MICRONESIAN ROUND-UP

THE WAR IN THE PACIFIC
AMERICAN MEMORIAL PARK 2004-2005

by

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War in the Pacific National Park, Guam

In January 2002, VIPs and local residents broke ground for the American Memorial Park Visitor Center. Since then, American Memorial Park has been a whirlwind of events and activities.

While American Memorial Park is a small National Park comprised of only 133 acres, its contributions to the island of Saipan and its returning veterans are tremendous. Over the last two years the park has excelled in its mission to honor those who died during the Marianas campaign. The park has hosted a variety of entertainment functions, provided residents with recreational opportunities, welcomed many dignitaries, and offered educational experiences to both local and international visitors.

In preparation for the 12–17 June 2005 commemoration of the 60th anniversary of the Battles of Saipan and Tinian, 12 National Park Service interpretive wayside exhibits (with text both in English and Japanese) were installed at various sites throughout the island. These waysides offer informative text and stunning graphics and serve to interpret the history about some of the significant, but previously unmarked, historical sites on Saipan. These waysides were installed at various locations throughout the island including Banzai Cliff, Mount Tapochau, As Lito Airfield, the invasion beaches, and at the area that was once Camp Susupe.¹

For the 60th anniversary of the Battles of Saipan and Tinian, American Memorial Park was busy rolling out the welcome mat for over 40 returning veterans and their families. A coordinated effort between the National Park Service, the Arizona Memorial Museum Association, and the Steering Committee for the Commemoration of the 60th Anniversary of the Battle of Saipan and Tinian transformed the island into a scene comparable to Norman Rockwell’s “homecoming.” With welcoming committees ready to greet WWII veterans at the airport around the clock, these returning veterans were certainly given a hero’s welcome. At the same time veterans were being honored, reflection and remembrance occurred for those islanders who survived the Marianas campaign.

On June 13th, a dedication ceremony was held for the Marianas Memorial. Site Manager Chuck Sayon along with the Marianas Memorial Committee and the Governor of the CNMI hosted the ceremony at American Me-
The Marianas Memorial was envisioned as early as 1975, and just shy of 30 years later this vision became a reality. The Marianas Memorial “honors Chamorro and Carolinian civilians who lost their lives during World War II when caught between two warring nations in a conflict not of their own making.” This graceful memorial in black granite lists the 933 individual who died and provides their age at the time of death. While the Court of Honor was erected in 1994 to memorialize more than 4,300 servicemen who lost their lives during Operation Forager, nowhere in the park were the fallen civilians listed. With the construction of the Marianas Memorial those islanders who perished in the Marianas during World War II were finally recognized.

Following the Marianas Memorial dedication ceremony, the park hosted a ribbon cutting ceremony for the upcoming Visitor Center. This ribbon cutting would signify that it would only be a matter of time before the built to suit 5.7 million dollar facility would open its doors to the eagerly awaiting Saipan community.

Throughout this week of commemoration, Historian Daniel Martinez along with Chief of Interpretation Rose Manibusan conducted oral history interviews with returning Veterans while Volunteer In the Park Toni Ramirez interviewed Chamorro survivors. These oral histories were recorded and preserved and some were subsequently used to help create the exhibits within the Visitor Center.

In addition to speeches and seminars, participants in the week-long commemoration events also had the opportunity to see the newly created World War II nose art traveling exhibit. This exhibit, “Planes and Pin-Ups,” was unveiled for the first time and was open to the public free of charge during the commemoration week. This exhibit included two interpretive panels, one of which included an original painting “Accentuate the Positive” by famed nose artist Hal Olsen. Also on display was a wonderfully informative video on the history and significance of nose art, as well as a simulated aircraft fuselage onto which over 40 famous nose art images were projected. Nose artist and World War II Veteran Hal Olsen was present during the exhibit opening to answer questions about how he came to be a nose artist and the sources of his artistic inspirations.

Perhaps the highlight of the 60th Anniversary of the Battles for Tinian and Saipan was the History Alive Seminar Series that took place from June 15-17. Each day, approximately 350 people attended the seminar that was held at the Hyatt Regency. This seminar and lecture series was facilitated by Former Park Superintendent Karen Gustin and the Historian of the USS Arizona Memorial Daniel Martinez. Special guests for this seminar series included; Dirk Ballendorf, Professor of Micronesian Studies at the University of Guam; Author Fred Kluge; Navajo Code Talker Teddy Draper, Nose artist Hal Olsen, and American World War II pilot Hap Halloran, a former POW in Japan.

Figure 1. Three Navajo Code Talkers, all who served in Saipan during WWII, pay their respects to their fallen comrades at this wreath laying ceremony at American Memorial Park's Court of Honor during their return to Saipan

While not a part of the History Alive Seminar Series, Colonel Paul Tibbets, the pilot of
the Enola Gay B-29 Bomber which dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima, participated in a wreath laying ceremony and delivered a speech at American Memorial Park in front of the Court of Honor. Hundreds of local residents and visitors turned out to listen to the speech delivered by the man who ushered in the atomic age.

In addition to facilitating an educational seminar series and hosting Colonel Paul Tibbets, the park also organized an old-fashioned USO show at the park’s amphitheater and held “fire-side chats” with the returning veterans. After a series of lectures, performances, dedications, ribbon cuttings, exhibits and fireside chats, the week of commemoration came to a close. While the returning veterans may have boarded their planes to return home at the conclusion of the commemoration, they said that the hero’s welcome they received and the island hospitality they experienced won’t soon be forgotten.

In August 2004, the National Park Service met with the project manager from Pacific Studio on Saipan to select the artifacts for the new Visitor Center. Within three days, artifacts from the War in the Pacific National Historical Park, the American Memorial Park, and from the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands Museum of History and Culture were chosen based on their ability to illustrate the story of the Battle for the Marians. While the hardware and the tools of war were some of the artifacts that were selected, many other artifacts were chosen because they helped demonstrate the cultural, social, and economic realities of prewar Saipan. Other key artifacts showed the personal effects of a Japanese soldier, and depicted the way the islanders were resourceful during their internment in the civilian camps after the US had secured the island.

In the months following these artifact selections, labels were written, exhibit text was scrutinized, edited, and translated to Japanese, and special mounts for the artifacts were designed, reviewed, and fabricated.

In April 2005, a Japanese Sakai aircraft engine was donated to American Memorial Park by the CNMI Historic Preservation Office. This required that the engine be removed from the jungle where it was languishing and then be cleaned and treated so it could be safely exhibited in the museum environment. At the end of April, the exhibit fabricator began installing the exhibits and by the middle of May, the artifact installation process was complete.

The grand opening of the American Memorial Park Visitor Center occurred on Saturday, May 28th, just in time for Memorial Day. A heartwarming speech was given by returning veteran Carl Matthews and after other speeches, the maile rope (woven of leaves) was untied and the long-awaited Visitor Center was opened to the public. On the opening evening alone, over 1,000 visited the new Visitor Center.

While the Visitor Center may have commanded the attention of the park staff over the last two years, the park never neglected its primary duty to serve the public. From August 2003 to August 2005, the park hosted the Street Market where local restaurants, farmers, and craftsmen convened each Thursday to display some of Saipan’s best produce, cuisine, and locally made products. During this weekly street fair, local musicians would also provide free entertainment as the public shopped and dined.

American Memorial Park also hosted both the annual Flame Tree Festival of the Arts and the Taste of the Marianas. Each Saturday night in May during the Taste of the Marianas, the Marianas Visitor Authority opened up thatched roof huts where local restaurants proudly offered their signature dishes at bargain prices. Free admission, several live performances, a plethora of picnic tables, and the beautiful green space of the park beckoned crowds to come enjoy the evening and meet with friends.

On June 28th, the Emperor of Japan visited the American Memorial Park to pay respects to those who died under the Japanese flag during WWII. He laid one wreath at the Marianas Memorial for the Chamorro and Carolinian civilian population and laid the other wreath at the Court of Honor. This was a very historical and important occasion that demonstrated Japanese awareness of the 60th anniversary of the end of the war.
Figure 2. Local dancers perform in front of the new Visitor Center at the Grand Opening Ceremony on May 28th, 2005. The opening of the new Visitor Center coordinated with Memorial Day.

Figure 2. The Emperor and Empress of Japan bow in front of the wreath they laid at the Marianas Memorial at American Memorial Park. This black granite memorial, which lists the names of 933 civilians who died during WWII, was completed only last year. The memorial was completed and dedicated as part of the commemoration of the battles of Saipan and Tinian.
An influx of Japanese visitors followed in the Emperor’s footsteps and many said that his regal gesture provided “closure” for the war dead and for those who survived.

On August 9th, the Osaka City Council visited the American Memorial Park and toured the new Visitor Center. The delegation of City Councillors, their spouses, and aides made this trip “in memory of those who died in the war, and in order to pray for peace, and promote friendship and goodwill between Japan and the U.S.A.” They, like the Emperor, laid two wreaths in memory of both the Americans and islanders who were victims of the war. Their trip and these wreath-laying ceremonies coincided with the 60th anniversary of the atomic bombing of Nagasaki.

On August 29th, American Memorial Park hosted a slide show presentation and lecture by Don Lyons, a WWII veteran who returned to Saipan. Don Lyons served as a dentist in Saipan in 1945 and worked at the civilian hospital. He took many photos of his experiences during this era and he showed a PowerPoint presentation of these slides to an audience of approximately 100 people. During this presentation, he donated his photo albums to the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands Museum of History and Culture; a CD of these images was donated to American Memorial Park. This was a special evening as some of the Chamorro nurses who worked with Don Lyons were in the audience and were reunited with him once again after 60 years. The public greatly enjoyed this presentation and a stimulating question and answer period followed the hour-long presentation.¹

This year the curator scanned a significant number of the photos in the American Memorial Park museum collection. In a quest to maximize the public’s access to the museum artifacts and cultural resources, many of these images have been uploaded to a portion of the War in the Pacific website. In the future, three-dimensional artifacts will also be photographed and these images will be uploaded to the website.

On October 24, 2005, three Navajo Code Talkers who served in Saipan during WWII returned to the park to participate in a wreath laying ceremony at the Court of Honor. Following the ceremony, they participated in a question and answer session within the auditorium of the new Visitor Center where they each detailed some of their experiences while serving in the Marine Corps on Saipan in 1944.

On Veteran’s Day, American Memorial Park hosted a Veteran’s Day ceremony to commemorate those who have served in the Armed Forces. Many turned out for this ceremony on the eleventh hour, of the eleventh day of the eleventh month.

While many would argue that American Memorial Park’s most significant accomplishment in the last two years was designing, building, and opening a state-of-the-art Visitor Center, one cannot deny that the park continues to honor those who died during the Marianas campaign while at the same time providing the island with numerous educational, recreational, and entertainment opportunities.

ENDNOTES

1. These waysides can be viewed at http://www.nps.gov/wapa/indepth/PDFs/AMMEwaysides.pdf and photos of these waysides in situ are available at http://www.npswapo.org/gallery/AMME-waysides


4. These images can be viewed at http://www.npswapo.org/gallery/Images-and-photos.

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