



The Task Force arrived at Noumea, **New Caledonia** harbor, on **March 12, 1942**, and Major General Alexander M. Patch assumed active command. Troops went over the side in landing nets and were immediately dispersed to the hills because intelligence reports indicated an air attack might be expected. The attack never materialized.

The unloading on the inadequate docks of Noumea was the biggest job yet to face the youthful Task Force. Thousands of tons of supplies piled up on and around the docks. Troops worked desperately in shifts. There was no way to protect the material from the weather. There was little transportation to move it away. For weeks, the next months' food and equipment for 17,000 men lay massed in huge piles under the burning sub-tropical sun.

There was no supply set-up; it was established. There was no vehicle pool; one was organized. The maps were poor and scarce; draughtsmen went to work. Slowly, order began to return. With tremendous effort, the cargoes were moved, stored, and finally dispersed. One great phase of the **Battle of New Caledonia** was won on the docks. There the Japs had missed another chance.

An amusing sidelight on those first days in New Caledonia, which will be remembered, was the use of bright blue French taxicabs for reconnaissance. These were requisitioned by the force, complete with drivers, who continued their old methods of swinging corners madly. The fact that their horns blew at all times gave them right of way, they felt. This practice was largely abandoned, along with some taxicabs; very soon after, American 6x6s appeared. Such was this French Colonial Island where the Americal Division was born.



WWII 2.5 ton 6X6 Truck

When the Task Force reached New Caledonia, the inhabitants had been almost two years without a supply boat from France. Before the fall of that nation they had been kept dependent on the mother country for necessities and for luxuries. Stocks were low, to the disappearing point. They had made no improvements because they quite simply had expected the Japanese to come. Many of the best farmers were Japs. Morale was almost too low to be called morale. Vichy had many strong supporters. DeGaulle's military representatives had made themselves unpopular by their arbitrary methods. The cat could jump either way at this mountainous outpost.

This was the delicate political situation when the American troops arrived. This situation went even deeper than that. For some time afterward the people felt that the troops would make only a token resistance and then depart as had happened against the Japanese on other islands where they had kinsfolk. It developed there was more than a mission of defense for the command. There was the political mission of building up the self-respect of these people and their faith in what the allies would and could do. How this was done, the old-world palaver that had to be gone through to help assure these Colonial Frenchmen of their importance in the allied scheme might have appeared droll except in the light of what was at stake, whether it was to be a friendly base or one torn by bitterness and revolt.

As if to complete the picture there was even a coup d'etat thrown in. A new governor was inveigled to Lafora where he was amicably confined in the hotel which had been taken over by the Task Force for a Forward CP. There was an international incident in the making. An officer who was ordered to check on the situation, was blandly told that "they always held the revolutions there. In a few days the French Home Guard appeared carrying '03 rifles in place of ancient Leblers. This had a very soothing effect on both factions.

Of the French garrison guarding Noumea, they had guns which the Force Command knew were probably ineffective, yet they had to be treated as though they were important cogs in the defense. There was a gun guarding the harbor for which there were only 96 rounds in the world. It had not been fired for 5 years. So it went. The success of this portion of the mission of 6814 need only be told in the fact that there were no unpleasant incidents. Relations were friendly, and when the troops finally left for combat it was almost an island tragedy.



This was the situation in March 1942. There was no Base Command. Transportation was meager. There was supply to be organized. Tontouta and Plaines des Gaiacs airports were still small and inadequate. For construction there, Task Force transportation would be required. And there still remained field training and defense. Headquarters was established at the Grand Hotel du Pacific in Noumea by General Patch. The strength of his command on arrival was; 799 officers; 113 nurses; 5 warrant officers, and 15,962 enlisted men.

The rugged geography of New Caledonia gives an explanation for some of the difficulties of defense. It is a long, cigar-shaped island, running in a northwesterly direction for a distance of some 250 miles with an average width of 20 to 30 miles. The Chaine Centrale Mountain System runs the length of the island like a spine. Communication over this area of 8,000 square miles was largely limited to one narrow road winding the full length, with occasional secondary spurs crossing it. This road had to be improved, was difficult to maintain and subject to floods and washouts.



There were three airports around which the defense was to be built: Tontouta, 32 miles from Noumea; Plaines des Gaiacs 160 miles north and Koumac, nearly 100 further north. The latter had been partly destroyed because of the problem of defending it.

Request was wired March 25, 1942, for one additional regiment of infantry, one regiment of Cavalry and one Signal Intelligence Company. The 97th F.A. Battalion, Pack Howitzers joined the force April 3, 1942. The 164th Infantry Regiment, April 19, and the 72nd F.A. April 23, 1942.

The organization of a Combat Reconnaissance Squadron was begun April 23. Lt. Col. George was relieved by Lt. Col. Moore as G-3 and given command. This organization was to exploit the mobility of the 1/4-ton reconnaissance vehicle (Jeep or Peep) in concentrating heavy firepower at a point quickly. The troop was unofficially known as the Peep Troop.



Armed WWII Commo Jeep

The Division Forward CP was set up at LaFoa, 75 miles north of Noumea, April 9. This CP was closed May 1 and a new CP established at Paita, a village 50 miles south. General Patch set up his headquarters there May 23.

The constitution and organization of the **Americal Division**, without numerical designation, was authorized **May 27** (G.O. #10, 5/24/42). The name **AMERICAL**, was proposed by Pfc David Fonseca of the **26th Signal Company**. He explained his suggestion by saying the first part of the name would suggest **AMERICA** and the last part **CALEDONIA**, the division's birthplace.

(The division was activated under provisions of War Department Letter, TAG 320.2, 4-1-43, OB-1-GNGCT-M, dated April 3, 1943,. General Orders #91, Headquarters, USAFISPA, dated April 18, 1943, and General Orders -#15, Headquarters Americal Division, April 3, 1943.)

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At the time of the arrival of the Task Force at New Caledonia, the only garrison to the north was a unit of some 300 commandos of the Australian Army under command of Lt. Col. Matheson. These rugged soldiers had been used to explore the interior, man observation posts and, in the event of invasion, harass the enemy as long as possible. They were of great help to U.S. troops because of their knowledge of the terrain and the natives, in whose villages in many cases they lived. They also assisted in training troops in jungle patrolling. They were relieved and returned to Australia in July.

ISLAND DEFENSE PLAN

The defense of New Caledonia was based on the protection of the city of Noumea with its harbor facilities, and to the north hinged on the three airports, Tontouta, Plaines des Gaiacs and Koumac. Initially the island had been occupied by the Australian commandos of Col. Matheson. They functioned as a skeleton observer force to the north. Transportation difficulties hampered the movement of troops to defense positions, but the **182nd Infantry** moved first to the area occupied by the commandos. Besides performing a defensive mission, this regiment was to be trained in commando tactics.

The plan involved a cordon type defense because of the wide separation of critical points. The 182nd was charged with the defense of the northern sector with particular attention to covering Plaines des Gaiacs and Koumac. Their headquarters were at Bourail, second town on the island, located 105 miles from Noumea.

The 182nd Infantry, less 2nd Battalion, set up headquarters in the vicinity of Bouloupari and were charged with the protection of the Thio- Bouloupari Road, St. Vincent's Bay and the waters around Thio. Theirs was in general the Central Sector.

The 164th Infantry, with headquarters at St. Vincent was charged with the protection of Tontouta airport and the South Sector.

The French Garrison, the 112th Cavalry and the 2nd battalion of the 182nd Infantry were assigned the defense of the Noumea area, with the 70th Coast Artillery, plus dubious French elements and supporting artillery.

Both light and medium artillery were assigned to support the Infantry combat teams in case of combat, and in addition were disposed to protect critical water approaches up the island. The third element of their mission was responsibility for airport defense.

The 754th Tank Battalion at St. Vincent was held as a striking force to be thrown in wherever needed. Also the Peep Troop in LaFoa was held as a highly mobile striking force to be used principally in the Northern and Central Sectors.

Units devoted their time principally to reconnaissance and organization of sensitive points and in training for combat on the island terrain. When, after the great and crucial **Battle of the Coral Sea** during **May 4-8,1942** it became more or less a certainty that the island would not be attacked, the type of training was shifted to prepare for general operations in jungle areas.

Meanwhile, the story of the artillery of the division is a somewhat confusing one. In the force as constituted at New Caledonia, there were two battalions of medium artillery and one regiment of light artillery. From these troops, because of defense requirements, a third battalion of light artillery was organized provisionally, for the Bourail Sector. A Division Artillery Headquarters and Headquarters Battery (Prov.) were authorized August 15 (Spec. Order #162). At this time the artillery units were redesignated and activated as three light battalions; 245th, 246th, and 247th F.A. Battalions, and two medium battalions 221st and 223rd F.A. Battalions. (When the movement into combat began, the 223rd F.A. Battalions. was transferred to the Island Command).

During the months of June and July unit training was carried on under difficulties because troop stations were scattered over a distance of 180 miles. All OPs were being manned. The trucks of the division were constantly being requisitioned for hauling details to Plaines des Gaiacs airport, a round-trip run of more than 300 miles over washboard roads. The vehicles were showing the effects of hundreds of miles of this rugged going and there were many on deadline for lack of parts. Decision was made to rush the construction of an airport for bombers at Qua Tom, 60 miles from Noumea. This had been a secret fighter strip for some months. All trucks available were taken for this punishing detail, carrying Marston mats from the docks. By this time Route One was in the worst condition since the occupation of the island. However, this job was completed in record time.

All this made division and even combat team maneuvers practically out of the question. It was a dull time for officers and men alike. Recreation facilities were meager in Noumea and non-existent up country. The civilian resources came nowhere near filling the needs of the soldiers and leave of any kind meant long drives over back-breaking roads. Issue movie projectors were not yet available except in large centers of troops and Army beer was a rare event.

Through it all the famous New Caledonian mosquitoes (non-Malarial Carriers) flourished in the intense heat, fed as they had never been fed before. The islanders were called the Kanakas. They were a happy-go-lucky mixture of Polynesian and Melanesian. They were known for their colorful dress and red or orange hair. They rubbed lime into their hair to achieve the colors. It also acted as a repellent for parasites and mosquitos.

The island had a plentiful supply of deer, so the troops took up hunting for sport. Eventually the higher ups stopped the practice.



But the climate was essentially a dry, healthy one. The men got brown and hard and their spirits, though restless, were excellent. The above period stands as the initial hump of the division's mission on New Caledonia. That mission had been to occupy and defend the island, its accomplishment is a simple matter of record. The other elements of that mission which cropped up because of the outpost situation and the length of supply lines, may not show so clearly. That the Americal Division turned over a friendly island instead of one torn by revolt, an island of five great airports built in good part with transportation of one division and in the meantime had organized from a group of spare parts a fighting division, may or may not be remembered when the final story of World War II is written. Suffice it for this chronicle to say only **MISSION ACCOMPLISHED**.

From the end of July forward, the position of the Americal Division in New Caledonia was fading. Marine Raider Units had arrived and were staged for a move into combat. The establishment of the port of Noumea as a Naval Base was well under way. Naval and Marine installations largely dominated the Noumea area. **August 7** the Division G-3 gave the island situation map to the advance elements of USAFISPA Command. That same day the Marines landed on **Guadalcanal** and Tulagi. Time was running out.

Lt. Col. Gavan relieved Colonel Moore as G-3 and Colonel Moore took command of the 164th Infantry September 15. September 19 (Gen. Ord. #30) the Americal Division was organized into a mobile command made up of all combat troops, less the 70th Coast Artillery and air units, under command of General Sebree. The Base Command under General Williamson encompassed all service units. Colonel Rich took the Air Force Command. (This set-up was reorganized in more

workable detail by Gen. Ord. #37, Oct. 24). The ground forces of the Americal Division were thus ready for the new operation which was known to be coming.

Twenty days later, **Oct. 9, 1942**, the **164th Infantry** embarked at Noumea, the first echelon of the Americal Division to go into combat. The remainder of the troops were alerted and movements to staging areas were begun.

The 43rd Division arrived at New Caledonia November 6, and established headquarters at LaFoa. The next day the general staff of the New Zealand Defense Division arrived to confer with division authorities on their mission, the relief of the Americal Division in New Caledonia. The new Island Command under General Rush A. Lincoln was authorized November 10. The New Zealand Kiwi Troops debarked at Noumea Nov. 11. The G-3 Section and forward echelon of the **Americal Division** left for **Guadalcanal October 12**: General Patch went forward November 20. From then on it was simply a period of checking equipment and waiting. The next echelon left Nov. 3. The third combat team, consisting of the 132nd Infantry and the 247th F.A. Battalion arrived at Lunga Beach Dec. 8. This completed the movement of the main body of the division to Guadalcanal.



Loading troop transports in New Caledonia to Guadalcanal October, 1942

The combat action of the Americal Division has been covered in appropriate War Department reports (see Combat History Americal Div., Guadalcanal). Only the general tactical phases and the relation of the division to other troops in the action will be outlined here.