

Few places in the world can lay claim to having been attacked by both Germany and Japan during the Second World War. This unique and unenviable fate befell the tiny Pacific island of Nauru, a British Commonwealth possession and important source of mineral phosphate. Following a German naval attack and aborted landing in 1940, Nauru was occupied by the Japanese in 1942 who then transformed the remote atoll into a heavily defended stronghold. Subject to frequent American air attacks, the island was wisely bypassed and isolated during the seizure of Tarawa, the garrison surrendering to Australian forces in September 1945.

Situated in a remote area of the Central Pacific Ocean, the tiny island of Nauru lies 47 kilometres south of the equator, approximately 2,500 miles south-west of Hawaii. A single raised coral atoll of 21 square kilometres, it was first discovered in 1798 by Captain John Fearn of the British ship *Hunter* who, attracted to its lush, tropical appearance, named it Pleasant Island. There was little contact between the natives and Europeans until the 1830s when whalers began calling. Fifty years later, German traders who had settled on the atoll sought incorporation into Germany's Marshall Islands Protectorate, and a formal annexation took place in October 1888 with the arrival of the gunboat *Eber*.

In 1899 it was discovered, quite by accident, that Nauru was essentially an enormous deposit of guano, the excrement of sea birds built up over hundreds, if not thousands, of years. Chemical analysis of a rock sample in the Sydney office of the British Pacific Islands Company revealed high-grade phosphate of lime, an important raw material in fertiliser manufacture. Although they held sole mining rights on the island, the Germans were apparently unaware of the wealth beneath their feet. Lengthy negotiations were held between the German company Jaluit Gesellschaft and the Pacific Phosphate Company before a mining deal was finally struck, the agreement culminating on June 27, 1907, with the first loading of Nauru phosphate onto the SS *Fido*. During the next six months, 11,630 tons of the valuable fertiliser were hand-dug and shipped to Australia, and by the end of 1913 over 630,000 tons of the mineral had been exported to meet an increasing world demand.

With the outbreak of the First World War on August 4, 1914, British and German co-workers on Nauru suddenly became enemies. The German administrator, Herr

NAURU

W. Wostrack, proclaimed a state of martial law and deported the British subjects to nearby Ocean Island. However, Wostrack decided against trying to defend the island, and surrendered it on September 9 to a landing party from HMAS *Melbourne*. On November 3, an Australian occupation force under Major-General W. Holmes arrived from Rabaul aboard the SS *Messina*. A small garrison of 50 men plus ancillaries was established under Captain E. C. Norrie. The British Nauru workers were returned to Nauru and 23 Germans shipped to Australia for internment. Phosphate mining resumed and continued throughout the war.

On the morning of December 15, 1914, two Japanese cruisers and a transport arrived off Nauru, whereupon Japanese officers

By David M. Green

supposedly came ashore to officially verify the state of occupation. Conjecture exists as to whether the Japanese had arrived too late to seize Nauru, as they had earlier done with other former German Pacific colonies such as Palau (see *After the Battle* No. 76).

In 1919, the newly-formed League of Nations conferred a joint mandate for Nauru's jurisdiction to Australia, Britain and New Zealand. An Australian administrator was installed with a board of commissioners representing each partner country. The end of the war signalled a growth in primary production with both Australia and New Zealand requiring increased amounts of fertiliser. Facilities on Nauru were improved to meet this demand with 4.3 million tons of the valuable phosphate exported between 1933 and 1939. The declaration of war with Germany in September 1939 brought little cause for alarm on the remote Pacific mining colony until the following year when the Kriegsmarine returned.



When war broke out in 1939, the tiny Central Pacific island of Nauru, situated some 1,800 miles north-east of the Australian mainland, was jointly administered under a League of Nations mandate by Australia, Britain and New Zealand. Economically important because of the presence of phosphate rock, used as agricultural fertiliser, it was a coveted possession of many nations including Germany (of which it had been a colony from 1888 to 1918) and Japan. From this, Nauru gained the unique distinction of being the only place in the world to have been attacked by both Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. In addition, the atoll became the target of Allied bombers later in the war. Above: Nauru under attack by Liberators of the US Seventh Air Force.

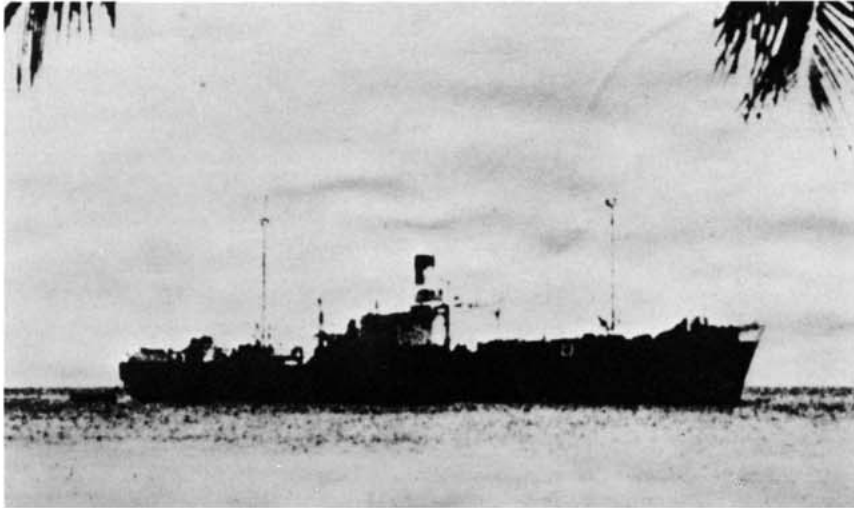
THE GERMAN ATTACK

Nauru was beset with bad weather during the first week of December 1940 which prevented the loading of phosphate onto carrier vessels. Without a sheltered anchorage, ships awaiting their cargo were forced to drift off the island until the rough seas abated. In such conditions it was not unusual to find several vessels in the vicinity of the island at any one time. Naval protection was unavailable, and shore defences non-existent under the terms of the mandate.

Prowling the waters east of New Zealand at this time were three ships, masquerading as Japanese merchantmen, which comprised the German Kreuzergeschwader — the Far East Squadron. Despite a deceptively non-belligerent appearance, the ships were in fact the heavily-armed auxiliary cruisers *Orion* and *Komet* (disguised respectively as the *Maebasi Maru* and *Manyo Maru*) and the supply ship *Kulmerland*. On November 24, the captains of the German raiders met to discuss a possible landing on Nauru, and it was later agreed that a combined force of 185 men would land to destroy the phosphate works and capture any shipping. During the raid, Allied prisoners currently held in cramped quarters below decks on the German ships would be transferred ashore.



Situated in the sea passage between the Marshall and Gilbert Islands in the north and the Solomons archipelago in the south, Nauru also represented a military position of strategic importance for both Japan and the Allies. However, the first attack on it was to be launched by the Germans.



During the war, the Kriegsmarine took to the ruse of using auxiliary cruisers disguised as innocent merchantmen. One such force, composed of the *Komet* (above) and *Orion* plus the supply ship *Kulmerland*, posing as Japanese ships at a time when Japan was not yet at war, was operating off Nauru in early December 1940. (AWM)

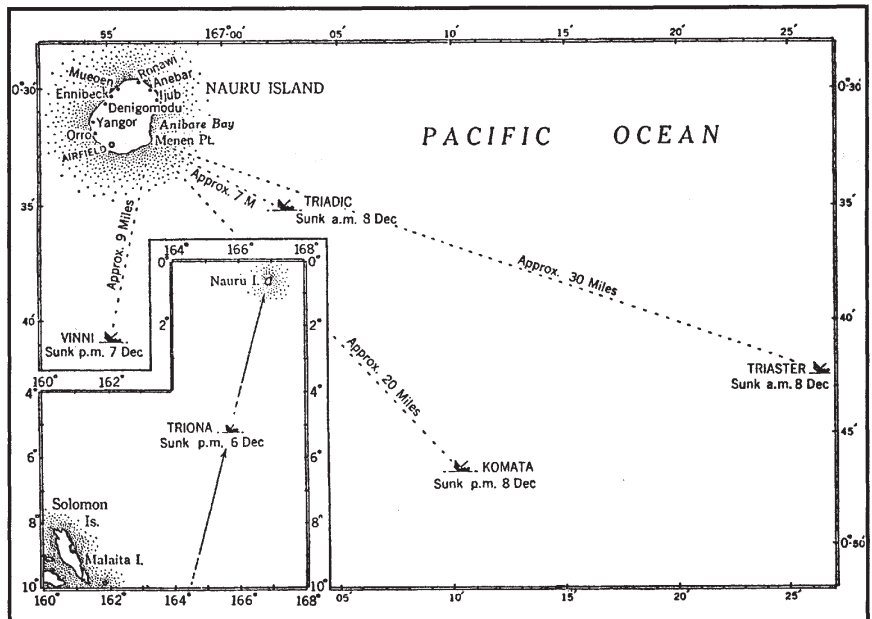
watched helplessly by those ashore. Discovering a further target, *Kulmerland* was ordered to pick up survivors while *Orion* stalked and sank the smaller *Triaster* (6,032 tons). *Komet*, meanwhile, had begun searching the area north of Nauru and rounded the island to pick up a boat of survivors from the *Triadic*. The sole remaining ship in the vicinity was the four-masted *Komata*, the 3,900-ton New Zealand steamer being despatched by *Komet's* 15cm guns approximately 20 miles off the island. Although a land assault had been impossible, the raid had nevertheless netted five Allied ships with a combined tonnage of over 25,000 tons.

Totally ignorant of the German presence, the Nauruan administrator alerted the Australian Naval Board to the presence of the strange Japanese ship observed the previous night and the two unexpected, and apparently Japanese, ships standing by the burning *Triadic*. The communiqué continued: 'Other British and Allied vessels which are drifting on account of weather and which should be in vicinity of *Triadic* but which have not been sighted and which have not communicated anything untoward are *Triaster*, *Komata*, *Vinni*, *Triona* due Nauru 8th December.'

The German operation against Nauru began on December 6 when the squadron intercepted the British Phosphate Commission vessel *Triona* after a nine-hour chase. A 4,413-ton phosphate carrier, it was sunk by the *Orion* while the faster and more mechanically reliable *Komet* steamed ahead to reconnoitre. Next day, the *Komet* intercepted and sank the 5,181-ton Norwegian motor vessel *Vinni*, which had been waiting offshore for a week to receive its cargo. Through heavy rain squalls the 'camouflaged' *Komet* was observed from Nauru and assumed to be a Japanese merchantman returning home.

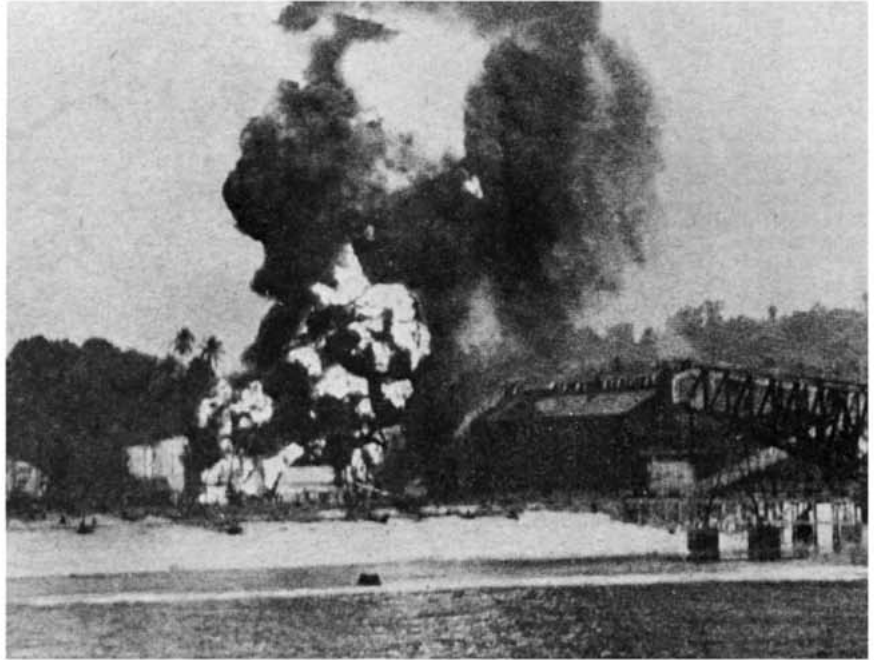
On the morning of December 8, the three German ships rendezvoused off the tiny atoll. Prevailing high seas prohibited a landing but provided several unfortunate victims. Following a meeting of the German captains, *Orion* circumnavigated the island from the south, sighting the 6,378-ton *Triadic*. Refusing to stop when signalled by the Japanese mystery ship, the Phosphate Commission motor ship was immediately shelled and set alight, its demise being

In just three days, the German raiders managed to sink five Allied ships.





Right: On December 27, *Komet* returned to Nauru alone and began shelling the installations ashore, setting fire to the oil tanks and damaging the phosphate works and loading wharfs. Above: From its deck, the crew of the *Komet* observe the destruction they wrought.



The Australian Naval Board responded to the situation by ordering all ships bound for the area to disperse and sail for either Fiji or New Guinea. Authorities in Australia and Nauru were unaware of the total number of ships lost or of the size of the enemy force involved but, in any case, little could be done with the closest naval vessel, the armed merchant cruiser HMAS *Manoora*, 2,400 miles way at Darwin, Northern Australia.

From Nauru the German squadron dispersed, *Kumerland* and *Komet* refuelling at Ailingapalap in the Marshalls, while *Orion* sailed towards Ponape in the Caroline Islands. Regrouping on December 15, the three ships were forced to abandon a second attempt at landing on Nauru due to continuing high seas. Having intercepted radio broadcasts revealing that Allied shipping was ordered to avoid Nauru, the Germans departed for the seclusion of the Bismarck Archipelago. When they arrived at remote Emirau Island, 514 prisoners from the three ships were provisioned with food, kerosene and rifles and put ashore. Free of prisoners, apart from 150 retained as a security shield, the Far East Squadron disbanded, *Kumerland* travelling to Japan for supplies while *Orion* met up with the tanker *Ole Jacob* and supply ship *Regensburg* during a refit at Lamotrek.

Following an unsuccessful attempt to lay



Konteradmiral Robert Eyssen, *Komet's* commander, was awarded the Knight's Cross for his Nauru exploits.

mines off Rabaul in New Britain, *Komet* sailed again for Nauru, the innocent-looking raider returning on the morning of December 27. Several warnings were signalled to the shore by Morse lamp to refrain from wireless communication and to evacuate the phosphate plant, and a warning shot was

fired to scatter the natives on the waterfront. Hoisting the German flag and draping another ensign over the Japanese hull markings, the raider then opened fire at 6.40 a.m. Steaming in close, *Komet* systematically shelled the installations, setting fire to 13,000 tons of oil and extensively damaging the phosphate works, storage bins, and mooring facilities. In the words of one resident: 'The Germans played fair, attacked only military objectives and were away in time for us to enjoy a late breakfast.'

The two attacks on Nauru and its shipping proved to be Germany's most successful Pacific wartime undertaking. Repercussions were immediately felt with a ten-week delay in phosphate shipments bound for Australia and New Zealand, a problem further compounded by a lack of suitable phosphate carriers. The German naval presence caused considerable rethinking and alteration to the disposition of Allied naval forces in the area. *Komet's* shelling of Nauru was the sole attack carried out by a German raider against a land target during the war. In Tokyo, the German naval attaché reported Japan's annoyance over the bombardment and interference to phosphate supplies. Meanwhile, German naval staff in Berlin cautiously recognised the success of *Komet's* operation, while forbidding such actions outside of operational orders in future.



Five years later, when the Australians reoccupied Nauru, the cantilever wrecked by the *Komet* was still unserviceable.



Though needed to carry the phosphate across the shallow reef to ships anchored offshore, it was not repaired until 1948.



Likewise, the oil drums set afire by the German raider still lay bent and buckled in September 1945. The German attack lasted one hour and 18 minutes, during which 126 5.9-inch, 360 3.7cm and 719 2cm rounds were fired causing extensive damage and stopping all phosphate operations for ten full weeks.



Even before the German foray, on June 12, 1940, the Italian merchantman *Romolo* was scuttled off Nauru after interception by the Australian armed merchant cruiser HMAS *Manoora*. Thus, in a way, the third Axis power — Fascist Italy — figured in the island's wartime history too. (AWM)

JAPANESE OCCUPATION

As a consequence of the earlier German attack, a small Australian garrison of about 50 men with two field guns was established on Nauru under captain J. C. King, a request for 6-inch coastal guns and two aircraft having been refused due to their unavailability. The day after the attack on Pearl Harbor, a Japanese flying boat circled Nauru, foreshadowing Imperial intentions. With Japan's expanding Pacific territory drawing closer, the army contingent, together with many residents, were evacuated by the Free French destroyer *Le Triomphant* on February 23, 1942, leaving behind the administrator, Lieutenant-Colonel F. R. Chalmers, together with six other Europeans, native Nauruans and foreign mining workers.

The Japanese plan for invading Nauru was a small part of a complex operation known as 'MO' (abbreviated from Port Moresby). Its objectives involved the establishment of a seaplane base at Tulagi in the Solomon Islands, an amphibious assault on Port Moresby, and the seizure of Nauru and Ocean Island. In charge of 'MO' was Vice Admiral Shigeyoshi Inouye, commander of the Japanese Fourth Fleet. His planning also envisaged the intervention of an American carrier task force which would be trapped in the Coral Sea between his aircraft carriers and the naval aircraft based at Rabaul.

Countering the Port Moresby invasion force, the Americans deployed their aircraft carriers as anticipated. The ensuing Battle of the Coral Sea was hailed as a victory by both sides; the Americans destroying the Tulagi seaplane base, sinking the carrier *Shoho* and damaging the *Shokaku*; the Japanese sinking the carrier *Lexington*. Ever-cautious, Admiral Inouye had earlier delayed the Port Moresby invasion because of the American naval threat. Now, encountering increased Allied air activity, he postponed it indefinitely.

Inouye subsequently dispatched the Nauru and Ocean Island invasion group on May 10, 1942, supplemented by units from the former Port Moresby force. Faced with the sinking of the fleet flagship, *Okinoshima*, by the US Submarine *S42* on May 11, and intelligence reports of American carriers off Tulagi, the admiral ordered his fleet to Truk.

The Japanese attack on Nauru eventually took place on the night of August 23/24, opening with a naval bombardment and followed three days later by the landing of Japanese marines. Representatives from The South Seas Development Company arrived soon afterwards to investigate resumption of phosphate production using native labour. This idea was soon abandoned, with Nauru assuming a more strategic rôle as part of Japan's Pacific island defensive chain.



Finally captured by the Japanese in August 1942, Nauru became one of the many island strongholds in the Empire's defensive chain protecting its Pacific conquests. Expecting an Allied attack any day, the Japanese strongly reinforced the little atoll, building numerous pillboxes and gun emplacements. The garrison also included these four Type 95 light tanks — all of which were found parked under canvas next to one of the burnt-out oil tanks by the Australians when they occupied the island in September 1945. (AWM)



The oil storage tanks were replaced by new ones during the post-war reconstruction.

Right: Inland from the beaches, the Japanese placed four Type 89 (1929) dual 127mm naval anti-aircraft guns in revolving turrets. Their rusty remains survive to this day in the lush undergrowth.

OPERATION 'GALVANIC'

Following the American and British Combined Chiefs-of-Staff meeting in Washington in May 1943, it was decided to begin offensive operations against Japan through the Central Pacific region. After examining possible options, it was agreed to invade both the Gilbert Islands and Nauru in an operation Admiral Chester W. Nimitz code-named 'Galvanic' (see *After the Battle* No. 15).

The invasion of Nauru was assigned to the US 27th Infantry Division, a former New York National Guard unit. Initial planning had assigned the entire division to the assault, with two regiments landing on the north-west coast of the island and the third held afloat in reserve. However, the decision to take Nauru was not universally shared. The atoll lacked sheltered waters and possessed only a small airfield. Any strategic value in capturing the island would be offset by potentially high casualties. With Nauru situated 390 miles from the western Gilbert Islands, simultaneous amphibious landings would also strain available shipping resources and disperse a fleet which faced the possibility of Japanese naval counter-attack.



Left: Not far from 'Jim' is another 127mm piece. Note that the barrels have been 'bulged' by the Australians after the Japanese

surrender to inactivate the weapon. Right: A third 127mm dual gun survives at what is now known as Command Ridge.



Left: There were also several concrete-roofed emplacements for 80mm guns like this one being inspected by a soldier of the 31/51st Infantry Battalion. (AWM) Right: Today, the guns are gone and only the mountings remain, this particular bunker

being sited outside the Menen Hotel. Before 1943, this was the site of a Nauruan leper colony but on July 12, 1943, the Japanese radically solved the leper problem when they placed 49 lepers on a small boat and sank it by gun-fire.



In addition to exterminating the leper colony, the Japanese committed numerous other atrocities on Nauru. Early in 1943, the US Seventh Air Force was charged with neutralising Japanese targets on Nauru and the Gilberts. One particular raid on the night of March 25/26, destroyed eight bombers and seven fighters at the newly-completed Nauru airbase. In retaliation, the senior Japanese officer, Lieutenant-Commander Nakayama ordered the execution of Lieutenant-Colonel F. R. Chalmers, the former Australian administrator who had stayed behind when the garrison evacuated the island in February 1942, and five other Europeans the next morning. This memorial (*above left*) is dedicated to them and others — Nauruans, Gilbert and Ellice islanders and Chinese — who lost their lives during the Japanese occupation of 1942-45.



Above left: 'Pilot Officer L. Marquis, interpreter, RAAF, checking the details of a Japanese 25mm anti-aircraft gun found soon after the island was occupied by troops of the 31st/51st Infantry Battalion.' (AWM) The original caption describes one of the island's three Type 96 (1936) 25mm machine cannon twin mounts, one of which is now on display (*above right*) near the boat harbour. The rusting relic in the foreground is a magazine for the cannon located inland. *Left:* Pedestal mounting for a Type 93 (1933) 13.2mm machine gun surviving in the Command Ridge area. *Right:* David also found numerous other remnants of Japanese defensive positions, like this dugout, overgrown and deteriorating after 50 years of neglect.







On September 24, Nimitz received a recommendation from Admiral Raymond A. Spruance to cancel the Nauru landings. Makin Atoll was proposed as the better alternative, offering superior beaches, a lagoon, smaller Japanese garrison and ample room for airstrip construction, and in October a revised Operation 'Galvanic' was issued, detailing proposed landings on Tarawa, Apamama and Makin. Any threat posed by Nauru during the Gilberts operation was to be removed by carrier strikes, naval bombardment and bombing missions flown by the American Seventh Air Force.

Following a preliminary bombardment, American GIs stormed the beaches of Makin on November 20. Pitted against them were 800 Japanese defenders, of whom 500 were Korean labourers. Against relatively weak defences, the 27th Infantry Division suffered heavily, sustaining 218 casualties, but had they invaded the more formidable Nauru atoll, the cost in lives would have been considerably higher.

Nauru became increasingly isolated as American naval and air activity intensified. Faced with a situation of overcrowding, 1,200 Nauruans were shipped by the Japanese to the Caroline Islands. Food shortages plagued those remaining, and over 300 Japanese were to die from starvation, some Imperial soldiers resorting to cannibalism for survival. Additional atrocities committed by the Japanese during their occupation included the execution of five Europeans and over 50 natives.

The capitulation of Germany in May 1945 brought about renewed demands on behalf of Australia and New Zealand for the invasion of Nauru and the immediate resumption of phosphate mining. However, the British authorities were unwilling to risk lives when, in time, they viewed the isolated Japanese garrison falling victim to starvation. American interests were also focused elsewhere with the forthcoming invasion of Japan, until the dropping of the atomic bomb led to the unconditional surrender of the Emperor's forces.



By far the most-powerful type of gun on Nauru were ten 6-inch naval guns, one of which is here seen being inspected by members of the Australian 31/51st Infantry Battalion on September 14, 1945, after they took over the island.



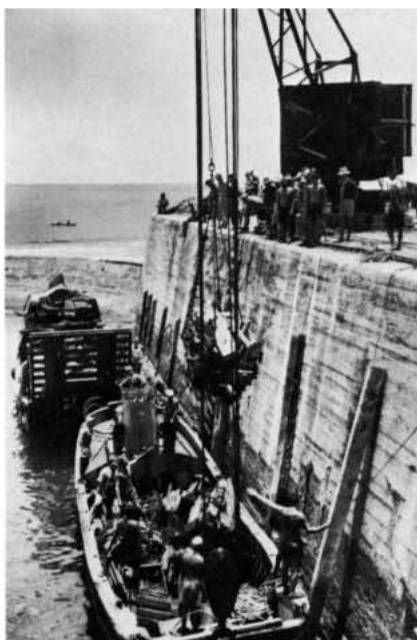
These quick-firing, breech-loading guns had been built by the British firm of Sir William Armstrong Whitworth & Co. Ltd for the Japanese Navy before the First World War. Although the

batteries themselves have long since been dismantled, surprisingly enough, several of the 6-inch barrels still survive on the island today, like these two at Anebore Bay dated 1911.



In the end, all the Japanese efforts to make Nauru into an island fortress were completely wasted. Planning their island-hopping campaign, and studying the Nauru defences, the V Amphibious Corps issued an estimate for the invasion which 'envisaged considerable difficulty in the capture of Nauru.' It was estimated that at least one division would be needed 'to seize the rocky, cave-riddled Nauru'. Admiral Spruance, Nimitz's Chief-of-Staff and later the commander of the US Fifth Fleet, recalled afterwards: 'The more we studied the details of capturing Nauru, the tougher the operation appeared to be,

and finally it seemed doubtful the troops assigned for it could take it. The transports available for trooplift were the limiting factor. On the other hand, Makin was an entirely suitable objective, and its capture was well within our capabilities'. So a decision was reached to bypass and isolate Nauru. However, the Japanese garrison held out till the final capitulation of the Empire in August 1945. Only on September 13 did HMAS *Diamantina* arrive to arrange for its surrender. Here, Australian and Japanese officers confer aboard the *Diamantina* prior to signing the instrument of surrender. (AWM)



Troops of the 31/51st Battalion unloading supplies at the British Phosphate Commission wharf the day after the surrender. Today, phosphate supplies on Nauru are forecast to become exhausted before the next decade, and the government of Nauru (an independent republic since 1968) is seeking alternative forms of revenue by investing heavily in countries such as Australia. (AWM)

Although Nauru lay within the American Pacific Fleet area, the US Chiefs-of-Staff agreed to the proposal that Nauru and Ocean Island surrender to Australian military forces. HMAS *Diamantina* was dispatched, reaching Nauru on the morning of September 13, 1945. At 2.45 p.m. that afternoon, the Japanese surrender party of Captain Hisayuki Soeda and five other naval officers boarded the *Diamantina*. Presenting his sword to Brigadier J. R. Stevenson, commander of the Australian 11th Infantry Brigade, Soeda signed the formal instrument of surrender.

The Japanese garrison at the time of the surrender consisted of the 67 Naval Guard Unit and the Yokosuka Special No. 2 Naval Landing Party. Soeda's Nauru occupation force, under the command of the Japanese Fourth Fleet at Truk, comprised three battalions plus other units totalling 2,681 men. Also stationed on the island were 541 Koreans and 513 Japanese civilians attached to labour and construction units. After the surrender, Japanese soldiers on Nauru were transferred to Torokina on Bougainville before repatriation to Japan.

Below: A curious relic found by the Australians was this American 75mm cannon. It was salvaged from the wreckage of a B-25G, the *Coral Princess* of the US 41st Bomb Group based on Makin, which crashed on Nauru on June 29, 1944, after being hit by Japanese 127mm flak while on a bombing mission with 11 other Mitchells.





Above: Japanese PoWs being transported to waiting naval transports for the journey to Bougainville before repatriation to Japan. Right: The lack of any sheltered deep-water harbour in Nauru means that all shipping cargo must be loaded onto barges and shuttled ashore, and vice versa, which is as much a problem today as it was 50 years ago.

Half a century later, relics from the Japanese occupation can still be found on the island. Concrete pillboxes continue to encircle Nauru, while rusting artillery pieces deteriorate in the humid environment. Trenches and barbed-wire entanglements designed to repel Allied invaders are today falling victim to the elements, whilst the former air base has been enlarged to allow operations by the jet aircraft of Air Nauru. Yet it is hoped that at least something of the rich wartime history of Nauru can be preserved before it too, like the island's phosphate deposits, disappears.



Although Nauru airport has recently been enlarged by bulldozing debris of the Japanese airbase into the sea, still other relics remain. Left: A bent propeller from an aircraft that crash-landed on the beach. Right: A gun barrel retrieved from the sea.