



The volcanic island of Bora Bora in the South Pacific — one of those tropical paradises untouched by western civilisation — in 1942 experienced a rapid introduction to modernity when

the United States decided to make it a staging post on the line of communication between the US and Australia. The base's airstrip was on the island of Motu Mute, in the foreground.

BORA BORA — WWII IN PARADISE

Bora Bora is a small, beautiful island, set in the South Pacific, specifically French Polynesia. A member of the Society Islands, it is thought by many people (myself included) to be the best example of a tropical island paradise. It is located 2,700 miles south of Hawaii and 5,200 miles west of Panama. The Society Islands consist of the Windward Islands — Tahiti and Moorea — to the east, while to the west are the Leeward Islands: Raiatea, Tahaa, Huahine, Bora Bora and Maupiti. Tahiti is the centre of government and commerce for the entire island group.

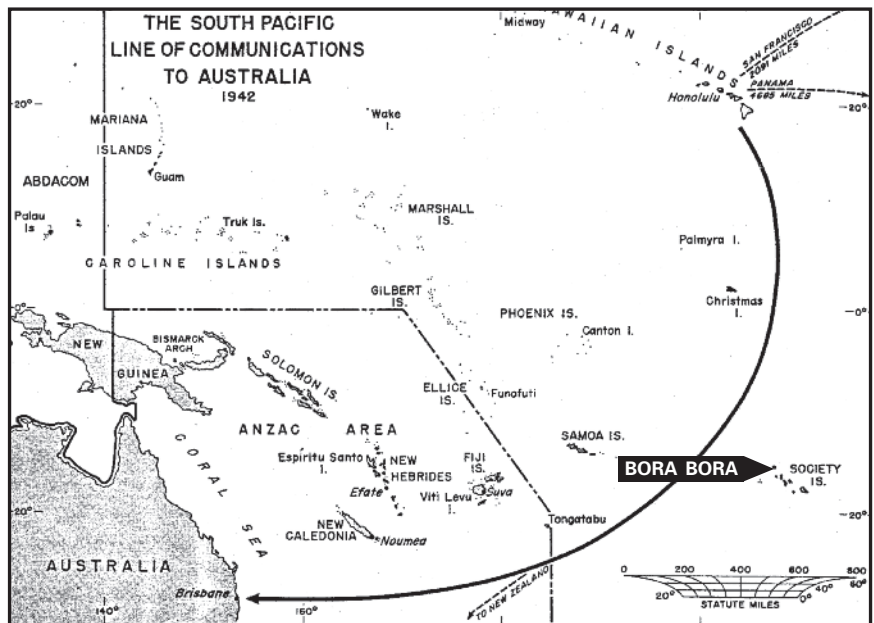
Having heard of Bora Bora as the most beautiful island in the world, I had always wanted to visit there and finally got the opportunity to do so in January 1991. I was aware that the US military had been all over the South Pacific during WWII but I was surprised to learn they had had such a large presence on Bora Bora and that they had so radically changed the island during their stay. I resolved to research this subject at home and to return to Bora Bora to investigate further.

With one bold stroke, on December 7, 1941, Japan declared war on the United States and in doing so, seized the initiative in the Pacific. Guam and Wake Island had been captured, the Philippines and Singapore were under siege, the Japanese had invaded the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia) and the British had lost Hong Kong. The Japanese seemed unstoppable and it was obvious that they had designs on Australia and New Zealand. Keeping an open line of communication between these two allies and the United States was an obvious strategic imperative. The northern route across the Pacific south-west from Hawaii was under Japanese control, thus leaving only the southern route via the South Sea islands.

Since 1935, the US military had been making contingency plans for bases in the Pacific where the Navy could concentrate its strength in case hostilities would break out between the US and Japan. As its chief offensive task in the Pacific, early plans called for the Navy to capture and establish control of the Marshall and Caroline Islands and surrounding areas and to establish an

By Raymond E. Charlton

advanced fleet base on Truk. These plans projected this would be completed six months after the outbreak of war. It was expected that a Japanese offensive would be contained within the western Pacific and the newly established base facilities in the South



Bora Bora forms part of the Society Islands. Other US bases set up on the air and sea route from Hawaii to Australia were Palmyra, Christmas, Canton and Samoa.

Right: The dock at Vaitape, the main village on the island, pictured soon after the arrival of the US forces in February 1942. Made of coral and earth, it was only wide enough for one vehicle at a time. Note the horse-drawn cart in the background. There was more horse-drawn than motorised transport on the island before the advent of the Americans.



Pacific would remain secure. The attack on Pearl Harbor immediately transformed the situation. All of this advanced planning was abandoned and it became imperative that the military planners look to the eastern Pacific for the establishment of advanced bases.

On Christmas Day 1941, Admiral Ernest J. King filed a request with the US War Plans Division to 'proceed at once to study the matter of a fuelling base in the central South Pacific area [such as the] Marquesas, Society, or Cook Islands'. Five days later, the War Plans Division recommended that the base be established on Bora Bora in the Society Group which was under the control of the Free French government.

After June 17, 1940, when France capitulated to Germany, the government in Tahiti, as with those in all other French territories, had difficult decisions to make. It had to decide whether to follow the legitimate and constitutional government of Maréchal Henri Pétain, which had negotiated the surrender of France, or should join forces with the rebellious Free French movement which Charles de Gaulle had started in London five days after the surrender. The news from France was confusing and incomplete so after several parleys, the Tahitian populace held a plebiscite and 82 per cent voted to align with the Free French. Thus, the government of French Polynesia was friendly to the US interests in establishing a base there.

On January 3, 1942, preparations for the Bora Bora base began to come together, when the first memo was written to execute Admiral King's order. Five days later, Admirals King and Harold R. Stark and General George C. Marshall signed a seven-page joint Army/Navy basic plan for the occupational defence of the island. 'A fuelling base will be established at Bora Bora by the Navy; the base will be defended by the Army', read the directive. 'The code-name and short title for the base will be "Bobcat".'

The plan these men created stressed the importance of establishing a joint fuel base for Allied vessels and seaplanes at Bora Bora to facilitate the use of shipping routes between the US and Panama to Australia and New Zealand. A complete study of the problems of establishing such a base had never been made. The participants would soon carry out such a study in real life.

The Navy was assigned primary responsibility for the mission to 'construct, administer and operate the Naval Fuel Depot, Seaplane Base, and harbor facilities'. Also, the Navy was to furnish transportation to equip the base, to provide subsistence en route and to supply the main defensive weapons which would consist of eight 7-inch guns and their ammunition. The Army was to furnish standard equipment for its units, ordnance (except the 7-inch guns) and ammunition and sustenance ashore for all personnel. Supplies and maintenance material were to be provided for both the Army and Navy on the island, originally as a 60-day supply, and later increased and maintained as a 90-day supply.

A convoy was planned and immediately organised using ships from various East Coast ports. The convoy's final assembly point would be Charleston, South Carolina. The first part of the convoy was known as 'Baker Tare 200' and consisted of the troop-carrying ships *Santa Elena*, *Santa Rosa*, *Barry*, *Argentina*, *Island Mail* and *McAndrew*. Warships escorting Baker Tare



A much larger concrete dock was built by the US Navy's 1st Construction Battalion — the original Seabees — soon after their arrival. Today, this is used by air passengers who are shuttled by boat to and from the airport on nearby Motu Mute.

200 were the light cruisers and destroyers *Milwaukee*, *Trenton*, *Moffett*, *Sampson*, *Jarvis* and *Erie*.

The second part of the convoy was known as 'Baker Cast 100' and consisted of six ships which were assigned the task of moving the majority of the men and their equipment to Bobcat. Among them was the cargo ship *Arthur Middleton*, which was the first all-welded vessel made in the United States. Another was the *President Tyler*, which had been used as tramp freighter for the previous ten years and had room for 2,200 men. The rest of the ships in 'Baker Cast 100' were the USS *Alchiba*, scheduled to carry troops and cargo, and the USS *Hamul*, *Mercury* and *Irene DuPont*, all carrying cargo. The warships escorting this part of the convoy were the light cruisers *Richmond* and *Warrington* and two destroyers.

The men who carried out Operation 'Bobcat' numbered 4,600: 4,385 enlisted men and 215 officers. Of these, 22 officers and 650 men were Navy and of these, eight officers and 250 men formed the 1st Construction Battalion.

The Army forces were made up from the 102nd Infantry, Connecticut National Guard; 198th Field Artillery, Delaware National Guard; 13th Coast Artillery; and the 609th Separate Signal Company (radar), the latter two both Regular Army. The commander of the Army contingent was Colonel (later Brigadier General) Charles D. Y. Ostrom, who, as ranking officer, was designated Island Commander. Because of the suddenness of the call-up, many of the officers and soldiers were in the National Guard with some of them having served in the First World War.

Naval personnel included 78 enlisted men and nine officers from Seaplane Squadron VS2-D14 (later changed to VS-52), equipped with eight OS2U Kingfisher single-engine float aircraft, and 123 enlisted men and six officers assigned to the Fuel Oil Depot.

The 1st Construction Battalion consisted of 138 apprentice seamen, 13 petty officers, 99 rated men and eight civil engineer officers. Its commander was Lieutenant Commander H. M. Sylvester. This battalion is historically significant because these men were the first to be organised for overseas construction duties. There were known initially as 'Bobcats' and later as the 'Seabees'. The 99 rated sailors had been trained as an administrative group headquarters company to function with advanced based civilian construction workers in Iceland and had been diverted from this assignment to Bobcat. The 138 apprentice seamen were from the boot camp at Newport, Rhode Island, untrained for combat or engineering.

The construction and aviation personnel embarked at Quonset, Rhode Island, their transport stopping at Norfolk, Virginia, to pick up anti-submarine boom nets and the 7-inch coastal defense guns. At Charleston, South Carolina, the convoy assembled for redistribution of personnel and loading operations.

At Charleston, the Bobcats were called upon to perform their first construction job. The *Arthur Middleton* transport ship had developed a 12-degree list after the installation of anti-aircraft weaponry on the deck. By using a heavy concrete mix, the Bobcats ballasted the ship back to an even keel. This operation took two days.



The unloading of the ships which brought the men, material and equipment to Bora Bora was beset by many problems, which caused considerable delay. Before proper billets could be erected, new arrivals had to camp in the open. (USNA)

All of the ships had collected at Charleston by the afternoon of January 23. Two of them had come from New York and one from Boston.

The primary purpose of Bobcat was to be a refuelling base, and it was at Charleston that the fuel tanks were loaded aboard ship. The Standard Oil Company of New Jersey designed and provided the bolted steel tanks with the following storage capacities: 200,000 barrel bunker fuel oil (twenty 10,000-barrel bolted tanks), 20,000 barrel diesel oil (two 10,000-barrel bolted tanks), 5,000 barrel aviation gasoline (five 1,000-barrel bolted tanks) and ten 5,000-gallon gasoline tanks which were to be used at the seaplane base.

It was at Charleston that the problems began to arise — problems which would loom large in operation 'Bobcat'. Men and equipment were pouring into the port from all over the east coast. It should be kept in mind that this was the first joint Army/Navy operation since the Spanish-American War. Personnel and equipment needs were poorly coordinated between Army and Navy. An example of this was delivery of goods not boxed for shipment and boxed goods which were not marked for contents or destination. Thus, much effort was expended to identify/package/repackage necessary equipment.

Everything needed to be accomplished in the shortest time possible. Fearful of attack by German submarines in US coastal waters, those in charge of the overall planning wanted the convoy to set sail as soon as possible. The stevedores were inexperienced at this type of loading and were not used to working at such a rapid pace, so the Army and Navy personnel were used as labourers to help with the manpower shortage.

A related problem was lack of information and procedures. An example of this caused guns to be loaded in the hold of one of the ships, which were an intended part of the deck armament of this same ship. By the time the error was discovered, it was necessary to unload one railcar load of lumber and 50 tons of general stores to regain access to the weapons.

Because the convoy had taken on cargo and personnel at three different locations (Quonset, Norfolk and Charleston), the stage was set for the largest problem of all to occur which would cause untold grief in the

harbour of Bora Bora when the convoy arrived. The original plans directed that material be loaded so that unloading would be 'in order of priority: lighterage [barges], shore defence, fuel tanks, army housing'. As it turned out, this was not an easy order to carry out. The total cargo to be shipped strained the convoy's capacity and, indeed, some material would be left on the docks at departure.

By working around the clock, the Army/Navy personnel were able to finish loading the ships and were able to embark January 25, 1942, and they sailed from Charleston on January 27. In an incredibly short time period of three weeks, Commander Sylvester and the men of Bobcat, lacking any precedence, using skills they didn't know they had, unclear as to who was in charge, had loaded and assembled the convoy, and set sail for Bora Bora, not knowing if the Japanese would be there to meet them.

On February 14, Baker Tare 200 arrived at Bora Bora, with Baker Cast 100 following on the 17th. Both parts of the convoy had transited the Panama Canal and had uneventful passages in the Atlantic/Caribbean/Pacific areas. The Navy hydrographic ship *Sumner* had preceded the convoy. She reached Bora Bora on January 22, to survey and chart the area, and then to enlarge and straighten the only channel into the deep-water anchorage of the island's lagoon. All the *Sumner* had for reference was a French map of the island from 1886. The convoy had also been preceded by the tanker *Ramapo*. Existing records are not very complete regarding Baker Tare 200. It appears that the ships only carried men and provisions which they unloaded on three beaches and rapidly departed. Baker Cast 100, on the other hand, has very complete records and it was this part of the convoy which remained in the harbour, unloading cargo, for quite some time.

The scene witnessed by the convoy was stunning in its beauty. After sailing through Teavanui Pass, an incredible sight lay before them. The two towering volcanic peaks dominated the scene: Mt Pahia 2,000 feet high and Mt Otemanui almost 2,400 feet high.

Bora Bora is a small island, about 4½ miles long, 4 miles wide, 20 miles in circumference and 14 square miles in area. A steep barrier reef, extending 1 to 3½ miles offshore, com-

pletely circles the island. A number of small and medium sized islands called motus are situated along the reef. The largest of these is Toopua. Motus here (except for Toopua) tend to be long and narrow and rise only a few feet above sea level. The most important motu is Motu Mute for reasons which will be explained later. The lagoon, deep on the east side, is fully enclosed by a reef, and the only access is via Teavanui Pass.

At the time of the expedition's arrival, the island's population consisted of approximately 1,200 islanders and less than six French officials representing the government. There was an American couple living on Bora Bora, Hank and Connie Hedges, who had retired from Illinois and moved to the island to get away from civilisation. Hank had worked as an engineer and he was to be helpful in getting the oil storage depot constructed, while Connie was to become a mother figure to many of the home-sick soldiers.

Not long after the anchors of the convoy came crashing down into the bay, two major problems became evident to the Americans. They had thought there would be a steady reliable source of fresh water available to them but this proved not to be the case, as the natives used only rain water and small wells for their needs. The men would have to rely on the ships in the harbour for water until wells could be dug and streams dammed. So the construction of a freshwater system for the island was added to the project list for Bobcat.

The second problem arose almost immediately upon arrival and was so overwhelming that it almost doomed the mission right at the beginning. After hauling many tons of supplies, weapons, vehicles, and aircraft, almost one quarter of the way around the globe, nothing could be put ashore! The haphazard loading job that had taken place in South Carolina meant that the ships could not be unloaded without the floating equipment (pontoon barges), and these could not be assembled without being unloaded first.

The barges, which were the principal means for moving cargo ship-to-shore, were stored in various holds on various ships, often deep within the holds. Not only were barges not stored near the top of the holds, but in some cases, they were discovered in the holds of ships on which barges were not known to be loaded. In the end, it was two 30-ton tank lighters (barges) stowed on deck which saved the day. Within 24 hours of the convoy's arrival, these barges were in the water and operating. The first 50-ton barge came available three days after the arrival of the convoy, the second six days after, and the third and fourth eight days after. But even three weeks later, the two 100-ton barges had still not been uncovered in the holds.

To make matters worse, tie rods and accessories (known as 'jewelry') to be used to assemble the pontoon barges, had been buried beneath other cargo and were not available when needed, so the first few lighters had to be welded together. Weight-handling equipment (slings and cargo nets) had not been provided, delaying the unloading even more. Three weeks passed before the first crane was located and unloaded. Everyone was learning that improvisation was going to play a major part in the success of Bobcat!

Bora Bora had just two coral piers for unloading cargo, one at Vaitape and the other at Faanui. Both were small and only wide enough for use by one truck at a time. Neither was substantial enough to support a heavy load. Here again, the 30-ton lighters proved their value. These smaller barges could come close into shore and unload on the sloping sections of the beach, eight areas on the two-mile stretch of beach between Vaitape and Faanui being used to deposit cargo.

Once the cargo was put ashore, it was moved off the beach by one of the six bulldozers the convoy brought with them. They also brought two station wagons, ten motorcycles with sidecars, 20 bicycles, five ¾-ton pick-up trucks, ten two-cubic-yard dump trucks, a five-ton hoister-lift truck, two caterpillar track shovels with crane and drag-line attachments, two 10-ton truck cranes and four small cement mixers.

The unloading fiasco still further complicated the work that had to be done on Bora Bora. The men found many of the supplies poorly marked or not marked at all and identification was only possible by breaking into the packing boxes and crates, and then examining the contents.

It was often necessary to stop work on board ship to wait for a barge to be unloaded at the beach or vice-versa. Even when trucks and other equipment were available to transport cargo around the island, the work progressed very slowly because of the small number of barges and boats moving the cargo to shore.

Cargo unloading started February 17 with the *President Tyler* and all the other five ships on February 19. It took ten days to unload the *President Tyler*, three weeks for the *DuPont* and the *Alchiba*, 4½ weeks for the *Middleton*, 6½ for the *Hamul*, and 7½ for the *Mercury*. The *Hamul* and the *Mercury*, carrying 6,200 and 5,551 tons respectively, were the two ships which carried the most cargo of the convoy and took the longest to unload. All the time, the threat of Japanese attack was ever present.

Once supplies were stockpiled ashore, another problem arose. There was only one road on the west side of the island, running along the coast, one lane wide, built on crushed coral and sand, with small bridges and large muddy spots. It was destroyed almost immediately by the 7-ton prime movers (trucks having three axles and ten wheels) which were used to move the supplies inland and around the island. The bridges and culverts were damaged and the road surface was torn up under the weight of this new traffic. Usage of heavy trucks was, at first, reduced and, ultimately, banned from the road to be replaced by smaller vehicles.

Yet still another task confronted the Bobcat's road construction. No proper equipment, such as road graders, had been provided. Only one rock crusher with a 20-ton/hour capacity had been included in the cargo and, although this was run 24 hours a day, it was still barely able to keep up with the demand. The engine to drive the rock crusher was never located, so the Bobcats had to adapt a Chevrolet engine to run it instead.



Above: To accommodate the 4,600-strong garrison numerous tent camps were built, like this one next to the village church at Vaitape. (USNA) Below: The open field is now a basketball pitch.



The primary mission — construction of a fuel storage and ship refuelling facility — had to be postponed while a large portion of the detachment's effort was directed towards improving and maintaining the island's road in a passable condition. The fact that the task force had arrived during Bora Bora's rainy season only worsened conditions.

The need for a reliable water supply was such that work was started within two weeks of landing. The fresh-water supply system would consist of two concrete storage dams, one earth-filled storage dam, four 10,000-barrel and six 500-barrel storage tanks and 11 miles of 4-inch water main piping. This project was completed in six weeks.



When they sailed for Bora Bora in January 1942, the Seabees took what trucks were available, hence the interesting mixture

of civilian and military trucks in this 'Bobcat' camp ('Bobcat' was the code-name for the US base on Bora Bora). (USNA)



The Americans mounted eight 7-inch guns on the island. These came from the old battleship *USS Connecticut* which had been scrapped in 1923. Installation of the 28-ton guns was a difficult job, requiring much ingenuity, improvisation, and sweat. Here, one of the barrels is lifted using an A-frame. (US Navy)

As the unloading of the ships was getting sorted out and mountains of material were being deposited on the beaches, the problem of defence of the base grew in importance. The only defence Bobcats had was the weapons of the escort ships anchored in the bay, and they would soon be leaving. Work quickly began on making the island secure.

While the Seabees were setting up living quarters and places for the men to eat, four sites had been chosen to place the 7-inch guns which would comprise the main defence of the island: Point Tuahora (3 o'clock), Point Matira (6 o'clock), Point Pahua (9 o'clock), and Point Tereia (11 o'clock).

The first gun was unloaded on March 10, but getting the guns off the ships was easy compared to what had to be done next. Each gun weighed 28 tons total, the base and barrel each being 14 tons. Preparation of the gun sites involved excavation, clearing brush, leveling ground, pouring concrete foundations and building small walls with lava rock. Much of the initial work had to be done by hand as the first jack hammer was not located in the supplies on the beach until April 1. The guns had to be moved up hills which in some places had 45-degree slopes. The sites on these hills varied from 200 to 500 feet above sea level. Given the top priority these weapons had, many new and unorthodox methods were used to emplace the guns.

In one location, the gun was mounted on wooden skids and hauled up the side of a hill, pulled by two tractors hooked together and going down the other side. In other locations, a road was carved out of the hillside and, using switchbacks, ran from the island road to the hilltop. In each instance, a lot of manpower was required when suitable equipment could not be obtained. A combination of A-frames and jacks were used for the seemingly insurmountable task of getting the gun tubes literally threaded into the needle of the gun base.

To move the barrels the Seabees used wooden skids and metal pipes for rollers.



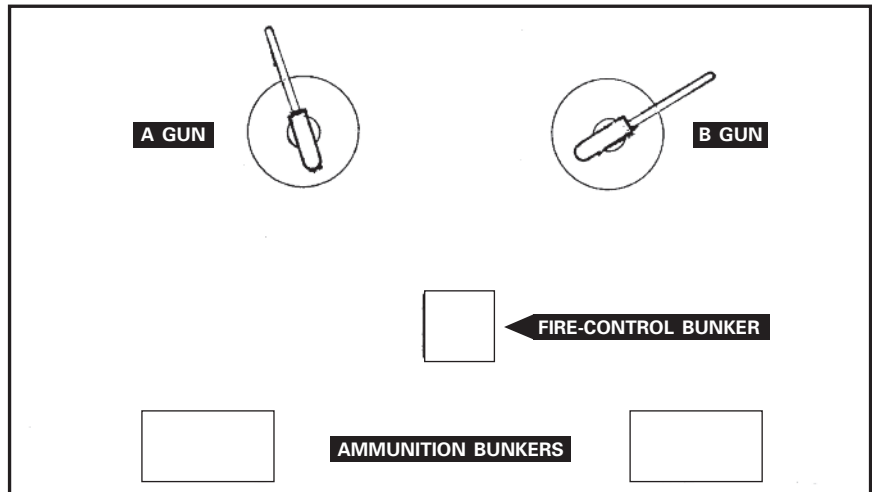
The eight guns were installed in pairs in four batteries placed on high ridges at four corners of the island. Moving the barrels uphill was somewhat eased by the fact that much of the vege-

tation which normally would have covered the hillsides had been stripped away by the hurricane which hit the island in 1939. (US Navy)

Right: Each battery had the same layout: the two guns were placed side by side and in a forward position, with a fire-control bunker centrally behind them, and two ammo bunkers behind that.

Gun-site construction first started at Point Pahua on April 5. This was the most important site because it overlooked the entrance to the lagoon. On May 21, the first gun was test-fired for the first time. By June 1, the foundations for all eight guns (two guns per site) had been completed and six guns had been mounted. All four gun-sites were complete by August 1. Each had two small ammunition bunkers, a battery command post and a large searchlight for night-time illumination. There were also two radar stations on the north and south sides of the island.

Below: The battery at Point Tuahora (at 3 o'clock position), as seen from a helicopter at 1,000ft.



The Tuahora battery is the easiest to visit. Both guns A (left) and B (right) are still in good condition.



Point Tuahora's fire-control bunker.



One of the ammunition storage bunkers.



The battery at Point Matira (6 o'clock) is more overgrown. This is Gun A.



The battery's fire-control bunker.



The best-preserved battery is the one at Point Pahua (9 o'clock) which overlooks the island's lagoon. Left: Gun A. Above: Gun B.



Below: The fire-direction bunker.



Our author, Ray Charlton, on top of the one gun remaining at Point Tereia (11 o'clock).



Point Tereira's other gun was moved after the war and now rests by the side of the road in Povai village.



Above: The seaplane base at Tupua, inside the lagoon on the north-western part of the island. The eight OS2U Kingfisher aircraft brought to Bora Bora belonged to Navy Seaplane Squadron VS2-D14, commanded by Captain Jack Roubush. Commissioned only on January 15, 1942, at Quonset Point, Rhode Island, the squadron had sailed from Charleston on the 24th with its aircraft, plus a six-month supply of spare parts,

bombs, ammunition, drummed avgas and depot equipment distributed over four cargo ships. The first assembled Kingfisher flew on March 3. The hangar — a large Quonset hut elevated 2½ feet off the ground — was built a few months later. Once established, the squadron routinely flew three-plane patrols around Bora Bora at dawn and dusk. (USNA) *Below:* The site of the seaplane base today.

The Army had decided to set up their base around Vaitape village, and the Navy at Faanui village and bay. The oil tank farm was located on the hill above the north shore of Faanui Bay. The tanks were elevated should the need arise to refuel ships by using only gravity. This left the seaplane squadron to locate at Tupua.

The seaplane base at Tupua was a totally separate construction project and the sailors of VS2-D14 were pretty much left on their own to accomplish what was needed. With the help of two Seabees, a bulldozer and a length of heavy chain, the coral heads were cleared from the beach. The barges could then deliver the wingless seaplanes from the ships to the shore. The planes were moved around on their beaching gear and dispersed into the coconut grove. The wings were uncrated and bolted into place. The aircraft were deprotected (unwrapped from their protective coverings and coatings and readied for flight) and the first Kingfisher took off on March 3, just two weeks after the convoy had arrived.

On April 11, it was decided some Seabees could be spared from other construction projects to help with seaplane base construction. Work was started on a concrete seaplane ramp, concrete compass calibration rose, and the permanent gasoline storage of ten 5,000-gallon tanks. These tanks were buried in the mountainside just behind the base area and connected by underground pipelines to the refuelling areas near the ramp. An aircraft hangar was constructed using a 40-foot by 100-foot Quonset hut. By the time the base was completed, there was shore parking aprons for 12 planes, one 20-foot by 50-foot steel dugout bomb magazine and 45 Quonset huts which provided living quarters, galley and mess hall.

Right: The concrete ramp for the seaplanes still exists today.



As one construction project neared completion, men would be shifted around the island to help on other projects. The road was a constant work-in-progress and would soon circle the island. Work on the fuel oil depot (the reason for Bobcat's existence) did not begin until April 2. Level areas for the fuel tanks had to be blasted out of almost solid rock on a very steep hillside. Adequate construction equipment had not been provided so the Bobcats' ingenuity came into play. The tanks were erected by fashioning a guy derrick from two tubular steel radio masts. By setting up the derrick at the tank's centre, the sides were hoisted into place and bolted in a continuous circle. It took 2-3 days to erect a tank in this fashion. The Army, after some initial reluctance, loaned the Seabees 700 soldiers and 25 officers to help with the fuel tanks. Working around the clock, seven days a week, eight of the 22 tanks had been assembled by June 9. On that same day, a tanker came into the harbour, sea loading connections were made and filling of the tanks from the tanker was begun.

Two cruiser moorings (consisting of three ten-ton anchors lashed together) were placed in Faanui Bay. These moorings were where ships would tie up to take on fuel that was pumped from the storage tanks.

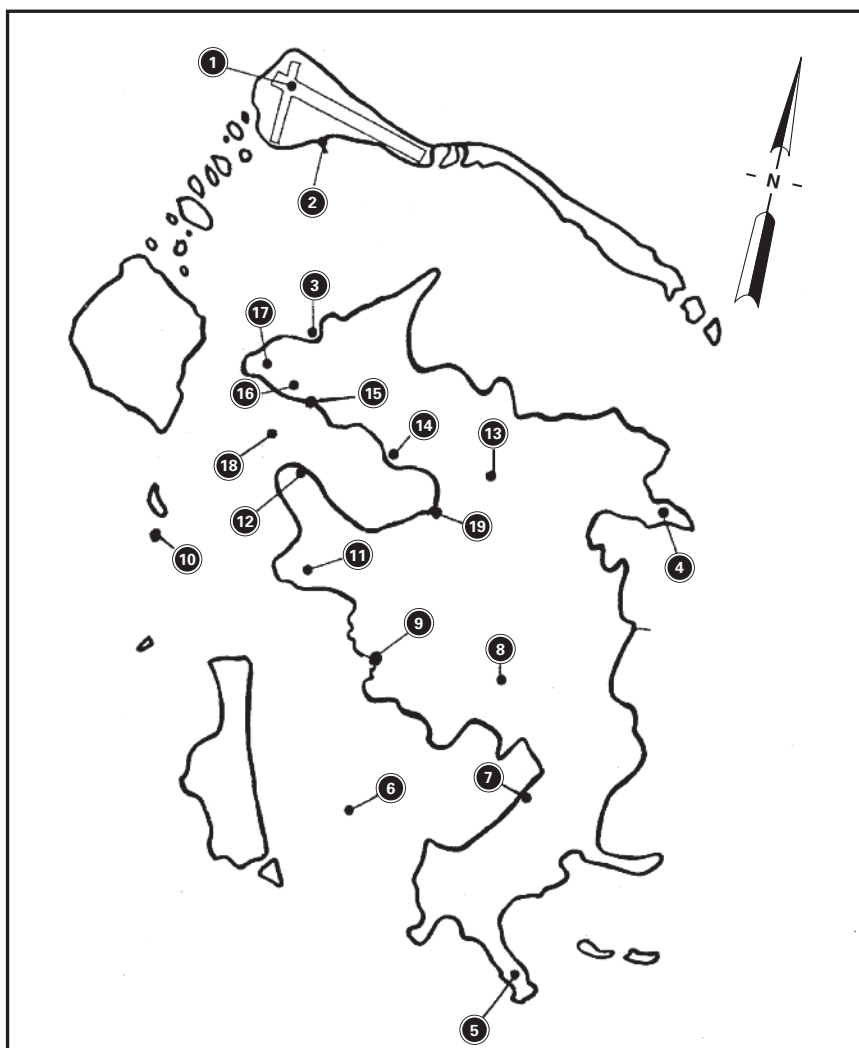


One of the anchors used as cruiser moorings in Faanui Bay, now at Povai.

In the autumn of 1942, the seemingly endless construction projects were coming to a close yet the Army hoped to increase the usefulness of Bobcat by building an airport. Fighter aircraft then could be shipped to Bora Bora, assembled there and island hopped to the front. Construction of the air depot was proposed in October. The Army was to provide the necessary equipment and material and the Navy the construction personnel. So another high-priority construction project was started on December 16, but this time, not on Bora Bora, but on Motu Mute, the large, flat island just to the north. Motu Mute was just large enough for the planned 6,000-foot by 400-foot main runway. There would also be a smaller 3,000-foot by 150-foot cross runway. Both runways would be asphalt topped. Work began on a seven-day week/24-hour schedule and the runways were completed in seven weeks, with the first plane landing on March 17, 1943. By April 5, all work connected with the airport had been completed with the addition of a control tower, a steel assembly shop, a radio station and 12 Quonset huts.

No sooner had the airfield been completed when orders were received to cancel construction of the fighter assembly plant. Thereafter, the field was to be used only occasionally by mail and transport aircraft.

The next-to-last project was construction of a permanent wharf for more efficient unloading of cargo. An area was chosen on the south side of Faanui Bay and Landing Number 3 was built. Started in March 1943, and completed in May, the wharf had a face of 430 feet with sheet piling and dirt filling.



A sketch map showing the important sites on Bora Bora. [1] Motu Mute airfield. [2] Motu Mute dock. [3] Tupua seaplane base. [4] Point Tuahora battery (3 o'clock). [5] Point Matira battery (6 o'clock). [6] Povai Bay anchorage area. [7] Seven-inch barrel from Point Tereia and mooring anchors from Faanui Bay. [8] Povai Valley ammo bunkers [9] Vaitape town, dock and church. [10] Teavanui Pass (entrance to lagoon). [11] Point Pahua battery (9 o'clock). [12] Cargo Landing No. 3. [13] Water dams and ammo bunkers at Faanui Valley. [14] Large ammo bunker. [15] Refuelling dock. [16] Oil storage tank. [17] Point Tereia battery (11 o'clock). [18] Faanui Bay anchorage area and cruiser moorings. [19] Faanui town.

And what of the people living on Bora Bora? The natives had had very limited contact with the outside world up to this point. There were several old Ford automobiles in which they could ride when gasoline was available and a radio station which would pass along news and gossip among the other islands including Tahiti.

And then came the 'friendly invasion'. Huge ships filled both bays. Thousands and thousands of men swarmed over the island and changed it forever. The island population had increased by a factor of five. Americans worked on their construction projects around the clock. There were large trucks running up and down, men in constant motion, construction crews setting off blasting charges ashore to build the road and in the bay, removing coral heads that would otherwise hinder navigation. A construction crescendo that never stopped!

The natives were amazed at the speed with which the troops were building their installation. The noise, frantic activity and sheer numbers of people were all rather overwhelming to a people who a short time before had known everyone on the island and had seen few changes in their lifetimes.

The Americans had arranged leases through the French administrators for areas

which they wanted to occupy. They took over 169 parcels of land owned by 115 individuals who received a token payment of \$1 per year for each lease. Repairs, alterations and additions had to be made with the consent of the owner, albeit they were not in much of a position to argue. The United States agreed that the Navy would provide food for the Bora Bora natives because their normal channels of commerce and communication with other islands would be shut down for security reasons.

The US also agreed to recognise Free French sovereignty on Bora Bora and that the title of the naval base property would remain with the Free French government. All permanent installations such as waterfront facilities and buildings would become property of the French upon expiration of the agreement.

With the many construction projects being accomplished on Bora Bora, the first year was spent getting facilities built and in running order. Only 64 ships came through Bora Bora between June 1, 1941 and January 1, 1943. Some of these ships unloaded cargo, but most were refuelled and sent westward. It was in 1943 that Bobcat began to be used as originally intended. In that year, 181 vessels were refuelled; 193 were given water



(although fresh-water replenishment for passing ships was never included in the plans for Bobcat); repairs were made to 45 vessels, including 10 major repair jobs; and approximately 1,200 vessels were handled covering 50,000 tons of cargo, and liberty parties comprising some 19,000 persons from visiting ships. Eleanor Roosevelt was among the VIPs who visited Bora Bora in August 1943.

It was also in 1943 that the US High Command realised that the war was passing Bobcat by and there was no longer any need for so many soldiers to defend the base. The number of Army troops was reduced in stages from some 4,000 to 1,000. With the completion of the airport, the seaplane squadron was no longer needed so VS-52 was withdrawn in June 1943. The 1st Construction Battalion was withdrawn in September. Navy personnel were reduced from 47 officers/700 men to 22 officers/400 men.

A refuelling wharf had been needed since June 1942 for, while the cruiser moorings worked well, the process was slow and much manpower was required. It was decided in 1944, that with the draw down of personnel, a more efficient means of refuelling was needed. The final construction project on Bobcat was the building of a refuelling wharf on the north shore of Faanui Bay. It was completed in October 1944.

The reduction of Bobcat personnel was an ongoing process. In November 1944, the remaining Army personnel left, leaving only 125 Navy personnel. In May 1945, these were further reduced to four officers and 46 enlisted. By now, fewer and fewer ships were using Bobcat's facilities (averaging one per week).

While Bobcat was used less and less, as the end of the war in the Pacific was approaching, the base was considered important enough to leave open until after VJ-Day. Finally on June 2, 1946, Bora Bora Naval Station was disestablished and the remaining facilities were turned over to the French Colonial authorities.

Bora Bora returned to being a quiet, remote island. The large oil tanks were removed by the French and taken to Tahiti. Parts of the water system were also dismantled and taken to other islands.

It was in the late 1950s that Bora Bora's airfield assumed an importance it had never had during the war as the airport at Motu Mute was then the only operational one in all of French Polynesia. In 1958, Compagnie de Transport Aériens Intercontinentaux (TAI of Paris) extended their Paris-Saigon-Noumea (New Caledonia) air route to include a stop in Bora Bora. Passengers would begin the flight in a Douglas DC-6 airliner and upon their arrival in Bora Bora, disembark and get on a Consolidated PBY-5A Catalina flying boat to continue their trip to Papeete (on Tahiti) where they would land in the bay. However, since the French built Faaa Airport in Papeete in 1961, Bora Bora has been used only for inter-island travel.

Remains of the refuelling wharf on the north shore of Faanui Bay.

I have visited Bora Bora four times in between January 1991 and July 1997 and on each trip I learned more about Operation 'Bobcat'. There are several obvious reminders of the US occupation beginning with the 20-mile road circling the island and the airport. The latter remains basically the same as when it was constructed in 1943 but only the long runway is used and maintained today. The passengers who arrive at the airport are shuttled to the island by boat to the dock in Vaitape, the same one built by the Americans. The large US dock on the south side of Faanui Bay is in daily use for cargo, while on the north side of the bay, the remains of the refuelling dock can be seen.

Also, along the road, on the north side of Faanui Bay, can be seen a large ammunition bunker. There are five more of these bunkers on the island: three in Faanui Valley, and two in Povai Valley. They are quite impressive structures. The bunker at the end of Faanui Valley is the easiest to visit as the rest are on private property, and the doors are often locked.

All along the eastern side of the island are hundreds of concrete pads, many visible from the road. At the peak of the US occupation, there were over 800 Quonset huts on the island. The huts were removed by the military when they closed down Bobcat, but the concrete pads stayed and many of the natives have constructed their houses on these ready-made building platforms.

The seaplane ramp is still visible at Tupua alongside the road. The remains of a small concrete wall that formed part of the aircraft hangar can also be seen.



There are six large ammunition bunkers surviving on Bora Bora: one along the road at Faanui (above), three in Faanui Valley and two in Povai Valley. All are exactly the same, built like a large Quonset hut with several feet of dirt covering on top and measuring 20ft wide by 50ft deep with a ceiling 10ft high. The natives still use the bunkers as shelter when a hurricane threatens the island, which occurs about once every ten years.

There are two anchors and a 7-inch gun that can be seen from the road in Povai. The anchors were removed from the bay and formed part of one of the cruiser moorings and the gun was removed from Point Tereia. Some 20 years ago, all three items were placed in the back yard of a native who was planning to create a museum, but this has not materialised.

Of the eight guns on the island, all save the one now on display at Povai are still on their original sites. Those at Point Matira, Pahuia and Tereia can all be reached following a 10-15 minute hike up those hills. In places, remains of the roads made to mount the guns can still be seen. Each site has two small ammunition bunkers located nearby and a square, concrete command post located halfway between. They are all exactly the same in size and construction. The best gun-site to visit is Point Pahuia, the one defending the entrance to the lagoon. This has good views of the lagoon and the town of Vaitape. The places and dates of manufacture and serial numbers are still legible on the breeches of all of the guns, the manufacturing dates varying from 1906-08.

The easiest site to visit is Point Tuahora but there is a catch. The road to it runs past a rubbish dump, and after passing through a cloud of smoke from burning trash, and parking at the base of the hill, the visitor is greeted by swarms of flies. The guns here still have legible range markings.

Point Matira's guns are overgrown with foliage so there is no view, but they are still interesting to visit. Point Tereia's site is probably the least worth the effort as there is only one gun remaining, the other having been moved with only the mounting remaining.

There are several tour companies on Bora Bora which give excursions around the island. One of them is equipped with four-wheel-drive vehicles and takes tourists to the Point Pahuia gun-site.

Bora Bora is a very pleasant place to visit and there are now some 800 hotel rooms on the island. Tourism is the major industry in French Polynesia and the government has passed new tax regulations that promote investment in tourism-related projects. Nevertheless, no matter how many changes occur, the beauty of the island will always remain and it will always hold a special place in the history of the US overseas operations of WWII.

In closing, I would like to thank my wife Deb for helping me to write this article and for putting up with my obsession with Bora Bora for the last six years. I would also like to thank Bora Bora residents Alfredo Doom and Nir Shalev for their help with my research.