

# Apocalypse Now? The Fate of World War II Sites on the Central Pacific Islands

**Dirk H.R. Spennemann**

With the 50th anniversary of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor just behind us, it is time to take stock of the impact this event and the subsequent four years of warfare had on some parts of the Pacific. Not in terms of death and destruction, or in terms of changed political alliances, such as the creation of the (former) Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, but in terms of the visible remains of these times and the role they play in the modern world.

As early as the late 1930s some of the islands of Micronesia had seen the development of large Japanese naval and air bases. After the outbreak of the war, with the expansion of the area conquered by the Japanese, further base development took place in the Philippines, Indonesia, Kiribati (the former Gilbert Islands), Nauru, Papua, New Guinea and the Solomons. At the same time, the other combatants developed their own bases, such as Eneen-Kio (Wake Island)—later to be conquered and further developed by the Japanese— Samoa, Tongatapu (Tonga), Viti Levu (Fiji), Funafuti (Tuvalu, the former Ellice Islands), Efate (Vanuatu, formerly the New Hebrides) and so on. While the U.S. bases as well as those in the Japanese-conquered areas were of a temporary nature only, the Japanese bases in Micronesia had been built as permanent installations.

The impact of the American offensive left many of these bases by-passed by the U.S. forces, cut off from supplies and "left to wither on the vine," with thousands of Japanese soldiers dying of starvation. At the same time the U.S. erected their own temporary bases in Micronesia concurrent with their advance.

Many of the Japanese military installations had been destroyed from a military point of view by the often daily bombing runs, but much of the substance of the buildings is still around. In modern terms this means that these islands are littered with war remains, ranging from runways and other parts of the air installations to piers, gun positions, bunkers and the like. The artifactual inventory includes shipwrecks, airplane wrecks, tanks, vehicles, as well as heavy guns, an abundance of unexploded ammunition and aspects of after-hours life in the form of beer bottles and the like. Battlefields were left behind littered with burned-out tanks and vehicles, scattered small arms and ammunition; even the orderly U.S. withdrawal from temporary bases after the Japanese surrender left behind a great number of remains. The concentration of such remains in Micronesia had been so great that it had acquired the nickname of "Rust Territory."

What is happening to these sites today? Some are still in use. After having originated as fighter and bomber strips built by either side, a number of airfields and runways are still in use, while others, based on World War II strips, have been substantially enlarged and have become hubs of modern aviation. Henderson Field on Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands, and Nadi Airport in Fiji immediately come to mind, but so are Fua'amotu Airport in Tonga, Funafuti in Tuvalu and a number of strips in the Republic of the Marshall Islands. Roads are sometimes still used, such as the island road on Efate (Vanuatu).

In several instances bunkers and the like are now used as sheds and pig sties, and larger structures, such as air command centers or ammunition depots, are used for human habitation. The radio-direction finding and command building of the Japanese base on Taroa Island, Maloelap Atoll, Republic of the Marshall Islands, serves as a church.

Other sites have been left untouched and vegetation has reclaimed them. But this historical heritage has been exposed to some destruction and impairment by a number of factors, which

leaves us with little compared with what had been left behind after surrender in September 1945, but with a great deal compared with other historic battlefields and sites.

From the late 1950s until the mid 1970s, local and foreign entrepreneurs pillaged these sites in search of scrap iron and especially non-ferrous metals. For some islands scrap metal was a major source of revenue. In the Marshall Islands, for example, scrap metal was the second largest export commodity in the late 1960s. One of the effects of the Jeanette Diana affair, a U.S. purse seiner caught by the Solomon Islands fishing illegally in their fishing zone in 1985, was that scrap metal imports from the Solomon Islands were prohibited by the U.S. These scrap metal drives continued the destruction of the historical resources at an unprecedented rate. While a bombed and burned-out generator station was still easily recognizable as such, these generators were cannibalized for the copper wiring of the anchors, the fly-wheels, and the like. What remains is often a sorry sight.

In retrospect, the scrap metal collectors, as well as the well-intentioned cleanups and the removal of unexploded World War II ammunition during the same period caused more structural damage to the World War II heritage than the war itself.

Now a new threat has developed from people collecting war remains, labeled "relics," to increase their spiritual value and thus the collector's justification for taking them in the first place. These artifacts end up in their private collections or for sale to major U.S. and Japanese museums specializing in this line of business. These collectors range from one-time individuals—who encounter a number of artifacts and take one "for the fun of it"—to fanatics driven by the desire to possess a complete collection of all Japanese infantry gear or the like. Apart from these individuals, there are also a few who come to the islands to obtain war planes and other remains for eventual restoration and resale to museums. Their argument is commonly that they will take a number of plane wrecks in order to return one restored plane to the community. In the end, this most likely does not happen, but the island is stripped of all plane remains since it takes parts of more than one wrecked plane to restore a plane.

The Republic of the Marshall Islands recently had to deal with such an attempt, and so had the Solomon Islands Museum. In Belau a court case is ongoing on the rights to salvage and export a submerged plane. Salvaging of shipwrecks and their cargo is also an ongoing problem, as recent events in Papua, New Guinea testify. The level of legal protection of this kind of heritage is often either non-existent or only too wide-meshed in many Pacific countries, which are also plagued by lack of a sufficient number of trained staff to manage the resources. Any removal of artifacts or any further damage and impairment of the sites and resources will lead to the depletion of that part of the Pacific Region's historic heritage to a level that the overall integrity of some resources may be gone forever.

People, especially collectors with a vested interest, have argued that the remains are left to rot and decay and that islanders do not really care about them or at least did not care about them in the past. The question not asked is why they should have cared in the first place. With some exceptions the Pacific Islanders were not actively involved in and had little stake in the war. It happened around them; it happened against them. Their islands were bombed and burned; their gardens burned by napalm or destroyed by tanks plowing through them; their villages shelled by naval vessels and canoes sunk by aircraft; the islanders themselves were commandeered for forced labor, experienced food shortages and starvation. Some of them were even executed because of suspicion of collaboration with the enemy. In short, the great Pacific War, which forms an important event in world history from a Western and Eastern point of view, is all but a very short intermission from the Pacific Islanders perspective. It is a time of painful memories and thus a time better forgotten. And it would have been largely forgotten were it not for all the war remains lying about the atolls and islands of the Pacific, which even 50 years after the event cause carnage by hidden ammunition exploding on unsuspecting villagers.

But these remains have signified little to the Pacific Islanders and if they did, they were reminders of that painful period. The entire period would have been repressed were it not for all those who come to see these sites. They come to see the sites on land, and they come to dive on the sunken ships. The sunken Japanese fleet on the bottom of Chuuk (Truk) lagoon

has become a Mecca for divers. And so have many shipwrecks in the Solomon Islands, and so will the fleet sunk in 1946 during the nuclear testing period on Bikini Atoll, Republic of the Marshall Islands.

At the same time sites on land, such as the air bases on Mile and Maloelap Atolls, Republic of the Marshall Islands, while part of the World War II history of Efate (Vanuatu) is promoted by Air Vanuatu in the in-flight magazines of their partial parent airline Ansett, advertising Efate throughout Australia. With tourism espoused by many Pacific Islands governments as a new and major source of national revenue, if not as a panacea, these war tourists have been recognized as an economic force, and with them the sites they come to see. The World War II remains have become national assets and as such they are in need of proper management, now more than ever. The Tourism Council of the South Pacific has recently financed the restoration of the Japanese coastal defense guns at Betio, Tarawa Atoll, Republic of Kiribati—an indication of the importance a regional tourism organization gives World War II-related tourism.

There are four horsemen of the apocalypse for historic sites: the first is war and the impact wreaked on sites and collections; the second is neglect and destruction labeled modernization or development; the third is the army of avid collectors, raping and pillaging sites, as well intentioned as some of them may be. The fourth of the horsemen of the apocalypse is about to visit upon these sites: the tourist. And the tourist will not come alone but with many of the same: with hundreds of feet trampling over the site, poking here, poking there, with hundreds of curious hand-pulling there, picking up this and that and chucking it back in the general direction it came from. Some are descendants of the third horsemen and will take away some parts of the resource, little by little, but with a steady flow. The dimensions and complexities of several of the sites are daunting; management and visitor surveillance are problems in view of extremely limited staffing.

The Historic Preservation Office of the Republic of the Marshall Islands, with financial support from the Department of the Interior, Office of Territorial and International Affairs, has begun a program to take stock of the existing resources, ranging from complete airbases \_ with aircraft wrecks, gun emplacements with guns installed, concrete installations, personnel shelters, bunkers, support structures including vehicles and the like. The lagoons of several atolls are littered with wrecks of ships and aircraft, or with war surplus material discarded by the U.S. forces after the Japanese surrender.

Majuro Lagoon, for example, sports a huge graveyard of U.S. military vehicles ... The program, which will cover the atolls of Jaluit, Mile, Maloelap and Wotje, all locations of major Japanese bases, focuses on the survey of the extant World War II sites, which will be mapped, inventoried, described and documented. Based on these surveys, management plans for the resources will be drawn up to determine the needs and directions of future management and preservation efforts. Ultimately, tourism management and development plans will be developed for each atoll to ensure that the onslaught of the brigade of fourth horsemen will not cause more detriment to the resources than all three previous horsemen taken together.

Dirk H.R. Spennemann is chief archeologist in the Historic Preservation Office of the Republic of the Marshall Islands.