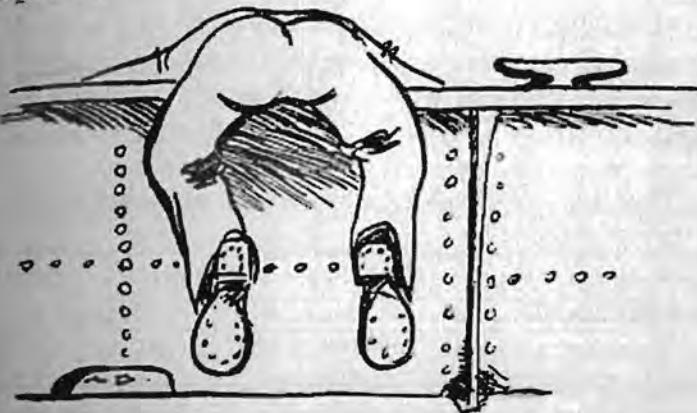
Flying fish had already caught the attention of the railbirds. Schools of the little fellows romped across the waves, covering a couple of hundred feet or more at a flight, cutting through the wave tips and disappearing or suddenly changing direction and hopping off again. Splashes far seaward were identified variously as por-

poise, shark and even whale. Occasionally the ship would knife through patches of what was believed to be a peculiar type of seaweed, almost granular in form, brownish in color and hanging close to the water's surface. This was often hastily described as "oil slick" and from then on "you pays your money and you takes your choice." How it got there was said to be: (a) from a torpedoed tanker; (b) seepage from some ship ahead; (c) a depth-charged submarine.



Stories of "ash can" action during the night made the rounds in the morning. Some nights, down in the hold, it really did sound as if some were dropped. But you'll have to get your Congressman to check on this.

Along about this time it fell to some of the World War I veterans among us to deplore the offhand practice of tossing overside papers, cigarettes, orange peel, apple cores and other trash. It wouldn't have been tolerated in the other war, they said: A dead giveaway to the enemy.



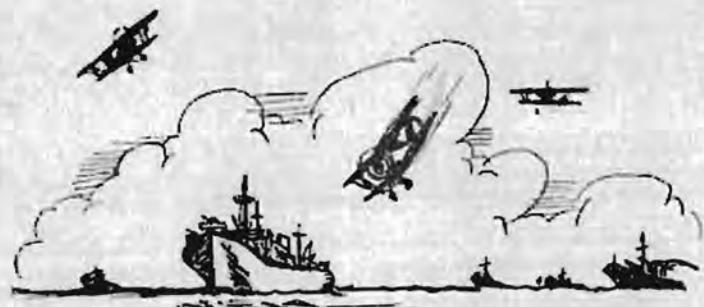
Physical training on the forward cargo hatch in the early afternoon was supposed to provide some exercise for otherwise sedentary personnel, but the practice was perfunctory and gradually petered out. One rigidly regular routine was piece inspection, both by chiefs and officers. Rust would appear overnight either in the rifle barrel or around the breech merely from the damp atmosphere. Oiling and cleaning was a chore well looked after.

Some of the most beautiful sunsets in the world are fashioned in the declining moments of a Caribbean day. Like a backdrop to an Inferno, the fiery sun sinks behind an arc of clouds lying flat on the horizon, and from this prismatic core every conceivable hue radiates across a vaulted sky while slowly changing shapes of fire-fringed clouds are flooded by color—brilliant and delicate and unforgettable. Call between 7 and 7:30 p.m. Must be seen to be appreciated.

Since the men, at this time, had little else to appreciate, they lingered at the ship's rail, watching the scenic miracle on the rim of the sea.

Seasickness took a continuing toll. Lemon-sucking became a common deck sight. Not so common, but noticeable enough, was indiscriminate retching. One night the chow line was 350 men short. No appetite. There were days and nights of rather violent rolling and pitching. The ship creaked and rumbled throatily when zigs were changed to zags. The zigzagging was normal and natural. Our ship did it regularly throughout the voyage.

During our Caribbean crossing rain was infrequent. When it did come, it loomed out of the distance as a gray, opaque cloud sliding across the water, then split into streams as it neared. You saw it coming and you could see where it ended and sometimes you could sidestep.



*Panama landfall.*

We made our Panama landfall in mid-morning. First sight of the tenuous land strip on the horizon brought the usual skeptical comment: "Land, he says. He calls that land! That's clouds!"

But it was Colon, Panama, a welcome sight. Both land and seaplanes zoomed out to look us over. Destroyer escorts met us outside the heavily fortified zone to conduct us in; then, when we were in close to the jetties, they circled far behind and continued patrol.

Amid this display of wartime seafaring and defense, we saw two Panamanian natives paddling their canoe around the inlet with enviable unconcern, fishing the waters nations vie for.

It was afternoon before we had picked up our pilot and actually entered the first of the Panama Canal's four Gatun Locks, the magnificent, massive pieces of engineering that convey the ships over high ground. Sleek black-and-yellow donkey engines on grooved rails toiled up the hills of track, dragging the lumbering vessel by rope until she was safely through to the calm fresh-water lake beyond where we met British and Canadian craft bound for the locks.

Above hovered the queer-looking Panamanian birds with the split tails and dive-bomber wings which we called, for want of a better name, the "long-assed duckbill." Later someone claimed they were properly known as "frigates" or "men o' war."

Crewmen of our ship flexed their imaginations and told lurid tales of the Panamanian jungles, not forgetting the headhunting classic about the white man who formed a jungle expedition to locate his archeologist friend lost some years before. The story says that he came upon a group of natives who offered some shrunken human heads for sale. One of the heads (of course) was that of his long-lost friend. Hm-m-m!

Descent to the Pacific side of the Canal (which runs north and south) began with entrance into the first of

the Pedro Miguel Locks. We passed through the second one in the night's early darkness. Overhead brilliant shafts of anti-aircraft searchlights stabbed the sky, weaving a web of light. Some melted away and others flashed on, crisscrossing each other and converging on patrol planes that shuttled back and forth. The air seemed alive with might and invulnerability.

Farther on through the waterway the Miraflores Lock, last of the chain, came into view with its large neon arrow, signs and lighted embankments. We tied up. There was no blackout that night and we stayed on deck for a long time. On the concrete below sat two natives conversing in a ground-slapping, gesticulating sign language interspersed with gutterals.



*Through the Pedro Miguel Locks.*

By morning we found that we had already slipped through the lock and were into the Pacific. Destroyer escorts trailed at our sides, but eventually they were

gone and we were depending for safety on the speed and maneuverability of our vessel, which was considerable, and on our own armament.

Compared to the Caribbean, the Pacific was calm. Some days its glassy surface seemed to move only in long, slow undulations. The ocean could show its temper, though. One story that went the rounds told of a Seabee ship which, in crossing a few weeks before, had run afoul of a terrific storm. There had been violent moments of uncertainty when the pitching vessel barely managed to withstand the pounding waves. A chief petty officer had died (of natural causes) at the height of the storm's fury; and a small escort ship had gone down with all hands.

But during our crossing, one day was much the same as another: Rail-lounging, reading, incessant



smoking, arguments on any subject at all, dozing. Chief diversion was the mid-day opening of the ship's store belowdeck near Sick Bay. There you could purchase cigarettes, pipe tobacco, if available, writing paper,

pipe cleaners, peanuts and other small items. On deck at 11 a.m. the candy counter opened. You took pot luck with frozen bars that were rationed three to a customer. The lines were long and the waiting was hot, even if you came early, because someone was always there first. But while the stock lasted, men hit the line "again and again and again."

Dress aboard ship was a matter of comfort and whim; the only required item was the Mae West, the kapok-filled life jacket that picked up more grease and dirt than a fleet of street department masseurs. Tied in front at the waist and slung to cushion the butt, it served mainly as portable upholstery, or as a pillow on which to sleep when you strung up a poncho or blanket for shade. Depending on the weathering of your skin, you went naked except for a pair of shorts, or you wore shorts and skivvy shirt or even full overalls. Some men were painfully burned by the equatorial sun for the sake of a good coloring.

In the evenings musical talent foregathered on a forward cargo hatch, set up their instruments and launched into a jam session, led by jivey, wailing "licorice sticks." If they got off the beam on the long-haired side, the hepeats had the screaming meemies until they got back in the groove. Shoot the Klaxon to me, Jackson!

The more sonorous elements of the band, plus a foot-pumped organ which came from the chaplain's office, held forth during Sunday morning divine services, conducted for both Catholic and Protestant faiths. The altar was on the usual hatch and the congregation spread out over the width of the deck, incorporating some who hung at the rail or watched and listened from

other unconventional points. There was no absence of religious feeling at appropriate times and it was not at all uncommon to see a man engrossed in his Bible or Testament in private moments. Beneath the surface lay anxiety. Men wanted to know the answers.

Since leaving the Panama Canal we had struck out in a zigzag course southwesterly across the Pacific. We crossed the equator at a narrow oblique angle on February 19 1944. War or no war—this we had to celebrate!

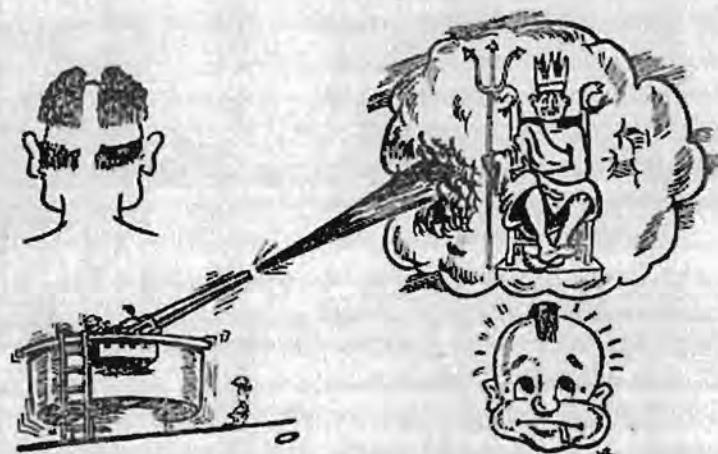
Shenanigans began in the morning when the ship, an erstwhile sub-dodger, kicked up her heels and practically did a hornpipe, circling willy-nilly and cutting back until only the captain and the sun knew which way was west. Everything on board that could be fired sounded off in ear-splitting thunder. Anti-aircraft tracers grunted skyward in rapid succession to hang in the air a moment before bursting. Cannon exploded in a mushroom of fire, smoke and concussion, and far out across the sea geysers sprang to life.

It went on for what seemed a long time, until Neptune Rex (the amphibious gentleman with the toga, crown and trident) was duly warned of our approach. The ship, recovering from her epilepsy, shook herself and continued on course.

But the activities were not over. Neptune sat regally enthroned on the forward hatch, surrounded by his henchmen. Everyone who had not yet undergone the rigors of crossing the equator was still a Pollywog to him. That included everyone on board except the ship's crew and a very few others. To graduate from the Pollywog stage and become a full-fledged line-crossing Shellback, you had to be initiated into the Ancient Order of the Deep, which is accomplished by an infinite

number of methods limited only by the most horrible depths of the sinister mind. In all forms, however, King Neptune holds court.

One by one the sheepish Pollywogs knelt before the Rex, heard charges lodged against them and entered pleas. The usual practice was to answer "Guilty!" A plea of "not guilty" usually brought a stiffer penalty, because you were convicted anyhow. If by silence, you implied "nolo contendere," you were likely to get the works. Toward the end, court became merely a matter of passing in front of Neptune, perhaps grinning at him, and going on to face the music.



*A receding hairline was the fashion.*

Charges ran in this vein: Winking at the Royal Mermaids; confusing the sun and the moon; failure to show proper respect in "my realm;" giving away food to the mermaids at the expense of Seabees; etc., ad infinitum.

Punishments fit the crimes like mail order suits and were meted out at random. "Make him an old man" meant to cut the hair down to the scalp. "The sun and the moon" meant shave a patch here and a patch there. "Give him the equator, a north to south, the sun and the moon" was very nearly the works.

With your hair cut in weird patterns, you ran the gauntlet. Your bare skin was painted with dye back and front, and as you slied off down the deck, a fire hose dispensing volumes of sea water drenched you and pushed you around.

Not every Pollywog became a Shellback that day. There were some who never became Shellbacks; there were a few who repaired to belowdeck privacy and had a buddy trim a lock from their hair, thus escaping Neptune's wrath, but provoking Hoyle's.

Mimeographed certificates attesting to the act were presented qualified Shellbacks aboard ship. Later, on Banika, personnel received sheepskin-size, colored certificates inscribed in Old English lettering with their names, the date of the occurrence and their destination, then called only South Pacific.

Days and days of nothing but water and sky, flying fish and sunsets piled up monotonously. Now and then there would be a hurried bark from the ship's speaker, calling gun crews to stations. On the bridge, field glasses would scan the water and clouds, then as excitement relaxed, gunners would be released. Regular stripping, cleaning and testing of the armament went on day in and day out. There was no telling when it might have to be put to work.

On at least one occasion actual presence of the enemy was detected. It was toward mid-afternoon. The

speaker blared orders for all men to go on deck and to secure life jackets on their persons. Tension on the bridge communicated itself to the troops and serious faces peered over the waves and at the clouds. Ship's officers on watch combed the seascape with glasses, pointing here and pointing there. The eyes of the men followed their gestures, but the sea looked the same as ever. Groups hung conspicuously near the large wooden life rafts which were poised for release should the signal be given. In half-bantering mood, reluctant to disclose their true fears, men sketched plausible courses of action if an attack should come. Others ate up the situation with relish, even disdaining the Mae West.

Whether the suspected enemy was a plane or a sub was never really known to the rank and file. (This is another thing you'll have to have your Congressman check after the war.) But the excitement waned and at last the all-clear signal was given. Inevitably, tales of things seen with one's "own eyes" came to light. One man "saw" a torpedo knifing across the waves. It missed the ship.

"Dahellya mean? There was three of 'em. A guy seen 'em . . . I'm telling you!"

To meet a ship on the broad expanse of the Pacific was a novelty. We met one only once. At the sight of her we veered sharply off course until recognition as a friendly ship was assured. Apparently the same thing had gone on aboard the other ship, for her course changed, too. We were never within hailing distance of each other.

On March 1 we crossed the International Date Line without fanfare, making the following day March 3. Periodically on the westward voyage we had been told

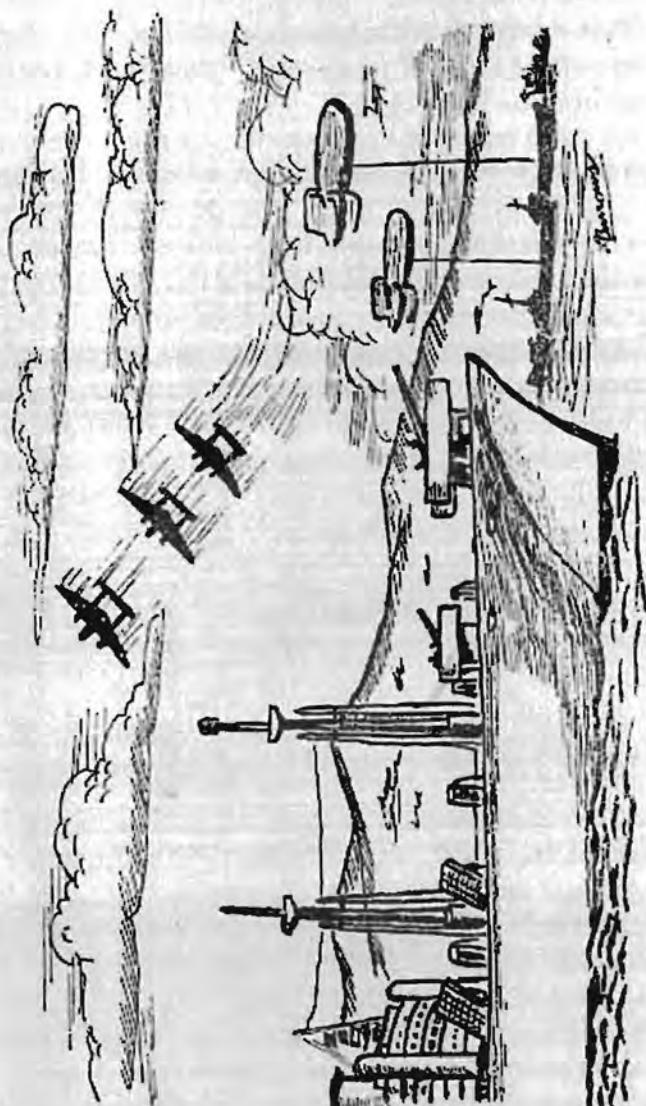
to reset our timepieces, roughly once every two days. And when we approached the islands of the New Hebrides group, we were a full 17 hours ahead of the Eastern Seaboard time.

First sight to break the monotony of solid water was the large gray mass of an extinct volcano, which we judged to be some 40 miles distant. It rose in impressive majesty from the water line, its peak thrust into the clouds. We never heard what it was.

Islands began appearing on all sides now. Characteristically in this season, known as the period of the intermittent northwest monsoons (so-called rainy season), heavy rain was a frequent daily occurrence near



land. Through the rain and haze, we skirted several small islands, threaded warily through the narrows between others, until we gently nosed into the fortified harbor at Espiritu Santo, largest of the New Hebrides island group. Months later we would have a hard time trying to recapture the interest we showed then in coconut plantations and nuts bobbing in the water. We were

*We anchored briefly at Guadalcanal.*

to find that unrestrained drinking of coconut milk rendered the system—shall we say—incohesive.

As we neared the island of Espiritu, wartime activity was greatly in evidence. Escorts had met us the previous day, and now planes were circling overhead, skimming low over the ship, the pilots waving in greeting.

Like the Allied naval base it was, the inner harbor of Espiritu Santo teemed with merchantmen, transports and warcraft. We anchored in the harbor for two days and swam for the first time in the far Pacific.

Most striking to many on the first night here was the absence of blackouts. Lights shown aboard ships, searchlights swept the water, specks of lights glowed from all shore installations, and along the winding roads in steady procession moved the twin beams of vehicular traffic.

"Dimout in the states, lights all over out here!" we said. "Jeez! We tell 'em back home, they wouldn't believe us!"

There was no blackout for us that night either. The deck was littered with gabbing men until near midnight.

From Espiritu it was but a few days' run to Guadalcanal. Our trusty escort criss-crossed the zigzag course we followed. We passed the spot where a pre-war American liner, converted to a troop transport, had gone down after striking one of the area's protecting mines. Part of it was reported sometimes visible above the water.

Anchored only briefly at Guadalcanal, we spent time studying the contour of the island and trying to estimate the location of historic spots such as Bloody Knoll

and Henderson Field. In the sky, P-38's kept up a fast pace of dog-fighting and startling air tactics. Along the busy shoreline we saw fire-blackened hulls and wrecked, sunken craft.

This was our first stop in the Solomon Islands, the war-publicized archipelago that swings in a 700-mile arc up toward New Guinea. Our next stop was to be in the Russell Islands, some 50 miles way, at Banika's White Beach. We arrived there in mid-March 1944.



# ISLAND ALBUM



*Units' symbol at entrance  
to camp areas.*

**DECLASSIFIED**

**ITINERARY OF CONSTRUCTION BATTALION MAINTENANCE UNIT 572**

Formed at Camp Peary, Virginia.

30 Nov 1943 - Transferred from Camp Peary to AEB Gulfport.

7 Feb 1944 - Departed AEB Gulfport for overseas.

1 Apr 1944 - Located in Russell Islands.

2 Sep 1944 - Operating at Russell Islands in conjunction with CBMU 572.

1 Aug 1945 - Still located at Russell Islands.

To Facilitate  
Administrative Handling  
Classification changed  
SPECIAL

**DECLASSIFIED**

No: **RESTRICTED**  
Irvin S. Rossmoor USNR

Signature

**NOTE:** This itinerary based on records in G.R. Operations and Personnel  
Section of Bureau of Naval Personnel.

Date: 4 September 1945.

C.B.M.U

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