

CHAPTER 10



THE SOUTH PACIFIC

"The average person puts only 25% of his energy into his work. The world takes off its hat to those who put in more than 50% of their capacity, and stands on its head for those few and far between souls who devote 100%."

Andrew Carnegie

The *USS GENERAL JOHN POPE* arrived at the Naval Receiving Station in Nouméa²⁰, New Caledonia²¹, on December 23. Nouméa sat approximately 915 miles northeast of Australia. The French-owned island served as a significant military hub in the South Pacific.

The southern part of New Caledonia boasted heavy occupancy, mostly by servicemen, and this particular receiving station dispatched Marines and sailors assigned to submarines, battleships, cruisers, and destroyers. In many ways New Caledonia earned its reputation as a big playground for Navy personnel. Graham Jackson told the

truth about one thing: John would travel to exotic islands in the Pacific.

Troops being transported finally found dry land 14 days after their departure from Shoemaker, California. Every man aboard cheered upon setting foot on land. Freedom from claustrophobia, Japanese attack subs, hot-tempered servicemen, and even hotter boiler room temperatures gave everyone something to be happy about.

Colonizing New Caledonia represented an important strategy, called island hopping, for U.S. Armed Forces. "US forces moved from island to island, using each as a base for capturing the next."²² "Building on their success at Guadalcanal, Allied leaders began advancing from island to island as they sought to close in on Japan. This strategy of 'island hopping' allowed them to bypass Japanese strong points while securing bases across the Pacific. Moving from the Gilberts and Marshalls to the Marianas (left), US forces acquired airbases from which they could bomb Japan."²³

"With its central Pacific location, New Caledonia provided a strategic air base as well as personnel and logistics support for the war."²⁴ Nouméa's small city population naturally gravitated to different aspects of the island outpost. More often than not, men chose where to spend their time based on ethnicity, branch of service, division, rank, or activity. When so many personnel landed in one spot, it was nearly impossible to predict what priorities mattered most. Like an internal compass, people ended up where they felt most comfortable. The same rang true at the beach.

The many beaches throughout New Caledonia made the stop a favorite among all military personnel. Officers,

subordinates, sailors, and Marines took advantage of the island's peace and tranquility. Newcomers savored the locale most because they had never seen anything like it anywhere stateside unless they came from south Florida or southern California. Contrast the lingering signs of depression stateside against a massive youthful island installation in the South Pacific and it became plain to see why military personnel loved passing through there.

John's first exotic port of call provided heavy doses of tropical heaven on earth. He and his buddies had arrived in paradise. Everyone had smiles on their faces. So many things about New Caledonia put a surreal stamp on John's new life.

With economic challenges at home and vacation paradise abroad, one central theme appeared ostensibly wedged between them: war. World conflict complicated the exclusive lifestyles of the troops, resources, and assets committed to the islands they currently inhabited. The Navy and Marines knew they must defeat a powerful enemy in the Japanese, while the Army and Allies took on the Nazis in the European and North African Theaters. Taking into consideration what was really going on, many men could only enjoy themselves temporarily. Beneath the playful exterior of many sailors and soldiers lurked unsettling fear and anxiety. Swiftly the glow of paradise takes a dark turn toward its true purpose: to spell the fatigued and prepare fresh personnel for battle.

Some of the men who had not been dispatched struggled to make sense of their environment. Among the restless, John could not quite get the hang of doing nothing for any length of time. Beyond beach activities, his options included movies twice a week, softball, and

checkers. John showed little interest in games before he enlisted in the service. Like he had on the troop ship, he looked for things to do, and food prep gave him plenty to do.

As he awaited reassignment, he requested kitchen duty, with a virtual guarantee he would find plenty of work to do. In fact, the mess officer was only too happy to accommodate him. Needless to say he got his wish. John's temporary duties again involved peeling potatoes and vegetables for 15,000 to 20,000 sailors and Marines, a military city not quite as large as Shoemaker in personnel yet equally voracious in appetite. As much as he wanted to be assigned, he enjoyed working rather than sitting around.

John wanted a fast track to the front lines. No one really understood why he was in such a hurry to enter the war. On the one hand, he never had so much free time while being paid. On the other, he had no prior experience with paradise, so who could blame him for saying paradise bored him? His buddies wrote him off as a workaholic while they refined the art of doing nothing.

Some of the guys wanted to check out Australia. New Caledonia was in close proximity if they could figure out how to get there. Seeing the world caught John's attention, and he was interested if they could sort it out. As a few black sailors stood around debating their general interest outside the transport office, a few white sailors came out making preparations of their own. One of John's buddies asked them what the process was to go visit Australia. One of them retorted, "Well, I don't know. You coloreds can't go over there because the Australians think you are all like monkeys without tails." The group broke out in laughter as

they walked away. John was not one to give up on anything easily, but after that comment, the four of them looked at each other, thinking any comparison to monkeys completely turned them off. In an instant none of them had any further desire to go to Australia.

The troop ship provided clear leading indicators of life at war in the South Pacific. The heat and humidity started to wear the men down. Predictably, tolerance ran thin. The military police threw servicemen in the brig left and right for five- and sometimes ten-day stretches. Any time the guys thought about starting a fight somewhere, the sight of MPs reminded them that the reward for stupidity included bread, water, and the brig. That straightened out any nagging itch for mischief. When the MPs got tired of picking up the same jarheads over and over again, they sent the persistent troublemakers to the rock pile. One MP told another, "Thirty days on the pile, a sledge hammer, and sun... does the trick every time."

While hot, humid weather conditions in the South Pacific caused most of the bad behavior throughout the receiving station, regional weather proved equally volatile. On New Year's Day, howling winds woke everyone out of a deep sleep. Before noon, a full-blown typhoon²⁵ began to tear up the place. Incredibly high winds wrecked their light construction facility like it was a house of cards attached with string. The lethal winds destroyed nearly all the living quarters, called Quonset huts, pulling the tin roofs from their framing and easily folding the mesh screen siding. Made of the same materials, sick bay had to be tied down by dozens of sailors and Marines to protect the wounded.

Quonset huts stood about fifty yards from the toilet facilities, which were nothing more than glorified

backhouses. Halfway around the world, John just shook his head in amusement. The military version also had no running water, though built large enough to seat ten and designed without interior walls. For the sake of efficiency, the government-issue design did not require privacy. The construction battalion built these quick-assembly latrines on the logic of military engineers, who rationalized their design by concluding that all men do their business the same way. Men willing to die for each other had nothing to hide. More to the point, privacy costs extra.

High winds blew the tops and sides off the latrines, knocking men down into the sewage pit below the ten-man bench seat. As makeshift materials landed on servicemen, some got pinned down, became trapped and submerged in the sewage. Waste acted like quicksand drowning them. Other men were blown off their feet and lifted into the air with nothing close enough to anchor them. John found a tree and literally hung on to save his own life. Approximately 50 lives were lost because they could not tie themselves down fast enough. John had been in New Caledonia for only ten days. With all the mayhem he had already seen, he was ready to leave.

After the typhoon, a lot of men were transferred to other islands. John's group received assignments at Espiritu Santo, which was part of the New Hebrides Islands. Once again their quarters were Quonset huts with open sides. This time the familiar hut design had no screens. They were instructed very clearly from the beginning to tuck the netting under their mattresses to keep the island wildlife out of their beds. John assumed that what he couldn't see could not hurt him. He also

presumed that Espiritu Santo could not possibly be any worse than New Caledonia. So he ignored the suggestion.

One night at the tail end of a long, busy day, John was sleeping peacefully when he felt something odd around his legs. Still groggy, he woke up and reached for the chain light hanging over his bed. With eyes barely adjusted to the light, he threw the blanket and sheet back. Before John could focus, he distinguished a foot-long green lizard. He nearly jumped three feet straight in the air and out from underneath the tin roof in one continuous motion.

He had never seen anything that big and green in his life! The creature startled him so badly his eyes were still wide open. He actually forgot to breathe. Not knowing whether to swing at it or freeze until it ran away, he hesitated before shooing it off his bed. Now wide awake, he turned in search of netting. More willing to cooperate, he hoped to avoid more reptiles, malaria-carrying mosquitoes, and any other undesirables.

The effects of island living began to crawl under John's skin. The fate of his mental health hinged on keeping his mind focused and his head uncluttered in this completely foreign environment. Always preferring to use his hands to keep his mind occupied, he found work down at the docks. His work duties on the island included unloading Liberty ships full of cargo such as food and other supplies. Underneath all the busy activity, John had to wait for everything. Thus he discovered a critical secret.

The hardest thing to do in the military was stay busy. His new mission, even on a short term basis, was to keep from losing his mind through boredom and repetition. That's where the fighting, the restlessness, and all the anxiety came from. He figured that out and then no longer

cared to hear all the whining and complaining of others. He made up his mind to tend to his own business and he would get through this. His formula proved most successful.

Espiritu Santo had become just another island at this point. The exotic pleasures of island living had gone by the wayside and now the mission was to stay busy to block out the noise. His colleagues would rather sit around and complain. Admittedly, everybody managed depression that stemmed from a myriad of sources. Homesickness, uncertainty, and talk of war all dissolved courage and took a piece of each and every brave sailor or soldier who remained idle too long. It all added up to fear, and fear poisoned the mind. However, even the best psych ward doctor could not tell whether unknown fears did more damage than known ones.

Some guys were petrified after warnings that the Japanese were holed up in the hills above the outpost. Everyone heard the warnings: "Do not stray beyond secured areas." Recovered remains suggested the enemy had cannibalistic tendencies.

At first John didn't believe it, until he thought back to the lizard incident. He was so far out of his element that anything was possible. Every now and then he and others were informed of victims who had been attacked, killed, and dismembered. He clearly did not know how to categorize this type of danger. He only wanted off the island, and new evidence convinced him to leave immediately. In utter disbelief he spoke a thought, "What kind of people eat other people?"

The admission brought the atrocities of war closer to all the men in the South Pacific. John refused to fathom

what else to expect. Four months passed on Espiritu Santo by the time his new orders came in. Without hesitation he boarded a destroyer, destination unknown. He honestly did not care where it went as long as he left this island.

Looking back, the search for a permanent assignment had begun with New Caledonia and Espiritu Santo. The obvious *modus operandi* of military personnel management suggested that many sailors were shipped into the Pacific Theater with no specific assignment, making their unofficial assignment to wait. John's work ethic kept him sane. Maybe the Navy had spread the cliché about "people waiting for their ship to come in" because everyone in the Pacific waited for their orders, fortunes to be determined. Only now did he begin to understand the possibility that his search for an assignment was a metaphor for life. And if that were true, then as best he could tell a great many people around him were lost.

Even when some had ship assignments, they either waited for their ship to arrive or they were sent on a wild goose chase searching for their assigned ship. John wondered whether the Navy moved sailors around sometimes just to keep them busy. In other words, would the Navy dole out assignments to move a sailor from one installation to another rather than onto a ship? He never knew, but if so, did this procedure have a name or did it represent a breakdown? With so many sailors to keep track of, missed assignments and miscommunication led to all kinds of problems.

The true story of one sailor went that he received his assignment, chased down his ship, and narrowly missed her as she pulled away heading out to sea without him. Before anyone on board had a chance to report that he was

not on board, the ship got fired upon by an enemy vessel and sunk. The Navy got notification of the ship's sinking, and the correspondence pool sent out letters in the form of telegrams. On behalf of the U.S. Navy, his family received the "death notice" telegram delivered by a junior officer. In the meantime, the sailor naturally became upset that he missed his assignment and he sought reassignment, regretting that he missed his chance to join the war and fight for his country. In all the confusion, his name went back into the pool. It might have even gotten lost among all the other names. The bottom line was that his family thought the sailor perished at sea.

Once John got to the undisclosed checkpoint, the officer on the destroyer told him he was being assigned to a submarine. Subsequently he boarded a bus to the submarine base. Reporting for duty, he climbed on board the sub and down the ladder. As he approached a landing area inside the sub, he moved toward the captain. The captain looked up at him and said, "How tall are you, sailor?" John responded, "I'm not sure sir," so the captain said, "Stand over here." A mark on the wall indicated that John exceeded the maximum height limit for duty on a submarine. The captain informed John, "I'm sorry, sailor. We will have to reassign you. You are four inches too tall."

After looking around the confined interior of the sub, John privately breathed a sigh of relief. The waiting was killing him, but living in an underwater coffin scared him to death. Walking away from the sub, he confronted the mental picture of getting claustrophobia while sneaking around the Pacific, dodging depth charges, and chasing down enemy ships. By his calculations, when a submarine got sunk no one lived. With no chance of survival, a sub

was the last place he wanted to be. John thanked God for letting him be tall.

Before he knew it, John received new orders. The officer's voice conveyed urgency. This time there was no mystery to where he was going. He was shipping out immediately to meet up with Battleship *USS NORTH CAROLINA*. A battleship finally! He didn't know much about it, but he felt he was ready for anything.

For the first time, he and six other black sailors really entered the war. The time came to be a sailor. He and the others boarded a PB4Y Privateer amphibious seaplane. John did not know all his colleagues yet, but that soon changed as they flew to Pearl Harbor, Honolulu, Hawaii, to board the ship together.