







Fiji is known for its idyllic beaches and warm waters but for the Japanese in 1942, the islands were seen as a stepping stone in their expanding Pacific empire. Allied defences were hurriedly constructed to repel the expected invasion — which never arrived — and the remains of these defences can still be found today.

Japan's entry into the Second World War was followed by a series of fast and unexpectedly-easy victories. Enthusiastic and over-confident staff of the Japanese Navy then proposed such grandiose operations as the invasion of Australia, Hawaii and India (from where Japanese troops would theoretically drive northward to join up with German forces in the Middle East). Dissension arose between the members of the Japanese Army and Navy General Staff over these unrealistic plans before a compromise was reached: the invasion of Port Moresby in New Guinea and the cutting of the Australian supply line with the occupation of Samoa, New Caledonia and Fiji.

Fiji is an archipelago of 320 islands scattered through 500,000 square kilometres of the Pacific Ocean; 3160 kilometres north-east of Sydney, Australia, and 2120 kilometres north of Auckland, New Zealand. The largest and most populous of the islands is Viti Levu, home to the group's chief port and capital, Suva.

The Fijian islands were first sighted in 1643 by the Dutch navigator Abel Janszoon Tasman. However, it was not until 1789 that the main islands were discovered by Captain William Bligh following the infamous mutiny on the *Bounty*. The strategic significance of Fiji was noted in 1919 by Earl Jellicoe aboard HMS *New Zealand*. In a letter to the British Admiralty he wrote: 'It is impossible to consider the question of naval strategy in the Pacific without taking account of Suva Harbour. This harbour holds a position of great strategic importance with reference to New Zealand and Australia. It should accordingly be strongly fortified and held.'

THE GUNS OF VITI LEVU

By David Green

By 1936, the British Overseas Defence Committee had concluded that both the Royal Navy and New Zealand's armed forces should be responsible for the defence of Fiji. Two years later, New Zealand's Chiefs-of-Staff recommended the Fiji Defence Force be increased to brigade size, and advocated the construction of airfields and siting of coastal artillery. The Pacific Defence Conference of April 1939 argued that an unfavourable European situation could prevent the English fleet from sailing

to the Far East. Seizing the initiative, Japan could then launch attacks against Australia and New Zealand. An invasion of either country would require Japanese bases in the South Pacific. As one of the principal established naval refuelling bases in this area, Fiji would provide Japan with the ideal platform from which to launch such operations.



Japanese conquests in the Pacific during 1942 brought Fiji into the front line as the last island group between Australia and the United States. Picture (top) shows men of the 1st Heavy Regiment of the Fijian Army at the 6-inch coastal battery overlooking Suva harbour.



By the time the threat against Fiji had faded, five coastal batteries had been established on the main island of Viti Levu. The Suva battery site has been abandoned to the jungle; this is how David Green found it during his expedition to the island in August 1995.



THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Prior to the declaration of war in September 1939, Fiji was totally unprepared to defend itself from either seaborne invasion or attack by surface raiders. Indeed, it was the outbreak of war against Germany which prompted the order for coastal artillery to be installed. Plans were drawn up by Colonel Nurse of the Royal Australian Artillery for the establishment of an examination and harbour defence battery at Muanikau Hill, Suva. Guns for the battery arrived in record time from New Zealand aboard HMS *Leander* and, with a black-out and security measures in place, no one noticed the guns being 'carried' off the ship by two sailors.

These dummy weapons were replaced by genuine 4.7-inch guns three months later. It was rumoured these particular guns had seen action in Hong Kong with an earlier history as field artillery in the relief of Kimberley, besieged for 126 days during the Boer War. Gun drill during the first months of the Second World War was practiced with two ancient 3-pounder Quick Firing guns, formerly from HMCS *Pioneer*, unearthed from Public Works Department stores.

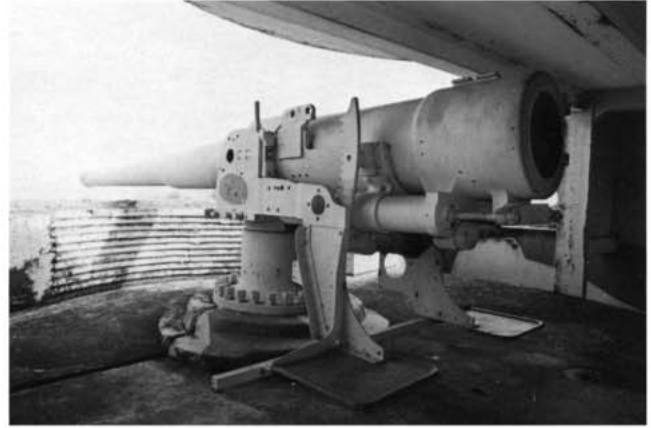
The first proof shot from the new Suva battery was fired on March 11, 1940. Then, a mysterious vessel appearing out of bad weather on the morning of July 22 resulted in the firing of the first Fijian 'heave-to' round.

Ignoring orders to stop after the initial challenge, the ship was assumed to be hostile, and it was only after a near miss that the irate and non-belligerent Scottish skipper contacted the battery commander!



The second gun position to be built was located on the western side of the island at Momi and this is the only battery which has been officially preserved for public inspection.

Today the Fijian National Trust looks after the site and has set up a small museum in one of the semi-underground buildings (centre) once used as the observation post.



The two Momi guns are 6-inch MkVIIIs on MkII central pivot mountings. This was a combination introduced into service in 1898 and the markings on the guns indicate that they were manufactured at the turn of the century by Vickers, Son and

Maxim, although they were not installed on the island until 1941. They could fire a standard 100lb shell at 2,538ft/sec out to 14,000 yards and the projectile could penetrate 15 inches of steel plate at 1,000 yards.

A second coastal defence position was established at Momi on the western side of Viti Levu. Guarding the strategic Navala Passage, two 6-inch Mk VII guns arrived to complete the battery in March 1941. The Suva battery was upgraded on December 1 with two additional 6-inch Mk VII guns. The two original 4.7-inch guns were then transferred across the harbour to a new battery at Bilo. Searchlights were installed to illuminate Suva's harbour and 24-hour manning of the guns began. The three positions — Suva, Bilo and Momi — were respectively referred to as A, B, and C Troops, Suva Battery, later amended to A, B and C Batteries, 1st Heavy Regiment Fiji Artillery.



A warning shot was fired at the Japanese cargo vessel *Taka Chiha Maru* on December 6, 1941, for failing to stop when requested. Speculation exists that the ship deliberately drew fire from the Suva battery to ascertain its position and range as it is almost certain that this information was known by the Japanese submarine which surfaced eight miles south-west of Suva on the afternoon of January 16, 1942. After unsuccessfully firing two torpedoes at the armed merchant cruiser HMS *Monowai*, gun-fire was exchanged before the submarine submerged.

Although the radar antenna on the hillside above the battery was said to be used for fire control, the Royal Artillery Historical Trust believe it was a tactical control or surveillance radar, probably American in origin.



A second harbour gun site was established at Bilo utilising the two original 4.7-inch guns moved from Suva when that battery was upgraded to 6-inch. David says that 'the Japanese were experienced in attacking and capturing coastal forts from earlier conflicts: taking Port Arthur from the Chinese in 1894, and again from the Russians in 1905, and capturing Tsingtao from

the Germans in 1914. In each case, the main contingent troops were landed away from the fort's striking distance, advancing to the rear and attacking the position from behind.' As Bilo battery is now used by the Fiji Army as a training area and is off limits, David must have taken a leaf out of the book of the sons of Nippon to take these photographs!

To bolster the defences of Suva harbour, an additional coastal artillery position was constructed at Flagstaff Hill. Situated half a mile from the Suva Battery, the new fort was equipped with three of the latest Mk 24, 6-inch guns. In either close defence or counter-bombardment rôles, its guns were capable of hurling a projectile over 24,000 yards. Fire control was assisted by the newly-installed radar station. The soft soapstone of the area enabled the magazines, plotting and powder rooms to be excavated some 60 feet below the surface.

By early 1942, the Japanese invasion of Fiji seemed imminent. To strengthen the western defences a fifth and final 6-inch coastal battery was constructed at Vuda. Its arc of fire covered the port of Lautoka and combined with the Momi battery to protect the important Nadi airfield. A radar facility was installed at Momi to assist in fire direction.

NEW ZEALAND AND THE UNITED STATES

The defence of Fiji and operations by the Fiji Defence Force (FDF) was initially the responsibility of the 2nd New Zealand Expeditionary Force. Fijian personnel recruited for the coastal artillery batteries as ammunition handlers soon proved themselves capable of more worthy tasks such as unlaying and signalling. Native Fijians were also employed as coast watchers, maintaining an important 24-hour watch on the main and outlying islands.

By early 1942, it was realised that Fiji was the final defence bastion between Australia and the United States. On June 10, 1942, the US 37th Infantry Division arrived in Suva to relieve the New Zealand forces. The Americans' primary purpose was to defend Fiji whilst preparing for forthcoming operations against the Japanese and on June 30 the Fiji Defence Force officially came under the control of the US Army.

The coastal artillery batteries were taken over by the American 251st Artillery Regiment with the exception of Flagstaff Battery which was retained under FDF control. Small parties of native gunners were assigned to the US units stationed at each battery and practice shoots were staged on a monthly basis, using both British and American fire procedures.

With the Japanese threat to Fiji lifted by the end of 1942, the bulk of the US forces was removed and the 251st Artillery Regiment departed Fiji on February 13, 1943. Suva and Bilo Batteries were handed back to



Little remains to be seen at Flagstaff Hill but . . .

the Fijians, forming the 1st Heavy Regiment, but those at Vuda and Momi remained in US hands until February 10, 1944, when the manning of all coastal artillery ceased.



The threat of Japanese landings on Fiji never progressed beyond the planning stage but, had the tide of war turned in Japan's favour at Midway, it may well have been a different story. On May 18, 1942, Lieutenant-General Haruyoshi Hyukatake, commander of the Japanese 17th Army, was ordered to prepare landings on new Caledonia, Samoa and Fiji, and to continue the overland attack against Port Moresby. From these newly-acquired territories, sustained attacks would then be launched against Australia and New Zealand to prevent the concentration of Allied forces.

The proposed invasions, however, were postponed following a joint Japanese Army-Navy meeting which agreed with Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto's plan to invade Midway. A resounding defeat, it marked a major turning point in the Pacific war and spelt the end of the Japanese threat to Fiji. The closest the Japanese actually came to Fijian soil was the *Monowai* attack and several reconnaissance flights by aircraft launched from the submarines *I-10* and *I-25*.

Although manned throughout the war in a state of constant readiness, the guns of Viti Levu never challenged the Japanese invasion. Today, these guns and their concrete emplacements stand as ageing memorials to a time when the security of this idyllic island may well have depended upon them.



. . . David trekked to the remote battery at Vuda on the eastern side of the island. The site is rarely visited and he found both guns lying just as they must have been abandoned in 1944.

David writes that 'with this particular gun (left) I was able to swing it round to get a great shot looking out to sea'. Right: The second piece rests immobile in the grass.