CHAPTER EIGHT

BOUGAINVILLE

NOVEMBER 23, 1943 - SEPTEMBER 26, 1944

After the Japanese were ejected from the Central Solomons the next step toward the neutralization of fortress Rabaul was taken on November 1 when the IMAC executed its plan to invade Bougainville. All Admiral Halsey needed at Bougainville was enough real estate to build some air and motor torpedo boat bases. Because Bougainville-based fighters and light bombers would be closer to Rabaul than those flying from existing bases, they would be in a better position to stifle Japanese air and naval activity there. Similarly, new PT boat bases in Bougainville would extend the length of the gauntlet that Japanese supply barge traffic had to run before reaching their island garrisons.[127]

There were estimated to be 44,000 Japanese on Bougainville but IMAC had no intention of fighting them all. IMAC, not wanting another Guadalcanal or New Georgia, sought to bypass as many enemy troops as possible. With this goal in mind the landings were made in Empress Augusta Bay at Cape Torokina, an area extremely difficult to reach by land and far from any major Japanese troop concentrations. The ground was so swampy and rugged that the Japanese never seriously considered that the Allies would try to launch an offensive over it, and as a result there were only a few surprised enemy troops there to defend it when the invasion force arrived. In a few days the Marines fought their way through the Japanese and jungle to establish a perimeter large enough for the Seabees to begin work on the first of three planned airfields, a fighter strip at Torokina Point. Torokina Point was the only reasonably dry ground on the beachhead.

On November 22 Echelon One of the Sixth Special NCB followed IMAC to Bougainville. After breaking camp and loading their household equipment on an LCT, the Seabees, with what they described as a new grimness and seriousness of purpose, picked up their helmets, packs, and rifles and boarded LCIs (Landing Craft Infantry) for the 170-mile trip to Empress Augusta Bay. The hop to Vella Lavella had put Echelon One on the flank of the Japanese at Kolombangara. The hop to Bougainville was taking them deep behind enemy lines. The

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[127]John Miller, CARTWHEEL: The Reduction of Rabaul: United States Army in World War Two: The War in the Pacific (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History United States Army, 1990); Morrison, Breaking the Bismarcks Barrier; Ronald H. Spector, Eagle Against the Sun: The American War with Japan (New York: The Free Press, A Division of Macmillan, Inc., 1985); Rentz, Bougainville and the Northern Solomons. All information related to the campaign in the northern Solomons was drawn from these works unless otherwise noted.

sight of the island itself was forbidding.[128] Its lush green jungles were by then familiar to the Sixth Special men, but the island's mountainous spine had the highest peaks in the Solomons, rising over 10,000 feet with large portions of the range over 5,000 feet. Situated to the northeast of Cape Torokina for all new arrivals to see was the towering 8,650-foot cone of Mount Bagana, an active volcano continuously belching out thick white smoke. A more exotic setting could not be found in any Hollywood adventure film. On the approach to the island one expected to hear the rhythmic pounding of native drums. Head-hunting tribes had only recently, and imperfectly, been suppressed by Christian missionaries.[129]

As the Seabee stevedores of Echelon One and the LST supply convoy they were part of sailed northward, the Third Marine Division was beating back the Japanese along the Numa Numa and East-West Trails to secure ground for the two additional bomber strips called for in Admiral Halsey's plans. After twenty-one days of episodic fighting in jungle conditions worse than Guadalcanal, the American ground troops were close to their goal of securing a defensive perimeter in which to build their air bases. The Japanese infantry resisted vigorously, but because the Japanese Army commanders believed the landing was just a diversion they did not attack in sufficient strength to jeopardize the American operation. There were only around 3,000 Japanese troops in the area facing two American divisions.

The American success on land was matched by equal success against Japanese air and naval forces. On the night of November 2 a Japanese interception force of cruisers and destroyers was fought off by Rear Admiral A. Stanton Merrill's Task Force 39 in the Battle of Empress Augusta Bay. An even greater Japanese naval threat manifested itself days later when Admiral Takeo Kurita's heavy cruiser task force arrived at Rabaul intent on raiding the American beachhead on Bougainville. The Japanese caught Admiral Halsey with no capital ships other than his few carriers with which to oppose an imminent enemy surface attack. Halsey gambled his carriers and launched air strikes that caught the enemy ships at anchor and caused enough damage to force the enemy fleet to retire for repairs.

The pre-invasion Allied attacks against the five Japanese air bases on and around Bougainville were successful in suppressing enemy flight operations there, but bombing attacks on Rabaul's air bases were not so effective. In November Rabaul-based planes attacked the Bougainville beachhead practically every night, and sometimes in daylight too. Air Command Solomons put in a yeoman effort at suppressing Japanese air power. Airsols bombers worked over the Japanese air fields heavily, and combat air patrols and night fighters intercepted many of the enemy raiders before they could reach their targets. Some Japanese bombers got through, but fortunately the damage they inflicted did not exceed the American capability to absorb it, and American plans were not seriously hampered.

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[128]"6th Special Travelogue," 11; Peyton, Monthly report for Section Two 6th Special NCB concerning activities from November 1943 through January 1944, 7 February 1944.

[129]Edward J Doherty, Danger, Fighting Men at Work: A work-a-day tale of how the job was actually done by the 27th Seabees as told by Willard G. Triest (Baton Rouge: Army and Navy Pictorial Publishers, Army and Navy publishing Co., [ca. 1945]), passim.

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Just before dawn on November 23 as Sixth Special Echelon One's convoy drew up to Cape Torokina an air raid alert was sounded. Anti-aircraft guns on the beaches opened fire, exciting the dim morning sky with the blazing streaks of thousands of tracers. The LCIs and some of the LSTs slipped through the coral-lined channel and quickly made their way to the beach north of Cape Torokina to discharge their cargos. Other LSTs headed for the seaward side of Puruata Island, about 1,000 yards away.[130] It was an exciting morning for the stevedores, but they suspected that things might be rough on Bougainville when they were issued hand grenades. They slipped them in the pockets of their dungarees and coveralls as they walked down the bow ramps of their LCIs to the black-sand beach.[131]

It took most of the day for Echelon One to get into its temporary bivouac position. Before they left the beach they saw a LST get hit with mortar fire and their Marine neighbors shoot up some Japanese landing barges moving up on their left flank. Between these episodes of violence they discharged their equipment, piling it on the narrow beach feet from the bows of their landing craft. The LCTs were unloaded easily, but negotiating crates down the steep narrow ramps of the LCIs was more difficult. The Seabees were assigned a bivouac area in front of the artillery batteries about 1,000 yards from the nearest point of the perimeter, a salient approximately four miles wide and four miles deep. No part of the beachhead was out of enemy guns, range, and the Japanese had been busy moving artillery up to 155mm into the hills outside the perimeter to shell the American positions. In light of this important information no Seabee in Echelon One had to be ordered to dig a foxhole. Compared to the danger of enemy shellfire, rain and mud were minor concerns.[132]

The Sixth's first camp was nothing more than a couple of hundred foxholes dispersed among the trees of an uncleared jungle. Small piles of military accoutrements cluttered the already unruly scene. The jungle itself added to the sense of chaos with its thick, claustrophobic tangle of close packed vegetation that had to be hacked clear so one man could see another. Typically multiple canopies of growth shielded the jungle floor from the sun, keeping it dim even in bright daylight. The stench of things rotten pervaded the jungle, especially after the daily rainstorm. The humidity and the insects made life even more unpleasant.

For the Sixth men their early foxhole life on Bougainville was a taste of what the front-line troops had to endure day in and day out. Concealment was not an issue for service troops They could at least improve their camp. The men did their best to make their foxholes comfortable and secure. The longer they stayed in them the more elaborate they became. Logs were cut to roof them over and provide some protection from air bursts, shelves were cut into the walls for sleeping, and ponchos were stretched on wooden frames over top to keep the rain out. It was preferable to sleep above ground rather that in a wet

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[130]" 6th Special Travelogue," 11.

[131]Gall, interview, summer 1994.

[132]"6th Special Travelogue," 11.

hole, so some men improvised sleeping platforms right over their foxhole shelters. During an alert they could roll out of bed and into their foxholes.[133]

Their first uneasy night on Bougainville the men ate their boxed K rations and tried to sleep in their foxholes. At night the jungle is alive with the sounds of the many creatures that call it home, and it glows with a strange phosphorescence that confuses the eye. At night anxious ears and eyes heard and saw the rustling of animals through the dimly glowing palm leaves, showing about as luminously as a white handkerchief in a dark room, and imagined they saw Japanese soldiers. The Sixth Special men were technically behind the perimeter, but that perimeter had plenty of holes in it, and there was a real danger of Japanese infiltrators, so guards were posted. It was an uneventful first night beyond the wild shooting by nervous men on sentry duty and the unfamiliar sound of American artillery harassing the Japanese. In the morning a new rule was instituted forbidding sentries to fire at night. For the sake of safety, sentries were to keep their bayonets fixed and stay into their holes. Anything that jumped in their hole was to be bayoneted. Anything that stayed outside their hole could pass unmolested. This rule made nocturnal trips to the latrine much less dangerous.[134]

On November 24, as the Marines were finishing off the Japanese resistance to the northwest of the proposed bomber strip sites, the stevedores of Echelon One were sent to the beach to assist the Marine unloading details, while the Sixth's maintenance gang got to work building their showers and galley.[135] A high standard of living is characteristic of Seabees, even when forced to live in foxholes. The returning stevedores found hot food and cool showers waiting for them when they returned from the beach, but not a good night's rest. The whistle of incoming artillery shells sent a cry through the bivouac to take cover. The men dashed for their foxholes and wished they had dug them deeper as Japanese shells exploded near their camp, shaking the earth. There would be no sleep, for throughout the night the Japanese guns sent shells over their heads. The enemy lengthened and shortened the range unpredictably, apparently searching for some profitable target; perhaps it was the American artillery battery dug in 200 yards behind Echelon One. Many of the shells fell too close for comfort, and to compound the strain Japanese bombers raided the area before dawn.[136]

Sunrise on November 25 brought an end to the night's mayhem, with no Sixth casualties other than frayed nerves which were quickly restored. Appropriately enough November 25 was Thanksgiving Day. For supper the Sixth men enjoyed a hot foxhole meal of fresh turkey and at least some of the trimmings. The men were delighted to have the traditional holiday

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[133]Peyton, Monthly report for Section Two 6th Special NCB concerning activities from November 1943 to January 1944, 7 February 1944; MacNamara, interview, 18 June 1994; "Bougainville B.S.I. Nov. 25 1943, Typical Foxholes", Photograph taken by battalion photographer, NAVFAC Archives.

[134]Maas and MacNamara, interview, 23 July 1994.

[135]"6th Special Travelogue," 12.

[136]Ibid., 13; Gall, interview, summer 1994.

food not so much because it was well prepared but because it was not Spam, the all too familiar, and despised, staple of the American fighting man. That jungle Thanksgiving meal also symbolized the great disparity between American and Japanese power. It was not lost on the Sixth men that their country could send frozen turkeys to them one-quarter of the way around the world, while the Japanese were struggling to get a barge load of rice to their garrisons on neighboring islands less than fifty miles away.[137]

On Thanksgiving Day the construction of permanent perimeter defensive works began, but the Americans did not reach their final defensive line until December 15. The delay was related to the Japanese artillery attacks, something with which Echelon One had first hand experience with. To put a stop to the artillery attacks the Marines were called upon to push their perimeter further east, to take the prominences from which the Japanese were shelling the beachhead. The resulting fight for Hellzapoppin Ridge, a natural fortress about a kilometer and a half from the northeast corner of the perimeter, began on December 9 and continued until December 27.

Though the historian can look back and calmly calculate that the Japanese air attacks on Bougainville were never of sufficient magnitude to threaten the success of the operation, the picture was much different to the men who stood on the receiving end of those attacks. The few planes that slipped past the Airsols combat air patrols and the island antiaircraft defenses were of great concern to the stevedores whose work was frequently interrupted by them. The prime targets for Japanese artillery and bombers were not the Marines and Army troops on the perimeter but the ships, supply dumps, and airfields on or near Cape Torokina where the Sixth Special lived and worked. Air raids and artillery attacks were so frequent in the first three months after the invasion that the Seabees had to wonder if it was less dangerous on the perimeter. For the Seabees, working under the threat of Japanese attack made for exciting duty. On one occasion an LST beached outside the American defensive perimeter, but the stevedores gamely unloaded its cargo anyway.[138] During the period of vigorous Japanese intervention only two Sixth men broke under the strain and had to be evacuated from the combat zone.[139]

By the end of January the Sixth men considered bombing raids so commonplace that they rarely warranted mention.[140] Most men still respected the alerts and dashed for cover at the sound of the three cannon shots that signaled approaching enemy planes, but there was one man in the Sixth who simply refused to be inconvenienced. During a typical night-time air raid alert, as men leapt from their cots to run for their foxholes, one man remained comfortably situated in his bed. As the sound of engines drifted through the humid night air his friends called out to him, "Jap planes are coming!"; but he laconically replied, "They're

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[137]MacNamara, interview, 18 June 1994; Gall, interview, summer 1994.

[138]"6th Special Travelogue," 13.

[139]Peyton, Monthly report for Section Two 6th Special NCB concerning activities from November 1943 through January 1944, 7 February 1944.

[140]Ibid.

friendly planes." Then the whistle of falling bombs was heard and the men in the foxhole yelled, "Here come the bombs!" Unmoved by the flawless logic of his shipmates, the tired Seabee replied, "They're friendly bombs."[141]

On Bougainville the Sixth Special was in the awkward position of being directly responsible for the timely discharging of the LST echelons but not having direct control over the units they were trying to unload. Getting the ships unloaded so they could get off the beach before the deadline took tact and diplomacy as well as innovative stevedoring. The Officer-in-Charge of the Sixth Special's Second Section reported that: "In this operation the unit received many verbal commendations for the efficiency and time saved in the dispatch of ships." The commanding officer of IMAC's Fifth Field Depot, under whom the Sixth had previously served at Vella Lavella, also commended the stevedores on their performance.[142]

All of the Sixth Special's stevedoring work on Bougainville before January 15 was unloading LSTs. The Seabees had experience in this line of work, but on Bougainville it took on a new twist. The beaches at Torokina were shallow, causing the LSTs to beach seventy-five feet from shore with three feet of water between their lowered ramps and the sandy bottom. This made unloading a problem. A vehicle driven off the LST ramp would disappear under the water at high tide and crash to the ground at low tide. Additional ramps were needed to bridge the gap between the LST ramp and the sand. In the strong surf dirt ramps were quickly washed away, and coconut log ramps sometimes broke up under the continuous strain of supporting heavy vehicles. The Navy had a prefabricated ramp that held together well, but it took over an hour to assemble, an intolerable delay in light of the frequency of artillery attacks. For the sake of speed the Sixth men preferred the log ramp. Bulldozers pushed it in place and then the LST's own bow anchor windlass was used to hoist the log ramp up to the level of the LST ramp where it was secured. The whole operation was completed in ten minutes.[143]

Even with the ramps in place vehicles could not always drive off under their own power if the water was too deep. When it was necessary to drive vehicles through deep water the Sixth's stevedores preferred to deflate the tires slightly and remove the fan belts. Under-inflated tires gave better traction on soft sand. If the fan belts were not removed from the engine it was likely to stall when the spinning fan blades hit the water as the vehicle rolled off the ramp into the surf. A vehicle stalled in front of the ramp was like a cork in a bottle.

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[141]Maas and MacNamara, interview, 23 July 1994.

[142]Peyton, Monthly report for Section Two 6th Special NCB concerning activities from November 1943 through January 1944, 7 February 1944; Peyton, Memorandum to Commander S. E. Mittler concerning LST discharging, 5 April 1944; Walter A. Churchill, Letter of commendation from commanding officer of the 5th Field Depot, Supply Service, IMAC, Fleet Marine Force to commanding officer of 6th Special NCB Section Two, SERIAL: 00920, 7 March 1944, NAVFAC Archives.

[143]As noted earlier, all information concerning the working of LSTs comes from the detailed reports of Lieutenants Peyton and Glaze unless otherwise cited.

No other cargo could be towed or driven off the LST until a bulldozer pulled the immobile vehicle away.

The first LST echelons that the Sixth discharged brought in men as well as supplies. Troops and their organizational gear limited the amount of cargo space for fuel, ammunition, and rations to about 800 barrels of fuel and oil, about 200 tons, and 200 tons of ammunition. A load of dead cargo somewhat smaller than this took less than two hours to discharge from a plan-loaded LST at Vella Lavella, but without adequate trucks it took about seven hours to discharge on Bougainville. Depending on the distance to the supply dumps, maximum cargo discharging efficiency required at least sixteen trucks, eight taking on cargo in the tank deck while the other eight were delivering their loads to the dumps. Even with trucks, the high speed LST unloading that the Echelon One men perfected on Vella Lavella was possible on Bougainville only when the tide and surf were low enough that trucks could drive in and out of the tank deck under their own power. The truck shortage was not corrected until early December. When an adequate supply of trucks was finally put at the Sixth's disposal, the mixed cargo LSTs that previously required seven hours to discharge were unloaded in five hours or less, despite difficult operational conditions. Subsequent LST supply echelons brought fewer new troops and their related organizational gear and more of the aviation fuel and lubricating oil necessary to satisfy the needs of the three air strips. Eventually each LST brought in 2,000 drums, about 500 tons, of fuel and oil. By this time the Sixth men had adapted and refined their unloading techniques to the point were they could discharge 2,000 drums from an LST in five to seven hours.

Trucks greatly boosted the Sixth's operational efficiency, but even without them no LST that they were charged with unloading ever withdrew with its cargo less than completely discharged. This was at a time when LSTs were ordered to sail on an 18:00 deadline whether they had completed unloading or not, and many ships were leaving with cargo still on board. When they had no trucks the Seabees improvised. A fifty-five gallon drum of gasoline or oil weighs almost 500 pounds which makes it very tiring to manhandle. The Seabees let the ocean carry the drums. Since fuel and oil will float on water, the drums were simply rolled down the LST's ramp and into the surf where the wave action washed them onto shore. The men guided the drums down the ramps and through the water, swimming them in. It was wet duty, and it was not uncommon to find men working naked in the surf. Rolling the drums off the LSTs got them unloaded fast, but it made for some difficult work on the shore. The hard part of the operation was getting the drums up on the beach. Their weight caused them to sink into the sand, so strips of marston mat were laid end to end to provide a hard "runway" for the rolling drums.[144]

To unload ammunition without using trucks the stevedore company formed a human chain and passed artillery shells hand to hand. The chain began at the piles of shells on the tank deck, ran down the ramp, through the surf, and up the beach where another pile was made.

When there were no trucks available to take the cargo directly to the dumps the highly explosive fuel and ammunition was simply piled on the beach. The supply-strewn beaches were inviting targets to the Japanese and a distinct danger to the coastal defense batteries,

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[144]Gall, interview, summer 1994.

which because of the narrowness of the beach were directly behind the piles. One night the Japanese artillery scored a hit on a big stack of aviation gas drums causing a tremendous explosion and a spectacular fire the likes of which was rarely seen in civilian life. Drums were blowing up and launching other red hot drums hundreds of feet into the air, where they too would explode. There was no fighting the fire. When it finally burned out it was discovered that 480 drums of fuel had been lost and the intense heat had destroyed an adjacent 155mm Long Tom coastal defense gun, its melted barrel drooping like a wilted flower.

Inadequate transportation to the dumps made piling supplies on the beach an unavoidable evil, but the Sixth had a partial remedy. Before the Sixth arrived it had taken 100 men three to four days to manhandle a convoy load of fuel drums and shells onto trucks so they could be taken to the dumps. The Sixth men got the job done in one day by using their light crane and chimes to do the lifting.[145] By getting the dangerous cargos off the beach as quickly as possible they reduced the risk of losing to enemy action the supplies they had worked so hard to unload. They also eased the nerves of the 155mm gunners defending the beach, who were not enthusiastic about working in a powder keg.

Work on the perimeter defenses and airfields was steadily progressing while the Sixth Special brought ashore the men and materiel to construct and sustain the beachhead. They unloaded the Thirty-sixth NCB on November 26, and that unit immediately went to work on the first of the Piva bomber strips. When the Sixth Special arrived the Torokina fighter strip was only partially covered with marston mat; on December 10 it finally went into operation as the first eighteen gull winged Vought F4U Corsairs of Marine Fighting Squadron 216 took up station there. On the same day the 77th NCB arrived at the beachhead to build the second bomber strip. On Bougainville it took a Seabee battalion about a month to carve up the jungle slime and put an airfield in its place. Six regular NCBs were working there: the 71st, 25th, 53rd and 75th had gone in on D-Day. Simultaneous with the airfield construction, support facilities were built, including tank farms, hardstands, nose hangers, storage buildings, camps for aviation personnel, mess halls, galleys, and hospitals. A motor torpedo boat (PT boat) base with all its collateral camp facilities, maintenance shops, warehouses, and moorings was being constructed concurrently on Puruata Island. In many cases the work was executed despite attempts by the Japanese to interrupt it with air, artillery, mortar, or sniper attacks.[146]

By December 15 the Army and Marine troops were finished fortifying their perimeter. They dug trenches and two-man foxholes, mortar pits, machine gun nests, and artillery positions, behind a double row of barb wire with a 100 yard clear field of fire in front of them. Obstructions were placed on every trail and the ground around the intervening swamps mined to confuse and break up Japanese ground attacks. In addition, wherever the enemy

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[145]Chimes are multiple strands of cable that are attached to the cargo hook. The cable ends are fitted with specially designed adapters that allow them to easily pick up specific objects, usually several at a time. There were chimes for lifting bombs, gas drums, and other kinds of cargo.

[146]Building the Navy's Bases, pp. 268-273.

might direct his attack, American artillery was already registered and prepared to lay down a barrage on call. With the completion of the perimeter IMAC was relieved by the Army's XIV Corps, and the Marines' contribution to the Bougainville fight began to close as newly arrived Army units gradually relieved, them all along the front line. The Sixth men wondered if they too would be relieved but it was not to be. They were attached to XIV Corps.

As the Marines and Army were finishing the perimeter defenses the Sixth Special was starting on their new camp. The stevedores spent only a few weeks living out of foxholes. In early December they moved to a new camp site, and between convoys, using Seabee ingenuity to make up for a lack of materials, they built an excellent camp with many rear area conveniences including a theater that they officially opened on Christmas Day. Rustically fashioned of native wood, the theater was named after Second Section's commanding officer. At the dedication ceremony the final nail securing the theater sign was to be gold, and it was to be driven with a golden hammer. The Seabees made both using a common nail, an ordinary hammer, and some yellow paint. The one-foot-by-fourteen-foot sign read "Peyton's Playhouse," with a large yellow circle separating the two words. A yellow circle was the symbol that marked all Sixth Special equipment, but the circle on the theater sign was embellished with a painting of a buccaneer, a parrot on his shoulder and a cutlass in his hand. It was the unofficial symbol of Sixth Special NCB Second Section, Peyton's Pirates.[147]

Like relatives come to call on the holidays, Echelon Two rejoined Echelon One on Bougainville on December 23; 108 men were still on sea duty with LST Flotilla #5.[148] The Sixth's first Christmas overseas was celebrated at the theater. The two men wounded at Vella Lavella were each presented the Purple Heart medal by Lieutenant Peyton. A presentable Christmas tree was on hand, and Santa Claus made an appearance clad in soiled whites, wearing a cotton beard and carrying a sea bag stuffed with presents. There was good cheer, but the laughter, as one Seabee described it, was "covering many a saddened heart."[149]

Since the earliest days on Guadalcanal, Seabees had shared a special bond with Marines, and the Sixth was no exception. The Marine battalions bivouacked near their camp were always welcome to use the Seabees' showers, share in their entertainments, or eat in their mess hall, where they were sent to the front of the line. The Sixth's generosity was not limited just to the Marines. They were generally magnanimous.[150] When the 464th Army Quartermaster Company arrived on Bougainville during a heavy electrical storm, the Sixth invited them into their camp, even into their tents, providing them with shelter and hot coffee.

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[147]MacNamara, interview, 18 June 1994; Stoltz, interview, 13 February, 1994; details of the Christmas Day theater dedication and subsequent celebration came from photographs of the event and the notes written on their backs, NAVFAC Archives.

[148]Peyton, Monthly report for Section Two 6th Special NCB concerning activities from November 1943 through January 1944, 7 February 1944.

[149]"6th Special Travelogue," 13.

[150]MacNamara, interview, 18 June 1994.

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The soldiers had never been in the combat zone before, and during the air alerts and the artillery duel that took place later in the day the Seabees made room for the green soldiers in their foxholes and taught them to differentiate between the sounds of Japanese and American artillery shells.[151]

Because the Seabees were not stingy with their talents or their resources, some of them admittedly ill-gotten, they were popular with their neighbors. Perhaps there was always a touch of guilt at work in the hearts of the Seabees, who had so many relative luxuries where the fighting troops had so few. Unlike most service troops the Seabees shared in the dangers of the combat zones on many occasions, but their lives were on the whole much more comfortable and safe than those of the front-line fighting men of the Marines and Army. Having experienced danger themselves, the Sixth men had greater appreciation for their comrades on the perimeter. One evening while the Sixth men were enjoying a talent show in their theater, the sounds of battle raging on Hellzapoppin Ridge a few miles from their position grew so loud that the performers could not be heard over the artillery and small-arms fire. Gradually the audience drifted out and the performance ended.[152] For the Sixth men, being able to relax at a stage show while a few miles away the Marines were fighting a pitched battle was a situation tailor made to make the Seabees self-conscious of their lifestyle.

As Second Section battled the rough Empress Augusta Bay surf and the Marines secured Hellzapoppin Ridge, the Sixth Special First Section prepared to depart Fiji for its new duty station. They left on December 28. On January 1 they made a ten-hour stop at Espiritu Santo in the New Herbrides Islands, and on January 3 arrived on fabled Guadalcanal, coming ashore at Teneru beach at 16:00. Like Second Section before them, Guadalcanal gave First Section their first taste of the truly miserable equatorial climate that they would come to know well, with all its concomitant woes of malarial mosquitos, jungle rot, and land crabs. The debris of battle still littered the shore, providing the wide eyed, and unbloodied, Seabees of First Section the same striking views seen by their Second Section shipmate's three and a half months before. The end purpose of all their hard labor was obvious in the wreckage of the Japanese barges and ships along the beach. Every bag of cement, every box of rations, every bomb they lifted, they handled to bring about the defeat of the Japanese.

Instead of putting up their own camp or building their own galley the First Section lived as squatters in the 29th NCB camp and ate at the First Special NCB mess hall. The scuttlebutt among the men predicted another move in the immediate future, and on January 11 their Officer-in-Charge, Commander Dunbar, assembled them at the Seabee-built Teneru Theater to inform them that they were leaving for Bougainville and a reunion with the other half of the battalion as soon as transport was available. During their fifteen-day stay on the Canal, the First Section stevedored in conjunction with the First Special NCB. The Sixth

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[151]"Tour of the Pacific," 4; Ens. H. M. Scher. "Sixth Special Seabees Adopt Army Quartermaster Company," A contribution for the Seabee News Service BuY&D, [ca. 1944], NAVFAC Archives.

[152]MacNamara, interview, 18 June 1994, 40, 53-55.

men worked nine ships and one LST over the course of six days, handling 3,275 tons of cargo.[153]

On January 17 the First Section Seabees were issued ammunition for their weapons, and final preparations were made for the trip to Bougainville. The long awaited LCT and LCIs arrived, and the men loaded up their organizational gear for an 07:00 departure from Kukum Beach on January 18.

Meanwhile, on January 15 Second Section began discharging the first two cargo ships to hove to off Torokina. They lightered all the cargo ashore using the big LCTs, which were less likely to broach in the rough surf, and Army amphibious trucks (DUKWs) which avoided the dangers of broaching because they did not have to be unloaded in the surf. The DUKWs simply drove right up onto the beach and on to the supply dump. Second Section had forgotten nothing about conventional stevedoring during their months of LST specialization. They worked both ships at once, discharging 5,629 tons of cargo from the U.S.S. Adhara in ten days at a rate of 24.6 tons per platoon hour, and 4,417 tons from the U.S.S. Serpens in eight days at a rate of 18.25 tons per platoon hour. The total of 10,721 tons unloaded at an average rate of 21.5 tons per platoon hour was a very respectable performance.[154]

On January 20 while the Second Section labored to discharge the Adhara and the Serpens, a twenty-four vessel convoy sailed into Empress Augusta Bay. The LCT and LCIs that carried the First Section, Sixth Special NCB were among the new arrivals. Naturally they were greeted by an air alert. First Section came ashore on beach #2 at Torokina,[155] reuniting the sections for the first time since they left the United States. Commander Dunbar immediately resumed his duties as Officer-in-Charge of the united battalion, but it took about a month to work out the organizational growing pains. Commander Dunbar reassigned his officers on February 25. Lieutenant Peyton returned to his role as executive officer.[156]

In January Airsols was going all out to neutralize Rabaul. The bomber and fighter strips at Bougainville were buzzing with activity, but to keep up their offensive they needed Liberty ship loads of supplies. The Sixth Special was reunited on Bougainville in anticipation of a large influx of cargo ships that would bring the bombs, gas, spare parts, and all the other materials necessary to keep the planes striking at the Japanese. In the last half of January the battalion discharged five cargo ships at Torokina and handled 19,650 tons of cargo. February was a peak month for cargo handling. Nine new ships, most of them Navy attack cargo

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[153]James A Dunbar, Monthly report for Section One 6th Special NCB concerning activities in January 1944, 8 February 1944, NAVFAC Archives; "Tour of the Pacific," cover, 3.

[154]Peyton, Monthly report for Section Two 6th Special NCB concerning activities from November 1943 through January 1944, 7 February 1944.

[155]"Tour of the Pacific", cover, 4.

[156]James A. Dunbar, Memorandum from Officer-in-Charge 6th Special NCB to all battalion officers concerning command structure and duties, 25 February 1944, NAVFAC Archives.

Liberty ships, arrived and the Sixth handled 79,440 tons of cargo at a rate of 19.75 tons per platoon hour.[157]

The Japanese continued to strike back in the air through February. The old First Section of the Sixth Special, in the combat zone for the first time, became well acquainted with Japanese air raids before January was out. From January 23 to 29 enemy planes attacked nine times under cover of darkness, once nearly hitting a ship in the bay. Red alerts caused the stevedores to lose forty-five platoon hours of working time in the last six days of January. In February the Seabees experienced eleven more attacks over five days and lost another forty platoon hours to red alerts. The Seabees at least had the satisfaction of seeing one enemy plane shot down over the water. The last four attacks, which came on February 14, killed a few soldiers and sprinkled shrapnel around the Sixth's camp. After February 14 a Japanese air raid on Bougainville was a rare thing.[158] Airsol's persistence against Rabaul was paying off. In early February Japanese ships stopped using Rabaul harbor, and before the month was out they abandoned the airfields. Thereafter a raid on Rabaul was a milk run.

In February Japanese air and naval forces ceased to contest American occupation of Bougainville, but the ground forces, estimated at fifteen thousand men, under the command of General Hyakutake, had no intention of giving up. Driving the American garrison off the island and denying them their airfields could have given Rabaul breathing space to build itself up again. Final American victory in the Solomon's campaign would likely have been delayed by several months since the Allies would have to retake Bougainville or a similar advanced air base from which to hammer Rabaul with medium, dive, and torpedo bombers. Strategically General Hyakutake had correctly determined the course of action he should take; the American garrison was in fact inadequate to guard the full length of the perimeter, but ultimately General Harukichi Hyakutake lacked the resources and the skill to succeed. Still, during the month of March his attacks gave the 27,000 combat troops of the 37th and Americal Divisions cause for concern.

The Americans expected the Japanese to attack. Enemy troops were on the move and barge activity was up. On February 1 several Japanese barges were sunk up the beach from the Sixth position. Rumor was that they were loaded with troops.[159] On February 23, 700 of the Sixth Special men began training for emergency defensive operations.[160] It was thought that the Japanese would attempt an amphibious landing and the service troops would have to defend the beaches. During the March attacks a "condition black," signifying an enemy

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[157]Peyton, Monthly report for Section Two 6th Special NCB concerning activities from November 1943 through January 1944, 7 February 1944; Dunbar, Monthly report for Section One 6th Special NCB concerning activities in January, 8 February 1944; James A. Dunbar, Monthly report for 6th Special NCB concerning activities in February, 4 March 1944, NAVFAV Archives.

[158]Ibid.

[159]"Tour of the Pacific," 3.

[160]Dunbar, Monthly report for 6th Special NCB for February 1944, 4 March 1944.

amphibious landing, was announced and the Sixth men were sent back to camp for their rifles and ammunition. In their seaside foxholes they sweated out a Japanese counterinvasion that fortunately never came.

The Japanese attack opened on March 8 just after dawn when the Japanese opened up on all parts of the beachhead with artillery they had laboriously hauled up into the mountains outside the American perimeter. That night the Japanese broke through a part of the perimeter. Before the enemy offensive played itself out on March 27 they made several more small penetrations. The ground action was fierce. The Japanese fought with their usual tenacity but lacked enough infantry or artillery to defeat the Americans, who had good defensive positions and more men and guns at their disposal. The Americans also had tank and air support; the Japanese had none. Artillery shells were traded back and forth regularly. This was a part of the battle that the Sixth men could observe for themselves. On ten days during the offensive Japanese shells fell spasmodically all around the Sixth camp, blowing up an ammo dump on March 20, but the number of outgoing American shells always greatly outnumbered the incoming. On four nights the Sixth men lay awake listening to the Americans guns steadily bombard the Japanese.[161]

On the noisy nights of March 22, 23, and 24 the American gunners were trying to smother what would turn out to be the final serious Japanese attack of the Bougainville campaign. On March 22 and 23 General Hyukataki was concentrating his remaining troops for a mass attack against one point in the 129th Infantry's line. Forewarned of the Japanese plans, the Americans used their artillery and mortars to break up the enemy infantry attack before it got started. The Japanese struck at night on the March 23, pierced the American defensive line, and captured four pillboxes despite the murderous shelling raining down on them. The Americans parried in strength on March 24 with tank and infantry attacks supported by the 37th Division's artillery, three battalions of the guns from the Americal Division, the 129th Infantry's cannon company, and twenty-four 4.2 inch mortars. By afternoon the Americans prevailed and the Japanese who were left alive began to withdraw, again harried all night by American shells. A general retreat followed on the March 27. The last Japanese offensive cost the Americans 263 dead and the Japanese over 5,000 dead and over 3,000 more wounded. The Japanese ground forces were still an effective force, and there were a few more vigorous fights in store for the Americans in April when they expanded the perimeter, but the beachhead and air bases were never again threatened. In April the Japanese made their presence known to the Sixth Special with an occasional artillery attack. The first fifty-eight of the 108 stevedores assigned to LST Flotilla #5 returned to Bougainville on April 3, in time to hear for themselves the whistle of enemy shells overhead. The Japanese shelled the beachhead on April 10, 11, and 12, when they hit a fuel dump. After a final artillery attack on April 16 the Sixth Special was unmolested by the enemy.[162]

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[161]James A. Dunbar, Monthly report for 6th Special NCB concerning activities in March 1944, 4 April 1944, NAVFAC Archives; "Tour of the Pacific", 4-5.

[162]"Tour of the Pacific," 4-5.

In early March plans were in the making to send Company A of the Sixth Special NCB to stevedore on Stirling Island in the Treasury Group. On March 24 the Navy Liberty ship that was to carry Company A and its equipment, AK-96, the U.S.S. Sterope, completed loading and prepared to sail.[163] While the last Japanese offensive was being crushed in the hills on the perimeter the seven officers and 215 enlisted men of Company A assembled along the road near the exit of their camp around the Army DUKWs and 2-1/2-ton cargo trucks that were waiting to take them to the beach. These Seabees had the look of veterans. They had been in the combat area continuously since October 1, when as Echelon One they first came under enemy fire on Vella Lavella. By this time they were a disheveled and variously uniformed bunch. When Company A was in the combat areas the enforcement of uniform regulations took a back seat to critical stevedoring operations.[164] Both in camp and on the job they dressed for comfort. In the tropical climate their cotton uniforms were always wrinkled. To keep cool, pants were cuffed high above the ankle and shirts were often untucked if not unbuttoned. Some men wore their undershirts or simply went bare-chested. Shorts were made on an as needed basis by cutting off long pants. A few men even improvised sandals by trimming off the toes and tops of their field boots. The sailor hats, Navy shirts, and dungarees that at first dominated their dress were now leavened with green HBT (herringbone twill) Army and Marine fatigue hats, jackets, and pants.[165]

Though Treasury was a small step back from the combat zone, most of the departing Company A men took their weapons with them. The men climbed into the DUKWs and trucks with their Springfields, carbines, and Browning Automatic Rifles (BARs). Some even had their packs and equipment. However, many a Seabee preferred traveling light, taking no more than the clothes on his back and his mess gear. Regarding their issue equipment as too burdensome, they had disposed of it at the first opportunity. The Company A men had the rough-and-ready appearance of combat veterans, an ambiance that was further enhanced by the helmets that many wore; some others wore just the light-weight camouflage painted liner.

Company A's morale was high as they drove to the shore. The prospect of moving, especially if it was out of range of Japanese artillery, was usually a boost to the men's spirits.[166] An LCT, its bow lashed to piles driven into the beach, waited for them, its ramp down in the shallow surf. When the Seabees arrived they wasted no time getting aboard and taking what seats they could find among the wooden cases of ration boxes that half filled the vessel. The officers sat among their men as they sailed out to the U.S.S. Sterope. The liberty's crew had hung cargo nets over the side so the men could climb aboard, and the LCT drew up to them.

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[163]Ibid.

[164]MacNamara, interview, 18 June 1994.

[165]A series of captioned photographs taken by the Company A, 6th Special NCB, photographer chronicling the trip from Bougainville to Stirling Island, NAVFAC Archives. These photographs and their identifying captions are the source of much of the detail for the description of the trip to Stirling presented here.

[166]"6th Special Travelogue," 15.

With rifles slung and helmet chin straps buckled the men scaled the nets. It was an operation that warranted some care because a fall could land the clumsy Seabee back on the steel deck of the LCT, or in the water between the LCT and the ship, which offered the chance to drown or get crushed between the two vessels, or both. The Company A men brought along one of their pets, too. Empress, named after the bay, was a little black floppy-eared dog. Empress was known for the speed with which she took to the foxholes during an alert, but the men had grave doubts about her ability to scale the nets. Officer and enlisted man consulted and determined that little Empress could make the climb most expeditiously by riding in the front of a Seabees shirt like a baby kangaroo in its mother's pouch.

It was a seventy-mile journey to the Treasury Group, and the men passed the time on the deck playing games of chance, relaxing, eating K rations, conversing, and enjoying concertina music thoughtfully provided by one of their mates. They arrived at Stirling on March 26.

By the time Company A was stationed at Stirling it was a fully established base. During the week prior to the American invasion of Bougainville Allied landings were made on both the Treasury Group and Choiseul Island, the former about twenty-eight miles south and the latter equally far to the east of the southern tip of Bougainville. Both landings were intended to divert Japanese attention away from the planned November 1 invasion of Empress Augusta Bay. The Second Marine Parachute Battalion withdrew from Choiseul after a week of harassing the Japanese, but the Eighth New Zealand Brigade's invasion of the Treasury Group was more than just a diversion. Like Bougainville the Treasury Group became the site of an American advanced air and torpedo boat base from which to strike at Rabaul and the other Japanese positions in the Bismarck and Northern Solomons. The Treasury Group consists of the islands of Stirling and Mono, which bracket Blanche Harbor, creating an excellent sheltered anchorage deep enough for large ships. Mono is eight miles long and five miles wide, heavily jungled, and rugged but not mountainous. Stirling is about three and one-half miles long and one mile wide, and being a coral island it is relatively flat. A radar outpost was built on the north shore of Mono, but it was on Stirling that the 87th, 82nd, and 88th Seabees constructed most of the base facilities for Acorn Twelve,[167] to which the Sixth was attached.

On Stirling the Seabees built a 7,000-foot by 300-foot medium bomber field with two taxi ways, hardstands, quonset huts for shop facilities, and a 5,000-barrel aviation gas tank farm. The PT base had its own fuel station, a wharf, three pontoon dry docks, and a small boat and crash boat pier. The Seabees also built numerous roads, two hospitals, a sawmill, LST landing beaches, camps for all the activities stationed on the island, magazines and warehouses for the naval supply depot, and a 43 foot by 428 foot pontoon dock which large cargo ships could tie up against for easy loading or discharging.[168] It would be at this dock that the Sixth's Company A would land, and work. During the Sixth's entire tour of duty in

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[167]An "acorn" was a standardized advanced air base, the smaller cousin of an "oak," the full sized air base.

[168]Building the Navy's Bases, 2:267-269.

the combat area, Stirling Island was the only place where they worked cargo from a dock, without the need for lighters.

Stirling Island was an escape from Japanese air raids and artillery but not from work. The number of ships calling at the base increased tremendously shortly after Company A arrived.[169] At times the men had to work six hours on and six hours off to keep the cargo moving on schedule.[170] They set a record for the unit in the four and a half months they spent there. A single company worked 104 ships and handled 57,538 tons of cargo. In the same time period on Bougainville the other three companies handled 120,398 tons of cargo, which when split three ways equals 40,132 tons per company, over 17,000 tons short of the A Company figure.

When the pace slackened and the Company A men got some recreation time, they enjoyed the beauty and serenity of the little island's quiet lagoons where they swam, fished, and sailed. They also developed an intensely competitive intracompany baseball league.[171] The hard coral was not the ideal playing surface; island ball players quickly learned that sliding into a base was a painful and bloody proposition.[172]

While at Stirling, Company A, like the rest of the old Second Section, celebrated the anniversary of its first year overseas. Though most men had been away from their families for more than a year, the anniversary made the Sixth men hopeful that relief and a trip home were something they could expect sooner rather than later.[173] They felt they were long overdue for a rest. At the time of enlistment, a pair of veterans recalled, they were told that they would be rotated back to the United States after six months overseas service![174] At that point the Sixth men would have been delighted with a liberty in New Zealand or Australia. It was not to be. A year of hard work in a tropical climate was a lengthy stint, but it was not always possible to relieve units. Both sections of the Sixth Special were due for a rest. Never had they worked harder than on Bougainville and Stirling. They worked ships practically every day, and so many ships came to Torokina and Blanche Harbor that the stevedores often worked three or more at once. From January 15 to September 30 the Sixth worked 137 ships, handling 286,618 tons of cargo, and another 104 ships and 57,583 tons were logged at Stirling from March 26 to August 14, for a battalion total of 251 ships and 343,201 tons in eight and a half months, over 80 percent of it handled in lighters.

Back on Bougainville, aside from the air raids, artillery attacks, and frequent earthquakes, life within the perimeter had shown a steady improvement since December. When the

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[169]"6th Special Travelogue," 15.

[170]MacNamara, interview, 18 June 1994.

[171]"Sixth Special Travelogue," 15.

[172]Gall, interview, summer 1994.

[173]"6th Special Travelogue," 15.

[174]Maas and MacNamara, interview, 23 July 1994.

battalion reunited a new larger camp was built. Later, as the Japanese were abandoning their airstrips on Rabaul, the Sixth Special theater got its first movies. On March 2 the first anniversary of the formation of the Sixth Special was celebrated with a party, and cake was served in the chow hall. In April the camp got its first electric lights, and the Ship's Service and other small stores opened.

May brought some outside talent to Peyton's Playhouse in the form of a 22nd Special Service Command stage show and the Eddie Peabody show. In late July and early August there was an unprecedented overflow of top quality entertainment. On July 31 the U.S.O. came to Bougainville, and the stevedores enjoyed a show with Bud Casanova, but the entertainment kept getting better. In the first four days of August the Bob Hope show came to the island. More important than jokes, Bob Hope brought along beautiful white women, something many of the Sixth men had not seen in almost a year. On August 3 what many Sixth men regarded as the best performance yet was put on by the sixty-piece Royal New Zealand Air Force band and an eighteen-piece swing band. On August 16 Company A returned to Torokina, and the battalion was reunited in time for the Jack Benny show, which preformed on the island for three days.[175] On September 16 they saw a U.S.O. production by the gracious Peggy Alexander. She perhaps more than any other performer won the hearts of the Sixth Special stevedores when she politely declined the "gold braid's" request for her to join them at dinner. She told the Sixth Special officers her husband was a sergeant in the Army and that she would eat with the enlisted men.[176] The final stage show came on September 21, courtesy of the 37th Division Band.

On Bougainville the Sixth men found that rear area comforts did not come without sacrifice. Rugged living in the combat zone had allowed the relaxation of many of the rules and regulations by which military units traditionally maintain discipline in garrison situations. Discipline for discipline's sake chaffed at the more independent-minded Seabees. Once in the active theater of operations the men never again stood guard over nothing armed with a wooden drill rifle as they had done at Camp Peary. When the enemy was within striking distance and stevedores were urgently needed, it was understood by officer and enlisted man alike that the really important thing was to get their job done. During those times no Sixth Special officer tried to tell the men how to dress, or when to shave, and the men were never asked to march around on the drill field in the tropical heat, an exercise that was extremely difficult to justify in terms of accelerating the ultimate defeat of Japan.

As the Torokina beachhead quieted down, stateside rules and regulations enjoyed something of a revival under Commander Dunbar, whose belief in the discipline enhancing virtues of frequent drill were well known to the men of C and D Companies who served under him at Fiji. The beards came off and the men had their first inspection and muster in late April. In May Commander Dunbar instituted a daily program of close and extended order drill whenever the work schedule permitted. The Company A men, because they were

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[175]James A. Dunbar, Monthly report for 6th Special NCB concerning activities in August 1944, 5 September 1944, NAVFAC Archives; "Tour of the Pacific," 6-7.

[176]Maas and MacNamara, interview, 23 July 1994.

stationed in Stirling, missed the drill program. They would have considered it a petty distraction, somewhat undignified for proven veterans like themselves. Company A had seen more action than any other part of the battalion, and they regarded themselves, not without reason, as fairly tough customers. Their feet had not touched the parade ground for a year and they liked it that way.[177]

In the summer of 1944 the Japanese were reduced to impotence in the South Pacific. Bougainville was in the backwash of war. By September the 71st, 75th and 36th NCB had packed up and pulled out, and the Sixth men wondered when, and where, they would go. One hundred replacements joined the battalion on August 24, which was regarded as a poor omen for rotation home and for relief in general. The prospects of relief grew bleaker a few days later, when the battalion started getting in lots of new equipment, rolling stock, and caterpillar tractors (cats).[178] Commander Dunbar assembled the men at the camp theater and explained the situation. According to Commander Dunbar he had done the men a "big favor." He told them that they had been scheduled for a rest in Australia, but he had arranged it so that they would make one more "hit" and then return home to the United States. The men regarded his "big favor" dubiously.[179]

With Allied domination of the Southern and Central Pacific, the first steps of the American plan for defeating the Japanese were complete. The next steps called for gaining control of Luzon, Formosa, and the South China Coast as prerequisites to establishing airfields throughout China from which the Japanese home islands could be bombed and blockaded to soften them up prior to an American amphibious invasion. Besides the eventual necessity of invading Japan, the only part of the April 1943 plan to endure into the fall of 1944 turned out to be the invasion of the Philippines. To secure the approaches to the Philippines the commander of the Central Pacific forces, Admiral Chester A. Nimitz, proposed to establish air and naval bases on the Palau and Talaud Islands and the Yap and Ulithi atolls. It was the latter operations that the Sixth Special was scheduled to participate in. Ulithi is ninety-three miles to the northeast of Yap. For this assignment the Sixth Special was again split in half, though because of the close proximity of the two islands the halves would not be fully autonomous, administratively independent sections. Companies A and B and half of Headquarters Company, including the unit administration, formed A/B Detachment under the leadership of Commander Dunbar. Companies C and D and the other half of Headquarters Company formed C/D Detachment under the command of Lieutenant Lestle W. Newcomer, former C Company Commander.

September was a busy month for the Sixth Special. It started off with the death of a Company A man while souvenir hunting. The man walked into an American mine field, which compounded the pointless tragedy of his death. He lost his legs and his life for no

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[177]James A. Dunbar, Monthly report for 6th Special NCB concerning activities in April 1944, 6 May 1944, NAVFAC Archives; MacNamara, interview, 18 June 1994.

[178]Dunbar, Monthly report for 6th Special NCB concerning activities in August 1944, 5 September, 1944; "Tour of the Pacific," 6.

[179]Maas and MacNamara, interview, 23 July 1994.

good reason after surviving everything the Japanese could throw at him at Vella Lavella and Bougainville. His comrades buried him on a rainy day in the muddy island cemetery, the body looking tiny draped under an American flag as the chaplain and the commanding officer paid their respects.[180]

The dead Seabee was not alone in his passion for souvenir hunting. It was a popular pastime on Bougainville and in their spare time men would often borrow a truck and drive up to the lines to have a look around. It was a risky pastime, as the Japanese were known for planting booby trapped items. One Sixth veteran recalled the expedition that caused him to forever swear off souvenir hunting. He had discovered a Japanese pack in the jungle and rushed over to claim his prize, but somehow caution took over and suppressed the instinct to snatch the item up. Instead the wary Seabee lifted the pack slowly and carefully to look underneath. A wire was attached to it. It was a trap![181]

Before the Sixth was finally secured on Bougainville on September 15 they were shaken by another three small earthquakes and whipped by a typhoon, which destroyed three of their typewriters. After they were secured the only ships they worked were their own transports; still, the total tonnage for about half a month's work was 14,096. In addition to stevedoring work they had a lot of preparations to make. The battalion got shots for cholera and tetanus. Their rifles were inspected. They stood muster again and got their cash changed into Hawaiian invasion money. On the September 23, wearing their greens, they were inspected by the commanding officer of the advanced base at Torokina, Commander E. H. Kincaid. The next day they began loading out their trucks so they could be stowed on the tween decks of their transport. In the words of one Seabee, they took "every useful and useless piece of gear we'd procured though the Pacific in the past fifteen months."[182] Sixth Special camp construction was hampered on previous occasions for lack of materials, and it stands to reason that the maintenance gangs might become pack ratish. After all, nothing is really useless in the hands of a Seabee.

On September 26 A/B Detachment boarded the Navy Liberty ship AK 117, the U.S.S. Zaurak. The prefix AK stood for cargo ship. Navy Liberty ships differed from their commercial sisters principally in the size of the crew. A Navy Liberty had a crew of several hundred. A civilian liberty ship had a crew of fifty-two plus a Navy armed guard of twenty-five men to man the ship's limited defensive armament, six 20mm cannon, a 3 inch bow gun, and a 5 inch gun on the stern. The men of A/B Detachment were told by the Zaurak's crew that their captain had lost a ship to Japanese bombers off Tulagi and that he was determined to settle the score. There was ample evidence that this was not just braggadocio in the profusion of extra antiaircraft guns that were welded to the deck wherever they could be fit. The Zaurak's captain sought out extra weapons at every port. Compared to the average

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[180]Gall, interview, summer 1994; Dunbar, Monthly report for 6th Special NCB concerning activities in September 1944, 7 December 1944; Photograph of the funeral from the collection of EM1c Harold Wein, author's collection, Cranford, N.J..

[181]Maas and MacNamara, interview, 23 July 1994.

[182]"6th Special Travelogue," 16.

Liberty ship the Zaurak bristled guns, but unlike a civilian vessel there was no shortage of sailors to man them. Though the crew was inexperienced, they were as gung ho as their captain. Already veterans of too many air attacks, the Sixth men shared none of the sailors' enthusiasm for meeting the enemy at Yap.[183]

The rest of the Sixth Special did not linger long on Bougainville. Their transport, the S.S. Cape Cleare, arrived on September 29 and was loaded and ready to depart on October 1. On that rainy morning C/D Detachment began boarding at 10:30, and all companies were aboard by 12:30. Four hours later the Cape Cleare sailed, and the C/D Detachment left the steamy malarial jungles of the Solomons for good; their next assignment was on the pleasant coral atoll of Ulithi.[184]

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[183]MacNamara, interview, 18 June 1994.

[184]"Tour of the Pacific," 7.