

On the distant volcanic islands of Samoa, tribal warfare erupted in 1899, sending dangerous clouds of discontent across the emerald jungles and over the blue lagoons.

Malietao Tanumafili, young son of the Chieftain King Malietao Laupepa, was to claim the tribal throne of his deceased father. But the war chief Mata'afa Iosefo, old and gnarled, saw the boy as only a puppet of greedy foreigners and claimed the throne for himself. He knew that if he was ever to be king, he must seize power, ruthlessly spill the blood of those who would resist him and do it so violently that none dare challenge his right to rule.

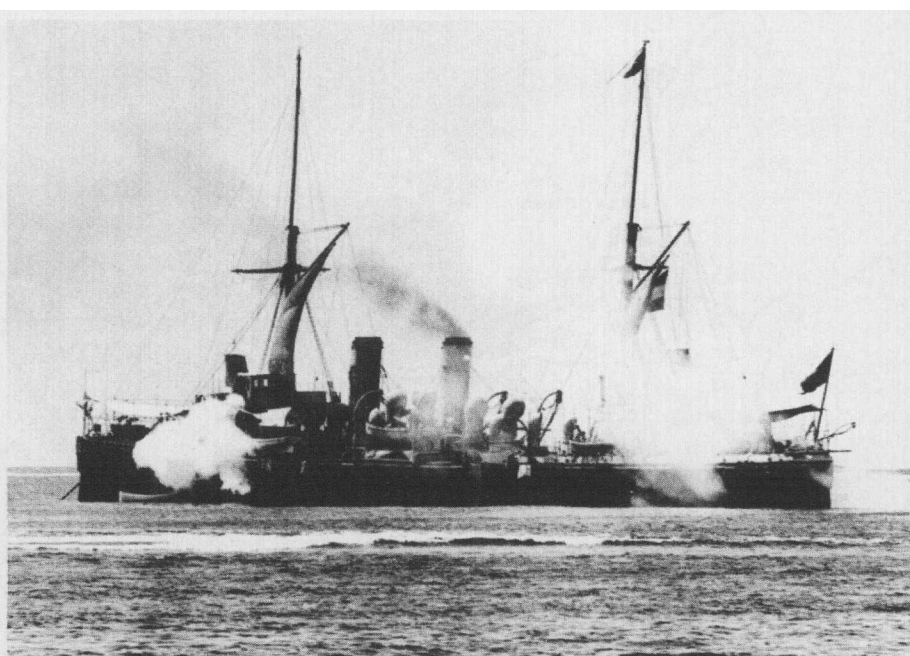
Armed with European-made Mauser rifles which allegedly were "gifts" from the Germans who, with the Americans and British, had interests on the islands, Mata'afa struck swiftly and without mercy. His loin-clothed warriors ravaged the camp of Tanumafili in a gory massacre that sent the terrified survivors fleeing into the jungle while Mata'afa's henchmen leisurely lopped off the heads of those unable to escape. Tanumafili's supporters, of course, vowed revenge, and slaughter ensued.

Adventures in paradise were far more sanguinary on the islands of Samoa than on other isles of the South Pacific inhabited by Polynesian tribes. American and European men of the sea considered the natives of Samoa far more warlike than their distant relatives who inhabited the Hawaiian chain.

It was not without reason.

Although Polynesian, the Samoans are (by ancestry) akin to the fierce Maori of New Zealand. Inhabiting the islands for 2,000 years, they had remained a people unto themselves. Intruders had their skulls crushed by well-muscled warriors swinging war clubs or were chased far out to sea by powerful men paddling canoes. A few unlucky ones were eaten. In the Samoan language, which is the oldest form of Polynesian in existence, "talofa" means welcome. It was a word that outsiders did not hear or know until relatively recent times.

In 1722, a Dutch explorer named Jacob Roggeveen became the first European to reach Samoa and live to tell about it. After him came the missionaries (Protestants mostly), then the Yankee whaling ships, followed by the traders



The flagship of the Pacific Squadron USS *Philadelphia* (above) fired across Apia Harbor and at native warriors fighting American and British forces on the island of Upolu. *Philadelphia's* Marine Detachment was led by then-1stLt Constantine M. Perkins shown (left) in 1915 as a lieutenant colonel.

was dispatched. In reprisal the Americans burned three villages, set fire to some canoes and killed a number of natives whose war clubs were no match for ball and powder. The landing party, which suffered no losses, left after teaching the "heathen" inhabitants a lesson they'd not soon forget.

Unfortunately, the lesson was not in humiliation but in something more practical: the need to obtain modern weapons to avenge their ancestors, to protect themselves from further humiliation and, more pragmatically, to defeat any lesser local enemies.

Thus, five decades later, news of the Tanumafili camp massacre sent a chill through the American, British and German citizens living on the islands. Indeed, all foreign residents were in danger, and the foreign consuls became uneasy. As early as November 1898, American Consul General Harold M. Sewell requested the commander of the gunboat USS *Nipsic*, then anchored in the Upolu Island harbor of Apia, to land Marines who could protect the American citizens and the consulate. The skipper, Com-

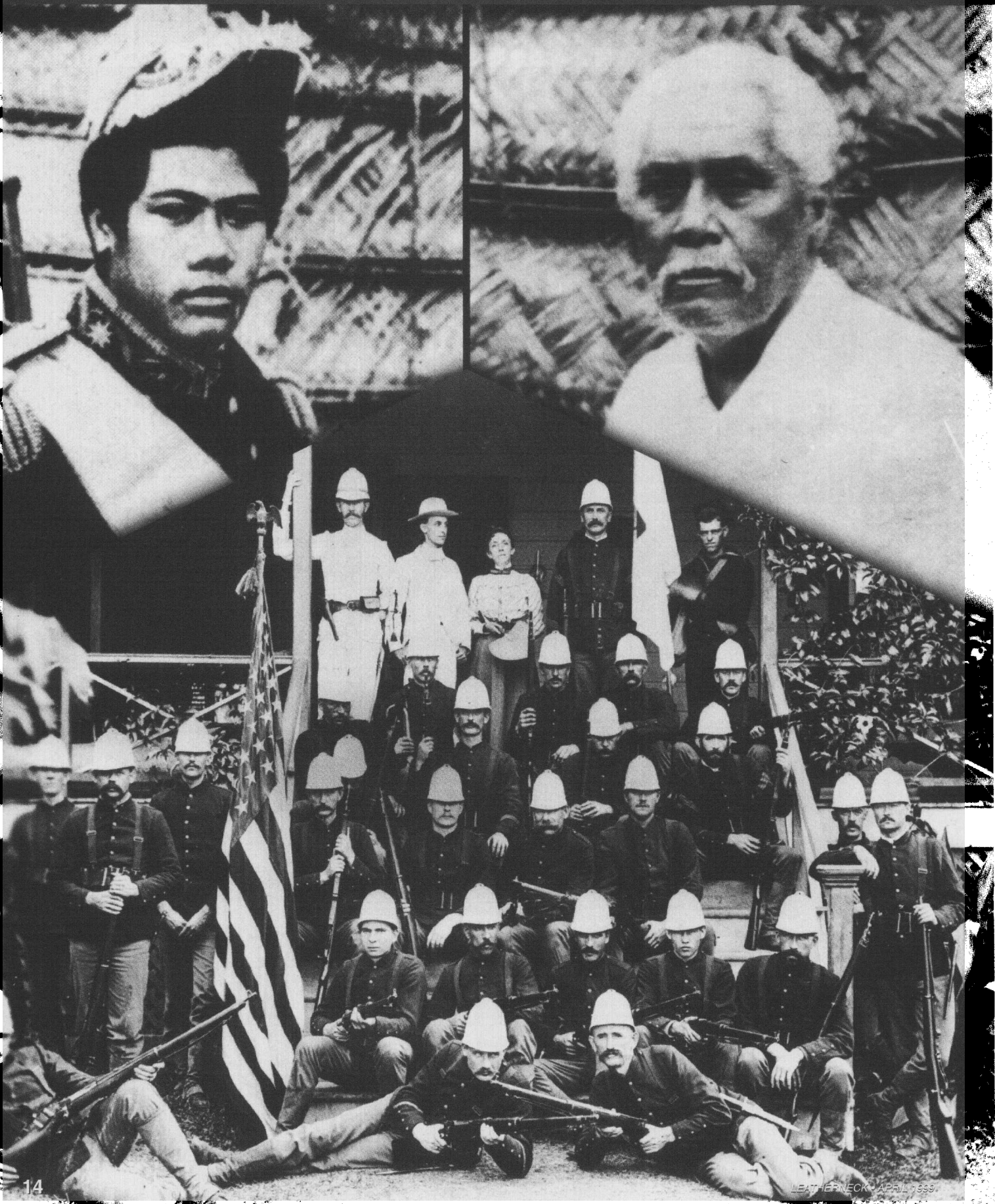
and commercial outposts. By the mid-1700s, the isles had become a regular stop for ships sailing that remote region of the world, and a Frenchman tagged the location as Navigators Islands.

By 1841, however, the natives understandably had grown restless and resisted the yoke of civilization. They demonstrated their frustration in what was considered an uncivilized manner: burning three villages, attacking missionaries and murdering an American seaman.

A 70-man American punitive force

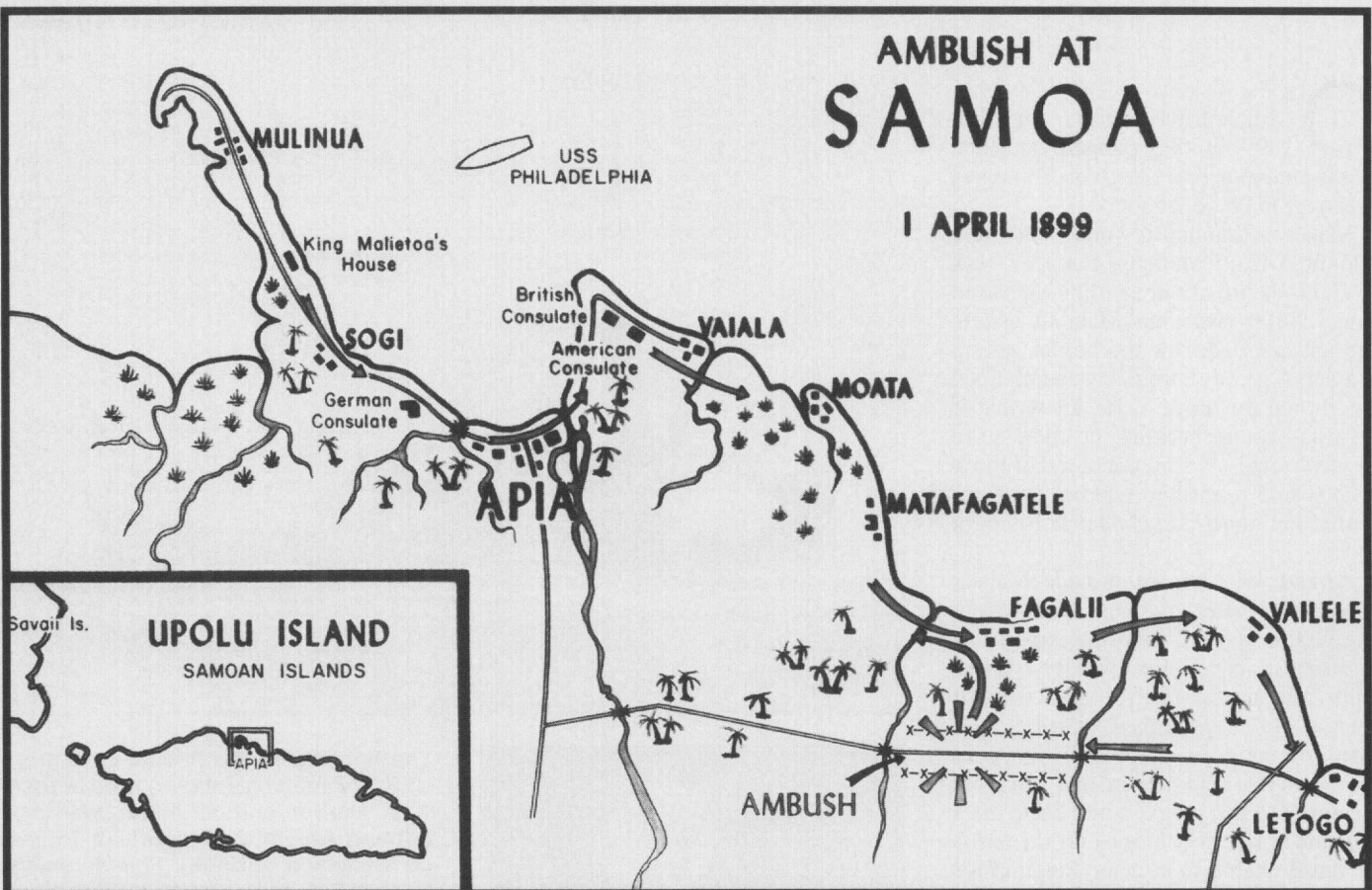
Opposite page (clockwise from left): Young Prince Malietao Tanumafili was heir apparent to the tribal throne. But war chief Mata'afa Iosefo was the man who would be king. When tribal warfare erupted, Marines, commanded by 1stLt Constantine Perkins (in white uniform with mustache) from USS *Philadelphia*, were sent to evacuate the consul, his wife and his son. (Photos courtesy of the Marine Corps Historical Center)

Samoa: Marines Intercede in Bloody Power Struggle



AMBUSH AT SAMOA

1 APRIL 1899



Map by MarGun Patrick Brewer

Leathernecks reinforced the small consulate as best they could. They mounted one of their guns in what had been the consulate's kitchen.

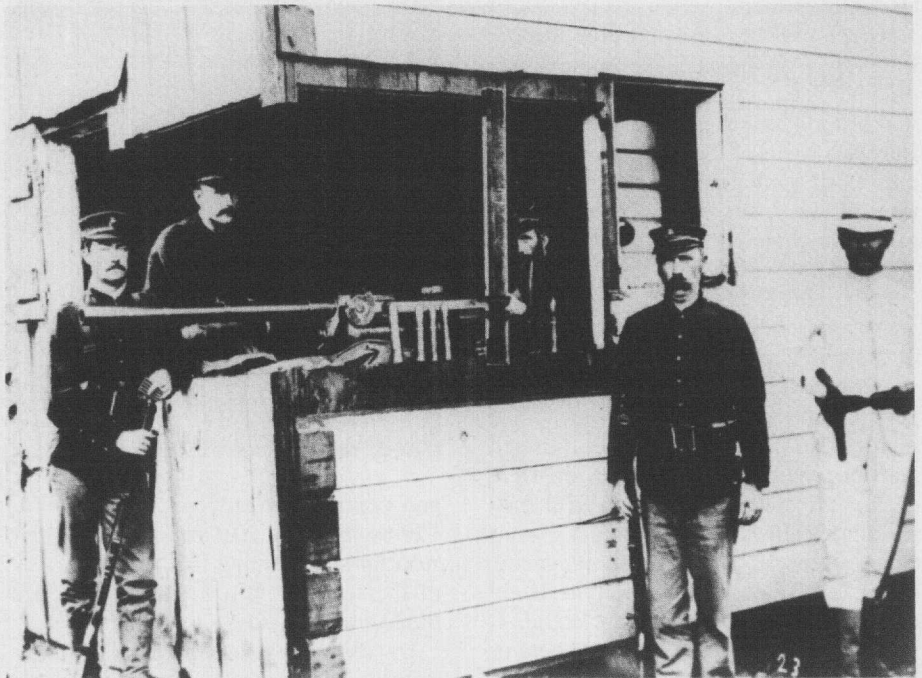
mander Dennis W. Mullan, detailed First Lieutenant T. Glover Fillete and 10 Marines ashore where they remained for several months until *Nipsic* was needed elsewhere.

In the meantime, USS *Philadelphia* (C-4), flagship of the Pacific Squadron, steamed 2,200 miles from Honolulu, and in March anchored off Upolu along with three British warships: HMSs *Tauranga*, *Porpoise* and *Royalist* and also the German covette SMS *Falke*.

On March 6, a captain's gig flying the Union Jack pulled alongside *Philadelphia*, and Royal Navy Captain Leslie C. Stuart, who commanded *Tauranga*, boarded as the senior British officer. Rear Admiral Albert Kautz, who commanded the Pacific Squadron, welcomed him.

Together they hammered out a proclamation which essentially demanded Mata'afa and his forces comply with the Berlin Treaty of 1889, lay down their arms and cease hostile action. They also hammered out a joint punitive campaign to be implemented if Mata'afa declined.

Fifty Marines and bluejackets commanded by Navy Lieutenant G. W. Brown and Marine 1stLt Constantine M. Perk-

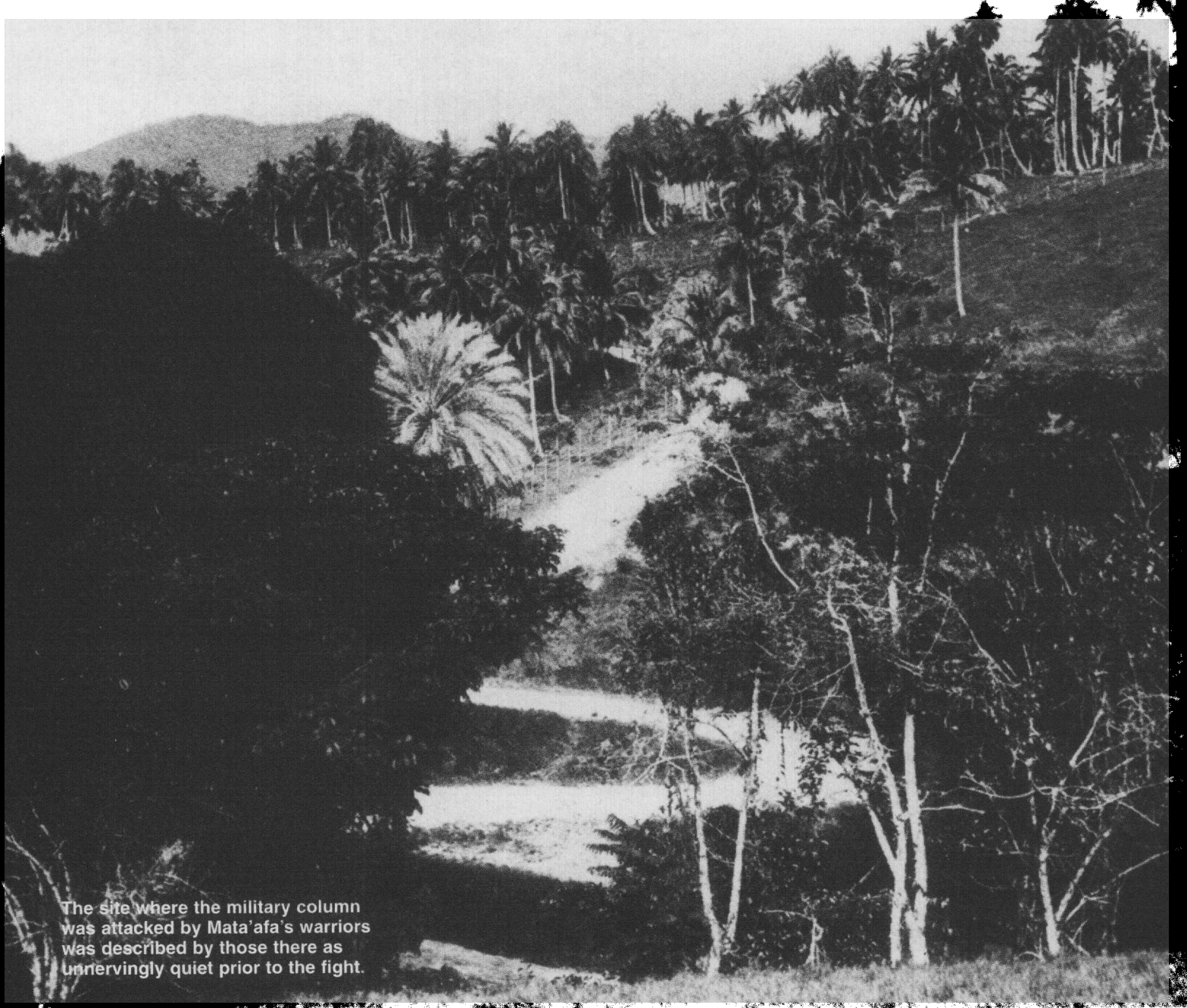


ins went ashore at Mulinu Point on March 13 carrying cartridge belts with pouches bulging with ammunition for their Lee rifles and toting a heavy, tripod-mounted Colt machine gun. Their orders were to proceed to the American Consulate within the capital of Apia and "to remain indefinitely."

They stepped off on a lengthy march which required them to bivouac in the jungle. That night nobody slept. From

the blackness came the pounding from not-too-distant drums and singsong chants of war. Mata'afa had answered the proclamation.

Dawn was a welcome sight for the American landing party, and so was the arrival of reinforcements commanded by Navy Lt Philip V. Lansdale from off *Philadelphia*. Together the forces marched into Apia where they made their way to the American Consulate which was little



The site where the military column was attacked by Mata'afa's warriors was described by those there as unnervingly quiet prior to the fight.

more than a small, nondescript home with a veranda. Lt Perkins was assigned 35 men and left to guard the consulate. The rest escorted the consul, his wife and son, several other Americans and an Englishman back to the safety offered by *Philadelphia*.

The next day, over German objections, the British and American warships started firing 6-inch shells into the jungle behind Apia and the Vailoa village which was reported to be harboring Mata'afa supporters. The bombardment went on for three hours and proved as perilous to the leathernecks as it was to the natives. The consulate and Perkins' Marines were not only in the line of fire, but also very near the intended targets. Although the Marines had scrambled for cover, there wasn't much to offer in the way of protection. One 6-inch shell

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screaming toward its target suddenly burst almost directly overhead. It blew away part of the consulate roof—and an unlucky fellow named Private John E. Mudge.

Mata'afa's men were in their element and not about to let the opportunities of the Samoan night be squandered. They

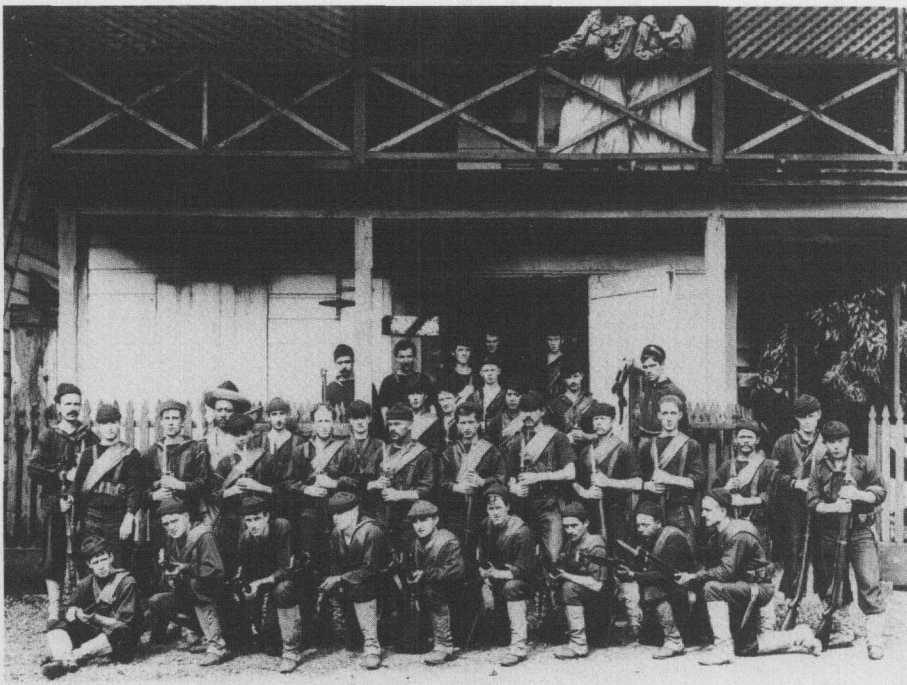
struck first at the Brits, who had set up their own outpost manned by Royal Marines and sailors. When dawn broke, three of the Brits had been killed or wounded.

The natives hit again the next night, this time probing the U.S. Marine defenses and shooting to death Pvt Thomas Holloway.

It continued similarly, day and night, for more than a week. Perkins called for volunteers to slip into the jungle and ambush Mata'afa's men as they moved toward the consulate. The tactic succeeded in keeping snipers from gaining positions too near the consulate.

Meanwhile, Mata'afa patiently bided his time, knowing the Marines eventually would be drawn out from their defensive posture.

He did not have to wait long.



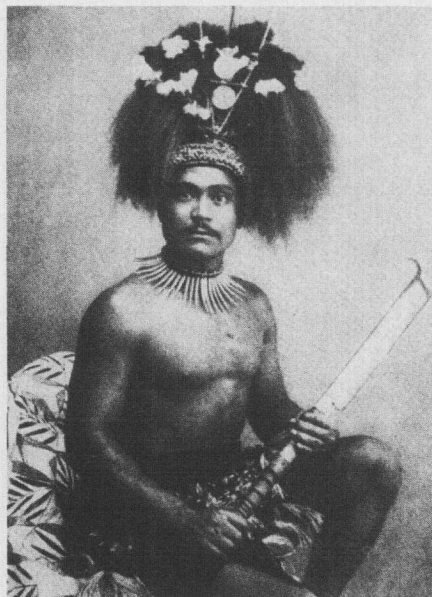
The April landing force also included these American sailors (above), from USS *Philadelphia*, who had by now changed from white jumpers to less visible blues. What they and British forces faced were Samoan warriors, similar to the one (right) holding a beheading knife, who were considered first-class fighting men.

On March 31, Lt Perkins with 28 Marines scouted the area east of their defenses, carrying the Colt machine gun with them. While nobody relished the thought of hefting the cumbersome weapon, everyone knew the advantage the gun would give them in a firefight. It proved prudent.

After some distance, Perkins took care to select a position for the gun which would provide cover and help it remain concealed while he and 20 others scouted what appeared to be a tranquil village. Flankers went out, and the point men cautiously proceeded. Suddenly, a warrior rose up in flight almost right beneath their feet. The Marines responded with rifle fire from the offhand. From the village, other similarly concealed warriors started shooting back. The leathernecks rushed forward, firing as they went. Inside the tree line the huts were abandoned.

Perkins pulled his forces together and was receiving his battle report when a hail of Mauser bullets kicked up spots of dust, cracked through twigs and implanted themselves in the trees around them. Somewhere a lot of people with a lot of firepower were aiming it at them.

It was enough to force the Marines to withdraw from the village. They slowly

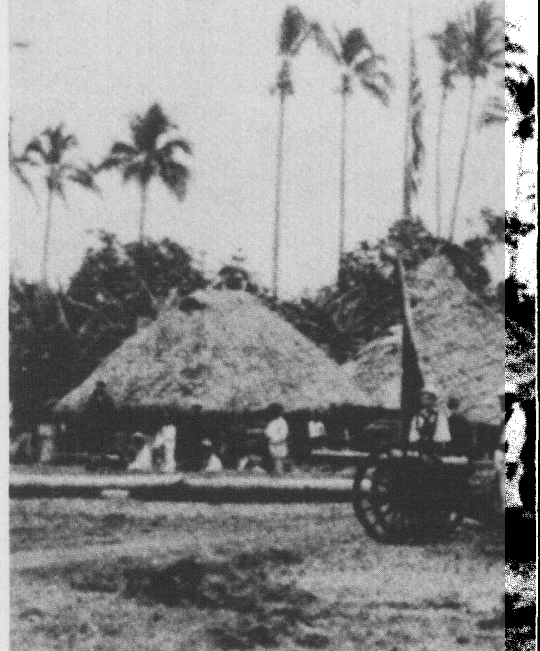


retraced their line of attack, taking heavy fire but no casualties as they fought their way to the hidden machine gun. There the gun crew returned heavy fire toward the native positions, surprising Mata'afa's warriors and causing the ambush to collapse.

Enough was enough.

On April 1, orders to a joint British and American force stated, "Pursue the hostile natives into the interior, defeat or capture them and bring the troubled conditions to an end."

A Royal Navy lieutenant named Angel Hope Freeman, the senior expedition officer, took charge of the column including a Royal Navy lieutenant named Lt Cave and 62 Royal Marines and sailors. U.S. Navy Lt Lansdale, Marine Lt Perkins and Navy Ensign John Monaghan led a force of 20 Marines and 36 sailors.

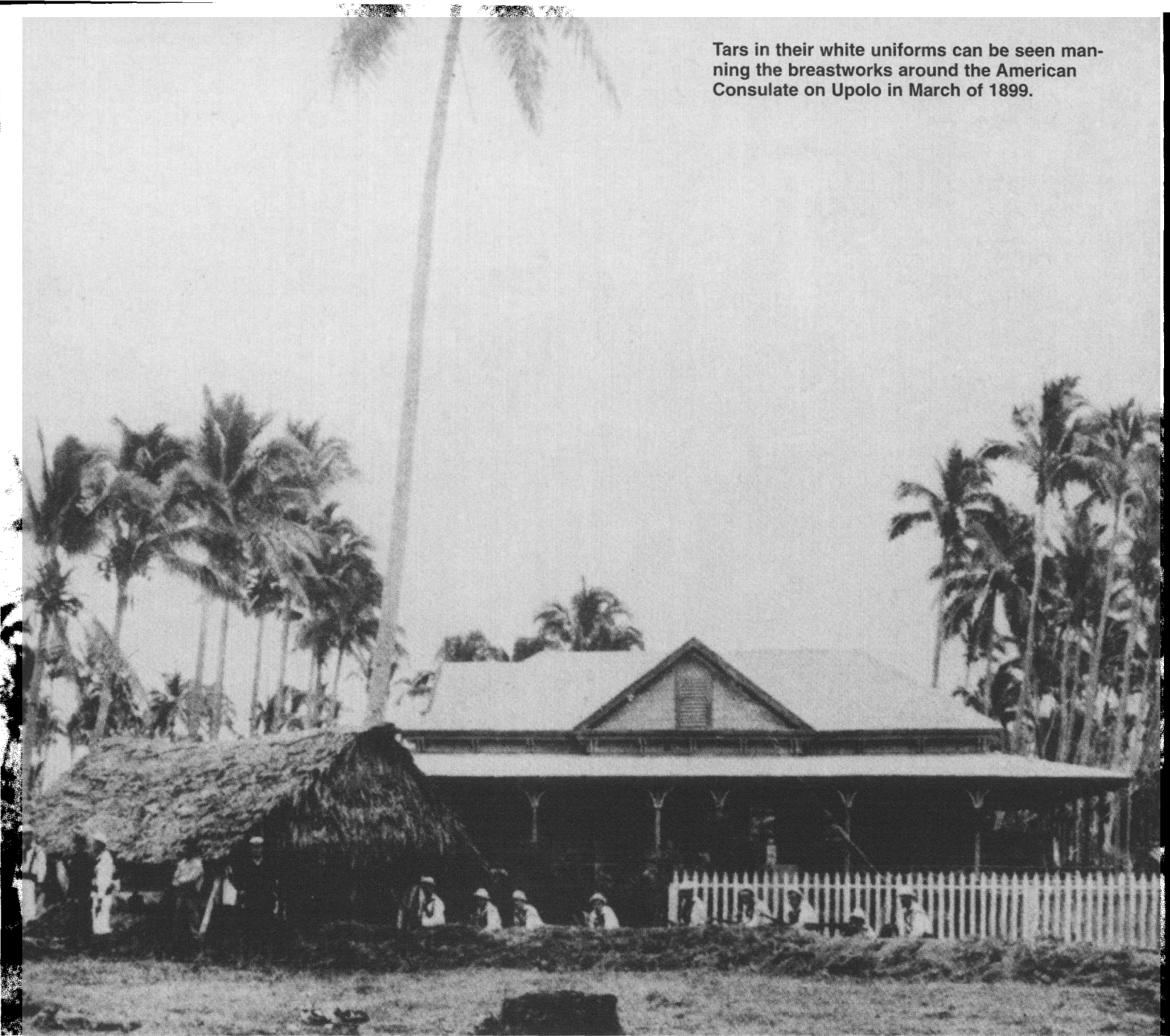


Accompanying them were approximately 100 friendly Samoans who had enlisted to fight against Mata'afa.

That afternoon the column route-stepped along the beach and turned inland after passing the village of Faglii. They worked their way inland and up toward the high plateaus and over the area that Perkins and the Marines had patrolled the previous day. The rumble and thunder off in the distance were comforting, for not only did they herald a monsoon storm, but they also signaled the impact of naval shells from *Royalist*, which was providing interdiction fire to their front.

The joint force was watched the whole time, according to Mata'afa. "Many times when the white soldiers were marching along, my people were on each side of

Tars in their white uniforms can be seen manning the breastworks around the American Consulate on Upolo in March of 1899.



them, unseen, and could have killed many of them, but they let them pass unharmed."

The column paused only briefly to burn an abandoned village, and they were momentarily taken aback when ammunition hidden in thatched roofs cooked off. Six miles later they came upon a German plantation. It was unnervingly quiet.

Sergeant Bruno A. Forsterer, the senior enlisted Marine of the *Philadelphia* detachment, quietly warned Lt Perkins to be careful, saying he'd been ambushed there before.

"Ambushed before?" replied Perkins. "When?"

"In 1888, sir," Forsterer quickly explained. He was a graduate of the German Imperial Naval War College

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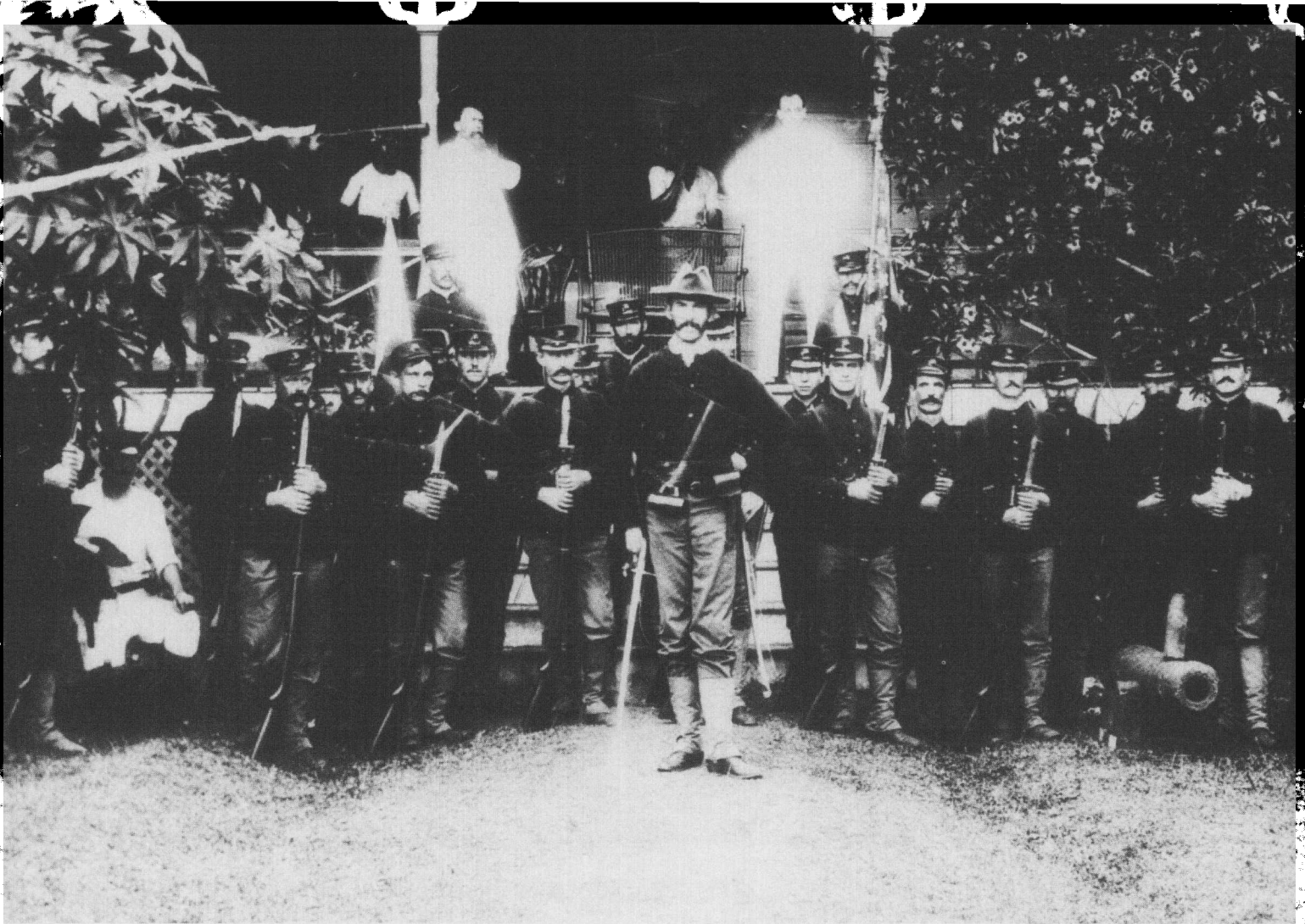
and had previously been to Samoa as a lieutenant in the German navy. "They ripped us up pretty badly here. And they cut off the ears of all the officers they caught."

Perkins informed Freeman, who hadn't liked the looks of the place anyway and wanted to approach it more cautiously.

As the column turned, it put the Marines as the rear guard, and the air suddenly buzzed with Mauser rounds.

More Mauser bullets poured in on the column's flank. One punctured Lt Freeman's heart, killing him instantly. Hundreds of warriors hidden in the grass charged toward the beleaguered column at headlong speed with war clubs ready and brandishing their knives and rifle bayonets toward their intended victims. The Colt machine gun, which 24 hours earlier had saved the day, now refused to work, drawing frustrated curses from its crew. Lt Lansdale, trying to assist the Colt's crew, was shot through the leg and could not run when the gun was abandoned.

Ens Monaghan ran to Lansdale's assistance.



Above: While the overexposed film caused the white-suited civilians to glow, the Marines had shed their white helmets for more subdued headgear.

Below: SgtMaj Henry Hulbert, then a private, won the Medal of Honor for his actions on Samoa.



"Save yourself, John," pleaded Lansdale.

Monaghan straddled the downed Lansdale to protect him, pulled his revolver, cocked the hammer and got off one shot before the charging warriors slammed full force into them with bayonets and war clubs. English-born U.S. Marine Pvt Henry Lewis Hulbert, who had been wounded himself, saw the naval officers being overrun. He couldn't leave them without knowing if they were still alive. Alone, Hulbert shot and hacked his way through the enemy to his officers. Apparently, Lansdale was still breathing. Hulbert held off the natives until he was sure the lieutenant was dead.

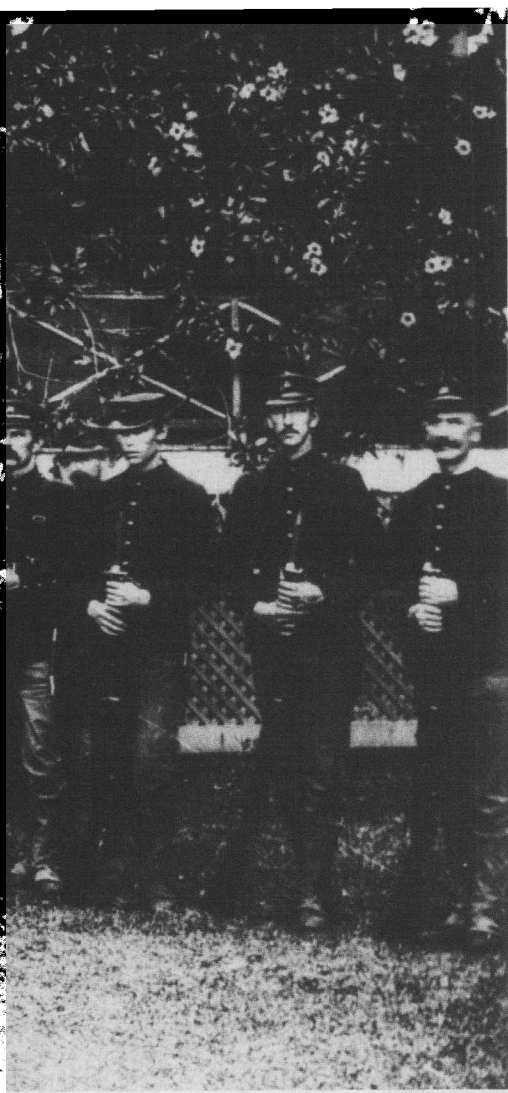
The attack had turned into a rout, and if Mata'afa's men had cut the column off from the rear, it would have become a massacre. Command of the beleaguered expedition fell to Lt Perkins, who ordered his flank to fall back approximately 300 yards to a wire fence edging the plantation. He huddled his remaining officers—Lt Cave and a Navy surgeon named Dr. Lung. He placed the U.S. bluejackets under the surgeon and ordered them to the front of the column to help the wounded back to the beach.

Perkins and Cave would use the Marines to bring up the rear and cover the blue-jackets.

Once on the beach, there was still no letup in fire from the natives. The Marines and sailors dug entrenchments on the water's edge to provide cover. They nervously eyed the jungle and anxiously waited for *Royalist* to lower armed rescue boats.

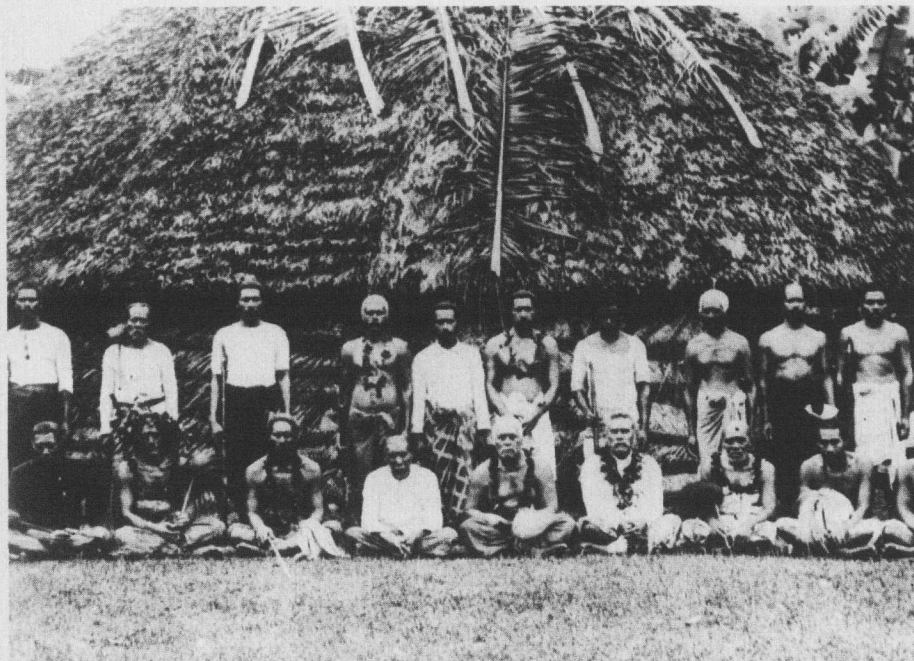
From out of the jungle tree line came several stragglers. One, his face caked in blood, said he'd been wounded and fainted. Several of Mata'afa's men, thinking the man was dead, started hacking off his ears. That brought him to, and once he started running, he never looked back. Sgt Forsterer and Pvt Hulbert, who not only fought his way through the warriors trying to overpower him, but also linked up with Forsterer and an immigrant Irishman named Sgt Michael J. McNally, fought a rearguard action to protect the column. Lt Perkins was especially impressed with Hulbert's actions, reporting, "His behavior throughout was worthy of all praise and honor." All three Marines would later be awarded Medals of Honor.

The boats arrived none too soon.



If anything positive
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Mata'afa's warriors could be seen coming over the makeshift defenses as the boats pulled the last of the ill-fated expedition members off the island. The next day, the Marines and sailors returned, well prepared and in force to retrieve their dead. They met no resistance. Reports do not say how many British and native Samoans of the expedition died, but the Americans recovered the bodies of Lt Lansdale, Ens Monaghan, two sailors and one Marine. The officers had been beheaded, and the enlisted men had their ears taken. Others killed in the expedition were Ordinary Seaman N. E.



Things had quieted down when Mata'afa (front and center) and rebel chiefs settled for peace. He was given the title of paramount chief, a ceremonial position. He died in 1912.

Edsay, USN; Leading Seaman John Long, RN; Leading Seaman Albert M. Prout, RN; Able Bodied Seaman A. H. J. Thornberry, RN; Ordinary Seaman Montague Rogers, RN; Ordinary Seaman Edmond Holloran, RN, all sailors off *Royalist*. The dead then were carried back to the ships.

Reciprocity was swift and massive. Punitive naval bombardments were almost continuous. Mata'afa, who watched it all, later said, "Many of my people were killed or wounded by the [naval] guns which fire many bullets, like the drops of rain in a heavy shower."

After a week, the natives understandably grew "unrestless," and peace was imposed. Tanumafili was placed on the throne, and Mata'afa was given the title "ali'i sili" or paramount chief, a ceremonial position with little power. He died in 1912.

The foreign powers had obtained what they wanted, at least for a while. Samoa was partitioned between Great Britain, the United States and Germany. After World War I Germany would turn over Western Samoa to be administered by New Zealand. Western Samoa became independent Samoa in 1962. Great Britain received the Solomon Islands and Tonga as compensation.

In 1904, a U.S. naval station was established at Tutuilla, the main island of what became American Samoa. The Marines trained a native security force known as the Fita-Fita Guard, a U.S. Navy unit made up of regularly enlisted Samoans, who were commanded and trained by a Marine first sergeant. Later, a Marine

Corps Reserve battalion (often mistakenly referred to as Fita-Fita Guards), composed of native Samoans and trained by U.S. Marines, was organized at the start of World War II. The battalion was commanded and mentored by a succession of leatherneck noncommissioned officers.

If anything positive for the Marines came of the expedition, it was that they recognized the Samoan natives as first-class fighting men. Many years later, citizens of American Samoa would become eligible to join U.S. Armed Forces. However, in the years directly following the expedition and for many years after, the outlying U.S. naval base in Samoa never needed American Marines to garrison the barracks.

Author's note: Special thanks for assistance in the preparation of this article to Tom Sansom, who quickly came up with answers to questions from his Web site in Samoa.

*The following were used as references: "The History of the United States Marine Corps" by Alan R. Millett; *"The U.S. Marine Corps Story" by J. Robert Moskin; *"Soldiers of the Sea: The United States Marine Corps from 1775-1962" by Col Robert Debs Heintz Jr., USMC; and "A History of the United States Marine Corps" by Clyde H. Metcalf.*

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