PAVUVU
Bevilacqua, Allan C, Maj
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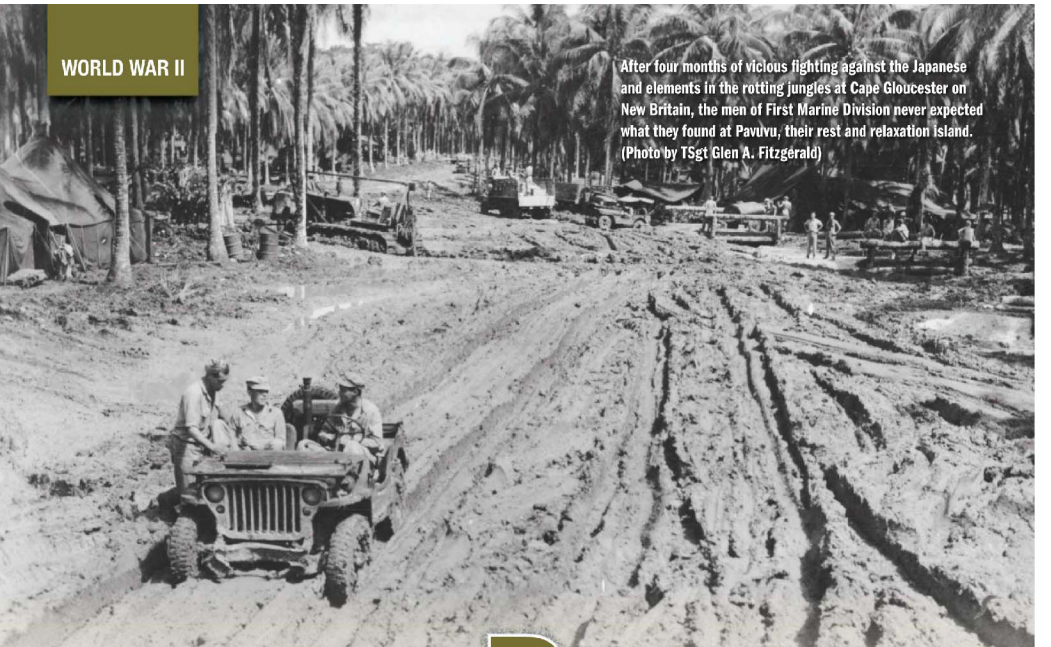
WORLD WAR II



After four months of vicious fighting against the Japanese and elements in the rotting jungles at Cape Gloucester on New Britain, the men of First Marine Division never expected what they found at Pavuvu, their rest and relaxation island. (Photo by TSgt Glen A. Fitzgerald)

PAVUVU

Story by Maj Allan C. Bevilacqua
USMC (Ret)

USMC photos courtesy of Susan Strange

"Sure, I still remember Pavuvu, and I still can't stand the sight, the smell or the taste of coconuts."

–GySgt Irvin R. "Dick" Stone
MCRD San Diego, 1961

Pavuvu. Say it slowly: PahVOO-VOO. Doesn't it bring a mental image of a tropical paradise, palm trees swaying in a gentle breeze, the soft scent of hibiscus blossoms filling the evening air, the sinuous figures of graceful dancing girls outlined against the setting sun? Aren't the romantic syllables enough to make you almost taste the cool delight of an iced drink in a tall glass, inhale the aroma of tantalizing taste treats prepared for your dining enjoyment? The picture is idyllic, isn't it?

If you were a member of the First Marine Division in May 1944, the picture of Pavuvu was something completely different—a picture that had nothing at all to do with swaying palm trees, graceful dancing girls or tall, cool drinks. Pavuvu in the spring of 1944 was enough to make a profane and blasphemous man run out of four-letter words.

The Division had emerged from a grueling campaign that lasted four months in the Cape Gloucester region of western New Britain Island, where nature itself was as hostile as the die-hard Japanese. Even the appetites of the most determined masochist would have been satisfied. The campaign had been fought through the worst of the northwest monsoon, deluged with constant torrential rain. Slogging through chest-deep swamps, beset by hordes of bloodthirsty, disease-bearing insects, ravaged by malaria, dengue fever, fungal infections, dysentery and tropical skin ulcers, the Division had left New Britain dog tired and ready for a break.

It was the fervent hope of all hands that the longed-for break would take the form of a return to Australia, where the Division had rested and refitted at Melbourne after the campaign on Guadalcanal the year before. To Marines leaving behind the jungles of Guadalcanal, Melbourne had been a dream come true. The people of Melbourne had taken the Marines to their hearts. In return, the 1stMarDiv had fallen in love with Melbourne, and it was to Melbourne that everyone hoped to return.

It wasn't to be. What was to be was Pavuvu.

Located barely south of the equator, searing hot Pavuvu was the largest of the Russell Islands, the outermost of the Solomon Islands chain. Before World War II, Pavuvu had been the site of extensive coconut plantations operated by the Lever Brothers Company, makers of a variety of popular bath soaps that incorporated coconut palm oil.

When the area was overrun by the Japanese in late 1941 and early 1942, the site had been abandoned, the workers and managerial staff departing for less hazardous shores. In turn, a small Japanese garrison on the adjacent island of Banika was evacuated after the loss of nearby Guadalcanal. In February 1943, the 3d Marine Raider Battalion landed on Pavuvu, only to depart shortly after finding no sign of Japanese or any other human activity. Left to its own, with no human hand to keep things under control, nature, as it usually does in tropic climes, exploded. Plant and animal life alike ran riot, in no time at all returning Pavuvu to a state not far removed from pre-man.

That was the "rest camp" that greeted

the worn-down, worn-out 1stMarDiv. First, though, the Division would have to build its rest camp. A picture begins to take shape, doesn't it?

For the first arrivals crowding the rails of USS *Aquarius* (AKA-16) and USS *Titania* (AKA-13) as the pair nosed their way toward the old Lever Brothers pier in Macquitti Bay, the picture didn't look all that bad. A long, wide beach glistened with white sand, looking almost like snow in the morning sunlight. Palm trees, thousands of palm trees, were spaced meticulously in geometrically precise rows. The palm trees really were swaying gently in a mild breeze. At first glance, Pavuvu looked like a setting for one of those popular South Sea Island movies with Bob Hope, Bing Crosby and Dorothy Lamour.

In the ranks of Battery L, 4th Bn, 11th Marine Regiment, Chicago-born Private First Class Milton "Milt" Royko thought Pavuvu looked "pretty neat." Such personally identifying materials as journals and diaries were frowned upon by officialdom, yet many young Marines, who for the most part had never been much more than 50 miles from home, kept such records of their travels in the Pacific. Milt Royko carefully recorded his first impression of Pavuvu. "When the island came into sight it looked like a nice tropical island." Idyllic? Maybe it well and truly was.

Unfortunately, ashore the idyllic image ended at the tree line. Where the glistening white sand ended, the shin-deep, foot-sucking mud began. The entire island of Pavuvu once may have been a genuine coconut plantation, but for more than two years it had been an abandoned coconut plantation.

No one had bothered to tell the palm trees about the change in routine. Those thousands of palm trees kept right on producing coconuts. With no human hand to harvest them, the coconuts ripened, overripened and fell to the ground, in some places collecting to a depth of 2 or 3 feet.

CPL ALAN MOTT

The 3d Marine Raider Bn landed on Pavuvu, in the Russell Islands, in February 1943 to find the Japanese gone. In the leathernecks' stay on the island, the biggest issues were logistics and the environment. Similar issues faced 1stMarDiv one year later.

Then they rotted, their putrid contents mixing with the daily afternoon rain to turn the ground into a throat-gagging glue. Idyllic Pavuvu stank to high heaven.

Years afterward, during the war in Korea, William "Barney" Baxter, by then a staff sergeant, told a young 5th Marines machine-gunner of life on Pavuvu. If he had to choose between the stench of a corpse that had lain three days beneath a hot sun or the stomach-turning stink of thousands upon thousands of rotten coconuts, he would have to think long and hard on the matter.

While Pavuvu had a superabundance of rotten coconuts, the island offered absolutely nothing in the line of amenities, not so much as a palm-thatch hut for a Marine to put between himself and the sky above. "In the beginning there, a caveman had it better than we did," remembered 1st Marines rifleman Salvatore "Sal" Gambardella. "At least the caveman had a cave to sleep in. All we had was a poncho or a shelter half, and you didn't want to bed down under a palm tree where you could get brained by a falling coconut."

It wasn't that bad. No Marine had to settle down for the night in a festering ooze of rotten coconuts. The Division had an adequate supply of that old Marine Corps standby, the six-man pyramidal tent. Most Marines in the Pacific viewed sleeping in an actual tent, a rare and treasured experience, as a luxury straight out of "The Arabian Nights." A tent? For a Marine who rarely slept under anything more substantial than the stars overhead, that was living the good life.

The Division had plenty of tents. Too bad that after several years of sitting in open storage in the tropics most of those tents were dry-rotted. In some places the

CPL JOHN F. SAFFORD

USMC

Above left: Two 1stMarDiv bandsmen set aside their regular duties as cornetist and French horn player to do their laundry on Pavuvu in May 1944.

Above right: Cpl George W. Breslin takes time to apply a brush and some soap to his clothes on Pavuvu in May 1944.

SGT LAWRENCE ASHMAN

Chow call on Pavuvu in May 1944 for the leathernecks of 1stMarDiv—Pavuvu, the site selected for the Division's rest and refit. The photographer wrote, "This picture was taken before coral and sand had been used to fill in the mud holes."

tents kept out water, while in others they didn't. A Marine could cover the gaps with what was available, a few palm fronds, a poncho or a shelter half and turn in on his cot.

A cot? Yes, another old Marine Corps standby, the folding canvas cot. There was no shortage of those, but like the tents themselves, most of the cots were dry-rotted. Maybe it was on Pavuvu that some unknown Marine started the hoary theory that the Marine Corps motto *Semper Fidelis* was actually a Roman army term that meant "Improvise and Simulate." Sling your jungle hammock in the wooden frame of the cot, and drape your poncho over it. Try to find a piece of wood to put beside your cot in order to keep your feet out of the mud. The tents had no decks. In the words of the popular catchphrase of the day, "Things are tough all over."

Along with the tents and the cots there was another old Marine Corps standby that became used widely on Pavuvu: working parties. If campsites were to be made fit for human habitation, all those rotten coconuts had to be picked up one by one and disposed of in the swamp at the north end of the island. All too often, a coconut would burst in the hands of the Marine picking it up, drenching his dungarees in a shower of rotten fluid that would have caused a skunk to back off.

Wearing helmets while picking up rotten coconuts was not required, but it was wise. There were still more coconuts up in the trees waiting to fall, something which could get a Marine awarded an unofficial "Pavuvu Purple Heart" and more good-natured reminders that "things are tough all over."

If helmets were not required for "harvesting" coconuts, they were a necessity for carrying coral. The best and about the only remedy for all that foul-smelling mud was to pave the company areas with coral. As soon as the Division's engineers came ashore, a quarry was begun. Transporting crushed coral to the billeting areas was a matter of bucket brigades: long lines of Marines carrying coral from the quarry to individual company areas by hand.

There were no buckets to carry the coral, but there were helmets. Pick up a helmet full of crushed coral at the quarry and carry it to the designated site and empty it. Then go back to the quarry for another helmet full of crushed coral. Those long lines of Marines did that all day every day.

The Marines in the bucket brigades and the coconut harvesters were not healthy men by any stretch of the imagination. Few among them were without the burning and freezing ravages of malaria or without their feet, armpits and groins rubbed raw by fungal infections. They were sick men by any definition of the term. During the nightmare campaign on New Britain, most of them had lost an average of 15 to 20 pounds. But all those rotten coconuts had to be picked up and all that crushed coral had to be carried, and there was no one else to do it, so the 1stMarDiv turned to and did it.

The seemingly endless supply of rotten coconuts and crushed coral was contrasted by the near absence of other things that usually are taken for granted. Those dry-rotted tents were devoid of electric lights, and there were no candles. The Marine who wanted to read or write letters by candlelight found an empty bottle, filled it with cumshawed gasoline and fashioned a wick from a bit of rope.

For sanitary facilities Pavuvu offered nothing beyond "Stinky Davis" four-holers and P-Tubes. Personal hygiene, at least until the engineers got wells dug, was a matter of stripping naked, grabbing a bar of soap and dashing out into the daily afternoon downpour. Some Marines usually were covered with soap when the rain, as it always did, stopped abruptly.

Gourmet delicacies were not offered by Pavuvu mess halls. For that matter, there were no mess halls. The mess sergeant and his acolytes simply plied their trade in the open on field ranges.

The chow line was an *al fresco* affair as well, serving trays set up on tree stumps or empty crates. The daily fare was drearily routine. Fresh meat occasionally was sent over from Guadalcanal, but there were no refers (refrigerators) to preserve it. Dehydrated and powdered everything was the daily standard. Powdered eggs, soggy dry cereal, powdered potatoes, canned dehydrated vegetables and a thoroughly detestable canned processed meat that came under various names, but was universally cursed as Spam, were served day after day.

In pre-war days the Lever Brothers Company had maintained a small herd of cattle on Pavuvu. The herd was rounded up quickly and slaughtered, but a few dozen head of stringy beef cattle didn't go far among more than 20,000 hungry Marines. (That didn't prevent the Lever Brothers Company from presenting the Marine Corps with a hefty bill at war's end.) No, there was what there was, so a Marine sat down in the open wherever he could with his mess gear full of dehydrated this and powdered that, hoping he could choke it

Eugene V. Sledge Comments on Pavuvu

A conversation overheard:
"I think the Marine Corps has forgotten where Pavuvu is," one man said.
"I think God has forgotten where Pavuvu is," came a reply.
"God couldn't forget because He made everything."
"Then I bet He wishes He could forget that He made Pavuvu."
Thanks for that one, "Sledgehammer."

—Maj Allan C. Bevilacqua, USMC (Ret)

Right: While Pavuvu may have seemed more like hell than a garden of Eden, there was entertainment. Marine 2dLt Bob Crosby sings to the 1stMarDiv leathernecks in this December 1944 show.

Below: And Bob Hope found Pavuvu. When Bob Hope, center, and Jerry Colonna, right, took their USO show to Pavuvu in August 1944, Hope found time to express his mock disdain for Marine enlisted pilot Sgt Woodrow Witherspoon's moustache.

SSGT ARNOLD M. JOHNSON

SSGT ARNOLD M. JOHNSON

Bob Hope's USO tour groups were noted for their beautiful ladies. In this August 1944 visit to Pavuvu, Patty Thomas gives a dancing tip to a lucky 1stMarDiv leatherneck during a dance contest skit.

all down before the sky started to leak and turn his meal into slop.

Everything taken together, life on Pavuvu could bring out some odd quirks of character. The ranks of the 7th Marines had one such, an otherwise well-balanced personality who commenced each day by pummeling a palm tree with his bare fists while shouting, "I hate you, damn you! I hate you!" With that out of his system, he turned to and went about the day's business.

What may have seemed demented in the civilian world was pretty much shrugged off by onlookers. As Corporal Vincent Desarmeau explained it, "You know yourself that after the Canal and Cape Gloucester we were all a little weird by then." When odd behavior was put that way, it all seemed completely logical.

While odd and eccentric outbursts could be taken as a matter of course, Pavuvu's wildlife couldn't. The most thoroughly unacceptable forms of wildlife on Pavuvu were palm-tree rats and land crabs. It didn't take the Division long at all to discover that those vermin existed in numbers beyond counting. In pre-war days the plantation staff more than likely had methods for keeping the island's rat and crab populations under control. By the time the Division arrived, Pavuvu literally was crawling with the disgusting creatures.

The rats, most of them about the size of common house cats or larger, lived in the tops of palm trees by day. At night they descended to the ground to forage for anything edible. Given that there were thousands of palm trees on Pavuvu and practically each palm tree harbored its nest of rats, the rats existed in mind-boggling numbers. Rats scurried about atop tents and inside tents. They were covered with fleas. They ate anything and everything. A discarded ration box or a sleeping Marine, it was all the same to the rat.

If the rats weren't bad enough, the land crabs were even worse. A newly arrived replacement in "King" Co, 3d Bn, 5th Marines, Private Eugene "Sledgehammer" Sledge, who was many years from becoming a professor of biology and prize-winning author, described the repulsive creatures: "The most loathsome vermin on Pavuvu were the land crabs. Their blue-black bodies were about the size of a man's hand, and bristles and spines covered their legs. These ugly creatures hid by day and roamed by night." More than one Marine was jolted awake to the nauseating sensation of a land crab scuttling across his face.

Marines battled rats and land crabs by every means available: rifle butts, bayonets, entrenching tools, wooden clubs and pick handles.

It was all in vain.

No matter the numbers of rats and land crabs killed, there were always many, many more, and their mortal remains had to be disposed of. In one company, hundreds of dead rats and land crabs were shoveled into 55-gallon gasoline drums and burned. The resulting stench would have stopped a charging rhinoceros dead in its tracks. Eventually, medical authorities decided that live rats and land

TSGT B. FERNENBURGH

crabs were less of a health hazard than dead rats and land crabs.

Perhaps the worst thing about life on Pavuvu was its next-door neighbor, Banika.

While Banika was separated from Pavuvu by only a narrow channel, in the matter of creature comforts the difference was one of light years. The 93rd Seabees (93rd Naval Construction Bn) had built a comparative metropolis on Banika, one complete with barracks, mess halls, maintenance facilities and all the amenities of civilization. There was even a hospital on Banika, a hospital replete with genuine U.S. Navy nurses. It all could be seen clearly without the need of any optical instrument. For all the chance a Marine on Pavuvu had of actually getting to Banika, that island, so close geographically, may as well have been on another planet.

However, there were movies. Some thoughtful soul on Banika eventually began sending over 35-mm films on a daily basis. Even in a pouring rain, the evening movie soon became the high point of each day. Seated on makeshift coconut-log benches, Marines watched Hollywood flicker across an equally makeshift screen.

The nightly movies became interactive affairs, as members of the audience shouted action-enhancing advice to the characters on the screen. Any film offering that included romantic interludes invariably triggered advice that realistically couldn't be expected to be seen. Still, even if it was the image of T. Texas Tyler or Lana Turner that filled the screen, watching a movie for a few hours, even perched atop a tree stump in a pouring rain, was better than listening to rats scurry across a tent top.

Amid the rotten coconuts, the rats and land crabs, the monotonous chow, the working parties and the daily business of bringing a division of sick Marines back to health and getting ready for the next "blitz," there was one genuine ray of sunshine. That one ray of sunshine was a man named Bob Hope.

Bob Hope, the star of radio and motion pictures who gave so freely of himself to take a bit of home to Americans serving far from home, didn't hesitate to change his itinerary to include a stop on Pavuvu. With his comic sidekick Jerry Colonna, songstress Frances Langford and dancer Patti Thomas, Hope insisted on adding Pavuvu to his schedule. Years later, middle-aged men who once had been young Marines remembered with affection and appreciation an afternoon on a faraway island with the star whom Sledgehammer Sledge called "this most gracious man."

But what in Hades was it all about anyway? Why was a worn-out, sick-on-its-feet 1stMarDiv dumped on an island different from the island it just had fought on only by the absence of an armed enemy? The answer lay in the experience of the 3dMarDiv in its preparations for the campaign of Bougainville. That training, or the attempt at training, had taken place during the summer of 1943 on Guadalcanal, by then a backwater of the war. There the island commander, the Senior Officer Present Ashore, had levied a daily requirement for 1,000-man working parties on the Division. Training suffered accordingly.

It was to avoid a handicap like that which befell the 3dMarDiv that the 1stMarDiv was sent to Pavuvu. On Pavuvu, miserable as it was, the Division got back on its feet, purged the malaria from its system, ironed the wrinkles out of its belly and made itself ready for its next contest with the Japanese.

That contest would take place on another island, one not much bigger than Pavuvu. That would be an island named Peleliu in the Palau Group, where every infantry regiment in the Division would suffer at least 50-percent casualties.

There would be a return to Pavuvu, where life was improved significantly. Another campaign would follow, an even more blood-soaked battle on Okinawa, and occupation duty in North China. Finally, in 1946, the 1stMarDiv packed up its seabags and returned home.

The 1stMarDiv never returned to the home of its heart, Australia, so it did the next best thing. The Division took Australia home with it. Go to Camp Pendleton today and attend a parade or review of the First Marine Division. As the last notes of "The Marines' Hymn" echo off the surrounding hills, you will hear the band swing into the strains of the official regimental march of the 1stMarDiv, that all-time, all-Australia favorite "Waltzing Matilda." Old loves never really die.

Editor's note: Leatherneck *appreciates the difficult, but successful, efforts of Susan Strange, an independent researcher at the National Archives, in the search for photos of Marines on Pavuvu making the island more inhabitable.*

Author's bio: Maj Bevilacqua, a Leatherneck *contributing editor, is a former enlisted Marine who served in the Korean and Vietnam wars. Later in his career, he was an instructor at Amphibious Warfare School and Command and Staff College, Quantico, Va.*

Leatherneck—On the Web

See more photos of Marines on Pavuvu at www.mca-marines.org/leatherneck/pavuvu