

Marines in Australia, 1943

"Bring Your Lads Here. We Will Show You and Your Men Every Hospitality."

By Maj Allan C. Bevilacqua, USMC (Ret)

"You were wonderful to us. You adopted a bunch of half-starved, malaria-ridden teenagers who were a long way from home and took us into your homes and your hearts. None of us will ever forget you."

—Marine veteran John "Jack" Biggins

On Dec. 8, 1942, the First Marine Division was relieved on the island of Guadalcanal. After four months of constant and savage combat in a natural environment that truly may be described as malevolent, Japanese resistance on the island had been overcome, and Major General Alexander A. Vandegrift's division had been wrecked. A staff officer described it by saying, "The Division sustained 100 percent casualties during the Guadalcanal campaign."

A look at the figures leaves a distinct impression that such a belief had more than a minor basis in fact. Combat losses in killed and wounded on Guadalcanal totaled 2,138, far less than the 30,000 Japanese dead, but Marines killed or wounded in action were only a part of the story. Many more Marines were afflicted by the very nature of the campaign.

Nearly 7,000 Marines who walked away from Guadalcanal actually were ambulatory hospital cases, alternately freezing and burning with the ravages of malaria. Cases of dysentery were so far beyond counting as to be almost commonplace. So were the varieties of fungus infections: "Jungle rot" or the "creeping crud" inflamed armpits, groins and feet, leaving those areas raw, burning and bloody. Festering, suppurating and infected sores inflicted by poisonous and voracious insects were dismaying body adornments. Painful skin ulcers were a natural outgrowth of the fact that every Marine on Guadalcanal was in one stage or another of malnutrition.

Only days after L-day, the U.S. Navy cargo ships carrying the bulk of the 1stMarDiv's supplies were forced to leave the area by the imminent arrival of far superior Japanese surface



An Australian soldier presents his nation's flag to the First Marine Division on behalf of the city of Caulfield, a suburb of Melbourne, March 17, 1943. (USMC photo)

combatants coming down from Rabaul. From that day forward, every Marine on Guadalcanal was on short rations. Only two skimpy daily meals, many consisting of captured Japanese rations, were allowed to make limited food stocks last. Among the Japanese, Guadalcanal was "Starvation Island." For Marines, it was only marginally less.

An old-fashioned word, practically out of the dictionary today, describes the Marines who left Guadalcanal: "starvelings." An assemblage of starvelings called the 1stMarDiv was loaded aboard ships that took the Marines from the place no one regretted leaving. More than a few were too weak and worn down to climb the cargo nets necessary to board ship. Far too many had to be hauled aboard manually like an 81 mm mortar baseplate or a heavy machine-gun tripod. Once on deck, most of them promptly collapsed.

Subtropical Brisbane on Australia's east coast was not the

"Never before in history has such a group of healthy, toughened, well-trained men been subjected to such conditions as the combat troops of the U.S. Marine Corps faced during the days following August 7. ... Weight losses in muscular, toughened young adults ran as high as forty-five pounds. Rain, heat, insects, dysentery, malaria, all contributed, but the end result was not blood stream infection nor gastro-intestinal disease but a disturbance of the whole organism, a disorder of thinking and living. ... And this incredible strain lasted not one or two days or nights but persisted and increased for months."

—LCDR E. Rogers Smith, MC, USNR

place to send a collection of sick-on-their-feet young men, but Brisbane was where the 1stMarDiv was going. The upper echelons of theater headquarters, even further removed from reality than by geography, had decided that “after a short period of rest,” the 1stMarDiv would be employed in constructing and then manning beach defenses to guard against a feared Japanese invasion.

At dockside in Brisbane, descending the ladder of the transport that brought them there, the first arrivals of the 1stMarDiv looked little different from a collection of scarecrows. The ragged, dirt-encrusted dungarees most wore rarely had been off their backs since August. Few of the men walked steadily; most stumbled, staggered and lurched, not merely resembling scarecrows but drunken scarecrows in the bargain. A frightening number of them, too weak to manage something as ordinary as walking, fell and tumbled down the ladder.

Ragged, worn out and dirty they were, but practically every man had saved his prized Marine Corps emblems. The men wore them proudly, affixed to dungaree jackets and covers, telling the world they were United States Marines.

Watching them disembark was a group of senior officers from theater headquarters. Nearby, only slightly less ragged than the worn-out starvelings making their way off the ship, a division staff officer turned to the neat, clean, well-fed onlookers. “There are your saviors of Australia,” he offered.

If the arrival was disheartening, the accommodations were worse. Much was said and written—none of it complimentary—about the camp they were assigned. “Don’t call it a camp,” a battalion commander commented. “Just say we’re dispersed in a swamp.”

Gen Vandegrift moved swiftly to correct a condition that would have meant the disintegration of his command. He did not ask theater headquarters to move the 1stMarDiv to a more temperate climate. Gen Vandegrift flatly and unequivocally told headquarters that the division would be moved.

“Sorry,” came the response. There was no shipping available. Hearing that at his headquarters in New Caledonia, Vice Admiral William F. “Bull” Halsey, one of the greatest fighting seamen America ever had, proved himself to be one of the Corps’ and 1stMarDiv’s greatest friends. If the division needed transports, VADM Halsey would provide them.

Where did Gen Vandegrift wish the division to be taken? Sydney, filled to overflowing with uniforms, was considered briefly and discarded quickly. Inquiries were made in Australia’s second-largest city, Melbourne. “Bring your lads here,” was the response. “We will show you and your men every hospitality.” On Jan. 11, 1943, the first contingent of Marines began disembarking



Above: Marines from the 1stMarDiv arrive in Melbourne, Australia, on March 13, 1943, to rest and recuperate after the division’s four punishing months on Guadalcanal.

Below: The 1stMarDiv staff and band march through Melbourne, Feb. 22, 1943, in celebration of George Washington’s birthday. The division’s infantry regiments followed in trace.



from the transport USS *West Point* (AP-23) in Melbourne. It was the beginning of a love affair between U.S. Marines and Australia that never has ended.

Young June Bebee’s father watched them coming in at Williamstown docks. “Those kids looked exhausted. They’re all young, and they’ve been through a lot,” he told his family that evening. June Bebee had no idea that among those “exhausted kids” was the man who would be her husband for almost 60 years.

To sick, weary men who had been immersed so recently in near impassable jungle and all but bottomless swamps, crawling with leeches, venomous snakes, poisonous spiders, scorpions, centipedes and clouds of malaria-bearing mosquitoes, Melbourne at first sight appeared as an improbable vision from another world.

Recording his first reaction to seeing civilization after months in the green inferno of Guadalcanal, one Marine wrote: "Around us lay a city of wide streets, taxis, trolleys, department stores, bars, hotels, gas stations, street lights, soda fountains, factories, row after row of houses and thousands of friendly people."

For all of the Marines thronging the rail of *West Point* as the ship nudged her way toward her assigned berth, Melbourne was their first sight of a modern city since that very brief stay in New Zealand prior to reloading for Guadalcanal. For those who would survive until the Japanese surrender, more than two years in the future, Melbourne would be their sole contact with civilization during their entire time in the Pacific.

As fast as *West Point* and other transports arrived dockside, the men of the 1stMarDiv were transferred to camps ready and waiting for them in and around Melbourne. They would be living under canvas, that time-honored Marine Corps standby, the pyramidal tent. For the average civilian, sleeping on a bunk in a tent might have seemed the ultimate in roughing it. For men whose only roof had been the sky and their living quarters a hole in the ground, such accommodations were the equivalent of an executive suite at New York's Waldorf Astoria.

Seabags that had been left in storage in New Zealand arrived and uniforms were broken out. The word had come down from division: For the first 90 days, unlimited liberty for all hands. For 2,000 seabags there were no claimants; their owners lay in graves or hospitals. For the owners of a few more thousand, the worst of the malaria cases, there would be no liberty immediately. Those Marines lay in hospital beds of the recently finished Royal

Melbourne Hospital in Parkville, given over to the Marines for as long as it was needed.

Even without the missing, there were more than enough Marines to fill the streets and see the sights of Melbourne. Equally eager to see them were the citizens of Melbourne, who opened their homes and hearts to those young men who had come from thousands of miles away to stand beside Australia. In very little time, the openness and friendliness encountered by Marines had many of them remarking, "This place is just like home."

That impression became more pronounced on Feb. 22, 1943, George Washington's birthday, when the 1stMarDiv paraded through the center of the city. From the Shrine of Remembrance to Parliament House, past Flinders Street Station and City Hall, the parade route was packed with spectators. What seemed to be the entire population of Melbourne thronged the route, waving a forest of small Australian and American flags.

When the band played the first strains of the all-time Australian favorite, "Waltzing Matilda," the cheers from onlookers rattled the storefront windows. Bandsman Henry "Harry" Monckton thought he was "back at home on the Fourth of July." It is not by chance that "Waltzing Matilda" remains the official song of the 1stMarDiv today.

Marines in summer khaki became a common sight throughout Melbourne. The months of January and February mark the approach of autumn and winter "down under," and cotton khaki is a bit on the chilly side. Arrangements were made with Australian authorities to outfit Marines with Australian Army-issue winter battle jackets. The garments caught on, were adopted by the

"Thanks for the Memory"
*"Thanks for the memory
Of castles in the air,
Fingers in my hair,
Of Collins Street
And kisses sweet
And those medals that you wear.
How lovely it was."*

—Title song written by Australian Red Cross girls



CPA ANSEL SERNA, USMC

The special relationship between the First Marine Division and Australia continues to this day as units with Marine Rotational Force-Darwin have been deploying to Darwin and the Northern Territory to conduct training with the Australian Defence Force. Brigadier Mick Ryan greeted the leathernecks of 1st Battalion, 4th Marines during a "Welcome to Country" brief at the Brigade Parade Ground, Robertson Barracks on April 22, 2015, by saying, "The 1st Brigade is now your home. You are our friends."



Marines from 1stMarDiv eagerly read mail from their families back home while in Melbourne, Australia, 1943. During their later campaigns, the Marines received as much mail from their new Australian friends as they did from friends and family back home in the U.S.



COURTESY OF MRS. JUNE HEIM

June Bebee met her future husband, Gordon Heim, at the Palais de Danse in Melbourne in early 1943. After serving with the 1stMarDiv on Cape Gloucester and Peleliu, Heim returned to Melbourne to marry June on Dec. 23, 1944.

uniform board and became a standard item of clothing issue for the next 10 years.

Shoulder patches, the first to be worn by Marines since leather-necks fought in France some 20-odd years before, appeared. Now identified with the 1stMarDiv and designed by Lieutenant Colonel Merrill B. Twining, the division's assistant operations officer, the blue diamond patch bore the numeral 1 emblazoned with "GUADALCANAL" and the stars of the Southern Cross, the same stars that appear on the national colors of Australia and the state of Victoria. Still the identifying insignia of the division, it remains a symbol of the special bond between America and Australia to this day.

Along with articles of clothing, Australian speech was picked up in no time. A buddy became a "cobber" or "mate." Any girl was a "sheila." Something extraordinarily good was "bonzer." A proposal that seemed reasonable and acceptable was "fair dinkum."

All day, every day the streets of Melbourne were crowded with Marines. Many were the sons of small-town and blue-collar America. Most were 20 years old or younger. Their life experiences, for the most part, consisted of high school, boot camp, advanced training in North Carolina, followed by total immersion in violent and savage combat against a tough, disciplined enemy. For many of the Marines, Melbourne was the largest city they ever had seen, and they wanted to see it all.

Any public place in Melbourne was sure to be filled with Marines. Luna Park, the walkway along the Yarra River, St. Kilda's Esplanade, the Botanic Gardens, wherever there was something to be seen, there were Marines there to see it. Many still were suffering bouts of malaria, but they weren't about to permit microbes to interfere with liberty call.

At any motion-picture theater, half of the audience was sure to be Marines. Melbourne's excellent street railway system was never without Marines going nowhere in particular, simply riding about for the sheer enjoyment of it. Marines prowled the aisles of department stores, not in search of anything special, just glad to be alive and enjoying it all. For no other reason than to see it, Marines found their way to the lobby of the Young and

Jackson Hotel where the famous nude portrait "Chloe" had long been a fixture.

Chloe may have been a painting, but there seemed to be no end of real live Australian girls to meet, girls just as fascinated by those smiling, open Americans as the smiling open Americans were by them. Dancing at the Trocadero, the Palm Garden and the Palais de Danse at St. Kilda became the destination of choice in scarcely any time at all.

June Bebee wasn't at all enthused about attending one such dance, but she had been invited to meet friends and her brother's fiancée one evening at the Palais de Danse. "There'll be no one there but girls," she muttered as she left the house. However, when she walked into the dance hall that was large enough to hold 1,000 people, all she could see were Marines. Those "exhausted kids" didn't look so exhausted to her.

Making her way through the crowd to the coat-check counter, June Bebee found herself face to face with a tall, handsome Marine. His name, she would learn later, was Gordon Heim. He was a member of Colonel James W. Webb's Seventh Marine Regiment and originally was from Baltimore, Md. She would say later that she could recall no conscious thought that prompted her to ask, "Did you say that you would like to dance?" Neither, at that moment, could she have known that her first step on the dance floor was her first step in eventually becoming a Marylander.

Gordon Heim and June Bebee weren't the only American-Australian couple. There were more and more such pairings as Marines and Australian girls met. Post-war sociologists would devote voluminous studies claiming to reveal the reasons for young American men being attracted to foreign girls. All the studies missed the most obvious reason: They were there.

As Marines and Australian girls met, Marines in ever greater numbers became unofficially "adopted" by Australian families. The residents of Melbourne truly opened their homes and their hearts to those young men from distant shores. So many young men away from home and family for the first time in their lives were taken into the circle of Australian families. The requests for Marines as dinner and weekend guests of Australian families



never ceased. That first step quickly led to Marines becoming part of the family in all but blood.

It wasn't all quiet and tranquility. Veterans of the 9th Division, Australian Imperial Force, who recently had returned from the Middle East and soon would fight again on New Guinea, took exception to Marines dominating the social scene. More and more fistfights broke out when the two uniforms collided.

Captain Leon Brusiloff, the division band officer, suggested a solution. Have a beer bust and old-fashioned American barbecue at the Melbourne Cricket Ground that had been turned into an encampment for Col Clifton B. Cates' First Marine Regiment. Serve the beer in paper cups so "some character doesn't throw a beer bottle in the air and hit somebody with it." And no military police were to be present.

That Capt Brusiloff's suggestion worked was best attested to by one Australian. "What the hell are we fighting for, Yank? There are plenty of sheilas to go around, and there are more than enough Japanese. Let's have a beer, mate!" It was just a case of fighting men getting to know one another.

Whether it was excellent Australian beer or excellent Australian food, Melbourne had something for everyone. For men who had subsisted on a starvation diet of captured Japanese rice and fish, Melbourne was a chowhound's dream come true. The Australian favorite that rapidly became a Marine favorite, steak and eggs, could be had for as little as two shillings, six pence (less than \$1). Mario's Italian restaurant, close to the YMCA, served up the best Italian cuisine outside of Rome.



COURTESY OF MRS. JUNE HEIM

Gordon Heim told his future bride that he was from "Balmer, Murland." Her father had never heard of such a place and told his daughter that after a line like that, she shouldn't expect to see the Marine again. Mr. Beebe eventually discerned the accent, and upon meeting Heim, asked, "Are you by any chance from Baltimore, Maryland?" He was, and his widow, June Beebe Heim, still lives in Maryland today.

Islands in preparation for the campaign on the island of New Britain. The division never returned to its home away from home in Australia. For the first year after departing Melbourne, the 1stMarDiv received more mail from Australia than it did from the United States. "You would never know these fellows were Americans," wrote one division chaplain. "All they talked about was Australia."

At war's end, nearly 15,000 Australian war brides journeyed to America to join their husbands. In the decades since then, those young Australian girls, their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren have become Americans but have not lost their connection to families and friends "down under" or their love of their homeland or heritage. The bonds of friendship and family that the two countries forged more than 70 years ago remain.

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LEPT. KATHRYN HOWARD/USMC

Almost 75 years later, Marines are still visiting Australia, this time to train in the Northern Territory. HM2 Jordan Mullan, Combat Logistics Detachment 1, Marine Rotational Force-Darwin, is pulled out of the audience by an aboriginal dancer during a "Welcome to Country" ceremony April 22, 2015, at Robertson Barracks, Palmerston, Australia.

