

Summer 2003

## Obscure but Important: The United States and the Russell Islands in World War II

David Lindsey Snead  
*Liberty University*, [dlsnead@liberty.edu](mailto:dlsnead@liberty.edu)

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### Recommended Citation

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## From the Editor

Greetings from Southwest Asia! Your editor was mobilized for the duration, and is writing to you from the Military History Group at the Coalition Forces Land Component Commander's headquarters in Kuwait. I represent the Marine Corps' Historical Division. Together with my Army colleagues, we are working to capture the history of this campaign before the electrons evanesce, and human memories fade. Though this is hardly a garden spot, it has been a fascinating experience, especially for an historian.

Before I left home, I put this issue together out of four articles, and Tina Offerjost, our typesetter, put them into an attractive format—and sent me the proofs as attachments to e-mails. This is the first time that we have done business this way—and it works!

The first of the four articles is by David Snead, who has written about a neglected piece of military real estate, the Russell Islands in the South Pacific. They are located north of Guadalcanal, and were important for the Marine Corps when it needed a training base and an expeditionary airfield. The author tells us that the airfield was more of a success than the training base, and he describes the misery that the Marines who landed there had to endure.

Robert Bush has written an article about the colonial regimes in Louisiana. The article contains a lot of data about the administration of the territory, something that is not standard fare for us, but it provides the context for interesting data about the forts that the Europeans built before France sold Louisiana to the United States in 1803. He makes it clear that the colonial administrators were very concerned about their personal prerogatives and authorities. As I read the article, I wondered if there was something about the overseas experience that caused expatriates to focus on such things.

Then, when I read Clark Burkett's analysis of a duel in Mississippi in 1810, I wondered if expatriates and frontiersmen had something in common—an obsession with honor. His article grew out of an article about Fort Washington, Mississippi, that we published in an earlier issue of JAMP. Perhaps, if you're isolated at a faraway post, affairs of honor take on exaggerated importance. On the other hand, I suppose it would be possible to argue that perhaps they had something to do with being an officer and a gentleman in that era.

The last article in the issue is by Mike Brodhead. His article about a fight between General Crook and a group of Indians after the Civil War provides interesting insights into a little-known clash and a piece of terrain known as the "Indian Gibraltar." It is also a good biographical essay on one aspect of Crook's life.

Finally, our book review editor, Harold Raugh, once again has put together a first-rate selection of book reviews, along with a note on a university press, that of New Mexico, that will be of interest to many of our readers.

*Nick Reynolds, Editor*

# Obscure but Important: The United States and the Russell Islands in World War II

*By David L. Snead*

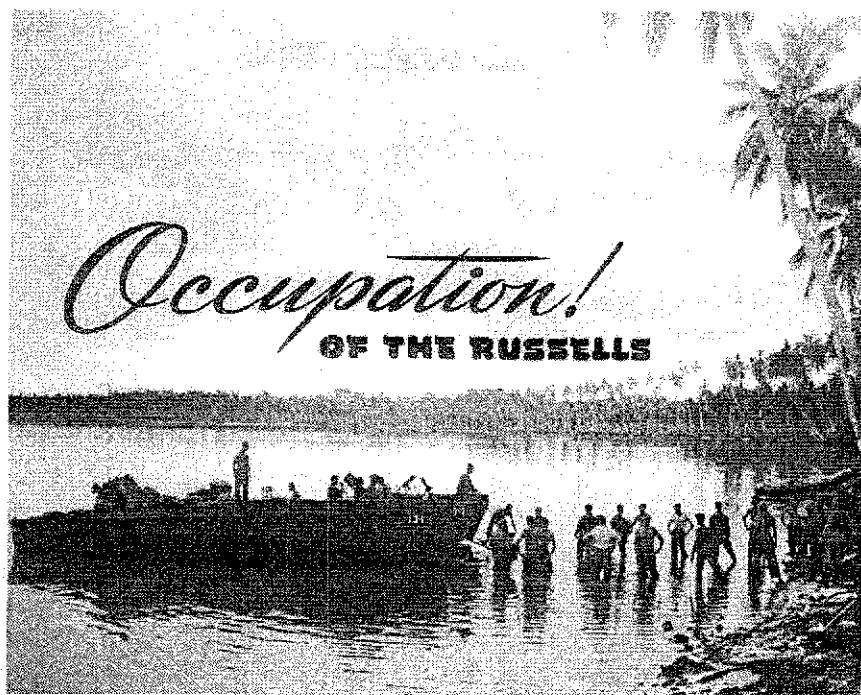
## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*The author is an assistant professor of Diplomatic and Military History at Texas Tech University in Lubbock.*

1943 was a pivotal year in World War II as the tide of the war unquestionably turned in favor of the Allies. In late January and early February the Battles of Stalingrad and Guadalcanal drew to a close. In May combined American and British forces pushed the Axis powers out of North Africa. While the war was far from over, optimism prevailed in the Allied camps as the Axis forces in Europe and the Pacific went on the defensive. It was in this transition period that the Russell Islands, a small archipelago in the Solomon Islands, rose from obscurity to play an important role in the Allies' ultimate victory in the South Pacific and the history of the 1st Marine Division.

As the Battle of Guadalcanal wound to its end in late January 1943, Admiral Chester Nimitz, the commander-in-chief of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, gave his approval for Operation Cleanslate, the seizure and transformation of the Russell Islands into a forward operating base.<sup>1</sup> Nimitz and Admiral William F. Halsey, the commander of the South Pacific Area and South Pacific Force, saw the capture of these islands as the first step in the conquest of the central and northern Solomon Islands. Ultimately, success in the Solomons would provide one element in the isolation of the Japanese stronghold at Rabaul on New Britain.<sup>2</sup> Although Allied control of the Russells was not essential to achieving success in the Solomons, the islands proved very valuable as an air base, staging area, and training center.

The Russells are located in the Solomon Islands less than fifty miles northwest of Guadalcanal and approximately 120 miles southeast of



Soon after the Marines landed and the Islands were considered secure, supplies were brought ashore. This photo was apparently used in a World War II newspaper or magazine for the troops. *Official USMC photo.*

the New Georgia Islands. Stretching ten miles north to south and twenty miles east to west, the Russells consist of over fifty small islands centered around the two largest: Banika and Pavuvu. The former is roughly eight by two miles, and the latter is eight by seven miles.<sup>3</sup> Approximately 350 natives lived on the islands prior to the war and helped cultivate coconut plantations owned by Lever Brothers.<sup>4</sup> Outside of these few inhabitants and select others, no one knew or cared much about these islands before the war.

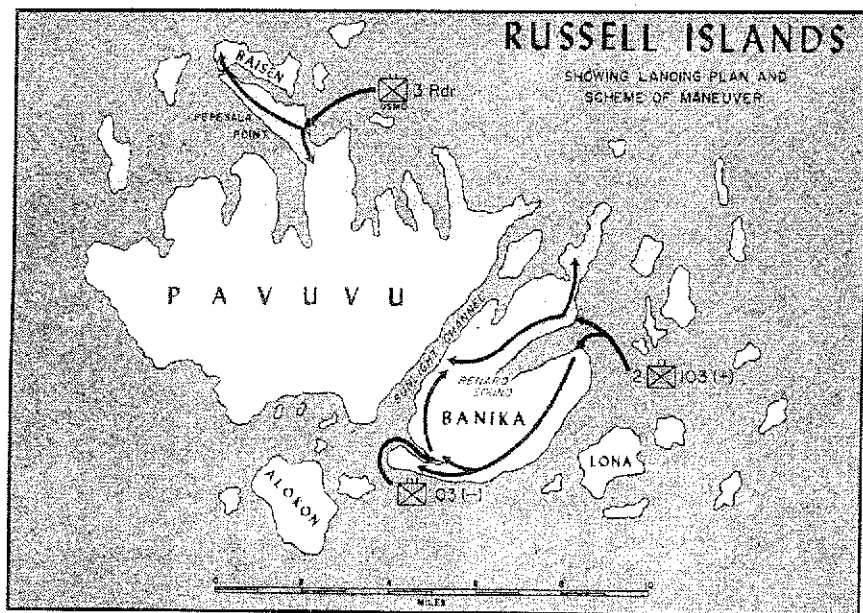
This perception of the Russells changed after the Battle of Guadalcanal and with the American plans to isolate Rabaul. Broadly defined, the isolation of Rabaul called for forces under the command of General Douglas MacArthur to seize parts of New Guinea and New Britain and Admiral Halsey to capture strategic bases in the Solomons. The next major target in the Solomons after the capture of Guadalcanal was New Georgia, located roughly 170 miles further north. It is because of that distance and the Russells' advantageous position that they became significant. If the United States forces

by-passed the Russells, they faced the potential danger that the Japanese would occupy the islands and pose a threat to Guadalcanal and American operations to the north.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, once in U.S. possession, the Russells offered potential airfields, PT boat bases, and staging areas for future operations.<sup>6</sup> The airfields became particularly important. "For Allied operations worked in such a way," Air Force historian Kramer Rohfleisch argues, "that each fresh base became a successive cancer in the structure of enemy's defense lines, sending out its tentacles and relentlessly destroying the equipment and personnel opposing it."<sup>7</sup>

The Japanese never occupied the Russell Islands in any force.<sup>8</sup> They mainly used them in the last week of January and early February as a staging area for their withdrawal from Guadalcanal.<sup>9</sup> The best estimate of Japanese troop strength in the islands in early February is 400, although this number could have temporarily fluctuated to 5,000 as forces withdrew from Guadalcanal.<sup>10</sup> The last Japanese troops withdrew from the Russells sometime between February 7 and 10.<sup>11</sup> Reconnaissance of the islands in the ten days proceeding Cleanslate by Australian coastwatchers and a team of U.S. Army, Marine, and Navy officers and New Zealand Army officers found some hastily abandoned equipment but no Japanese troops.<sup>12</sup> Despite the reports of the Japanese withdrawal, Admiral Halsey decided to carry out the operation as planned on February 21 since he feared that the Japanese might suddenly decide to reinforce the islands, and he saw the operation as a practice run for future island-to-island movements in the Solomons.<sup>13</sup>

Most of the invasion force for the operation assembled in New Caledonia before being transported to Guadalcanal.<sup>14</sup> The Japanese did detect the convoy transporting most of the troops to Guadalcanal and launched one air attack on February 17. While the attack failed to produce any damage, it did make a vivid impression on most of the soldiers and sailors on board the ships since it was the first time many of them had faced enemy fire. An officer from the 118th Engineer Combat Battalion claimed, "Any one of the men can relate the excitement, thrills, and experiences of the first attack."<sup>15</sup> Captain John Doll, the commanding officer of the 43rd Cavalry Reconnaissance Troop, was even more graphic. "Then all hell broke loose," he reported, "as every gun in the convoy cut loose on the enemy torpedo planes as the [Japanese planes] roared to the attack. The planes could be clearly seen when the moonlight reflected from their silver wings. The ship was zig-zagging in a desperate effort to avoid the torpedoes that were being dropped in our path. The noise of battle was terrific...this was our baptism of fire."<sup>16</sup>





This map shows the Raiders' and the Army's schemes of maneuver when they landed in the Islands in 1943.

monumental task of transforming the islands into a usable base. The two main islands, Pavuvu and Banika, had large areas of rain forests, and the coconut plantations had not been worked since before the war. Of the two, Banika was definitely the better choice for the main base facilities. Overall, "The topography of Banika ... was highly favorable for the projected facilities. Well-drained shore areas, deep water, protected harbors, and lack of malaria made it a good location."<sup>33</sup> While there were sheltered harbors, excessive water depths limited the amount of available anchorage. Because of the islands' volcanic origins, some areas close to shore had depths of up to 300 feet.<sup>34</sup> While these obstacles were not impossible to overcome, they did hamper the development of the islands.

The construction units had three principal missions once ashore on the Russells. First, they had to build airfields as quickly as possible. Second, they had to build a PT boat base. Finally, they were required to establish staging areas for future operations. Several factors hampered their initial efforts. Shortages of materials were a major problem in the early days of occupation. Local supplies were used until they were exhausted. This led to other problems as men resorted to stealing to acquire needed resources. Furthermore, when

supplies were available, inadequate storage facilities caused many of them to rot. One last difficulty was the lack of heavy construction equipment for use in building roads and airfields.<sup>35</sup>

The men had to deal with less than adequate provisions and a hostile environment in addition to problems with supplies and equipment.<sup>36</sup> Except for the occasional beef from some of the cows on the island and a few fish, their entire diet was generally canned food.<sup>37</sup> One regimental history explained, "One of the greatest difficulties encountered here was the matter of food. Dependent as the troops were on shipping, [and] being quite isolated, there were periods when the rations were found deficient as to quantity and flavor."<sup>38</sup> Water at times was also difficult to come by because the five-gallon cans used for storage and transport easily rusted.<sup>39</sup> Finally, the lack of certain vitamins and the tropical climate played havoc on the soldier's bodies. Roughly one-third of the men suffered from skin infections, and some suffered from malaria and other diseases.<sup>40</sup>

Despite these difficulties, engineers quickly began to transform parts of the islands by constructing roads, a PT boat base, housing, hospital facilities, and most important, airfields.<sup>41</sup> "The Russells soon became a boomtown—," Charles Melson argues, "a jerry-built staging area for Allied units arriving in the South Pacific, reorganizing, or moving to other battlegrounds."<sup>42</sup> Inadequate equipment and too few workers slowed the construction process, especially of the airfields. Furthermore, an initial lack of adequate surveying and planning meant, "drainage, grading and surfacing of the air strips were not properly done."<sup>43</sup> These problems were later corrected. When the first runway was ultimately completed in May, it was 6,300 feet long and could operate both bombers and fighters.<sup>44</sup> This airfield, located sixty-five miles north of Henderson field on Guadalcanal, greatly extended U.S. air power in the central and northern Solomons.<sup>45</sup> The engineers completed a second airfield on Banika in June.<sup>46</sup>

Progress on the airfields became very important after the Japanese discovered the presence of the Americans on the islands. The U.S. transformation of the islands continued unimpeded prior to March 6. However, at 1:50 pm on that day the Japanese launched a surprise air raid. Upward of twelve dive bombers and twenty-five fighters struck the unfinished airfield and PT boat base with "absolutely no warning."<sup>47</sup> Although the damage was limited, the Americans suffered their first casualties on the islands due to enemy activity with one killed in action and another twelve wounded.<sup>48</sup>

The March 6 raid was only a precursor to fairly frequent Japanese air attacks over the next three months. The Japanese generally

attacked at night with forces ranging from one to fifty planes and caused little damage.<sup>49</sup> However, in raids on May 18 and 19, at least fifteen men were killed and another twenty were wounded.<sup>50</sup> The air defense of the Russells gradually improved during this period with the implementation of better early warning systems, air cover from fighter planes on Guadalcanal, and by late May, the operation of the airfield on Banika itself. Japan launched its largest raids on the islands on June 7 and 12. In both raids, American fighters intercepted between forty and fifty Japanese planes. Total Japanese losses in the raids were close to fifty planes, while the United States lost thirteen. Fortunately for the United States, it safely recovered ten of the thirteen pilots, something the Japanese could not do.<sup>51</sup>

The initial stage of the transformation of the islands was complete with the start of regular operations from the airfield in late May. By this point, the United States was using the Russells as a PT boat base, airfield, training center, and staging area for future operations. Operation Cleanslate, by all measures, had been a success, and many valuable lessons had been learned. In terms of initial stages of the operation, military planners learned the importance of practicing loadings and landings, performing thorough reconnaissance, supplying sufficient numbers of logistical support troops in addition to combat forces, and developing and maintaining an adequate road system.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, the operation taught that beyond the initial occupation, "success of the venture depends upon the ability to deliver safely not only the first, but also the succeeding echelons of troops, engineers, ancillary units, equipment and operating and upkeep supplies and replacements."<sup>53</sup> In the end Cleanslate proved to be the successful "opening move of the drive on Rabaul."<sup>54</sup>

The next step in the drive to Rabaul was the seizure of the New Georgia Islands, which are located about 120 miles northeast of the Russells. The Allies called this move, Operation Toenails, and in many ways it was based out of the Russells. As the main "Allied forward operating base and staging area" north of Guadalcanal, the Russells offered an intermediate step to New Georgia, the main island in the New Georgia Islands.<sup>55</sup> From bases on Banika, American airplanes and PT boats could more easily reach New Georgia. Basing the attacking forces in the Russells also cut down the time and distance they had to travel over open waters that were susceptible to Japanese air attacks.<sup>56</sup>

U.S. forces used the Russells as a training center and staging area in preparation for Operation Toenails. The 43rd Infantry Division, in particular, underwent "an intense program of jungle and amphibious training."<sup>57</sup> Joseph Zimmer, the official historian of the 43rd Infantry,

explained, "In the jungles of Banika and Pavuvu, bunkers were constructed to simulate the ones the Japanese had built on Guadalcanal. Time and time again, these bunkers were assaulted in mock combat."<sup>58</sup> In addition to being a training center, the Marine 4th Base Depot on Banika became the primary supply base for the operation. It had several primary responsibilities including the maintenance of at least 60 days of supplies and the supervision of the handling and loading of supplies and equipment onto ships.<sup>59</sup> The Marines of the 4th Base Depot handled supplies ranging from clothing to sand bags. At the start of Operation Toenails, the depot had almost 24,000 drums of fuel and lubricants and 13,000 tons of gear on hand for the invading force.<sup>60</sup>

As important as the Russells were for these other activities, they were more significant at this point in the war for their airfields. With the opening of the two fields in May and June, "for the first time it was possible to send fighter escort with bombing missions to the northern Solomons, thus permitting daylight bombing of targets which had hitherto been accessible only to night attack."<sup>61</sup> An example of this was on June 6 when American forces launched the first daylight attack against Bougainville in the Northern Solomons since the previous February. Twelve F4U Corsairs from the Russells escorted twelve torpedo bombers and eighteen dive-bombers on a successful mission.<sup>62</sup> From the perspective of pilots stationed on Guadalcanal, the airfields served an even more practical purpose as an emergency landing strip. On April 18, a force of sixteen P-38s from Guadalcanal launched a daring and successful operation to shoot down a plane carrying Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, the commander of the Imperial Japanese Fleet. The plan required the pilots to fly their P-38s to the limits of their range and beyond. After the interception and shoot-down of Yamamoto's aircraft, Captain Besby Holmes' P-38 ran low on gas and had to make an emergency landing in the Russells. Without this airfield, Holmes faced the perilous danger of ditching at sea.<sup>63</sup>

While the first airfield on Banika was ready for emergency purposes in April, sustained operations did not begin until May 25 when Marine Air Group 21 (MAG 21) began flying missions.<sup>64</sup> At various times in the summer and fall, Marine fighter squadrons (VMF) 124, 213, 214, and 221 served as part of MAG 21.<sup>65</sup> The squadrons primarily escorted bomber missions, intercepted Japanese air attacks, and provided air cover and support for other operations in the central and northern Solomons.<sup>66</sup>

Operation Toenails began in late June with American landings in the New Georgia Islands. Air support for the operation came from



The nature of the terrain and the difficulties of construction in the Russells are evident in this photo of road construction. *Official USMC photo.*

bases on the Russells and Guadalcanal.<sup>67</sup> The Allied air squadrons provided air cover for convoys, a constant daylight patrol over New Georgia, air strikes against enemy bases and shipping, reconnaissance, and close support for ground forces.<sup>68</sup> According to one Marine historian, "In seizing the Central Solomons the United States acquired a series of unsinkable carriers. From two fields in the Russells, Allied planes not only covered Admiral [William] Halsey's northward advance but also intercepted Japanese air strikes against the Guadalcanal-Tulagi base."<sup>69</sup>

Rear Admiral Marc A. Mitscher, Commander Air Solomons, had over 600 planes at his disposal at the beginning of Operation Toenails.<sup>70</sup> Up to 120 of these planes were stationed on the Russells in July.<sup>71</sup> Every day from 7 am to 4:30 pm thirty-two fighters were constantly on patrol over New Georgia. Altogether sixteen separate flights participated each day with four originating from the Russells and twelve from Guadalcanal.<sup>72</sup> Although Guadalcanal provided the bulk of the flights, Major General Millard Harmon, the commanding

General of U.S. Army forces in the South Pacific Area, "doubted that it could have been achieved without the aid of the two Russell strips."<sup>73</sup> Admiral Halsey later wrote, "The landing proceeded smoothly, under an umbrella of thirty-two fighters from Guadalcanal and the Russells, which beat off attempted attacks twice during the morning."<sup>74</sup> Furthermore, Japanese air attacks against the invading force achieved only three hits on American shipping in the entire month of July.<sup>75</sup> Ultimately because of their own heavy losses in these raids—close to 100 planes—the Japanese abandoned efforts to launch air raids or to send reinforcements in daylight.<sup>76</sup>

While heavy fighting still continued in the New Georgia Islands at the beginning of August, it was beginning to wind down. The squadrons stationed on the Russells during August and September generally performed escort duty, some reconnaissance, and occasional strafing attacks.<sup>77</sup> By mid-August air strength on the islands fluctuated as the fighter squadrons began to move to the new airstrips on Munda in the New Georgia islands.<sup>78</sup> By early October American bombers, for the most part, had replaced the fighters.

The best example of the fluctuation in fighter strength on the islands is VMF 214 or as it is better known because of a 1970s television series, the Black Sheep Squadron. VMF 214 had been reconstituted in early September under the command of Major Gregory "Pappy" Boyington and was stationed briefly in the Russells.<sup>79</sup> The squadron flew one significant mission from the Russells on September 16. Twenty Corsairs from VMF 214 escorted 150 dive-bombers and torpedo planes on an attack near Bougainville.<sup>80</sup> VMF 214 definitely shot down eleven Japanese planes and probably another eight. The next day the squadron flew to Munda and stayed there until the end of September. It returned to the Russells for the first ten days of October before leaving the Russells for good on October 10.<sup>81</sup> The only significant action in its second stay in the Russells was on October 4 when the squadron shot down six more Japanese planes, and according to one intelligence memorandum, Major Boyington gave a "demonstration of racial superiority."<sup>82</sup>

Sharing the Russell airfields with VMF 214 was a squadron of new night fighters making its first appearance in the Pacific. Until late 1943, there was little the Americans could do to impede Japanese nighttime attacks besides using ground-based anti-aircraft weapons. Since American fighters were not equipped with radar they could not intercept targets at night. This changed in September 1943 with the arrival of VMF (N) 531 in the Russells.<sup>83</sup> This squadron flew radar-equipped Lockheed PV-1 Venturas. Although the PV-1s proved

generally ineffective, the installation of radar on fighter planes marked a major shift in their ability to intercept the enemy at night.<sup>84</sup>

The mission of the Russell airfields began to change in late September and early October. By this time the Russells were no longer threatened by Japanese air attacks; therefore, most American fighters had been shifted to more forward bases.<sup>85</sup> In their place, bombers became the most significant occupants. In particular, Army Air Force B-25s from the 42nd Bombardment Group used the base for attacks on Rabaul and Bougainville.<sup>86</sup> The raids on Bougainville were particularly significant as all the B-25s used in that campaign were based in the Russells.<sup>87</sup> Over the last two weeks in October, the 42nd Bombardment Group launched raids on at least eight separate days with great success.<sup>88</sup> Following the actual American invasion of Bougainville in early November, the group continued to provide bombing support until the island was secured. The completion of the Bougainville campaign and final isolation of Rabaul in early 1944 in many ways completed the mission of the Russells as a base of air combat operations. While the last combat planes did not leave until late 1944, they flew few actual combat missions after February.<sup>89</sup>

The metamorphosis of the Russells continued after the end of the combat operations in 1944. From then until early 1945, the Russells served five major functions. They provided naval base facilities for one PT boat squadron, destroyers in transit, and cargo ships. The airfields remained open and were used primarily for transportation purposes. Seabees built additional hospitals to expand the Russells' capabilities in this area. The islands also continued to be used as a supply base. Finally, the 1st Marine Division used Pavuvu as a staging area for its operations against Peleliu and Okinawa.<sup>90</sup>

The Russells remained a hive of activity even with the change in mission. Seventeen different Seabee battalions spent at least a month on the islands working on various construction projects.<sup>91</sup> The harbor facilities on average handled thirty-seven cargo ships a day, and immediately prior to the Peleliu operation in the late summer 1944, they serviced eighty.<sup>92</sup> The number of personnel on the island fluctuated depending on the presence of training divisions on the islands. Between January 1944 and February 1945, no fewer than 16,000 service personnel were on the islands. The number peaked at approximately 60,000 in August 1944 immediately prior to the 1st Marine Division's departure for Peleliu. After February 1945 when the 1st Marine Division left for the last time, the number of personnel on the islands steadily declined to less than 5,000 by August.<sup>93</sup>

While the Russells gradually lost military importance as American forces advanced beyond the Solomons, their history would be

incomplete without an examination of the experiences of the 1st Marine Division on the islands. This division was one of the most famous in World War II and served in several major Pacific campaigns. While most of the Marines would have traded the horrors of combat for more time on the Russells, many remembered the Russells as the most inhospitable place they served outside of combat zones.<sup>94</sup>

May 1944 to February 1945 proved the busiest time of the war in terms of actual personnel on the Russells. The 1st Marine Division moved from Cape Gloucester on New Britain to Pavuvu in the Russells in May. Pavuvu had played only a very minor role in the use of the Russells as a base prior to the division's arrival. While it was the largest island in the Russells, its terrain and environment were much less suited for use than Banika. Only a small part of Pavuvu had been cleared prior to the war for coconut plantations, and most of the island remained covered in dense jungle.<sup>95</sup> It was in this environment that the 1st Marines made their home on two separate occasions in 1944 and early 1945.

The 1st Marine Division moved to Pavuvu for rest, rehabilitation, and training after experiencing horrible conditions and combat in the Cape Gloucester campaign on New Britain.<sup>96</sup> Marine Major General Roy S. Geiger, commander of the III Amphibious Corps, chose Pavuvu as the base for the 1st Division after reconnoitering the southern Solomons in an airplane.<sup>97</sup> He wanted to avoid stationing the division on Guadalcanal because other divisions on that island had been forced to supply work details of up to 1,000 men a day. He also believed stationing the division near the 4th Base Depot on Banika would provide easy access to supplies.<sup>98</sup> Geiger was wrong on both accounts, but he was not the only one to develop incorrect impressions after viewing the Russells from a distance. Private E.B. Sledge remembers approaching the Russells on a transport ship and thinking, "The symmetrical groves [of the coconut palms] and clear water were beautiful." He added, "Pavuvu looked picturesque."<sup>99</sup>

Sledge soon found the view from the air and sea proved quite different from the one on the ground. "Once ashore," he explains, "one found the extensive coconut groves choked with rotting coconuts. The apparently solid ground was soft and turned quickly to mud when subjected to foot or vehicular traffic."<sup>100</sup> Pavuvu simply was not ready for the 1st Marine Division. The 15th Seabees had the initial job of transforming part of Pavuvu into a camp and training center. However, they were not highly motivated to complete their work since they were supposed to be on R & R themselves. To make matters worse, the 1st Division arrived a month earlier than



scheduled.<sup>101</sup> The result was not pretty. Marine General Oliver Smith explained the problem—"The camp was very compact, and, with good roads, camp administration would have been simple. When we arrived, however, the camp was hardly more than a bivouac."<sup>102</sup>

The 1st Marine Division established its camp on a 600-acre coconut plantation on the northern coast of Pavuvu. Since this plantation was less than one square mile, the roughly 27,000 Marines of the 1st Division lived and trained in a tight environment.<sup>103</sup> Marines leaving Cape Gloucester had high hopes of a long rest in Australia or New Zealand. Robert Leckie remembered: "All the way [from New Britain] we had indulged in silly speculation on the impossibility of sending our diseased, decimated division into action again without a rest in Australia, or New Zealand, if not back in the States."<sup>104</sup> Accordingly, the Marines were shocked on their arrival on Pavuvu. "I have never discovered a satisfactory reason for sending us to the rat-infested swamp that was Pavuvu," writes Private James Johnson.<sup>105</sup> The aforementioned Private Sledge explains, "None of us, old hands or replacements, could fathom why the division command chose Pavuvu."<sup>106</sup> As the Marines arrived, they had to build roads, construct camp facilities, and clear coconuts.<sup>107</sup> Even then, the conditions were only "passably endurable."<sup>108</sup>

The Marines had to perform duties normally accomplished by the Seabees or construction units because they "found themselves dumped on a rain-soaked, rat-infested hunk of real estate where virtually nothing had been done to prepare for their arrival." The Division was hampered in these efforts because its assigned construction units, including the 19th Seabees, lacked equipment.<sup>109</sup> Seventy-five percent of their equipment was inoperable because of wear and tear and a shortage of spare parts. Furthermore, the 3rd Marine Division had stripped the 4th Base Depot of trucks and equipment for its deployment to Guam.<sup>110</sup> The result was that much work had to be done by hand where "there was no underbrush to be cleared, but there was ubiquitous mud to be conquered."<sup>111</sup>

The Marines ran into other difficulties in addition to having to build their own camp.<sup>112</sup> They were in such poor shape when the men arrived on Pavuvu that their rations were supposed to be increased by twenty-five percent. This did not happen. At one point, the Marines even started butchering some of the 600 cows that had been abandoned along with the plantations at the beginning of the war. However, Australia, which controlled the islands before the war, ordered this stopped.<sup>113</sup> The result of these problems was a decided lack of fresh food. The men had fresh meat only once a week on average, and fresh eggs only twice in four months. The normal fare

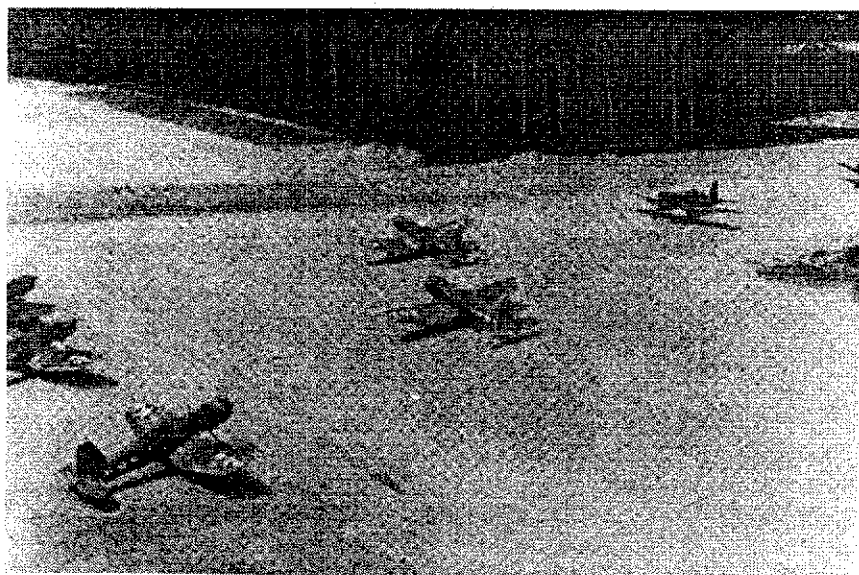
was Spam, dehydrated potatoes, and powdered eggs.<sup>114</sup>

The Marines had to deal with a variety of animals and insects in addition to the poor rations. Among the most common were black gnats, rats, iguanas, pigeons, bullfrogs, and crocodiles.<sup>115</sup> The worst, however, were the crabs. Sledge explains, "The most loathsome vermin on Pavuvu were the land crabs. Their blue-black bodies were about the size of the palm of a man's hand, and bristles and spines covered their legs. ... Periodically we reached the point of rage over these filthy things and chased them out from under boxes, seabags, and cots."<sup>116</sup> On the 1st Division's second stay on Pavuvu in December, Sledge claims that he and his tent mates killed over 100 crabs in their tent alone.<sup>117</sup>

Other issues compounded the problems. Shortages of fresh water left little for bathing. The Marines often waited for the frequent afternoon storms in order to bathe in the rain. The key was to get lathered and rinsed off before these brief showers ended.<sup>118</sup> Furthermore, with one exception, there were few opportunities for entertainment. While films were generally shown nightly, they were not of very high quality. Of greater importance to the men, they seldom had access to more than three beers per week.<sup>119</sup>

The one example of quality entertainment occurred by chance and only because of one entertainer's commitment to serve the troops. The Marines enviously looked across the channel to Banika. To them, "Banika was a fleshpot, Banika was the big town, Banika was Broadway. ... And Banika had beer."<sup>120</sup> There was also "forbidden fruit: the nurses."<sup>121</sup> There was some truth to these claims. Marine pilots stationed at Banika's airfields lived in what they called "palatial" accommodations that provided "the most idyllic living in the eastern Solomons." Among their perks were electrified huts and a refrigerator with cold beer.<sup>122</sup> Seldom, though, did the Marines across the channel enjoy these comforts. However, on one occasion the paradise of Banika made a special and unscheduled visit to Pavuvu.

USO shows periodically stopped at Banika, but normally never made it to Pavuvu. This changed in 1944 when Bob Hope, Patti Thomas, Frances Langford, and Jerry Colonna added a performance on Pavuvu. They flew with their entourage on eight Piper cub planes to Pavuvu where they had to land on a road.<sup>123</sup> The Marines were overjoyed. Private Sledge remembers it as "the finest entertainment I ever saw overseas."<sup>124</sup> Private Johnson claims, "For us masses of the marine line companies, it was truly inspiring to have people as famous as Bob Hope and his crew—Jerry Colonna, Patti Thomas, and all—come and do a show for us."<sup>125</sup> What Johnson, Sledge, and the



Marine F4 Corsairs taxi at their base in the Russells.

other Marines did not know was the affection went both ways. After the war, Hope claimed, "it was the most exciting thing that happened on the trip [to the South Pacific in 1944] to see those 15,000 guys all looking up and cheering each little plane as she came in."<sup>125</sup>

Unfortunately, Hope's visit was the exception, and most of the Marines had to simply plod through their dreary existence on Pavuvu. The conditions on the island overwhelmed some. One historian notes that no other place in the Pacific surpassed Pavuvu "in isolation, geographic ferocity, and sheer boredom."<sup>127</sup> Private Sledge best summarizes the feeling of most Marines, "On Pavuvu we felt as though we were a million miles from not only home but from anything else that bespoke of civilization."<sup>128</sup> This situation had a dramatic affect on both the physical health and morale of the Marines. "The incidence of sickness shot upward, while morale plummeted to the lowest point it ever reached during the Pacific service of this elite outfit [the 1st Marine Division]," recalls Marine historian Frank Hough.<sup>129</sup> Several men even resorted to suicide.<sup>130</sup>

The Marines still had to prepare for the next campaign while enduring these hardships. The 1st Division used Pavuvu as its training center for both the Peleliu and Okinawa campaigns.<sup>131</sup> The work of camp construction, limited space, and equipment shortages severely hampered training.<sup>132</sup> Private Sledge recalls, "Pavuvu was so

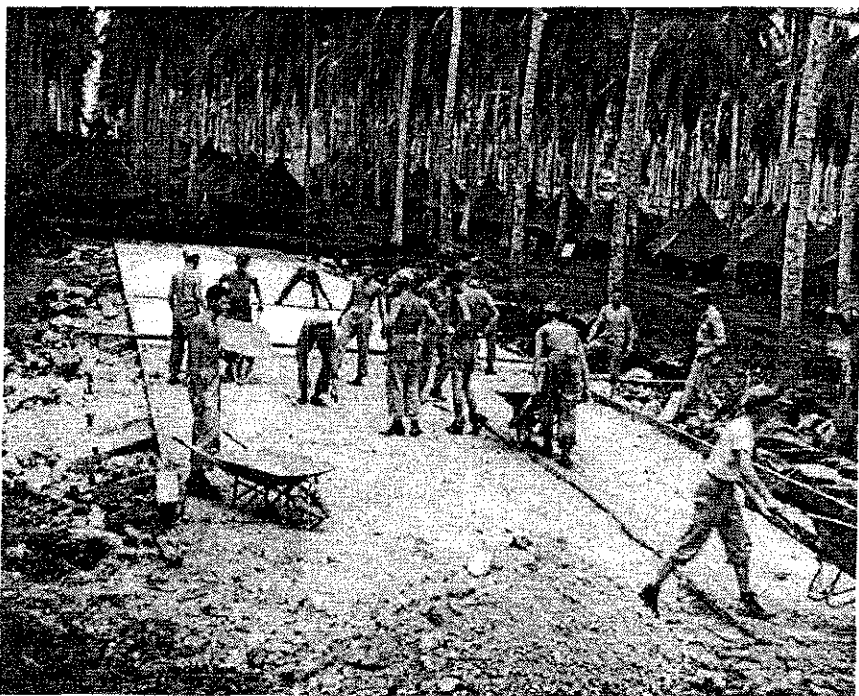
small that most of our field exercises were of company size rather than battalion or regimental."<sup>133</sup> Brigadier General W. A. Wachtler remembered, "The island was a veritable jungle in which a troop unit even as small as a platoon would have great difficulty maneuvering."<sup>134</sup> Marines on maneuvers found themselves "dodging among heads and mess halls and tripping over the guy ropes of their own tents." Space was so limited that conditioning hikes consisted of marching in circles.<sup>135</sup> One particular glaring deficiency was the lack of amphibian tractors for training.<sup>136</sup> Some of this equipment arrived barely in time for loading.<sup>137</sup> Finally, when it was time for the 1st Division to disembark from the Russells, the loading facilities were inadequate and "loading was a piecemeal process."<sup>138</sup>

The departure of the 1st Marine Division for the Okinawa invasion marked the end of the Russells as a significant base. From February 1945 onward the principal mission of the forces in the Russells was to close the base down. Only one airfield was kept open for emergency purposes, and other facilities were gradually reduced in size or closed.<sup>139</sup> Eventually, any materials or supplies that could not be removed were destroyed.<sup>140</sup>

The shutting down of the Russells in 1945 occurred without notice, and the islands returned to the obscurity of their pre-war existence. Historians have often overlooked the logistical support bases that made those operations possible in their desire to cover the campaigns and battles of the war. Although the Russells are only one small group of islands that played this role, and operations from this base did not change the outcome of the war, they were important nevertheless. American campaigns in the central and northern Solomons would have been much more difficult without Pavuvu and Banika.

Having said this, the Russells' effectiveness as a base was mixed. The airfields on Banika provided brief, but invaluable, support for operations against New Georgia, Bougainville, and Rabaul. While most of these air operations could have been based out of Guadalcanal without the help of the Russells, planes flying from Henderson Field faced an additional 100 miles on any round trip flight to the central and northern Solomons. This added distance would have created a myriad of problems. Furthermore, the naval base facilities on the Russells shortened the distance transport ships had to travel through potentially dangerous waters to reach targets further north.

While the Russells were used successfully as an air and naval base, their effectiveness as a staging area and training center is questionable. While General Geiger's decision to place the 1st Division on



The Marines made some order out of the tropical morass. The engineers that are depicted are laying concrete for a messhall. Tents for Marines are clearly visible to the rear of the photo. *Official USMC photo.*

Pavuvu in May 1944 was a terrible mistake, it is understandable considering his limited knowledge of the islands at that time. However, the decision to return the division to the Russells a second time raises questions about the Marine leaders' judgment. Were they concerned about the welfare of their men, or the quality of their training?

While the effectiveness of the military's use of the islands can be debated, their importance to the war effort cannot. Operation Cleanslate provided invaluable experience in amphibious operations. Air squadrons from the islands' airfields flew air cover, close air support, and bombing missions for operations against New Georgia, Bougainville, and Rabaul. Even after combat operations were completed in early 1944, the Russells remained important as supply and training areas. The United States transformed the Russells in World War II and made them an important part of the war effort. The United States would have faced many more difficulties in the Solomons campaign without them.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Henry I. Shaw, Jr. and Douglas T. Kane, *Isolation of Rabaul: History of U.S. Marine Corps Operations in World War II* (5 vols., Washington, 1963), 2: 23. By early 1943, the Navy and the Army had reluctantly agreed on the command structure for the Solomons and New Guinea campaigns. General Douglas MacArthur commanded the latter and Admiral Nimitz the former. See Ronald H. Spector, *Eagle Against the Sun: The American War with Japan* (New York, 1985), 220-25.
2. John N. Rentz, *Marines in the Central Solomons* (Washington, 1952), 14. Cleanslate was part of Operation Cartwheel that in turn was part of the Elkton plan. See Wesley Frank Craven and James Lea Cate, *The Army Air Forces in World War II* (6 vols., Chicago, 1950), 4: 129-35, 163, 208, and 312.
3. This geographic information can be found in John N. Rentz, *Bougainville and the Northern Solomons* (Washington, 1948), 148; John Miller, Jr., *United States Army in World War II: The War in the Pacific, Guadalcanal: The First Offensive* (Washington, 1949), 351; First Narrative of the Russell Islands Naval Command, 21 Feb. 1943 to 15 Aug. 1945, U.S. Naval Historical Center in Washington, D.C. [hereafter USNHC], Command File, World War II, Box 447, Folder - Command History of the Russell Islands Naval Command, 5; and George Carroll Dyer, *The Amphibians Came to Conquer: The Story of Richmond Kelly Turner* (Washington, 1991), 460.
4. On the native population, see Part I, Base Facilities Report, 1/1/44 - Russell Islands, Records of the United States Marine Corps, Records Relating to U.S. Marine Corps Operations in World War II, Record Group 127, National Archives, Washington [hereafter RG 127, NA], Box 35, Folder - USN Base Facilities (SoPac Area) 3 of 3, 2. Lever Brothers was an international chemical and soap-manufacturing firm. See Kenneth B. Cumberland, *Southwest Pacific* (New York, 1956), 155-6.
5. See also William L. McGee, *Amphibious Operations in the South Pacific in World War II* (2 vols., Santa Barbara, 2002), 2: 229-44.
6. See Base Facilities Data, 9/1/43, Russell Islands, USNHC, Base Facilities File, Box 77, Folder - Base Facilities Data for Russell Islands, 1 Sept. 1943, 255.
7. Kramer J. Rohfleisch, *The Thirteenth Air Force, March-Oct. 1943* (Washington, 1946), 9.
8. First Narrative of the Russell Islands Naval Command, 2.
9. Samuel Eliot Morison, *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II* (15 vols., Boston, 1950), 6: 97-98.
10. Field Order #2, 2/15/43, RG 127, NA, Box 315, Folder - A1-1 TF31, Movement of TF by Small Landing Craft (17 April 1943), 1. For estimates of several thousand Japanese forces in the Russells, see Morison, *U.S.*

- Naval Operations*, 6: 97-98; and Edwin P. Hoyt, *The Glory of the Solomons* (New York, 1983), 35. The estimate of several thousand does not fit with other sources unless the soldiers being evacuated from Guadalcanal are included.
11. See Annex #2 to Field Order #2, 2/16/43, RG 127, NA, Geographic Files, Box 315, Folder - A1-1 TF31, Movement of TF by Small Landing Craft (17 April 1943), 1; and Report of the Russell Islands (Cleanslate) Operation, 4/9/43, *ibid.*, Folder - A10-1 3rd Raider Battalion, Operation Reports (9 April 1943), 82; and Hoyt, *Glory of the Solomons*, 13-5.
  12. See Report of the Russell Islands (Cleanslate) Operation, 2 and 6; D.C. Horton, *Fire Over the Islands: The Coast Watchers of the Solomons* (Sydney, Australia, 1970), 159-63 and 207; Oliver A. Gillespie, *The Pacific: Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-45* (Wellington, New Zealand, 1952), 244; and Miller, *U.S. Army in World War II*, 353-4.
  13. Shaw and Kane, *Isolation of Rabaul*, 23-4.
  14. Report of the Russell Islands (Cleanslate) Operation, 4.
  15. 118th Engineer History, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, Record Group 407, National Archives, Washington (hereafter RG 407, NA), World War II Operation Reports, Box 10746, Folder - Unit History, 118th Engineers Combat Battalion, 43rd Infantry Division, 10.
  16. 43rd Cavalry Reconnaissance Troops, Report of Operations Feb. 12 to April 18, 1943, *ibid.*, Box 10745, Folder - Operation Report - Russell Islands Campaign - 43rd Cavalry Reconnaissance Troop (Mechanized) 43rd Infantry Division, 12 Feb.-18 April 1943, 2. For other descriptions of the air attack, see Operations in Pacific Ocean Areas, Feb. 1943, Records of the Office of Chief of Naval Operations, Record Group 38, National Archives, Washington (hereafter RG 38, NA), World War II Action and Operational Reports, Box 28, Folder - CINCPAC, May 11, 1943, 6-7; and Action Report - Japanese Night Torpedo Attack on Task Unit 62.7.2, northeast of San Cristobal Island, Solomon Islands, on Feb. 17, 1943, *ibid.*, 1.
  17. Shaw and Kane, *Isolation of Rabaul*, 24.
  18. See Movement of a Task Force by Small Landing Craft, RG 127, NA, Geographic Files, Box 315, Folder - A1-1 TF31, Movement of TF by Small Landing Craft (17 April 1943), 1; and R. G. Rosenquist, Martin J. Sexton, and Robert A. Buerlein, *Our Kind of War: Illustrated Saga of the U.S. Marine Raiders of World War II* (Richmond, 1990), 74-81.
  19. Headquarters, 169th Field Artillery Battalion, Report of Operations 12 Feb. to 18 April 1943, RG 407, NA, Box 10749, Folder - Operation Report - Russell Island Campaign - 169th Field Artillery Battalion - 43rd Infantry Division 12 Feb.-18 April 1943, 2.
  20. George C. Kenney, *General Kenney Reports: A Personal History of the Pacific War* (New York, 1949), 191-2.
  21. Annex #4 to Field Order #2, 2/15/43, RG 127, NA, Geographic Files, Box 315, Folder - A1-1 TF31, Movement of TF by Small Landing Craft (17 April 1943), 2.
  22. Annex #3 to Field Order #2, 2/17/43, *ibid.*, 1-19.
  23. Report of the Occupation of Russell Islands (Cleanslate Operation), Feb. 21 to April 17, 1943, RG 38, NA, Box 539, Folder - Comphisopac, April 21, 1943, 2.
  24. Dyer, *Amphibians Came to Conquer*, 464.
  25. See Russell Sydnor Crenshaw, *South Pacific Destroyer: The Battle for the Solomons from Savo Island to Vella Gulf* (Annapolis, 1998), 84.
  26. Dyer, *Amphibians Came to Conquer*, 465-6.
  27. Morison, *U.S. Naval Operations*, 6: 100.
  28. See Oscar F. Peatross, *Bless 'em All: The Raider Marines of World War II* (Irvine, 1995), 190-3.
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  30. Report of the Russell Islands (Cleanslate) Operation, 4/9/43, 3.
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  32. Wincoff to Colonel, 2/22/43, RG 127, NA, Geographic Files, Box 315, Folder - A3-1 Special Weapons Group, 11th Defense Battalion Observations, 1.
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  34. Base Facilities Data, 9/1/43, Russell Islands, 262.
  35. First Narrative of the Russell Islands Naval Command, 29-56.
  36. Report of Russell Islands (Cleanslate) Operation, 8.
  37. 118th Engineer History, 15.

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52. Movement of a Task Force by Small Landing Craft, 4-6.
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58. Joseph E. Zimmer, *The History of the 43rd Infantry Division, 1941-45* (Nashville, 1945), 20.
59. Shaw and Kane, *Isolation of Rabaul*, 57-8.
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61. First Narrative of the Russell Islands Naval Command, 30.
62. Rohfleisch, *Thirteenth Air Force*, 60-1.
63. Hoyt, *Glory of the Solomons*, 77.
64. Rohfleisch, *Thirteenth Air Force*, 59-60.
65. *Ibid.*, 457-61.
66. Shaw and Kane, *Isolation of Rabaul*, 471.
67. Melson, *Up the Slot*, 31.
68. *Combat Narratives, Solomon Islands Campaign*, 57.
69. Rentz, *Marines in the Central Solomons*, 150.
70. Shaw and Kane, *Isolation of Rabaul*, 471.
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81. Air Activity from Cleanslate, Sept. 12, 9/13/43, RG 127, NA, General Subject Files, Box 50, Folder – Air Command Solomon Islands Intelligence Summary, Sept. 1943, 1, 30, 46, and 49.
82. Air Activity from Cleanslate, 10/5/43, *ibid.*, General Subject Files, Box 50, Folder – Air Command Solomon Islands, Intelligence Summary, Oct. 1943, 1.
83. See Air Activity from Cleanslate, Sept. 11, 9/12/43, *ibid.*, Folder – Air Command Solomon Islands, Intelligence Summary, Sept. 1943, 1.
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88. Sherrod, *History of Marine Corps Aviation*, 175-9.
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90. *Ibid.*, 30; and *Building the Navy's Bases*, 2: 261.
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95. Personal Narrative – New Britain Island, Russell Islands, and Peleliu, Personal Papers, Marine Corps University Archives, Quantico, VA, Personal Papers of General Oliver P. Smith, Box 22 – World War II Pacific Campaigns, 51.
96. See Wheeler, *A Special Valor*, 204-25.
97. Frank O. Hough, *The Assault on Peleliu* (Washington, 1950), note 40, 25-6.
98. Personal Narrative of General Oliver P. Smith, 58.
99. E.B. Sledge, *With the Old Breed: At Peleliu and Okinawa* (New York, 1981), 28.
100. *Ibid.*, 31.
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102. *Ibid.*, 52.
103. *Ibid.*, 51.
104. Robert Leckie, *Helmet for My Pillow* (New York, 1957), 263.
105. James W. Johnson, *The Long Road to War: A Marine's Story of the Pacific Combat* (Lincoln, 1998), 68.
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111. Leckie, *Helmet for My Pillow*, 265.
112. George McMillan, *The Old Breed: A History of the First Marine Division in World War II* (Washington, 1949), 232-8.
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114. Hough, *Assault on Peleliu*, 26.
115. Personal Narrative of General Oliver P. Smith, 57.
116. Sledge, *With the Old Breed*, 32.
117. *Ibid.*, 166.
118. See Personal Narrative of General Oliver P. Smith, 52.
119. Hough, *Assault on Peleliu*, 27.
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121. *Ibid.*, 275.
122. Bruce Gamble, *The Black Sheep: The Definitive Account of Marine Fighting Squadron 214 in World War II* (Novato, Calif., 1998), 132 and 197.
123. McMillan, *Old Breed*, 249.
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# Civilian Versus Military Leadership in Napoleonic Louisiana, 1803

By Robert D. Bush

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*The author is the former head of research for the Historic New Orleans Collection and the editor of three books. He lives in Commerce City, Colorado, where he works for the U.S. Advisory Council on Historic Preservation.*

Despite the festivities surrounding the bicentennial of the Louisiana Purchase (April 30, 1803), it is easy to overlook the momentous military and civilian issues of the time. European administrations in colonial America in 1803 were diverse, although each had to deal with similar problems—defense, land settlement, tax and tariff collection, recalcitrant colonials, and relations with the Indians. There were some similarities between French and Spanish institutions during the late eighteenth-century in particular, and hence colonial Louisiana—stretching geographically from the Mississippi River Delta to the Rocky Mountains—offers a unique case study.

Administration in colonial Louisiana, first by France and, by treaty after 1769 by Spain, which then retroceded it to France on November 30, 1803—in time for its final transfer to the United States twenty days later—understandably exhibited all of the familiar traits of overlapping administrative prerogatives, mutually exclusive offices, and rival claims to authority. In other words, Louisiana's colonial administration mirrored the problems of governments in Europe. The system of royal patronage, whereby a term of office in the colonies was universally regarded by administrators or military governors as an opportunity to acquire property and riches in order to return home as a gentleman of means, added yet another dimension to the already existing problems. The dualistic system of colonial administration,