

Wallis Island Postscript

Story by Gen Wallace M. Greene Jr., USMC (Ret) • 23d Commandant of the Marine Corps

Editor's note: Gen Greene was, at the time, plans and operations officer (B-3) of the 3d Marine Brigade.

Following the success of the landing on Uvea (Wallis Island) on May 27, 1942, Brigadier General [Thomas E.] Watson, commanding general of the 3d Marine Brigade, commenced to wait very impatiently for a rough landing strip to be fashioned on Uvea so that he could fly there from Upolu. As many readers will remember, the general always longed to be in the first boat of any assault landing executed by any element of his command.

Finally, the welcomed word arrived and very soon afterward we took off from our brigade airfield in the coconut groves of Faleola and headed west toward the Wallis Island group. Aboard the plane, in addition to Gen Watson, were the B-2, B-3, B-4, the brigade quartermaster and the general's aide.

Although we crossed the International Date Line and changed days, the distance to be flown was actually less than 150 miles. We soon found ourselves climbing out of our aircraft as it finished rolling to a bumpy halt on a very short, rough airstrip on Uvea. There we were met by Colonel Raphael Griffin (a long-time friend and World War I buddy of Gen Watson's, the commanding officer normally of the 10th Marines

and now, temporarily, the island commander) with members of his staff.

We learned that the first event on our program was to make an official call on the ruling chief of the island. We climbed into jeeps and set off for the principal village of Mata Utu, a short distance away on the east coast of Uvea.

Dismounting from our vehicles, we found ourselves entering a very large "fale" (hut) which apparently served as an official meeting place. There facing us were several chiefs all wearing stovepipe top hats (of the Lincoln variety) and dressed in tuxedo jackets over white cotton skivvy shirts open to the waist and showing the typical long white "lava lava," the grass skirt of Polynesia which extended almost to their ankles.

The leading chief greeted us through an interpreter, assuring us that we were very welcome—that his people did not like the Vichy French—and that they would loyally support us in defense of their island. (There were three or four thousand inhabitants at the time.) Gen Watson replied appropriately and we departed without further ceremony. In Samoa we would have exchanged formal greetings and then sat in a semicircle on the floor, fac-

ing a similar semicircle of chiefs, drunk ceremonial "kava" from coconut shells, discussed business and finally repaired to the village green outside to watch some marvelous village dancing (the siva-siva) and listen to the accompanying chants. There was none of that here, but everywhere we went in our limited time we found the natives friendly and glad to see us. A few spoke French and told us that all of the Vichy French, who controlled the island before our arrival, had been swept up and removed by the crews of the Free French frigates which were in our naval task force. However, I did see a number of French sailors, barefoot and wearing red berets, wandering around town, and I let our B-2 find out who they were—Free French he reported.

During the general's inspection of positions in our defense plan, we jeeped through a considerable portion of the island. I observed a number of the natives and their way of life and was immediately struck by the great differences between these islanders and those of Samoa. Those on Uvea lived in small, dirty, grubby huts actually shared with their dogs and chickens. Some were filthy in appearance and a few even had mud plastered on their faces and bodies

as I had seen before in Africa. The villages were small and nondescript. On the other hand, the Samoans were a tall, handsome and proud people with well-planned villages, community infrastructure, customs and religious beliefs. The contrasts were stark and striking.

During our passage around the island, we passed the top of a great dead volcano cone filled with fresh water. After hearing from our people that they had been unable to touch bottom inside the cone, I later sent them a coil of sounding line of length sufficient to permit them finally to successfully plumb the bottom and to report the depth and victory to me.

Uvea is the principal island of the Wallis group. It is only about 10 miles long and 4 miles wide. Completely surrounded by a barrier reef, its lagoon is entered from the sea by several small passes which penetrate the coral wall. In some ways, on a smaller scale, this geography resembles Samoan Upolu and Eniwetok in the Marshalls. Once our defense positions on the island had been completed and stabilized there was very little to do to make life interest-

ing for the defenders—guard duty interspersed with swimming, fishing, letter writing and games. Anticipating this, upon our return to Samoa, we set about to move recreational and athletic gear and post exchange supplies from our area to the men on Wallis.

Force Headquarters, under Major General Price's command in Pago Pago, American Samoa, tried to help us to do this, but not always successfully, even though their efforts were cooperative and well-intentioned. A small freighter, reportedly loaded with PX supplies, was diverted, prior to docking in Pago Pago, and was directed to proceed to Wallis and unload there. Prior to cargo discharge at Wallis, it was discovered that the reported PX supplies consisted solely of several hundred cans of beer!

Force Headquarters was notified and permission requested to return the ship to Pago Pago. To our surprise and consternation this request was denied. The order was to "unload"—much to the delight of willing Marine working parties who landed the beer, stored it under tarpaulins, placed a guard over the

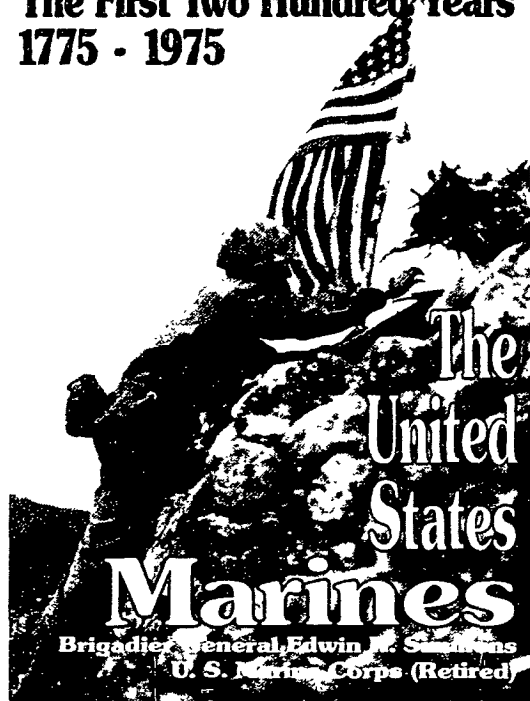
dump and for many weeks afterward carefully rationed the precious beverage. As you know, even warm beer can taste good in the tropics!

Following occupation of Uvea, cases of filariasis ("Mu Mu" to Samoans) commenced to surface among the men. Initially resulting from and spread by daytime mosquito bites in Samoa and later incubated and extended on Wallis, this debilitating blood infection eventually resulted in elephantiasis with enormous swelling of extremities and scrotum. In many cases those afflicted had to be evacuated by air to cooler climes on the West Coast of the United States.

No one, of course, knew whether this landing on Wallis was going to be opposed or not. The landing party went in ready to fight as Marines have always done. The result was the successful occupation of an outpost on the approaches to Samoa. This prevented the Japanese from seizing the island and launching an attack against our forces to the east which were guarding the vital air and sea lanes to Australia and the South Pacific.



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