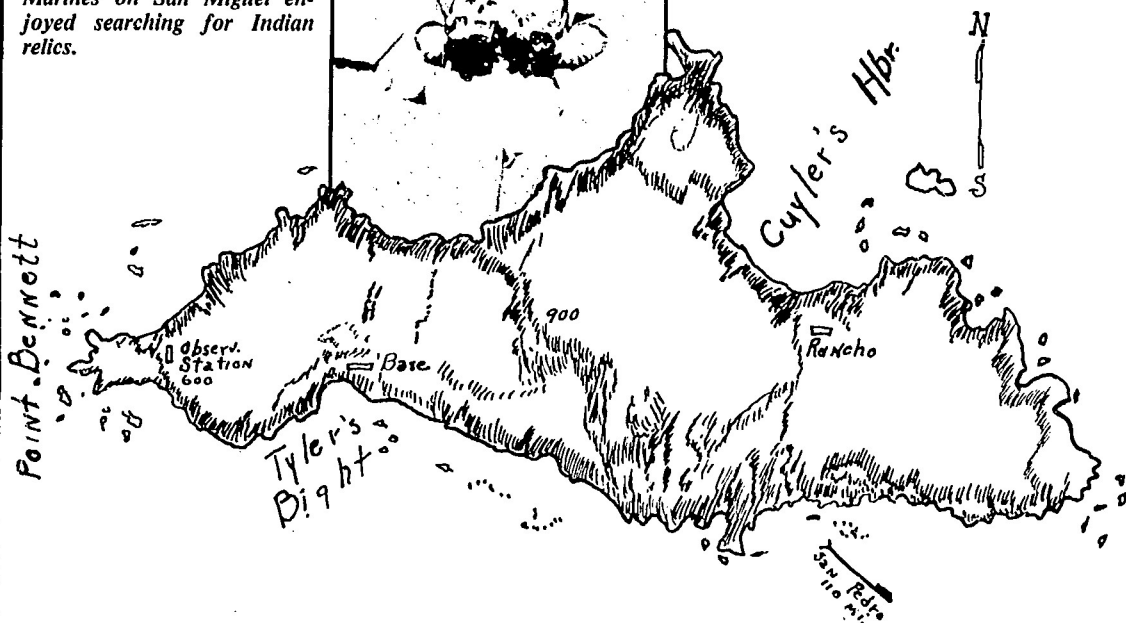


Marines on San Miguel enjoyed searching for Indian relics.

What were young lieutenants doing 52 years ago? Here's an adventure experienced by a future Commandant as recorded by him at the time.



## Outpost on San Miguel Island

by Gen Wallace M. Greene, Jr.,  
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San Miguel photos by the author.

**D**uring the recent war problem in the Pacific (Fleet Problem XIV), observation stations were established by the Blue defending force upon certain of the channel or surf islands. The mission of these posts was to establish radio communication with the commander of the base force, to maintain a continuous day and night watch for the enemy, Black Attack Force, and upon sighting him to radio this information to the base force. The task of establishing the radio outpost upon San Miguel, the most westerly of the islands and the most difficult one upon which to land, was assigned to the battleship *Tennessee*. The following account is the story of that expedition, of the problems that it encountered and the experiences that befell it.

On the afternoon of 6 February 1933 eight Marines and two blue jackets under the command of a second lieutenant together with all necessary supplies and equipment were transferred from the *Tennessee* to the tug *Algoma*

in Los Angeles harbor. Shortly after 1800 that evening the *Algoma* got underway and nosing around the end of San Pedro breakwater into the setting sun headed northwest towards San Miguel. That trip was eventful because of two things: the cold that the men experienced sleeping topside and the diabolical pitching of the tug that tried the mettle of all hands as sailors.

At dawn of the following day the long irregular shape of our island bulked up ahead shrouded in the morning mists. We came to anchor just outside the reefs on the southwestern side of the island. All hands began loading the expedition's gear into the whaleboat and small motor launch belonging to the tug.

At this point it may be well to give the reader a picture of the island and the problems that faced us. Shaped like a high heel slipper with the heel pointing north, the barren stretches of San Miguel extend for seven and a half miles in an east and west direction. The island has an average width of two miles. The entire coastline

is jagged and precipitous and is surrounded by sharp and dangerous reefs over which the seas smash to roll in as surf on the strips of sandy beach at the foot of the cliffs. Only two points are suitable for landing men and supplies. (See sketch.) Cuyler's Harbor on the north will permit the entrance of small boats and the landing of equipment except in a northwest blow. Tyler's Bight on the southwestern coast, although flanked by forbidding reefs and shoal water, will allow the landing of field equipment except at times when the surf is running too heavily. We had chosen Tyler's Bight for our landing party because of its proximity to the western extremity of the island where the outpost had to be established. From Point Bennett on the west the land climbs abruptly from desolate sand dunes to a 600-foot-high plateau that sweeps eastward for some 2 miles. This plateau is a waste of sand and rock cut by gulches that have been chewed out of the lime and sandstone body of the island by the high winds that continually sweep its width. To the east this lonely highland is flanked by a pair of hills that form a 900-foot ridge sprawling from northwest to southeast across the island. The slopes of these hills are covered with a short grass, which furnishes grazing for a flock of 4,000 sheep.

A high arm of the ridge is crooked to the north and east, its fingers reaching as far as the eastern side of Cuyler's Harbor. Within this curve lies a desert of sand and stone whose surface is splotted with skeleton-white graveyards of petrified wood and limestone formations. On the fingers of the ridge, whose precipitous sides drop away to the harbor, are built sheep corrals and a herder's home.

Not a single tree or bush grows on this entire island. There is no water outside of a few puddles of rain, which collect for three months of the year in the hollows of the uplands and a few miserable trickles of unpalatable alkali water. There is an alkali well at the sheep rancho, but its water is only used for drinking in an absolute necessity. Our party, therefore, was forced to bring not only food and tents with them but also a supply of firewood and drinking water. Let us now return to our landing party, which by this time had loaded the boats for their initial trip.

The motor launch towed the whale boat to a point just outside the surf where it anchored. The whaleboat carrying a line from the launch was pulled in through the surf and onto the beach. All hands were wet to the waist in the icy water in their attempts to keep the boat

from breaching broad onto the beach. The line running from the launch was made fast around a 2 by 4 driven into the hard packed sand, the gear in the whale boat was packed ashore and the whale boat returned to the launch for another load. In this fashion all of our equipment and supplies were landed without mishap, the whale boat trolleying from launch to beach along the line.

While this was being done, a site for our camp was selected on a well-drained grassy slope in the lee of a steep ridge about 300 yards back from the beach. It was an ideal spot for a camp, but it had the disadvantage of lying over a mile from the western nose of the island plateau where we were forced to place our observation and radio station. This, however, could not be helped as there was not a single protected spot closer to the windtorn expanse of the island's top.

The last of our possessions were dumped upon the beach. The *Algoma's* boats returned to the ship. Soon after she had hoisted them aboard she got underway and steamed south to disappear over the horizon. We were alone.

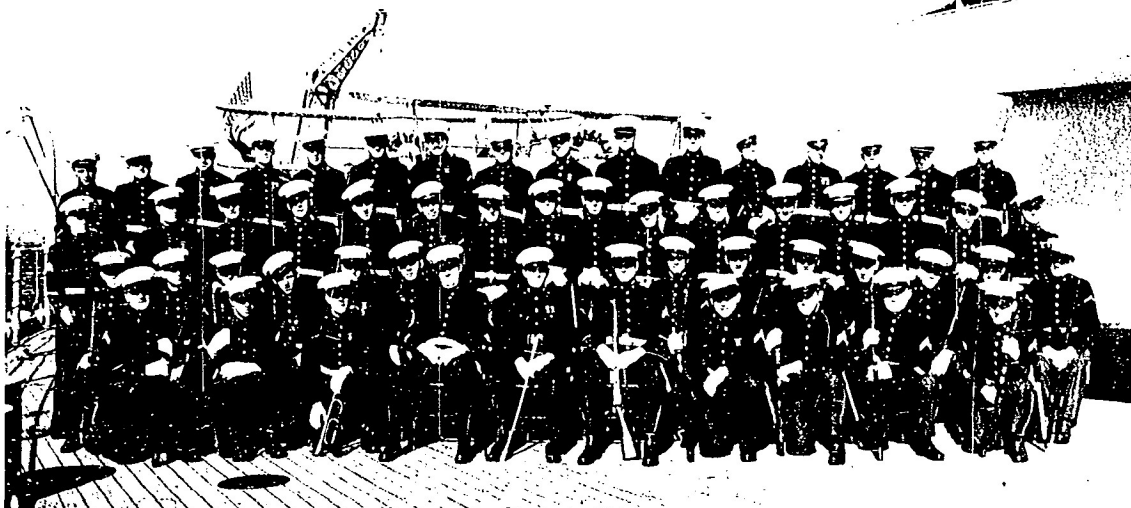
Our first problem was to transport our gear from the beach to the camp site. Tents, heavy radio parts, food, bedding, firewood, and 60 tins of fresh water had to be passed by hand up a 40-foot sand bank to the top of the bluff and from there packed up the hill to the camp. It was a slow and discouraging task.

In the meantime, the cook had rigged a tarpaulin around a small two-burner gas stove and had prepared a hot meal, which made all of us feel much better after our backbreaking work. Soon after dinner the tents were going up, ditches dug around them, the stores were under



*Setting up the camp site.*

*Two days after this photo was taken aboard USS Tennessee, the author (front row center) led a small detachment ashore on a barren, windswept Pacific island.*



cover, a latrine dug, and a garbage hole excavated; our camp was commencing to look like a real one.

In lieu of a field range we had brought along a 3-foot by 3-foot piece of half-inch boiler plate. We built a low stone fireplace and placed this plate on top of it. Around this fireplace we rigged a tarpaulin as a windbreak. For 10 days this boiler plate fireplace served as an excellent range on which the cook did all his cooking.

During supper that night we decided that now our camp was completed it should be christened. Soon afterwards, a full moon climbed to the mountain tops of Santa Rosa Island in the east. Back of us the soft glow of lantern light came from the tents. Behind the tents the ridge was silhouetted in dark lines against the night sky. Somewhere from the shadows a fox barked at the moon and the stars that hung about her in twinkling points of ice. At our feet the sea came crashing in across the reefs, and the surf boomed on the beach. It was, indeed, an auspicious time for a christening. I had loaded a Very pistol and raising it now, I said, "We name you Camp Tyler!" and pressed the trigger. A red star rose with a hiss up into the night and curving over dropped into oblivion. Camp Tyler — for better or for worse.

The next morning we ate breakfast in the darkness before dawn. As soon as it grew light

enough to see, we tackled the job of carrying the radio equipment from the camp to the intended observation station. This meant packing a Navy field radio set, which included transmitting and receiving units, gasoline motor, generator, hand generator, calibrator, antenna poles, spare parts, gasoline, oil, water, two tents and other equipment, up a steep hill and thence over a mile of terribly broken country. Ten hours later our radio station was set up and the base ship some 100 miles away contacted. It was a tribute to the men who had slaved like horses to make this possible. One of them grimly remarked as the last tent stakes were being driven into a ground so hard that many of the pegs were splintered in the driving that a fitting name for this upper camp would be "Camp Hardpan." From that moment on this camp was known by that name. Sweat, not a Very pistol star, marked the christening.

The regular guard was not to be established until the evening of the following day. We seized this opportunity to contact the person in charge of the sheep herd on the island and also to explore the island as thoroughly as possible. With these plans in view, six of us set out to the east shortly after noon.

We first crossed to the northern side of the island where from the edge of the plateau we viewed the wild sweep of the broken rocky coast, the needle-like islands offshore and the

long line of surf as it plunged in towards the beach from across the ragged claws of the reefs. The whole scene was plunged in February sunshine and made an unforgettable impression upon our minds.

Pushing towards the east over very rugged ground, the dead plateau rose up in low steps, its ragged head cut frequently by deep canyons that ran downward to the sea. As we approached the grassy slopes of the eastern hills, we encountered myriad grazing sheep.

The entire tableland that we had crossed was blanketed with a countless number of small snail shells whose inmates had long since died leaving their homes to be weathered to chalk by the elements.

We climbed to the summit of the highest hill. Behind us to the west stretched the desolate barrens on whose far edge we could faintly discern the tents of our observation post. Beyond and on all sides lay the sea, its face a soft blue in the afternoon sun. Below us and to the east within the crook of the encircling ridge lay a wilderness of sand and weathered rocks. Where the hill descended to the rock rim of Cuyler's Harbor were some buildings that evidently made up the sheep rancho. In the distance we could see the mainland, the whitecrested mountains of California rising to meet the blue sky.

Over there on that mainland in the shadow of the missions of the Franciscan Fathers the last of the San Miguel Indians had finished out their miserable existence. The Portuguese explorer, Juan Cabrillo, putting into Cuyler's Harbor in 1542, under the Spanish flag had found a

strong, well-built race of people, the Canalinos Indians, living on the island. San Miguel had been well watered and wooded then, the surrounding sea teemed with fish and sea otter, and in spite of their stone-age existence, the people were happy and contented. The white men who followed the Spaniards changed all this. The Russian sea hunters sweeping down from the north not only exterminated the sea otter but left behind them a trail of rapine, murder, and disease. Later, immense flocks of sheep were grazed on the island. The sheep, unable to find enough grass, turned to the trees and shrubs, killing them. With the disappearance of the trees, the soil was washed away and the island like its people slowly but surely died.

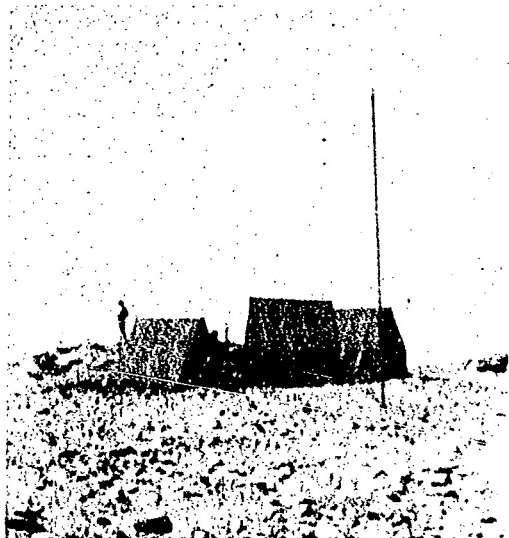
This had been indeed an isle of tragedy for down there somewhere in the rock walls of the tiny harbor that he had discovered the body of Cabrillo had been laid away following his death from a fall experienced soon after he had landed. An island of mystery too, for extensive search has never revealed his grave.

Dismissing these thoughts we plunged down the steep hillside and struck into the desert. Our approach brought us to the rear of the rancho. It sat upon a hill beyond the sand. Here there were fences, and off to the left a road wound steeply down to the harbor. We walked along a tall board fence until we came to a corner of the main building. Here a barred gate was set into the fence and on either side upon high pickets were placed the bleached horned skulls of rams.

This was the home of the rancher, Herbert Lester. Both he and his wife were delighted to see us. For months on end they lived a life that was totally cut off from the rest of the world. They had no boat, no radio, no means of communication with the mainland. They were living on a frontier of the world and had only themselves to depend upon.

They made us sit down in their house and plied us with questions and food. We in turn learned many things about San Miguel, for the rancher had made a study of the island and its ancient people. He had opened many of their graves and had dug in their kitchen middens that were scattered everywhere about the island. He had searched, too, for the cave in which Cabrillo had been buried but had never found any trace of it. The year before he had discovered in the ridge behind his rancho the fossilized remains of two prehistoric elephants, their enormous tusks still entwined where they had fallen in deadly combat centuries before.

The sun was sitting on the hilltops when we arose to go. It was cold, and we walked very fast to get warm. Fortunately, the moon rose early



*Sweat christened Camp Hardpan.*



*(Above) Mrs. Lester and daughter outside the ranch house. (Left) Mr. Lester returns a visit by the Marines.*

and helped us to pick our way over the rocks and sand banks. We struck straight across the ridge and hiked westward along the southern side in the direction of our camp.

The going soon became difficult. Deep rough canyons, their bottoms sunk in darkness, crossed our path, and we were forced to make long detours around the heads of these crevices. We had marched fast and silently for nearly two hours when we found ourselves climbing a steep hill. That was strange. By this time we should have left all of the hills behind us. A suspicion crept into my mind. I called a halt and looked at the stars. Sure enough, we were heading directly east back across the very ridge we had crossed a short time before. We had kept turning to the right in order to skirt the arroyos, had reached a point halfway across the island and executed a complete about face.

We turned about and started in the right direction checking our course every few minutes with the north star. A fox scurried away from in front of us. We could hear the surf pounding on the rocks off Point Bennett intermingled with the roars of the vast herd of sea lions that lived there.

We reached the rim of the plateau above our camp. Below us the bay shimmered in the moonlight, its waters rolling across the reefs in long slowly moving curls of lace that dissolved into showers of diamonds as they cast themselves upon the sand below the tents. A fire was burning in the fireplace. Through the tents came the orange gleam of the lanterns. We were ravenous and tired. With a yell we plunged down the hill.

The next morning was cold and overcast. The

wind arose and was soon sweeping a gale across the plateau bringing with it sheets of sand that hurtled like shot across the tableland, over its edge, and down onto our tents. The sand penetrated into everything, even biting its way through our clothes and into our skin.

The tents at the observation post were double-guyed and staked. Their sides bulged in like sails, but they held.

At midnight the first sentries were posted. The sand storm was still raging and to it had been added a biting cold. A tarpaulin had been rigged as a windbreak around the fireplace that had been dug deep into a hummock of hard packed sand. We managed to build a fire; but the wind soon buried the burning wood under a blanket of sand, and after several attempts to keep the fire going, it was at last allowed to die out. Thereafter the lookouts stood their watches huddled in the lee of the radio tent.

Two sentries were required to be on watch at all times. One man was actually on post observing while the other rested in the guard tent or ate. During their watch they relieved each other frequently. The day was divided into five watches. The first watch was from eight in the morning until four in the afternoon. The other four were four-hour watches. The radioman stood a watch on his assigned frequency during the first 15 minutes of certain designated hours of the day. Consequently, he was not available for other watch standing. The pharmacist's mate, however, stood a regular watch with the Marines.

The sand storm kept up for three days. We slept in our clothes most of the time to keep

warm. Our little two-burner gas stove proved to be a blessing. With it we boiled coffee in tin cans and, like the oil lamp of an igloo, it took some of the chill from the interior of the guard tent.

The gasoline motor generator had been placed under a fly next to the radio tent; but the sand continually plugged the carburetor, and we were forced to clean it at all hours. We also discovered that by shifting our antenna about 45 degrees more towards an east-west direction from its original position that we increased the signal strength and range considerably.

In spite of the sand and cold the men not on watch found time to explore. Enormous numbers of abalone were discovered on the ledges along the shore. These we pried loose from the rocks with a sharpened stake. Opening the shell with a knife we removed the meat. This flesh was laid on a rock and pounded with a 2 by 4 until soft. The abalone was then soaked in salt water for a time, and it was then ready for frying in deep fat or for manufacture into a chowder.

In several spots about the island there lay the great whitened vertebrae of whales. The Indians had used these giant bones to mark the graves of their dead. Among the sand dunes of Point Bennett we came upon one of these markers. The vicinity was littered with the bones of humans and animals. We made some excavations at this point but while we unearthed a great number of human thigh bones and ribs we discovered no complete skeleton or skulls. However, a few hundred yards away between two sand banks we stumbled onto two human skulls, whose tops just protruded from the ground. We dug them out of the sand very carefully, but as soon as they were touched, they crumbled away. Beneath them we found nothing.

Later, in one of the numerous shell and bone piles, called kitchen-middens, which marked the site of old Indian camps, we did unearth two Indian skulls in good condition. We also found one arrowhead of peculiar shape in that it had an extremely long point.

One Marine was indefatigable in his search for Indian relics. One afternoon, while skirting a sand bank on the northwestern edge of the upland, he noticed a long-bone sticking out of the sand. With a shovel he very carefully dug around the bone. He discovered more bones and finally unearthed a complete skeleton lying in what was plainly a grave. The skeleton was that of a woman. It lay on its side with its legs curled up under it. In the pelvic region lay a tiny bundle of bones of what appeared to be an unborn child.

Beneath the neck of this skeleton lay a pile of grey-green stones. Some of these stones were

short and cylindrical in shape with a hole bored completely through them. The others were elliptical in shape with a single mark scratched around their middle. A hole had been bored into the tapered ends of these elliptical stones for a depth of a half inch. Another hole had then been bored at right angles from the side and joining the first hole. This permitted stringing. The stone ornaments, upon assembling them, formed an amulet that originally had been strung around the neck of the dead woman.

Under the woman's waist was a heap of small bone beads, reddish-brown color. Each bead had a hole bored through its center. One side of the bead was convex; the other side, concave. This permitted the beads to be strung very closely together on the same string. In one corner of the grave lay a handful of rough flints—some 60 odd in number—probably of some religious significance.

A discovery that rivaled this one was that of an unbroken "doughnut." This much prized rarity was a flat circular piece of smooth stone three inches in thickness and about five inches in diameter. Through its center was bored a one-inch circular hole. These stones were used by the Indians in hunting sea otter. A hide line was passed through the hole in the disc and knotted. Upon sighting a sea-otter the line with the "doughnut" on its end was whirled around the head and hurled at the animal. If the aim was good the otter was killed without injuring the skin.

In all our searches we never discovered a single piece of metal. All implements and ornaments were either of bone or stone in the fashioning of which the natives had been very clever. The selection of colors, the smoothness of finish, the accuracy of boring the holes, and the carving were remarkable.

As for the Indians themselves, the size of their bones showed that they must have been tall, well-built and strong. Most of the skulls had fine teeth with no cavities although many of the front teeth were worn flat. The heads were small in size and of a peculiar roundness.

One midnight someone shook me out of my sleep to tell me that a ship was laying in towards the bight. It was the tug, for when we signaled to her with our Aldis lamp she flashed, "*Algorma*. Am sending in boat. Do you need anything?" We asked for 50 gallons of fresh water. The tug came to anchor a mile off-shore. We went down onto the beach and marked the landing with two lanterns. Soon a whaleboat shot out of the darkness, poised for a moment, and then plunged in onto the beach on the crest of a roller.

Our water was landed and an inspection made of

our camp and radio station. When we returned to the beach, the men had built a fire on the narrow strip of sand and were sitting around it laughing and smoking while they dried their clothes. The *Algorma's* crew embarked. We helped run the boat out through the surf and then returned to the fire thoroughly drenched to dry our clothes and warm ourselves before turning in for the hour or so left before daybreak. The lights of the *Algorma* disappeared into the night as we huddled around the fire. We were destined to see her no more.

The days followed each other rapidly, and monotony of the lookout duty in the cold and the sand storms that continued without letup being relieved somewhat by further explorations about the island, through reconnaissance having been directed by the naval commander.

On the southern cliffs we found two huge nests of eagles. One of these was located on the almost perpendicular face of the plateau east of our camp. Through glasses we could see two eagles perched on this nest. We decided to climb to this nest and to secure some photographs.

Following a sheep path that wound precariously along the face of the cliffs we crept to a point about 25 feet above the lofty aerie. Upon our approach the two eagles swept screaming into the air above their nest. The birds were brown in color with white markings under the wings. They had a wing spread of about four feet and were equipped with long ugly looking yellow beaks that they seemed anxious to fasten into our necks.

The nest was built on a small rocky promontory that jutted out about 400 feet directly over the beach. The nest, taller than a man, was made out of pieces of wood the size of a finger. The wood was closely knit together into an upright, solid, cylindrical structure in whose top was a shallow depression in which rested two white eggs. The vicinity of the nest was littered with sheep bones.

The western tip of our island was fringed with a saw-tooth rim of reefs. The wind would catapult the sea in across these rocks with a deep booming sound, the water rising in white mountains toward the sky. It was a wicked vicinity for ships. We found rusty pieces of boiler steel and the great timbers of a ship that had been thrown high up into the rocks on the northern edge of Point Bennett. These were the grim remainders of the steamship *Cuba*, which had been driven onto the reefs the same stormy night that had seen the division of Navy destroyers go aground off Point Arguello. The crew and passengers of the steamer had been saved.

A shepherd on an adjoining island learning of the plight of the *Cuba* had immediately set out for San Miguel, in his boat. Upon reaching the island he had found that the sea had gone down and that no one was aboard the stranded ship. So he boarded her and claimed possession. When the salvage party sent out by the owners of the steamship reached San Miguel they were stopped by the gun held in the hands of the determined shepherd. A compromise was finally effected, and the shepherd renounced his claim.

The salvage company found that it was impossible to pull the *Cuba* free from the rocks onto which she had been cast so they set about dismantling her. As the various parts of the ship were removed they were carried ashore in boats and on floats. A narrow gauge railroad was set up across the sandy tip of Point Bennett, and the salvaged parts of the *Cuba* were transported across to the southern side of the island where they could be loaded aboard the salvage ship. Several rusted wheel trucks, half buried in the constantly shifting sands, mark the obliterated path of this railroad.

On 17 February great activity at sea was witnessed from our observation station. Destroyers raced northward under forced draft and disappeared to the eastward in the passage behind Santa Barbara Island. A cruiser ripping forward at full speed vanished in the same direction. We sighted three submarines wallowing eastward along the southern coast. The *Pennsylvania* hurriedly steamed by on the same course. All of these vessels we were able to identify as belonging to our own force. We saw no trace of the enemy although we knew that something decisive must be occurring behind Santa Barbara.

That night we picked up a news broadcast from San Diego and learned for the first time of the entrance and later discovery of an aircraft carrier in Santa Barbara Passage.

The following morning we were contacted by the *Tennessee* and ordered to dismantle our station and to break camp immediately. The *Tennessee* would pick us up at about noon of the same day.

We hurriedly broke our two camps and carried the gear down to the beach. We were nearly finished when the *Tennessee* hove into sight over the horizon and steamed in towards the island. Two hours later we were all back aboard ship and steaming north towards Frisco while our island dropped slowly out of sight behind in the shimmering mists of midafternoon.

USMC